

PHILIP TAAFFE
 “Sanctuary,” 2010. Installation
 of 148 drawings. Oil pigment
 on paper, dimensions vari-
 able. Collection Kunstmuseum
 Luzern. Purchase made possible
 by a contribution from Landis &
 Gyr Foundation. ©Philip Taafe;
 Courtesy of the artist and Luhring
 Augustine, New York.



Dear Friends and Readers,

How can ecological and social forces be transformative? In her recent AICA-USA Distinguished Critics Lecture, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev explored this question through the lens of Lacan’s fascination with topology and the creation of chain relations or knots. The notions of alchemy and “thought form” were brought up repeatedly in her presentation, *Thought-Forms* being the well-known book of Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater that helped spread the ideas of the Theosophical Society—a central influence on modern art. Mahler, Sibelius, Mondrian, Hilma af Klint, and Kandinsky, were members along with many writers and poets, from James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Lewis Carroll, William Butler Yeats to Lyman Frank Baum (the author of the *Wizard of Oz*), even the inventor Thomas Edison.

Our latest Rail Curatorial Project, *Spaced Out: Migration to the Interior* at Red Bull Studios in Chelsea, offered a similar opportunity to submit ourselves to a realm of play and experiment, expanding our “thought forms” beyond conventional norms and expectations. In addition to two poetry readings and a panel discussion, at the closing reception Bladerunner Trio played a magnificently tripped-out set. It was then I realized how the musical performance echoed Raymond Foye’s guest editorship of this winter issue. The music was driven by improvisation, and embraced the maximal potential sounds of minor keys and the minimal equilibrium between downtempo and upbeat rhapsody, evoking endless repetition, both overt and subtle. Likewise, Raymond arranged the Critics Page in an unexpected and beautifully discreet way, reflecting the essential spirit of the *Rail*. By featuring the people and the work he loves with equal passion—as though one can’t exist without the other—Raymond has created a story within a story. We’re grateful to the generous spirits of Bladerunner Trio (the remarkable Will Epstein, Tlacacl Esparza, and Dave Harrington), Nicolas Jaar, and Raymond.

In conclusion, we have an open end. Human syncretism is welcome, and with it what will we do? On behalf of the *Rail*, I’d like to thank the wonderful team at Red Bull Studios and the participant artists, as well as those who have worked on the exhibit. It’s been a productive and adventurous year for Rail Curatorial Projects: *Bloodflames Revisited* at Paul Kasmin Gallery this past summer; *Spaced Out: Migration to the Interior* at Red Bull Studios; and *24/7* curated by Alex Bacon and Harry Tenzer in Miami. At Mana Miami, we hosted the first-ever public conversation between the *Brooklyn Rail*, the *Miami Rail*, and the *Third Rail*, in addition to a discussion around alternative pedagogy lead by Jarrett Earnest with his fellow teachers from the BHQFU. Finally, thanks to the extraordinary teams at Paul Kasmin Gallery and the Dedalus Foundation, we produced two beautiful catalogues for *Bloodflames Revisited* and last year’s exhibition, *Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1*.

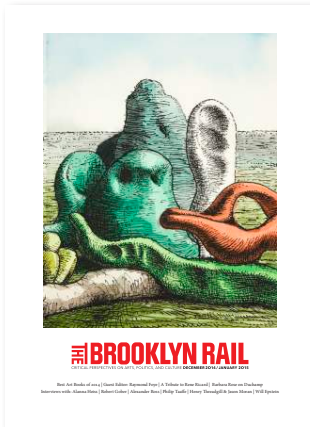
Lastly, I’d like to thank you for your support in keeping everything we do and create free to the public. We have always relied on the generous tax-deductible contributions from our readers, and this year, we are excited to host a benefit auction in collaboration with Paddle8. I’d also like to thank all of our board members—Christopher Apgar, Meghan Carleton, Dan Desmond, Michèle Gerber Klein, Abby Leigh, Will Ryman, Michael Straus, John Thomson, and Merrill Wagner—for their total dedication, as well as our community of editors and writers. In 2015, we look forward to future Rail Curatorial Projects both in New York and abroad; potential *Rails* in several American cities; and the continued expansion and exploration here at home, blooming into the *Brooklyn Rail*’s 15th anniversary.

Happy Holidays,
 Phong Bui

ROBERT GOBER
 “Untitled,” 1992. Shown installed
 at Dia Center for the Arts, New
 York, September 24, 1992 – June
 20, 1993. Photo: Russell Kaye,
 Courtesy of the artist and Matthew
 Marks Gallery.



ALEXANDER ROSS
 “Untitled,” 2010. India ink,
 watercolor, and graphite on paper,
 12 3/4” x 10”. Courtesy of the artist
 and David Nolan Gallery.



RENE RICARD
 “Untitled (Then if God is love...)”
 2003. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42”.
 Courtesy of the Rene Ricard Estate.



RITA BARROS
 “RR,” 2010. Courtesy of the Rene
 Ricard Estate.

P.S. Our Paddle8 benefit auction runs until December 22. We are especially indebted to the exceptional artists who donated magnificent works: Marina Abramović, Peter Acheson, Shoja Azari, Paolo Canevari, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Maria Elena Gonzalez, Allan Graham, Josephine Halvorson, Alfredo Jaar, Bill Jensen, Margrit Lewczuk, Nicola Lopez, Chris Martin, Shirin Neshat, Bruce Pearson, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Ishmael Randall-Weeks, David Reed, Joyce Robins, Shahzia Sikander, Charles Traub, and Joe Zucker. All sale proceeds will directly fund production and printing costs of our journal. Please visit www.paddle8.com/auction/brooklynrail.

DECEMBER 2014 / JANUARY 2015

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Whither The Republican Party?

The 2014 Election and the Future of Capital's "A-Team" by Charlie Post

FIELD NOTES

In most ways, the 2014 Congressional elections represented “more of the same” for mainstream U.S. politics. The Republicans’ increased majority in the House of Representatives and their capture of the majority of the Senate in 2014, despite appearances, does not represent any more of a “sea change” in public opinion than their 2010 victories. The substantial shifts in party representation were the results of *miniscule* shifts in the popular vote. In the more representative House, the Republicans won 52 percent of the popular vote, but secured 57 percent of the seats. In the Senate, a model *undemocratic* representative body, the Republicans won only 51 percent of the vote, but now hold nearly 66 percent of Senate seats.¹

Continuing declines in voter participation only further exaggerate the effects of small shifts in partisan voting patterns. Despite claims from both the mainstream and elements of the “progressive” left,² voter participation in 2014 hit its lowest level since 1942. Only 36.4 percent of all eligible voters turned out in 2014, compared with 40.9 percent in the 2010 midterm election—a drop of over 10 percent.³ Not surprisingly, working-class and poor voters—generally those earning less than \$50,000—are over-represented among the “non-voters” party in the U.S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, slightly over 75 percent of all Americans earned less than \$50,000 per year in 2010.⁴ However, only 36 percent of those who voted earned less than \$50,000 per year.⁵ Put simply, tiny changes in voter preference among an increasingly professional, managerial, and wealthy electorate propelled the Republicans to majorities in both houses of Congress. Working-class and poor people, traditional Democratic constituencies, have become profoundly alienated from a party who has consistently disappointed them as it embraces neo-liberalism and austerity.

There were some minor changes in the impact of capitalist campaign financing on the election results.⁶ As a result of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision, it has become more difficult to track the sources of capitalist funding to Republicans and Democrats. Contributions from individual businesspeople and corporate-business Political Action Committees, which are public, increased slightly from \$1.358 billion in 2010 to \$1.433 billion in 2014, while the proportion of capitalist funding actually dropped from 74.2 percent to 69.8 percent. “Dark money” from organizations that do not report all or some of their donors jumped sharply from \$160.8 million in 2010 to over \$219 million this year. Corporate funding went overwhelmingly (58 percent) to Republicans in 2014, especially compared to 2010, when Republicans received only 49 percent of capital’s largesse.

The Tea Party Insurgency

What may be different about the 2014 elections, compared with 2010, is the relationship of social forces *within* the Republican Party. Since the U.S. Civil War, the Republicans—the party representing the new industrial capitalist class—have been the U.S. capitalists’ “A-Team.” While capitalists in certain industries (telecommunications, media/entertainment), from newer immigrant groups (particularly Jews and Catholics), and in urban real estate and construction have dominated the Democratic Party for over a century, the Republicans have always been capital’s preferred political representatives. Capital turns to the Democrats when the Republicans have been compromised by scandal or political missteps, or during periods of working-class and popular insurgency when the former’s ties to the labor officialdom and the middle-class leaders of people of color, women, and L.G.B.T. people prove useful. However, no matter how far the Democrats drift to the right and embrace pro-capitalist policies, capital views the Republicans, with their historic links to key transnational industrial and financial corporations, as their most reliable spokespersons.

The rise of the right-wing populist Tea Party threatened to undermine capital’s traditional dominance of the Republican Party.⁷ As Kim Phillips-Fein pointed out, Citizens United undermined “older ruling class institutions [...] making it far more difficult for the business lobby to act in any concerted way. [It] enables wealthy individuals to spend lavishly and to do so with little sense of collective purpose.”⁸ As a result, right-wing billionaires like the Koch brothers and their Club for Growth have backed the Tea Party since its emergence in 2009. However, it is professionals, managers, and small businesspeople—what Marxists have called the *middle class*—who lead the Tea Party and provide the bulk of its electoral support.

On many issues, capitalists and the Tea Party agree: lowering corporate taxes, cutting social services, dismantling any and all regulations (financial, environmental, etc.) on capital, and, of course, attempting to completely destroy the remaining unions. However, middle class populism is also hostile to capital. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, a key Tea Party leader, was quite clear: “Big business is very happy to climb in bed with big government. Republicans are and should be the party of small business and of entrepreneurs.”⁹ The conflict between capital and a radicalized middle class is clearest in the Tea Party’s willingness to shut down the federal government and risk a credit default, and on immigration reform.

The Tea Party is a “political Frankenstein”¹⁰ for capital. While important segments of the capitalist class funded Tea Party candidates during the 2010 election, by early 2011, they found themselves endangered by their own creation. Specifically, the Tea Party’s opposition to an immigration reform that would maintain a workforce without citizenship rights and their willingness to risk the global credit of the U.S. capitalist state and shut down the federal government alienated the two most important capitalist-financed and -led policy planning networks: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable. While the Chamber represents a broad cross-section of the U.S. capitalist class and the Roundtable speaks for the largest transnational corporations, both clearly opposed the Tea Party on these issues in 2011 and 2012.

Scapegoating immigrants for rising crime, deteriorating public services, and growing unemployment, segments of the middle class and the native-born working classes support tightening of the borders and blanket deportations, and oppose any form of amnesty or legalization for undocumented immigrants. Capitalists, however, have a very different perspective. Not only do high-tech industries want access to skilled foreign professionals, but labor-intensive industries like agriculture, construction, landscaping, domestic service, child-care, health care, and hospitality rely on low-wage, vulnerable immigrant labor. Capital wants a *precarious migrant workforce* without legal status, disciplined by *selective* deportations, to labor for substandard wages in these industries.¹¹

Both the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable have been leading the fight for an immigration reform that would preserve and regulate a new migratory workforce in the U.S.; and *in opposition* to wholesale deportations and other policies that reduce the immigrant workforce. The Business Roundtable has long advocated a comprehensive immigration reform that would “strengthen border security”; allow more workers, skilled and unskilled, to enter the U.S. on temporary work visas; and provide a “path to citizenship” for the millions of undocumented immigrants already in the U.S.¹² In 2010, the Chamber joined the American Civil Liberties Union and the League of United Latin American Citizens in challenging Arizona’s anti-immigrant law (SB 1070) which resulted in thousands of immigrants fleeing the state in fear of arrest and deportation.¹³ More recently, the Chamber has argued that comprehensive immigration reform is necessary to

“address worker shortages, not only in high-skilled jobs, but also in lesser-skilled industries [...] like home health care, landscaping, and hospitality.”¹⁴ The Tea Party’s opposition to any immigration reform that is not based on massive deportations of those in the U.S. without papers has profoundly alienated U.S. capitalists.

Capital also wants massive cuts to social spending in the U.S. However, the Tea Party’s political brinkmanship—its willingness to let the U.S. default by failing to raise the debt ceiling in 2011 and to shut down federal government operations in 2013 in order to leverage cuts in spending or short-circuit the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”)—has also estranged capital. In 2011, the Chamber’s executive vice president for Government Affairs, Bruce Josten, mobilized members to urge their Congressional representatives to raise the debt ceiling, in order to prevent rising interest rates that would make “car loans, mortgages, and business and student loans ... more expensive.”¹⁵ The Business Roundtable, in a letter to the Congressional leadership co-signed by the Chamber of Commerce and a dozen industry-based associations, claimed that raising the debt ceiling “is critical to ensuring global investors’ confidence in the credit worthiness of the United States.”¹⁶

The fall 2013 government shut down marked the end of any uneasy alliance between the Tea Party and the capitalist class. John Engler, President of the Business Roundtable, and leaders of the Chamber issued numerous statements to the press condemning the government shut down and again warning of the dire consequences for capital of a government default.¹⁷ The clearest sign of a schism between the Republican populist right and capital was the emergence of “Campaign to Fix the Debt.” Originally formed in early 2012 in the wake of 2011 debate on raising the debt ceiling, Fix the Debt brought together dozens of former Senators and Congressmen and over 150 C.E.O.s of some of the largest U.S. transnational corporations,¹⁸ with a budget of nearly \$50 million. Their “core principles”¹⁹ formed the basis of the proposed “grand bargain” of closing corporate tax loop-holes while lowering the overall tax rate “in exchange” for “restructuring” (massive cuts) to federal pensions, Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. While the “bargain” garnered the support of Obama, the Democratic leadership, and mainstream Republicans, key leaders of the Tea Party refused to accept this compromise, sparking the government shut down of fall 2013.

Capital Disciplines the Republicans: The 2014 Primaries

In the midst of the 2013 budget crisis, leaders and staff of key elements of the “business lobby,” including the National Retail Federation, National Federation of Independent Businesses, National Association of Manufacturers, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Business Roundtable, and the Fix the Debt campaign began to discuss “helping wage primary campaigns against Republican lawmakers who had worked to engineer the political standoff in Washington.”²⁰ The Tea Party’s initial success in raising funds for the primary races²¹ led the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to take the lead in mobilizing for mainstream Republicans. Scott Reed, the Chamber’s chief political strategist, launched “Vote for Jobs,” targeting key Senate and House races to defend incumbents like Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and defeat Tea Party intransigents. In a public statement, the Chamber argued “Americans need leaders with the courage to govern on issues that matter, not those who refuse to acknowledge the unsustainable rate of federal spending or consider pragmatism to be an antiquated concept.”²²

In the first Republican primaries in March 2014, the Chamber of Commerce saw the first fruits of its efforts to discipline the Republican Party in the interest of capital.

John Cronyn of Texas soundly defeated his Tea Party challenger, Steve Stockman by a margin of 59 percent to 19 percent. In the next wave of primaries in early May, the results were a bit more mixed. Mainstream Republican Shelly Capito of West Virginia garnered 87.5 percent of the vote, but Chamber-backed candidates barely squeaked out a victory in North Carolina (45.7 percent for Thom Tillis versus 43.6 percent for two Tea Party candidates) and lost in Nebraska to “moderate” Tea Party candidate Ben Sasse.²³

Chamber of Commerce-backed candidates swept the Republican primaries in Kentucky, Idaho, and Oregon on May 21st. Senate minority leader McConnell easily defeated his Tea Party challenger 60.2 percent to 35.4 percent, after spending over three times his challenger in the Kentucky primary. In Idaho, Mike Simpson easily defeated Bryan Smith of the Tea Party 61.6 percent to 38.4 percent, with nearly \$2 million in support from the Chamber and other mainstream groups in a key House primary. In Oregon, Monica Wehby defeated her Tea Party challenger by an almost two-to-one margin. The only setback was in Georgia, where no candidate won a majority in May, but David Perdue—the only Republican elected to the Senate in 2014 without Chamber endorsement—eked past his opponent 50.9 percent to 49.1 percent in a July run-off. Despite this minor setback, the *Washington Post* declared the U.S. Chamber of Commerce “the biggest winner in primaries” who “spent more than \$12 million in races around the country and came through [...] with an undefeated record.”²⁴

During the Summer 2014 primaries, the Chamber’s candidates were generally successful, but there were important setbacks for capital’s struggle to discipline the Republicans. Tea Party challengers were defeated in Kansas, Tennessee, and South Carolina, returning mainstream Republicans committed to immigration reform and keeping the federal government operating. However, the Chamber suffered a near setback in Mississippi and a stunning defeat in Virginia. In the initial Mississippi primary, incumbent Senator Thad Cochran actually received approximately 1,400 fewer votes than his Tea Party challenger. Because neither candidate had received an absolute majority, there was a runoff in September, where Cochran squeaked out a victory of fewer than 7,000 votes—mostly from African-American Democrats in an open primary.²⁵

The biggest defeat for the Chamber and mainstream Republicans came in Virginia on June 10th. Republican House majority leader Eric Cantor was defeated by an almost unknown Tea Party challenger David Brat. While Cantor outspent Brat 10 to one in the primary campaign, Brat won the election with more than 60 percent of the vote. Brat successfully mobilized middle-class voters with his denunciations of “crony capitalism” and “the collaboration of public and private elites at the expense of workers and small businesses.” Brat “denounced Cantor for being too close to Wall Street [...] explained business support for immigration reform as a ploy for cheap labor and demonized the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable.”²⁶

Most media commentary have argued the Chamber and other capitalist lobbying organizations’ strategy was successful, producing a primary season where “mainstream Republicans have enjoyed most of the victories,”²⁷ which allowed Republicans to increase their majority in the House and win the Senate in November.²⁸ Business groups have greeted the general election results with a cautious optimism. Bill Miller, a senior vice president at the Business Roundtable, told the *New York Times*, “There is a pent-up demand for legislative action, and there was a logjam because of the campaign [...] The three issues we’ve got teed up now are corporate tax reform, then immigration reform, as well as getting new trade agreements passed.”²⁹ The Fix the Debt campaign praised the House and Senate Republican leadership’s commitment to tax reform, debt reduction (social service austerity), and to keeping the federal government running and paying its debts. Thomas Donohue, C.E.O. and President of the Chamber of Commerce, was also cautiously optimistic, claiming that “voters made it clear: They want a Congress with the courage to lead and the ability to govern,” and pledging to pursue the Chambers’ agenda of “comprehensive tax reform, immigration reform, domestic energy production, regulatory reform, and international trade.”³⁰

The business lobby’s caution is well founded. Only one Republican was elected to the Senate without the endorsement of the Chamber of Commerce—David Perdue of Georgia. However, there is still a substantial number of incumbent Tea Party Senators who follow the lead of Ted Cruz of Texas. Even more worrisome for the capitalist class is the fact that of 244 Republicans in the House, 32 were elected over the opposition of the Chamber. Even though six or seven House Democrats were elected with Chamber support, at least 13 percent of the Republican House caucus remain independent of, and possibly hostile to, the business lobby’s agenda in the coming Congress.³¹ While the 33 Republicans outside the capitalist mainstream of their party is many fewer than the six dozen elected in 2010, they may have the capacity to undermine the Republican leadership’s commitment to keeping the federal government open and paying its bills, and to a comprehensive immigration reform that will regularize precarious migrant labor.³² The test of the ability of capital to discipline their “A-Team” may come in the next few weeks, as Congressional Republicans respond to Obama’s attempt to bypass Congress on immigration reform with the issuing of Executive Orders that might reduce deportations, grant legal status to some undocumented immigrants, and expand various work visa programs.

Unfortunately for much of the “progressive left” in the U.S., in particular the leadership of the labor, civil rights, women’s, and LGBT organizations, the main lesson of the 2014 election will be to deepen their support of the rightward-moving Democrats. Despite the abysmal failure of this strategy to deliver any gains for working and oppressed people, other than during the tumultuous social struggles of the 1930s and late 1960s, the forces of official reform continue to tell us to support the Democrats as the “lesser evil” compared with an increasingly militant right-wing. Unfortunately, it is precisely the failure of the organizations of working people in the U.S. to act *independently* and *against* the Democrats that has opened the road to the right. The absence of any real left-wing alternative to the Democrats has made the Tea Party and other right-wing populists the *only* viable alternative to a bipartisan neo-liberal consensus. Only when working people begin to act independently of the Democrats—and of their official leaders—struggling in their workplaces and communities for their own agenda, will we be able to stem the rightward drift of U.S. politics. ☹

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CHARLIE POST is a long-time socialist political activist who teaches at the City University of New York and is active in his faculty union.

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The Revolution is Being Televised

IN CONVERSATION BRANDON JOURDAN OF *GLOBAL UPRISINGS* WITH PAUL MATTICK

Since 2011, Brandon Jourdan and Marianne Maeckebergh have been making a series of videos available on the web under the name *Global Uprisings*. Their latest production, “After Gezi: Erdogan and Political Struggle in Turkey,” was made available in late October. On a recent visit to Brooklyn, Brandon Jourdan made time for an interview with Field Notes Editor Paul Mattick.

PAUL MATTICK (RAIL): Your latest film, the 24th in the *Global Uprisings* series, follows events in Turkey over the past year. Why did you choose Turkey as the focus for a film at this particular time?

BRANDON JOURDAN: Marianne Maeckebergh, the co-founder of *Global Uprisings*, and I wanted to visit Turkey and follow up on our film *Taksim Commune: Gezi Park and the Uprising in Turkey*, which we completed in 2013. *Taksim Commune* told the story of the Gezi Park uprising from the perspective of those fighting within the Taksim area of Istanbul, where the protests started. These protests spread throughout Turkey to over 80 cities. While there have been large-scale conflicts in Kurdish areas and Alevi neighborhoods, the Gezi uprising was one of the first times in recent history that many people in Turkey participated in protests. So this was a pretty major event in Turkey and the uprising has changed the political landscape of that country.

We wanted to go back and make a follow-up film that further explored the political and economic situation in Turkey. We wanted to show the fragility of Turkey's economic policies and how they relate to the West's economic crisis and quantitative-easing policies. We also wanted to look more into why many people still support Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current president and former Prime Minister of Turkey. We wanted to show what happened in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests and how the political composition of protests included more than middle-class Turks fighting for a secular republic (as the media often portrays the situation in Turkey), but also groups like Alevis, Kurds, and others facing displacement by Erdoğan's urban development projects.

It also seemed important to touch on Erdoğan's support of Salafi jihadists in Syria and how this was disrupting the peace process with the Kurdish Workers' Party (P.K.K.). The peace process was a major achievement for Erdoğan, since the conflict between Turkey and the P.K.K. has resulted in over 40,000 deaths. The current situation in Turkey is very dangerous.

It was pretty difficult to tie all of that together into a 20-minute film, but it somehow worked out.

RAIL: How is the social and political situation in Turkey different from, and how is it similar to, the state of affairs in other parts of the world?

JOURDAN: I should start by saying that I am not an expert on Turkey, but I'll do my best to summarize what I consider to be important differences and similarities between Turkey and other countries that we have covered.

Turkey has a history that makes it unique. Before Erdoğan, things were not exactly rosy. Under the secular Kemalist governments, there was extreme political repression, including the persecution of the Sunni Muslim population, military coups, the war against the Kurds, the displacement of the Roma, and other forms of brutality that made it no more desirable than what Erdoğan has offered. Recent events have to be framed within this history.

More recently, Turkey's economic history differed from other places where there were uprisings. After a brief recession in 2009, Turkey experienced significant economic growth during the crisis, with eight percent growth in 2010. This made it different from Greece or Spain, where people were battling against austerity policies. In Turkey, austerity was not so necessary, due to the trade-liberalization policies and the privatizations that occurred after Turkey's economic crisis in 2001. According to Aslı Odman, who we interviewed in the film, one factor allowing growth has been the privatization of state-owned lands, mainly under Erdoğan's A.K. Party.

At same time the economic growth has not brought an increase in jobs and the jobs that do exist are precarious labor. The official unemployment rate has stayed around 10 percent, which was where the U.S. was at the height of the crisis. The real numbers may be as high as 20 percent, according to the economist Mustafa Sönmez, who we interviewed for the film. Also youth unemployment is high, so there are similarities with countries that are in crisis.

Also, I think that there are similarities between Turkey and other developing economies like Brazil as well. In both situations, you have economic growth and surplus capital being reinvested into large-scale urbanization, with populations aggravated and displaced by these massive development projects. Parts of the population do not feel that they are gaining from this development. Gezi Park was just part of the complete transformation of urban spaces throughout Turkey. They are building the largest airport in the world near Istanbul, something which is completely unnecessary, because there are already two airports. They are also building a third bridge across the Bosphorus, which will only lead to more traffic in Istanbul, already a sprawling megalopolis with approximately 15 million people. There has also been a huge investment in construction projects and housing, led by the Housing Development Administration, known as Toki. Toki was a relatively obscure agency that pushed for affordable housing until Erdoğan changed its bylaws in 2004 and assumed direct control over it. Under his leadership, Toki has grabbed properties at little or no cost, auctioned them off to developers, and kept the profits.

It is also interesting to look at how these mega-projects are funded. Large amounts of funding come from foreign sources in Europe and the U.S. Developing economies like Turkey have benefited from the way that the West dealt with the financial crisis. In fact, funds from the U.S. Fed's quantitative easing program were invested into the Turkish economy, prompting growth and paying for these enormous projects. So there is a direct connection between the crisis in the West and growth in Turkey. One also has to question whether this is sustainable economic growth or a bubble waiting to burst. The Turkish economy has already slowed down to the point of stagnation; Turkish G.D.P. actually contracted in the second quarter of 2014. When we did most of our interviews, in May and June, people like Mustafa Sönmez and Aslı Odman were saying that the economy wasn't sustainable, and I think that is being proven correct at this moment.

Along with Turkey's similarities to other developing economies there are important differences. These massive construction projects are tied to a cultural identity composed of Sunni conservatism and neo-Ottomanism. In place of Gezi Park, Erdoğan wanted to build a shopping mall that was a replica of Ottoman military barracks. The third bridge will be named after Yavuz Sultan Selim, who was responsible for the death of thousands of Alevis. This identity is also tied to legislation, such as banning the sale of alcohol near mosques, advocating for separate swimming pools for men and women, banning smoking in cafes, banning alcohol advertisements, and other laws that many feel directly affect the way people live.

Also, even though Erdoğan is quite authoritarian, he has been democratically elected. Some analysts point out that this makes him different from a dictator like Mubarak or Qaddafi. At the same time, this feature still relates to struggles elsewhere, because there is actually a sort of global legitimization crisis in process, one that affects both dictatorships and representative democracies. People feel increasingly upset, and while this has subsided somewhat in the West, these rebellions keep popping up.

Unfortunately, this has only led the majority of people in these movements to feel that their leaders are corrupt and has not led many to question the form of the state and the social relationships governed by capital. The movements of the last few years have not gone far enough, and states have been able to crush them, which is unfortunate. Still the fringes have grown significantly as well and while still a minority, I think there are increasing numbers of people who think that it is not purely a matter of political corruption or greedy bankers, but actually a systemic issue.

RAIL: Are there particular lessons—or questions—that you draw from the Turkish experience?

JOURDAN: Over the last years, a lot of interesting things have emerged in Turkey, including occupied factories, squatted buildings that have been converted into social centers, neighborhood forums, and resistance in the presence of an increasingly authoritarian state. The movements in Turkey have not been able to defeat Erdoğan, but they have at least offered the public a different form of politics than what existed beforehand.

While there was a political left before Gezi, it was more or less traditional in that it was in the form of traditional labor unions, nationalist, and Leninist organizations. Now the situation is quite different. This is not purely because of Gezi, but it definitely changed things.

Another interesting development is that the Kurdish Workers' Party has, at least rhetorically, rejected Leninism. This has little or nothing to do with Gezi, but more with the fact that their leader Abdullah Öcalan was exposed to the writings of Murray Bookchin while in prison. In Northern Syria, or Rojava, as it's called by Kurds, the P.K.K.-allied Democratic Union Party (P.Y.D.) has created three autonomous cantons and claims to be forming councils, cooperatives, and communes; it says it is no longer fighting for a nation-state. There have been reports that within these areas there is greater gender equality and religious pluralism. The Internet now is all abuzz on whether this is true or not. I have not seen much empirical data either way. Only a minority of people have written with first-hand knowledge. Most arguments are more or less launched by people who have not been there and are purely relying on information they have found online or from people critiquing the history of the P.K.K. I would love to see more interviews with people actually living there. If there is a way to find funding and a safe entry-point, I would be interested in visiting and seeing what is actually occurring on the ground.

RAIL: How did you get started on the whole *Global Uprisings* project?

JOURDAN: In early 2011, Marianne and I were both following the Arab Spring and responses to the economic crisis. We had both spent over a decade writing and making films about political movements. We felt that the media were not adequately contextualizing the protests and giving enough information about their similarities and differences. Both of us were already working on similar projects separately and were talking about working together on a project.

In late February, 2011, we learned that there was going to be a large general strike in Athens, Greece, the



After Gezi: Erdogan and Political Struggle in Turkey

first general strike following the downfall of Mubarak in Egypt. Marianne and I were curious to see whether the types of protest in North Africa would spread to Europe, so it seemed like a good idea to visit. Also, I was freelancing at the time and thought that the strike in Greece might make an interesting story for *Democracy Now*, whom I work for from time to time. I went, filmed the strike, and also interviewed people about other types of organizing happening in Greece. There was a lot more happening there than what appeared on the surface. There was an ongoing movement that refused to pay for public transit and highway tolls, wildcat strikes, and a large-scale immigrant hunger strike. When I got back, Marianne and I went through the footage, edited the interviews together and wrote the script for our first collaborative film.

Then there was a big anti-austerity protest in London on March 26, 2011 and we decided to film there as well. It was the second largest protest in London's history—some reports stating that 500,000 people protested against austerity, and at the end there were clashes between protesters and police in central London. There was also a failed attempt to occupy Trafalgar Square.

After the protests in Athens and London, the movement of the squares that had originated in North Africa spread to Spain and Greece. We continued covering responses to authoritarianism and the economic crisis. We made a film about an eviction defense action in Brooklyn, the M15 movement and building occupations in Barcelona, the underlying economic reasons behind the Egyptian revolution, and a film about Occupy Oakland. We realized that while there were local people covering actions in their locations, we were one of the only groups that travelled and were connecting this global wave of protests. We decided to do a Kickstarter campaign, since we were completely broke. We then needed a name and chose *Global Uprisings*. That's pretty much how it started.

Since then, we have gotten some small grants and made extremely low-budget films covering movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the U.S., and the U.K. In just three years, we have made 24 short documentaries, and organized various events including a large Global Uprisings conference in Amsterdam, which brought together people involved in movements from five continents.

RAIL: How has your conception of what you are doing changed in the process of doing it?

JOURDAN: All of our films have a similar tone. We have done a few without voiceover just to switch around the aesthetics. We also have done a few that are less about action and more about political content. The main thing is that we try to work constantly and want to provide people with something useful. One powerful thing about video is that you can actually view things rather than rely on a person's description. Of course, sometimes images can be just as misleading or even more so than the written word.

As for our political conception, we have grown a little more cynical. We do not think of political transformation as an event. We've been at around seven general strikes, countless riots, occupations, and protests, but very little has changed. In fact, things have gotten worse. It will take a lot more than protests to change things.

The occupation of public squares and buildings was impressive, but easy for authorities to crush. The large general strikes were interesting, but too short-lasting to have real effects on the economy. The riots that lasted for weeks were spectacular, but unsustainable. I am just a filmmaker and not really qualified to prescribe solutions, so I am not sure what will be necessary to drastically alter the state of the world.

States have shown they will unleash unbelievable amounts of violence on people pushing for simple demands. These uprisings have provided us with a taste of something different, but the stakes are quite high.

RAIL: What formal problems have emerged for you in the making of political films—how do you maintain a productive relationship between imagery and ideas? I remember Godard, very long ago, criticizing *The Battle of Algiers* for being a "Hollywood" film, sacrificing the exploration of problems to the visual excitement of mass action, clashes with cops, etc., so that a critique of vanguardism worked as a glorification of it. Do you see this as a problem for your kind of film? If so, how do you deal with it?

JOURDAN: Our general formula mixes together documentary film with journalism. We try not to just focus on riots or events. We always include interviews with people involved in organizing and try to find analysts who understand the political and economic factors that push people onto the streets. We put a great deal of research into these short films and try to produce films that are factually accurate.

As for Godard's idea, I think there's truth to it, and of course the clashes in our films might seem sensational,

but they have actually happened over the last few years and it would not make much sense to leave them out. In fact, it is important that people understand the intensity of these moments and I think when people see others putting their bodies on the line that is very inspiring, but we try to keep it in balance.

However, sometimes I get a little depressed that our films are a little too obvious and journalistic. I watch a lot of Chris Marker and Johan van der Keuken films and feel that sometimes we are limiting our work, but we make a lot of films and I am planning on working on some films that are a bit more experimental.

At the same time, we want to produce something useful that people can understand. All of our films are free online and readily accessible. We do not want to just make pretty images for galleries or art house films for film critics to pontificate over. We make films for angry people looking for a way to take action and for those that feel alienated in their everyday life. We want people to learn about what people are doing in other places and why they are doing what they are doing. For the most part, the mainstream media are unable or unwilling to do that. We want people to understand the political and economic factors behind riots, strikes, uprisings, and revolutions. We want people to feel that they can do something besides sitting alienated in front of computer screens.

Of course, people will only react to their own material conditions and films do not create waves of resistance. We certainly cannot expect our films alone to push people over the edge, but we would like to take them one step closer or to at least know that they are not alone.

RAIL: Where do you see yourself going next with the *Global Uprisings* project?

JOURDAN: We want to make a feature-length film that is more critical than the short films have been. For the most part, our films are little slices of movements with bits of information about the political economies of the different countries that we have visited. We would like to make a reflective film about the wave of uprisings that have occurred over the last few years, their significance, their limitations, and their gains. We would also try to find a way to place them in the context of the crisis of both capitalism and representative democracy. ☐

Find the films at globaluprisings.org.

Fighting for the Forest:

Ecological Activism in France by Clémence Durand and Ferdinand Cazalis

Not far from Toulouse and Albi in the Tarn (south central France), the ingredients were assembled for a new ecological and political scandal: local government and agricultural industry came together, with the support of the Socialist government, to construct a dam in the midst of a forest; opposition to this project was met by high levels of violence by police and private militias. On the night of October 26 – 27, when approximately 7,000 people gathered to protest the planned resumption of work on the dam on the following Monday, the police killed one of the protesters, Rémi Fraisse—the first killing of a political activist under the current Socialist government—apparently with a stun grenade.

On October 10, Clémence Durand and Ferdinand Cazalis, of the journal *Jef Klak* interviewed two activists in the Zone à Défendre (ZAD)—protected area—fighting the dam. What follows is an edited translation of that interview.

Can you give us a little background on the dam project at Sivens?

In the Tarn, between Gaillac and Montauban, a stream called the Tescou crosses the Sivens forest and the wetlands of Testet. This is a tranquil valley where people come to stroll or take a break, hunt or gather mushrooms—everyday, non-commercial activities, which are even in a way vectors of autonomy. In short, it was a typical “useless” piece of land, from the political and technocratic point of view; for 60 years the latter played with the idea of getting some “use” out of this area by way of economic development. Official reports followed the dance of pointless projects—a lake, an amusement park, a waste dump—all the kinds of projects that require ravaging a territory preserved up until now, to put it to the service of other territories already destroyed by intensive agriculture, urbanization, or tourism.

In 2001, a study on “reinforcing the Tescou water resources” laid the ground for a dam to be built in the river valley. In 2009, a second study was intended to update the earlier one, but the data were hardly different, although in nine years the river’s rate of flow was changed and irrigation and pollution abatement requirements had altered, along with the number of agriculturists requiring irrigation. In addition, up to the present, the project has received unfavorable reports from official bodies concerned with the national territory and the environment.

Why did they decide to carry out this project here? Are there particular reasons why this particular portion of the country should have been looked at for 30 years?

Industrial agriculture is at the center of this struggle. The local administrative council hammers away at the theme that the “small dam” will be dedicated 70 percent for irrigation and 30 percent to “support the low-water mark” of the Tescou. That is to say, they need the dam for corn farming (which consumes a lot of water) but also—this is the cherry on the cake—to dilute the pollution produced by an industrial cooperative dairy farm (Sodiaal, the fifth largest dairy cooperative in the world) and by a water purification station. “Support the low-water mark” of the Tescou means ensuring a water level sufficient for these purposes in a stream that tends to dry out, concentrating the pollutants.

Who is behind the dam project?

The initiative came from a mixed (public-private) company, involving two companies that regulate the hydraulic potential of the whole basin of the Garonne River around Toulouse, down- and up-stream. One of them has constructed many dams and small dams, for different reasons: some were built for the nuclear power plant at Golfech and others to serve agriculture. This company has 17 other dams planned for years to come. Its board of directors includes many public figures, such as local politicians and bankers.

The project is supported by the local administrative councils of the Tarn and the Tarn-et-Garonne, with the support of the European Union.

Opposition to the dam began in 2013, when work was scheduled to begin. A small group occupied the forest, beginning on October 23, 2013. A cycle of occupation-eviction-reoccupation-eviction began, accompanied by violence not always the work of the police or the gendarmerie. Small pro-dam, anti-ZAD militias formed in the region. For example, 20 or so people invaded a farm occupied by dam opponents, arriving in five cars with covered license plates, masked, and using chainsaws to cover the sound of their activities, and beat the two or three people there to the ground. They then smashed up the farmhouse, breaking the doors and windows, and put a powerful animal repellent inside. This act of violence aroused a lot of emotion in the region, with the result that the number of people staying at the farm grew from four or five to twenty. At the end of August, a lot more people arrived, and the farm was not only reoccupied but camps were set up in different parts of the forest.

This started the dance of eviction orders directed both at the camps installed in areas open to such orders—which were reoccupied the day after the expulsion—and at encampments in areas untouchable by such orders since they were private property (for instance, a family of peasants, opposed to the dam, put land at the disposition of the activists). Activists made a point of their presence in such places by parking a camper equipped with a mailbox, which led to a month of legal proceedings until a legal order of expulsion was issued. Dam opponents stayed in their campers and tents throughout the day, because when they left they were threatened, attacked, or arrested without cause by the police, in the middle of the construction site. This one half-hectare parcel, once very beautiful, is now just a desert: there is not a single tree standing, only campers and tents, with gendarme violence 24 hours a day waging a war of nerves with the ZADists.

Concretely, how did the deforestation and the resistance to it proceed?

The work began on September 1, 2013. Gendarmes arrived along with naturalists tasked with picking species to be moved to “compensatory-mini-zones.” The authorities quickly came to see that there was opposition: the preparatory work was sabotaged, barricades appeared, a bridge was damaged. Seventy or 80 people were living on the site, supported morally, materially, and physically by several hundred area residents. Some of them visited at 5 a.m., but most of the locals came at the beginning of every week or in the afternoons, after working hours, to bring food, materials, clothes, anything that could help the ZADists in their occupation.

Nevertheless, massive deforestation began at the end of the month. The work began by cutting down large trees with chainsaws. Very quickly, some of the opponents tried to booby-trap the forest by putting nails in the tree trunks



Gendarmes vs. Tree Huggers in the Sivens Forest

to force the sawyers to change their blades or re-sharpen them regularly, with the idea of making the work more difficult, slower, and more expensive.

Then enormous machines went into action: “choppers” that felled trees as you might pick flowers, seizing them at the base with a pincer, then cutting them with a giant blade and tossing them in a corner in less time than it takes to describe it. Then another machine put the tree in a truck; wood-chippers immediately turned the surrounding undergrowth and thickets into a desert of shavings. In different proportions, these are nearly the same methods used to deforest the Amazon.

In the face of this violence, the anti-dam forces continued to booby-trap the forest by nailing iron bars on tree trunks and tying the tops of trees together (to make toppling them more dangerous). People also constructed huts in the trees, climbing into them at different heights at dawn, to hinder the work of the chainsaws and force the intervention of gendarmes with specialized equipment. But it was obviously too late to prevent the deforestation.

Nonetheless, there was a little country guerilla warfare, with Molotov cocktails thrown in response to police aggression. On September 8, people buried themselves in the ground up to their shoulders to delay the work of the machines. So long as there were cameras present, the forces of order couldn’t go after them. But once the journalists left, it was barely a quarter of an hour before mobile gendarmes gassed everyone and stomped on the people in the ground. One woman had to be hospitalized. Then the destruction of the forest recommenced and went on until nightfall. From that day on, the machines remained on the site, guarded every night, making it more difficult to sabotage the work. All this lasted until the end of September. It is almost finished now: there is only a bit of forest left, due to be massacred shortly.

During this period, after August 15, the movement opposing the dam was made up of environmentalist groups along with unaffiliated people and people physically involved with the land—

On the one hand, there was the Testet Collective, which had tried to fight the dam in court, launched a hunger strike, and attempted to negotiate at the highest levels of the government, with the office of the Minister of Ecology. On the other hand, the ZADists occupied the site. These were often younger people, more inclined to physical resistance, peaceful or not. Then there was the local population, which got going after the beginning of September. Some people from nearby villages joined the hunger strike, others supported the ZADists, bringing food, wine, blankets, materials, tents, and other necessities to the occupiers, and participating in operations. Even if everyone did not share the same ideas, it went pretty well, with a few clashes on various points. In any case, the national demonstration called for October 25 was organized by a coordinating committee uniting all the elements of the struggle.

A part of the local population, however, favored the project, as is shown by the militias that attacked the farm you mentioned.

In opposition to the movement there are local decision-makers, the Socialist Party (P.S.) and the Radical Left Party (P.R.G., a small leftwing party connected with local economic interests), who have held the Tarn and Tarn-et-Garonne areas as political fiefs for decades. There is also the state, by way of its local administrative offices. Finally, there is the European Union, which is financing the project, but which may change its tune because of doubts that the project respects the basic water regulations of the European Commission. Finally, the project is massively supported by the National Federation of Agricultural Associations (F.N.S.E.A.), which favors agricultural productivism,

P.S. in the French government. (His influence perhaps explains why Prime Minister Manuel Valls, his minister of agriculture, and the government as a whole have supported the project.) He is also president of the regulatory council for the nuclear power plant at Golfech, leader of an irrigation association—and the owner of *La Dépêche du Midi*.

Meanwhile, the struggle became somewhat spectacular, with tree houses, the rural guerilla, and people in the ground—which attracted the national media (*Le Monde*, *La Croix*, *L'Express*) and a surge of reporting on this “new Notre-Dame-des-Landes.” The articles were less clearly biased and were more open to anti-dam arguments. But at the moment, the national media aren't covering the story any more: while the work advances and the violence increases, there are no more front-page stories. *Libération* went so far as to publish a double-page spread gloomily

Is the idea of the “Zone à défendre,” developed at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and spread to various parts of France, appropriate to the Testet situation, which has a very local dimension?

The expression “major project” is tautological: from the moment there is a “major project” it is imposed by force from far away and far above on the people here, down below. In the face of this, occupation seems completely appropriate as a political weapon in addition to the traditional ones (demos, organizations, public meetings, etc). It clearly expresses the idea that capitalism is predatory, that the imperative of economic growth, the accumulation of capital, implies the gradual erosion of more and more areas. It manifests the fact that land development policies are only the geographical version of the generalized management

On September 8, people buried themselves in the ground up to their shoulders to delay the work of the machines. So long as there were cameras present, the forces of order couldn't go after them. But once the journalists left, it was barely a quarter of an hour before mobile gendarmes gassed everyone and stomped on the people in the ground.

mechanization, and agro-industry. On September 2, the F.N.S.E.A. published a statement insisting on their right to benefit from the project and denouncing those who “keep France from moving forward.”

It was after this that the militias began appearing in the zone, attacking passing vehicles, denting their fenders with baseball bats, throwing stones, beating up the activists, shooting in the air. At first, they were thought to be peasants or hunters; eventually people realized that the Sivens hunting club was from the start hostile to the project—which makes sense, because the forest was a hunting ground. It may be wrong to think of the militias as made up of “pro-dam” people, because there are probably some who have nothing to gain from the dam, and who are neither hunters nor peasants, but simply get off on beating up young people with dreadlocks or a punk look. It's really a fascist phenomenon.

Is there any solidarity with the resisters from outside the area?

Yes—we receive expressions of solidarity from different parts of France; there have been support actions in Brittany, in Nantes, in Auxerre, a little everywhere. Links are developing: the call for the October 25 demonstration made clear reference to Notre-Dame-des-Landes [a big airport project near Nantes, also contested by a strong opposition] and to the Val de Suze [an energetically opposed project to build a high-speed rail tunnel from Italy to France]. But here what's at stake is not an airport or a high-speed line but a dam intended to serve industrial agriculture. We're trying to keep in mind the issues specific to this area, fighting on our level and insisting on the particularities of the Sivens project and its problems.

How would you describe the media coverage of the movement, in terms both of extent and of content?

At first, there was a lot of media coverage, which interviewed various protagonists of the story, but the articles in the big local paper, *La Dépêche du Midi*, soon became completely partisan, describing the ZADists as violent outsiders invading our peaceful countryside. The head of the administrative council of the Tarn-et-Garonne area, which initiated the project and finances it, is an important politician in the little P.R.G., the only current ally of the

explaining that the cause was lost, that there were only a handful of activists without local support.

There is a classic logic at work in the mass media: they talk about something at full volume for a week, and then suddenly speak of it no more, which gives the impression that it is over. While, seen from here, we could say that everything is beginning again. [This interview took place shortly before Rémi Fraisse was killed, which transformed the story into a national political crisis.]

Construction is due to continue until June 2015. The struggle is expanding, the authorities are panicking, and cost overruns are accumulating. There are also uncertainties regarding the European Union subsidies. If the *département* (local administrative area) wants access to the European gold mine, construction must be completed before June 21, 2015. But, according to the administrative council itself, it has become impossible to meet this deadline, and the opposition to the dam is determined to do all they can to keep it impossible, by inserting its struggle into the timeline.

From an ecological perspective focused simply on the preservation of wetlands, the forest, and native species, there is no more reason to fight, or nearly none. The forest is clear-cut, the wetlands devastated, with caterpillar tractors and bulldozers exterminating all the organisms not deported by the naturalists to areas where they will die because they are not their natural environments. In short, if the goal of the struggle was environmental conservation, we have lost.

Nonetheless, the Testet Collective is continuing its struggle. For there are other good reasons, more political ones, to oppose the dam: the idea that there should always be unexploited spaces where people can go to dream and have experiences, the desire to resist arrogant local elites, and in this case also to oppose national policies of land development, concretization, industrialization. Besides, we should remember that there is a swarm of other dams waiting to be built in the years to come: the more expensive this one is, the harder it will be to put the others over.

So yes, the struggle continues—against the local elites, against the violence, and for other uses of the valley: we can imagine a lasting ZAD, a protected area in which trees would be replanted, vegetables grown, as in our dreams. We would try to bring life back to Testet, in every sense of the word, and to renew non-predatory uses of this territory.

which dispossesses the workers of all control over their activity—here, the development of the area deprives us of the Sivens valley, on the pretext that its life was “underdeveloped.” Development of the area and management of activity: this is how the system of state and capital attacks our forms of life, our ways of doing things and of working, and the land where these flourish.

This is more often a matter of rural areas, which since the 1970s have become refuges for people opposed to the urban mode of life based on mass consumption and wage labor, who have tried to take refuge in the interstices between the large metropolitan areas. A new front has opened here, taking the form of opposition to development projects, each more absurd than the last: airports, factory farms with a thousand cows, industrial wind farms. We are resisting a capitalism that consists not only in the exploitation of workers but also in the “development” of the land, its destruction on the altar of Progress. The physical occupation and organization of such sites respond to the discontent of a generation that is seeking, sometimes outside of cities, a space liberated from money and the police, unions and parties, the business mentality and the statist passion for management.

Finally, the “ZAD principle,” as you say, has the merit of escaping the sterilizing alternative between, on the one hand, the wish to destroy the system (which can quickly collapse into a suicidal Leninism bringing back all the forms of domination we wish to oppose) and, on the other, the wish to immediately build another world (which can rapidly lead to the creation of niches in which one can sleep well, far from the horror of this world). The ZAD, on the contrary, while concretely opposing the system, allows us to invent new forms of life based on solidarity, sharing, collective discussion, and horizontality. ☯

Are we really feeling healthier or just dying less?

Questions for José Tapia

For years now, I have been traveling back and forth between Paris and southern Europe, more specifically Portugal. Since the imposition of austerity policies on Portuguese society, I face a worse social situation in this small country, probably the poorest in Europe, every time I go back there. While the social consequences of austerity and the destruction of public services are probably less dramatic there than in Greece, they are nonetheless terrible. This is to introduce the few comments that follow on the recent interview of José Tapia (JT), “Health and Economic Crises” published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in October, 2014.

I found the ideas expressed by JT very interesting and thought provoking, in the light of what I note empirically when I am in Portugal with my friends. The trouble is that these ideas don’t fit with what I know and observe, with the life and health problems I experience. In his interview, JT says, “When facts do not fit with general views about society, someone will soon appear to ‘demonstrate’ that they do not exist.” That’s exactly the feeling I had reading some parts of the arguments and analysis in the interview. Where does all the new misery, human suffering, and destruction I encounter fit in with the idea that recession does not bring about poorer health? Should I decide that what I know and what I see does not exist?

I am not a specialist on health or economics. Nor am I very fond of statistics, figures, and graphs, although I admit they can often help us understand issues. I respect the work JT and others have been doing on this subject, and it may well be that my comments and thoughts are not on the same level as their approach—that I am on the wrong track. Still, if theoretical thought, analysis, and abstraction have meaning for me, it is because they enable us to explain the reality we live in. Reading “Health and Economic Crises,” I was quite often puzzled, thinking that maybe we are not living in the same world. It’s not that I disagree with all the ideas expressed, many of which I actually share. It’s just that I have the feeling there is somewhere a distortion which doesn’t fit with reality. Maybe facts and statistics are not exactly the same thing.

Let me put my questions the best I can. JT starts by saying that some authors have asserted that “the health consequences of crises depend on the policies applied by the government” and that “health is deteriorated by austerity policies.” To discuss these issues, JT says, one needs to define and measure “health.” Apparently, “the best way to measure health is to measure how frequent death is,” i.e., the important thing is mortality rates. That is where my doubts begin. Maybe this is the best way to measure health, but then it seems to me we are missing something. Is health just a question of life or death? If so, it seems to me we need to measure life too.

Capitalism is not a healthy system, not even a system for life, it’s a system quite well adapted to death and which actually produces death; it is even able to turn life and death into commodities. I perfectly understand and accept that during periods of capitalist expansion, working people’s health deteriorates, due to the terrible consequences of wage labor and exploitation. I also have no doubts about Marx’s idea that it’s the system itself which produces misery and disease. By the way, when Marx talks about long working hours causing a number of different diseases, we should remind ourselves that we have returned to a similar situation today—a recession during which fewer people work,

but work longer hours, sometimes as long as in the 19th century. JT says that in general, “overtime and working hours diminish in recessions.” But in real society, this is not always true: today, most people who still have jobs work harder and longer hours, very often without pay (so that they are unaccounted for in statistics). That’s the situation generally, in countries from France to Greece or Portugal. The main reason people are forced to accept this situation, under modern exploitation, is fear.

The fact that stopping work is good for health is also a clear and obvious idea well worth underlining. No doubts on that either. That is what our own experience tells us, and what we fight for, as individuals or collectively.

We also agree, I suppose—or at least some of us do—that public policies are not enough to improve health. Most of the time, such policies just play a role in keeping people in good enough condition to continue being exploited. That is what’s known as “health.” Public health seems to exist to compensate for the fact that exploitation is bad for human beings. Having said that, I prefer living in a society where I can be taken care of in a hospital immediately if I break my knee, rather than suffering and waiting on a list for over a year to get a simple operation, as is the case in Portugal or Greece nowadays.

Statistics may well show that declines in overall mortality coincide with economic depressions. But I doubt we can conclude that recessions, in general, improve health! I wonder how statistics are produced, what people they take into consideration? For example, do they take into account the increasingly large numbers of unemployed, marginalized, or discouraged people who have fallen under the radar of economic statistics? Do they take into account the fact that many working people now go to work despite suffering and illness (which they cannot afford to treat), because they are afraid of losing their job?

Yes, I can agree that the crisis in the former socialist bloc, its transformation and the frightful social consequences and health problems, was a “special crisis.” But the current crisis of our societies also seems “special,” insofar as we are not experiencing a traditional business cycle crisis that lasts three or four years. This crisis seems to be longer, which means that we are only just beginning to see its effects. The social consequences for people’s lives, and particularly for their health, will become obvious only later. In Portugal, returning to my example, about a quarter of the population is now living below the poverty line (18 percent in 2009), many skip one meal a day, children are being fed at school (to the extent that schools are still open), not to mention the awful food people are forced to eat when they live in poverty. Also, how do we fit in the consequences of ecological destruction, which has actually accelerated with the recession? Is it possible to believe that this situation won’t in the long run have consequences for health?

The situation differs in societies where people were used to living in a welfare state, as in Europe, and in societies such as the U.S. In Europe, the attacks on the welfare state, public health services, and education, and the massive cuts in welfare benefits, together with rapid urbanization (primarily in southern Europe), leave the population increasingly vulnerable, with obvious effects on mental and physical health, which is all the more visible because it’s new.

As for suicides, JT’s statistics seem to me quite accurate. I disagree, however, that they are unrelated to the recession. Sure, there are other reasons for suicide; in Iceland or Finland, for instance, depression has been prevalent for many years. In Greece and Portugal, in contrast, suicide rates have risen very fast with the recession and austerity. I would treat this issue differently. Not statistically, but from the perspective of class struggle. Where people are losing hope and do not fight back, suicide is one option they consider. Where they are more ready to fight back, to struggle, as in Spain, suicide is less present. In a way, sliding into deep passivity and resignation is a form of suicide in our world of living-deaths.

While we’re on the subject of rates and statistics, how should we consider birth rates, which have fallen dramatically in the southern European countries? In Portugal, the birth rate dropped from more than 2 percent to less than 1 percent in only a few years. How can we relate that to the mortality rate? Could its decline be another indication of a dying society? If so, would it contradict the idea of a healthier society?

We surely agree that people are not doing very well these days! True, their life wasn’t great before either, during periods of capitalist expansion, when they had to work like mad; maybe the mortality rates were in fact higher. Now, maybe, people can live longer. But how much longer? And, if the crisis becomes permanent, under what conditions? How healthy will they still be? They may live longer, but in worse shape!

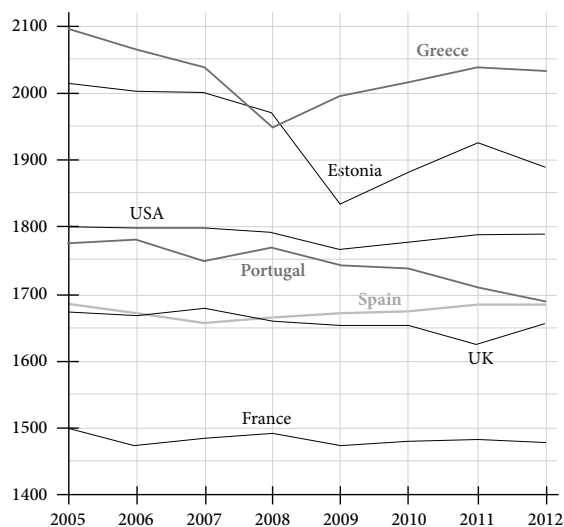
Besides figures, statistics, and rates, we could raise the issue of the meaning of life in this ugly system. Yes, I know, that is beyond the realm of “science” and statistics. But is it really? In fact, I see only one answer. To fight back, to oppose the system, is the only way to live in the world as it is presently organized.

Meanwhile, thanks for giving me the opportunity to think about all this stuff. It makes me feel healthier!

—A traveler in southern Europe

José Tapia replies: Feeling healthier or dying less—What is health? How to measure it?

Traveler (I will call my critic by that name and I will assume he is male) seems puzzled by the assertion that “the best way to measure health is to measure how frequent death is.” He adds that if that is the case, then something must be missing and it seems that we need to measure life too. Well, those who have investigated these issues have mostly been unable to find a better way to measure health than to measure death. Certainly, there are measures such as quality-adjusted life years (Q.A.L.Y.) and disability-adjusted life years (D.A.L.Y.), which are sometimes computed for the purpose of international or intertemporal comparisons. But these measurements “which measure life too” are very controversial, as they require us to assume that, for instance, living one year with blindness (or malaria, or depression) is equivalent to a percentage, say 80 percent, of living a totally healthy year. Therefore, for measuring the deterioration of population health, five persons becoming blind would be counted as suffering a health loss equivalent to that of one person dying one year in advance. Of course, percentages like these are arbitrary, can be arrived at only “by consensus” of experts, and are widely disputed. Attempts to add up disease and death in measures of population health that “measure life too” have thus only produced controversial indicators and unending arguments. This may puzzle those unfamiliar with the field, but that is the way it is. Life expectancy at birth is by far the less controversial way to measure health. But, unfortunately, is totally based on mortality rates.



Average annual working time, hours per worker. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Traveler says that capitalism is not a healthy system. Whether that is or is not the case largely depends on what we compare capitalism with. From the point of view of the survival of humans, other systems of economic organization were far healthier than capitalism. In primitive societies of hunter-gatherers cannibalism was common, human bones provide evidence that humans died at very young ages—often killed by other humans or animals—and life expectancy at birth was very low, just a few years. Things probably improved when agriculture appeared. In the large agricultural economies of the empires of antiquity, life expectancy was higher than in hunter-gatherer societies, but life expectancy was still much lower than today. During the Middle Ages, when the predominant economic organization was that of tribute regimes, populations often suffered major epidemics that could reduce them by half or more. Historical reports indicate, for instance, that in 1353 China suffered deleterious epidemics that in the Shansi region killed more than two-thirds of the population. At these times, life expectancy at birth could drop as low as 10 years or less. From the historical point of view, capitalism has been the economic system that has allowed world population to grow to the present 7.3 billion. This is because major epidemics have been eliminated, so that life expectancy at birth is now around 80 years in high-income countries and around 50 years in countries as poor as Chad or Niger. Life expectancy at birth was probably, in normal periods, below 30 in all regions of the world until a few centuries ago, and much lower in prehistoric times or in periods of famine and epidemics—which often appeared together. If capitalism continues to push human society against the limits of the natural world and toward another world war, the outcome could be a mortality crisis of unprecedented magnitude, but for the moment, fortunately, that has not happened. A society organized on the basis of egalitarian distribution and human cooperation in production might imply large gains in health, but for the moment, too, that is only a possibility.

Commenting on the idea that long working hours cause disease, Traveler asserts that in countries like France, Greece, or Portugal “today, most people who still have jobs work harder and longer hours, very often without pay.” The main reason for that would be fear. I agree that situations of high unemployment rates often force workers to accept both working longer hours and being paid at lower rates. That is a basic mechanism for the recovery of profitability during economic crises. However, Traveler asserts that today we may be in a

situation in which some people work “as long as in the 19th century.” This seems to me quite an exaggeration. In the course of the 19th century the fight for a shorter working day produced important gains and, although things may have deteriorated recently in a number of countries, I do not think the situation is similar to that of the 19th century, when the working day was often 14, 15, or even more hours. In England in 1833 a Factory Act was passed limiting the working week to a maximum of 48 hours—but that was only for children aged 9 to 13. The fight for shortening the working day extended for decades, but the eight-hour day was a reality in many countries during most of the 20th century. On the other hand, statistics of recent decades show that working hours generally increase in expansions and decrease in recessions. O.E.C.D. data show that in general average annual working time (in hours per worker)

was higher during the years before the crisis started. Thus annual hours per worker in Greece, Estonia, Portugal, the U.K., and France peaked between 2005 and 2008, and in 2012 were at lower levels than in 2005–06 (see figure); only in Spain was annual working time in 2012 at exactly the same level, 1686 hours, as in 2005. Workers are under management pressure to work more hours in every phase of the industrial cycle, but if collective bargaining requires workers to be paid overtime at a higher rate, then managers have a strong incentive to demand overtime only when the demand for the output is high, so that overtime is the first thing eliminated when demand starts slacking in the early phases of a recession. Then, if the recession deepens, before laying-off workers, managers prefer to reduce cost by demanding furlough days. All that of course is mediated by labor laws and regulations, and may change between countries. Furthermore, statistics on working hours may be biased by misreporting. In spite of all that, I believe that probably is a general law that working time per worker generally increases in expansions and decreases in recessions.

Traveler often refers to Portugal, which he considers the poorest country in Europe. However, that is only true in the context of Western Europe. Considering, for instance, average income as proxied by G.D.P. per capita in purchasing power parity units, the level of income per capita in Portugal in recent years is very similar to that of Greece, but about 50 percent greater than that of Bulgaria, twice that of Serbia, and three times that of Romania or Albania. Compared with its neighbor, Portugal’s G.D.P. per capita is about 80 percent that of Spain. In 2010–11 the literacy rate of the population aged 15 or over was 95.4 percent in Portugal, 97.3 percent in Greece, 97.7 percent in Spain, 96.8 percent in Albania, and 98.0 percent in Serbia. I could not get data on poverty for these countries, but I am quite positive that poverty rates in some of them are as high as or higher than in Portugal.

Traveler refers to the birth rate, which he says is at very low levels in Portugal. That is true, but the birth rate is also at comparably low levels in Germany, which has been to a large extent spared by the recent crisis. Suicide rates often rise during periods of economic recession at the same time that the unemployment rate grows. But after 2007 suicides rose very moderately in Portugal, and they are at much lower levels than in, say, France or Switzerland. Interestingly, compared with the levels in 2000–01 and in the 1990s, the suicide rate in Portugal doubled in 2002, and then remained high (see table). An aspect in which Portugal looks

particularly bad among European nations is the very low percentage of people who self-assess health as good, a statistic that is reported by the European Office of W.H.O. Portugal is at the lowest levels with 49.1 percent, which is similar to 49.0 percent in Latvia, 51.9 percent in Lithuania, and 52.6 percent in Estonia, and quite below 67.2 percent in France, 71.8 percent in Spain, 71.0 percent in Denmark, 75.5 percent in Greece or 80.0 percent in Sweden. All these are figures are for

	FRA	ITA	NLD	PRT	ESP	CHE
2000	16.8	6.1	8.8	4.3	7.3	17.2
2001	16.1	5.9	8.6	6.3	6.7	16.4
2002	16.3	5.9	9.1	10.1	7.0	17.5
2003	16.5	5.8	8.6	9.4	7.0	15.0
2004	16.3	.	8.6	9.6	7.0	15.1
2005	15.9	.	9.0	.	6.6	15.0
2006	15.3	5.1	8.7	.	6.2	14.9
2007	14.7	5.2	7.7	7.8	6.1	15.1
2008	14.9	5.4	8.0	7.9	6.6	14.4
2009	15.0	5.4	8.5	7.9	6.3	12.5
2010	14.8	5.4	8.8	8.2	5.8	11.1
2011	.	.	9.1	7.7	5.7	.

Suicides per 100,000 population. Age-standardized rates as reported by the World Health Organization.

2010. However, to feel ill does not necessarily mean to have any major health problem. To a large extent it depends on culture, and also on temporary factors. In the case of Portugal, maybe Pessoa and the *fado* do something to do with this gloomy self-assessment; I do not know. There are no recent figures for the percentage of people self-assessing health as good in countries of the old U.S.S.R., but from the early to the late 1990s in Ukraine it went from more than 80 percent to less than 20 percent. At the same time there was a loss of life expectancy at birth in that country, but it was only from 69.7 to 67.8 years.

The world economic crisis that started at the end of the past decade has quite specific characteristics in European countries like Spain, Portugal, and Greece, where the recession has been particularly long and deep. But I do not agree with the idea that the world economy is now in a state of permanent crisis, or with Paul Krugman or Larry Summers, who assert that the perspective is one of long-term stagnation. I rather think that in the past three years the world economy has been in a very weak expansion. That could change rapidly and another major downturn could start anytime. Indeed, today’s newspapers report that recession is now official in Japan. For the moment, statistics show that population health as measured by mortality and life expectancy is not damaged by capitalist crises. Of course, population health and health care are different things. Governments in Europe are applying policies of destroying or commodifying the public systems of health care that have been in place for many years. Austerity has reduced health-care budgets in many countries and patients have to suffer long waiting lists, and spend less on medicines. Fortunately, people’s opposition to all that has been often enough to stop these plans. In quite a number of cases, however—not when you break your knee—less medicine and fewer medicines can be healthy; too many pharmaceuticals and medical procedures are indeed useless or harmful. ☺

—José A. Tapia

in conversation

Robert Gober

WITH JARRETT EARNEST

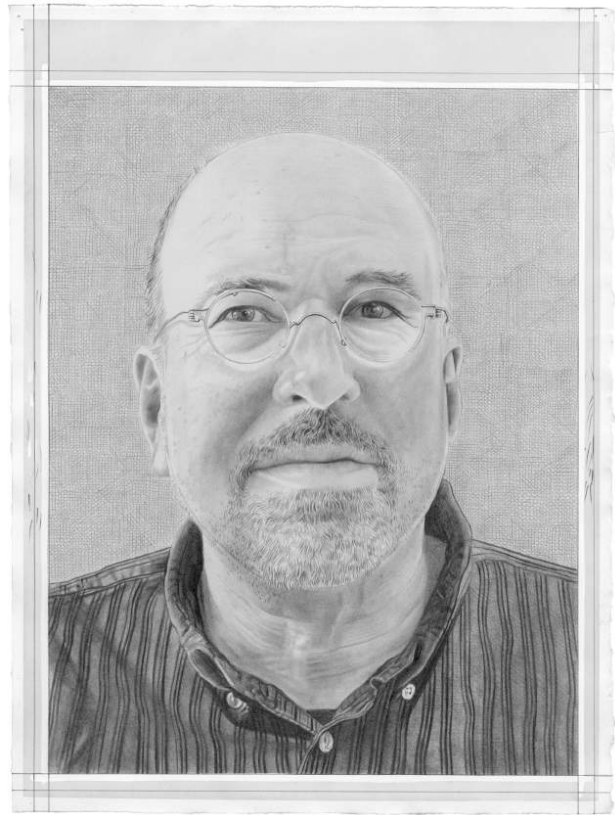
Robert Gober entered the New York art world in 1985 with an exhibition of polysemic sinks that effortlessly slipped between torsos, faces, tombstones, ghosts, and glory holes—animated by the gentle quivering of their handmade surfaces. Since that time his “common objects” have proven a major force, engaging the trauma and tenderness of the contemporary world. His 40-year retrospective *The Heart Is Not A Metaphor* (Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015) brings together drawings and sculptures, and reveals both the precision of his images and complexity of his greater vision. He met with Jarrett Earnest in his studio to discuss materials, art schools, faith, and the nature of metaphors.

JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL): I wanted to start with materials. I found it significant that the drains embedded in the walls in “Untitled” (1989), were made of pewter, which I feel is an especially tender metal: it is soft and sentimental, something that used to be given at weddings, but historically it’s a toxic metal—pewter once contained lead which was dangerous to eat from. I wanted to ask you about the decision to make them out of pewter.

ROBERT GOBER: It was an unusual metal that I didn’t see used much in the art world. It is a metal with a low melting point so we could do it here in the studio, now that they have leached the lead out of it. I grew up in Wallingford, Connecticut and one of my grandparents worked at International Silver, and before Wallingford became the silver-plating capital it was known for pewter work. But I’m thinking for the first time now of how pewter was used for plates and tea sets and things that you drank out of and ate off of, and I’m wondering if I wasn’t bringing that as a sort of dim metaphor to the drains—something going through you.



Robert Gober, “Untitled,” 2006. Blown glass, Flashe paint, aluminum, pewter, approximately 6½ × 13½ × 10 inches. Photo: Bill Orcutt, Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: When he curated *In a Different Light* at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1996, Nayland Blake talked about your sculptures as a form of drag—where “high-brow” materials masquerade as “low” materials. So you have the pewter, which becomes the drain. How did you relate to his idea of sculptures in drag?

GOBER: You rely on other people’s perceptions to help you understand your own output. I think Nayland was ahead of his time. That was a fascinating show—still reverberating. A collaboration, I believe, with Larry Rinder. My sculpture of a piece of plywood was in the section called *Drag*. Writers now refer to that piece as a sculpture in drag but don’t credit his mind, or maybe they’re just unaware.

RAIL: “Untitled” (2005 – 06), the paint can sculpture at the beginning of the MoMA retrospective, is cast lead crystal and painted to look like a can of paint. In contemplating the crystal interior, which has been made visually inaccessible by the paint, how do you think the inside and outside of the sculpture relate?

GOBER: [Gober retrieves another version of the paint can sculpture in his studio and places it in Earnest’s hands.] In this instance the glass is a metaphor for the paint. It’s a precious material. Paint is not, but lead crystal is. The paint can in the exhibition directly precedes the sculptures of the sinks, which were all painted with this same semi-gloss Benjamin Moore enamel.



Unpainted cast lead crystal for “Untitled,” 2006 at Gober Studio. Photo credit: Andrew Rogers, Courtesy of the artist.

ART

RAIL: Ugo Rondinone made those lead-filled bronze tromp-l'oeil fruits, and he maintains that because it is solid metal it has a different relationship to gravity that you can perceive, even though it just looks like an apple. I am trying to understand how you think about that aspect—you handed this to me to feel, and I learned something important about its nature as an object. For people who do not have the opportunity to handle it, does this information get delivered just on a conceptual level—because it says it is “cast lead crystal”—or is there some perceptive faculty that understands its density?

GOBER: That’s why stating the exact medium on the labels can be useful. Thinking about the medium might lead you into a more complex wondering about the piece, not an explanation necessarily.

RAIL: I think Brenda Richardson makes the point that your medium lists usually function as the surrogate title because the titles are mostly “Untitled.” Why is it important to you to keep the title as officially “Untitled” and then have these extremely descriptive lists?

GOBER: I have no talent for poetic titles. I tried. I envy artists who do, like de Kooning’s “Door to the River” (1960); could there be a more beautiful and evocative title? I tend to say “Untitled” or use a simple descriptive title. I know it’s annoying to people and that it creates a vacuum when you “untitled” things, but if I have no interesting information to add with a title then why do it?

RAIL: I read that the title of your current show is taken from Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights* (1979). She is a writer I admire because she is good at something I’m not good at: very precise observation that is hard, clear, tight, often about ambiguous things. That is why I read her, because I want to learn how she does it. Those are also formal qualities that could describe your own work. When did you start reading Elizabeth Hardwick and why did you want to make that reference?

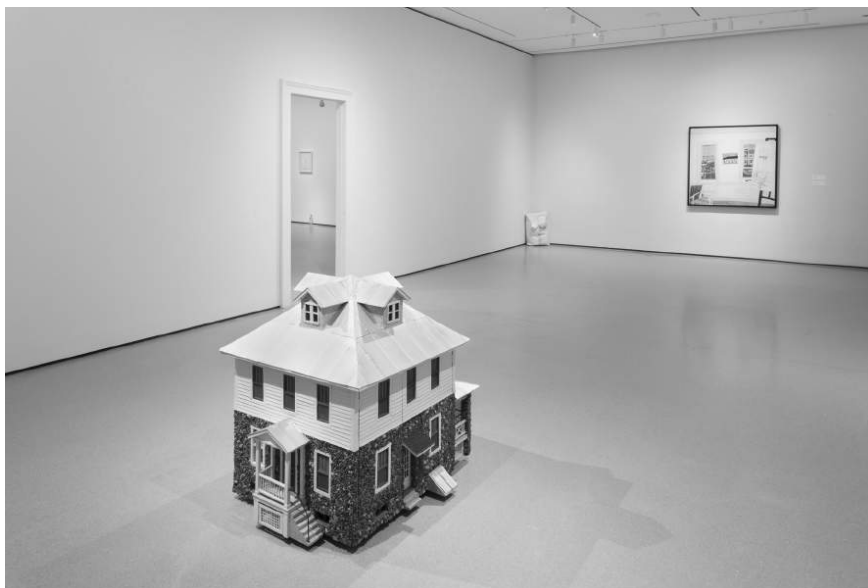
GOBER: It was years and years ago. I think I’ve read maybe everything and then re-read some. It was in re-reading *Sleepless Nights* a few summers back in Nova Scotia that the phrase “the heart is not a metaphor” jumped out at me. It was part of a longer sentence that I think read, “alas, the heart is not a metaphor—or not only a metaphor.” I had never titled an exhibition of my own work, I’d only titled exhibitions that I curated, but there it was. So from the beginning I had a working title although I wasn’t absolutely certain that I was going to use it. I never met her, but Hardwick was such an interesting, vital character to me, both in her writing of fiction, her amazing essays, her involvement in the founding of the *New York Review of Books*, her marriage to Robert Lowell, and her book *Seduction and Betrayal* where she ponders women writers. I was happy to bring her into the exhibition, even as a footnote, for people who might not have any idea of her.

RAIL: That is something you do a lot—retrieve people or things and say, “look at this great thing!” Have you always been drawn to creating those kinds of lineages, or sharing those kinds of obscure things? [*Gober gets up and hands Earnest a small panel—floating on a pale blue background is a bunch of tenderly painted violets—he points to a signature in the lower corner, “MFAULKNER”*]

GOBER: It’s by William Faulkner’s mother, Maud Faulkner. I had seen her paintings hanging in his home in Oxford, Mississippi a number of years ago and never forgot them, and I always wanted one.

RAIL: What was it about them?

GOBER: Imagine being William Faulkner’s mother!



Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015.
© 2014 Robert Gober. The Museum of Modern Art. Department of Imaging and Visual Resources. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

I think some of the things I am interested in—like bringing metaphor into a minimal language or bringing the question of faith back into art—are things that most people aren’t interested in. Artists spent decades getting rid of the connotations of faith being married to art.

RAIL: So, it’s not the paintings themselves, but the context of where they come from that you are interested in?

GOBER: Absolutely—William Faulkner’s mother.

RAIL: One thing this relates to is the way you put together the long chronology for the MoMA catalogue. It seems like a rather straightforward thing but it deals with a lot of art historical and intellectual issues. The most obvious being: what is the relationship of the biography of the artists to the stuff that they make and how do we talk about that relationship without being reductive? When did you envision doing that kind of chronology and what was important to include?

GOBER: Memory is like looking up at the stars, it’s not a linear thing—my memory is that the chronology was not my idea initially. This show hatched over a long period of time. The first years were mostly speculative talking. We were tossing around ideas for what would be useful as a catalogue. I think from the beginning Ann Temkin (the curator) did not think it would be useful to have the usual four or five distinguished scholars weigh in—this was not something that was interesting to either of us.

So one day during this process, Hilton Als, who I literally hadn’t seen in 20 years, although I’ve followed his writing, came to visit. He said he wanted to possibly write a book about me and my work. I was both puzzled and flattered. I told Ann about this visit and as she admired his work and his voice, she wondered if maybe Hilton’s idea for a book could be the book for the exhibition. When Hilton agreed, that became our anchor. We knew his writing would be poetic, allusive, and non-hierarchical in an art historical way, in terms of a definitive staking of territory—and probably something of a surprise. So then we thought, what is the balance to Hilton? I don’t spend much time thinking about how I might come across to people outside my immediate circle but I’ve been told that people say “oh, he’s so private,” and things like that.

So we both thought that it might be worthwhile to be pretty forthcoming about who I was, where I came from, what happened to me and where I am now. Claudia Carson, who is my registrar and archivist and much more—and who has worked alongside me for almost 20 years—began the work. She created an accurate timeline that included early school years, formative experiences, disappointments, friends, dogs, assistants, exhibitions, curators, trips, photos, and numerous interviews with my mother. Paulina Pobocha the co-curator of the exhibition then came in and interviewed her own selection of individuals—friends from my past, artists, curators, dealers, me, and it started to really fill in. Then I got more involved in shaping it, to be more reflective of my voice and how I would like to be presented given all this information that they had accumulated.

RAIL: I appreciated that you listed what shows nothing sold from, when and how you met certain people, romances, apartments, and when you adopted and lost all your dogs. All of that stuff seems equally legitimate information that is almost always excised from art historical accounts. One of the things you said that was being considered with the catalogue was that there is a perception of you as a “private” person—

GOBER: Which I don’t feel I do anything to help create. Sometimes I do things like this, like an interview, because I don’t want to create a false impression of myself as hermetic, even though I don’t have that much interest in talking about my work. My interest is my work.

RAIL: “Slides of a Changing Painting” (1982–83) made me think of how slippery and smart the images are as they relate to each other cumulatively. The title, *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*, seems like you are signaling that you are resisting language, as you’ve said multiple places, but in fact there is a lot of linguistic play in the images. In the slides you realize the relationships:



Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015.
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tree trunk to torso; leg to limb; seashell to ear; with abstractions in between—body to landscape to body. I thought that piece was a key to the exhibition; all the imagery is very much there in 1982.

GOBER: That is why we put it in the center, it worked metaphorically—

RAIL: It's the "heart"!

GOBER: Chronologically it should have been in the beginning but I was dead set on not beginning an exhibition with a dark room, with a slide show you have to sit through, because I wouldn't watch it, I would just say, "Let me get to the show." You ask about the title, people ask, "What does it mean?" and I always say, "I don't know." I still think it's a good answer, a valid answer: I don't know what it means—"the heart is not a metaphor"—because obviously it is, sometimes. It still stays in my mind as a puzzle. It becomes a bit of poetry that is almost irreducible, and that is why I love it.

RAIL: Do you think of your works as metaphors?

GOBER: I don't know how else you would understand it without metaphor. It is one essential way to experience and feel something about the pieces.

RAIL: When you started making work I feel the whole apparatus of art criticism had been about killing metaphor in the discussion of art, and what is funny about the sinks is that they can be minimal *and* metaphorical, which is I think what John Russell meant when he said of your first show "minimal forms with maximum content."

GOBER: I went to a liberal arts college—I didn't go to an art school—so I spent more time in literature classes than I spent in art class. Metaphor was not as thoroughly exiled in literature. I think some of the things I am interested in—like bringing metaphor into a minimal language or bringing the question of faith back into art—are things that most people aren't interested in. Artists spent decades getting rid of the connotations of faith being married to art.

RAIL: How does the metaphorical transformation work in an object? What is a metaphor in matter?

GOBER: A metaphor is something that loosely refers to and resembles something else.

RAIL: Perhaps wax opens itself up for association more than other types of materials. When you are choosing materials to work with is that part of what you are drawn to in them?

GOBER: Part of the task is to find the appropriate material, if there is one, that makes the work resonate in a way that another material might not help it to.

RAIL: It seems like a lot of what you are doing is working *against* the inherent qualities of your materials for specific effect.

GOBER: An example please.

RAIL: The paint can: the benefit of crystal is that it is transparent. And you have used it for its weight or density or value but robbed it of its most defining characteristic, or at least made it inaccessible. I think that is a strategy in a lot of your work.

GOBER: Is that a question? Sometimes the best questions don't need an answer—

RAIL: At one point in the chronology you say: "I was increasingly aware that my intuitive, somewhat blind, choice to make dollhouses was inevitably woven into the challenge of 'coming out' and whatever that meant." I want to know more about what you meant by that at that moment.

GOBER: My dad built the house I grew up in—not that you'd know it, it looks like an ordinary Cape—but it had a deep effect on me, growing up knowing "this is what a man does." If you need a house, you build one for yourself. When I really started making art, which is when I started making the dollhouses, I was a man making houses but what I was also doing was what was forbidden to me as a young boy, which was immersing my imaginative life in dollhouses.

RAIL: I really appreciated all the information you included about your work with the Gay Men's Health Center (G.M.H.C.) and ACT-UP—

GOBER: I have never talked publicly about what I did during the epidemic. What a lot of people did. But something moved me and I thought it was important to put down into print what it was like living in the epicenter of one of the worst public health epidemics of the 20th century and how that might have affected me and my work. I'm not sure that young artists understand that. How could they?

RAIL: At the moment you started making that work, were there certain formal or conceptual aspects that could speak to a gay sensibility?

GOBER: Well, to appreciate the dollhouses you had to get on your knees.

RAIL: Do you think there has been a contextual shift around the work? Do you think there is a change in how people perceive it now at MoMA versus how it was encountered in the '80s?

GOBER: I don't know. I grew up studying artists, great seminal American artists, who were same-sex attracted but who expressed that through an encoded symbolism within their work—I grew up learning from this in a very useful and creative way. Because I became more plain-spoken about my nature I don't think writers knew how to best handle that. A lot of art writers write from other writing and where was history for them there? I think they felt obligated to talk about it but didn't know how. I used to be called "openly gay." Finally, thank god, that stopped because it was absurd—who is talked about as "openly heterosexual?" Sometimes there is actually a review where it is not even referred to which is in some ways progress and some ways isn't.

RAIL: I talked about your work a lot with Dave Hickey last month, and I think his essay on you for the Dia installation in 1992 is very beautiful. It's hard to find, and luckily we were able to link to it in the online version of this issue. Despite his macho persona, many people forget that Dave wrote very sensitively and interestingly about a lot of women and gay artists.

GOBER: I thought Dave's essay was deep and perceptive and maybe hard-won, his observations about me as a gay artist as opposed to him as a straight viewer and writer. I appreciated how he identified *himself* within the essay—because writers as a rule don't want to do that, they want to seem more neutral or omniscient. I think it drives gay writers a little crazy when I tell them that I really value his take; I think they are hell-bent that this straight cowboy from Las Vegas is not going to be the one to define gay identity—as if there is a singular "gay identity."

RAIL: There was something in the catalogue that implied a criticism of art schools. What are your thoughts on education for artists?

GOBER: I'm totally pro-education and I think art comes out of life, so the more you know of life and thus of history, the better. The one thing that an art school never tells you is that they cannot teach you how to be an artist. That should be on their letterhead. That really is up to you to figure out.

RAIL: I was interested in the early show where you and Koons are both showing together—you sinks and him vacuums. Maybe because the two retrospectives had such close proximity, I was comparing and contrasting them in my head and I believe there are generative differences, maybe regarding hygiene—because the Koons have a lot to do with obsessive cleanliness.

GOBER: Some of my favorite of Jeff's works are the *Made in Heaven* series—I love the faux dirt marks on their cheeks and butts in the most salacious pictures. Obviously during the epidemic hygiene was a huge consideration, the same way you read in the paper now about Ebola—how it is contracted or not, and what you should do, or shouldn't do—so hygiene became a life-saving subject of interest.

RAIL: In that regard, I was interested in thinking of your activities with G.M.H.C. and aspects of "care"—what it is like to care for sick people as you did—and the way that your objects look very "cared for," in terms



Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015.
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of the qualities of the objects. Most people talk about this as “craft” and it seems to me more appropriate as “care.”

GOBER: That is a really nice observation. I wouldn’t have put that together but thank you, in a way, for noticing, I think it’s probably true.

RAIL: Walking through the exhibition I was thinking a lot about abstraction, which is something I think about a lot, and when you referred to “Plywood” (1987) once you said it was a “realistic sculpture of a more or less abstract object.” I thought that was compelling. How do you think about abstraction in what you do?

GOBER: I don’t think of abstraction that much in my own work but I do think about it in art in general, and I think where we are with a lot of very young abstract painters is puzzling—historically there was an attempt to understand contemporary consciousness through abstraction. I don’t see it, but maybe that’s my failure. I do find it hard to understand art in its time. It can take me years.

RAIL: At the time of the Forrest Bess show you curated for the 2012 Whitney Biennial I remember going to a panel of art critics and one of them was going on about how appallingly “sensational” it was to reproduce the photographs and writing of the self-surgeries along with the painting. I was incensed by that. Part of the argument was that if you disregard this weird stuff, they’re interesting paintings and as you showed they are not separable. Did you see Bess as an earlier moment in American art that was sympathetic to the work you were making? Or, that by making visible this historical artist that is not being seen it would help contextualize your own work?

GOBER: It was never that articulated in my mind. It must have been there in some regard, because I did it and I put it out there, but it was never a strategy for people to understand my own work better.

RAIL: I didn’t mean that in a strategic way—just that people seek out prior examples of things that validate what they already feel.

GOBER: But how would Bess exactly relate to my work?

RAIL: You don’t think that his hermaphrodite photographs look shockingly like some of your sculptures?

GOBER: I suppose you are right. Sometimes you work really blindly as an artist.

RAIL: Also maybe about scale—they are little, but actually big.

GOBER: They are intimate paintings talking about big stuff. He was a conundrum that fascinated me. I’m interested in occluded histories.

RAIL: What did you mean earlier when you said you were bringing faith into contemporary art?

GOBER: For decades it has been a high priority of contemporary art to exclude, or separate, art’s very old relationship with religion. An interest in revisiting that possible relationship is hard to put into words.

RAIL: Is that to tell me to not ask another question about it?

GOBER: No, it’s an attempt at answering a difficult question.

RAIL: I wouldn’t have had that sense based on the materials surrounding you and your work. The normal aesthetic scar tissue of being traumatized by Catholicism is there, sure, but in terms of a lingering engagement in aspects of faith, I haven’t picked up on that as a priority. Not that I couldn’t see it in the work, but in the chronology there isn’t any reference to a spiritual life.

GOBER: I do write about my first long time therapist, James Serafini, who was the cofounder of Dignity NY and to whom I dedicated the catalogue for the Dia exhibition in ’92. (Dignity NY was established in 1972 to encourage gay men and lesbians to “express their sexuality in a manner consonant with Christ’s teaching.”)

RAIL: I read an early interview in *Bomb* with Craig Gholson where you explicitly said you didn’t believe in God. He says “don’t you believe in god?” and you are like “no,”; then he says “well I don’t mean ‘God’ god, but in some kind of spiritual thing?” and you say, “no, I wish I did.” So, since that time you no longer feel that way?

GOBER: That was a long time ago, maybe 25 years ago. I was young. But it’s too reductive to ask, “Do you believe in god or not?” It was a rude question. Perhaps I was reacting to that, I don’t remember, but it isn’t something to talk about publicly. Did Warhol talk about going to mass every Sunday?

RAIL: What does it mean to be an artist?

GOBER: [Pause.] I think it’s trusting some inexplicable voice within yourself—it’s too cosmic a question in a way, “What it is to be an artist”—it’s trusting that voice in yourself that asks you to focus on an object even if it doesn’t make sense to do in the face of all the other things you have to do in life. It’s trusting the inexplicable—that thing that doesn’t make sense but bugs you and doesn’t let you alone. ☹

Alanna Heiss

WITH DAVID CARRIER
AND JOACHIM PISSARRO,
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
GABY COLLINS-FERNANDEZ.

Alanna Heiss is hailed as a founder of what we know as the “alternative space movement,” and one of the most important centers for contemporary art in the country. However, when she began these projects in the 1970s, there were no established terms to designate her activities. So in 1971, she called her organization an “institute”—now one of the monikers of many alternative art spaces. Heiss had probably no inkling that what she was starting in the 1970s with the Institute for Art and Urban Resources would eventually become the contemporary affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art, and a seminal movement in the presentation, production, and appreciation of contemporary art.

Since 1971 and the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Heiss has curated over 700 exhibitions in New York and around the world.

In 1976, she founded PS1, which she directed until 2008. Her exhibitions there include the inaugural *Rooms* (1976); *Robert Ryman* (1977); *Marcia Hafif, Breaking Color* (1979); *New York, New Wave* (1981); *Casino Fantasma* (1990); *David Hammons: Rousing the Rubble, 1969–1990* (1991); *Stalin’s Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism, 1932–1956* (1993); *Alex Katz Under the Stars: American Landscapes 1951–1995* (1998); *John Wesley: Paintings 1961–2000* (2000); *Greater New York* (2000 and 2005); *Jon Kessler, The Palace at 4 a.m.* (2005); *John Lurie, Works on Paper* (2006); *Tunga* (2007); *Arctic Hysteria: New Art from Finland* (2008), and *Gino de Dominicis* (2008), among countless others. The list of artists who have shown at PS1 since its inception reads like a “who’s who” of contemporary artists both in the U.S. and abroad.

Our premises are simple: we focus on leaders of art institutions who have utterly transformed the institutions whose helm they took.

Our latest interviews have focused on museum directors who had to balance the concerns of a permanent collection with the needs of temporary exhibitions. Heiss never had such a problem, but she did face other challenges.

PS1 is only a short subway trip from MoMA, but in 1976, it seemed a planet away from MoMA. Today, MoMA and PS1 are one and the same institution. Heiss and Glenn Lowry were the captains of this joint odyssey, initiated in 2000. We wanted to hear how Heiss led PS1—one of the pioneering institutions featuring contemporary art of its day—to become an inherent part of MoMA today.

Heiss has been much interviewed, and so our goal was to ask her questions she hasn’t often been asked. We wanted to learn how she came to be a passionate advocate of contemporary art, and how in her experience running a Kunsthalle presents distinctive demands from running a museum.

We invited Gaby Collins-Fernandez, who was in charge of the recording, to participate in the discussion—with happy results.

JOACHIM PISSARRO: I’d like to signal to the readers of the *Rail* that this is the first interview that brings us back home to Brooklyn. I’d like you, Alanna, to take us through this. We are in 1971, if my memory’s correct, and you decide to create that incredible Brooklyn Bridge event, where you bring a dozen artists—some now among the great luminaries of the late 20th century, some totally unknown to me, but that’s part of the picture. So what led you to this, via London?



Mika Ronkainen, “Huuatjat: Screaming Men” (2003), video-installation, courtesy of the artist, DA2, and MoMA PS1. *Arctic Hysteria* exhibition at MoMA PS1, 2008.



Portrait of Alanna Heiss. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

ALANNA HEISS: I was briefly in New York, off and on, for a year or so in probably ’67, ’68. I always had a feel of how the machinery worked, which is important to our discussion—our profession is really all about machinery. I always had jobs—paying jobs: there were day jobs and some night jobs. My artist husband was working all the time, but as an artist. So there was a known quantity: there simply wasn’t going to be any money. He was engaged as were most artists that I knew at that time in some sort of manual labor. In this case, he had with Philip Glass, Richard Serra, and some others, a plumbing business. They did a lot of lofts—illegal plumbing. [Laughter.] That was a very, very good operation. This operation gave me a great deal of important knowledge about price, and also knowledge about people making choices. As an estimator, I would have to give a total quote and we would have to live by that quote. The way I did it was: \$50 an appliance in my head and I multiplied it. So all the measurements that I did were complete nonsense. It was just fake.

Basically, if you were an artist living in a loft in the late ’60s and ’70s, you had two options. For every loft, there was water that would come to the toilet or to some sort of sink. That’s just commercial plumbing at the time. The idea that anyone would be mad enough to change the major pipes for water and re-direct it somewhere else—that would have been insane. Nobody would have done that. People would call Bellevue hearing of such a thing. But the real issue was, if you were going to plumb, for instance, across a loft, a sink, and a kitchen somehow—you could either put the pipes on the ceiling, which was terribly expensive because you had to run the pipe up, across the ceiling and then down the wall. Or you could plumb directly from the source of the water to a new water source, which is a diagonal across whatever rooms you were creating there—the studio, the living room, the bedroom, whatever—at a diagonal. It was the closest point between two points, a diagonal!

So the artist would stand there, women artists or men artists, it didn’t matter. This often led to the first clash an artist had with his middle-class upbringing. They would say, “Well, if it goes across the floor at a diagonal, doesn’t that mean you’ll have to step over it?” And there’d be a silence, and the two prices. I’d say: “Yes.” And, at least 70 percent would choose to have it plumbed directly across the floor at a diagonal and just step over the pipe, because the cost was a fraction of what it would cost to run it through the ceiling.

That was an early introduction to the knowledge that you were going to live a different kind of life if you wanted to function in the art world. Also, the lifestyle at the time was nothing that someone would choose nowadays. Artists! Today, it’s a lifestyle choice that many people want to have, because it’s brilliant and you’re a fabulous celebrity, and you go everywhere because you have lots of money. You all travel business class, usually because your

dealers do, and on and on. In those days, people were people. That was very different. In the old days, there were different voices for lifestyles. The museums were so far away from us in any kind of exhibition machinery. It wasn't even worth talking about it, or even thinking about it.

DAVID CARRIER: So, these installations weren't legal, were they, in SoHo?

HEISS: The plumbing? I've never been involved with legal plumbing even, perhaps, to this day. [All laugh.] The problem with lofts was that in addition to plumbing you needed electricity, and every artist I knew was afraid of electricity. So you didn't know how to electrify your loft, because you couldn't go to a union electrician. That would cost a huge amount of money. Though, people did do that, in the end, because most artists couldn't face dealing with electricity themselves. There were artists who would say to themselves, "Do I have to work 12 hours a day as a waiter, then work as a plumber, or could I just go to school and figure out electricity?" I always wondered why girls didn't do that, because electricity is not so terribly hard, but no one wanted to learn it.

PISSARRO: And so you did?

HEISS: No. I didn't learn! I'm also terrified of electricity, but we found some people who had been the equivalent of "disbarred" from being electrical contractors. They would sign off on jobs. I still have a list at home of artists who would agree to touch electricity. One of the problems that had to do with heat was that if it was electrical heat, it was a nightmare. If there was gas heat, you could run in gas from the street. There was a loft—John Chamberlain later lived in it—that was occupied by a man named Serge when I first came to New York. He was living with an opera star and a bunch of people who were part of the west coast digger movement, which was kind of a pre-squatter type, hippy anarchists. There were a lot of them and there was a huge loft. It was 10,000 square feet. What they had done for heat was they had installed an open barbecue pit that they'd bought at an auction from a Puerto Rican bodega, on which you could roast as many as 20 chickens at a time. They used it as a heat supply for this 10,000-square-foot loft, and let me tell you, that loft was warm! Fabulously warm. The kitchen was not far, so you'd just throw chickens on the grill. But, what happened was, they had plugged this gigantic 10-foot high grill into the gas meter, and were running it day and night. You can imagine the bills! The register on the machinery had the same amount of gas as a huge industry down in lower Manhattan.

So when I first came to New York, I was taken to the loft and met the opera diva and Serge, and all these diggers—which was a culture shock. Serge and his friends were discussing the potential bill for this illegal heat, and they were going to owe maybe \$300,000 in 1968 for gas running this unofficial "chicken rotisserie." I thought, they should reverse the meter and run it backwards. Bingo! That was my first contribution: "Why don't you run it backwards?" And they said: "That's just great!" So they took the gas thing off. The whole place was full of gas for a while and then they turned it around and they ran it for six months backwards. But then, the bad part happened: they forgot. They ran it too far back, into negative figures, and the gas company owed them money. [All laugh.] It was just terrible. It's fun to talk about these times, because they were very fun times. Everyone's youth, as you will discover, is fun—usually—unless they're morbid people who don't have any dates or something.

PISSARRO: You've given a lot of interviews and this one, I feel, is not going to be at all the same, but there's one quote that is almost your signature. Everybody quotes it or re-quotes it: "One of the most essential parts of art is to have fun." Today, in many parts of our art establishment, this is anathema. Why is it so badly considered to have fun in the art world?

HEISS: [Laughs.] Yeah. It makes having fun seem superficial and frivolous. That's why the merger with MoMA, for a person who insisted on having fun her entire professional life, might have seemed to some as baffling, because

for the first time it made people consider the possibility that fun must be taken quite seriously. It's a different order of priorities in museums than it is in other places, and the museum directors who I admire and who were so important to me were not always a lot of fun, but they had other qualities—they had gone against some list of priorities that was important from the country that they were in, or they had taken a list of priorities and had been able to maximize the impact, or they simply threw away the priorities!

CARRIER: I wonder, in a way, if the disappearance of fun isn't an inevitable part of bureaucracies and numbers, and the fact that things have to be organized.

HEISS: I always think of Dickens, *Bleak House*, when I think of museum bureaucracy. The one where he spends all day and all night going from department to department.

CARRIER: In a sense, what interests me here, in this historical perspective, is the kind of career you had at PS1. It is something that no one could replicate now, because now you would need to do the whole thing differently.

HEISS: I don't know that that's true. It's just that people who have the kind of personality that I have aren't usually wooed by museums. And most people like me are not attracted to museums. To talk about art criticism for just a second, I felt that in the '70s, which is my generation, we lost all of our best art critics to music criticism.

CARRIER: That's interesting.

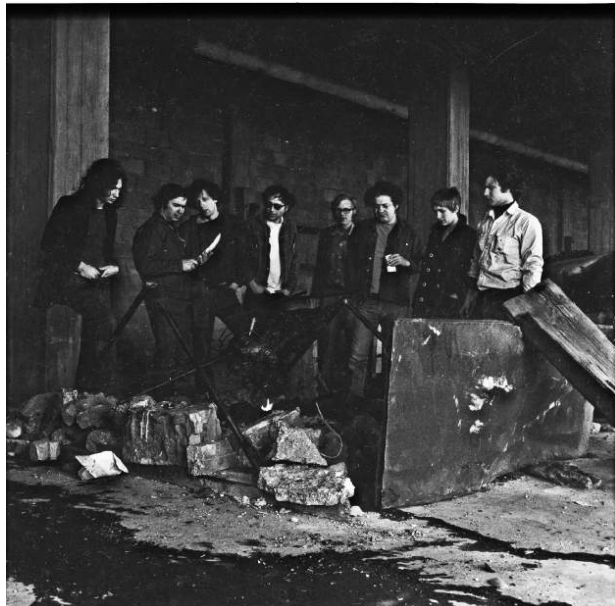
HEISS: Because the world of music was actually just so much damn more interesting and, once again, fun. Working as a music critic for *Rolling Stone*, for instance, your readership was different. Dave Hickey is the well-known crossover here. He gave up art criticism for years, and only wrote music—rock 'n' roll criticism. There were many terrific writers that just went over to music, and I'm not talking about classical music, obviously. I'm talking about rock 'n' roll. No one wants to be a classical critic. That would just be endlessly boring. The classical music world is not a lifestyle choice. Performers have to practice all the time. Things go wrong constantly with their hands, or their legs, or their mouths, or whatever the armature is, and then, they have to have horrible, dull operations. Although they can be very beautiful, of course, and esoteric and people do fall in love with them, they have bad clothes. They always have to wear this stupid black stuff for concerts. (I should know. I played in orchestras my whole youth.) Then, this is the worst part: terrible food. First of all, they don't have very many dinners. Occasionally you would be invited to dinner after a concert if you are first chair, and then would be served spaghetti—always with red sauce.

PISSARRO: What is this gap about between music and art, do you think?

HEISS: Perhaps food is the answer. I think people in music don't care enough about food and they don't demand good food. They're just poor entertainers. Whereas artists have an audience from the world of collectors. Collectors are rich people who like to eat. Name a collector who doesn't like to eat! Do you know one that doesn't like to eat? No. Every collector we know likes to eat, except for people who are trophy collectors—the third person in the partnership, the one who doesn't like art but is very young and attractive. You don't eat anything, then, because *your job is not to eat*.

PISSARRO AND CARRIER: [Laughter.]

PISSARRO: I'd like to hear you say a few words about the Brooklyn Bridge event. In 1971, you came back from London, and you said something very important—you said that all the museums were far away and I think



Pig Roast Party (from left to right): Lee Jaffe, Dickie Landry, Phillip Glass, Lee Brewer, Unknown, Robert Prado, Robert Prado's wife, Gordon Matta-Clark.

you meant, not just geographically, but also culturally, psychologically.

HEISS: Psychologically, they were very far away, but that really wasn't true in the '70s. In England, as I said, I had many jobs. I was a used car salesman for three years, which taught me a lot about collecting, because people collect those cars. It is a form of collecting. I had old cars, all kind of cars, junk cars. My business partner had the Rolls Royces. We had a pretty good business going, and I met a lot of automobile collectors. For instance, I sold a Buick that had belonged to Diana Dors that was in a barn in Scotland. I know, it's incredible, isn't it? It didn't run, but I had many auto collectors who wanted to buy that thing. What you started to ask yourself as a used car dealer was, why would they want a non-running, dysfunctional car, once owned by Diana Dors? (Not even a major movie star—an English version of Marilyn Monroe!) It was a Buick that would not even fit any English countryside road. Then you realize it's because deep in their heart, in their gut they're passionate about collecting celebrity cars, or passionate about Diana Dors. Diana was still alive when I sold her car. I reached her without difficulty. She told me her real name was Diana Mary Fluck, which was on the car registration.

I also worked as an intern at an artists' space—a big studio complex, which was created by Bridget Riley and Peter Sedgley. There I was able to observe the behavioral pattern of artists, who are rare birds, of course. If you see them cluster around something, either a watering hole or wherever—these rare birds, you just wonder: What makes them gather here? What attracts them to one spot over another? I believed then and I believe now, that most artists cluster in gangs, which allows them to spend time with each other and to talk about the work. There are of course exceptions, but the majority of artists do need that back and forth dynamic, for at least a certain period of time in their life when they're developing their work.

PISSARRO: So, why London? And what was the difference then with New York?

HEISS: London is a horizontal city. So it's harder for artists to gather in gangs, because they have to have transport. At the time, we had motorcycles, so we could get everywhere, but not so many English artists had bikes and cars in London in the late '60s. They didn't have the money. So there were pockets of young artists, but not strong movements and powerful cliques.

New York, on the other hand, is a vertical city, and one of the reasons it's always been a fantastic center for the arts is because of its verticality. We can name the places where artists have gathered in New York City. First

it was the Cedar Tavern, then it was Max's Kansas City. You name the place and you immediately can visualize the people. You can go there and they're there. It's like Madame Tussaud. They're there! They're just sitting there, day and night, drinking. Of course, the bars change. At this time in our New York City artist community, there are no longer the absolute identical spots that everybody would go to: it has become much larger.

One of the few museum people who did have a place at artist's gatherings was Henry Geldzahler. He was enormously powerful, because he lived the museum life at day, and the artist life at night. He stayed at the bars at night, and he stayed in the museum in the day—back and forth, back and forth. Curators, writers, artists knew this: they were there, always. Of course, they were alcoholics, so they had to be there, but all working art critics were at the bars constantly, and that included even Lucy Lippard and artists/critics of the time. Drink, drink, drink. Because you have to be in touch with the artists, usually, to write well about your contemporaries. Jill Johnson was a great writer at the time, a kind of art journalist about art, before she went mad, which also happens to art critics. It happens to critics more so than to artists perhaps because critics are frequently forced to ignore their ego.

But before all this, in London, I was kind of an artist liaison assistant. I used to give tours of the giant studio complex. I also used to do a lot of sets for films as a job. I did all of the selection of the art for Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*.

PISSARRO: Really? Did you?

HEISS: The Milk Bar scene talked to me. The rocking penis—I discovered that in Amsterdam. It was a Dutch artist named Herman Makkink who did the rocking penis. I think he had an identical twin brother. One of them did very formal paintings. The other one did these fiberglass genital works that were absurd.

PISSARRO: So, up to the early '70s, you acted as a connector or a facilitator. You brought together people. What was your first experience with the museum world?

HEISS: Experience taught me that the museum model was probably not the obvious setting that young artists could—or should—effectively show in. Dealers were obviously more open, because their job was often to do shows with living artists. In London, the early dealers were people who were very connected to the rock world, like Robert Fraser who knew both the Beatles and the Stones. In Germany, the dealers only showed American artists. But Germany had the great Kunsthalle system, which really emerged after the war, when the German constitution was re-written and they rewrote the whole museum system in Germany. German artists were always very lucky, because their museum system was a response to new issues then, as opposed to the museum systems in France and England. The Kunsthalle system was very useful, and the Kunstverein system was also very useful, and then, of course, the Kunstmuseum, which is where the collective energy is stored—visibly and metaphorically—these things are separately funded and encouraged in Germany where they were not in England and they were certainly not in America.

With contemporary art, the English came up with the I.C.A. structure.¹ That's one that we tried to copy back here in New York. The other thing I mimicked for my first organization here was something called the Institute for Policy Studies, which was an organization that gave a form for investigation by a number of—not so much freelance we would call them adjunct intellectuals. I thought, why not start something called the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, which gives an umbrella to a variety of different positions that people would be taking—curators, writers, and so on. I was trying to set up something that would be functional for a moving group of people. That was one thing—and a moving location.

PISSARRO: Please say a few words about that infamous Brooklyn Bridge event.

HEISS: The Brooklyn Bridge event was odd. It was never as important to me as other things were. It was basically a festival. I know about festivals. I'm a good administrator

and organizer (now called curator). The "curator" label is really used too often; curators at contemporary art venues should be designated "producers." We should remove that title. "Curator" is a horrible title. What does it mean in French? It means like concierge. No! Curators are producers: That's my feeling. Anyway, the Brooklyn Bridge event took advantage of a job I had when I came back from London, which was for a city betterment organization called the Municipal Art Society, which had some tangled but very important connections to the city bureaucracy. Brendan Gill was, among other things, the chairman of this institution and became my lifelong friend and my co-conspirator. As the chairman of the Institute of Art and Urban Resources, he figured out the name, because he said it was so long and inconsistent that the police would never be able to remember the whole name when they would write up tickets. They'd get Institute for Art, but they wouldn't remember Urban Resources. It's not exactly parallel. It was intentionally not parallel and confused many people. A lot of our mail went to the Institute for Art and Architecture.

A lot of our police tickets were for performances on streets—for instance, when Gordon Matta-Clark was selling oxygen to people on Wall Street. Remember the oxygen machine that he would wheel around? It was great, but it got him a ticket for no vendor permit. Gordon did the clock shower film on the face of the clock tower, where he was nude and spraying himself with a hose. We were apprehended quickly, because we were directly across from the federal court building and everybody was looking out the window at Gordon—that attractive half-French, half-Chilean young nude man on the face of the clock.

Anyway, the Brooklyn Bridge event was the first time, perhaps, that Gordon and I worked together and we were constantly scheming about things that would be fun and interesting to do. I had access to the Brooklyn Bridge because it was the 88th birthday of the Brooklyn Bridge so I thought we could do a festival and get city support for it. Except, we didn't get city support, but we did get permits. This is a story that has now been copied for the last 50 years in all cases of performance art (i.e.: you go to the film department of the mayor's office and get a permit to do a film with extras).

PISSARRO: And the extras all claimed to be artists.

HEISS: Yes. There were lots of artists. We always gave names that people could remember, like Picasso or Pissarro. Anybody that was remotely educated would see that this was a sham. We did the same thing, by the way, at the Clocktower. People had to sign in. You'd look at the lists of the signees, and there'd be hilarious people signing in. Timothy Leary. Albers was always signing in to these shows.

The Brooklyn Bridge was something that would have happened very commonly in any of the European cities that I lived in the late '60s because those were very accessible forms of performance festivals. The French never stop having festivals. Their festivals go on all year. They stop, like Tuesday, and then you get to sleep for two nights and then you start another festival on Thursday. The French also like to do demonstrations, they call them "strikes," which are not festival-like, but they're similar principles of organization. They're just not any fun. Then, at the end of the demonstration two days later, you have a festival—dancers like Jules Feiffer, ballerinas going around. And the British, of course—it's too rainy and cold to have festivals all the time. They insist on sitting in mud, watching opera—in mud. Of course, recreational drugs help.

PISSARRO: And there is a lot of chanting and dancing in those demonstrations.



Herman Makkink, "Rocking Machine." Photo by Fiona Makkink.

HEISS: [Laughs.] Chanting. Dancing. You're right—always a good combination. I feel so bad for the Chinese, because their festivals are so strangely desperate ever since Tiananmen Square. Tiananmen Square put cold water on festival organizations in China.

CARRIER: So you're back in New York, but now some years before PSI—1971. PSI doesn't start until 1976.

PISSARRO: Would you say that the Institute leads to PSI?

HEISS: Absolutely. We kept that as our legal name throughout the '90s. I went to the museums that were friendly, which were the Whitney and the Modern. Those were artist-friendly. The Guggenheim was not artist-friendly. Tom Messer was friendly, but it was not an interesting museum to approach for anything because they were always showing all those small, dark paintings from Hilla Rebay, Robert Delaunay, Oskar Kokoschka, Paul Klee, and so on. Not Minimalism.

PISSARRO: Then the closing Hans Haacke show.

HEISS: Another reason, you quite correctly bring up—the Hans Haacke problem. The Guggenheim. You're right. But even before that, nobody really wanted to be at the Guggenheim because of its curved walls. It was very hard for contemporary artists. [Laughs.] It was the last place in the world you could show Judd right. The only way one could show Robert Morris was by wrapping that felt around the walls saying, "Oh well, it's just like horizontal felt." LeWitt could do it, but it was way before those wall drawings. He was making silvery square stuff.

Now MoMA was very artist-friendly, because MoMA had been accidentally taken over by some lively people, namely John Hightower. Because in the John F. Kennedy world, who could be director of the MoMA but John Hightower. He was very handsome and young—and a good guy in every sense of the word. I can understand the trustees choosing him: "This is a new world. We need someone like John Kennedy. We need John Hightower!" He was, like Joachim, a very dashing man. He had a young colleague named Jennifer Licht. She was beautiful. She had red hair and was always at Max's Kansas City with all of the artists. So there's a direct link between the director of MoMA and Max's. She was only an assistant curator, but somehow—I don't know how it happened—she got the opportunity to organize a show in 1969, and she did one of the famous shows *Spaces*—six young American artists.

PISSARRO: She later worked with Bill Rubin, didn't she?

HEISS: Sort of, but I think she was under Rubin and the brilliant Dorothy Miller at John Hightower's office. Anyway, it was a great show, and there were all these young artists in it. So MoMA was right out in front of what was going on. That office made MoMA very permeable.

PISSARRO: Was she the person who introduced contemporary art to MoMA?

HEISS: She was young. She was good. She was strong. I actually saw her about three years ago. I told her that she was my idol and one of the most interesting organizers I had met.

PISSARRO: But Hightower's tenure was rather brief, wasn't it? Who else brought contemporary art within the museum?

HEISS: Well, there was that Pierre Apraxine, but he happened to have thrown a stone one day during a big MoMA strike, thus ruining his entire career as a curator. Obviously, you could never trust a curator again who joined the artists and threw a stone at museum staff. That was his downfall as a museum official. Of course, he went on to be immensely happy as a rich, well-connected advisor to collectors. Imagine what would have happened, he could have slaved away for many years as a young, and then aging, curator. But he was doing something important at MoMA: He'd been given permission to hang paintings in the café, the cafeteria.

PISSARRO: That was the beginning of a long legacy. It's still is going on, I believe, today.

HEISS: That's right, a long legacy, because it was not the outsider's café, it was the insider's café. By hanging paintings there, the big curators—these people would all see these works by artists whom Pierre deemed of interest. Pierre would sneak in these works and put them up. It was incredible. It was huge. He was an embedded curator—embedded in the great war at MoMA. You had Pierre hanging around. You had John Hightower at the top. You had Jennifer Licht.

PISSARRO: So what happened then?

HEISS: It didn't last long. They didn't like John Hightower. They fired him, and Jennifer went somewhere else. Pierre was fired for his stone throwing and banned. [Laughs.] I asked him once about why he threw that rock and he said, "Well, it wasn't a very big rock." [All Laugh.] He should have said, "I'm sorry. I just bent down to pick it up because I'm Belgian—and I pick up stones, because we're a very neat country." Of course, he was perhaps too blasé, as he had experienced many a student protest in Europe. He just didn't realize that you could not be a MoMA curator and throw stones, even if you were only a cafeteria curator. He didn't realize that he was only a stone's throw away from disaster—he came from a great Belgian family and he spoke French, of course. The idea was that if you spoke French you could probably get by at any given museum. That turned out not to be the case.

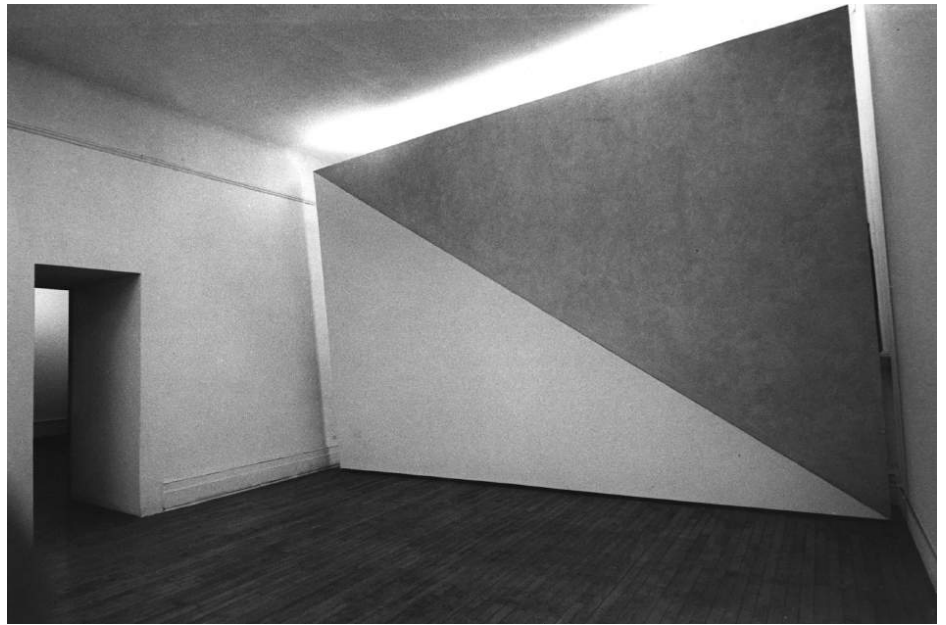
Anyhow, I went to MoMA and I went to the Whitney, and I said, "the fire now in our hearts is to decentralize the city's resources" because that's what the mayor wanted, and that's what everybody wanted. It was the time of the early '70s.

PISSARRO: Where did you get this idea from?

HEISS: I'd come from England where I was trained to be a good person in museums, and the Hayward Gallery and these other places. Here was the idea that museums have many things in storage and many contemporary works—new works. Those can be stored in a warehouse that is in Brooklyn, and there's one in Queens, and one in the Bronx, and you can just store the stuff here and there. Then, someone, me or my team—or working with you or your team—could move it out of the back 10,000 square feet and move it into the front 10,000 square feet, and change it every six months, and people can come and see it by appointment only. This could have made all this new art very accessible. I understood museums enough to know that they felt there had to be some coherent relationship in hanging things—they feel they owe the visitor a coherent visual experience.

CARRIER: Can you explain what you mean? What is this coherent visual experience about?

HEISS: This is the issue. That's why they [curators] can't show anything, because it's only with years and years of experience and thousands of degrees that you can possibly organize a *coherent visual experience* worthy of a great museum. Otherwise, you just keep what's there until you have to paint the walls. I explained that the point of the storage project is not to present the work as a coherent visual experience. No, no, no. You cannot be blamed for not doing it. You're just moving it out. You do not owe anything to your viewer. You just give everything a label. That's it, and it takes care of storage, accessibility—all these terrible problems. It's over, and you're alive



Robert Yasuda Installation, in *Rooms* (1976). Image courtesy of the artist.

in these different people's memories and artists can come and see it. Schools can do tours and the city will go *mad* with joy. When that was completely rejected I talked to John Hightower a lot about it. He rejected it, too. I didn't understand what I came to understand only years later—that they couldn't do it because of the coherent visual experience. I knew they couldn't do current shows with current people, but I didn't understand why, and it was because they didn't want to. It's a simple thing. If you have children, you understand. Why do children not do things sometimes? Because they don't want to. Most museums don't want to show contemporary art. This has all changed in the last 10, 15 years. But this is basically what it was.

PISSARRO: This is fascinating to hear this conversation. I actually did not know this. So museums all rejected this storage idea even though it made so much sense, and would have solved their ongoing storage crisis. Why didn't they take your project? That is really interesting.

HEISS: Oh, so many reasons. One reason they generally don't like this kind of idea is because they don't want to give credibility to artists before they think that—

PISSARRO: Before history has recognized them.

HEISS: Exactly. Each museum has a sense of history, and their sense of history tells them that the Museum of Modern Art is the place that, most of all in the world, has been conferred with the role of a history-making machine. The Whitney is less concerned with this. As a result, it is easier to make proposals, but they didn't want to do it either. It was just too much work.

GABY COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: But at MoMA, Frank Stella got in very young, he got that kind of validation. So, how do you explain that he was so quickly recognized as part of history?

HEISS: Yes, and I wonder why that happened.

PISSARRO: He's the only living artist today who had as many as three retrospectives at MoMA, and not one since Rubin stepped down. That says it all.

HEISS: And why did Rubin step down? We know why, don't we? He made a mistake. He made a mistake because he got carried away with his own theme: the Primitivism show of 1984.³ Until that moment, he had made many other mistakes, which we won't discuss here because it would be indiscreet. But in 1984, the mistake he made that was to forge connections between specific Picasso works and specific primitive works that were totally improper and were not backed up historically. It's very tempting to curators, but certainly for great experts like Rubin at the time, to think of themselves as carrying on the voice of history: Rubin was thought to be god—he was

thought to be god by everyone except people who cared, like Lucy Lippard. He couldn't just say that it looked to him as though Picasso had seen this. No, no. He had to go on further than that and declare dogmatically: Picasso did see this! And by stating things so dogmatically, he left himself open for attack and that was his mistake. So when Tom McEvilley attacked him—

PISSARRO: I would even go further than that Alanna: that show was seen and it has produced more ink than any other show, and more shows and counter shows. It was seen as a kind of race-colored, or race-oriented, thesis by which Modernism was propped up by "primitive art" (whether from Oceania or Africa)—

HEISS: Yes, you're totally right.

PISSARRO: And indigenous, so-called, "primitive art," that phrase could no longer be used after 1984—that whole expression was absolutely axed after that show.

HEISS: It made the whole word drop out of our language.

CARRIER: I remember that battle. McEvilley got going, and was one of the critics who wrote a vitriolic diatribe against this show and its thesis. Then Rubin would reply, but the reply didn't really make sense: it didn't at all address the issues raised by McEvilley. Rubin kept arguing, from the position of his ivory tower, about how many objects there were in his show: whether he placed 150 objects, or 200 of them in one of the vitrines—

HEISS: McEvilley's response was like: "Aha, the bear, the big bear is coming out!"

PISSARRO: But the greatest response, since we're talking about museum politics here, takes place in France in 1989, with *Les Magiciens de la Terre*.³ Tom McEvilley was invited to be on the organizing jury of the exhibition, which took the exact counter thesis of *Primitivism*: this was the first show ever where contemporary, living artists from all continents—including Australia and Africa, from everywhere—were brought together. Was that exhibition a mess? Yes, a phenomenal one! Was it incoherent? Definitely. Was it well organized? Terribly organized. But it set a new tone for upcoming exhibitions.

HEISS: I think it was an important show to do because it caused dialogue and people thinking are always better than people sleeping. [Laughs.] For that reason alone I think it should be enshrined.

CARRIER: And McEvilley only had a minor role in it. He wasn't sure about that exhibition—he wrote an essay for it, but, he was unhappy with it.

But, Alanna, we have mentioned a lot of people so far. Who were you working closely with at this point?

HEISS: Leo [Castelli] was my love advisor. He was very, very curious about current art activities, and we liked each



Alanna Heiss in front of PS1 Contemporary Art Center, 1997. Photo and styling: Lucy Sisman.



Markus Copper, "Futuro Lounge." *Arctic Hysteria*, 2008. Photo courtesy of MoMA PS1.

When I was invited by the City of New York to organize a long-term space in Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan, or the Bronx, I chose PS1 in Queens with the advice of all my friends, all the collectors, and all my interested artist-friends. We all decided that PS1 was really the right case study. It was so huge. It was bigger than any private grade school. It was two blocks by two blocks. It was more central than any place lower or upper Manhattan.

other. He was enormously good as a person who had great instincts about how to survive. He was on my board of directors. I was the first person to have dealers on my board. I had Leo Castelli and Richard Bellamy. It was very much a thing *not to do*. It's clear why it wasn't done. The reason I did it, though, was because Richard was essential to my life. He was a great teacher, a mentor—a stupid word, mentor. He was an unsuccessful dealer, which is why artists loved him so much. They knew he was the only dealer who had nothing—he was completely poor, much worse off than they were.

PISSARRO: Why? Did he spend all his money on art?

HEISS: Well he didn't even make much money. The money went straight to the artists. He lived in his car a lot of the time. He actually slept in his car. It's just mad. And there are stories about him, also legendary. He was often homeless because he'd have difficulties with either rent or with romance. And one person—I think Paula Cooper tells that story, was going to the Greene Gallery and looking around for Richard. She couldn't find him anywhere—and she realized there was a foot sticking out from underneath the desk. And there he was, he had fallen asleep under his desk because he'd been up working all night. He was really a very wonderful person. At first I had to follow him for a while before he would talk to me. I just followed him around. I follow people; I find that's a good way to meet people. When you want to meet people, just follow them and stalk them and eventually they give in.

PISSARRO: Were you criticized a lot for bringing two art dealers on your board?

HEISS: Yeah, people thought that was a bad idea—only serious people. But, by the way, they stayed on through the '80s and '90s. By MoMA time, there weren't any dealers on the board.

CARRIER: I've heard that repeatedly from different people, and I've never understood because it all seems a part of one system. The idea that someone's outside of it because they're a dealer or a curator doesn't make any sense.

HEISS: That's one of the things that we're talking about in this interview: where are the disguises and who has the masks and what are they masking? The museum, the collector, the dealer, the artist. The museum used to have—when I grew up in this New York art world, not

as a child, as a grown-up—these positions I thought were very fixed and solidly set, and I kept asking and finding out who they were: who was who in this art world? My best friend in all the world was James Elliott, who was director of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

PISSARRO: The oldest museum in America.

HEISS: Yes, the oldest museum in America. A very, very intelligent man from a good family—but an American family, from Washington State. Then he came to the Wadsworth Atheneum where he lived with his then-wife, Judith, who was a beautiful ex-model. And then they split up, and he went to the Berkeley Museum. I went out with him to San Francisco because he was my best friend. Went with Donald Droll who was another good friend of ours, who was a dealer. We went out together to see if Jim could be director of the Berkeley Museum. And our conclusion was absolutely not. It was just an odd museum, with weird architecture.

PISSARRO: Let's go back to your accomplishments. Take us through one of the exhibitions that counted most for you.

HEISS: The last show that I was organizing—before 2008 happened and all my sponsors wanted to run away, sponsors either jumped out windows or closed their businesses or whatever—was called *Spectacle*. It was about these gigantic art pieces which are *spectacles*. It examined the crossover into the art world of gigantic experiments in technology. I was trying to narrow it down to the spectacle in Asia because there, the idea of spectacle is very sought after and it is a completely legitimate artistic enterprise—unlike in our world. And it is at the forefront, technologically. The fireworks, everything. The larger the piece, the more it moves, the better! Whereas in our strict Protestant, Calvinist world, art that moves is generally bad art. Plug it in: bad art. Moving around: bad art. Except then you get eccentricities like Robert Breer (1926–2011), who made art that looked like a minimal piece of sculpture but had invisible wheels underneath. And then, this happened at MoMA actually, he left it overnight, he would turn it on and it would move by itself. Guards came back the next day, and all of it had moved. *[Laughter.]*

PISSARRO: I really wish I'd seen that.

HEISS: Oh, yes. Look up Breer and his moving art piece. I always wanted to do a really big show on this guy.

CARRIER: It's very moving! *[Laughter.]*

HEISS: Well, kinetic art is bad art. That was my last show in England. I worked on kinetic art. Tom Finkelppearl, who's now our Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner, my good friend, and a curator and museum director for many years, loved kinetic art—which I hated. My usual policy is to try to choose people to work with who are really smart people, who like and know more about something than I do. At PS1 that was essential to open up the whole place to different points of view.

PISSARRO: It's a little bit of *[Rail publisher]* Phong Bui's strategy.

HEISS: It's very much Phong Bui, and very much the *Rail* strategy completely. That's one reason Phong and I love each other. In fact, Phong was working with me on the *Spectacle* show. Phong and I traveled to Asia together. I was with him the first time he went back to Vietnam.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: I'm interested in what you started saying about the different masks people wear in the art world, and the sort of four-cornered archetypal situation of these roles; I'm wondering what those roles are for you. Thinking about the difference between the curator's mask and the artist's mask and the producer's mask in this sense—how you see them reacting to each other. I don't know if that's too clinical a question.

PISSARRO: No, that's a great question, I think. There's been such a shift in the past decade or so.

HEISS: A huge shift. It's a shift that today keeps evolving: all the roles keep changing, the entire set of the play is changed. All the costumes have changed and all the masks have changed. The museums can hardly maintain any mask at all. What's left? Is there any possible role to keep now, today? The shows happen too late, they don't have any money, and they have to be events that entertain the board members, but without causing too much trouble.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: Where before you had conservative institutions and unaffiliated people interested in art working against them, now you have those same interested power structures and—

HEISS: Now you have silly people. *[Laughs.]* Well, hopefully what you have are not people too silly to get a real job, but hopefully the people you hire are very good, very young people, people who don't want to sell art, and are not interested in retail. Museums are the only place now that you can hire people who are not interested in retail. The real relationship now is between the collector and the dealer. It's just too much money involved to have museums, in their older figuration, play a serious role. There is just too much money at stake, and sadly the museum has had to take a back seat.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: Except for artists' reputations, no? Ideas about a career or something like this, they still matter?

HEISS: Which do you think would be most important to an artist? The news that his work had been bought in a collection by, let's just choose anyone—Steve Cohen, for instance—or, that this artist was featured in an important article about him in *Artforum*? Which one do you think he would choose?

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: It depends on how old the artist is and where they want to go and how they're thinking about it. Because thinking about a mid-career artist, you know, an *Artforum* review for them is probably less important than their collection placement, or their mid-career retrospective.

HEISS: In 2014, I don't think it matters at all!

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: Okay.

HEISS: It's only who is collecting. It's only money. I think the money is the thing—it's easy to rail against money—oh money, money! Bad, bad! But, it doesn't examine the situation, just crazy, that this has happened. For some reason, contemporary art has become the sexiest, most enviable, attractive thing in the entire art community. It's much more important that you're buying a great John Currin than if you're buying a new condo, or whatever: acquiring great art is just more important! You walk into a room and you say: "Oh my god! Pissarro, look at these Tony Oursler works! I don't know how he got them, they weren't for sale!"

Now who is going to even say such a thing about a collector who just bought an incredible drawing from some 18th-century jackass? No one would even introduce him to anyone!

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: Okay.

HEISS: Yes, that's okay, because there's been a tremendous injection of money into our community from outside. People came from outer space with a big, gigantic injection of cash and said, "Where should we do this?" They just chose contemporary art and said: "Push, push, push!" Glenn [Lowry, director of MoMA] looks like a genius for encouraging contemporary art: it makes you look like a genius for writing about it. It makes me look like an idiot for never having collected a single thing, and not even knowing collectors who do it now. The discussion is that the situation has changed so radically that these masks that used to describe our actions are no longer relevant. They can be put in the closet.

PISSARRO: Or, have they not become interchangeable, maybe?

HEISS: For me, the change was when I realized that museums had lost the game. I never went to art fairs, because I figured they were immoral. Anybody who worked at PS1 and who went to an art fair would be fired. [Laughs.] I believed so much in this that when I was giving an award from the Illy coffee company to James Rosenquist, who designed the Illy logo, they wanted me to give it at the art fair, here in New York. This was about 10 years ago. I said I would never set a foot in an art fair. So, they built a kind of ramp over, so that I could go to the VIP luncheon award. That's how strongly I felt about art fairs. But I finally gave in.

CARRIER: So, tell us how you saw this radical change take place, and how you positioned yourself towards this huge shift.

HEISS: In the early '70s when I found out that museums didn't really want to show contemporary art I tried to look at different kinds of venues that showed art of my time and figure out how you would get permission to use them for shows. All I do is shows. I'm not interested in collections. I'm only minimally interested in storage; my true love is real estate. I developed a kind of manual of how to use buildings for art shows. I would develop a building that was in different kinds of ownership. There was a privately owned building called 10 Bleeker Street where I did a couple of shows. Then there was the city owned Clocktower building, with us perched at the top and a whole mesh of city affairs and city agencies below. Then there was the Coney Island Sculpture Factory. This was a federally owned building, which by the time I got it became city-owned; this was where the Idea Warehouse germinated, and a couple more such buildings followed in its wake.

PISSARRO: But tell us what was so different about all these buildings? About the Idea Warehouse, for instance?

HEISS: The Clocktower was for art which could be reflected on, or if you want, to be seen in a utopian situation: Jim Bishop, Joel Shapiro, Richard Tuttle. The shows I organized at 10 Bleeker Street were shows about sculpture: Nancy Holt, Richard Nonas. The Coney Island Sculpture Factory was different: it was a production space where you could make your own very big sculptures. It was John Chamberlain, it would have been Richard Serra. And the Idea Warehouse gallery was specifically about performance art. Paula Cooper was the most hospitable to it. People would do fantastic things for a few days in between exhibitions.

But then I said to myself: What if these performance people would get a whole month to do this! And, at the end of the month, they would give two days of performances, but they would have 28 days to develop the whole scenery. So here, the Idea Warehouse was born! You have an idea; you have a month to prepare it, and then, you give a public performance. I chose 12 artists. The first one was Philip Glass. The last one—number nine—was Charlemagne Palestine. We didn't get to numbers 10, 11, or 12 because the place caught fire due to an unfortunate mistake by Charlemagne. So the Idea Warehouse became very, very, very famous because it had this strange time limit. Anthony McCall did one of his great pieces there.

But, to go back to your question, each one of these spaces had a different kind of ownership and a different kind of program and then at the end of five years I thought, well this is fine, guerrilla warfare everywhere and over everything: Time to move on! People were starting alternative spaces all across the country. I helped with many of them and I was super happy with their proliferation. Then I realized that the last and ultimate challenge for me was a museum! It was back to the very beginning and for me, it suddenly made full sense. If you're a guerilla warrior, it's really fun for a while and you wear good outfits, and get yourself good boyfriends; but museums are about a whole different business. Museums are about long-term bureaucracy. Where can you run a museum that lays down a foundation for long-term activity, and that is still a good player? That became my new challenge.

CARRIER: So, it sounds as though you went full circle.

HEISS: Well PS1 was the perfect transition. When I was invited by the City of New York to organize a long-term space in Brooklyn, Staten Island, Manhattan, or the Bronx, I chose PS1 in Queens with the advice of all my friends, all the collectors, and all my interested artist-friends. We all decided that PS1 was really the right case study. It was so huge. It was bigger than any private grade school. It was two blocks by two blocks. It was more central than any place lower or upper Manhattan. We didn't dream it would take 40 years for people to go into Long Island City because it was seven minutes away from MoMA. We made plenty of mistakes. It was an experiment in how to run a very large space and swing being a museum without a having collection. There was never an idea of a collection. Marcia Tucker had all these dreams of a collection for the New Museum. Any museum is a museum, she said. I didn't care. I refused the invitation to join the American Museum Association. I refused the invitation to be listed among the American museums. And I was stupid to do this.

PISSARRO: Why?

HEISS: Because it would have solved so many problems just very simply. You realize that for 10 years we were listed in the *New York Times* under "other." How many people go to "other"? Power is power. Why not go to the American Museum Directors Association and lean on their power? Those people are all bored. You could be the entertainment for museum directors all over the world. I didn't do it.

PISSARRO: But, you heard this more than we did—and here I'm being the devil's advocate more than I want to be—because I actually believe so many great things came out of your staunch resistance to give in to the lure of the

museum establishment. And of course, you've heard all about the effect of the corporatization of PS1, the white box, whatever we want to call it. I remember the day it was announced that PS1 was about to fuse with MoMA—

HEISS: I know that was really a dark day, for some who thought it was giving up. After success as an outlaw, you join the sheriff team. (The foundation of most western films.) That wasn't how I saw it. For me it was a total win. I saw it only in terms of listings. The *Times* changed their listings to accommodate us. PS1 is the only successful radical museum in the world in those terms—it was never started as an alternative space. It was a completely different perspective. Every single thing I did was *with* or *against* the museum world. Alternative spaces were something else. It was like play, it was like having fun with artists doing festivals. PS1 was very serious. How do you choose good curators that don't have proper accreditations? How do you choose curators who work in a bar? How do you choose your choosers? I tried to formulate all such questions—over 40 years I had fun with reformulation. At the end of that, in 2000, I thought, we're so strong. We don't have any real debt. We have a \$100,000 debt—that's nothing. We have a fabulous board, a very powerful board. We have artists lined up around the world. What's left? What was interesting then was to come up against the Museum of Modern Art—the ultimate challenger from the very beginning! What are we today? Can we work together? The greatest museum of modern art in the world, by my estimation, and PS1, which didn't have to be the greatest—greatest is a common word—but it was certainly the largest and certainly the strongest anti-museum. What did all that mean? What could that confrontation mean—with what possible results? I thought, let's talk about this! And from the beginning, Glenn and I knew right away that in 10 years, these two organizations could be interestingly matched.

PISSARRO: As I saw you and Glenn in real situations many times, it seemed to me that you were very good friends. I can remember no times when Glenn was happier than when he was at PS1 meetings. I remember, for instance, when you offered him a chance to curate his own show. Can you comment on that relationship, which was a very unusual one?

HEISS: You know I really liked Glenn, and I think he is very bright, and I thought he had very good eyes. I mean, he has great eyes. I think he's better than very good, because he also has huge ears. He hears everything. He could hear us sneeze: he's probably listening to us right now. [Laughs.] But, I thought the curators would be more interested in playing with us; in getting engaged in the same things I was interested in. But I don't think they saw the fun and I don't think they saw the shows we were doing as being important. I'm not sure, I don't know what they saw. The lively curatorial exchange that I anticipated between MoMA and PS1 didn't happen immediately.

PISSARRO: But in terms of the public, I think the recent public has been more about PS1 than about the traditional MoMA model; and in a way that interchange and this new situation have led more to the PS1-ification of MoMA than to the MoMA-ification of PS1. Would you agree with that?

HEISS: I agree completely. And I think that Glenn and I working together during those years, watching each other: that was fun! I mean the curators with the great power and the great history of making shows, they weren't tantalized by this opportunity, were they? You, Joachim, were one of the few curators who even wanted to do a show there. Klaus [Biesenbach, present director of PS1, and successor to Alanna Heiss] and I worked together at PS1 for over 15 years and he was crucial to the project. Klaus took a position at MoMA so that MoMA could learn to trust him and I saw him as an embedded curator. His actions now reflect his own dreams at PS1. I'm just so happy he's putting the time into PS1 to reflect his own dreams, which are different than mine.

PISSARRO: Why do you think MoMA curators didn't feel more inclined to be more closely associated with PS1?

HEISS: They were all good students, that's true across the board. Maybe not the best, but they were all good students. And then they did something shining and wonderful and made people believe in them. Eventually somehow, as if their fortunes were controlled by Chinese fortune cookies, they end up at MoMA, with all this talent. And then, they have to go through this servitude, this training. They get to go to board meetings and watch their seniors behave with collectors, before they become seniors themselves. Eventually, they get up to the top spot and what's left then? There's the space they have but they don't really get any space to do a show. It's like every three or four years you get to propose a show. What can you do in this structure if you are a show producer? You can only be happy in that job if you don't really want to do shows, if you really want to write books or something else.

CARRIER: This is the first time that I hear the curatorial profession described this way. Tell us more about how you see this parallel between curator and producer.

HEISS: Klaus, for example, is a brilliant show producer. I worked with him for 15 years producing shows. He worked with me, he proposed installations to me, I changed them around, and the same in reverse; he really knew how to produce shows. He's a show machine. If you check back over the last five years, it would be interesting to add up all his exhaustive work and see that he has produced as many as 50 percent of the great shows presented at MoMA. I bet Klaus is just always in there. He's German: he's there in the morning; he's there at night. He's enormously hardworking and then, he doesn't have a private life, which is another plus. [Laughs.] You can't be a show producer of any major institution in the world and have a private life. The phone calls come day and night. You can't hand it off to a committee, which means you can't be a curator with a happy home life at PS1 with a big salary and have assistants. That's just not how it works.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: The way you speak about your own life experiences seems to reflect a great respect for the unpredictable elements of life, which end up influencing both one's own course and the way in which you relate to art. On the other hand, you referred to one of the obstacles of trying to set up this warehouse space being the responsibility to viewership that museums with older collections seem to have. So how do you, Alanna, relate to viewers, or art-goers—people who have lives outside of the art world, who come to museums to see certain things?

HEISS: This is a very good question. Jim Elliott my great museum director friend, whose model I follow (even though he is no longer with us)—and really, I pattern my life after him—he used to say to me, “Alanna, there are differences between different kinds of museums: There's something called a full service museum; there's something else called a university museum; and there's something called a collector's museum.”

And going through life, I recognize that, and I understand that, and did get to see the best in every category. Honestly, it took a long time for me to feel any responsibility to any viewer. And, that's why, in everything I did, I was responsible first of all to the artists, and then to a small magic circle in the art community around the world. I had no responsibility to the press. I certainly had no real responsibility to collectors. I had only one responsibility: to make interesting shows.

Why did that change? That changed because PS1 was falling down. All the early repairs we put in from artists' and supporters' money, and some city money, but very little. Despite all these efforts, things were starting to deteriorate. The patchwork of water systems, one problem led to another: it was never-ending. Heat: people had to wear fur coats and gloves to work there, through every winter. I got a grant from the city to restore PS1 and it was large: it was like \$5 million. This is nothing in city grants but to me it was a lot. It was a huge loan. We planned carefully how we would build the roof, how we would put the services in and connect the water. Once I took public money of that size I had acquired a new

responsibility. The responsibility was to allow people to get in. Before that, it was a night museum. It was a club museum. Just getting in was the museum. You were lucky to get in. We never had to publicize our openings. Screw you. Try to get in. That's all it was. Of course we were open on nights and weekends and were closed all summer. I never worried about it. I didn't worry about mass audiences. We did it, and we didn't worry about it. We did all this for years in the '80s and the early '90s but I didn't take it as a mission. But taking that public money, that saved PS1, made me change my mission. It was a matter of honor. I mean, I'm exaggerating of course with hours. We did have invitations and hours and all that, but it wasn't the primary thing. Once we took public money, I had to say: these are tax dollars. It sounds crazy, but I had to do it. Suddenly I thought, I'd better think now about who can come in here and at what time. Before that, the entire museum was adjusted more or less to my schedule: noon to 8 or 9 pm.

CARRIER: And there was no financial alternative than to take any city money. No donors.

HEISS: Donors were just like us. They didn't get up until noon. My contract with the museum stipulated that I never had to be anywhere before noon! That is the only remaining part of my early mission: I still can't be anywhere before noon! But, suddenly, it became super important to adjust to an outside viewer who'd be coming, an innocent civilian. We just changed everything to, let's say, become an accessory to a new kind of crime. We began publishing our regular hours; we had done something like that before, but never seriously. We promoted education projects in a way that we never did before. Guards, the whole damn nine yards.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: It's interesting to hear you talk about these vast changes. It seems straightforward to talk about the particular world of contemporary art you describe as being so isolated from life in general, or specifically here in New York.

HEISS: Well, I started in '71 and '72. The big issue was mailing list or no mailing list. Here's the deal: The total number of people interested in contemporary art in the world was similar to the entire number of people that were interested in, say, higher chemistry. You publish a magazine on higher chemistry four times a year and you could hand address those magazines by yourself, 200 copies. And that would be just the total world number of people interested in such a specialized discipline. It was the same thing for the contemporary art world at the time: for a New York-based exhibition, at the time, how many people would be interested? I don't know, for somebody like Red Grooms, maybe 500 people. But for normal shows Richard [Tuttle] noticed that I decided no more than 200 anywhere. We never had to print more than 200 invitations. We never had to print more than 200 catalogues. And we also had phone numbers for every single one of those 200 people. So I had a Rolodex, one for NYC with 200 people on it, and I would call them all up personally, and tell them when we were open. And I had another that had 2,000 people I couldn't call because it was too expensive. But, I could write to them. I could hand address them, which I did, or I'd pay somebody to do it.

PISSARRO: So, this might be a perfect place to reflect back on the quantum leap that occurred, for you, and for PS1 at large, from the 1970s to today. Let us look at your legacy: I know Klaus very well and we've known each other for a long time, but I wasn't sure how you felt about Klaus—who in many ways was your protégé—taking over your role, and becoming the new director of PS1. What did this mean to *your own* legacy to an institution you actually created?

HEISS: I was just so happy. In fact, you remember that for one year after I left there wasn't anyone appointed to that position, and that was quite risky. However, one of the major reasons I was interested in merging with MoMA was to see that there would be new ideas and sustenance for this beloved place, past my ability. I'm just thrilled now to see that it has worked out, that Klaus is the head of PS1. As a founder of an institution,

you have nightmares. My particular nightmare was to see that place turn into one of those musky art centers. To another, it's not exactly a nightmare but it's close to a nightmare, was to see it turn into collection-driven institution. That's why I never wanted air conditioning, ventilation, because that brings with it, you know anybody who's so dumb that they don't want to show sculpture because it doesn't have climate control: ask yourself about the room temperature IQ of that person. All the major museums in Europe have places that show all these great works without climate control.

PISSARRO: The Uffizi.

HEISS: The Uffizi, just start there and then go on.

PISSARRO: Windows open on the outside, in the summer—**HEISS:** Windows open. Go to the Pantheon, right? You could show anything for three months without climate control.

Now, I agree with them about guards, that's an issue. But, climate control [disapprovingly]. You know two months, three months is not going to have an impact on an artwork. No profession is ruled by the land of “no” like the art profession. Think of another one. Medicine? Well, yes that's the land of no except there are some laboratories in the world that make experiments.

COLLINS-FERNANDEZ: Also, thinking long-term, there's a whole part of the history of art based on political censorship of what could and could not be said. There is a history of “NO” in art which is based on social and cultural acceptability within various regimes.

HEISS: Well that's of course with dictators. Generally, dictators are good for art. I did this wonderful show which taught me so much about Socialist Realism, called *Stalin's Choice*. It was originally an attempt for me to discover why Stalin made aesthetic choices in art that were all similar to those of my Midwestern family. You see tractors, big breasted women, and all this kind of things like, you know, dubbed realism. I thought, what an interesting thing to show to Americans in the '80s, that Stalin, the evil empire person, was all about *realism*. And if they were about to say, “But, wait a minute, I like these!” then they had to confront the fact that they liked what Stalin liked: and it was like a causal effect. But then I got into another world, which was really another world. That was the world of Russia. That was really an issue, because that was in the late '80s and early '90s, and I had a lot of friendships with Russians, which were truly interesting. I was given a room in the Lenin museum, a corner office. There was no food, no café, no cafeteria. There was really no food. I'd bring suitcases full of stuff, but the Lenin museum was something else. To be a guest curator of the Lenin museum—can you imagine that!

But the most effective museum guy there was the guy who was the general director of the Museum of the Art of the Army and Navy, which was very important precedent to my show because of a lot of Stalin's choices of paintings would show up in that museum. I think his name was Colonel Korchov. Anyway, sometimes he would pick me up in his black car and we'd drive into the Museum of the Art of the Army and Navy, which had this back entrance for the director and his curators. Staff would all line up at the gate when his black car was getting close, and they would be saluting and there they were, curators, in their various uniforms, saluting! Just like you see in movies. It was fabulous. He would turn to me, because he too was always in uniform, and say, “You know, I just don't understand how any of you run museums without uniforms!” What an interesting idea, I thought. Yes, curators should be wearing uniforms and be saluting. Curators might as well be wearing uniforms, why not? Then they'd soon know who the director is, right? ☹

Endnotes

1. See Carrier and Pissarro's interview with Sir Norman Rosenthal in the July/August, 2014 issue of the *Rail*
2. *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984)
3. *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989

Philip Taaffe WITH CHARLES STEIN

Since the 1980s Phillip Taaffe has been forging a distinct visual language of density and delight, mining the history of forms to create layered, optically charged paintings. Exhibited widely, in 2008 the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg organized a retrospective survey *The Life of Forms in Art: Paintings 1980–2008*. Luhring Augustine will begin the year with an exhibition of new works in their Bushwick gallery (January 17–April 26, 2015) which coincides with the celebration of artist's 60th birthday. Taaffe met with Charles Stein—the eminent American poet, musician, and classicist—to discuss the intricacies of his process and recent images in all their richness and complexity.

CHARLES STEIN (RAIL): When you eventually arrive at what you want to have in a painting, is the number of elements something that is decided beforehand, or is it arrived at through the process?

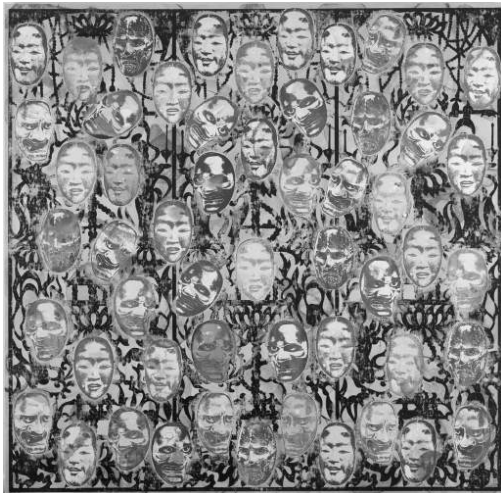
PHILIP TAAFFE: It's arrived at along the way. Number is important to me, and variation is important to me, as are the interior analogies within a work—how elements correspond in different parts of the work. I discover connections in the course of making the work. I build that into the work, so these discoveries get constructed into the picture itself. The wonderful thing about collage is that a lot of the elements on paper can be put in different places and later removed. I can lay everything out on the floor and figure out what's going on, and decide what to permanently apply to the work. I work in an elliptical way in that respect, an indirect way, as far as mark-making. It can be a mark if I want it to be, but then that mark can be erased. In the course of working on a painting what I leave out is as important as what I put in. There are all kinds of levels of intentionality within a work, and collage allows me to keep my options open during the working process.

RAIL: When you choose the elements, I presume it is for visual reasons, that is to say formal, as well as symbolical ones: what the images represent. But how much of this concern is worked out beforehand? Once chosen, how much are you allowing these images to come to significance on their own?

capture some aspect of that: echoes, reverberations. I used Shindo's title because it's always interesting to know what people are inspired or influenced by, but there is no direct correlation necessarily. Sometimes I choose to associate myself directly with a work of art like that—it's good back-up in a sense. I wanted to make this strong reference to an experience I had. It seemed something worthy to aspire to, in terms of an expressive goal.

RAIL: There is a simultaneous revealing and concealing of the laborious intensity behind the work, even where the subject matter seems to be ornament as such. What people see as "decorative" often involves concrete reference to ornamental forms and contexts.

RAIL: There are many languages of ornament. What is often at stake is the fact that your work does allude to the ornamentation of not only art, but of architecture and functional things like grates and fences, lifted from specific historical and cultural contexts. And these contexts may include the old books from which you have adapted or derived the images. The images also often have an emblematic character. There is thus an emblematic itinerary—a journey of images, glyphs, symbols, across different stations in historical time, that terminates at your picture. At the same time there is also a kind of "decorativeness" in your practice in the sense that abstract shapes are arranged in ways that are in themselves simply beautiful. They give pleasure by



Philip Taaffe. "Onibaba I," 2010–11. Mixed media on linen, 80 × 81 3/4". ©Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

TAAFFE: It has to make narrative sense in my mind. Often there are certain historical and geographical themes that can be brought together. For example, in "Onibaba I" (2011), I wanted to work with Japanese Noh masks. And I wanted to have these bronze lanterns and carved screens function as the enveloping network of lines behind the masks. Then I saw Kaneto Shindo's film *Onibaba* (1964), a Japanese ghost story, and it made a tremendous impression on me. It was a great primal film experience, and I wanted to



Philip Taaffe. "Amur Field," 2009. Mixed media on linen, 79 × 117 1/4". ©Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

TAAFFE: It's the specificity of it that really matters. For example, when I discovered this illustrated field report on the Mongolian canoe decorations of the Amur tribe, that was a real shock of recognition for me. I'm identifying a historical and geographical crystallization of culture—a certain visual trope that can transport me somehow in the making of a work. I always feel that I'm a medium. My ideal condition is to be outside of the work and to let these transmissions take place on the basis of my understanding and personal reflections and my urge to turn these tropes into something that is of palpable use, through my physical actions and gestures, through signs and traces—all of the things I can build upon and make connections from. I think that an artist has to set up imaginary fields of possibility for the participant, the viewer, to help them connect with their own personal history, their own humanity, where they come from. That's the dialogue that art provides. It's how we carry on.

how they look, not necessarily different from the way that ornamentations or decorations do. The surface is beautifully ornamented while at the same time alluding to specific ornamental realms. So there is a complexity to the meaning of the decorative in these works that goes well beyond the usual objections to the merely decorative. There is also a rhetoric of emblems and glyphs that is in another sense something quite different from an arrangement of "ornaments." They suggest a particular plane of registry, a register of the emblematical, parallel, say, to the plane of the pictorial. Floating on the frontmost surface of the work is a region where emblems float in their own realm.

TAAFFE: Well, these paintings are in part historical meditations. When I place glyphs that have been used by people in a certain time and geographical place, it's a kind of time-traveling. I'm unraveling a kind of narrative, bringing in certain disputed narratives, and weaving them back together—that's something that I very much like to do. In that sense my work

is about desire, ultimately. Painting is about what I want to exist in the world. I feel there's a certain kind of tonality and poetry and sensuousness that is missing, perhaps, from our time. So I'm trying to bring into the world something I don't believe exists in this way. If people want to call that "decorative" then that's their problem. I don't mind, just as Matisse didn't care that his paintings were thought of as decorative. The difference between the decorative and other aspects of the composition to his mind wasn't a determinate distinction. The problem with what we're getting into here is the shifts of tendencies in Modernism, and how there are academic critics who want to blot out the possibilities of a given history—a given color, a kind of music.

RAIL: Speaking of which: do you listen to music while you work?

TAAFFE: Sometimes, it depends on the stage the work is in. When I get stuck on a painting and I don't know where to take it next or I'm working out some complex structure within a work, I listen to Mozart, the marches. Somehow, they just snap me to attention, enable me to get to the bottom of things, the heart of the matter. Often I find old records that no one wants and that I've never heard of, and I'll give them a listen to. Recently I discovered Peter Warlock this way, on the flip-side of a Benjamin Britten recording. I'd never heard of Peter Warlock. His real name was Philip Heseltine. He was a British musicologist, and had a deeply scandalous life. I started listening to this piece of his and I really loved it. The "Capriol Suite" is based on 18th-century French choreography. He's someone who studied antique musical forms and made something new out of them. When I heard this composition and researched his work, I realized why I liked it. I like studying older paintings or older music and then culling something that I feel is unspoken, something that I can build upon—rhythms and variations. Encountering a visionary work can be inspiring no matter what medium, because you connect to that vision, it helps you to focus. Inspiration isn't necessarily like, "I'm going to take this and put it in a work," rather it's a kind of attitude or approach. Music is conceptually not unlike collage in that there are a certain set number of elements that you can use to create something. I guess I like that stricture. I like the discipline. I like going into a limited group of possibilities and making a world out of it. I like that sense of being resourceful. And I believe it has environmental and economic implications.

RAIL: How does color function for you in all of this?

TAAFFE: I think the color has to emerge from the emotional atmosphere of a work. At a certain stage in the making of a work the subtle tints that accumulate over the entire surface of the work bring about a unified experience. It has to do with the feeling-state of the painting. That's how I would put it. The colors have to do with the specifics of the painted experience. I like Matisse's claim that the best color is always dirty color, when there's something inside the color that's messy.

RAIL: In Matisse, the cut-outs were about immediacy and grace; you are about grace but with mediation. The mediation of a historical itinerary which complicates the pleasure.

TAAFFE: I like to use the term "adequacy" to describe the goal in view as I develop a piece. At a certain point in working over the many stages of these paintings, I have to remind myself what it is I hope to achieve. The answer in general is that I hope to achieve a level

of adequacy: sufficient for the specific requirements of the work, a sense that this is all that is necessary. I'm not fussing over it. It's adequately presented. That's an important methodological principle for me. It doesn't mean I'm settling for less. It's what it needs to be, given the materials that I wish to bring together in a work. A painting is an enclosure for a circuit of energy. Lots of things are connected and held in place by the format of the work itself. The edge is clearly important to me in terms of how the energy is held in place. One thing I try to avoid is a fragmentary pictorial experience. I like the works to be fully contained and fully realized, which requires a certain amount of compositional adjustment in the making. I make a lot of material and use it towards one painting, and explore that theme in depth, as opposed to spreading it out over a number of works. I don't really work in series, so when I do an exhibition in a gallery, each painting will be thematically quite diverse. But there is a thread between them somehow.

RAIL: It would be adequacy in terms of what you had already proposed to do. So the other side of that would be that you are proposing something that is not compromising.

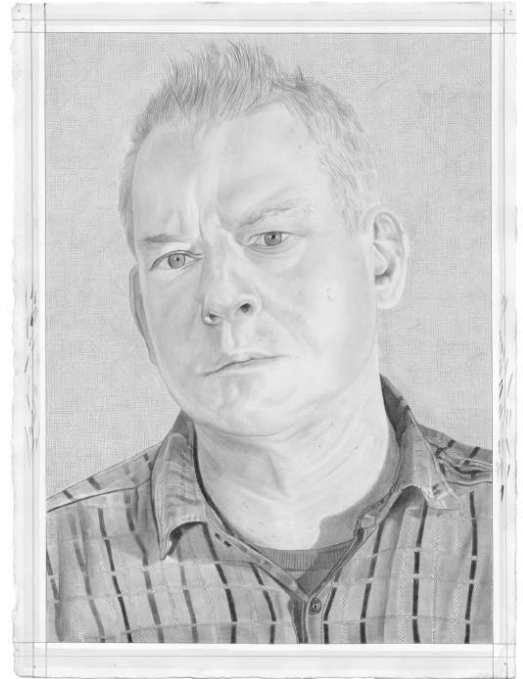
TAAFFE: It's always something that doesn't seem quite feasible at the outset. By now, painting for me seems like quite a long and epic involvement. Each picture is a long journey. Moving forward is like a wheel revolving, it goes forward but it comes back around—there's always a retrospective aspect to it. I don't discard any of my earlier imagery. There are a lot of earlier concerns continuing: iconography, glyphs, fantastic



Philip Taaffe. "Glyphic Brain," 1980–81. Collage on paper, 47 × 56". © Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York.

architecture. I don't close any doors behind me. I always try to expand upon what I have done, and add to it. It's all about the fullness of incident: trying to tell a complete story. What I'm really interested in is a larger synthesis—that's what I try to achieve. I always try to find a way of adding things that I think belong there thematically and symbolically, from the standpoint of gesture and incident—what ultimately manifests into a pictorial phenomenon. I think more is better, and I think it's very important to try to incorporate as much as possible. But then there's a lot of editing involved in making my work, a lot of process, a lot of research. I have to tell some sort of pictorial story on the basis of all of these concerns and gestures.

RAIL: But the evidence of your hand in these pictures often seems distant from the images themselves. Does this have something to do with the mechanical techniques used to create them?



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

TAAFFE: I wouldn't use as strong a word as "ideological," but there is something about the analysis of my own "voice" and my desire to be removed from the work, which these mechanical techniques somehow facilitate. There's certainly a psychological struggle going on there, in terms of those kinds of decisions. I want to be more of a mediator than an actor. There's the original creative impulse, and then later there's the self-consciousness or self-awareness of that impulse. Juggling these states is a game one plays with oneself in the work.

RAIL: There's an intense paradox, vis-à-vis this hands-on-ness, because you've removed some of that directness by changing the scale of some of the images you've used, such as the enlargements from microphotography. One has no idea of what the actual size of these things are, so the similarity between them and the way you have treated them volumetrically and coloristically are not interfered with by differences of scale. In the painting, you've brought them all into the same scale. And the change in scale also is how they become more generalized and abstract. The treatment in the printed image is on the way to abstraction, and you carry them further in the process by disengaging from the specificity of the scale.

TAAFFE: As to the distancing, I like the fact that my own process is hidden or understated. I don't like gratuitousness: gesture for the sake of gesture. I don't like to do things I don't have to do within the painting, but there are many things I feel I must do *outside* the painting. In preparing imagery for example, I have produced tusche silkscreens which are hand drawn onto the silk with a grease crayon. They're incredibly labor intensive, but the labor is not evident. Other images are relief-printed from linoleum carvings, but made in such a way that they're gossamer like—they're phantasmic. The decision to reduce the opacity of the prints, knowing that one would be able to see through them, was entirely intentional. That was a measured treatment. There's also a lot of in-painting, a lot of going back and re-touching, but you don't see the evidence of it. But I don't need to show all of this. I'm showing the world something else.

RAIL: You say you don't want to do any more work than you have to, but you follow by saying the silkscreens are hand drawn, which is highly labor intensive. There's a paradox here.

TAAFFE: Yes, the paintings are very much made up of paradoxes. There's ambivalence and there's clarity, and each has its place. The fact that all of these different renderings and approaches are combined is what puts the painting into the realm of abstraction.

RAIL: The superimposition of different content, different pictorial planes, different possible cultural and historical references, different rhetorical registers—is not only spatial, then, it's temporal—different phases of waiting or gestating, superimposed in their consequences.

TAAFFE: In my work the labor is never really restrictive or eliminative. It allows for a deepening, a discovery of qualities. There is no universal demand. In fact, I develop different procedures for each work. I never generalize or formalize them. I'm not making a strict agenda, I'm suggesting openness, and a state of natural abiding.

RAIL: The images in your work are applied in discrete series of operations, sometimes separated by extended intervals of time. These intervals are significant in that the accumulation of reflection between the applications of the various layers is the mysterious site, as it were, where the intuited relations between images and layers are allowed to accumulate and suggest the details of their final form. The picture becomes a receptacle not only of the images and their sources, but of the invisible spiritual activities performed during these periods of waiting.

TAAFFE: It's about arriving at a point of objective realization, then you go on to the next stage, to another state of realization. But one cannot proceed without the certain degree of closure that has

occurred at the end of the previous phase. That has to be brought to a point of resolution before the next phase can commence. Not only are there imagistic layers but there are deliberative layers. Painting for me is a considered process that is made up of observation *and* deliberation, and I'm inviting the viewer to participate in this process. Deliberation is important because it has cultural consequences. We need to have an awareness of the consequences of our actions, to be more deliberative in a cultural sense, and not be in this state of constant inattentive, distracted activity. That is what I mean when I say I try to avoid a fragmentary pictorial experience. Granted, this is all a very far-reaching notion, but I still think art should be paradigmatic—it should suggest a way of living. I still believe in the moral standards of artistic creation: that the painting can have implications beyond itself.

RAIL: I've been thinking about the primordial in your work—something that started to form in my mind when I was reading through your interview with Stan Brakhage in the *Composite Nature* book. There is a poem of Charles Olson's in the second volume of the *Maximus Poems* that ends:

The sea does
contain the beauty I had looked at
until the sweat
stood out in my eyes. The wonder is
limitless, of my own term, the compound
to compound until the beast rises from the sea.

TAAFFE: Astonishing. What is that "beast"?

RAIL: Throughout the *Maximus Poems* there's a history of the migratory journey of Olson's heroic figure, Maximus—who takes on the identities of different personages from literary archaic personages to, say,

John Smith, the British explorer, and finally Olson himself. But Maximus is always accompanied by a kind of dragon or sea-serpent, and it is this sea-monster that Olson is trying to *see*.

TAAFFE: He is trying to see the primordial.

RAIL: To bring it up into view. It has to do with the relationship between the primordial and the dangerous—a struggle with the hidden depths—that is brought to bear in a way that manifests as beauty. It is not the post-Kantian sublime. It is not something that is constituted in *contrast* to or even in excess of the rational. Though of course, it isn't particularly "rational" beauty either in a classical sense. The beautiful is already outside that consideration because of the intensity of its experience. It is a difficult beauty, a beauty borne of the intensity of a struggle, an unflinching looking into the primordial, risking being turned to stone, choosing to do the impossible thing and being willing to remain with it until it yields to vision.

TAAFFE: How long can we remain there is the question. Subliminal beauty is dangerous—Olson seems to be saying that one cannot inhabit that place indefinitely.

RAIL: We are always pulling away from it.

TAAFFE: We're pulling away from it, but there's also a kind of magnetism that the primordial represents and we're attracted to that. We're pulled by it, and then, in order to survive, we have to release ourselves from it somehow, to get away from it, but nevertheless to return to it once again, for our bearings, for our necessary spiritual sustenance.

RAIL: What strikes me in that particular passage in relation to you, though, is that the "term"—Olson speaks of his own "term" meaning, I think, both the language original to him and the sense of termination—the boundedness of his own form and power

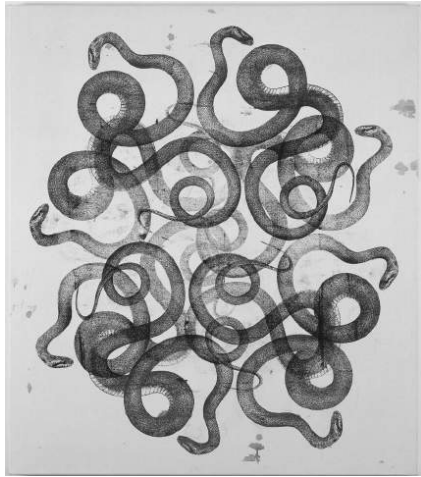


Philip Taaffe. "Sanctuary," 2010. Installation of 148 drawings. Oil pigment on paper, dimensions variable. Collection Kunstmuseum Luzern. Purchase made possible by a contribution from Landis & Gyr Foundation. ©Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

to originate form—but that in the poem the term for what he sees is *beauty*—that it doesn't escape into that other thing called "the sublime." The insistence that the thing seen is beauty and that it is really *there*. Olson has, as you say, again and again this sense of a kind of positive confrontation with the objectivity of the world that far from finding that objectivity lifeless or neutral, finds it full of living beauty, but also numinosity and a kind of pagan raunchiness. "I smell your breath, sea," he says somewhere. Look right at it. Smell it. Stare it down.

TAAFFE: Stare it down, that's right.

RAIL: I'm thinking of the snakes in the *Composite Nature* book. In repeating the snake images with various intensities of impression that are beautifully organized, you give a sense of a proliferation that



Philip Taaffe. "Calligraphic Study II," 1997. Mixed media on linen, 43 3/4 x 38". ©Philip Taaffe; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

is not only the natural proliferation of serpentine progeny. It is the *images* that proliferate, and therefore something in relation to ourselves. And yet at every point it is still these scary snakes.

TAAFFE: What is truly fearful is a situation where we find ourselves mortally threatened, as if we were confronting something that could put an end to our perceptive capacities—that we would no longer be able to perceive anything. We are tempted by these destructive forces. It's a kind of dance macabre. Art becomes a way of facing down death.

RAIL: There's a famous phrase from the theologian Rudolph Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*: "mysterium tremendum et fascinans": the numinous mystery that is overwhelming and fascinating. It is as if beauty itself becomes the means by which it is possible to sustain the gaze upon the primordial in the Olson poem, and in your work.

TAAFFE: Isn't it amazing how Olson is just constantly referencing the sublime? It's a constant. Everything is inflected by his pursuit of this otherworldly thing, but which is very much within this world.

RAIL: I call it the hyper-concrete: an attendance upon the immediate, the concrete reality that is more deeply what something is than its categorizable identity—an attention that so stays with the immediate that it arrives at something uncanny, something numinous.

TAAFFE: Yes, that is the pursuit. It's beyond any category of thought, and outside of language. The numinous cannot be arrived at through nominal means—it's something beyond description. Art is in that realm because it is not a linguistic exercise. It's a visual language, but it's not naming something. I'm not seeking to describe a situation. The painting *is* the situation. ☞

The Liberation of the Knots

Not merely an Amandla for Mandela welcoming him into the house of the heart, but in these mandalas Philip Taaffe has created from his immersion in love for India—where women at dawn on thresholds of their homes shape mandalas of rice flour or even pigment of flowers to protect house and all within it from forces that might do them harm—

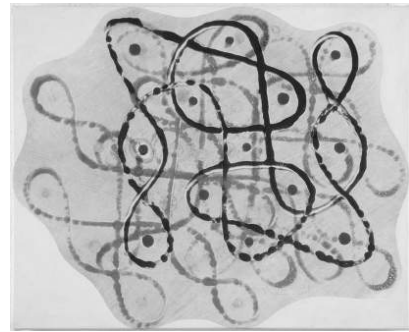
the knots abound, the knots abound, in gestures that reflect the intricate interweaving of all things in motion or still, reflect as well the tangling, the negations of the negation and the knottiness of the nut when it's opened to reveal the inside of its mystery, the alphabet of the oldest language: complexity and simplicity as one.

And the revelation goes direct to the gut: that these are paths—these knots—made by one continuous act of writing a line whose ultimate goal is the mending of all the tears in the face of the world through the attainment of the ecstasy when they are liberated in order more than knot to be.

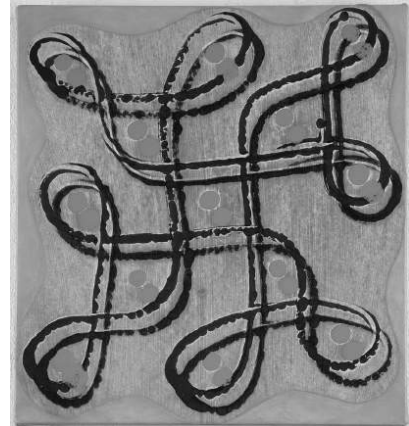
At which moment you realize that this is no mere graphic adventure in "aht", but the path of mandala (called Rangavalli in the north and Kollam in the south), comes also with the sounding of the sea of oils in the resonant and reverberant tradition of Japasutram, by which each breath of syllable sends out a vibration like a line of light upon the darkness of mind,

and to look is to hear and to hear is to see before your very own eyes a multicolored mezuzah un-scrolling from the doorpost, with hearts and spirals and stars of majestic joy at the unity of North and South and the sweet sound of the tearing away of eyelids all over the world, the better to see the total liberation of the knots in order that indomitable Beauty be.

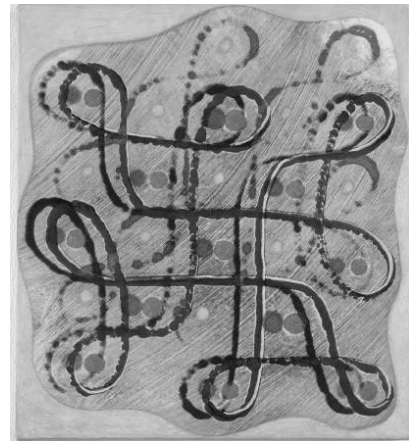
Jack Hirschman
March 20, 2014



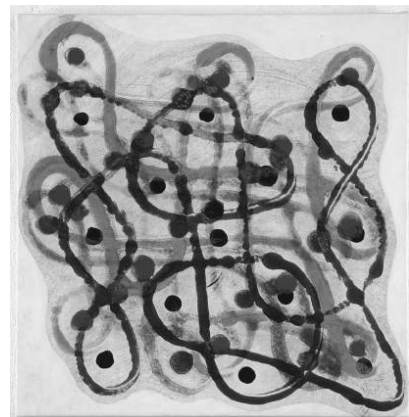
Philip Taaffe. "Rangavalli Painting (L)," 2014. Mixed media on canvas, 14 1/2 x 17 1/4". Rangavalli Paintings Courtesy of the artist and Studio d'Arte Raffaelli, Trento.



Philip Taaffe. "Rangavalli Painting (D)," 2014. Mixed media on canvas, 13 1/2 x 12 1/2". Rangavalli Paintings Courtesy of the artist and Studio d'Arte Raffaelli, Trento.



Philip Taaffe. "Rangavalli Painting (I)," 2014. Mixed media on canvas, 13 1/2 x 15". Rangavalli Paintings Courtesy of the artist and Studio d'Arte Raffaelli, Trento.



Philip Taaffe. "Rangavalli Painting (M)," 2014. Mixed media on canvas, 14 x 13 1/2". Rangavalli Paintings Courtesy of the artist and Studio d'Arte Raffaelli, Trento.

Alexander Ross

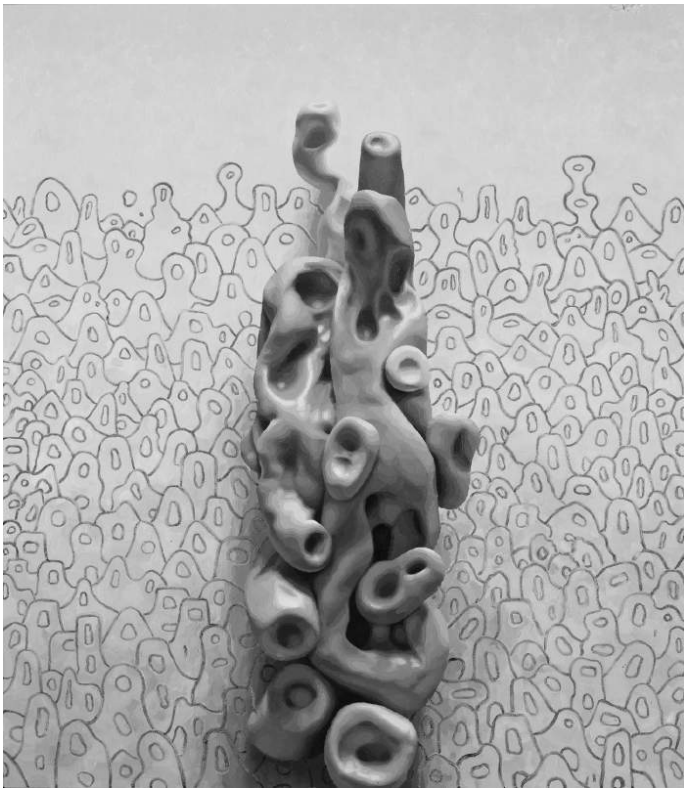
WITH WILL CORWIN

Alexander Ross's paintings exist in the hazy space between photorealism and abstraction. *Recent Terrestrials* at David Nolan Gallery (October 30 – December 6, 2014) pushed Ross's practice even further, exploring landscape and portraiture without leaving the alternate dimension his earlier work inhabited. Will Corwin has been interested in Ross's painting and drawing since summer 2013 when he first came into contact with the work at Cheymore Gallery in the group exhibition *Imprinted Pictures*.

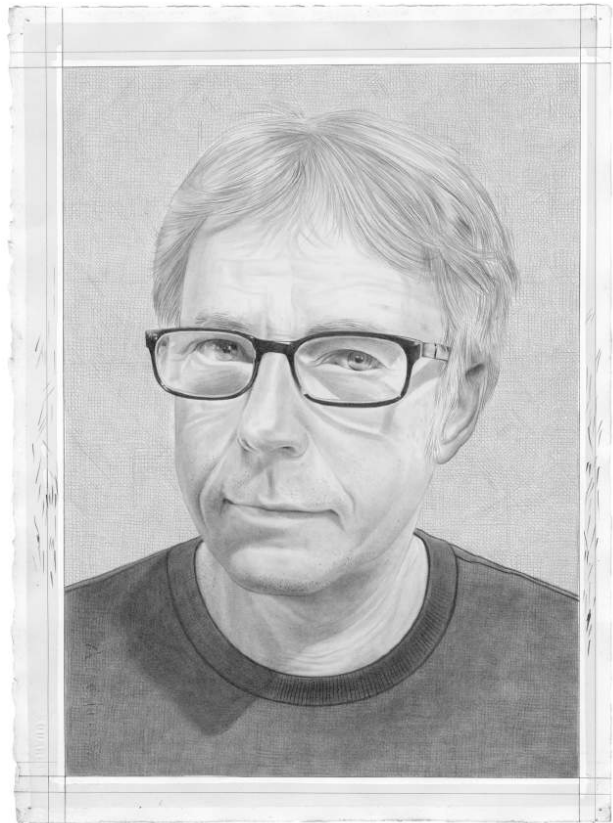
WILL CORWIN (RAIL): With your exhibition *Recent Terrestrials*, the thing that really struck me was the specificity and the simultaneous ambiguity of your subject matter. I was walking through the subway this morning and I saw an advertisement that had an image of Cappadocia—the peaks that you have in Cappadocia—and it immediately reminded me of several of the images I had just seen in your show, particularly "Untitled" (2014), a face with a tongue sticking out. How do you characterize your paintings? They've been characterized as abstraction, but do you consider them to be landscapes, portraits as well?

ALEXANDER ROSS: That's a good question. For many years I was thinking abstractly, even from a design perspective—spaces and shapes and colors and all kinds of experimentation and play. Something is rendered, something is highly illustrated, yet there are elements that are flat, or relationships of colors and shapes within the thing. Then with the mountain range, there's a deliberate stab at playing with dangerous territory, like children's book illustrations or fairytale imagery or sci-fi ideas that are somewhat taboo in fine art, or have been traditionally.

RAIL: How do you mean taboo?



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2014. Oil on canvas, 62 x 54. Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

ROSS: Taboo meaning that it's not always easy to directly touch on these things: there's a certain kind of irony or borrowing on a meta-level incorporating this imagery, which is all around us and increasingly infiltrating everyone's lives and minds. It has been for a while, but I think you need to go somewhere new. What have I never seen before, or seen less of in painting?

RAIL: When you say something new and meta that's all around us, looking at children's books, do you mean the sense of playfulness? Not overtly joyful, but playful? Do you think that's kind of taboo in contemporary painting and contemporary art?

ROSS: It goes in trends. There certainly are artists who are still playful and who are viable, but there are megatrends, there's a sort of cool abstraction right now and who knows how long that'll last. If everyone's being ironic, then being earnest can be interesting. I'm sort of following my own whims and a lot of times it's not deeply thought about until later. I've recently been looking at lots of illustration and album covers, sneaker tread patterns, anything that's out there, and it's all filtering through. The next thing I know, I'm messing around with the clay and exploring possibilities, and all of sudden things start suggesting themselves and I just go with it. And maybe even have a chuckle; fantasy mountaintops, that's really absurd, but they're fun at the same time.

RAIL: You've spoken previously about the idea of the grotesque, the medieval grotesque, the renaissance grotesque, and the thing about grotesques is that they're like a horror film, they're supposed to scare you but they don't really and there is that kind of self-conscious jokiness, even in medieval grotesques, that those demons aren't really scary. Is that something you're considering?

ROSS: Yes, absolutely. I think it's wonderful. They're mysterious and everyone kind of likes them. And why exactly are they there? I don't think there's a whole lot of information about that, there's conjecture.

RAIL: What I like about the paintings is that they're trying really hard to scare you, at least the new series.

ROSS: But they're also absurd, they're kind of outrageously absurd and silly and at the same time there's a sort of wickedness or freakiness. Like the large canvas has all these pointy little moments everywhere.

RAIL: That's a new thing in your work: what brought about the pointiness? Usually your forms have been quite bulbous or striated or they've been kind of field-like.

ROSS: There actually has been some pointiness in my drawings where I get into thorns and pricklers and serrated edges, but it's not been a big thing in the paintings. Really, the biggest change is moving into more specific, literal fictions. For many years, I've been keeping them very abstract, intentionally not titling them and giving no indication of scale, so whether they're microscopic or planetary in size it's hard to know, and a lot of it is left ambiguous—if not completely abstract—as to what they are. With my last show in New York a few years back they started to become more specifically landscapes with land and shadows. That was the first break from thinking of them just abstractly. And really, it's just where the exploration is leading them and it finally felt like time for me to get more playful, get more characters and be figurative. There was a lot to explore just keeping it abstract; now there's all this new room to play with in introducing that space.

RAIL: Did you feel a calling to the figure? It seems that at some point artists need to address the human form, how did it come about that you moved towards this?

ROSS: I've always drawn faces and figures, but I haven't shown them. It was a self-imposed restraint for many years where I was purposely denying explicit reference to anything in particular. Every time I saw faces accidentally appear, I would tweak them a little bit to keep them in check, because I had enough on my plate to work with as it was. That's where it started. I limited my palette to mostly greens and blues, and I limited my imagery to things that were suggestive but essentially abstract, and toyed around with what they could signify, such as rocks, architecture, or plants. After that, I've slowly been unwinding and loosening up my self-imposed restraints. Introducing more colors, more ways of making them, and letting the imagery be literal landscapes instead of implying that they might be.

RAIL: What did you find so attractive about the vagueness? The vagueness of scale? The impossibility of knowing?

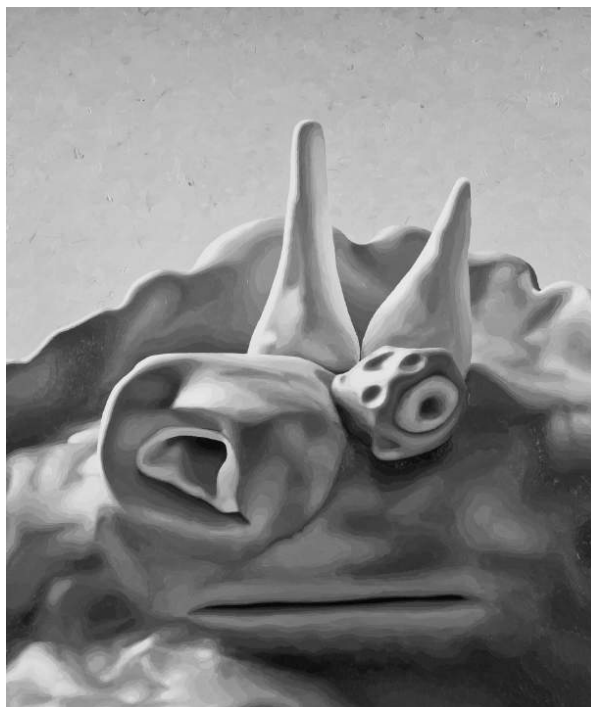
ROSS: With ambiguity, the viewer participates more, projecting their own meanings. Early on, my project felt a little risky, because it's a world unto itself; green, monstrous, the oddness of the whole program—I would describe it as a little bit hermetic. So I wanted to allow breathing room for the ideas to be understood in many different ways.

Anytime you get literal you shut down avenues of interpretation, especially if you give titles and things like that, then suddenly it's not open-ended, it's now a cucumber. It becomes more illustrative. I was employing a highly illustrative or photorealistic style, which traditionally showed you a world that you understood. Applying that to something abstract was really interesting, and still is, and then having it be hyper-depictive—as depictive as you can make it with all the shining bits and dark points and at the same time having it be unknowable. It seemed poignant and definitely worth exploring.

RAIL: I wanted to ask you about Ernst because you've talked about Ernst in the past. For me, you share a lot of thought processes with him. I was thinking about the piece in the Venice Guggenheim, the "Anti-Pope." It presents a group of objects and figures in a landscape, but within those figures there are also these abstract processes forming the figures. Within your practice, what has been your relationship with Ernst? What are some other painters that have influenced you?

ROSS: Ernst is one of, if not my all-time favorite painter. I've been looking at him since I was a teenager. What I love about him is his unrelenting exploration and inventiveness over many different types of work: the collages, the drawings, different kinds of painting and techniques: an outrageously great discoverer, craftsman, and visual thinker. I really like his quiet, steady, creative pace. It's solid, you can't argue with it. There's certainly a lot of thinking going on, but I would say he's a poetic, visual thinker over a hardcore conceptual thinker. Another artist I was influenced by early on was Giorgio Morandi, where there's this straightforward still life with dead space, highly focused-upon in a kind of dead background. That really appealed to me, as well as the handling of paint; a willingness to squidge it there in front of you and make an object. So there's definitely a still life approach with my work. And John Currin's early paintings were an influence on me in that he showed how a story or theme could drive a whole body of work.

RAIL: I think there is this tremendous connection between surrealism and still life. Maybe it's just the overwhelming sense when you're looking at a surrealist painting that it's frozen. Do you see a connection?



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2014. Oil on canvas, 60×50".
Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.

ROSS: There's something, it's a silent space, like Tanguy or Dalí, where there are sharp shadows and it's frozen in time. I've always found something about that appealing.

RAIL: I've noticed you use shadows to great effect as well. Do you sit and meditate about the shadows? Are they just automatically generated from the photographs?

ROSS: My early thinking was to make it a kind of "hyper" thing. It's extreme in all its aspects, so if the thing has light shining on it, it has a shadow. I would maximize the highlights by brushing oil on the clay sometimes to make it super shiny, and then light it so that it was extremely vivid, giving you the full range of light falling on an object, and then isolation, just a couple of simple shapes or forms. In a relatively empty background, you kind of underscore this oddness of reality, the oddness of the plastic form in space. It calls a strong degree of attention to it by not seeing exactly what it is, and it raises the fascination level, giving the viewer something to grapple with, myself included.

RAIL: Some painters I've talked to use photorealistic processes but say they are not photorealists. Do you consider yourself a photorealist?

ROSS: I see myself as a post-modernist. I take lots of different styles and revisit them. I'm purposely using photorealism.

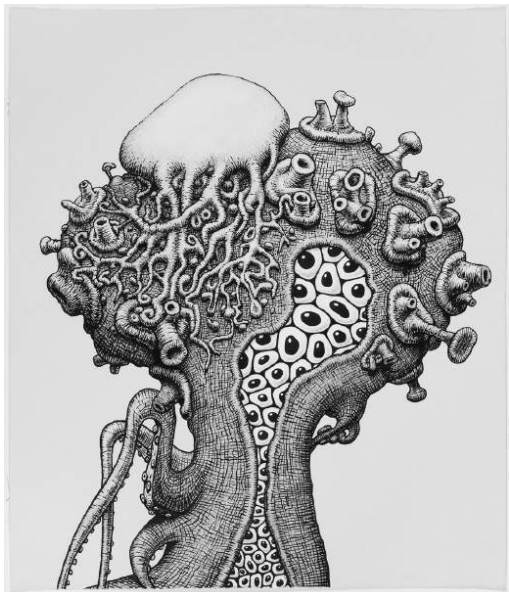
RAIL: And parts of your paintings are not photorealist either—the backgrounds are clearly hand drawn.

ROSS: I enjoy mixing. There's something about surrealism that I'm borrowing, I'm mixing that with photorealism. For a while I was borrowing the shaped canvases of the early '60s and purposely taking that and shuffling it into the mix: what if you did photorealism and surrealism and shaped canvases? What could you do with that? Maybe there's something new I can find. So, it just continues, I feel like I'm borrowing now from films, fairytales, or illustrations. What if I merged fairytales, or gargoyle and grotesque sculptures into my work? It's a lot of borrowing and shuffling and reconstituting of past approaches.

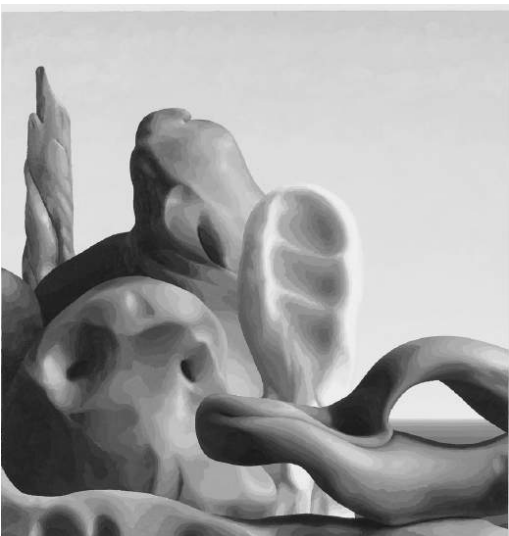
I feel like we reached a certain point where everyone was assuming that there was this kind of linear unfolding of avant-garde art, in the way that each generation challenges the previous and gets its new thing and it goes in a straight line. Suddenly everyone's scratching their head in the 1980s with multiple "isms" happening all at the same time in the art world, and it never settles. Increasingly there are artists who just go back to a previous style. Painting in an old style and just doing new subject matter. It's all over the place; a big messy tree with millions of branches and nothing



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2014. Oil on canvas, 90×79". Signed and dated on verso. Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2010. Ink, flashe, graphite and watercolor on paper, 25¼ × 22". Signed and Dated on Verso. Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2010. Oil on linen, 50×48". Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.

is taking the lead or setting any kind of standard. I think of what I'm doing as contemporary, just borrowing all of these styles. Everything's mixed up and cut up. Each artist picks and chooses from a huge bouquet of possibilities and finds what's interesting and employs them.

RAIL: But you clearly are seduced by the propensities of the paint. Talk a bit about your relationship with oil paint, I'm very curious.

ROSS: I have always found painting to be much harder than drawing. This brings me back to Morandi, there's something of the love of paint itself and letting it be itself. I made a decision early on to isolate the different components of painting: like the design and the subject matter, which I do all ahead of time, making the clay, I make a mock-up and finalize the image I want to paint. Then—I know Lichtenstein worked this way—once you have the final design and the mock-up, the next stage is execution. For me, breaking it down like that, having an execution stage as a separate component totally freed me up to enjoy painting itself and how to apply it, because I already had a map of where I was going. That's how the color bandings came about. I wasn't thinking about the compositions anymore, I had already finished that. I was just executing the image. I still like paint and I'm not trying to erase my hand. I love the hand of a painter, I love when it's visible. Just putting the brush down and letting the shaky stroke be kind of wobbly at the edge. I think I still come across as being pretty tight, especially from a distance, but if you get up close to my paintings, I'm definitely having fun moving the paint around. I'm always thinking about that feeling I get when I look up close at a Morandi, or I remember looking at messy painters like Frank Auerbach. I love the look of squishy paint.

RAIL: It was very refreshing to look at the surface of your paintings because I used to work for a photorealistic painter and there is an obsession with flatness, the idea that there is no hand. There is this obsession with not seeing any kind of detail at all. And then to look at yours, there is this variety of surface, there's the drawing in the background. You can see where you've kind of gone in with a tool. Even though you do paint in those striations, you don't seem to care about them that much. There's the expressiveness of the hand even within the striations.

ROSS: Yeah, exactly. Thanks for noticing. It's a give and take. Part of me wants to have that kind of old-fashioned, heavy, oil painting feel to it. I love that about painting. Maybe it's a romantic nostalgia but it's disappointing when the surfaces of paintings are so slick. But I understand that desire, some artists wanting to get rid of the hand. I'm into celebrating it or keeping it alive, especially if my imagery is going to be sort of clean from a distance. It seems the more of these things that I can get into the painting the more interesting they become to me. They're satisfying on a different level.

RAIL: You say you started with a fascination with biology. I'm also very interested in the process you work with by generating maquettes. You create a maquette, you photograph it and then you paint it. But how did that originate? How did that connect to the story you told in the last essay that you wrote for your previous catalogue, where you talk about looking at these expensive biology textbooks that you couldn't buy and falling in love with the images there? What dawned on you to start making sculptures, were you making sculpture at that point too?

ROSS: Here's what happened. It really started with Morandi. When I looked at his bottles I would think to myself, because of the way he painted them, that they sometimes look like they're made of clay because they're a little bendy and droopy. I always liked that about them. The paintings I was making at that time

looked cartoonish because they were inventions. I would come back to a painting I had just made and think it looked like a painting of clay. So I thought to myself, why don't I actually just make a clay model and work from that, because I'll get much more variety with the shadows and the highlights and unexpected surface things that can happen with an actual clay model than I could ever hope to invent from my head. It was a kind of a leap because it was not something I'd ever done. I was hesitant, but as soon as I started doing it, there was an overwhelming sense of freedom. Now I had a map to go by and could focus on laying down the paint. So it was a big point to switch over for me, working from the models. And I didn't even know if I could do it, if I had the skill level. But I really liked the results, so instantly, everything changed. It became much more dynamic—the whole thing just opened up to me. It was the end of a long search; I had been playing around with so many different ideas and styles, and had a really long gestation period all through my 20s and into my 30s—not knowing exactly what to paint or how to paint. And when I finally switched to working from the models, it was suddenly working for me, more than anything I'd ever tried. So I just decided, this is it, this is what I want to do. Sure enough, Hudson from Feature, who had been coming to my studio all along, agreed. He was like, "Yeah, I want to show this. This is good." It all just came together.

At the same time, my colors got brighter. It was the '90s, and techno music was becoming more of a thing. So there was something about the synthetic nature of electronic music—celebrating fake and plastic things. For me, it seemed culturally relevant. Everything was cool, bright plastic. It just all came together. Once I found that, I stayed on that track. I had been looking for a viable track to get on and I finally found it, and just stayed on it. Which is something I read about Tanguy, that he tried all kinds of different things and then suddenly he painted something that looked like what we think of as an Yves Tanguy painting. And it struck him like, "that's it," and for the rest of his life he painted only those.

RAIL: Are you actively interested in contemporary advancements in science? There's a photograph of your studio in the back of this catalogue from 2011 and there is actually a microscope.

ROSS: Yes, there is a microscope. It's called an inspection scope. You don't use it for slides. You put objects under it—it's big enough you can put your hand under it. It's an absolutely fascinating thing to play with. You can take it outside and sit in the grass and start putting insects and things under it. Because it's in stereo, it really gives you the volumetric feel of what you're looking at. Science is amazing on so many levels, and because it's verifiable and, in theory, real—as close to reality as we can get anyway. The strangest world is the real world.

RAIL: Do you feel that your paintings get a certain conceptual mileage from hitching their wagon to the fact that science is real. Because people then look at yours and say, "These must reference something." There's something in the human mind that then latches on to the recognizability of what you're doing.

ROSS: Yeah, I'm thinking that way anyway. For example, I was reading about, and it still hasn't really happened, but there's supposedly a coming biological revolution and people who talk about it say it's going to make this current computer revolution look like nothing because we're about to be able to manipulate organisms profoundly to our advantage. We now can grow human body parts and bone and have them implanted. But this indicates that the future, if we survive long enough, will have all kinds of organisms that we grow and create ourselves. So part of my thing is, what would those organisms look like if we lived



Alexander Ross, "Untitled," 2014. Crayon, 27 x 22 1/4".
Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.

in a world, say 200 years from now, where you have pets that were grown in a laboratory? Maybe they would be green and have chlorophyll in them. So what kind of paintings would you want on your wall in that kind of home? In the future, you probably would want something graphic from the past, like one of my paintings. [Laughs.] I'm projecting—this stuff will make sense in 200 years from now. I'm being tongue-and-cheek a little bit, but it's a fun fantasy. It helps me generate ideas and think about why I am making this work and why it looks this way. I'm attempting to jumpstart the future in some way, at least that has been one of my operating motivators.

RAIL: Tell me about the exhibition *Remote Viewing* at the Whitney in 2005, curated by Elisabeth Sussman. I'm interested in how you contextualize yourself. Do you feel that you're within a certain movement of abstract painting? You self-described as post-modern, but is there a movement that you fit into?

ROSS: I don't really see it as a movement but I loved being included in that show. Matthew Ritchie was largely responsible for putting it together at the Whitney. What he said, which I agree with, is a lot of the other artists are scoping out locations and aerial views, map-like territories and things, but my work has landed in the place and is showing the view from an actual position—like the Mars rover. That made a lot of sense to me because there is still something abstract, like looking at another space or another realm in my work, which is "remote



Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery.

viewing." Finding something in a different place and channeling it back. I don't really see myself so much as a part of a movement—I do see myself as a part of the contemporary attempt to find out what art can be at this point. I mean we don't really talk about style anymore because it seems trite, but it's there nevertheless. Even irony can be a long-term stylistic trend.

RAIL: Have you started working on the next body of paintings? Is there a big sea change after *Recent Terrestrials*?

ROSS: I was working very hard for a long time making that body of work. I got tired, burnt out. When a show is finally up is when I relax and explore. I've been experimenting with things that I haven't tried before as a way of generating more possibilities. But I am planning on more grotesques, and I already have a small canvas of a head just started.

RAIL: Do you think you will ever name the paintings?

ROSS: I don't know. Probably not the paintings, but lately I have been giving titles to the smaller drawings. I don't know why that's changing either. I am caring less—I don't know if it is wise to say that. When you care less, you take more chances and you just do things more on whim, and maybe you

can fail more often but you also find things that are more interesting.

There is this sense that things are out of control politically, global warming as well, you read so much bad news and so many warnings about what's going to happen, the economy, class issues. I can't help but take a little of that to heart and say "fuck it, whatever. I'm just going to make stuff and not even question it anymore."

Who knows? How long is art going to last anyway? It is sort of like the last blowout before you go or something.

RAIL: Geez, okay.

ROSS: I am not trying to be dire, I am just saying there is something in our collective atmosphere of craziness to respond to.

RAIL: Are the nasty heads kind of the artist chiding the viewer?

ROSS: Not chiding the viewer but in solidarity with the viewer. It is more like sneering in the face of impending doom, or sneering in the face of all the craziness. Sneering back at everything that is sneering at us? N.S.A. spying and all this other stuff; I think anyone who is paying attention is quite overwhelmed. So part of it was like, "fuck this!"

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Emma Bee Bernstein, self-portrait from "Untitled (Unique Color Polaroids)," 2003–2007. Color Polaroid, 4 × 3½". Courtesy Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein.

Stealing Time: Emma Bee Bernstein

BY MICHÈLE GERBER KLEIN

The daughter of artist Susan Bee and poet Charles Bernstein and sister of artist and writer Felix Bernstein, Emma Bee Bernstein, was a beautiful, brilliant, and prolific third-generation artist whose mysterious suicide at 23 in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice, Italy, in 2008 shocked and saddened her friends and family and the New York art world. Subsequently, there have been three posthumous shows of her photographs and films: *Masquerade: A Retrospective* (2010) at the DOVA gallery at the University of Chicago, *Emma Bee Bernstein: An Imagined Space* (2011) at the Janet Kurnatowski Gallery, and *Exquisite Fucking Boredom* (2012) at Microscope Gallery. Emma has been the subject of many poems and artworks. Her funeral is described in *Sunset Park*, the novel by Paul Auster. And her work—particularly the photographs she made for the show which was a part of her senior thesis at the University of Chicago now called the *Masquerade Series*, her Polaroid images, and *Emma's Dilemma*, a film she created with Henry Hills as a young girl—has attained cult status. Also two books that she was working on when she died were published posthumously in 2009, *Belladonna #4*, which features Emma's writings, interviews, and photographs, and *GirlDrive: Criss-Crossing America, Mapping Feminism* by Emma and Nona Willis Aronowitz.

It was the warm, late spring of 2012, at *Exquisite Fucking Boredom*, a retrospective of 200 Polaroid photographs Emma Bee Bernstein made while at the University of Chicago, that I first saw the album she had filled with some of those images. I leafed through it many times.

Clearly intended as an artist's book, it struck me at first as a little untidy. Some of its edges were frayed. It was as though the person who made it had carelessly roughed it up or perhaps simply neglected it. Perhaps its imperfection was deliberate, or, alternatively, the result of being lovingly poured over many times. I couldn't tell which. The contradictions inherent in this disarray fascinated me. The album was tangentially evocative of those cheap, old-fashioned "secret" photo diaries—the kind that used to be sold at Woolworth's as a place to hide the "treasured memories" of young girls—with pastel leather bindings and little gold locks and keys. So I imagined that there was earnestness to the work. Perhaps the right word was "sincerity." Only, of course, this album was open. And black. And by choosing the slightly blurry incandescence of the Polaroid medium for her album, Emma also managed to infuse the imagery in this book with immediate nostalgia. Also, unlike the five-and-dime diaries, which were intended as repositories of isolated reminiscences, Emma's book of moments was sequenced. The appealingly spontaneous-looking pictures of what appear to be pretty average kids, the kind every American grew up around, are sparsely peppered with annotations in smeared ink the effect of

which is more visual than expository. (*Rail* publisher Phong Bui, who curated *An Imagined Space* and *Exquisite Fucking Boredom*, comments that, to Emma, "the pictorial and the written language are essentially the same. Her portraits are like an alphabet.") And all is woven together into a hieroglyphically cryptic narrative. In her senior thesis, Emma effectively describes the success of the artistic image in terms of its ability to be "perplexing and strange" and its ability to "generate pleasure along with discomfort."

So although the work seems documentary, it's not. It's more like Emma's thesis quotation of Jenny Gage talking to her subjects: "We are doing some form of reality and some form of make believe."

Appropriately, several of the Polaroid images—for example: the brunette whose red lipstick matches her red dress precisely, the young blond leaning against the wall of a pink bathroom wrapped in a flimsy, pale pink lace negligee opened to reveal a deeper, brighter pink satin bra, and Emma herself, embodying young womanhood, chin down, slumped in a chair, eyes obscured by huge, black, film-star shades; dangling a lighted cigarette from the center of her crimsoned lips and, in a wonderfully mixed message, hugging a well-worn, rickety eared, old stuffed rabbit to her tummy (none of the subjects needed to be told not to look at the camera)—echo the more formal work of the *Masquerade* series and are clearly intended to push the border between the planned and the instantaneous; meaning and form.

Henry Hills's film *Emma's Dilemma* (1997–2004), is characterized by rapidly repeated sequences, "stuttering moments" that mimic the time stop of memory. It began as a composite of filmed interviews in which Emma, between the ages of 11 and 15, talks with a group of edgy artists and writers: Jackson Mac Low, Carolee Schneemann, Susan Howe, Richard Foreman, Ken Jacobs, Kenneth Goldsmith, Lee Ann Brown, and Tony Oursler, who remembers her as an "uncannily sophisticated" child. Hills remarks:

I curated the film portion of a program at Symphony Space and Charles brought her there. She must have been around 10 at the time, and she came up to me afterwards and started critiquing the work. I thought woah! This is intense! I've definitely got to use you in one of my films.

Susan had always taken her to shows her whole life. In one of the filming sessions she starts talking to Ken Jacobs about a show she saw and he says, "How old were you when you saw the show?" And she says, "Eight! Eight!" She was very smart, totally smart and very advanced in the way she could apprehend art.

She allowed herself to be used by me as an image.

When she was 11 she had a list to make sure she never wore the same thing in any shoot, and she never wore the same thing twice, although she had a necklace that she wore in every single shoot. When she got older she went through many appearance changes. There was a period in her teens when every three months or two months or less maybe she had a different hair color. Then she got a job as a fashion consultant for an online teen fashion magazine.

It just became more appealing to me to see her changes than to go interview these artists. So the film became a portrait, a chronicle of her progression rather than an interview in which the words are all important. But what you get is this repetition of gesture, this repetition of expression, and this was very interesting to me actually because when one has an experience with someone, it's fragments like these that one actually remembers.

It wasn't until after we finished filming that she actually started making art.

The grand Central Park West apartment of Emma's muse, her glamorous, nonagenarian grandmother Sherry Bernstein, is elegantly frozen in time. Everything has a place and is in it—as if not a hair of the carefully chosen décor has been turned since the 1950s, around the time Charles was born. Sherry is a fashion icon. She is in Patrick McMullan's book, *Glamour Girls*, and was the subject of a Channel Thirteen documentary on fashionable women, which also featured Nan Kempner. She offers me tea, fruit, and cookies in a room overlooking Central Park to Fifth Avenue and beyond, and is polite in a way that makes me feel comfortable and welcomed immediately. Emma, she says, loved to consult her on matters of decorum.

In one of Sherry's cedar closets, all the negligees and nightgowns Emma used as props are hung like haute couture, exactly an inch apart. Next to the closet, the door to the familiar pink bathroom is ajar. Walls of guest bedrooms are covered with the printed papers against which Emma juxtaposed her "models." And there, in one of the rooms, on a pastel frill-skirted bed, the old toy rabbit lies, in a huddle of much loved and lovingly preserved stuffed animals. "Why should I get rid of them?" Sherry asks.

Sherry tells me that Emma used to enjoy staging sleepovers in the Central Park West apartment. Everyone would have dinner and discuss adolescent matters: school, boyfriends, parties. Then Emma and her friends would stay up all night, dressing, posing, and taking photographs.

Susan Bee describes Emma's art as chiefly:

figurative, like my mother's [Miriam Laufer] and also like my own paintings, it's all about people, interactions, and relationships. Emma was interested in

that. She had this social skill. She'd introduce herself and she'd make friends really easily and always had a ton of friends. And her friends were very loyal. I would say the friends are very much part of the work. ... She was also interested in abstraction and light and color and pattern and texture: the same things we are all focused on in this family.

Antonia Pocock, Emma's close friend and collaborator, says Emma photographed:

like a French New Wave director. She would dress and place her subjects and then wait to see what happened. The images are staged and spontaneous and cooperative. Many of the photographs are of Emma herself.

Emma loved to work with an extreme, saturated palette and she developed her prints carefully, to reveal fine lines precisely and focus on exquisitely clarified details.

A lot of times for a photo session she would dress each subject as if for a fashion shoot. Outfits and accessories were all very important as was how they blended in with the setting.

"She played with abruptly contrasting colors," continues Antonia, "and with monochromes as well—that is images where the woman blends into the wallpaper or other surroundings. There was definitely a psychological component. Emma was very interested in facial expressions and the way they communicate. The effect was either of the subject becoming fused with her environment, or a tension between surface and interiority."

In "Herring Cove Beach," a video portrait filmed by Charles Bernstein, an unassuming, wind-blown Emma observes:

Fashion and art are not arch opposites. Fashion has always coexisted with art. Fashion represents surface values that translate something of the interior. Art is purely the interior made exterior. Fashion is okay with representing surface things: that's its purpose.

For the *Masquerade* series, Emma uses her subject's costumes in much the same way as most women use fashion. They are in overt reaction to the world around them, an intersection between themselves and their environment or what Emma describes as "the material manifestation of uncertainty."

By playing with what she defines as "fantasies of self-presentation" Emma connects her images to fashion photography. A girl on a slide—whose green and brown dress and brown boots mirror the colors of the playground around her—looks at herself in a mirror on the slide. Another girl, draped in ivory, is posed as a nymph, facing the camera and leaning back with upraised arms against a fluted ivory column. The green of a seated girl's skirt reflects the green of the art nouveau poster propped against the wall next to her. In the corner of an emerald garden, Emma stands looking downward in a dress covered with pink and red blooms, and awkwardly contrasting, starkly white stockings. And "hidden" in the corner of one of Sherry's closets, crammed behind some empty hangers, almost squished against pink printed wallpaper, a blond wears a yellow and blue printed dress.

These images quote Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, Francesca Woodman, Katy Grannan, Jenny Gage, Andy Warhol, (whose collective "deep superficiality" Emma notes in her thesis) and then Klimt, the Pre-Raphaelites like John William Waterhouse, and finally Velazquez's "Infanta." According to Charles Bernstein, Emma developed a rapport with the famous painting during a family trip to Madrid when she was 9. But it's not as though Emma has looked hard at these artists and then "added something of her own." Rather, she has used allusions to their work to inflect and deepen

the nuances of her own iconography in which, for her friends playing "dress up," what they wear represents a "state of mind"—what Emma calls "a continual process of becoming." And here the medley of model, dress, and background combine in one image where fashion is used as Emma describes it to "engender meaning in the surface of things" and reference "the human craving to be objectified, to be desired, to be seen as a living work of art."

WHEN SHERRY WAS IN HER 50S, HER HUSBAND died and she did not want to remarry. So for the next 30 years, as a diversion, she went clubbing with her neighbor, the famous hat designer Mr. John, and her friends. The last little room Sherry shows me is paper-collaged from ceiling to floor with thousands of newspaper clippings of herself in Mr. John's chic hats, at various nightclubs with a madly diverse collection of celebrities not limited to Halston, Queen Noor, Dr. Ruth, Elizabeth Taylor, Quentin Crisp, Mayor Dinkins, O.J. Simpson, Joan Rivers, Monica Lewinsky, Bette Midler, Michael Jackson, Divine, Starr Jones, Malcolm Forbes, George Clooney, Roy Cohen, Peter Max, and Andy Warhol. I remark that if Sherry thought of herself as an artist this would be a conceptual work of art. And I'm reminded of a passage in Alan Davies's prose poem, "I Think I Understand Emma Bee Bernstein":

Already

by the age of three

Emma had contrived a room of her own—and she may well have been conscious of having (done) that (of owning that) before she began showing it to me (I don't know). The walls were a matte white color

not at all bright

and there was room also for a small chest of three or four drawers. Already

in that tiny room

were all of those things that Emma would become (really (really) really become). From my first visit onwards the walls were covered with images cut from magazines. I don't know where she got those pictures

but she got a lot of them. Most of them were of people—it didn't seem to matter whether they were well known or not

but it was tacitly apparent that it certainly did (did (that it certainly did)) matter to Emma what they looked like

and what they were wearing

and (although their organization on the wall defied easy categorization) also (I think) how they went together. I have a sense of wildness

not only of the collage as a whole

but of the individual pieces of image that fed into that collage of image that fed into that collage and came out of it as something else—the parts created the whole so that it could transform the parts

and in that way there was a unity of form and material

Phong Bui thinks of Emma in the same breath as Alain Fournier who died at 28 and whose single novel, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, is considered a classic of French literature, or Raymond Radiguet or Rimbaud who stopped writing completely at age 21—as part of a group of artists who made work in their teens and 20s that would change a generation's way of seeing, and who would become emblems for their generation.

"Her subjects," says Bui:



Andy Warhol and Sherry Bernstein 1980.

are the young, sophisticated, educated middle-class. She's captured their contradictions, the rebellion, independence, ambiguity, and melancholy all at once. It's rare to find a photographer courageous enough to allow an epiphany of everyday life to be part of their image making.

There is a subtlety to Emma's images; almost a throw-away quality, an eerie casualness to her work. That's probably her brilliance. She believes in everyday life.

For me the portraits of Emma and friends play with serialization, I think of Robert Frank or Bernd and Hilla Becher. But Emma does it in a much more personal way. And like all good artists she gives herself rules and then rebels against them. She doesn't repeat herself. Each image is part of the whole and also its own moment.

Emma's work is luminescent. She trusts in the image being a truthful record of what your emotional or intellectual life is. It's remarkably viscerally, vulnerable and generous at the same time.

Antonia told me a story about Emma pounding on her dormitory door and waking her up to watch the sun's rise over Lake Michigan:

She literally drags me out of bed. It's pitch black outside and we go down and sit by the point. And I'm thinking "this is not very safe. We could get mugged or something." And she is saying, "No, no, we have to do this." So we sat by the water and it is beautiful. Emma planned the whole thing out. She wanted to listen to particular music while she watched the sun rise. I don't remember what it was, but she had created an artistic experience. I think that is why people were attracted to her. She appreciated the "now."

"The perfect projection of the internal imagined self, if it exists," writes Emma, "only does so for the photographic moment." This is exactly why Charles Bernstein's depiction of her Polaroid images as "... sparks of ... light in the enduring present" is my favorite description of Emma's work. ☺



Emma Bee Bernstein, self-portrait from notebook, 2003, black-and-white photograph, 4 x 6". Courtesy Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein.

Casa Wabi

BY DIEGO GERARD AND LUCÍA HINOJOSA

The Mexican landscape is—physically, socially, and culturally—a challenging arena for any cultural or artistic project with utopian visions. Mexican artist Bosco Sodi as founder, and contemporary art curator Patricia Martín as director, have embarked on a fascinating project with hopeful ambitions: Casa Wabi, an architectural gem sunk in the rural coast of Southeast Mexico, built by Japanese master architect Tadao Ando.

Located on the outskirts of Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, Casa Wabi is a non-profit organization offering residencies and opportunities for long-term projects for international and local artists. A fundamental goal of the organization is the collaborative involvement of artists and the local residents. This important social commitment might be the catalyst that will allow fresh ideas to develop, creating a dynamic process in which aesthetic and educational practices meet. The aim of Casa Wabi is to merge different realities to create a nurturing entity, in which art is used as a vehicle for the advancement of local communities through educational stimulation. Artists in residence are encouraged to develop projects that welcome locals to take part in workshops spanning several art genres—an approach that is intended to nurture both the communities' interests as well as the artists' approach to elements foreign to their practice. The educational aspect of the projects also serves as an alternative means of learning within the serious educational crisis faced by students throughout Mexico.

Bosco Sodi, based in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is mostly known for his sculpture-like, large-scale paintings, and the intricate process through which he makes them. Using natural pigments, he delicately crafts unstructured, abstract figures that resemble the formation of rocks or organic landscapes. His interest in the *Wabi Sabi* philosophy is revealed through the use of raw materials: a conceptual exploration that surpasses the technical elements involved in his practice. Sodi's work aims to recreate the ambiguities and imperfections of nature though his artistic goals extend beyond his awareness of the beautiful and his interest in aesthetics.

Driving north from Puerto Escondido along the rural coastline and veering off the federal road onto a dirt path, there awaits Casa Wabi in the middle of a magnificent, almost untouched piece of land. A few miles ahead, a gray concrete wall blocks an otherwise pristine view of a virginal beach and a rattled, gleaming ocean. Just past the concrete wall, Ando's masterpiece reveals itself. Designed in the tradition of the *Wabi Sabi* philosophy, the building might seem lush at first. However, when contemplating the space, it reflects Ando's philosophy of nothing being finished, nothing being everlasting, and above all, nothing being perfect. Divided in two wings, Casa Wabi has private accommodation for artists in residence; vast outdoor communal space; studios; a gallery space (with an installation by French artist Daniel Buren); a swimming pool overlooking the ocean; and a botanical garden, every aspect of which is determined by a shared characteristic of simplicity, minimalism, and the integration of natural objects in the unique surrounding ecosystem.



Casa Wabi's Gallery Space with Installation by Daniel Buren. Photo by Lucía Hinojosa.



Casa Wabi (Front Facade). Photo by Lucía Hinojosa.



Bosco Sodi. Photo by Robert Banat.



Casa Wabi (Studio Wing). Photo by Lucía Hinojosa.

Perhaps Ando's and Sodi's intention behind the simplistic *Wabi Sabi*-inspired design of the building is to let the artists in residence and communities involved bring the complexities to Casa Wabi, complexities that should be borne of the interaction between artists and communities, to fill the intentional—and meaningful—voids of the architectural space.

In order to truly understand the responsibility and challenge of creating such an organization, and such a space, one must dig deep into the horrid present of Mexican culture—a complicated manifestation of numerous power structures fighting against each other. Perhaps, the origin of this conflict is the claim for—and the lack of—identity. Through symptomatic reiterations, an evident pursuit for identity surfaces over cultural and political problems.

In a country deep inside the hellish hole created by the drug war, people are face to face with the possibility of losing family members to organized crime while low-income communities regularly lose children to criminal organizations that rule the country by way of force, extortion, and impunity. Non-profits like Casa Wabi are facing this tragedy with bravery, and a firm conviction that the power of education and art can pull people away from these grim realities.

Casa Wabi also meets a more complex obstacle: the struggles posed by the confrontation regarding educational reform. For years, the Federal Teachers' Union has forgone the universal rights of public education by creating and perpetuating a scheme in which affiliated teachers received a lifelong salary and the power to hand over their positions to anyone, whether or not the person has the formal preparation to teach and whether or not they possess a teaching certificate. Consequently, students nationwide, and especially in the state of Oaxaca—where the Teachers' Union has its core—have been receiving their basic education from people without professional training. In 2014, an educational reform was voted into law, stating that teachers, even if

they are part of the union, must pass a proficiency test to be able to hold their position and their salary. This has led to massive violent uprisings by the Teachers' Union, leaving classrooms unattended. Oaxaca has been especially struck, and children throughout the state have now missed over a year of basic education. Casa Wabi's geographical location and its mission of engagement with local communities will meet this struggle firsthand. As Sodi remarked, "art can help educate people in a way they wouldn't have otherwise been exposed to." Art can be a path to critical thinking, especially in communities that desperately need it, and have no immediate access to public education.

People in Mexico live amidst an overwhelming state of crisis, trying to push through daily lives of scarcities, education, and security concerns among other immediate pressures. Gradually, the country is isolating itself from the world. The international community is turning away, but Casa Wabi is a unique oasis attracting foreign eyes and the global contemporary art community. The organization is not a grand microclimatic institution detaching itself from Mexico's gruesome social and political struggles, but a conciliating project that can cultivate artistic values and international insight. Casa Wabi faces a demanding future, in which the impact of its outcomes will be measured through the creative collaboration of the artists in residence with the people living in the surrounding areas.

Casa Wabi's inaugural event, which took place in late October, hosted artists from Mexico and the world, and featured a performance piece in the swimming pool by the Mexican theater company *Ciertos Habitantes*. It marked the date for the first residential projects, in which Corban Walker, Claudia Fernandez, Benjamin Torres, Amy Feldman, and Michael Joo are set to weave their artistic practice with Southeast Mexican realities. They will live within the complexities of an idyllic setting, and the grim truths of a shaken country that are impossible to ignore. ☞

No Room for Artists.

BY DARRAGH MCNICHOLAS

Art and capital have a long and complicated history, but rarely do they combine so problematically as in the figure of Aby Rosen. In 2005, the controversial art collector and co-founder of RFR Holdings told the *New York Times* that life is about “melting art and commerce all together.” That same year, he purchased a 117-year-old warehouse building in TriBeCa for \$16.5 million that was once home to John Chamberlain, Andy Warhol, and Marisol Escobar. In late July of 2014, the New York City Department of Buildings approved his plans to replace the building with 11 stories of luxury condos.

Paul Pagk, Jaime Vinas, and Jacqueline Miro, a group of residents leading efforts to preserve the building at 67 Vestry, point out that there are still a number of working artists and many more long-term residents who will be forced out if Rosen’s development plans succeed. In this instance, commerce does not seem to be “melting together” with art, but displacing it.

Rosen is featured in *ARTnews*’s 2014 list of top collectors for his stockpile of Warhols and works by Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. “If he likes art so much,” asks Pagk, “then why did he kick out Bob Wilson?” The director and playwright Robert Wilson was one of the tenants who was unable to renew his lease after Rosen purchased the building.

Pagk, Miro, and Vinas have clear personal investments in the future of 67 Vestry, but they argue that, as a vital part of TriBeCa’s 1970s art renaissance and as a piece of architectural history, the warehouse merits landmark protection. But, so far, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (L.P.C.), the body that will decide the fate of 67 Vestry, is unconvinced that the building warrants this protection. Whatever the building’s status, it is hard to deny the criticism that TriBeCa is losing its romantic past to unsympathetic developers and that the L.P.C. could take greater steps to preserve that history.

The building was originally designed by Frederick Dinkelberg—a key architect of the Flatiron Building—as an A&P warehouse in 1897. Pagk delights in the brickwork’s subtle embellishment that he contrasts with the generic style of the condos that now fill much of TriBeCa. The architect Frank Helml capped 67 Vestry with two additional floors in 1910 in a lighter, cream colored brick that makes the warehouse instantly recognizable. Another A&P warehouse in Jersey City, built in 1900, was granted landmark status despite its more recent construction.

After hearing appeals, Community Board 1 (C.B.1) unanimously recommended the warehouse for individual landmark status or for inclusion in the bordering Tribeca North Historic District in late March. The L.P.C. stated in a June letter that, although the building “did not altogether lack merit,” alterations disqualified it for individual landmark designation. C.B.1 filed an appeal for reconsideration. Despite their efforts, and despite a MoveOn.org petition with over 1,600 signatures, RFR has already been granted demolition rights for the interior of the building.

The L.P.C. has been criticized for inaction in the past. In another Rosen development controversy, the writer Tom Wolfe stated in a *New York Times* Op-ed that the L.P.C. “has been de facto defunct for going on 20 years.” He went on to call Rosen’s proposed building at 980 Madison Avenue a “Mondo Condo glass box.” Rosen creatively dismissed Wolfe’s article as “anti-Semitic.” Despite its theatricality, the Rosen and Wolfe drama restages the relative helplessness of artists and residents who want protect their TriBeCa history but cannot find space to complain about it in the *New York Times*.

While the group is determined to persuade the L.P.C. to grant landmark status to 67 Vestry, the unreceptiveness of the L.P.C. to community boards and petitions has left other residents less optimistic. Nevertheless, the artist Roland Gebhardt, who has lived in the building since the ’70s, thinks that delaying demolition for as long as possible is still a worthy goal. While their appeals to C.B.1 have hinged on the physical importance of the building, it’s clear that the group thinks TriBeCa’s cultural life is just as vulnerable to development trends.

Miro argues the warehouse attracted diverse “residents [who] have been collectively involved in [. . .] opening schools, preserving piers and communal gardens, creating neighborhood associations to care for neglected parks, and opening thriving new businesses.” In other words, the residents at 67 Vestry worked tirelessly to invent a culture for TriBeCa. Unfortunately, she notes that their eagerness to renovate lofts to meet building codes and create a vibrant culture has pathed the way for occupancy permits and high rents. “When the loft tenants become rent stabilized,” she says, the building becomes “an open target for demolition.” Her comments highlight the role that artists have played in steering TriBeCa from a disused industrial area to a cultural hotbed and developer’s dream.



67 Vestry in 1988. Photo: Paul Pagk.

RFR’s website notes that art can enrich “both the urban landscape and the tenant/visitor experience, while maximizing property values and providing a unique identity and visibility for the RFR brand in its core markets.” Perhaps Rosen’s insistence on the fluidity of art and commerce can be instructive. The artists featured in his collection, like Warhol and Koons, were and are savvy, playful exploiters of art’s role as a commodity. Maybe TriBeCa’s cultural pioneers should leverage their ability to “maximize property values” in order hold on to their spaces in New York. Perhaps artists need to negotiate the world of property and business more strategically.

The art that Rosen successfully mixes with commerce is, strictly speaking, already in conversation with the financial world. But what happens to art and culture that is not about money? Is there space for it left in this city? ☹

To find out more about the effort to save the former A&P warehouse, go to: www.weare67vestry.com

SMOKE AND WATER **GREG LINDQUIST**
Nov 14, 2014- Feb 28, 2015
Southeastern Alliance for Community Change
317 Castle St, Wilmington, NC 28401
workingfilms.org 910.342.9000

in partnership with Working Films
in collaboration with Appalachian Voices, The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, Earthjustice, NC Conservation Network, NC WARN, the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, and UNCW Environmental Concerns Organization

My family lived on the hill above the Dan River and my Grandparents used to take us fishing. Over the years the river became cleaner because the EPA required most textiles companies to clean up the dye that they used to dump into the river which ran different colors. When the wildlife came back we used to count the turtles on the rocks every day from the school bus.
Deborah Div, Danville, VA, member of Fiddlers 4 Residents

I think that, instead of asking me what the significance of the river is, we should ask the inhabitants of the river. If we want to ask a fish, say, "Would you like your home to be filled with toxic sludge?" They would probably look at us and laugh. Unfortunately, we are unable to consult the fish about their opinions on cold ash, so we must represent them ourselves.
—Carolina Altunay, NHHHS student, Wilmington, NC



Al Held, "The Big A," 1962. Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation.

The Held Essays on Visual Art

Edited by Jonathan T.D. Neil

With the generous support of the Al Held Foundation, the *Rail* is pleased to present the following as one of the Held Essays on Visual Art, a series of texts that take on the state of our contemporary visual culture and take aim at the many received ideas that march under the banner of "art and politics."

TROUBLED SLEEP, SUGAR HIGH BY SIONA WILSON

<like>

I'm not the first to comment on the selfie-mania that accompanied last summer's most popular New York art-world event, Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*.¹ Even the artist felt compelled to respond in the form of a 28-minute film, *An Audience*. After being herded into the cavernous, defunct, and soon-to-be-demolished Domino Sugar Factory en masse—like a stadium rock concert experience—the amazing sight of Walker's gigantic white-sugar sphinx soon became secondary to the communal frenzy of photo-taking by crowds of milling viewers. High on something, with camera phones in hand, the audience collectively posed and snapped, seemingly fueled by a massive sugar rush. As we tiptoe around more than 100 years of processed sweetness oozing down the walls and pooling in sticky coagulating messes on the floor, the overwhelming, cloying, heady saccharine scent of decay fills the senses.

Oh god, I think I'm going to be sick.

An Internet search throws up a plethora of viewer postings on Flickr, Instagram, Facebook, and personal blogs. Piles of sugary vomit are everywhere in the work's digital afterlife: in the syrupy, girlish smiles offered to Walker's kitsch slave-child sculptures and the lascivious tongues reaching out to lick the sphinx's sex, in the fingers reaching out to pinch the sweet whites of her breasts. Everyone wants a taste of the sugar, to join in and feast, to participate and connect, to share.

This digital economy of image sharing stands in sharp relief against the older economies of slave labor, unpaid domestic work, and proletarian wage labor evoked by Walker's staging of the site.² Just as the sugary materiality of the installation was subject to a gradual dissolution towards some entropic formlessness, the hypermediatized viewer responses suggest a counter-posing temporal movement into a dematerialized closed circuit of identikit memes. Through the repetition of almost indistinguishable images showing different viewers adopting the same clichéd pose, the dissolving sculptures and site are distilled, hardened into an abstraction of viewer participation. This analog and digital world is condensed within the dream-space of *A Subtlety*, as the elegiac past of embodied labor is thrust into the permanent future of a digital archive. This seeming democracy of images suggests a kind of digital messianism that apes the now empty utopian impulse of the avant-garde.³

<rewind>

The older analog model of proletarian wage labor was once the dominant metaphor for a critical relation to socially engaged art. In his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer," discovered anew and widely read in the post-'68 moment, Walter Benjamin called for a type of modernist practice that would activate the viewer. Not because of its "correct" ideological message or political position, but rather through the work's formal staging, the viewer or spectator would become a producer of meaning, and this notion of the critical, participatory viewer involved in the intellectual labor of producing the work was implicitly set in opposition to a passive attitude of consumption.

This analogy of labor and aesthetics need not predictably evoke the figure of the male worker, even though it frequently does. Against this tendency, feminist artists have explored the complex economies of sex work, housework, childcare, and other types of (feminine) affective labor as part of post-'68 imaginings of possible and practicable futures. In this, a political economy was connected to its libidinal counterpart through experiments with new kinds of technology. The liberation of the subject was linked to social and psychic emancipation, which was imagined—dreamed of—through open form, participatory, new media art.

Today the language of digital sharing and instant connectivity has both appropriated and displaced this dream. The constant "revolutionary" innovation of new devices for accelerated consumption promises the digital realization of the democratizing desire for participation. The old dream was to activate the consumer as a producer of meaning and social action. This has now come true in a certain way. The 21st-century viewer is literally and actively distributing her participation through self-produced images that circulate in a networked visual economy.

It's like waking into a bad dream.

<connect>

This shift to digital participation is less about the image itself. As Jonathan Crary has put it, we need to understand the “subordination of the image to a broad field of non-visual operations and requirements.”⁴ The formulaic and ubiquitous banality of the selfie is the perfect expression of this point. Its formal grammar is readymade for data collection and largely irrelevant for visual analysis.⁵

Walker’s film, *An Audience*, reinforces this very point. It captures a more nuanced range of emotions and gestures, all of which escape the reduced abstraction of the selfie. While the compulsive image-taking at *A Subtlety* remains a very dominant feature of *An Audience*, it is part of a broader set of emotionally charged reactions that are not easy to read. With a particular focus on African-American viewers, this work seems designed to rescue *A Subtlety* from its clichéd digital afterlife. Yet it clearly cannot, and that’s also the point.

These remarks are not to be taken as a screed against technology as such, but an attempt to challenge the pervasive logic of digital messianism and to offer some thoughts on how it impacts politically and ethically engaged art. As David Golumbia has pointed out, “Networks, distributed communication, personal involvement in politics, and the geographically widespread sharing of information about the self and communities have been characteristic of human societies in every time and every place,” and were not invented in the so-called digital age.⁶ Critics of digital messianism such as Golumbia find that increased centralization of power and the management of everyday life are outweighing the democratizing aspects of computerized societies. Likewise, digital connectedness produces social isolation and political powerlessness as much as if not more than the emancipation so often promised.⁷

The growing fluidity between spaces formerly coded as private and our commerce-saturated public realm explains part of this. The American norm for family photography as it was once called—privately collected, modestly shared—has been expanded to include a broader spectrum, and massively increased *quantity*, of images and textual accompaniments that belong to an integrated public image culture shaped by commercial interests. In other words, photographs of your friends hanging out in contemporary art installations find their way onto online platforms, which deliver your friends to advertisers (when they log on to check themselves out) and ensure their activities will be subject to commercially-driven information mining.

American consumers have voluntarily signed on to this self-surveillance for someone else’s commercial ends. It’s only a low relief that distinguishes this from the sharper end of the state’s involvement in surveilling its citizens, from its persecution of N.S.A. whistleblower Ed Snowden as well as its spectacularly cruel punishment of WikiLeaks’ informant Chelsea (formerly, Bradley) Manning. Bad dream becomes nightmare.

<WTF>

The chilling effects of this profound mutation in the traditional public/private opposition are central to Eva and Franco Mattes’s photographic installation *The Others* (2011). Deploying computer software to gain remote access to numerous computer hard drives, *The Others* is a slide show made from 10,000 personal photographs stolen from anonymous strangers. The Mattes’s approach to this work is utterly complicit with the coercive ease with which digital storage permits access to personal information by companies, governments, and rogue individuals (including artists). In *The Others*, the artist becomes an avatar of some of the darkest aspects of invasive capitalism, as it connects with state surveillance preying wantonly on unwitting citizens.

This sociopathic aesthetic aligns with the philosophy of instrumental rationality that underpins digital messianism. If the mind is understood as a computer program, then it is only capable of rational processing. Cognition is reduced to calculation. But calculable reason precludes ethical or political responsibility. As Golumbia puts it, “If our decisions are established for us by logical procedures, who or what makes the decision to act ethically or unethically?”⁸ In *The Others*, the Mattes did not *decide* to hack into others’ personal computers, they “by chance... found a software glitch that gives you complete access to some people’s computers over the Internet.”⁹ And what does one do with such a “glitch?” Exploit it.¹⁰ A rationalist computational logic has taken charge.

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<share>

The rhetoric of digital messianism reached fever pitch during the Arab Spring. Western media, personal blogs, and Facebook postings reveled in triumphal enthusiasm. Not only could the revolution be televised, but live streamed, tweeted, and available in all manner of digital forms. In some quarters it is as if the social media itself creates social change. But the limited successes of these democratic struggles could only have been shaped by the necessarily invisible work of epistemic change at the grassroots level. This slower, non-spectacular effort at social change is eclipsed by the more symbolic, digitally circulated images of revolution. Excited young men waving flags and women wearing hijabs with fingers raised in the sign for peace are ubiquitous in the blogosphere. Such symbolic gestures and public protests are indeed needed, but they also cover over the work of organizing, reform, and activism that makes social change (until of course it fails).

There are a growing number of visually oriented activist projects that work more carefully and critically with the circulation of images through social media platforms. Take, for example, the photographic collective Activestills. This group uses digital formats to provide counter-archives of Israel’s widespread human rights abuses. But their online presence belongs to a broader on-the-ground-activist kind of approach that includes community organizing, intervention, and educational work. Digital forums can only be tools, not solutions.¹¹

<IMHO>

The power and controversy of Walker’s meteoric rise as a young artist in the 1990s was built on her anti-identitarian aesthetic. The antebellum world of sadistic sexuality described by her paper silhouettes challenges both sides of the master/slave dynamic. Walker proved controversial among some black artists and writers because her work did not solely explore white racism against the background of black victimhood and resistance. Rather, it suggested a shared contemporary investment in the gendered dimensions of a distinctly American master/slave fantasy, and expected the viewer to project her own shadow within these uncanny scenes.

The enigma signaled by Walker’s sphinx is the condensation of a series of contradictory symbols: slave past, pornographic present, and utopian, Egyptocentric Afro-futurism, all built from a refined whiteness that evokes the chromatic racial coding of master and mistress. Unlike sugar, maybe this riddle is insoluble.

While *An Audience* offers a range of complex viewer responses, sadly, we only see a fevered dream of infantile domination in the digital vomitorium engendered by *A Subtlety*. The racial diversity evident in the assertion of the viewer as master over the work is also significant. It suggests a generalized powerlessness that underpins the computer’s interface with the world, which produces a kind of equal-opportunity desire for narcissistic possession and domination. The riddle offered by the sphinx remains intact, but perhaps Walker’s dream for her work—providing a fantasy structure for the viewer—has indeed come true. After all, that dream was always nightmarish. ☹

Endnotes

1. Opinion on this phenomenon can be found in a broad range of mainstream media outlets from the *LA Times* and *Washington Post* to *Artnet*, *Jezebel*, the *Roots*, *Gawker*, *Huffington Post* and *Hyperallergic*. For one of the more interesting responses see: silviakolbowski.blogspot.com/2014/07/03/spectators-gone-unsutble/
2. The full title of the installation is: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby an Homage to the Unpaid and Overworked Artisans who have Refined our Sweet Tastes from the Cane Fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the Demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*.
3. For a critical discussion of the problem with leftist utopian thinking for our present political moment, see T. J. Clark, “For a Left With No Future,” *New Left Review* no. 74, II (April 2012): 53–75.
4. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 47.
5. See the project Selfcity.net/
6. David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.
7. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
8. Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, 194. Golumbia draws on the work of Jacques Derrida for this insight.
9. Quoted in Trent Morse, “Working the Crowd,” *Artnews*, September 2014, 88.
10. See Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
11. See Activestills.org. For an overview of other similar projects, see Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, eds., *Sensible Politics: the Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (New York; Cambridge, MA; London, England: Zone Books and MIT Press, 2012).

Rethinking Duchamp

BY BARBARA ROSE

Marcel Duchamp: *La Peinture, Meme*, the current exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, is a refreshing new look at Duchamp with many surprises. The title is fittingly a double entendre. Translated, it means “Even Painting” but the words spoken in French can also mean “Painting Loves Me.” The show is meticulously researched and brilliantly installed by Beaubourg curator Cécile Debray. The thematic spaces contain not only Duchamp’s paintings, but also works related to their context and conception. It is as close to a complete Duchamp painting retrospective as possible, missing only his dramatic farewell to the medium, the 1918 “Tu m’”

The enigmatic unfinished title “Tu m’” has been interpreted in several ways but “tu m’ennuie”—you bore me—seems the most accurate completion of the title. The truth is painting did bore Duchamp; his philosophical mind wanted more than images, surfaces, and colors from art. He wanted ideas and ways to play with them. The show follows his search for an alternative to what he disparagingly termed “retinal art” which appealed only to the eye but not to the mind.

Planting Duchamp firmly within his own contemporary culture and personal experience, the exhibition gives a much better picture of his ambitions and frustrations and the unity of his thought and accomplishments. This reading of his origins, sources, pursuits, and passions permits a glimpse of the secretive, vulnerable artist behind the carefully constructed mask of punster, trickster, transgressor, and distant cold strategist he fashioned to protect himself from those who would understand or misunderstand him too quickly. For all the endless number of Duchamp exhibitions, critical and academic exegeses, this has never adequately been done before.

The show is large, ambitious, and provocative. It opens with an introductory gallery containing the puzzle-like linear engravings Duchamp made at the end of his life based on images taken from Courbet and Rodin. It includes puppets popular when he was a child, the *Boîtes-en-valise* containing the mini reproductions of his works, his first “sculpture,” a charming racetrack with handmade toy horses, and the “original” 1919 small faded reproduction of Leonardo’s “Mona Lisa” on which Duchamp drew a mustache, goatee, and the letters LHOOQ, a dirty joke in French.



Marcel Duchamp, “L.H.O.O.Q.” 1919, Readymade. Private collection. © Estate of Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2014.

The reproduction Duchamp altered was made for the 400th anniversary of the death of Leonardo da Vinci, whose role as artist and scientist, inventor and innovator was obviously the one Duchamp would have liked to emulate. But it was too late. Art and science had branched off into two separate specialized disciplines that could no longer be reconciled. As for artistic innovation versus scientific invention, Duchamp realized early on that only science but not art could alter the world. Defacing a reproduction of a work by Leonardo was his best effort to change history, even if it was only a gesture reflecting the inevitable disappointment of his own ambitions.

The country fair puppets, toys, and miniatures evoke the childhood of the artist who was born in Blainville-Crevon, a small farming village in Normandy outside Rouen where his father was the notary and mayor. Games were extremely important to family life in the country. As a child, Marcel was especially close to his sister Suzanne, his willing playmate in activities conjured up by his fertile imagination. While the parents stayed home in the country, their gifted children were sent off to Rouen to study at the best lycée. His older brothers Gaston and Raymond, who became famous as painter Jacques Villon and sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, who left the family patronym to their younger sibling, were already there when 8-year-old Marcel joined them. At the lycée, he showed an aptitude for mathematics and won a prize for drawing. His first serious art attempts were drawings and watercolors he made at age 14 depicting his sister in various poses and activities.

The next section contains projections of a number of “racy” early silent movies of brides removing the layers of wedding finery in the presence of a voyeuristic husband or lover. The most amusing is the transvestite striptease in which the bride, once naked, turns out to be a man in drag. It is unforgettably and hysterically funny. To understand Duchamp’s gender bending, one has to see it in the context of his own time when, as Cole Porter wrote, “a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking.” Today, anything goes. But we should remember Duchamp, born in 1887, grew up in a provincial world of puritanical inhibitions. We have snuff movies, sex toys, and every conceivable form of Internet porn available on demand. Not sex outside of marriage, but the right to have government health insurance pay for transsexual operations is the cutting-edge issue.

In Duchamp’s day, cutting edge was collections of erotic photographs (basically well-endowed naked ladies demurely posed in interiors or landscapes) that could be viewed in relative privacy through a stereoscope, a device for fusing two separate images into one apparently three-dimensional image by looking through two apertures, each with a different lens focus, which made the image appear larger and more distant. Examples of these peep show machines and early photographs are also included in the show.

Despite the exhibition’s title, it soon becomes obvious that Duchamp did not love painting and painting did not love him. His early stabs at Fauvism

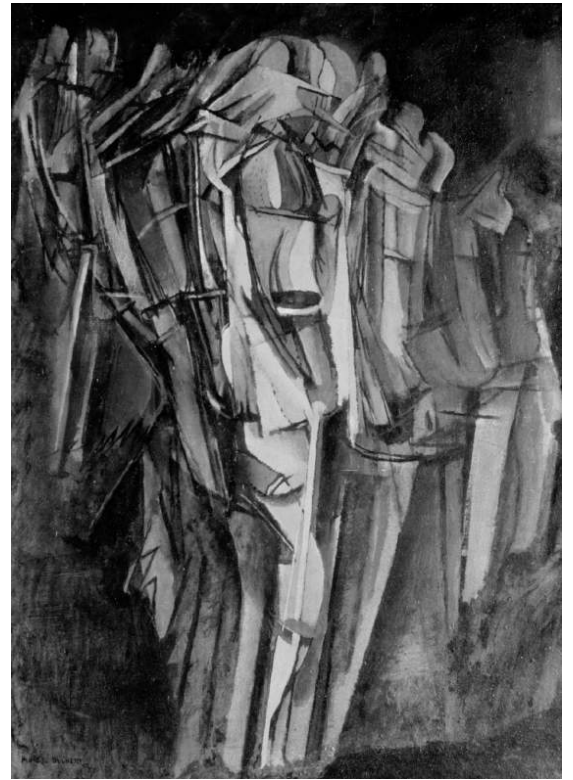
are flaccid, uninspired, and imitative. Doubtless he had a revolutionary personality, but by the time he came of age the revolution was over. A generation younger than the Fauves and Cubists, he was in fact a contemporary of Leger, not of Picasso and Matisse, who claimed that Cézanne was “the father of us all.” Apparently Duchamp originally agreed since he painted his father in a pose and style mimicking Cézanne’s portrait of own his father as well as a version of the “Bathers” based on Cézanne’s masterpiece.

The works in the exhibition make it clear that Duchamp understood Cézanne’s pictorial structure even less than he understood Fauvist color. Leger could build on Cubism to invent a contemporary style inspired not by still life or the figure but by machinery and architecture. But Duchamp was more interested in mechanical drawing and scientific diagrams, literature, and philosophy than Leger, who maintained that painters were stupid, a limitation Duchamp refused to accept.

Having joined his brothers in Paris in 1904, Duchamp enrolled in the Académie Julian, where students were prepared for the École des Beaux-Arts examination, which he failed. It was but the first of a string of humiliating failures. Their father insisted Gaston (Jacques Villon) study law and Raymond go to medical school. Neither finished their professional training and both dropped out to pursue art, although Gaston continued to attend law school for a time. With nothing better to do, Marcel returned to Rouen as an apprentice at La Vicomté printers—a job his family probably engineered—where he printed the engravings of his maternal grandfather, Émile Frédéric Nicolle, a successful businessman who also made prints. In 1905, at age 18, Duchamp enlisted in the army, knowing he would inevitably be drafted because France had universal conscription. Volunteers were allowed to serve less time so he spent only a year being trained as a soldier. His military service over, he returned to Paris to join his brothers, working briefly as a caricaturist.

Comparing the paintings Duchamp produced between 1907 when the term Cubism was invented and 1911 when Braque and Picasso codified them, it is obvious he did not understand the basis of their pictorial revolution, which established the roots of modernism. Indeed, one conclusion to be drawn from this exhibition is that Duchamp was never a modernist. His paintings are a prologue to something else that was highly original and unique but not truly part of the history of modern painting.

The show lacks the three great summits of his achievement, which Duchamp made sure can never be moved—“Tu m’,” his largest and final painting finished in 1918; the alchemical experiment “The Large Glass” of 1915–23; and “Étant Donnes,” his last work, which occupied him from 1946–66. This turns out to be a plus. Seen only in reproduction, their physical absence focuses us on why and how Duchamp devoted the last 50 years of his life to making these infinitely complex summations of his thinking and experiments. This is what they have in common: a dedication



Marcel Duchamp, “Sad Young Man on a Train,” 1911–1912. Oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm. Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection © 2014. Photo Art Media/Heritage Images/Scala, Florence © Estate of Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2014.

to handmade craft and precision, an obsessive fixation on the act of seeing, a long period of gestation documented with copious notes and guides based on sources outside of art—many of which are on view in the exhibition—and a provocation to the viewer to decode their cryptic meanings.

If, as Claes Oldenburg maintained in his *Notes*, everything he did was the result of childhood interests, this fact is even more relevant in the case of Duchamp. Artists, real artists in any event, tend to be obsessive: Monet was obsessed with perfecting his garden, Duchamp with mechanical toys, technological innovation, robots, and movies. He was fascinated by the machines produced by the birth of the industrial age and visited the Musée Arts et Métiers in Paris where they were displayed. Science and medical museums featuring anatomy also drew his attention. From childhood the young Marcel was intrigued by *how* things are perceived, which is the domain of scientific optics and physics and not of aesthetics. How we see—a mental process—interested him at least as much if not more than what we see. This is one of the threads binding his works.

The layout of the exhibition reveals how each of his three major works sums up a period of inquiry, structuring his oeuvre into the three parts that are like the movements of a symphony or acts of a play. I do not think this is coincidental. Nor is the fact that Duchamp insured they would remain in the United States (“Tu m’” in the Société Anonyme collection at Yale, “The Large Glass” and “Étant Donnes” at the Philadelphia Museum) and can only be seen elsewhere in reproduction. To see the originals, one must literally make a pilgrimage. Impossible to move, they are Duchamp’s last laugh: his revenge against second-hand experiences and reproductions.

Of the roughly 50 paintings in the show, it is significant that a large number are family portraits in one form or another culminating in the transitional 1911–12 “Sad Young Man on a Train,” which Duchamp identified as a self-portrait. He explained that his primary concern in this painting was the depiction of two intersecting movements: that of the train in which there is a young man smoking, and that of the lurching figure itself. He explained to Pierre Cabanne:

First, there’s the idea of the movement of the train, and then that of the sad young man who is in a corridor and who is moving about; thus there are two parallel movements corresponding to each other. Then, there is the distortion of the young man—I had called this *elementary parallelism*. It was a formal decomposition; that is, linear elements following each other like parallels and distorting the object. The object is completely stretched out, as if elastic. The lines follow each other in parallels, while changing subtly to form the movement, or the form of the young man in question.

These are issues Duchamp realizes more fully in the 1918 “Tu m’.” Visual paradox and this horizontal stretching out of the image correspond to Duchamp’s claim “to strain the laws of physics.” As his sources are gradually revealed, however, we find his images are based not on non-Euclidean geometry or the general theory of relativity, the great discoveries that were the talk of his youth, but on textbook illustrations of anatomy, mathematics, and physics, and the distortions of anamorphic perspective discovered in the 16th century.

At the meetings his brothers organized at their home in Puteaux outside of Paris, discussions might range from Robert Delaunay’s color theory to Poincaré’s

new mathematical theories to the latest arcane scientific discoveries. Most exciting for the group wishing to find a new frontier for Cubism was the possibility of a "fourth dimension," first proposed by Englishman Charles Howard Hinton in 1882, which became a hot topic in Paris intellectual circles a quarter of a century later. A restless Duchamp soon tired of the chatter and stopped attending the meetings. In his interviews with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp implied that his understanding of the fourth dimension basically was the science fiction version described by Gaston Pawlowski in *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension*.

Pawlowski's novel was no paean to the wonders of technological progress. Rather it was a critique and caricature of new-fangled gadgets like a bathtub entered laterally, a tape measure that could only measure 10 centimeters and a boomerang that did not return to the person who threw it "for reasons of safety." The same year Pawlowski published his science fiction fantasy of the fourth dimension describing a train trip, Duchamp began his first mecanomorphic painting, "Sad Young Man on a Train," in which the human figure begins to morph into a machine. Duchamp always maintained that his titles add important meaning to his work. If so, we may ask, why is the young man, who is Duchamp himself, so sad? Perhaps because the train—motorized transportation—is taking him from Rouen to Paris, from the provinces to the capital, from the country to the city, with each lurch forward distancing him farther from home and family.

Also painted in 1911, "Young Girl and Man in Spring" is still softly pastel. Its subject, two transported young lovers, is both symbolic and romantic, states of mind Duchamp became increasingly determined to discard for their old-fashioned sentimentality, replacing them with cold unemotional mechanical eroticism that served to mask his own feelings as well. In fact, in April 1910, Duchamp became romantically involved

with the model, Jeanne Serre. Because she was married, there was no pressure on him for a permanent relationship or family responsibilities. Nevertheless, in February Jeanne gave birth to a daughter, who was generally presumed to be Duchamp's child, although he made no effort to see her or have any further contact with her mother.

The years 1911–12 are the apogee of Duchamp's career as a painter. Beginning with "Sad Young Man on a Train" the paintings of this period include "The Passage from Virgin to Bride," "The Bride," the two versions of the "Nude Descending the Staircase," and "King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes" of 1912. One reading of the iconography of this painting is that the king and queen, both chess pieces, refer to Duchamp's parents surrounded by the swift nudes who are the children. Indeed, during his fateful trip to the Jura Mountains with Apollinaire, Picabia, and Gabrielle Buffet—Picabia's wife with whom he was apparently infatuated—Duchamp wrote notes that became the basis of the iconography of "The Large Glass." One describes a game played like chess with two teams, one of which was made up of five nudes and a leader who instructed them. It is hard not to imagine that the five nudes were Duchamp's siblings and that he thought of himself as the leader of their tribe.

"The Passage from Virgin to Bride" and "The Bride" do not allude to the body itself but rather to the interior system of veins, arteries, and organs—images inspired by the contemporary anatomical treatises and wax models in the exhibition. In Duchamp's painted "Bride" we see the guts of the nude, the machinery that keeps the body alive. Basically flayed open, Duchamp's mechanical women are in no way seductive. They are the realization of the prophecy of Villiers de l'Isle Adam in *La Nouvelle Eve* (*The New Eve*) that the women of the future would be robots. Duchamp was not a misogynist like the hardcore Surrealists with whom



Marcel Duchamp, "The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes," 1912. Oil on canvas, 146 x 89 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950. © 2014 Photo The Philadelphia Museum of Art / ArtResource / Scala, Florence. © Estate of Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2014.

he exhibited from time to time. But the popularity of the idea of a mechanical doll, an electrified Copelia or a neutered mannequin was part of the fantasy life of the men of his generation.

As in the "The Passage from Virgin to Bride," the titles of the paintings of 1912 relate to the various passages of female life. But he avoided the completion of that ultimate female anatomical passage—which Freud identified as the destiny of women—the passage from the bride to the mother in both life and art. He may have played the transvestite, inventing the coy Rose Sélavy as a female alter ego, but there is no evidence Duchamp was interested in men. On the contrary, beginning in 1923, he had three serious long-term overlapping relationships with women. All well-to-do, thus needing no support, already married, widowed, or divorced, so they could be neither virgins nor brides, and all beyond childbearing age, so incapable of producing a bothersome baby.

Duchamp's first "machine" painting, the 1911 oil-on-board coffee grinder—which he originally gave to his brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon for his kitchen—was also made in the period of 1911–12. An informal study, it depicts the motion of the grinding mechanism in various positions. Overall, the paintings of this brief period are fully realized despite their rejection of visible brushstrokes and the tonal passages and illusionistic space that have more in common with the lacquered surfaces and modeling of old master painting than with modern art. Duchamp's paintings are anything but fresh and spontaneous. They are deliberate and thought out, based on preliminary drawings which are also on view. The many drawings both notational and finished are among the delights of the show. As a draftsman Duchamp had a light but sure hand.

The exhibition includes examples of motion photography by Muybridge, Marey, and others that inspired Duchamp's ambulatory "Nude" seen in successive positions. The Futurists, who were obsessed with movement, had their first group show in Paris in February 1912, which Duchamp must have seen. Indeed "Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2" is much closer to the motion studies of Futurism than to the static images of Cubism, the reason that the chauvinistic

French organizers of the 1912 Salon des Independent rejected it. Of the incident Duchamp later recalled, "I said nothing to my brothers. But I went immediately to the show and took my painting home in a taxi. It was really a turning point in my life, I can assure you." He would paint little after this painful rejection. He made a decision to be alone: "Everyone for himself, as in a shipwreck" is how he put it.



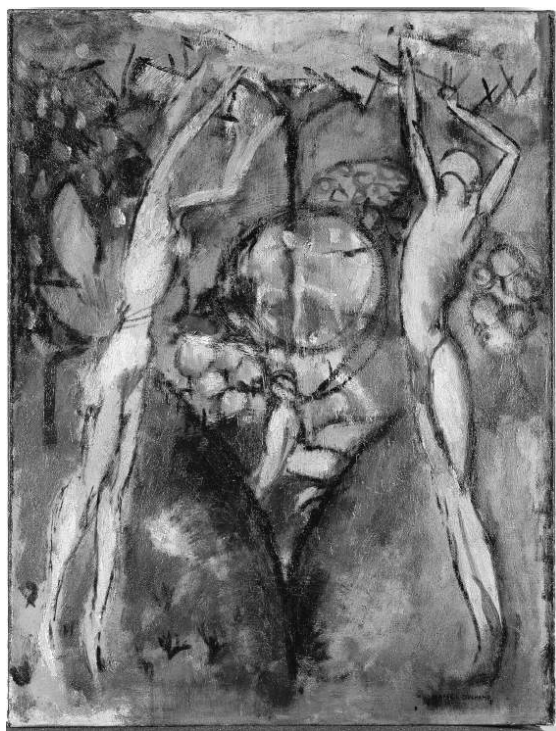
Marcel Duchamp, "The Passage from Virgin to Bride," Munich, July–August 1912. Oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 21 1/4". Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

Stinging from his rejection in Paris, Duchamp accepted the invitation of his friend Max Bergmann to visit Munich. He arrived on June 21, 1912 and found a 10-square-meter flat to live and work in on Barer Straße 65. He stayed for three months that summer freeing himself from Cubism and developing his ideas for "The Large Glass," a work that would go beyond painting. He later explained: "My stay in Munich was the scene of my complete liberation." But that is about all he had to say of the German experience that changed his life or at least his art.

Munich was a lively and strange mixture of a variety of metaphysical ideas.

There were artists and thinkers from other parts of Europe like the brothers Burliuk, Kandinsky, and de Chirico. According to *Mein Kampf* Hitler arrived in Munich in May 1912 to study architecture. But he was not accepted by the Academie des Beaux-Arts so he did not stay. When Apollinaire asked for a portrait to illustrate *Les Peintres cubistes*, Duchamp chose to be photographed by the most famous photographer in Munich, Heinrich Hoffman, who later became Hitler's personal photographer. What really happened in those three crucial months of seclusion in Munich is still a matter of conjecture. Duchamp avoided ever talking about his experience in Munich and the poker faced, closed mouth appearance in the Hoffman photograph is an indication of that attitude.

He wanted a complete break from the Parisian scene and a way to take painting somewhere it had never been. At the Deutsches Museum and the Bavarian Trade Fair, he discovered important technical details that inspired his readymades, which he began the following year in Paris. Not speaking the language apparently did not deter Duchamp from moving to a new city. For example, when he decided to move to New York in 1915, according to Man Ray, he spoke not a word of English. During his three months in Buenos Aires in 1918 he could not speak Spanish. In fact he once said that not knowing a language was the best way to think independently.



Marcel Duchamp, "Young Girl and Man in Spring," 1911. Oil on canvas, 65.70 x 50.20 cm. The Vera and Arturo Scharz Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art in the Israel Museum Collection, Jerusalem © succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2014.

how Cranach used his fingers and the palms of his hands to paint his shiny slick surfaces that eliminated any trace of brushwork.

The paintings Duchamp made in Munich have little if anything to do with Cubism. Indeed he was never a Cubist. His forms are not fractured and recomposed but rather they are subtly modeled with passages of old master-like *chiaroscuro*. In "The Passage from Virgin to Bride" semi-organic and semi-mechanical forms suggest fleshly vessels, armatures, and veins. The organs, ducts, and tubes have fluctuating contours compressed in a shallow space that is not however the superimposed planes and frontality of Cubism.

Duchamp's concentration was on the inner tubing and organs of the body's anatomy rather than on its outward envelope of soft flesh and skin. While he must have known Leonardo's anatomical drawings, observations of the interior of the human body became concrete documents with the discovery of the x-ray by German physicist Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in 1895. Three years earlier in Paris, Albert Londe invented a chronophotography machine to visualize the physical and muscular movements of patients by using a camera with nine lenses able to sequentially time the release of the shutters. The better-known pioneer of stop motion photography, Étienne-Jules Marey, was in fact a physiologist who broke down movement in order to study muscle and bone function. Duchamp surely knew Marey's physiological studies of biomechanical movement.

The idea was such a novelty that the pioneer filmmakers, the Lumière brothers, had a show of x-ray images in their theater. In fact, Auguste Lumière's primary interest was not film but medical technology. Done with moving pictures, in 1910, he operated the first x-ray machine in France as director of the radiology department at the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Lyon. Chronophotography, motion pictures, and x-ray technology are related discoveries that were new and exciting, especially to the young Duchamp eager to find directions for artistic innovation that did not take painting as a futuristic point of departure. Ironically, the painting style he developed in Munich did not look forward to abstraction but backward at the meticulous polished surfaces of Northern Renaissance painting featured in Munich's Alte Pinakothek.

In 1912, Munich was full of mysteries, the capital of occultism, and the spiritual underground. The city was packed with kooks talking about extrasensory perception like Gabriel von Max, who painted portraits of sleepwalkers and spirits, and his brother, photographer Heinrich von Max, who took photos of mediums in trance. It was also a headquarters for the Theosophical Society which taught Annie Besant's theory that the mind created abstract "thought forms." And, there was a Museum of Alchemy, later the Deutsches Museum. Kandinsky wrote his treatise on *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* inspired by Theosophy in Munich and Duchamp immediately bought a copy.

Little is known about Duchamp's Munich sojourn possibly because he thought his adventures in occultism, magic, and alchemy should be hidden since they were highly suspect in Paris as irrational and also perhaps because they provide the basis of the iconography of "The Large Glass," including the halo around the bride that can be

imagined as an astral Theosophical "thought form" aura.

In fall of 1913, "Nude Descending the Staircase, no. 2" was chosen by Walter Pach to be sent to New York to be hung in the Armory Show that introduced modern art to the United States. Duchamp's iconic painting created a sensation, probably because of its title, since the image was no more scandalous than any other Cubist or Futurist work exhibited. In 1913, Americans were still averse to nakedness. Their idea of "fine art" included studio nudes.

Duchamp did not attend the opening of the Armory Show in New York. In 1913, his mind on matters other than painting, he took a job as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève where collections of early manuscripts and books were housed. During the next two years he spent his spare time (which seems to have been all of his time) reading scientific and aesthetic texts and treatises. One of the notes in *The Green Box* containing the studies for the "Large Glass" says: "Perspective. See the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève. The whole section on perspective: Nicéron (Father J. -F.), *Thaumaturgus opticus*." Many of the books Duchamp consulted at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève are included in the exhibition. They contain word games, perception games, visual puns, and descriptions of both real and fake science. Meanwhile, in his studio he created a "Readymade" by mounting a bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool, very likely inspired by Comte de Lautréamont's idea of a chance encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table, a source for Surrealist juxtapositions of common objects.

Duchamp's epiphany that painting was dead occurred, according to Leger, at the Salon de la Locomotion Aérienne, which took place at the Grand Palais in Paris from October 26 to November 10 in 1912. Leger later recalled:

I went to see the Air Show with Marcel Duchamp and Brâncuși. Marcel was a dry fellow who had something elusive about him. He was strolling amid the motors and propellers, not saying a word. Then, all of a sudden, he turned to Brâncuși, "It's all over for painting. Who could better that propeller? Tell me, can you do that?"

It turned out that with the "Bird in Space" Brâncuși, who had become a close friend, could, which accounts for why Duchamp spent so much of his time and his own money promoting and selling Brâncuși's sculptures.

Among the texts and illustrations from contemporary publications on view in the show is an early edition of Raymond Roussel's 1910 novel, *Impressions d'Afrique*. Duchamp credits Roussel's images of humanoid machines and an android heroine as his initial inspiration for "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even," the full title of "The Large Glass." How much time Duchamp actually spent studying Poincaré, non-Euclidean geometry, or Einstein's general theory of relativity is not known. However, the visual evidence leads one to conclude it was not science but science fiction that inspired him.

The Armory Show scandal meant that Duchamp was already famous when he debuted in New York in 1915 apparently to avoid any possibility of being drafted despite the fact that officially he had a

heart murmur. In New York, he would continue to develop the transparent glass for "Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even" in secret for the next eight years. In the meantime, he scandalized the New York art world by submitting a mass-produced urinal as a sculpture to the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent artists. Unlike the Paris salons, the New York group exhibition presumably accepted anything submitted by an artist. Typically, Duchamp upped the ante. If the Paris salon rejected his painting, he would submit a "sculpture" to the New York salon that would challenge the tolerance of the Americans by calling an ordinary mass-produced found object art. "Fountain," the title for the urinal, an object referring to private bodily processes, once again made headlines.

Pawłowski's was a cynical vision of a world in a state of transformation from an agricultural culture to an industrialized machine age. Duchamp keenly felt the loss of the agrarian handmade culture into which he was born and its replacement by the machines and motors of industrial progress. This nostalgia never left him; although he lived in cities, he vacationed in the country. Even in New York he spent weekends in the country in Connecticut with his friends Alexander Calder, Hans Richter, and the heiress he turned into a major art collector, Katherine Dreier, who apparently along with Peggy Guggenheim, another wealthy Jewish art patron, found Duchamp irresistible. And there is no denying he used his powers of seduction to good advantage. Personally he wanted nothing to do with money. On the other hand even his austere existence and his generous support of other artists required it.

In the meantime, he continued his investigation of alchemical themes in "The Large Glass" secretly taking shape in his studio. Because there is a constant overlap and continuity in Duchamp's thinking that links all his works together in a continuous narrative, separating the paintings from the rest of his work is possible only in terms of medium. When asked what he was doing, Duchamp would explain he was playing chess, although he did claim a number of found objects as art during his stay in New York. In 1918, Katherine Dreier commissioned a mural on canvas which became the infamous "Tu m'," ending Duchamp's career as a painter, although he continued to draw. "Tu m'" combines real objects with the shadows cast by objects outside in real space. This is clearly illustrated in the exhibition by the presence of the suspended readymades, the bicycle wheel, bottle rack, and four-pronged hat rack, which are present in the painting only as shadows of themselves. These objects are like Duchamp himself: they are there and simultaneously not there. He is omnipresent in his comic self-advertisements, yet he sees mainly his intimate circle, lifelong friends and relatives.

In "Tu m,'" Duchamp plays with real and represented objects as well as with real and virtual space suggested by the shadows of objects that are not present and with different intersecting skewed perspectives. To further complicate the issues, he paints a trompe l'oeil tear in the surface of the canvas held together by real safety pins. In addition, a bristly bottlebrush—presumably to clean the bottles absent from the bottle rack present only in shadow—juts out from the tear at a right angle to the canvas. Duchamp

further emphasizes the spatial oddities of his picture by using various forms of "intersection." The corkscrew intersects the canvas; the safety pins pierce the surface of the canvas. The real bottlebrush and a bolt, fastened to the back of the canvas, pierce the front.

The distortions that arise from the intersection of depicted and real objects with the painted shadows of the readymades not present in the painting and an abstract color chart of overlaid squares diminishing in size refers to the warped perspective of an old master painting that is a secret *Vanitas*. There is no skull in "Tu m,'" but as Jean Clair was the first to point out the perspective in "Tu m'" is not that of the Italian Renaissance but the anamorphic perspective of the hidden skull in Holbein's "Ambassadors," a theme taken up again later by Jasper Johns. According to Clair, organizer of the Centre Pompidou's first Duchamp exhibition in 1977, the function of the bottlebrush is similar to that of the skull in Holbein's picture: namely, "to expose the vanity of the painting. But this time of all paintings."

Anamorphic images are distorted projections of an image that to be recognized must be viewed from a position different from the usual frontal position from which we normally view paintings. Holbein's distorted skull placed in the bottom center of the composition is stretched out horizontally until it is unrecognizable except from the side. Duchamp was very attentive to Leonardo da Vinci, once again looking back for inspiration. Leonardo made the first anamorphic projection in a drawing of an eye in 1485. The truth is Duchamp was an intellectual bookworm of immense curiosity. His sources include scientific and mathematical textbooks and their diagrams, some of which are in the show. He was also very taken with the idea of alchemy as a hermetic crypto-science. Alchemy involves the transformation of base metals like lead, the material of "The Large Glass," into gold and links Duchamp both to the tradition of the trickster Hermes Trismegistus, the original alchemist, as well as Yves Klein

and James Lee Byars, who were equally involved in such pursuits.

Jean Clair saw a reason for Duchamp's decision to stop painting other than boredom:

He had painted, in Munich, the "Bride," which is in every respect his masterpiece. The chromatic finesse of the grays and the ochre, the declination of the reds and the greens, a lesson in anatomy without precedent ... a work of infinite charm which placed Duchamp right away in the ranks of the great masters. He had established his supremacy. Abandoning the pigments and their bond with the earth, he chose the materials of a laboratory, the glass of test tubes and vials.

Duchamp admitted to Pierre Cabanne that he wished to leave New York because the U.S. had entered the war and he wanted nothing to do with it. In the summer of 1918 newspapers were filled with the news that American soldiers arrived in large numbers on the Western Front. In July, Duchamp finished "Tu m,'" and on August 14, 1918 he sailed for Buenos Aires on the SS Crofton Hall. He arrived in Buenos Aires on September 9, 1918. A month later Raymond Duchamp-Villon died, age 41, in an army hospital in Cannes of an infection contracted while working as a medic at military headquarters in Champagne.

Apparently with the idea in mind that Roussel had written about Buenos Aires as an exotic destination in *Locus Solus*, Duchamp left New York with Yvonne Chastel, the estranged wife of Jean Crotti, a Swiss artist soon to marry Marcel's sister Suzanne in Paris. Duchamp wrote Crotti that the purpose of the trip to South America was "to cut entirely with this part of the world." He imagined Buenos Aires as a kind of sunny New York, but he was soon disappointed with its copy of European culture and mediocre bourgeoisie and bored with the theaters and tango palaces. He continued to make notes and sketches for "The Large Glass," intending to complete it in New York. His letters to friends reveal a growing disenchantment and as for latin



Marcel Duchamp, "The Large Glass" ("The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even"), 1915 - 1923 / 1991 - 1992, second version. Oil on lead sheet, lead wire, dust and polish on broken glass plates, glass plates, aluminum foil, wood, steel. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © Estate of Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris 2014.

machismo, “the insolence and folly of men,” he found offensive. He returned to Paris in early 1919 after the armistice was signed and continued the theme of the readymade, with the idea of the “assisted” readymade in the “rectified” “Mona Lisa.” His trip to Paris that year was his first visit to the city after spending four years in New York and nine months in Argentina. He stayed only five months and then was back in New York in 1920 to resume work on “The Large Glass” in secret. Officially, he was playing chess.

“The Large Glass” is impressive in many respects. Over nine feet tall, it is a transparent freestanding object, fusing two glass plates with figures in lead inlaid between them. It is neither painting nor sculpture. Its neither/nor status is a basic part of its identity. Like the estranged states associated—or disassociated—with Surrealism, “The Large Glass” is “something else”—a fantasy as literary as it is visual. Duchamp’s mysterious recondite science turns out to be science fiction, the machinery of a Rube Goldberg contraption mocking progress. Not only an object but also an occasion for meditation and free association, “The Large Glass” is deliberately difficult to decipher. Duchamp intended it to be accompanied by a book, which like a manual instructs the viewer about the rules of the game. The notes, published as *The Green Box*, describe that his “hilarious picture” is intended to depict the erotic encounter between the “Bride” in the upper panel, and her nine “Bachelors” gathered timidly below, a mysterious mechanical phalanx of suitors in the lower panel.

In 1923, considering “The Large Glass” “definitively unfinished,” Duchamp returned to France ostensibly to devote himself to playing chess in professional tournaments. He took time, however, to continue his study of motion begun with the futuristic “Nude” in films he made with the help of Man Ray, who he had met in the United States. He settled down in Paris and began a romantic relationship that lasted 20 years with Mary Reynolds, a gentle, kind, intellectual American expatriate. But suddenly he surprised his friends by marrying Lydie Sarazin-Levassor, a woman Picabia introduced him to in 1927. The marriage, which lasted seven months, is documented by Duchamp’s unfortunate first wife in a guleless memoir titled *Un Échec Matrimonial*—the failure of a marriage. Is it a coincidence that chess in French can be interpreted as a double entendre for failure?

There was not much pretense about the fact that Marcel had to marry Lydie, who Carrie Stettheimer accurately referred to as “fat,” because he was for the first time dead broke. His parents had both died in 1925. As long as they lived he had a small pension, but he spent his even smaller inheritance buying Brâncuși’s unsalable sculptures, thus protecting Brâncuși and his work but leaving himself penniless. It was soon clear that Duchamp preferred chess to his wife. Once she realized this, she glued his chess pieces to the board in their Rue Larrey garret. This was pretty much the end of his brief first marriage, which seems to have overlapped with his continuing relationship with Mary Reynolds anyway. After his divorce, Duchamp permitted Reynolds, who was a young widow, to be seen with him in public, but he would neither marry her nor live with her full time.

Playing chess steadily, he definitely improved his game. In 1932 he was named



Marcel Duchamp with Lydie Sarazin-Levassor. Image source unknown.

French delegate to the International Chess Federation and won the Paris chess tournament. He found time, however, between 1925 and 1935 to experiment with kinetic art and to collaborate with Man Ray to make films. “The movies amused me because of their optical side,” he told Katherine Kuh:

Instead of making a machine which would turn, as I had done in New York I said to myself, Why not turn the film? That would be a lot simpler. I wasn’t interested in making movies as such; it was simply a more practical way of achieving my optical results. When people say that I’ve made movies, I answer that, no, I haven’t, that it was a convenient method—I’m particularly sure of that now—of arriving at what I wanted. Furthermore, the movies were fun.

La Peinture, Meme includes films by Man Ray, Leger, and Brâncuși, in addition to Duchamp’s own *Anemic Cinema*. Film, of course, is a collaborative process and in making and appearing in films, Duchamp found many playmates. He himself only became a movie star in Hans Richter’s films, but he and Man Ray conspired to turn Duchamp into an advertisement for himself. He was a star without a vehicle but he was famous, the first artist to invent a cult of personality that later inspired theatrical types like



Marcel Duchamp, “Tonsure (rear view),” 1921. Gelatin silver print on Carte postale paper, 4 3/4 x 3 1/2”. Photographed by Man Ray. © 2009 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

Warhol and Beuys. He was happy to be photographed by anybody from Stieglitz to Man Ray to Richard Avedon. Poker faced, he is expressionless until the late laughing and mocking photographs. The carefully staged photographs are the public face of the private man determined that no one know his vulnerabilities.

During the ‘30s he went back and forth between New York and Paris and produced the *Boîte-en-valise*, the portable

museum of miniatures of his works, probably inspired by the circus suitcase designed by his friend Alexander Calder to house his miniature transatlantic traveling circus. With Mary Reynolds he designed exquisite unique bookbindings for avant-garde authors, which are now in the Art Institute of Chicago. When the Germans occupied Paris in 1942, Reynolds chose to stay although Duchamp tried to convince her to leave with him for the United States. With the code name “Gentle Mary,” she joined a resistance group which included Samuel Beckett and Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia. Under Gestapo surveillance beginning in the summer of 1942, she was forced to flee France. Leaving via Madrid, she finally arrived in New York in 1943. By that time, however, Duchamp had begun his ill-fated romance with Maria Martins, the socialite surrealist sculptor and wife of the Brazilian ambassador to the U.S.

No two women could be more unlike than the two Marys. Reynolds was a heroic, selfless, modest but perfectionist creator of elegant and refined bookbindings. In Maria Martins, the great seductress, the great seducer met his match. He had broken the hearts of many women, but in a drawing for Martins, he was so smitten that he drew a red heart below a French inscription that begged her not to crush it. Martins was an aggressive domineering *femme fatale* who had already caused her teacher Jacques Lipchitz to have a nervous breakdown when Duchamp met her. In Washington, she turned the top floor of the embassy into a sculpture studio, but D.C. could not accommodate her ambitions, either erotic or artistic. So she left her family in Washington and rented a duplex on Park Avenue where she lived in *luxe* and gave glamorous parties.



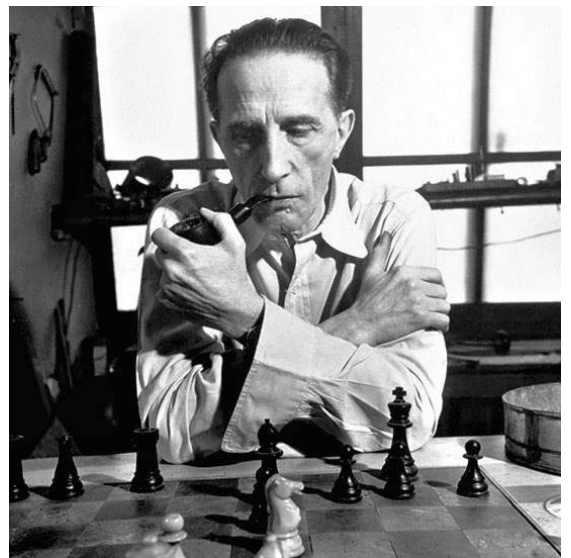
Maria Martins, 1941. Image source unknown.

Maria Martins’s sculptures and her *Time* magazine interviews are truly embarrassing, a proof that love is blind. Duchamp’s “New Eve” is not the passive mechanical doll set into motion but a voracious Brazilian temptress, a feminist *avant la lettre* who has found her inner goddess in the form of Yara of the Amazon, the subject of an over life-size sculpture that appears to be a nude self-portrait. Their tumultuous affair is a cliché resembling a bad Hollywood *noir* movie. This is a conclusion to be drawn from her incredibly kitsch poetry: “I want to see you lost, asphyxiated, wander in the murky haze woven by my desires,” she wrote. “For you, I want long sleepless nights, filled by the roaring tom-tom of storms. Far away, invisible, unknown. Then, I want the nostalgia of my presence to paralyze you.”

Exulting in the idea that she was a Venus flytrap, Martins caught Duchamp

in her web and had him in her thrall until 1950 when she moved back to Brazil with her husband and three children. That same year Mary Reynolds, who had returned to Paris in 1945, died. Duchamp was crushed. His correspondence with Maria Martins, secret for years, was made public in the Philadelphia Museum catalogue for “Étant donnés.” Her nude body, which Duchamp cast in a long series of trial-and-error projects, is the focus of “Étant donnés,” Duchamp’s last work, which occupied him for 20 years from 1946 until 1966.

With “Étant donnés” Duchamp came full circle, recuperating his past and all that had concerned him from his early years beginning with the racy scenes of the 19th-century stereoscope peepshow.



Marcel Duchamp, 1952. Image source unknown.

The divider or other view-limiting feature that prevents each eye from being distracted from seeing the image intended for the other eye now takes the form of two holes in a wooden door that seals in the bizarre tableau. But this peep show has grisly qualities. This “nude” is not only not seductive, it is repulsive with its played legs and gash-like hairless vagina.

“Étant donnés” is a further recapitulation of his obsessions with voyeurism, movement, representation, and mechanization. This time, however the bride is transformed not into a machine but into a corpse in a strange kind of anatomy lesson. Installed after Duchamp’s death in 1968, “Étant donnés” has given rise to its own interpretation industry. Duchamp intended it to be enigmatic and multivalent and surely it is. There is no “one” way of seeing or interpreting it. That the position of the nude was changed is certain. In the original drawings and studies Maria Martins is upright, standing on one foot with her leg raised in the air in a pose similar to that of a dog urinating, probably the only way a woman could use a men’s urinal. Finally, a purpose has been found for “Fountain.”

Over the period of 20 years during which this work was laboriously made, the original casts of Maria Martins’s body ended up as a composite of fragments. The one new body part specifically identified as such is the arm that holds aloft the torch, which was cast from the arm of Duchamp’s second wife, Alexina (Teeny) Sattler. It is reminiscent of the torch of freedom of the Statue of Liberty that

had welcomed Duchamp twice, in 1915 and 1942, which is appropriate since he became an American citizen in 1955. The nude we see through the peepholes has her face obscured by a blonde wig—the color of Teeny Duchamp’s hair—rather than the original brown wig associated with Maria. The nude is no longer upright but spread out vertically. She is now literally a “reclining” nude.

Previously, Duchamp deliberately created questions regarding his sexuality in provocative photographs of himself dressed in drag as his alter ego, “Rrose Sélavy.” On the other hand, cross-dressing was a fairly common avant-garde activity. Artists like the American synchronist Morgan Russell had themselves photographed in women’s clothing as

a daring charade. There is one account that Duchamp participated in an orgy with three women organized by his close friend the novelist Henri-Pierre Roché. Ultimately, he confessed to Pierre Cabanne, he was boringly normal. He intentionally distanced himself from romantic sentimentality. But the truth is, as the inscription to Martins reveals, he was sentimental and romantic. He was also unhappy because as much as he valued his freedom and solitude, he wanted a playmate like his siblings, especially his sister Suzanne, his favorite playmate. However, it not only takes two to tango, but also to play chess, which was one way to find at least a temporary playmate. Leaving his work open to any and all interpretations was his way of enticing the viewer to become the absent playmate.

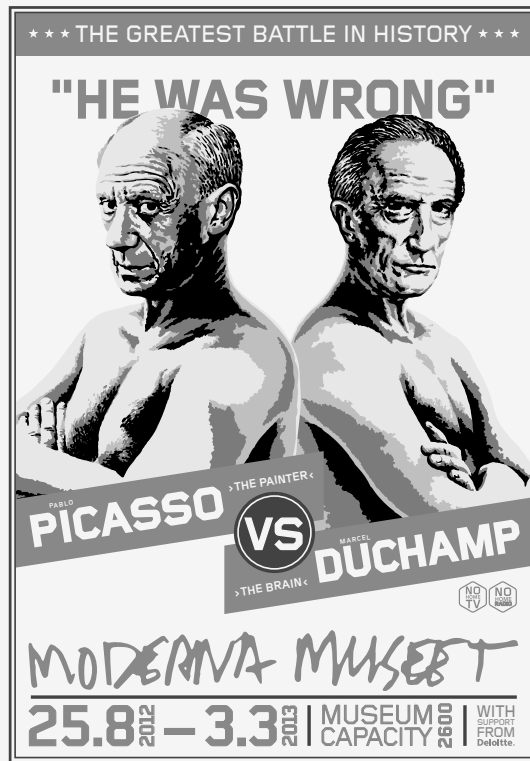
Duchamp missed the warm atmosphere of his original tight-knit family, which closely resembles the psychological profile Freud described in his essay on “The Family Romance.” Reasserting his own place as the center of attention, in 1964 he made collage of the original 1899 photograph of the Duchamp family with his three younger sisters and two older brothers, masking out Gaston and Raymond by cutting the photograph in the shape of the urinal, leaving himself as the center of attention. At the same time, he honored his brothers and in 1967 organized an exhibition *Les Duchamps* that included their work along with his own and that of Suzanne. The work of all the family members is appropriately also part of the Centre Pompidou exhibition.

Recovering from the loss of both Maria and Mary, Duchamp finally found his ideal playmate in Teeny Sattler, the ex-wife and mother of Pierre Matisse's children, whom he met in 1951 and married in 1954. The melancholic, sad young man became a contented and satisfied old man as the stepfather of Matisse's grandchildren, who were devoted to him. The family had been reconstituted. Teeny was even able to persuade him to meet his own daughter, a painter who signed her works Yo Serremayer, and Duchamp organized an exhibition of her work at the Bodley Gallery in New York.

With her immense charm and discretion—she was universally beloved—Teeny had the lack of pretension, generosity, and warmth that were the reality behind the mask of the *faux* persona Duchamp had created, encased by the hard shell of the uniform of the bachelors in "The Large Glass" he assumed to protect the hypersensitive vulnerable poet inside from rejection and loss. Never free from his original family but unable, until the end of his life, to have a family of his own, Duchamp emerges from this exhibition as a product of his time and experience, a lonely, melancholy, fragile man who signed letters to those he knew well "affectionately, Marcel."

The idea that he was strategic and deliberately seeking to shock is contradicted by the statement he made to Katherine Kuh in 1962: "The strange thing about readymades is that I've never been able to come up with a definition or an explanation that fully satisfies me." He claimed he had no artistic intention when he fastened a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool in 1913, "I didn't want to make a piece out of it, you see ... there was no conception of readymade nor of anything else, it was just a distraction. I didn't have a specific reason for doing so, or any intention of an exhibition, or description." He was not a cold strategist but in many respects a merry prankster in search of relief from loneliness. He inhabits no real laboratory but the alternate universe of jokesters and tricksters of Alfred Jarry's *pataphysique*, which Duchamp admitted was an inspiration.

The pose of not being serious left Duchamp off the hook in terms of critical judgment. But it was also a façade. Hardly the lazy *flâneur* or the amoral gigolo he would let the world believe he was, in fact he was deeply serious, working constantly even when officially doing nothing but playing chess. What he



Picasso/Duchamp He was wrong, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 25 August 2012 – 3 March 2013. Campaign by TBWA Stockholm. © Moderna Museet and TBWA Stockholm.

achieved was neither easy nor superficial, the transformation not of reality but literary fantasy into art in which the actual physically present materials and their forms and space are at least as, if not more, important than the iconography and the stories they tell. Intentionally left open to multiple, even conflicting, interpretations, his objects and writings have become an international tournament of interpretation and a veritable academic industry.

By putting together *The Green Box*, the notes for "The Large Glass," and *The White Box* with material related to "Étant donnés," and then the notebook with the precise guide of how to install the contents of "Étant donnés," he provided guides to the rules of the game. By now there are probably more people playing the international Duchamp Game than the entire population of Rouen. But it's a great game, more fun than chess and far more intimate and revealing. Your move, Marcel. ♠

The sources I have relied on include Pierre Cabanne's Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont's extensive research compiled for the Moderna Museet, Francis Naumann's essays and compilation of Duchamp's letters, and Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal. For any discussion of the fourth dimension, Linda Henderson's book on the subject is indispensable. Gradually more and more of Duchamp's correspondence has been published in French and English clarifying his life and thought. The Philadelphia Museum exhibition of "Étant donnés" includes for the first time the correspondence with Maria Martins. I also learned a great deal from the catalogue for the first Centre Pompidou exhibition in 1977, published in four volumes, as well as the excellent catalogue for the current show. The literature is so vast on Duchamp that volumes would be necessary simply to list the titles.

Post Script

I met Marcel Duchamp on a number of occasions. He was, as many have observed, charming, courteous, unpretentious, amused, elegant, and diffident or possibly just amused. I was first introduced to him at the opening of the 50th anniversary of the Armory Show in April, 1963. He was not yet quite the hero he would be, but certainly no longer considered the imposter and hoax the papers pictured him as in 1913. My Ph.D. oral exams were the next day and Professor Julius Held, who was on my committee, was astonished I was not home cramming. I should have been but I was dying to meet Marcel Duchamp, the mysterious figure who occasionally would turn up at Happenings.

At the time he was mainly known as a Dadaist or a Surrealist. His stance of being retired from art having been accepted, no one had any idea he was working on an infinitely complex installation in secret. When Walter Hopps organized the first Duchamp exhibition in October of that year at the Pasadena Art Museum, I managed to get there and again shake hands, but this time also to see a lot of work I had never seen before, which I admired for its craftsmanship and opaque enigma. Fascinated, I too could not help but want to come and play with Duchamp. One evening John Cage asked me if I would like to visit Marcel and play chess. I said I would like to visit Marcel and Teeny but I was not going to embarrass myself by playing chess. Instead I watched Duchamp play chess with John Cage, who was never embarrassed by anything.

As impressed as I was by Duchamp's charm and intelligence and his ability to stay clear of the art market and the intrigues of the art world, I was angry he convinced so many that painting was dead, since above all, I loved painting. I got over this moment of pique because I was intrigued by his imagination and inventiveness. What Duchamp himself had done was always interesting and provocative. What was done in his name, on the other hand, was responsible for some of the silliest, most inane, most vulgar non-art still being produced by ignorant and lazy artists whose thinking stops with the idea of putting a found object in a museum.

In 1971, fed up with everybody and everything, I took a job as director of the art gallery of the University of California, Irvine. With my colleague Moira Roth,

a Duchamp scholar, I organized an exhibition and symposium titled *Marcel Duchamp: Choice and Chance*. I thought Duchamp should be present throughout the show. With the hare-brained idea in mind for an interdisciplinary participatory media-oriented exhibition, I spent months making tapes with everyone who knew Duchamp who was still alive, including John Cage and Jasper Johns. I flew to Mexico to interview Octavio Paz, who had been very close to Duchamp. I borrowed copies of Duchamp's films and rotoreliefs. Hans Richter loaned me his movies featuring Duchamp, including the then unfinished *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. I accumulated slides of every image by and of Duchamp and every sound recording he made that I could locate so his voice and image were constantly present throughout the exhibition.

Then I made the mistake of taking Apollinaire's idea that Duchamp would be the artist to unite art and the people seriously. I gave my students the assignment of creating Duchamp awareness all over the Irvine campus, which accommodated graduate engineering and science schools as well as the liberal arts and humanities. When they showed up dressed as cheerleaders waving pompoms chanting, "Marcel is still da Champ, Marcel is still da Champ," I knew I had lost that round. But I was sure that the symposium of experts like Anne D'Harnoncourt, Richard Hamilton, Kynaston McShine, Nan Rosenthal, and Annette Michelson, which I had videotaped, would be stimulating and edifying. The tapes are lost, but Walter Hopps's contribution was unforgettable. The students, impatiently wearing buttons saying "Walter Hopps will be here in twenty minutes," were restless by the time Walter ran down the aisle to the stage and grabbed the microphone. He spoke for more than half an hour, but all he talked about was how at the age of 11 he had visited the home of Duchamp's great patron Walter Arensberg in Pasadena. We anxiously awaited the climax, which was that after climbing many flights of stairs Walter came to a door and knocked on it. The door opened and a man in a robe was standing there. Breathless now, Walter said, "I asked, are you Marcel? And the man said yes." That was the end of the lecture. I think Duchamp would have loved it.

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"Another Winter" (2007), Taxidermy and black mirror.
Courtesy of Center of Contemporary Art, Podgorica, Montenegro.

ALEKSANDAR DURAVCEVIC

SELECTED WORKS 2007 – 2014 | CENTER OF CONTEMPORARY ART, PODGORICA, MONTENEGRO | NOVEMBER 6 – 30, 2014

BY PHONG BUI

*In Search of the Miraculous:
Time Lost and Regained*

Endless emptied buckets in a vertical matrix that evoke
Both his ancestors' action to honor those soldiers
Who defended Tãrgu Jiu and Kafka's cryptic fable of
The rider who came away empty from a coal merchant.
It was he who relished the LIGHTNESS OF OBJECTS.
It hovers decidedly above the fatherland while
Mother Nature internalizes her humility,
Turns her body into unequal fragments of earth.
She is exposed to the elemental air for her agriculture.

A constellation of countless broken pieces of glass, resembling a
Falling star that is destined to cradle glimmering fractions of light
Quite unpredictably! Dissimilarity cries out for
Similarity of an imagined democracy in spite of the slogan
"Working Class Do Not Vote," here and there, and everywhere.

Mysterious, enigmatic, and as pure as his elegance assumes,
Especially with the back of the left foot that barely touches the floor,
It's true! On this occasion the reflection in the mirror is oblique
And unfathomable in translation. I did not know where the virgin was
When we needed her to welcome us through a different portal.
The one that lies beyond, that does not seem
To comply with the given.

It's just "ANOTHER WINTER." And
"There Is No Glory For Me," as [he] looks to his left. And
"There Is No Glory For Me," as [his] father looks towards his right.
There is no "VICTORY" except for the patina of time that
Welcomes the beauty of decay.
One certainty proposes two perspectives of one view.

The luminous moon prompted
The silhouetted tree to serenade her in the night.
She rises just as she aspires, by an increment of an inch
And less than a half to the right.
His intention was to deceive our assumption.
I, too, have "SOMEWHERE" to go!

I am promised more moisture in the atmosphere
And a rainbow that elevates hope and profound pleasure
Even in the darkest hours. How and why this picture was made
Is beyond my comprehension.
"SVI ONI" seems to imply that it's
The air here that replaces the light.

"All of Them" suspend in pitched black squares
The different feathers that constitute the
Dissimilarity and similarity of an imagined utopia.
Like the two cylindrical rainbows that majestically reside in the
Two niches of porta della camera anteriore.
"SOMEWHERE" is here.

"TELL ME YOURS I WILL TELL YOU MINE."
Like GOD and DOG, and a discerning atheist who has dreadful dyslexia
And still he is flexible and graceful everywhere he goes.
On one side is the "LAKE OF DREAM[s]"
On the other side "SEA OF TRANQUILITY."

It's impossible to choose which you & I, us, he, she, they,
Whoever would prefer.
Albanians thought [he was] Montenegrin
Montenegrins thought [he was] Albanian
Italians thought [he was] a Slav
Latinos think [he is] Italian
Blacks think [he is] French
French think [he is] one of their own.
Where do you & I, us, he, she, they belong?



"Mother," (2014), tin buckets.
Courtesy of Center of Contemporary Art, Podgorica, Montenegro.

Letter from COPENHAGEN by Terry R. Myers

OLAFUR ELIASSON: RIVERBED

LOUISIANA MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, HUMLEBÆK, AUGUST 20, 2014 – JANUARY 1, 2015

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET: BIOGRAPHY

SMK – NATIONAL GALLERY OF DENMARK, SEPTEMBER 19, 2014 – JANUARY 4, 2015

I am indebted to the Louisiana Museum for sparking my interest in emerging Nordic art. Starting in the mid-1990s, my visits provided first encounters with the work of several artists who have held my attention ever since: Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Olafur Eliasson, Elmgreen & Dragset, Nils Erik Gjerdevik, Henrik Håkansson, Superflex, and Tal R. My appreciation of all of these artists was bolstered by the Louisiana's singular articulation of *place* through its immersive setting, an architectural and environmental statement that continues to support this museum's particular commitment to the social experience of all types of modern and contemporary art. My 1990s experiences were recently reinforced during two visits to the Louisiana, and not only by the visitors who still treat the museum as an accommodating home. (The entrance is through the unassuming mansion that was on the property when Knud W. Jensen founded the museum in 1958.) This past April I was knocked out by an impeccable survey of the early 20th-century Swedish artist Hilma af Klint that came off as resolutely current, and in October I was nearly as overwhelmed by Olafur Eliasson's "Riverbed" (2014), a landscape of rocks and running water inspired by his native Iceland and set upon raised (and well-concealed) platforms that ran through the entire length of the museum's south wing.

Eliasson's substantial intervention is, of course, a spectacle on par with many of the other projects that he has created and engineered over the years, and it delivered on what I took as its promise to provide an experience that interacted in provocative ways with what the museum already produces on its own: a perpetual oscillation of interior and exterior combined with the careful incorporation of works of art into a wandering journey that somehow doesn't disrupt the ability of those objects to hold our focus—and even our wonder—beyond a moment. The Louisiana constantly asserts itself as a walk, so Eliasson's work is, at its core, a deliberate repetition, a walk *within* a walk. It is here where Eliasson's intervention intersects provocatively with *Biography*, a concurrent exhibition of the collaborative sculptural installations of Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset at the SMK—the National Gallery of Denmark. It is worth noting that the SMK's hybrid architecture is itself connected by a series of walkways between the original 1890s building and another built in 1998, but, more strikingly, the installation of Elmgreen & Dragset's work also relied upon a mindful re-performing of the journey of their work, a walk fraught with nothing less than core issues of life and death, even at its lightest moments, like when encountering "Welcome" (2014), a maybe-too-romantic fender-bender of a sculpture made up of replicas of an Airstream-esque trailer and the Welcome to Las Vegas sign.



Olafur Eliasson, "Riverbed," Installation shot, Riverbed, 2014. Photo: Anders Sune Berg Courtesy: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek.



Elmgreen & Dragset, "Andrea Candela, Fig. 3 (Virtual Romeo)," 2010. Wax, t-shirt, hoodie, socks. Photo: ONUK. Courtesy: Andrea Thulle & Heinz Peter Hager.

Elmgreen & Dragset share Eliasson's high level of ambition, as demonstrated, for example, by the placement of "The One & the Many" (2010), in the entrance hall of the SMK. A life-size four-story replica of an apartment building with windows that allow views into some of the apartments, each furnished very specifically (in one, the television was on showing the U.K. "X Factor"), it provocatively infuses voyeurism with a social conscience. This was particularly effective in the insertion of an earlier work into one of the ground-floor apartments: "Andrea Candela, Fig. 3 (Virtual Romeo)" (2006), is a complete *mise-en-scène*, including a wax figure of a young man lying on a small mattress on the floor. He is, in fact, the product of the most sought-after qualities on a dating website called "Gay Romeo" (it's on the screen of a laptop next to him on the floor), a constructed identity that the artists have also uploaded to the site so that actual users can write to "him."

Without the addition of the social complexity (and slight weirdness) of "Andrea Candela," the spectacular presence of Elmgreen & Dragset's apartment block would have kept it more in line with the relatively easier read of "Welcome." That said, it was in the rooms and hallways that were built for a presentation of Elmgreen & Dragset's "Powerless Structures" works alongside several other pieces that the survey demonstrated their long-standing ability to make the anonymous deeply personal, hence the title *Biography*. Walking amidst, to highlight a few works, a baby left in front of an A.T.M. ("Modern Moses" [2006]), two pairs of men's jeans and underwear abandoned on the floor ("Powerless Structures, Fig. 19" [1998]), a bunk bed in a prison cell with the top bunk facing the bottom ("Boy Scout" [2008]), and several dysfunctional doors (for example, "Powerless Structures, Fig. 123" [2001], with hinges and a door handle on each side), I found myself being moved, step by step, beyond both spectacle and any interpretational limits to something open, speculative, and reverberating.

Eliasson's "Riverbed" could have suffered a similar closure if not for the inclusion of other works in his exhibition: "Model Room" (2003), and three more recent films. As a tabletop presentation of Eliasson's studio procedures, "Model Room" provided useful insight into the inner workings of his enterprise (the models were developed in collaboration with the Icelandic artist Einar Thorsteinn). The films, however, were even more crucial for breaking the spell of "Riverbed," augmenting it with a completely different range of imagery that at its best could be called magical. This was especially the case in "Innen Stadt Aussen" (2010), shot in Berlin. Tracking a truck outfitted with a large mirror on its side, the visual ride it took me on (while sitting in a theater space outfitted with wood bleachers) might have impacted my experience of "Riverbed" even more than it did, had I not decided in the end to retrace my steps and walk back to the entrance of the museum to start once again by going the other direction—another way that makes me now realize that the ongoing promise of yet another way is what makes the work of these three artists important. ☺

MOURNING HABITS BY ADELE TUTTER

DEATH BECOMES HER: A CENTURY OF MOURNING ATTIRE

ANNA WINTOUR COSTUME CENTER, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART | OCTOBER 21, 2014 – FEBRUARY 1, 2015

One hundred years ago saw the beginning of World War I and the end of the elaborately codified tradition of “wearing mourning.” As the phrase indicates, the word “mourning” had by that time become synonymous with the apparel worn, mainly by women, during the formal mourning period, transforming the internal process of grieving the dead into a codified expression and performance of this process. “Wearing mourning” thus helped free the respectable mourner from the emotional burden of grief, allowing her to carry on with her life—including keeping up with the latest fashions. *Death Becomes Her* references the double purpose of mourning attire: to dignify and beautify the griever, and to embody her grieving.

This illuminating exhibition is notable not just for its stunning examples of mourning costumes (dating from 1815–1915), including gowns worn by Queens Victoria and Alexandra, but perhaps even more so for its tactile conveyance of the much larger, even elaborate role that mourning played in times past. Assuming the mourning attire so beautifully displayed at the Met was more or less routine for the young women who grieved departed parents, husbands, siblings, and children at a time when one in five children died in infancy and the average life expectancy was less than 50 years, it becomes eerily clear that for the women of this era, death was a constant and oppressive reality.

The show is aptly held in the subterranean Costume Institute, transformed for the occasion into a tiny necropolis, complete with funereal music. An elaborate mise-en-scène of costumed mannequins greets the viewer descending the steps, inviting the public to join their private receiving line. The generally petite display figures stand on slightly elevated platforms that bring them closer to the height of the audience. Further minimizing the distance of observer and observed, the dim lighting desaturates all clothing of color, turning visitors into dark silhouettes that mirror the mannequins, which, pale and corpse-like, seem like the ghosts of those who once wore their clothes. We have entered the afterlife of their mourning.

The Met is to be praised for the impeccable presentation of garments that made changing demands of the female body: the sloping shoulders and bustle of the mid-19th century give way to the sway-backed “unibosom” of the turn of the century. Alongside these changes, understated wigs provide

a complementary narrative of evolving hairstyles, helping to bring to life the clothes of the dead. Moving through the show, unobtrusive labels note the sober intricacies of mourning attire such as the complex manufacture of mourning crape, a dull black silk prized for the non-reflective quality considered most appropriate for mourning. Apparel was officially keyed to graded periods of the mourning process, from full mourning, during which only black was worn and minimal or no ornamentation was allowed, to half-mourning, when colors including mauve, purple, and gray could be introduced, as well as reflective and decorative materials such as fringe, beading, and metallic accents. Dressmakers compensated for the constraints imposed by the limited palette with the creative use of texture and trim; in one superb example, a dress is adorned with cording of tightly ruched crape.

The show is not without its difficulties, however. While atmospheric, the low light and distant placement of some of the mannequins make it difficult to see much of the exquisite tailoring on view. In contrast, the apparel displayed in last year’s *Impressionism, Fashion, and Modernity*, also at the Met, was more accessible, even when displayed in glass boxes. Projected period quotes fade in and out, injecting a contrasting degree of animation to the static displays. Wisely confined to the walls opposite the mannequins, they are needlessly theatrical and distracting; this viewer would have preferred the display of original texts; the artfully posed mannequins need no help, creating a range of subjectivities all by themselves.

Displayed in a separate room are jewelry made from jet (fossilized wood) and containing hair of the departed, millinery and accessories, several early 19th-century mourning dresses, memorial portraits, and period fashion plates. Here, one wall is given over to a remarkable series of prints by Charles Dana Gibson, published in *Life* magazine. Telling the story of a fetching woman in mourning and the unwanted attention she receives from men, these satirical illustrations speak to a different side of the mourning widow, whose peers see her as a menace, and whose lovely clothing fails to comfort her or help her reintegrate into society. Death surely “becomes” this preoccupied, if perfectly dressed, wasp-waisted woman: as if presaging her own imminent passing, she attends a costume ball as “Juliet.” Immune to her suitors and their entreaties, she ultimately leaves her former life, and becomes a nun. ☹



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NEO RAUCH *At the Well*

DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY | NOVEMBER 6 – DECEMBER 20, 2014

BY TOM MCGLYNN

Neo Rauch has all but cornered the market on post-modern historical painting. While his histories don't overtly present as such, he does thread a specific temporal narrative (German, idealist) through what one might describe as the hangover dream of the repressed nation-state. The nation-state haunting here is the former East Germany, a state cornered by its political designation, one aligned to Cold War socialism and the social realism that became the sanctioned genre of that limited corner. Rauch doesn't go about incorporating his experience like some of his older forebears, Gerhard Richter or Sigmar Polke; they, like him, grew up in the East and plotted their aesthetic self-creation from a point of departure left over from official culture. Rather, his approach represents a return to a kind of figuration that Richter and Polke most probably eschewed as being too close to the official social realist style. Rauch seems unafraid to go there simply because historical distance may have made it palatable again for his own generation, for whom the style most likely became, ironically, more of a pop idiom.

Rauch's cast of dimly characterized figures in this new series of paintings includes soldiers, village festival goers, workers, shopkeepers, students, businessmen, craftsmen, matrons, politicians, professors, and fools—in short, almost every category of citizen to make up a potential working social order. All of the elements are there, but the artist scrambles them in a virtual anarchy of figural gestures displacing the suspension of political belief needed to coalesce such an order. One is left wandering in these paintings, navigating the lack of clear narrative between heraldic slugs, somnambulant boatmen, sickbed protagonists, hunched crones and hulking giants, sportive clerics, thoughtful sculptresses, and scarlet maids born of flayed fish. These characters all collide in scenarios underscored by the detached assumptions of shared dogma central to medieval morality and passion plays, rather than a more modern, Shakespearean pathos that might lead one to actually identify with some of the enacted scenes. The lack of any given belief in the artist's peculiar, post-post-modern metaphysic allows for surrealist free association while keeping his absurd scenarios uncannily generic.

Rauch's painterly technique supports this disenchanting surrealism with clay-like drawing and modeling, extreme shifts between the grisaille and complementary color structures, and impossible perspectival transitions



Neo Rauch, "Der Blaue Fisch," 2014. Oil on canvas. Diptych, 118 1/2 x 196 1/2". Courtesy David Zwirner New York/London

made plausible by the artist's brilliant knack for smoothing these compositional ruptures, maintaining a haptic sense of the whole. It is his talent for adumbrating the gestalt of painting's formal elements that creates the real sense of belief in these works.

Most of the paintings in *At The Well* are very large, appropriate to the scale of ambition of a post-modern Courbet. Rauch, like Courbet, assembles large ensemble casts put to allegorical purpose. One thinks of the older artist's "Burial at Ornans" (1849 – 50) or "The Painter's Studio" (1854 – 1855) when considering Rauch's similarly overcrowded pictures. Like Courbet, too, Rauch sublimates the narrative thread of woman as mother/earth/goddess. Consider "Der Blaue Fisch" (2014), a painting that depicts a patriarchal figure helping a fully dressed woman out of a wound in a large, freshly caught fish. He is aided by a flaying fishmonger and attended by a punting canal man. It's a flat-footed, secular "Birth of Venus" (1485 – 87) in an acrid red, green, and yellow landscape of windmills and humble cottages evoking Old Europe. This event draws the attention of the rest of the workaday village, effectively crowd-sourcing the mysticism of a quotidian epiphany. In "Skulpteurin" (2014) another female protagonist, this time more matronly and less passive, mounts a ladder to sculpt a monumental female form in flesh-colored stone. A small maquette of the sculpture stands on a pedestal nearby while drone-like artisans in guild caps stand ready to hand the sculptress her tools. In both of these paintings, Rauch comes closer to a clear allegorical statement than in most of the other works in the show. While Courbet may have coded his allusions to a presiding feminine spirit in works such as the gushing cave of "The Source of the Loue" (1864) and the centralized open grave in "Burial



Neo Rauch, Heillichtung, 2014. Oil on canvas. Diptych, 118 1/2 x 196 1/2". Courtesy David Zwirner New York/London.

at Ornans" (1849 – 50) Rauch makes explicit the role of the woman as both the passive object of fascination and active maker of worlds. The exhibition's title, *At the Well*, might be connected to "la source" (1868) but in Rauch's case more towards a nationalistic wishing than an elemental wondering.

One of the most complicated works in the show is "Heillichtung" (2014), a vast 9-by-16-foot canvas that sets up a field triage in an alpine landscape. The painting is further populated by incongruously lute-toting soldiers emerging from a ramshackle corrugated steel barracks and what appears to be a former artillery crew attending to a fallen tree trunk. These figures are scattered in widely varying scale in a mountain valley with giant mushroomrooms and two dueling sculptures that recall Brancusi's "Endless Column" (1918) and Rodin's "Monument to Balzac" (1898). On the far horizon a castle burns a la Ruscha's "LA County Museum on Fire" (1965 – 68) and an organic-looking radio tower topples like one of H.G. Wells's alien machines in *War of the Worlds*. Inserted into this nutty mélange, like a pop-up window on a computer, is a miniature Fauvist landscape painted in primary red, yellow, and green-blues. A translation of the title means "healing clearing," most likely referring to war and its aftermath. Although Rauch was too young to experience WWII—the tragic, defining moment in German 20th-century history—with this work he makes reference to the residual need to come to terms with that moment for his countrymen of all generations, past or future. In painting allegorical content in such an antic and kitschy way, Rauch simultaneously heals and reveals the inherent meaning behind this historical reckoning.

Because of his general tendency to distance himself from any ideological subtext of historical allegory, Neo Rauch remains an important if quixotic figure of post-modern figurative painting. By reanimating the rhetorical mechanisms of obsolete historical narrative as idiosyncratic follies, he simultaneously undermines the power of representational ideology while instilling belief in the continuity of dreams. ☞



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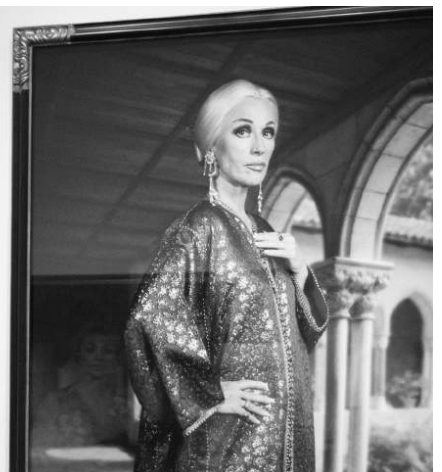
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Photo: Exhibition of works by Cindy Sherman at Metro Pictures Gallery, 2008



ANETA GRZESZYKOWSKA *SELFIE*

RASTER GALLERY, WARSAW | SEPTEMBER 26 – NOVEMBER 15, 2014

BY DAVID RHODES

In using her body as both the image and site of her work, Aneta Grzeszykowska continues the dialogue and tradition of such artists as Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, and, most obviously in this exhibition, Alina Szapocznikow—another Polish sculptor whose work traffics in bodily fragmentation. As its title *Selfie* suggests, the subject of this exhibition is the construction of the self through photography. But Grzeszykowska's process is far from straightforward. Grzeszykowska has made objects in the likeness of parts of her own body and then photographed them, often as she holds them in her hands. The material used is pigskin, variously painted, stitched, and pinned. In "Take, Selfie #6" (2014), the artist holds a paintbrush with one hand whilst applying red paint to the lips of a head steadied by the other hand. Eight pins with black heads are positioned on either side of the nose and imitation teeth are convincingly in place behind the lips. Other areas of the head are blank and featureless—no eyes for example—and provoke charged unfamiliarity. The missing detail stimulates uncomfortable thoughts

of erasure and deformation. When taken overall, the fragmentation implied from so many body parts prompts thoughts of a body actually rendered apart. Disambiguation is prevented both by the separation of a body into parts and the incompleteness of these parts. This Golem-like recreation of a body suggests the fractured and constantly changing nature of selfhood, a process requiring acts of creation as well as memory.

"Selfie #10" (2014) comprises two eyes with dark irises and lashes, surrounded by about an inch of facial skin. The artist's hand presents them delicately for our gaze. One of the eyes is raised to afford a better view; it also looks more directly back at us. The division of the eyes from a face and the different directions in which they direct their gaze raise issues of a divided self, perhaps. This estrangement of reality from a sense of wholeness and the eruption of conflicted rearrangements of a body also recall Surrealism. The grays, browns, and dark reds of the smooth leather used as a background in the photographs are quietly institutional. From a distance, they offer a balanced classicism in contrast



Aneta Grzeszykowska, "Selfie #6," 2014. Courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw.

to the disturbing *nature morte* tableau the photographs become upon closer inspection. A performative aspect of making is evidenced as the artist's hand can often be seen at work crafting the objects. Artifice and reality are integrated, as in the hybrid identities of stage actors in character.

The dead flesh with living flesh, meat with the female body, a deliberate circling around powerful conceits definitely not of a harmless kind. In insisting on a link between self-creation and mortality, Grzeszykowska points to the invention over time of identity and its inevitable obliteration in death. ☞

CARY SMITH AND DON VOISINE: *Orthogonal and Diagonal*

GREGORY LIND GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO | NOVEMBER 6 – DECEMBER 20, 2014

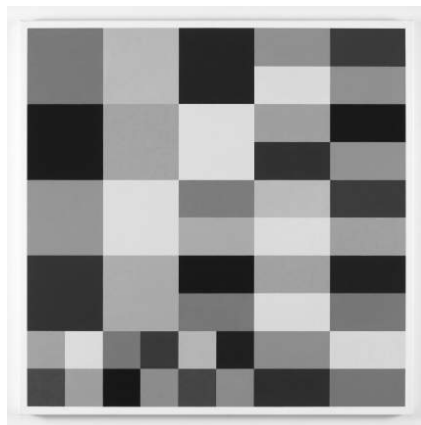
BY JOAN WALTEMATH

Interspersed in a two-person show in San Francisco, the work of Cary Smith and Don Voisine is heavy on black and white, with notes of color punctuating in concert and alone. Both Smith and Voisine are working out of a tradition of geometric abstraction that is again enjoying a moment in the spotlight. For seasoned viewers, the cyclical nature of what we are given to look at in any particular time is familiar. Yet the meanderings of geometric thought that have been with us since the beginning, from the earliest remains of potsherds in the anthropology museum to the present day, go much deeper. From notations incised in clay to the genre of the hard-edge, there are consistencies in the problematics of fixity and fluidity.

This historical context sheds light on the importance of both Voisine and Smith's desire to keep things in motion. While the hard-edge appears to be fixed, the organization of elements in both their work sets things in motion. Hung with an eye to these relationships, their works reach across the room to extend the conversation.

Voisine is especially known for his black-on-black paintings, with their subtle shifts in surface reflectivity ranging from chalky matte to high gloss that allows neighboring forms to be distinguished by the sheen of their skin. He often uses specific but simple diagonally oriented shapes that are overlaid to generate forms. The complexity of the resulting configurations is unexpected because his project initially appears to be so simple in and of itself. Soon enough it becomes apparent that only a finely honed internal logic could generate the kind of minimal diagonals, in "Noir" (2014) for example, that torque the central expansive "X" form and allow it to take on volume.

Cary Smith's *Grey Blocks* (2012–14) paintings are configured on a grid whose demarcations often vary from the upper left to the lower right corner on a kind of diagonal symmetry. Modulated in warm gray, blue gray, charcoal, and black tones they set in motion the painting's subtle changes in value. These orthogonal forms don't rest—they are shifting and slide forward as they claim relationships and generate connectivity, momentarily though, before giving way to the next most demanding articulation. Like an LED screen or video monitor, their unceasing motion can be mesmerizing,



Cary Smith, "Grey Blocks #21," 2012. Oil on linen, 31 × 31".

yet the kind of movement they create is different, allowing for an opening up of thoughts and contemplation of relations.

There is a calm cohesive feel to the show, the correspondences between Voisine and Smith redolent. Voisine's "Time Piece" (2014) and "Index" (2014) both use a series of rectangles around their central black-on-black squares that spin around the frame while the high-contrast moments pop. Next to it, the bright canvas ground and multicolored grid of squares in Smith's "Yellow Wonder Wheel #1" (2014) begin to fluctuate, making the regularity of the grid dissolve. Smith's movement evolves slowly as we key in initially with the contrasts and then, as time is taken, colors register and start the boogie.

Smith, initially known for his exquisitely and precisely painted stripes, has several different formats in the show. Two small pieces at the entrance are mostly comprised of striped black and white and gray forms, both warm and cool, but then in the corner they break with the logic they start to suggest and begin to pixelate. There are several common terms that come to mind here—one is veils, the other is passes. Often in Voisine's work there are geometric shapes positioned side-by-side



Don Voisine, "Contact," 2014. Oil on wood panel, 17 × 17". Courtesy of Gregory Lind Gallery.

that are equivalent; then a layer is laid down passing over the top of them to "connect" the two forms. In "Hinge" (2014), this veil sets the work in motion, the left side tends upwards and the right side downwards. Banded by two gray horizontal stripes, the movement perpetuates.

Smith's use of motion in the *Grey Blocks* series tends to move forward and back of the picture plane, and while some works like "Grey Blocks #21" (2012) are calmer, next to it are more active renditions. The subtle variation in both the temperature and value of the grays makes it seem as if, like in the Voisines, there are layers of color put down on top of each other. The net effect of this illusion is to enhance relationships between the singular rectangles. And while this is all pretty subtle, the motion and tension that the value changes generate becomes all the more pronounced in the company of Voisine.

There is a lot of humor in both artists' work and it's a relief to feel that neither takes himself too seriously. The days of purist geometry and the tyranny of quietude seem far away. In Voisine's "Herald," a crest-like form is an arrow pointing south. Smith's *Splat* series reads like the hallmark of hybridity. One could infer from this or not, but to read between the lines is an interpreter's pleasure. ☞

LILIANE TOMASKO *Into the Darkness*

LESLIE FEELY, NEW YORK | OCTOBER 29, 2014 – JANUARY 10, 2015

BY DAVID CARRIER

Normally, there's a visually obvious distinction between figurative and abstract paintings. John Constable shows English landscapes, while Jackson Pollock's large late-1940s abstractions depict nothing real. But it's generally difficult to identify the subjects of Liliane Tomasko's paintings. Thus, this exhibition is surprisingly puzzling. Most of Tomasko's larger oil-on-linen paintings, all made in 2014, present fields of lines on intense dark, Nordic-colored backgrounds—"Night Shifting," and "Ludlow Dream" are examples. But one picture, "Linens," has intense blue, violet, and yellow lines on a white ground. In "The Bed" we see the dim image of a man sprawled on a bed. And the title of "Linens" certainly clues us into how to read what initially looks like a purely abstract pattern. Identifying the subjects of all of these pictures, however, only becomes possible when we learn how they were made: Tomasko paints from Polaroid photographs of ordinary fabrics, bed sheets and linens, curtains and clothes, transforming these objects into something almost unrecognizable.

She takes us "into the darkness"—into the world of bedtime dreaming.

Twenty-five small works—either watercolor on paper or oil on canvas paper—were installed in a dense hanging on one wall. A few, such as "Map, June 12, 2014," are identified as maps with dates of their creation; the titles of most, however, contain the phrase "Everything. In its right place," which is written out in one painting "Everything. In its right place #7, 2014." In these very varied works on paper we are brought close to Tomasko's processes of picture-making. Some, like "Everything. In its right place #30," look like small Abstract Expressionist paintings. Others, like "Map, June 21, 2014," are small versions of her larger pictures. If we are patient, we really do see *every thing* in her visual world, for every way of mark-making that she employs is mapped out, set in its right place. A few years ago Tomasko made paintings showing recognizable beds. Her new pictures look abstract in part because now she takes us close up to her subjects. In fact, the apparent abstraction of Tomasko's paintings

bears witness to the enchanting complexity of her pictorial subjects. Look closely and attentively at banal fabrics nearby, she shows us, and you will find how much there is to see right at hand.

Sometimes when an exhibition is puzzling, it is good to look nearby for inspiration, outside of the show itself. Two blocks north of Leslie Feely, so it happens, there is an exhibition at the Frick that includes Jean-Antoine Watteau's "Fêtes Vénitienes" (1718–19), on loan from the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. Look closely at that Franco-Flemish painter's fabrics and you will find an uncanny anticipation of Tomasko's concerns. Like her, Watteau loves the patterns created by the folding of colored fabrics. His fabrics are suggestive because they reveal or veil the bodies of the elegant men and women he depicts. In Tomasko's much larger paintings we are taken close up to textiles. Her subjects thus become the pretext for seemingly abstract pictures, images that, because they exist as if at the margins of ordinary perception, are hard to recognize. In our culture where



Liliane Tomasko, "Night Shifting," 2014. Oil on Linen, 56 x 50 inches. © Liliane Tomasko. Courtesy Leslie Feely, NY.

photographic images are omnipresent, only figurative paintings that take risks like hers stand a chance of having an impact.

My analysis is indebted to Anne Hollander's classic *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting* (Yale University Press, 2002). ☞

DAVID CARRIER is co-author with Joachim Pissarro of *Wild Art*. His *The Contemporary Art Gallery*, co-authored with Darren Jones, is forthcoming.

XU BING *Phoenix: Xu Bing at the Cathedral*

THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE | JANUARY 2014 – MARCH 2015

BY TANEY RONIGER

Since last winter, a formidable presence has resounded across the cavernous interior of The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Upper Manhattan. It is not that of the divine, although that too is surely there. This presence is that of two mammoth birds created by Chinese artist Xu Bing. Suspended from the cathedral's vaulted ceiling by an elaborate rigging system almost as wondrous as the massive pendants in its charge, the beasts, collectively titled "Phoenix" (2008–10), conspire with their host to create a commanding appeal for hope and unity in a time widely marked by their absence. If the cathedral's lifeblood is the salvific power of the transcendent, the salvation heralded by these creatures is to be found in the transformative potential of human ingenuity. Though not its intended context, the cathedral lends the work a dimension of meaning that both universalizes and expands upon its original intentions. Here, art, social activism, and the spiritual fuse to create a force so compelling we might wonder why they were ever dissociated.

The story of the work's commission is inseparable from its meaning. Having been asked to create a large-scale sculpture for the atrium of a high-rise being erected in Beijing, Xu visited the site and was shaken by the deplorable working conditions of its migrant laborers. Responding to the glaring discrepancy between these workers' plight and the luxurious lifestyle the product of their labor would afford others, he conceived a piece that would be both a monument to the sacrifices of these men and a commentary on the larger issue of China's increasing urbanization. "Phoenix" was to be made entirely of industrial tools and detritus gathered from the building's construction site and would take the form of the two-fold phoenix of Chinese legend: a

male and female pair symbolic of unity and good fortune. Although the proposal was initially approved, the building's developers backed out after the financial crisis of 2008, apprehensive about what kind of statement such a raw and politically charged work might make in the freshly bruised country. Only after the intervention of a private collector was the work eventually realized, now with materials gathered from construction sites across Beijing and the assistance of a large team of migrant laborers. Finally completed in 2010, the creatures have since become birds of passage; after being shown twice in China they flew to the States, stopping for a year at MASS MoCA before coming to New York.

But knowing the birds' story does little to prepare one for the experience of seeing them. Entering the immense, Gothic-style building, one is immediately dwarfed by vastness. At nearly 140 feet high, the nave's canopy towers overhead, inducing a mood of hushed reverence and humility. Looking up being the immediate impulse, it is the "supergrid" that one sees first: a spectacularly baroque system of metal trusses, cables, and pulleys that hangs halfway down the nave. Suspended from it, and hovering 12 feet from the ground, are Feng and Huang, the two creatures whose union forms the Chinese Fenghuang. Each about 100 feet long and weighing a combined total of 12 tons, the birds are a wonder to behold.

Sacred and benevolent though they may be, polite these birds are not. Instead of opulent feathers and their Sunday best, they don stained, scarred, and mud-caked vestments. Not merely adorning their bodies but indeed composing them are countless pipes, shovels, tire rims, jackhammers, saws, pliers, and drills, all meticulously arranged to conform to ornithoid anatomy and fastened together



Xu Bing, Installation view: *Phoenix* (2008–10), The Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Construction tools and debris, LED lights; dimensions variable. Photo: Jesse Robert Coffino.

with the utmost precision. Neither are they without humor: instead of talons, they boast rusted steel claw scoops that they keep daintily curled up against their breasts. Hard hats, fire extinguishers, fans, and goggles: Feng and Huang have left nothing behind. Fierce, raw, and redolent of earth and sweat, these birds exude strength—and, above all, pride. As if to underscore the latter sentiment, tiny white lights lace their entire forms, turning the beasts into majestic constellations at night.

Gazing up at the tremendous pair, one cannot but feel the presence of the Chinese laborers whose hands must have touched every inch of these tools. Their isn't the only unseen human presence, however. With labor in mind, one can hardly fail to wonder about those who built not just the suspension system but the cathedral itself, both testaments to human might in their own right. So rarely do we consider the untold numbers whose fortitude and ingenuity created the structures we take for granted, so

thoroughly has all evidence of their struggles been expunged from our lives.

More seldom still does one think of collective labor as a spiritual matter—especially in the artworld, where one seldom thinks of the spiritual at all. But with its plea for unity in the context of a religious atmosphere, "Phoenix" suggests a kind of communion of which even the staunchest atheist can partake: that which can be achieved through binding ourselves together in collective action toward a common goal. If people working together can create sublime works of art, engineering, and architecture, why can we not do the same toward a more just and conscionable world? We mustn't wait for divine intervention, "Phoenix" seems to admonish. Together, we can achieve transformation right here in the gritty realities of concrete and asphalt. Significantly, Feng and Huang do not face the cathedral's altar. Instead, they face the street, perhaps pointing our way to the work that needs to be done. ☞

GILLIAN WEARING *We Are Here*

MAUREEN PALEY, LONDON | OCTOBER 13 – NOVEMBER 16, 2014

BY SHANA BETH MASON

Tranquil, sunny scenes of a British town fill the first frames of Gillian Wearing's latest film, *We Are Here*, showing at Maureen Paley's landmark gallery in East London. Cars whiz past, trees endlessly sway in the sunshine. Suddenly, the camera cuts to a white, elderly man standing somberly in thought. He relays, through interior monologue, a story of a woman he loved as a teenager (several years older than he), and subsequently let slip away for reasons unknown to him. As he speaks, we learn that he is dead, speaking from the confines of the afterlife. Other "shades" begin to tell their stories.

Another elderly appears; he is only visible in profile. He relished his resemblance to actor Tom Cruise in his youth, but for the rest of his life, allowed his crushing insecurities to erode his relationships with others. The remaining stories follow similarly gloomy patterns: a Muslim woman describes how she repressed her feelings to spare others from hearing them; a black woman attempts to rationalize her loneliness by insisting that she was a kind person; another black woman relays the isolation her illness (undisclosed) had laid upon her.

All of the characters file into an unidentified community space. There they sleep, stare, and are caught up in themselves. Waves of low-frequency sound permeate the space; it resembles the amplified hum of Buddhist monks in deep meditation. The film reaches a buzzing climax in the form of a passionate spiritual: with arms raised and eyes towards the heavens, the souls



Gillian Wearing, "We Are Here" (video still), 2014. Color video with sound, 21 minutes. © Gillian Wearing. Image courtesy of Maureen Paley, London.

are like those in Dante's *Limbo*, holding out for salvation never to be received. They chant in eerie, rumbling rounds, "We the memories, all alone. No-one knows that we are here." In the final seconds they repeat, in unison, "We are here." The lush trees just outside the window are seen as a kind of peaceful world that the characters will never reach. A bird darts out from the leaves, and the camera cuts to black.

Much of Wearing's work is a process of inversion: bringing the inside out, folding the outside back inward. *We Are Here* accomplishes both of these tasks simultaneously. The ghostly "shades" reveal their mistakes, their grievances, their secrets to the audience, but they remain invariably mute; they are as anonymous in death as they were in life. Wearing keeps most of her subjects' faces hidden from view while they speak, as if they were privately confessing.

Confession is a major undercurrent of Wearing's work, realized in photography, performance, and film. Early series such as her seminal *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992–93) documented textual results of strangers' confessions written,



Gillian Wearing, "We Are Here" (video still), 2014. Color video with sound, 21 minutes. © Gillian Wearing. Image courtesy of Maureen Paley, London.

then shown to the camera, on placards. Her performance *Dancing in Peckham* (1994) captured confession in kinetic format with Wearing herself dancing in a trance-like state within a busy, South London shopping mall. In a series of portraits taken between 2003 and 2006, Wearing sits in the confessional as she takes on the uncanny likenesses of Warhol, Mapplethorpe, and even her parents. The photographs reveal her aspirations, her influences, and perhaps even her frailties.

We Are Here is a dark, deeply poignant fusion of Wearing's previous investigations of absolution through experience. Whether they are people she observes or her own internal makeup, secrets are revealed voluntarily to the artist, who acts as a kind of receptor. The origins for the film are traced to American poet Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), where voices from the grave implore the reader to act as their confessor. Anonymity is a similar burden for Wearing's subjects. In life, they tucked away their truths to preserve intricate façades of poise and calm. In death, they crave empathy, even attention, and find

little comfort in the fact that they are part of a community of "invisibles."

There is no question that Wearing leaves her audience suspended between feelings of despair (for the inevitability of the body and mind's disappearance) and feelings of gratitude (for the privilege of living, at all). Though as an artist, perhaps Wearing's most vivid achievement with *We Are Here* is her ability to expose a world oscillating between tangible, accountable gestures and hazy, forgotten events. It is not death that is the ultimate specter of Wearing's film, but the loss of memory and its rapid advance within human consciousness. The intense beauty of the film rests in the cinematic capture of these stories; framed by wide shots, interrupted with minimal to no cuts, the piercing hum in the soundtrack colors the final act of supplication as one of spiritual ecstasy. Among contemporary artists of the last two decades whose chosen subject matter communicates the complexity of human life and whatever may follow, Gillian Wearing has been (and continues to be) in a class by herself. ☐

BETTINA BLOHM

MARC STRAUS GALLERY | OCTOBER 26 – DECEMBER 12, 2014

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

German-born, Berlin- and New York-based artist Bettina Blohm paints gouache and acrylic works that rely on their lyricism to affect the viewer. Her designs are simple but never simplistic; the resolutely abstract works may stem, as she puts it, from "something seen," but she takes care to "collect visual ideas" and produces colorful, emotionally compelling paintings through rhythm and repetition. While her art can come close to whimsy, and her abstraction shows that she is a good student of the New York School, there remains in her paintings a possibly European-based restraint, which gives them a certain seriousness even when they are light-hearted to a high degree. Indeed, the tension between earnest intention and whimsical enthusiasm is central to her art.

Natural-seeming expressions of design are regularly found in Blohm's paintings. Grids are a recurring visual pattern, though the artist typically skewers right angles in favor of something more off-balance. Blohm also often works in a serial fashion, repeating themes in slight variations. There is a reason she produces art that is cognizant of both American and European abstraction, for her style is indicative of three decades of living in New York as well as her experience in Munich as a student and, presently, her long stays in Berlin.

An ardent believer in painting, Blohm works at a time when the genre is being questioned, although there are signs that painting is undergoing a revival, as it always does when writers and curators are pronouncing its death. Blohm knows that there will always be a place for painting in art, even if it is no longer considered the most advanced means of visual communication. Her engagement with drawing—an activity she emphasizes when she is in Europe—and painting shows us that it is still possible to find artists committed to the by-now-long tradition of abstraction, whose basic attributes of line and color are handled extremely well by the artist.

Thus, Blohm may be understood as a perceptive student of painting's legacy, mostly because she sees herself as working within a continuum rather than inside an abyss. Additionally, she makes a strong argument for a nearly pure abstraction, saying that she goes "back and forth between order and freedom, gesture and shape, clean and rough borders." In some ways, abstract art has never been so vulnerable as now, in the face of advances in high-tech art and a general reliance on a conceptual approach. Actually, if it is in fact true that painting is moribund—the statement can be debated—this may be the moment to restate its ability to reify intuition and idea.

It is evident that Blohm herself is determined to follow the footsteps of some great painters. I think that Matisse is particularly an influence on Blohm; his lyricism as a painter is echoed in the grace of her nonrepresentational forms. The viewer can experience her expertise in a moving painting entitled "Memories" (2014), which consists of a grid of 30 dark blue squares, each with a white line rendering a balloon-like shape whose interior is gray or blue or a mixture of the two hues. It is a terrific presentation of what remains alive within us—what carries us beyond the forgetfulness of life lived only in the present. "Procrustian Physics" (2014) presents a composition organized according to a skewed, diagonally aligned grid. Its white lines don't quite match up but provide a real contrast to the raven blue ground behind them. Articulating space to the edges of the canvas, the grid barely fits into the work's dimensions.

"Diagram 1" (2014), part of a sequence undertaken in the last two years, could not be more direct: it consists of a gray gouache background, divided more or less evenly by vertical lines. Toward the bottom of these lines are open circles, composed with a slightly black line. The weight thus brings the eyes downward over the canvas, where there is a pleasing sense of articulated order. The vertical lines give the open circles a coherent sense

of place. Finally, "Diagram 8" (2014) is composed of thin black lines that build an open architecture-like structure, with pentimenti hovering just beneath them. The image could well be inspired by the Bauhaus, whose elevated design Blohm may be following. It is a quietly beautiful painting, mysterious in its serenity and calm. Blohm considers these paintings part of a group, despite the fact that they are not always stylistically similar.

Here and again the artist demonstrates an uncommon hand, one in keeping with her sense that the paintings should maintain their own internal rules. This enables Blohm to explore a world saturated in color that is being supported by the linear elements in her art. The works are easy to like, but they also demand extended study to be understood. Like Japanese zen koans, the paintings are exquisite conundrums, puzzles that introduce themselves quietly into the viewer's consciousness. In this work Blohm conveys a playfully open world, but also one that is inventively structured. Indeed, her whimsy is most often offset by sincere motivation, which elevates her art. ☐

MOBY *Innocents*

EMMANUEL FREMIN GALLERY | OCTOBER 23 – DECEMBER 31, 2014

BY WILL CORWIN

As a photographer, Moby's efforts have been predominantly autobiographical. His 2011 book of images, *Destroyed*, offered a view into the life of a travelling musician: empty hotel rooms, paparazzi lying in ambush at the arrivals gate, and fans in ecstasy, viewed from the stage. The project itself was more or less readymade, as there is always an audience willing to experience and share the life of the artist, especially a well-known performer, and the photographs themselves were beautiful—very atmospheric and evocative, somber and dark. But for his new series, a cycle of large-scale photographs entitled *Innocents*, Moby tackles the greater challenge of generating a set of characters that can retain the viewer's interest while striving to maintain the continuity needed in any mature artistic practice. In this case, the cast is a fictitious cult at large in Los Angeles. He has now placed his work within the genre of dystopian suburban mythologies, a playing field dominated by Gregory Crewdson and Joel Sternfeld, and thus needs to make a convincing transition from autobiographical photographer to photographer as unseen author.

In works like "Innocents" and "A New Spring" (all 2013), Moby presents us with circles of masked officiates set against the cloudless

blue skies of L.A. Other images show the same masked figures as they baptize themselves, submerged, in a backyard pool. On land, these acolytes wear flowing white robes; underwater they are often naked or normally dressed, as demonstrated by the girl in a monkey mask and party dress seen in "Damage" and "Lone." There is no indication of what they believe beyond that individual identity is subsumed into that of the group. The choice of masks—those of demons and wild animals—simultaneously conveys humor and a looming sense of horror. To a certain extent we are asked to question what it is we fear in these mostly harmless associations of very fervent people. It's a surprising jump for an artist whose photography has primarily rested on the premise of offering up a view of the world that is unattainable for most. Like a war or nature photographer, Moby's view from the inside out is one that few of us will ever enjoy in the flesh and is thus fascinating to a certain degree. Combined with an eye for detail and lyrical composition, the series *Destroyed* was both successful and straightforward.

The alienation of *Destroyed* is retained in *Innocents*. Despite the emptiness of the single-figure images that posit a post-apocalyptic subtext, the idea is that a new religion might sprout from a plunge pool, sun deck, or the

aisles of a Stop n' Shop, as in the exhibition's most successful print, "Receiving." In it, a robed figure stands at the center of a fish-eye lens photo of a grocery store, its head and chest the center of perspective. The figure's monkey mask and pure white robes are contrasted with the shelves stacked with colorful cans of cat food and boxes of toothpaste, while the goofy mask and the curvature of the straight lines lent by the distortion of the lens function almost as a twisted comic relief for the scene. Unlike many of the other prints that navigate the uncomfortable line between horror and sexual stimulation, as in "Metasis," where a masked naked body stands silhouetted and submerged in a pool, the incipient comedy of "Receiving" underlines the absurdity of religious awakening in a sun-drenched city of wealth and privilege, something of a Bonfire of the Vanities.

As a manifestation of current multimedia artistic practices, *Innocents* does not in fact exist solely as photographs, but evolves as a series of posed stills from several of the short videos created to accompany Moby's new album of the same title. The music video has stood as a vague and hard-to-pin-down genre throughout its short existence. As a creative afterthought meant to provide a visual distraction while the music is playing, videos have often strayed into moments of unintended brilliance and culturally iconic significance. They have progressed into a refuge for mainstream directors looking to supplement their income and have also recently become an artistic proving ground.

Kalup Linzy and Ryan Trecartin employ or wholeheartedly embrace tropes of the music video. Michael Stipe and REM opened up their final album *Collapse into Now* to the interpretive capabilities of Sam Taylor-Wood and James Franco among others; the duo Javelin produced both a film and a large sculptural interactive installation at the Clocktower Gallery in 2012 to accompany their album *Canyon Candy*. By generating a cycle of photographs based on the video that accompanies his music, Moby is extending the reach of what has become a common manifestation of the total work of art: the music video, a contemporary actualization of the spectacle, something mystically resembling an opera. The problem of the music video is often that the action on screen has nothing to do with the words. Quite possibly this is to the benefit of Moby's photographs as independent works, as they seek to solidify the narrative that exists outside of the music.

Moby's *Innocents* are luminous works featuring dark subject matter that is both powerful and timely. "Masters" shows a bear mask floating in a shimmering pool of blank white reflections. The reflections and distorted highlights simultaneously overwhelm and coalesce around the mask, pitching the man-made plastic object of the spirit creature against the further dichotomous background of the backyard pool. Moby has moved from the personal alienation seen in *Destroyed* to a wider cultural disembodiment, though it remains to be seen if he can continue to expand on these propositions. ☞

MICHELLE GRABNER

JAMES COHAN GALLERY | OCTOBER 9 – NOVEMBER 15, 2014

BY KATE LIEBMAN

For Michelle Grabner, there is no distinction between her life and her art. She is a consummate artist with a conceptual agenda: to what degree can the domestic and the artistic be fused? Her self-proclaimed desire for a "relatively conventional lifestyle—family, kids, a mortgage"—has helped her merge her domestic life and her studio practice. Every piece on view at James Cohan, Grabner's first solo show in New York, questions how fully the domestic and artistic can be integrated.

David Robbins, whose work Grabner curated in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, made a short video that introduces the artist. "A Few Minutes With ... Michelle Grabner" plays on a loop in the foyer. By splicing together scenes of Grabner's domestic life (she gardens, she cooks) and scenes of her artistic work (she weaves, she discusses her creative process), Robbins shows us the degree to which Grabner's domestic and artistic lives exist in tandem. In both realms, Grabner works at the same pace and with the same precise technique: slow, repetitive, meditative.

Not only do Grabner's "conventional" and artistic lives co-exist, but they mutually reinforce each other. In the beginning of the film, we see Grabner make a pie: she rolls out dough, she slices the extra into roughly half-inch strips, she weaves the strips to make the top of the pie. Pan to Grabner's studio, where we watch her make a paper weaving, one of the dozens featured in the show. Grabner explains that she prepares for her paper weavings by cutting color-aid paper—an educational tool familiar to most art students—into half-inch or one-inch strips. She then weaves the first strips using

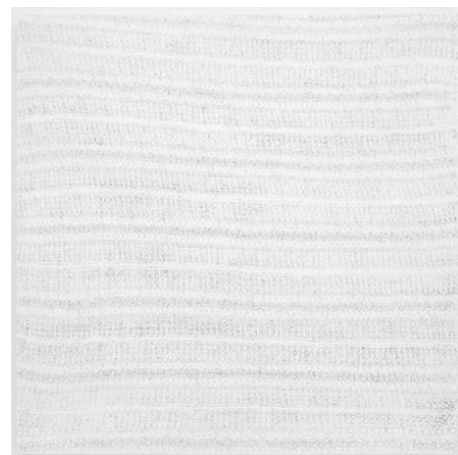
simple math. This initial pattern determines the appearance of each weaving. Indeed like all patterns, it is planned and repeated without any certain start or stop point.

A group of Grabner's graphic paper weavings have been placed haphazardly on a low table in Cohan's first room. The arrangement of the weaving—overlapping each other—diminishes their visual effect. It is impossible to take in a single weaving as a complete piece, and the graphic, matte, saturated colors begin to look like placemats. In Cohan's main room, the weavings' relationship to the domestic is deepened. Here they lie horizontally on a large, low table. This group resembles a carpet. The work's association with the domestic is not a fault; rather, it suggests Grabner's inspiration. Grabner began making these weavings 20 years ago after her son came home from kindergarten having completed a similar project.

A large installation hangs from the ceiling in the gallery's main room. Gently rotating above the second group of paper weavings, the installation resembles a child's mobile. Its two arms hang in harmonious symmetry. The large sculpture makes literal Grabner's refusal of work-life balance and signals her insistence on integration. On one arm, she and her husband, a collaborator on this piece, have strung replicas of children's furniture and a family photograph. On the other, a giant assemblage of flattened trashcan lids emanate from one of Grabner's circular paintings. The first arm represents domestic life, the second artistic. One suggests humans and the figure, the other abstraction and pattern. Both arms participate equally in her art.

Grabner's black-and-white paintings hang on the walls of Cohan's large main room. Grabner has made her surfaces flicker by carefully placing dollops of enamel paint on a flecked surface. Whereas Grabner's paper weavings seek to expose pattern in its simplest state, her paintings reveal patterns embedded in our daily, domestic lives. In her paintings, the most impressive visual work in the Cohan show, Grabner transforms patterns from crocheted baby blankets into compositions for abstract paintings. In so doing, Grabner collapses the distance between pattern and composition, yet again proving how the domestic and the artistic can blend into each other.

The most rewarding room in the Cohan show is the last one, where Grabner's colored paintings hang. Her jewel-like colors are tints rather than the fully saturated hues of the paper weavings, and the works demonstrate a keen understanding of color relationships. For example, in "Untitled" (2014), a slightly green enamel paint sets off the orange and yellow haloes underneath. Without the distractions of the mobile or the paper weavings, it is easier to approach the works and appreciate their subtlety and beauty. The patterns dissipate and we can appreciate Grabner's systematic, repetitious, perhaps even tedious, method of applying paint.



Michelle Grabner, "Untitled," 2014. Enamel on panel, 60 x 60 x 1 1/2". © The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

Grabner's work has attracted much attention and has been widely criticized. Critics have correctly, yet disparagingly, linked her formal concerns with pattern and weaving to her gender. They have improperly established a causal relationship between the domestic and how interesting her art can be (i.e. the domestic is boring, so her art must be too). But critics have failed to point out that domestic work *is* work, *is* labor. In Robbins's five-minute film, we never see Grabner not laboring; she gardens, cooks, weaves, constantly using her hands to complete precise motions. To diminish the domestic is to participate in an exclusive, outmoded paradigm that refuses to acknowledge its validity, both as a place of labor and a source of inspiration. ☞

JAMES HOFF *Skywiper*

CALLICOON FINE ARTS | NOVEMBER 2 – DECEMBER 21, 2014

BY CHARLIE SCHULTZ

James Hoff makes paintings with a printer. He does not engage in a tug-of-war with the machine, like Wade Guyton, whose means of creating paintings centers on forcing a canvas past ink jets. Hoff's approach is less physical and more oriented in the technological realm, where communication occurs in code. Indeed, his process may be the most interesting aspect of the work. Each painting is created by infecting a digital image with a malicious virus. The resulting image is printed on a sheet of aluminum using a dye sublimation process, and then mounted on a wood panel. There are 11 of these in the show (all from 2014) and they vary in size, although every one of them could be carried under arm.

Hoff's paintings look like extreme close-ups of digitally battered textiles, where one can begin to see the weave coming apart. Horizontal striations are the most prominent characteristic of the works. Their color schematics are held within a fairly narrow range, and the edges of the compositions have an arbitrary quality that induces one's eye to drift. And yet, each painting is remarkably unique. Some have a sense of depth; others appear resolutely flat. A couple even seem to mimic landscapes, but

that may simply be the human eye attempting to locate something familiar in an image that reproduces nothing from the natural world.

"Skywiper No. 4" is one of those that is reminiscent of a landscape, be it a rather rudimentary example. From bottom to top the image becomes less saturated, which gives the lower, darker end a sense of gravity. The upper portion of the painting lightens, as the sky might at dawn or dusk. Depth is achieved here through color relationships as much as through form. In this work—where the darks and lights are particularly offset—there is a strong sense of space receding and coming forward.

The codes Hoff uses, Stuxnet and Skywiper, have each been employed in cyber attacks. Consequentially they carry an implicit degree of malice. This gives the work a bit of edge, but what's really at stake here is the aesthetic element produced by these viruses and the ability of an artist to use something inwardly aggressive and infectious to produce objects that are outwardly attractive and fundamentally benign.

If Hoff's paintings address a specific territory of aesthetics, it might be the aesthetics of the glitch. Beneath a smooth surface of line, form,

and color there is a set of data points whose pattern has been twisted and deformed. At their root these are pictures of digital disturbance, the end results of ruptures that have been set in motion and allowed to progress on their own terms. Part of their success is that the distortion has completely wiped out whatever it was distorting, which allows the abstract forms generated by the virus to stand-alone rather than attempt to accommodate a partially scrambled image.

Hoff's paintings straddle an art historical fence in terms of legacy. On the one hand, the process and focus on technological distortion put him in-line with artists such as Nam June Paik and Cory Arcangel. On the other hand, Hoff makes paintings whose formal vocabulary is based on the interaction of line, color, and form. And therefore one is inclined to hold Hoff's work up to painters such as Julian Stanczak, and to potentially anchor his pictures in the color theories of Josef Albers. The problem here is that Hoff's code-infected images are not as visually commanding as anything produced by Stanczak or Albers, nor do they embody any sense of the warmth that develops when a painter works and reworks a picture. They are cool, technical objects.

If this is a shortcoming, Hoff's practice assuages it. In addition to infecting images with code, he's used the same process with sounds to create *Blaster* (2014), a critically acclaimed album of code-infected music. *Blaster* was



James Hoff, "Skywiper No. 4," 2014. Chromaluxe transfer on aluminum, 20 × 16". Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, NY.

pressed into vinyl, which gives Hoff's digital sonic scramble a warm, if somewhat ironic, analog presence. Carrying the idea further, Hoff infected a photograph he took of the gallery wall. In the resulting image, the bottom quadrant of the wall disappeared. Correspondingly, Hoff cut out the bottom portion of the gallery's wall, revealing the guts of the space's infrastructure. To stand amongst sites of such careful violation is a little perverse. If only Hoff's record had been spinning, the immersion into his world of infection would have seemed so complete. ☞

JULIAN STANCAK *From Life*

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | OCTOBER 30 – DECEMBER 6

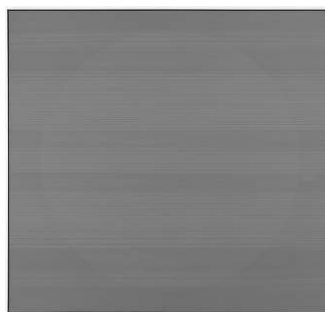
BY TATIANA ISTOMINA

Julian Stanczak's solo show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash coincides with the 50th anniversary of his first New York exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery in September 1964. Titled *Optical Paintings*, the young artist's show was reviewed in *Arts Magazine* by Donald Judd, who offered a concise summary of the artist's biography: "Stanczak was born in Poland and now lives in Cleveland." He then described the works in the show ("His paintings are primarily fields of narrow, vibrating stripes"), discussed how they compared to works of other abstract painters ("not nearly as good as Brigitte Riley's, which they resemble somewhat"), and ended the text by identifying a movement in painterly abstraction, primarily concerned with optical effects, geometry, and color. "Optical effects," he wrote, "are one thing, a narrow phenomenon, and color effects are another, a wide range. Op art." The last sentence is believed to have originated a new art term.

Stanczak's biography was much more colorful than Judd's review suggests. His itinerary between Poland and Cleveland included a labor camp in Siberia, wanderings in the Middle East, a Polish refugee camp in Uganda, the Polytechnic Institute in London, Cleveland Institute of Art, and Yale art school, where Stanczak studied under Josef Albers. But from Judd's point of view, shared by most artists and critics until at least the late 1980s, an artist's biography was irrelevant to the discussion of his work (not *her* work—for women artists, things have been different). For a male abstract painter, a peculiar biography could be a handicap, as it undermined the notion that the artist was revealing a universal truth, speaking from a "neutral" subject position on behalf of all

humanity. Times have changed. The belief in universal narratives is much weakened, and today an artist's identity appears as one of the few reliable paths to understanding art. Not surprisingly, the current show's press release reproduces Stanczak's life story with a conscientious attention to detail—as have most other reviews and articles about Stanczak in recent years. In another telling contrast with the 1964 show, the new exhibition is titled *From Life*, encouraging the viewer to see Stanczak's "optical paintings" as reflections of the artist's personal experiences rather than purely formal explorations of color and geometry.

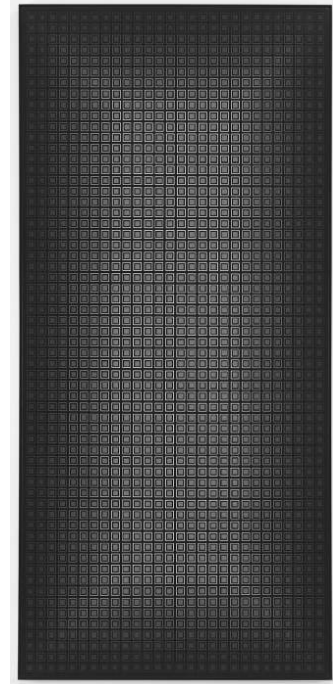
The paintings on view span almost Stanczak's entire career: the earliest date from 1968, the latest were made only last year. Today, his paintings produce dazzling perceptual effects through masterful manipulation of geometry and color, as they did 50 years ago. He paints with acrylic, building his imagery through successive applications of opaque layers of contrasting color. His visual vocabulary is simple: parallel lines, straight or curved, a variety of grids, and basic shapes such as circles, squares, and rectangles. Over the years, Stanczak has developed several distinct methods of painting, each producing a specific perceptual effect. In some works, he starts with a few large shapes, which are then broken and modulated by successive layers of hundreds of parallel lines in contrasting colors. The varying densities of these lines over the painted background create optical mixtures, giving the appearance of soft color gradations and hues that are not physically present in the work. In a variation on this method, Stanczak sometimes overlays his background imagery with thousands of small



Julian Stanczak, "Referential Circle," 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 72½ × 77½". Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

dots or squares. These semi-transparent screens create optical effects similar to those produced by natural phenomena such as atmospheric refraction. In the magnificent "Referential Circle" (1968), for example, the rhythmic fluctuations in the density of green lines painted over a red circle transform the abstract composition into an African landscape—a giant red sun suspended low over the horizon. In another of Stanczak's methods, he painstakingly and methodically applies multiple precisely calibrated colors in consecutive layers of opposite colors, their values and hues shifting gradually from one part of the canvas to another. As a result, the surface is broken into thousands of small divisions, which, when viewed from a distance, merge to produce glowing, rippling, or pulsating sensations. The use of this method in "Equatorial" (1978) generates a fierce yellow glow in the center of the canvas and an almost tactile sensation of boiling heat.

Stanczak's attraction to hard edge geometry and systematic method, coupled with his deep sensitivity to color, produces a body of work that covers the spectrum from purely formal painterly exercises such as "Addition" (1980) to wonderfully poetic, poignant works like the



Julian Stanczak, "Stoic," 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 70 × 32½". Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

stark black-and-white "Stoic" (1983), which projects an air of noble and tragic reserve. Apart from such extremes, most of Stanczak's works seem to accommodate both Judd's formalist reading and the more personal, autobiographical interpretation suggested by the current show. This may be the consequence of the mysterious subject of Stanczak's ongoing exploration. In the artist's own words, from an interview with artist Julie Karabenick, "Color is abstract, universal—yet personal and private in experience." ☞

CHRIS OFILI *Night and Day*

NEW MUSEUM | OCTOBER 29, 2014 – JANUARY 25, 2015

BY ALEXANDER SHULAN

Night and Day is the first major U.S. retrospective of the work of British artist Chris Ofili, mounted just four years after his major retrospective at the Tate. Ofili draws influences from sources as varied as the work of William Blake, rap, Catholic religious imagery, Greek mythology, comic books, and the landscape of Trinidad. It is both a formal investigation into painting and a deeply emotional exploration into issues of race and Ofili's own private history, firmly establishing him as an artist with an importance that supersedes his reputation for controversy.

Night and Day is spread over three floors, and presented in approximate chronology. Over the course of the exhibition a stylistic shift is clear—from a wild experimentation that draws from many areas of culture to a series of no less engaging imagistic forays into the practice of painting.

On the first floor, in the midst of an array of Ofili's early, colorful paintings, many of them portraits, is Ofili's painting "No Woman No Cry" (1998), a portrait of Doreen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager who was murdered while waiting for the bus in London in 1993. The subsequent murder investigation into Lawrence's racially-motivated death at the hands of two white juveniles was marred by deep-seated institutional racism. "No Woman No Cry" shows Doreen Lawrence in profile, huge tear drops cascading down the center of the frame, a portrait of her son embedded in each one. Looking at this painting now, it is hard not to see a powerful resonance with the shooting of Michael Brown that has dominated the media in the past few months, and with the public, tear-filled recrimination by Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, of the grand jury that failed to indict officer Darren Wilson: "Do you know how those bullets hit my son, what they did to his body, how they entered his body?"

Images like these recur throughout *Night and Day* with an energy that expands in all directions. Ofili's early paintings are rendered in colorful strokes of oil and acrylic, surrounded by collaged elements of porn magazines, glitter, splashes of resin, colorful map pins, and clumps of elephant dung. They represent a diverse range of characters and subjects: invented superheroes in "The Naked Spirit of Captain Shit and the Legend of the Black Stars" (2000–01), religious portraiture in "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996), and psychedelic landscapes "Third Eye Vision" (1999). All have an overriding visual language drawn from an audacious combination of Blaxploitation film and Renaissance art history. Even now, 20 years later, the work bristles with the energy that made Ofili a young artworld star, and the issues they raise are no less pertinent. His use of elephant dung, which was so controversial at the time, benefits from its distance to the harsh light of the tabloids. It

seems much less a gesture of punk irreverence, of the sort that has characterized so much of the long-term reception of his YBA peers, than a subtle institutional critique. The importance and similarity of this gesture to the kind seen in the work of David Hammons is even clearer in retrospect. It addresses the kinds of roles that are expected for a black artist, a painter no less, by a predominantly white art-going audience. Ofili told Michael Kimmelman at the *New York Times* in 1999: "what people really want from black artists ... We're the voodoo king, the voodoo queen, the witch doctor, the drug dealer. ... I'm giving them all of that."

Probably the most famous of these early paintings is "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996). Its presentation in the Brooklyn Museum's *Sensation* exhibition in 1999, a touring exhibition that had controversial showings at the Hamburger Bahnhof and the Royal Academy, was a culture-war fire starter, leading to a civil court case by Rudolph Giuliani to block the funding of the museum. The work still bristles with an erotic and critically self-aware energy. It is a powerful incursion into popular expectations for painting. Its use of the Madonna challenges one presiding narrative of painting's history in the West as a predominantly white discourse (with a problematic legacy of imperial borrowing), and it acts as a kind of avatar for Ofili's own manifold mythology.

Throughout his career, Ofili has worked in a variety of styles, and these are all on display elsewhere throughout the museum. In an adjoining gallery, a series of *Afro Paintings* uses a limited color palette: the reds, blacks, and greens of the pan-African flag designed by Marcus Garvey. Of these, "Afro Green" (2005–08) is particularly beautiful. Two figures hold hands in a lush African wilderness—the work appearing variably as an abstraction and an Edenic fantasy, conjuring up a narrative landscape rife with possibility.

In contrast to the bright fluorescent light that illuminates the rest of the museum's galleries, Ofili has dimmed the lights dramatically on the second floor. Nine paintings are spread across the gallery, their palette restrained deep blues and blacks. The room is cast in such a deep and domineering shadow that at first it is hard to make them out at all. On one wall stands



Installation view, *Night And Day*. Photo by Maris Hutchinson/EPW. All artworks © Chris Ofili. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

"Blue Devils" (2014), a new painting whose title refers to a troupe of ghoulish Carnival dancers from Paramin, Trinidad. In accord with Trinidadian folklore, the blue devils, covered head to toe in blue pigment, are permitted to hassle tourists and transgress normal social mores. The shifting surface of "Blue Devils" reveals a black man in a hooded sweatshirt inset with a design that almost resembles a medieval suit of armor, standing in the center of the frame surrounded by indistinct policemen, who descend upon him in an anonymous, hostile mass. The painting has an immediate visceral power; it speaks not only to the overt violence American (and English) police notoriously direct at black youth, but also to the closeted, pervasive nature of such violence. Looking at "Blue Devils" and the other *Blue Paintings* made since Ofili moved from London to Trinidad, is akin to an experience had in the strange moments between sleep and waking; images arrive, are reconfigured, and disappear into darkness.

The exhibition concludes with a series of magnificent paintings of scenes from Trinidad, loosely made in response to Titian's depictions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The paintings use much broader strokes and push the atmosphere of fantasy present in the *Afro Paintings* to a smoky, sensual nadir. Mounted on top of a rich painted wilderness that covers the walls from floor to ceiling, these are paired with a series of works made this year of scenes at *Studio Film Club*, a makeshift bar and film club in Trinidad run by Peter Doig (with whose work Ofili has long had a very close affinity). The lush atmosphere of the work of Paul Gauguin is a clear reference, as well as the work of Matisse and Picasso. Ofili's "Ovid-Actaeon" (2011–12) shows a series of slender classical figures in repose against a purple background, with a stark division of color reminiscent of Matisse's most dramatic Fauvist experiments. "The Raising of Lazarus" (2007) adopts an angular,



Chris Ofili, "Ovid-Actaeon," 2011–12. Oil and charcoal on linen, 125 x 78". © Chris Ofili. Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner, New York / London and Victoria Miro, London.

disjointed style reminiscent of work from Picasso's African period. But Ofili's paintings reduce the problematic distance created by the historical import of images from the West Indies to Europe by diving into their setting headfirst. The canvases appear as if they have been soaked in the environments of Trinidad and have spilled out and filled the entire gallery, their vivid colors and elegant figuration easily dominating the entire space. With his fusion of styles Ofili creates for himself a uniquely multifarious space in the history of painting. These are images with extraordinary range: displaying humor, sadness, muffled and terrible violence, and perhaps ultimately, a sense of luminous possibility. ☞

FRANCESCO VEZZOLI *Teatro Romano*

MOMA PS1 | OCTOBER 26, 2014 – MARCH 8, 2015

BY SAMUEL B. FELDBLUM

Francesco Vezzoli is an artist whose work telescopes time. His needlepoint pieces starring actresses and models as Madonna with child, created in Italy in the late '90s, collide classic tropes with a more familiar, dynamic modernity. His short films, advertising movies that will never be made—*Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's "Caligula"* (2005); perfumes that will never be worn—*GREED, A New Fragrance by Francesco Vezzoli* (2009); and politicians who will never run for anything—*Democracy* (2007)—foretell a future that will never come and exists only in the present. *Teatro Romano*, currently on view at MoMA PS1, raises the stakes of this temporal toying. For the exhibition, Vezzoli acquired five statuary Roman heads and painted them as they may have been in their own time. Although the artist consulted classicists and art historians, catalogue essayist Clemente Marconi does not “think academic discussions matter to Vezzoli very much.”

Vezzoli sometimes courts controversy, but Marconi's point is well taken: here the artist aimed for historical accuracy but does not need to hit his mark. The project is not about educating the viewer so much as reconstructing the way that we normally encounter history. This starts with the space: the heads, encased in glass, rest atop a series of plinths arranged in a receding V that invites the viewer in, an effect enhanced by a central colonnaded walkway. The room is dimly lit, with spotlights trained on the pieces, casting spindly shadows behind them and reflecting squares of light in front. The pieces are the actors in this Roman theater, but we too are bathed in their glow. The viewer feels as though he has entered a temple, worshipping a suddenly contemporary past.

Unlike the gaudy, cartoonish colors of the concurrent *Transformations: Classical Sculpture in Color*, on view at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen—which also lays claim, plausibly but conflictingly, to historical fidelity—Vezzoli's hues are mostly neutral and understated, giving a roughly life like appearance to the figures. Some of the heads sport scars from their journey through the ages, which remain unpainted—time is notoriously hard on noses. The color adds a dimension of vitality. The white marble relics to which we are accustomed advertise their dead-and-goneness even as we encounter them in real time; as a youthful blush is breathed back into these cheeks and white hair regains its pigment, we are reminded that these statues, like every ancient artifact, once existed in their own dynamic present moment. So did their sculptors, their models, and their public. History, of course, is nothing but a long series of such moments.

Not only does the color add vivacity, it likewise allows us to be more aesthetically discerning, as each work takes on particular characteristics. Romans, we are told, were captivated by the exotic strangeness of Egyptians; “TRUE COLORS (A Marble Head of Isis, Eastern Mediterranean, Roman Imperial, circa 1st Century A.D.)” (2014) sports an Egyptian complexion distinct from those of the paler busts surrounding it, especially the fairer features of a Roman woman—perhaps a goddess—set directly across the V. “TRUE COLORS (A Marble Portrait Head of a Man, Roman Imperial, Antonine, circa Mid 2nd Century A.D.)” (2014) stares dolefully back at the viewer, the hint of a smirk turning up the corner of his bearded mouth. If perched atop a living body,



Francesco Vezzoli, “TRUE COLORS (A Marble Head of the Resting Satyr, circa Late 1st century A.D.)” 2014. Ancient sculpture, pigments, casein, wax, varnish. Courtesy Prada Collection, Milan. Photo courtesy of MoMA PS1.



he could easily be found in Brooklyn today, or perhaps even curating shows at PS1. Careful coloration reveals asymmetries in clearer detail, peculiarities allowing for greater personality. Removed from what Marconi calls the “dreaded white army of Greek and Roman statuary,” the works become vessels that transport us to the time of their creation.

This transportation, though, depends on the purchase and subsequent alteration of a historical heritage often treated as a public good. Is Vezzoli's work restoration, or is it desecration? Perhaps both. Those academics that aim for verisimilitude in their encounters with history may not rejoice to see such personal interpretations literally stamped on the objects of their study. But this is not Ai Weiwei dropping a Han Dynasty urn, realizing its current relevance by breaking it. Instead Vezzoli juxtaposes the ages by bringing us into the time of these statues rather than bringing them into ours, contemporaneity asserted through revival rather than through destruction. Even

classicists could surely find value in the project of resuscitating the objects of their study. And they ought not worry—if they wait another two millennia, the heads will again fade to their more familiar hues.

Whether or not we paint our historical artifacts, we are always stylizing the features of history to fit some narrative or another—seeing these brushstrokes physically applied emphasizes this fact. We never encounter epochal snapshots truly on their own terms, unmediated; their very historicity ensures that they embody a story. Perhaps attempting to collapse temporal distances is then as close as we can come to a raw viewing experience. As Vezzoli's heads stare at their own reflections in their glass houses, they must be more shocked than anyone to have regained their original vigor, to again be actors in our space-age theater, vibrantly reborn in this once-incomprehensible future. ☞

TOM OTTERNESS: *Creation Myth*

MARLBOROUGH GALLERY | OCTOBER 22 – NOVEMBER 25, 2014

BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

You've very likely seen Tom Otterness's trademark figures—a carnivalesque collection of mischievous characters—without even knowing it. His permanent installation entitled *Life Underground* (2004), which fills the 14th Street/8th Avenue subway station, often prompts hasty New Yorkers and tourists alike to stop and snap a picture, or watch tenderly as their children attempt to converse with a statue. The artist's ability to subtly alter public space, a far cry from the hubris of most public sculpture, is perhaps his most powerful artistic act. Otterness uses his chosen media with characteristic humor and technical mastery to engender an intimate interaction between the viewer and his or her environment. It almost makes riding the A train in from Brooklyn bearable.

In *Creation Myth*, Otterness rolls out his cadre of bronze, marble, and stainless steel actors onto the stage of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, in which Pygmalion becomes so enamored with a female figure he carves from ivory that she comes to life. The Pygmalion myth encapsulates the contrived, masculine nature of art history, a discourse that is at once laughably shaky and doggedly longstanding. Otterness's show acts

as a cheeky reversal; in “Cone Fixing Cylinder” (2013), for example, a female entity creates a male entity by literally installing his head—the locus of imagination and creativity—as a comical transformation of the standard lineage of high modernism. The title suggests that something was broken and needs fixing, despite the smooth, uninterrupted surface of Otterness's bronze, an allusion, perhaps, to the fictive seamlessness of gender. As a result, the ever-shifting, ephemeral nature of myth stands in fascinating relief with the material heaviness of Otterness's sculptures, opening both sculptural practice and gendered discourse to critique and reconfiguration.

Similarly, “Cone Sculpting Sphere” (2014), gendered only by the associations we have with triangles and female restrooms, suggests a new Pygmalion story wherein it is the man who emerges from stone at the behest of a woman. The sculptor, who could tentatively be called “female,” has one foot in our world and the other in the space of creation. Woman, thereby, becomes the mediator of the creative process. The rigid yet formless realm of pure material from which the sculpted figure emerges complicates the uninterrupted exterior of the

sculpture, reminding the viewer that sculpture, like identity politics, is the synthesis of physical and conceptual modes. Yet none of the sculptures' titles indicate sex; rather, Otterness names them only by the shapes involved. Gendered associations with shapes are, like art, fabricated.

Perhaps, then, Otterness is pointing to universal aesthetic forms, like Wassily Kandinsky's Suprematist compositions or Donald Judd's repetitions of shapes. However, as art historian Anna Chave famously argued, the Minimalist urge toward an apolitical form of expression through hefty materials—privileged exactly because of their masculine connotations of strength and permanence—was its own kind of sexism. But the constant, flamboyant transformation of shapes in *Creation Myth* manages to circumvent such chauvinism; despite their intensely physical and, at times, imposing presence, the sculptures also convey a lighthearted self-criticality. Universal forms such as those found in “Cone and Cube” (2014), do not represent an unchanging space separate from lived experience; Otterness's forms are perpetually becoming, figures that come to life as they are removed from a mold like a newborn. His work is contingent, sincere, and unafraid to expose the mechanics of its making.

Like Lily van der Stokker's unabashedly pink installations shown at Koenig and Clinton earlier this year, Otterness's work refuses the vanity of the “art object” in order to affect



Tom Otterness, “Cone Sculpting Sphere,” 2014. Bronze, ed. of 9, 14 × 6.5 × 14”. © Tom Otterness, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York.

a more powerful, nuanced, and accessible relationship between his sculptures and his viewers. Otterness creates forms that are at once purely formal and entirely embodied, a kind of social formalism. This revolutionary act gives rise to an ethos of understated subversion, a place where we can engage with the critical function of art without the stifling pretention of normative art historical narratives. Combining humble materials with enviable skill and conceptual astuteness, *Creation Myth* is an arena of experimental ideas, free for all to enjoy. ☞

LOUISE BOURGEOIS *Suspension*

CHEIM & READ | OCTOBER 30, 2014 – JANUARY 10, 2015

BY PHONG BUI

Irremediably we became members of the rebellious children seminar.
Beehives, intestinal cocoons, Rembrandt's "Carcas of Beef"
(That inspired Soutine's) precede our rebellion.

"The Quarter One" has pockets that collaterally subsume
Sacred water that feeds the children

In a chronic state of wandering.

"Janus Fleuri" forms divided selves.

Identical twins seeks to separate,
Hang like fragile cutouts over a neighbor's clothesline
Some of us can attest our equal weight

To "Hanging Janus with Jacket."

They're my children at different ages, heights,
Textures, genders, and what not,
Trained acrobats by necessity.

As "Henriette" refuses to see Pinocchio
"Arch of Hysteria" offers a similar power,
That of Persius's shield to behead Medusa.

Frontal "Femme" recalls half the Venus of Willendorf,
Half a fowl waiting to be roasted.

Its back calls forth her identical twins that sought to?

Be separated they could not!

Hanging upside down has prompted a new perspective.

He is as full and filled—fulfilled as she.

Extending feet appear as vintage wooden shoetrees

Size 6, or is it 7, in Grimm's Fairy Tale of the shoemaker

And the mythical elves that long to wear the shoes

And pants like those we've recently seen at

Bob Gober's theater in the Museum of Modern Art.

These proudly decline an invitation to kiss the floor.

What a magical moment when an object rejects gravity!

Nearby are the greatest perennial lovers,

Fragments of shifted scales "Hanging Figures" appear slowly,

The curtain of the Boulevard of Crime is unveiled.

In this instance they hang naked without heads

Not far from "The Couple" in the next room.

Who could fit inside of "Fée Couturière"?

Sure, "Legs" that are made to dance and skate

On and through the silence of a particular snowy field

That we slowly approach in our solitude

Rather than trudge slowly with the snow up to our knees.

How far, how near have we come to realize her magical

Affinity to, bond with whatever materials were

At arm's length or miles away from here—

They are present in her majestic disposal to become alive

Once more in honor of the goddess of liberty!

Where do the men go?

I do not know LB!

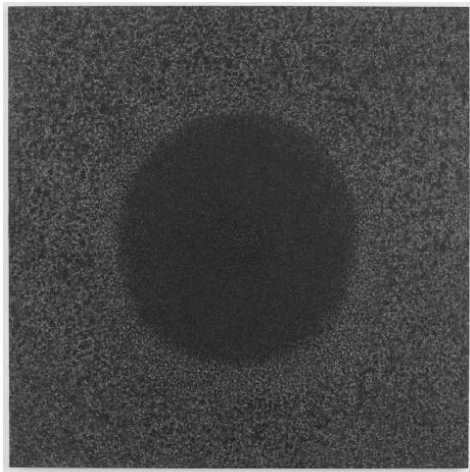
You can ask all of our fathers!



Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), "UNTITLED," 1995. Fabric, 20×7½×6".
Courtesy of Cheim & Read.



Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), "LEGS," 1986. Rubber, 120½×3×8¼" (element one). 121¾×3×8" (element two).
Courtesy of Cheim & Read.



Richard Pousette-Dart, "Cerchio Di Dante," 1986. Acrylic on linen, 72" x 72". Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

RICHARD POUSETTE-DART

PACE GALLERY | NOVEMBER 7, 2014 – JANUARY 10, 2015

BY PHONG BUI

Spotting, scratching, pressing down, building up marks that
Radiate from the central orbit.
As though the wattle and daub structure beneath has allowed
For his journey to the center of "Cerchio Di Dante."

Red, green, blue here and there dancing along
Until the convergence of total dominance of black matter
That absorbs as much light as it gives it away.

Where was Descartes when Galileo was in the prison cell?
Still arguing the earth was not a square?
The Delphic square, it has been on Walt Whitman's mind
For quite some time.

The texture of earth migrates differently
And informs the formation of our mind,
Especially the edge treatment in "Black Circle, Time."

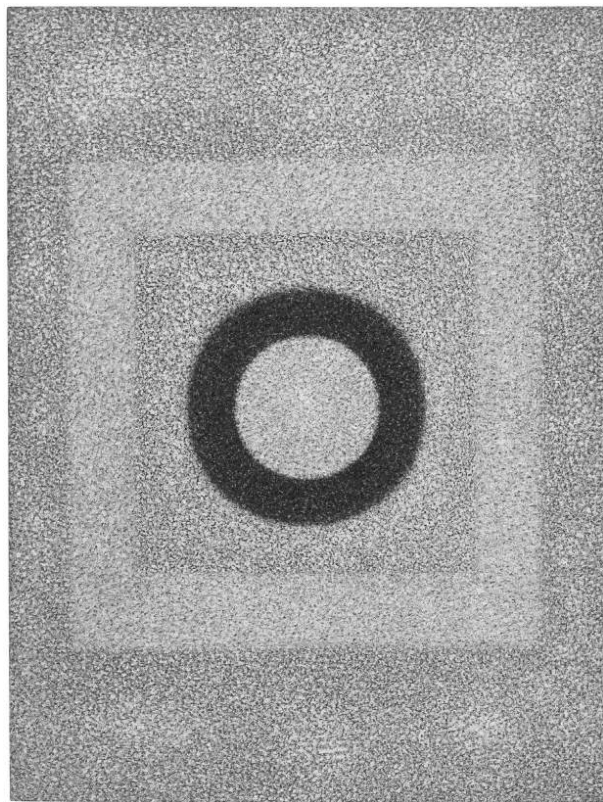
I am transfixed by their silent speed
Shape shifting across the surface
From here to...
Offering a secret to impermanence,
Of time and the universe.

Just like in the "Eye of the Circle" when one square
Compromises its four equal sizes and harmonizes with
An extended reticent rectangle, surprising.
Accumulations of texture on the temple's walls
"White Circle, Time," "Islamrada (Window of Unknowing)"
Exert physical dimensions to pay homage
To "Square of Meditation #2."

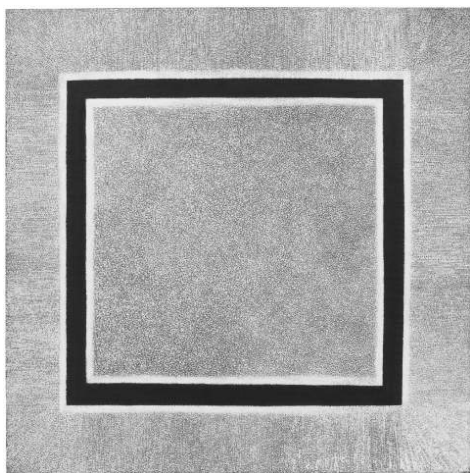
In its remarkable dialogue "Eye of the Circle"
Has given birth to a silky terrain
It's where we came from long ago.
It's a special place
That both the king and the farmer possess
Equal share of responsibility: the King performs
His noble duties; the farmer cultivates
His land with his knowledgeable hands.
"Time, Space, Window" desires "Square, Rectangle and Circle"
We're from here, to...

Infinite differences void all assumptions
Trusting "Micro Black" means harvesting
Hieratic figures and leading them
To the "Reflected Center" of "Ramapo Forest."

The "Celestial Rectangle" can't comprehend how
A member of its family is called "Chopiniana Square,"
Or "Mirror of Space."
Yet, the rambling apertures
Perfectly, evenly order
Their legendary atmospheres.
The vehicle and its field
Co-exist for our total pleasure.



Richard Pousette-Dart, "Square of Meditation #2," 1979. Oil on linen, 72" x 54". Courtesy of Pace Gallery.



Richard Pousette-Dart, "Mirror of Space," 1979-80. Acrylic on linen, 90" x 90". Courtesy of Pace Gallery.



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Konsthistorisk Tidskrift / Journal of Art History (Stockholm) 83,
Issue 3 (2014), Special Issue: 'Reconsidering the
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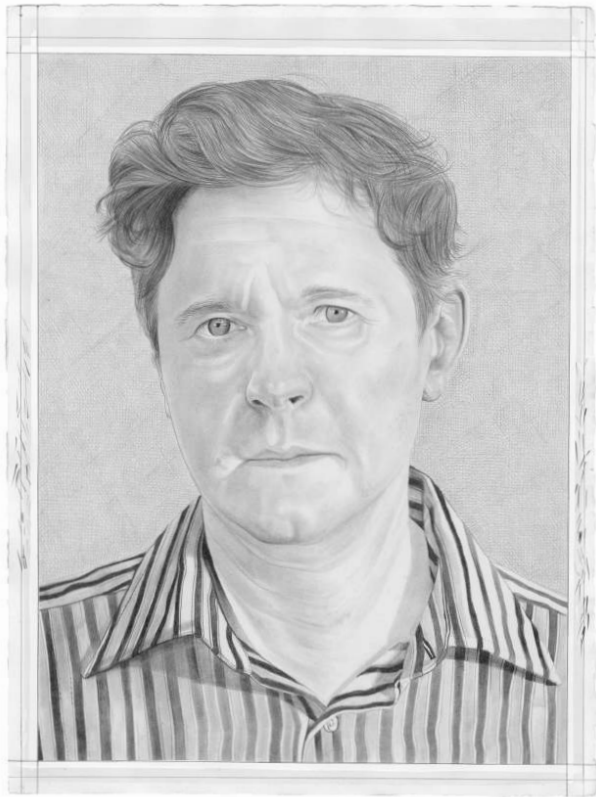
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Reviewed: *The Times Literary Supplement* (London), 4 March 1994,
by Andrew Ballantyne

Modernities: Art-Matters in the Present

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993
ISBN-13: 9780271008080
Reviewed: *M/E/A/N/I/N/G/S*, no. 14 (November 1993),
by Robert C. Morgan

A TREE WITH ROOTS



Portrait of Raymond Foye. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

When Phong Bui asked me to edit the Critics Page of the *Brooklyn Rail* I felt I could not refuse, since it's the only art magazine I read anymore. Ezra Pound said culture is news that stays news, and for me the *Brooklyn Rail* is the news. The only problem was I only had three weeks to fill the pages. There were a number of projects lingering on my desk and I needed good impetus to finish them up. So what I have chosen to present in this issue is not a coherent critical statement but rather a group of "projects" that somehow found their way into my gravitational sphere over the past nine months.

"I almost never think of art in terms of value judgments," the poet James Schuyler once said to me, and I've always considered these words of wisdom. I am generally suspicious of theoretical positions, as I consider artists to be teachers, and if you are coming from a set position you're going to miss an important part of the story. In fact I think a critical position is largely unnecessary, unless you are the artist who is creating the work. "Vividness is self-selecting," Kerouac said, and that's good enough for me.

Certainly there are critical themes that run through this material: all of the artists speak of a strong sense of lineage, engaging the living traditions of jazz, poetry, and music. Shamanic traces animate the collaborations of Peter Lamborn Wilson and Tamara Gonzales. Charles Stein and Philip Taaffe discuss the primordial origins of form, and the artist's responsibility to keep this impulse alive through a journey of images, glyphs, and symbols across historical time. Publisher Shiv Mirabito describes an artistic trajectory that lead from Allen Ginsberg's farm to the holy men of India and Nepal. Henry Threadgill and Jason Moran speak of jazz ancestry and the need to engage that tradition in ways that are global, unsentimental, and unorthodox. Twenty-four year-old electronic musician Will Epstein offers his generational take on the survival and adaptation of the folk tradition in the digital age.

Art in the flow of life: I suppose that is what this section is about. And no one embodied this better than the late poet/artist Rene Ricard, who is prominently featured in this issue. Earlier this year his 44-year reign of terror in the art world came to a poignant close, a milestone for a great many of us. He was the fabulous fanatical exemplar of a fearless way of life, a one-man revolutionary of the mind.

I would like to express my gratitude to the amazing staff at the *Brooklyn Rail*, in particular Sara Roffino, Sara Christoph, Anna Tome, and Andrea Gordillo; designers Walter Chiu and Maggie Barrett, and music editors George Grella and Marshall Yarbrough. For their perspicacious editorial insights (not to mention personal warmth) I also thank Phong Bui and Nathalie Provosty. Lastly and most importantly, Jarrett Earnest has been the very beau ideal of wit, humor, and critical intelligence, and has made this endeavor a joy throughout.

—Raymond Foye
The Chelsea Hotel
December 9, 2014

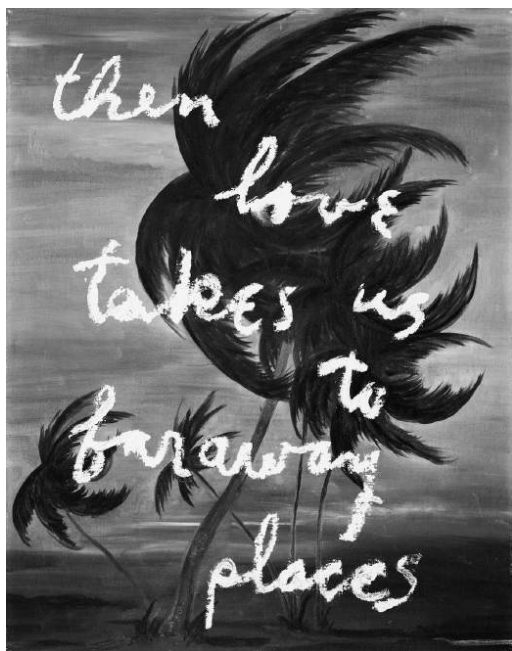
IN MEMORIAM
Rene Ricard
 (1946 – 2014)

by Raymond Foye

Growing up in Lowell, Mass., I often took the train to Boston to visit Gordon Cairnie's Grolier Poetry Bookshop in Harvard Square, hoping to encounter an authentic poet. Harvard and Inman Squares in Cambridge had a handful of cafes, storefront galleries, and publishing collectives. The scene was dominated by the gothic shadow of John Wieners, already possessed by drugs and madness. In a rare reading on Mother's Day 1973, I witnessed a stunning performance by Wieners, who read every poem he'd ever written to his mother, about 15 in all. It was over in five minutes but remains as vivid as anything in my life. Thirty years later on the day John Wieners died Rene left a wet gray canvas at my door that read, in a desperate scrawl: "John Wieners, my mother, is dead. Oh my God."

Even from an early age Rene Ricard was famous in the Boston poetry community for his wild beauty, fierce intelligence, and fearsome wit. He dropped out of school after completing eighth grade because he knew more than his teachers, constantly correcting even his French teacher in class. Soon he embarked on an independent study program that largely involved seducing Harvard boys. When I visited Provincetown for the first time in the early 1970s, Rene was also famous there. Even when there were only 15 or 20 people who knew who he was, he was famous. It was an aura that surrounded him from the start.

Born at the marvelously antiquated-named Boston Lying-In Hospital (later Brigham and Women's), Rene would always bristle when his birthplace was listed as New Bedford. In his day that was a considerable step down, despite the fact that in the 19th century New Bedford claimed the highest number of millionaires per capita in the U.S. (courtesy of the shipping and whaling trades). Rene grew up in Acushnet, which was also the name of the ship on which Herman Melville went to sea before writing *Moby-Dick*. He had an abiding love of



Untitled, 2013. Archival ink jet print, 30.5 x 24".



Rene Ricard waiting from across the hall, my kitchen July 27, 1986. Allen Ginsberg

RR by Allen Ginsberg, 1986. Courtesy of the Allen Ginsberg Estate.

Melville, and in his younger photos I always see Rene as Billy Budd, the sensitive youth fighting to survive in a claustrophobic environment full of Catholic torment, gratuitous violence, and sublimated homosexuality.

Rene told me the defining moment of his life was seeing a Warhol flower painting at the Boston ICA in 1966. "I sat in front of that painting for two hours and plotted out my entire life." When Warhol came to Boston for the opening he shot several reels of the *Chelsea Girls* at the Cambridge apartment of Ed Hood, who was a close friend of Rene's. Rene appears in the film, sitting silently on the bed, peeling and eating a grapefruit slowly enough to fill the 20-minute reel. I can say without irony the performance is riveting.

Unlike most poets who were happy to give readings and attend each other's, Rene hated to do either, so his appearances were rare. When he did read he usually arrived at the last minute (extremely high) and left immediately after. He let it be known that for him poetry readings were poor and déclassé, and anything less than a fancy cocktail party on the Upper East Side was well below his dignity. There were, however, a few memorable readings, such as the one Rene shared with his then-boyfriend. Between the time the reading was booked and the evening it took place Rene and the young man had split up, and Rene had composed a long hate poem filled with the most embarrassing sexual details recounted in excruciating detail, which he recited with his friend's parents sitting in the front row. This was typical of Rene: he was our Catullus, writing elegant and obscene poems of love and hate with brevity and dispatch. But maybe it was best to avoid him?

Finally I met Rene at Allen Ginsberg's apartment during one of my first visits to New York in 1978. I was 21, he was 31. I gave him my address and the next day he woke me up banging on my basement window that faced the street. He had a plan: he'd agreed to write an essay for Pace Gallery and wanted to collect the \$10,000 advance. We went up to West 57th Street and waited for the gallery to open. A check was written with a letter to the bank manager and a few minutes later Rene had \$10,000 in cash. We immediately went to the Russian Tea Room for bellinis, caviar, and vodka. The bill was \$900. From there we visited the Charivari boutique where he bought \$900 worth of Jean Paul Gaultier underwear. The day went on in this manner, and early the next morning I dropped him at the men's homeless shelter on the Bowery—peniless.

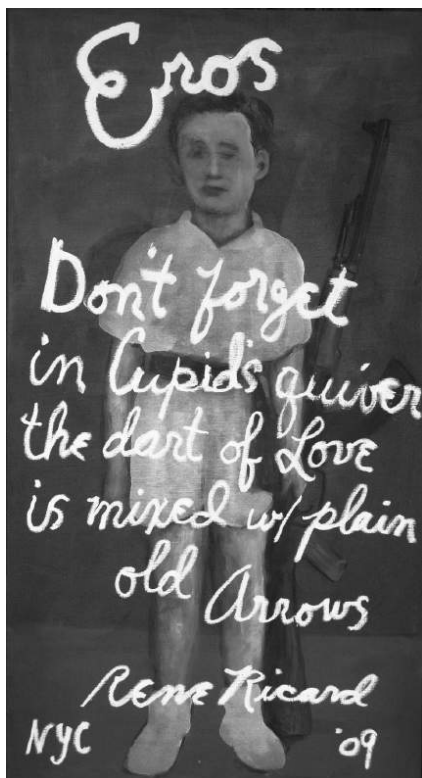


Anthology Film Archives poster, 2012.

Several days later I ran into him and inquired about the underwear, which for some reason was the thing that day that really impressed me. It had been stolen. He'd washed it and placed it out to dry on a park bench and when he woke up it was gone.

I realized I had met one of the extraordinary figures I'd always read about: Villion, Poe, Nerval. The classic poète maudit who lived by a crazy economy that involved throwing something away as soon one possessed it. Yet throughout the day he repaid loans, treated his poorer friends lavishly, and in general lived like the ruined aristocrat that he was—an esoteric French count fallen on hard times. It is difficult to describe the fierceness of the man from this distance.

Despite that picaresque first day, it took me about four years to win him over. Contempt, disdain, and mistrust were standard with him. As I got to know him better and he told me about the beatings and sexual abuse he'd grown up with since the age of eight, his defensiveness became more understandable. The animal instinct to strike out was always just below the surface, and did not take much to scratch. It was only after I'd



"Eros," 2009. Gouache on inkjet print, 7.5 x 11".

edited two volumes of John Wieners's work, and told Rene I held his work in the same esteem, that he began to warm to me a little.

One thing we shared from the start was our Massachusetts background. He liked the fact that I knew of his hometown of Acushnet, a tiny farming village not far from Cape Cod. Rene prized the local, and with our statehood pride we often used to laugh about Robert Creeley insisting he was not from Acton but West Acton—a distance of about half a mile. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, Longfellow, Dickinson: Rene's literary pantheon was likewise local. When the Library of America began publishing their remarkable series Rene pointed out to me that 19 of the 21 writers from the 19th century were born within a 75 mile radius of Boston.

Rene's feminine and extravagant side was always a problem for him growing up. His book *God With Revolver* describes a scene where he was raped and molested by one of his older brothers and his gang of friends. An unpublished late poem, "In Daddy's Hand" describes the violence he lived with as a child. His father was a drinker and gambler: if he won at cards or the horses they would dine on lobster, if he lost there was nothing to eat. Often in the winter there was no money to pay for the oil heat. Mother and children were regularly beaten. Eventually the father went to jail for life on a murder charge. He was found dead by one of his sons, who was also in prison, and he in turn died at home on the sofa of a drug overdose on his mother's birthday. Aside from his mother Pauline, whom he adored, he never mentioned the family. Once he thought he saw a brother on the street in New York and he spent two weeks hiding in his room, refusing to go out. After he died and I cleared his room I found several touching letters from nieces and nephews reaching out to him on the topic of art or poetry. I don't think the letters were ever answered. Some were never opened.

"So many years and so few poems," was what Warhol said to him in his fey but acerbic way at the book party for Rene's first book. But Rene was not the prolific type. The poems were condensed, intense, and few. Some were lost due to his disarranged life, but he also had the good sense to always leave copies with (mostly) responsible

friends. And when he hit on the idea of making poems/paintings, the writing had a much higher survival rate.

But it was really the *Artforum* articles of the early 1980s, on Schnabel, Haring, and Basquiat, that put Rene on center stage. (The world owes a considerable debt still unacknowledged to his editor Ingrid Sischy.) Importantly, the dynamic had changed between Rene and his artists. He was now their elder and they were his students. Not since Apollinaire and the Cubists was a poet able to stand on the shoulders of his audience and explain the vast terrain. No longer mere publicist or court jester, Rene was now teacher and mentor, and he loved the role because it meant his vast body of arcane art historical knowledge could be channeled into contemporary works. It made him feel useful, which is pretty much all anyone wants in life.

No artist made better use of what Rene had to offer than Jean Michel Basquiat. Rene saw his work on the street and at the home of friends, and sought him out. His remarkable work of agitprop on Julian Schnabel had just appeared in *Artforum*. At their first meeting Jean said, "Can you put me in the ring with Schnabel?" "I'll lace up your gloves," Rene replied.

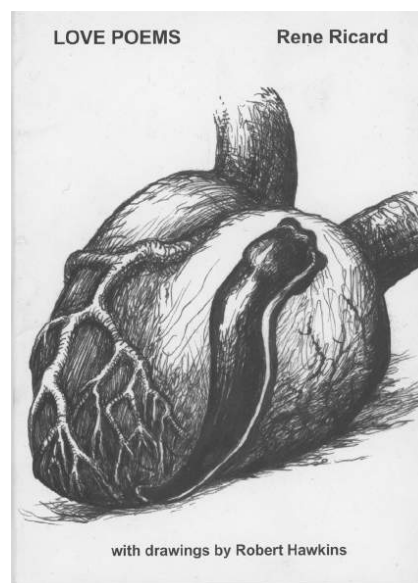
Someday an important essay could be written on the borrowings from classical Greek and Roman art in Basquiat's painting—it is a constant hidden subtext in his work. Jean had numerous 19th-century illustrated histories of Hellenistic and Roman art crammed with engraved illustrations from which he borrowed heavily. Rene was always present to explain and discuss the illustrations, the influence and power these works held for artists through the centuries. No one soaked up Rene's knowledge more than Jean. In those days Rene always had a key to Jean's loft on Crosby Street and frequently crashed there when Jean was out of town. At one point Jean telephoned from the Caribbean where he was staying with a girlfriend. Rene was effusive over a remarkable drawing based on the Apollo Belvedere. "I'll give it to you if you haven't stolen it already," Jean told him.

For most of the 1980s Rene lived a crack and heroin-fueled life. One only encountered him by chance, usually in a state of great disarray if not outright derangement. Sightings were reported between friends. On a sleepover at the Schnabel house, the Clemente twins were sitting on the front steps at one in the morning—their first late night away from home. Suddenly Rene came stumbling down the street, a bottle of champagne in one hand and a bag from McDonald's in the other. "We hid under the steps till he went by," they told me.

Rene's appetite for drugs was gargantuan, and the fact that he never overdosed or was killed still amazes me. (Once he asked me if I'd ever used a certain drug and I said "once." The idea that one could use a drug only once was not something he could conceive of. "You mean once as in one year?" he asked in all seriousness.) It had to do with that crazy sense of measure he brought to all things, in spite of his excess. I often think of the Charlie Chaplin film where the poor tramp is taken into the mansion by the millionaire who thinks he's found his long lost brother. The butler offers a bowl of sugar cubes and Chaplin drops about 17 into his coffee—before breaking the last one in half.

Rene's 1989 book *God With Revolver* was culled from manuscripts that I'd carefully collected over the previous decade. We edited the book in one day at Henry Geldzahler's house at 33 West 9th Street. Rene spent most of the day smoking a crack pipe and having sex with a Times Square hustler in the bathroom. At one point Gregory Corso stopped by. "I've never smoked crack," he said. "I hear you get hooked the first time you do it." "So what's wrong with that," Rene replied, "you just do it for the rest of your life." Gregory accepted the pipe. "So, your Literary Parnassus has quickly devolved to a crack party," Rene said to me with a sneer.

During this period Rene's behavior at parties and events became so unruly the invitations began to dwindle, and this seemed to be one of the few consequences of this lifestyle that concerned him. In his paranoia he began to suspect the invitations he



Love Poems, Cuz Editions, 1999.

did receive were being sent to keep him from attending other, more important events. He referred to these as "decoy" invitations and quickly threw them out.

Since he gave very few readings, art openings were one of the few places one could encounter him. He always entered a room with great drama and flourish and left just as suddenly. He had devised the perfect response to hapless artists who asked him to do a studio visit: "Sure, \$5,000." End of discussion. Except for one wealthy artist who actually accepted the offer. "How was the visit?" I asked him afterwards. "The best they ever had," he said, laughing.

By the mid 1990s Rene had secured an apartment in the Chelsea Hotel and things slowly normalized, to the extent that word could be applied to him at all. Ironically he was given a room immediately next door to his archenemy, the writer Victor Bockris. Victor still carried a prominent scar on his cheek from a champagne glass Rene shoved into his face at Max's Kansas City two decades earlier. Rene's rent was \$1,000 a month. One day as I was passing through the lobby I heard him in discussion with Stanley Bard, the hotel manager. Stanley was pointing out that Rene was four months overdue on the rent, and Rene was explaining that he only paid the rent once a year, because it was easier for him to raise \$12,000 once a year than \$1,000 every month. It made sense to me but wasn't going over very well with the manager.

His small room was number 921: bed, sink, dresser, bookshelf, closet. A small space by the window to paint by the northern light. The bathroom was in the hall outside. One day he wanted to attend a Robert Creeley reading and asked me to pick him up on my way. At 7 p.m. I knocked several times and then pushed the door open. Books, papers, and garbage were piled three feet high. Burnt-out candles were propped on books, on the wooden tabletop, on the windowsills. Rene was sprawled out asleep on the bed in a magnificent three-piece Italian suit given him by Gregor Von Rezzori's widow. We barely managed to get to the reading on time, and Creeley read his marvelous poem, "For Rene Ricard" in tribute. The next day Robert told me how pleased he was that Rene had taken the trouble to wear a beautiful suit to his reading. I didn't have the heart to tell Robert he woke up that way.

As his downstairs neighbor at the hotel, I gradually slipped into a comfortable (even domestic) friendship with him. Seeing Rene was always thrilling: his very presence was eventful. He would arrive with social news, or a new poem, or a new insight into a favorite painting. And there was always the wardrobe. The poetry aside, when I think of Rene it's the clothes I



Room 921, Chelsea Hotel, February 1, 2014.

remember most. “To understand fashion you must understand the 18th century,” he once said to me, and I’m sure he kept this in mind when he dressed. I’ve never seen anyone wear clothes as well as Rene, and I always looked forward to bumping into him for this reason—it was like being handed a bouquet of fresh flowers. Velvet dinner jackets from Sulka, magnificently cut, worn with embroidered carpet slippers. Donegal tweed suits with silk cravats. A lime green Hermes jumpsuit with matching designer sunglasses. Or he’d suddenly adopt a nautical style (French, of course): Breton striped jersey and a mariner’s beret topped with an impossibly large pompom. One could easily be treated to all of these costumes within a single week—and always in color combinations unthought of, before or since. Even on the rare occasions when I’d encounter him on West 23rd Street in pajamas and slippers, walking back from the Aristocrat Deli with his late morning coffee and muffin, he was a spectacle of perfect style. Or should I say *especially* then.

Rene disliked the fancier cafes in the neighborhood. He preferred a little bakery and coffee shop on the corner of 23rd and Eighth Avenue that he sometimes called “my office.” He also enjoyed the benches outside a few of the local restaurants. People-watching was a favorite activity and he especially loved to observe the old ladies in the neighborhood, their dress, hats, manners, and style. He once said to me, “When you see an old lady in New York City, she’s not just any old lady. She was a showgirl!” He shared that similar strength and courage, the sense that one should dress well as a courtesy to others, to face each day with a sense of style and dignity. Rene’s all-too-brief life as a senior citizen was one of the more beautiful and unlikely transitions I have ever witnessed.

Often Rene would drop by my apartment in the early evening and I’d be listening to old opera records. Rene loved the opera and knew all the classic singers: Mary Garden, Dame Nellie Melba, Amelita Galli-Curci, Bidu Sayão. He would sing along to the recordings, warbling and laughing with hysterical joy. Most of these singers have written wonderful autobiographies and of course he’d read them all. He could discuss the gossip surrounding these singers and their amorous conquests, often cross-referenced with passages from the memoirs of Casanova, Berlioz, or Delacroix. His involvement with music (like most everything) was intensely physical. I remember him sitting on the edge of his seat, listening to Friedrich Gulda’s breathtaking recording of the Beethoven *Waldstein* sonata, shrieking with delight at every twist and turn. “It’s like a great silent movie soundtrack!”

I found it odd that for someone who loved music as much as he did, he never owned any type of player. I decided to give him a portable CD player with headphones, and a few Maria Callas CDs—Callas’s emotional pitch *in extremis* was his ideal. He carried the CD player and headphones with him everywhere. One day as we were exiting a cab the device fell out of his pocket and as he put his foot on the pavement he stepped directly on it, smashing it to pieces—a flawless bit of slapstick



RR, 2010. Photo by Rita Barros.

only he was capable of. I offered to replace it but he refused. “I’ve had it for three months and I haven’t written a single poem. I have to get rid of it.” It was then I realized that much of the poverty and denial he lived with was about eliminating *all* distractions so he could practice his art.

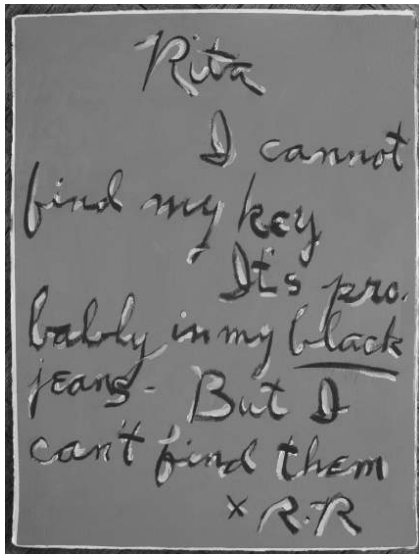
At the top of his list of favorite music were the operas of George Frideric Handel and Henry Purcell, works he knew intimately. He loved French song, in particular Suzanne Graham’s recital of the songs of Reynaldo Hahn and the classic recording of the *Chants d’Auvergne* sung by Madeleine Grey. He loved lyric tenors Tito Schipa, Hugues Cuénod, and Nicolai Gedda. He loved the ballads of the British Isles and their American counterparts; the first two Joan Baez albums were favorites for this reason. One recording I put him on to was Sviatoslav Richter’s remarkable 1987 Mantova recital of the Haydn piano sonatas. He played it dozens of times, essentially memorizing it.

Rene’s depth of knowledge in the history of art made any museum visit with him a near-psychedelic experience. (After an afternoon at the Frick a young friend of mine referred to him as “a chain-smoking

encyclopedia.”) He possessed a photographic memory for artworks in virtually all subjects and styles from pre-history to the present, but the Renaissance was his true love, with French baroque not far behind. He could tell you where the artist was born and who they studied with. He could tell you where the painting was made; who purchased it first and for how much, and its subsequent provenance and history of restoration. He had a conservator’s knowledge of supports, grounds, primers, pigments, etc., and most of these techniques he had practiced himself as an amateur. When the subject of the painting was a historical figure, even a minor one, he could describe their biography in detail—not overlooking personal intrigue or sexual scandal. He knew the natural history behind every color, their origins, trade, chemical properties. His knowledge of the history of costumes and style was exhaustive and he could likewise describe the techniques by which the garments were woven and sewn. He could choose an isolated subject—the history of lace for example—and easily discourse for an hour, never pausing for a moment to recall the correct phrase for a technique that had not been employed for 200 years. In rare cases when the



RR’s Hydra notebook, 2012.



"Untitled (Rita I cannot find my key...)" 2010. Acrylic/charcoal on paper, 24 x 18". Collection of Rita Barros.

clothes the subject was wearing still existed, he had usually visited the costume institute to examine them in person. Because we lived a few blocks away from the Fashion Institute, we would always visit the marvelous exhibitions there. An exhibition on the history of perfume unlocked a belle epoch reverie of Proustian dimensions. That was a four-hour visit.

Rene read avidly and he was never without a book. His favorite author was Marcel Proust and he would talk about the characters as if they were people he'd known. He always said the one thing no one ever tells you about Proust is how funny he is. (Once on a long train ride he proposed a game: we would write down every reference to famous paintings in Proust. I came up with 12, he came up with well over 100.) He loved mysteries, royal biographies, court memoirs, maritime histories, travel guides. British comedies of manners were high on his list: Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, E. F. Benson. He'd committed to memory much of Ronald Firbank and loved to act out favorite scenes. He read almost everything on the Kennedys. (An illustrated biography of Jacqueline Onassis was the last book he read in the hospital.) Over the years I was fascinated by items he used as bookmarks: coffee cup lids, bandages, twenty dollar bills, a piece of bread, coins, cigarettes (smoked and not).

When Rene would visit my room he'd often spy an expensive art book he'd want to borrow. Lending him a book often meant one would never see it again. But I never had the heart to refuse him the loan because he devoured them with such incendiary intelligence. He would argue with books the way he'd argue with people and eventually I encouraged (and in some cases paid) him to annotate them. But after he lost my copy of Colin Eisler's monograph on Giovanni Bellini and I learned replacement copies started at \$600, I instituted a system whereby he had to leave a book of equal or greater value in the event he failed to return the one he borrowed. Rene referred to these as "hostage books." Several of his composition books in my collection I acquired in this way.

He wrote mostly in notebooks and carried favorite ones around for months at a time. This always caused me anxiety, because I knew how much great poetry was between those covers, and how likely he was to lose it. I asked to borrow a notebook for an hour, so I could xerox the contents and keep them safe, but he flatly refused: "You don't understand a poet's mojo" he said disdainfully. Another time I begged him to put his name and address in the flyleaf of an especially important notebook, knowing full well he would do nothing so mundane. A few days later I peeked inside;

scrawled in that extravagant hand were these four words: "If Lost, Please Find."

Eventually Rene's Chelsea Hotel room became too crowded and he began to enjoy the company of his upstairs neighbor Rita Barros. Soon he moved in with her, sleeping on the sofa and unobtrusively setting up camp in little corners of her living room. And there he stayed for the next 10 years. Until he awoke on the first of January 2014 and was unable to get out of bed. He'd had trouble walking for a few weeks and thought he'd pulled a muscle. It was clear he needed medical attention so a trip to Bellevue Hospital followed. When I saw him there a few days later he offered words of advice: don't go to Bellevue on January 1st, it's full of New Years Eve casualties: stabbings, falls, alcohol poisoning, etc., It took 10 hours to be seen by the doctors. X-rays revealed a fractured femur requiring a partial hip replacement. Then closer scans the following day revealed a significant tumor on his lungs. The cancer had also spread to his bones, spine, brain, and lymphatic system. I stood by his bedside as the doctors delivered this grim report. He listened silently, then looked up at me. "I'm dead," he said, matter-of-factly.

He adjusted well to the ups and downs of the hospital routine. Pokings, probings, scans, physical indignities, boorish roommates. The room filled up with flowers and friends. The outpouring of affection and expressions of love sustained everyone. I wanted to ask him in those days what he thought about death. The question could really never be approached. He was still too full of life. But one snowy Saturday afternoon, his sole visitor, he asked me to sit on the edge of the bed. He began to discuss dynastic Egypt—one of his favorite subjects. For over an hour he detailed the monetary system, daily life, social strata, farming, navigation, and eventually their ideas on death and burial. He discussed Charos and the River Styx, and the migration of that myth to Greece and Rome. It was a rapturous monologue, whispered in a rapid delivery. When he was finished he told me he was exhausted and asked me to leave. Walking home in the snow, I felt I'd somehow received my answer.

One morning a perky hospital worker came by to ask Rene a series of tedious questions for which he was in no mood. A perky and typically clueless American type, she ran down her list of questions. Rene could barely manage a whisper. Answered her questions with a marvelous mixture of courtesy and deprecation:

You're a writer?
 "I'm a poet."
 How wonderful!
 (Withering look.)
 What's the last year of school you completed?
 "Eighth grade."
 Your name is Albert. They call you Rene?
 "It's my professional name."
 What's your religion?
 "My own."
 What are your hobbies?
 (Horried look.) "Hobbies?"
 Yeah, like, what do you do for fun?
 Long pause, thinking, smiles. "Poetry."

Certain deaths in the New York art world seem seismic. John Wieners noted that with Frank O'Hara's passing in the '60s, "a certain tone of town was gone." After Andy died the entire club culture faced a crisis it never recovered from. "What's the point of going to a club if Andy's not going to be there?" a friend of mine said. I feel Rene's passing in this way. How strange the Factory poster boy of self-destruction should outlive nearly his entire retinue.

The headline to his *New York Times* obituary referred to him as "Art Arbiter with Wildean Wit." Nothing would have pleased him more. Arbiter is Petronius. Wilde his hero. Wit his most revered quality. "Andy was a great wit, people don't understand that," he once said

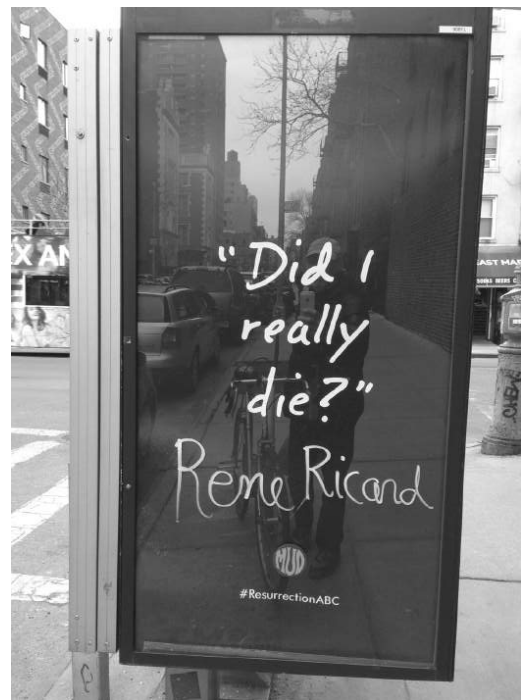


RR at Philip Taaffe studio, 1999. Photo by Raymond Foye.

to me sadly. In fact, being in the presence of another great wit was the only thing that could neutralize him.

In the numerous memorials that followed his death a strange pattern emerged in people's history with Rene: not only was he the defining figure in our lives in New York, but a remarkable number of us met him the *very first day* we arrived in New York. It was as if he were out there waiting for us, in whatever the junkie equivalent is of the Welcome Wagon hostess.

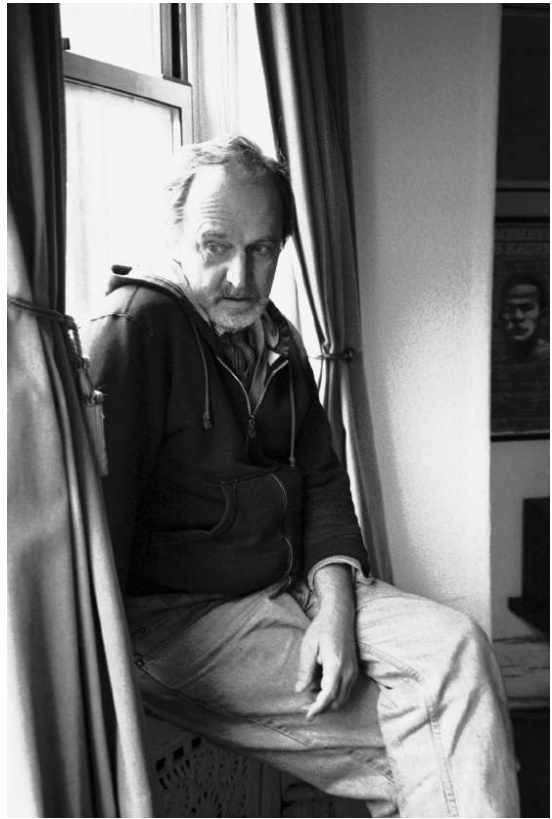
For so many years Rene was always the problem child, the bad boy, the enfant terrible. But gathered amongst a hundred or more of his friends crowded into his memorial service a few days after his death we all felt the same numbing grief: we were his students, and we'd lost our great teacher. Death had revealed Rene's higher purpose, and it had been a deadly serious one all along, only disguised as fun. Serious fun. ☹



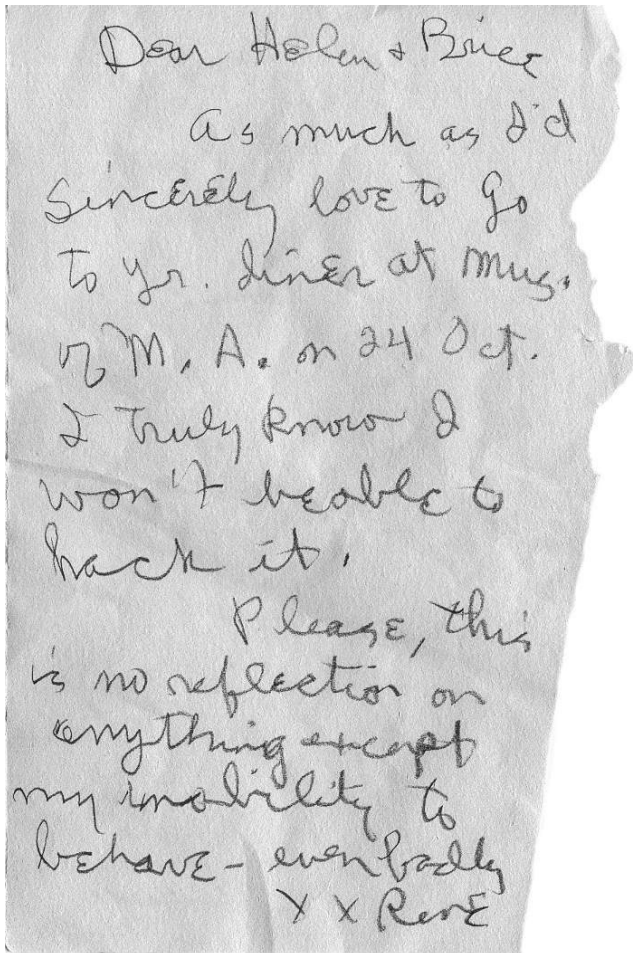
Altered advertising sign, Lower East Side, NYC, 2014. This graffiti began appearing a few days after RR's death.



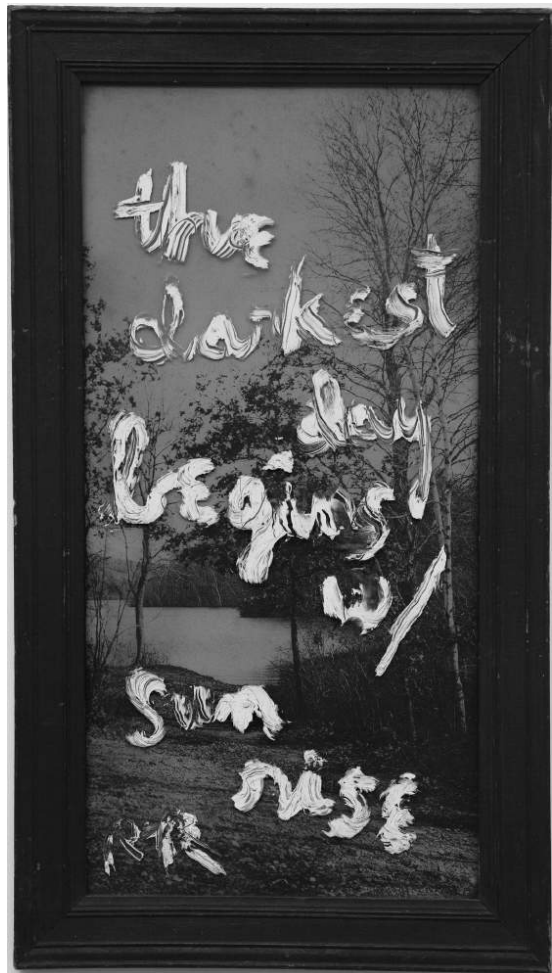
"Untitled," 2010. Found object and acrylic on glass. 9.5x13".



RR, Chelsea Hotel Room 814, 2002. Photo by Raymond Foye.



RR holograph letter, 2006.



"Untitled (Walden Pond)," 2010. Found object and acrylic on glass. 18.5x10.5"

Massachusetts Avenue

II

Walking along the beach road at sunset with the, to me, heart-breaking foliage—beach plums, bayberry, ineffably pink dog roses that fall apart if you try to pick them, etc... We were four grownups and a six year old, I turned to Jaqueline:

"If I were Kai's age I'd dash right into that underbrush. I wasn't allergic to poison ivy and so could make myself at home in any woods."

Indeed, when I was little I had no friends outside the woods, where I was thoroughly at home. I knew where the bird's-foot violets were and when; walk on a ways where, always with an abrupt halt, the heart-stopping Lady Slipper in its shaft of light bloomed on the oak leaved floor. And wild strawberries on the Fourth of July in Maine—where I saw a black-masked warbler beneath tall, yellow, moccasin-orchids. Yes, always wild strawberries.

I was fortunate that some of the best woods were in my family, as it were. Crossing Main Street to Aunt Laurette's and through her yard with its elm tree where the pristine sack of a Baltimore Oriole's nest over-hung her morning-room window and out the rhubarb sided track, past the shed where Claribelle, the goat, was tethered, then around the back of the old Ashley estate (paved with lilies of the valley in season) and into the Sawmill woods.

The Sawmill woods began abruptly with a leather green pavement of Wintergreen, then I was in the woods. The path immediately darkened with an audible hush. Nature took over and, if you were looking and listening, put on quite a show. The birds stepped up a few rungs in quality, their songs distinct and quotable.

The first event as you entered was an eroded cliff on the right glamorously scaled to a not-yet-grown person, the oak on its crest overhanging the yellow earth where its roots threw themselves out. The sun and the ground had a routine worked out whereby a beam piercing the leavers would spotlight a wild flower on its own shelf on the cliff face—one plant per sunbeam. The flat-faced heavenly blue birds'-foot violet with its little orange cone in the very center—one plant and the only one I ever saw. And Turks-head Lilies. Tall, thin, nodding and orange or sometimes, yellow.

Don't think I was fully accepted. As much as I wanted the birds to make me ball gowns and mice surround me for a chat, I would sometimes be dive-bombed by birds and chided relentlessly from branch to branch by one squirrel in particular. And I would always fall for the wounded bird trick where the bird with a broken wing would flop around, just out of reach, until I couldn't remember where the pantomime had started, and then knowing I'd been led far enough away she'd fly off and leave me ignorant of where on the ground her nest lay and I was deeper in the forest.

Then the woods opened up. To the left was the Sawmill River (the headwater of the Acushnet River eponymous to the real whaler Melville shipped out on that was the model for the Pequod of *Moby Dick*). To the right a sloping glade and directly in front an abandoned 18th century cranberry bog and beyond that the grey-black horizontal of a pine forest that formed the self-declared boundary of my woods.

Throughout the years I spent in the Sawmill woods I never saw a single person. My sense of privacy and safety were complete. There were no surprises greater than a toad underfoot or a quail's clumsy thrashing into, but never quite making it into, the sky.

There were no unpleasant surprises, so that when I tell you that, here, I would sometimes turn right and sit on the moss and daisy upholstered fieldlet, and stare at the Pines across the bog or eat the wild strawberries growing within arms reach. My sense of solitary belonging was complete.

Around my eleventh birthday, that year, later in the summer, when the vines had taken their dominion over the trees, on a white and muggy day I lay on the daisy covered ground. I was only wearing a bathing suit, as usual—no shirt or shoes. I was golden brown from the sun and the baby hair on my arms and legs was golden. My head covered in whitish blond hair crew-cut but with a platinum cowlick over my left eyebrow dark like its mate over double-fringed black eyelashes surrounding eyes the color of a wild blueberry cut in half.

It was early in the white day, the sun at my left hand. I lay back, my hands tucked under my head. My knees bent up, my heels against the back of my thighs—let's put a juicy blade of grass in my mouth—strawberries were finished.

I looked up at the white sky. Suddenly the sun was declining on my right hand. The whiteness had possessed me. I got up. My shorts were, I could see, quite far away. Eight or nine hours of my life had disappeared. Many years later trying to recapture what happened in that split second that took all day, I remembered the light descending and collecting around me. Whether that's a real memory or something else—I haven't a clue.

I was sixteen and living in Boston, working as an artist's model, don't laugh, it supported me. I lived on Beacon Hill but had friends at Coffee Corner near Mass. and Huntington Avenues. I'd walked down Newbury Street and was on the Mass. Ave overpass near Ives Gammell's at Fenway Studios where I passed a very beautiful young man carrying his schoolbooks walking in the opposite direction toward the bridge to Cambridge. A design he'd heavily over-marked in pencil on the cover of one of his schoolbooks—the outside one, caught my eye. I swivelled on my heels, ran a bit, caught up with him and said, "Were you an ecstatic child?"

We stood there facing each other: the traffic and the pulse of a city dying away and he told me that, yes, he'd been an ecstatic child. I don't remember where I was exactly going or where, ostensibly, he was off to; but previous plans were set aside. "Come with me," he said. I guess he was eighteen or nineteen.

We went to his room. Boston at that time was honey combed with rooms. There were beautiful teenagers in rooms everywhere. The rent got paid, the educations were completed, and the sex was guilty.

We sat across from each other at a small table. This was a business meeting not a date and was not prolonged unnecessarily. I don't remember saying good-bye—there was no further rendezvous contemplated or suggested, I never asked or found out his name, and what he told me ran something like this: At the age of twelve God began raping him. It was horrible. God would violate him forcefully, would ravish him violently and repeatedly. To be singled out like that is hopeless for a child—there is truly no one to turn to. I was the only person he'd ever told. We were both crying.

Realizing the futility of his situation and combining ingenuity with intrepidity at eleven o'clock mass, during the benediction, this beautiful twelve-year-old boy walked up to the altar rail as the priest's back was turned to the congregation, who were kneeling and with bowed heads, my ecstatic friend banged on the marble altar rail and, in a loud voice in the hushed church, demanded, now screaming that God keep his evil hands off of him and leave him alone. I suppose, come now to think of it, he humiliated God enough so that as a result the ecstasies ceased. You can all write for yourselves here the movie of what went on in the church and at home after this—if he told me, I don't remember. But if my memory of childhood has any insight at all, I'd say, not much. The righteousness in this little boy's anger and the tone of his voice must surely have warned everyone who heard that this was an event outside their experience and to act as if it didn't happen: In fact collective "oublie" probably set in.

I suppose we said goodbye. I know I left his room because I am not there now. But we had had the same experience, somehow. He had had his suffering and I had had a hole in time. Recognizing him re-affirmed the event for me. The words "ecstatic child" had jumped out of my mouth when he passed by: a symbol unconsciously scratched in graphite onto the cover of a school-book had leapt out at me and told me that what I had experienced was ecstasy—in a deeply incised double-cross.

—Rene Ricard, *Summer 2003*

All Day

So this is reality too, come in
and now you're here, all swept
up for you the floor shiny
and our wonderful pal, the
antelope clatters its little hooves
on the floor to eat from your
hand, all the pictures
you love on the walls and
your favorite books read
themselves aloud, and you
can leave if you want to, just
turn the page or have the kids
come over for cake, little Louie
from downstairs, he likes you
so much he brings his friends
too, the twelve year old girl,
She loves it here we give her
shiny hair and crackling
petticoats. It's always
just after school and
just before supper. The
flower in the flowerpot smiles
all day in the sunshine
and waves its little
leaves when you come home. Such
a bright yellow floor and
such a big cozy bed
It says Hey Get Up or
You've got a temperature or
Stay here with me
let's watch TV all day.
Sometimes there's a moon
when we're alone but
like always the grinning
kind that hangs from a
thin wire. Oh yeah, the
stars have five neat points
The coffee pot giggles and
the dishes wash themselves with
their little rubber gloves
squeaking and laughing.
You have that effect on things
and even the bathroom,
so often left out of things,
is happy, when you're
home.

Oct 25
1978 RR

Vatic Utterance

If I love you
There is no limit
But love is Luxury
Housing
The rent must be
paid
The lease expires
Evictions are noticed
And a new Tenant
Moves in

2005 Oct 24

Galas We Missed

Helen + Brice?
Very nice!
But I am missing
a slice
So if you want
me there
Invite me
Twice

R.R. 2006

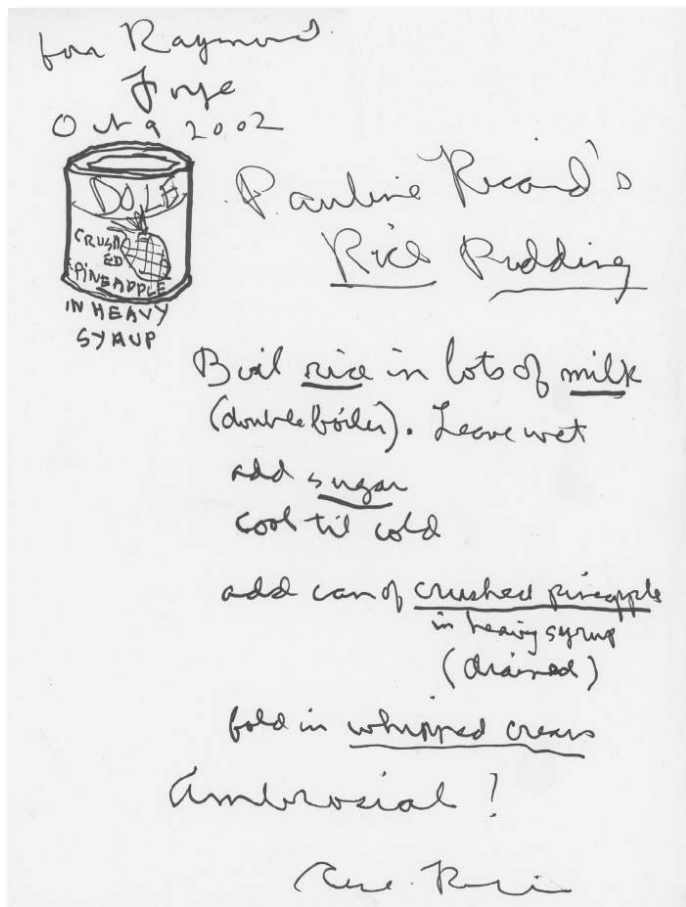
Boy Running

Is the boy who runs
Away
Gently begging you
To stay?
Perhaps he genuinely needs
Some rope and knots
To keep him here...If that
Is so...
Go away I don't want
you here that
way
unless you
Bring the rope
yourself

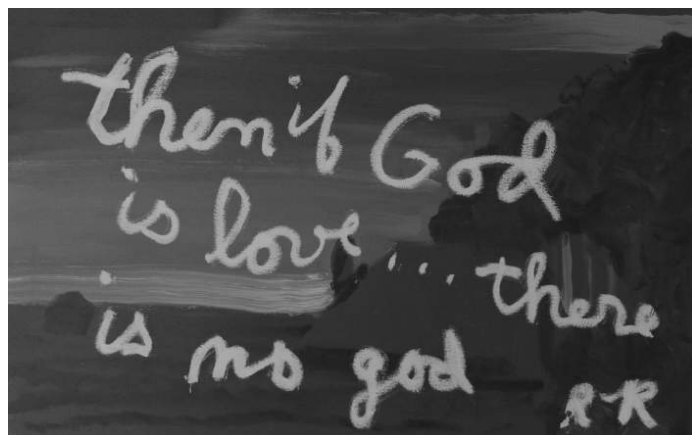
Rene Ricard
2006

Some
Day
I'll wish
upon
a star and
wake up
where
the
enidifications
are
I suppose
Judy Garland
did that every
day
at home
where
dreams
are manufactured
for
the
room
more/roover than Judy
who could not
dream:
the Drugs

Poem for Judy Garland holograph manuscript, 2010.



Holograph manuscript, October 9, 2002.



"Untitled (Then if God is love...)," 2003. Oil on canvas, 36 x 42".

The Secret

The Heroin mixed w/ the
Free-Base and apparently I am
Having Blackouts. I say
Apparently since I've no
Recollection of — Sacking my
Already "who did it and ran"
Apartment. The neighbors
Complaining about the loud fights
In my place. I was alone!
I'd surely like to remember if
Someone were there w/ me — Even
A fight to quench this Sahara of
Loneliness I've placed myself
Within.

Do I have a secret
Life where I am even engaging in
Domestic quarrels? Wouldn't that
Be civilized! From me though it
Is probably one of a multitude of
personalities
Showing off for the others.

R Ricard '06

And,
If I could see to
The end...would it be you
There — waiting for me?
No. The
Waiting days belong to another
Not to me. Vanity —
No. Beauty — but who
Knew? Well, Bye,
To all that! Now, to
Let it go with dignity.
Ha! Ha! Dignity! Fuck
That. A nasty old man, Me.

Rene Ricard
June 20, 2005

Have a Good Day

Lola S.

Have a good day
But not just today:
All the days that
Come around today—
Like yesterday
and tomorrow
Yesterday, today and tomorrow
Love them all
nice days

The Perception of Time Under Stress

Bernini has poor Daphne
in a whirl
Surging upwards, she's torqued
for escape
In the Borghese Collection
A 'this isn't happening to me'
horror
To the ends of her finely drilled
hair
That repeats in miniature the
Solomonic
Spiral in St. Peter's baldochino

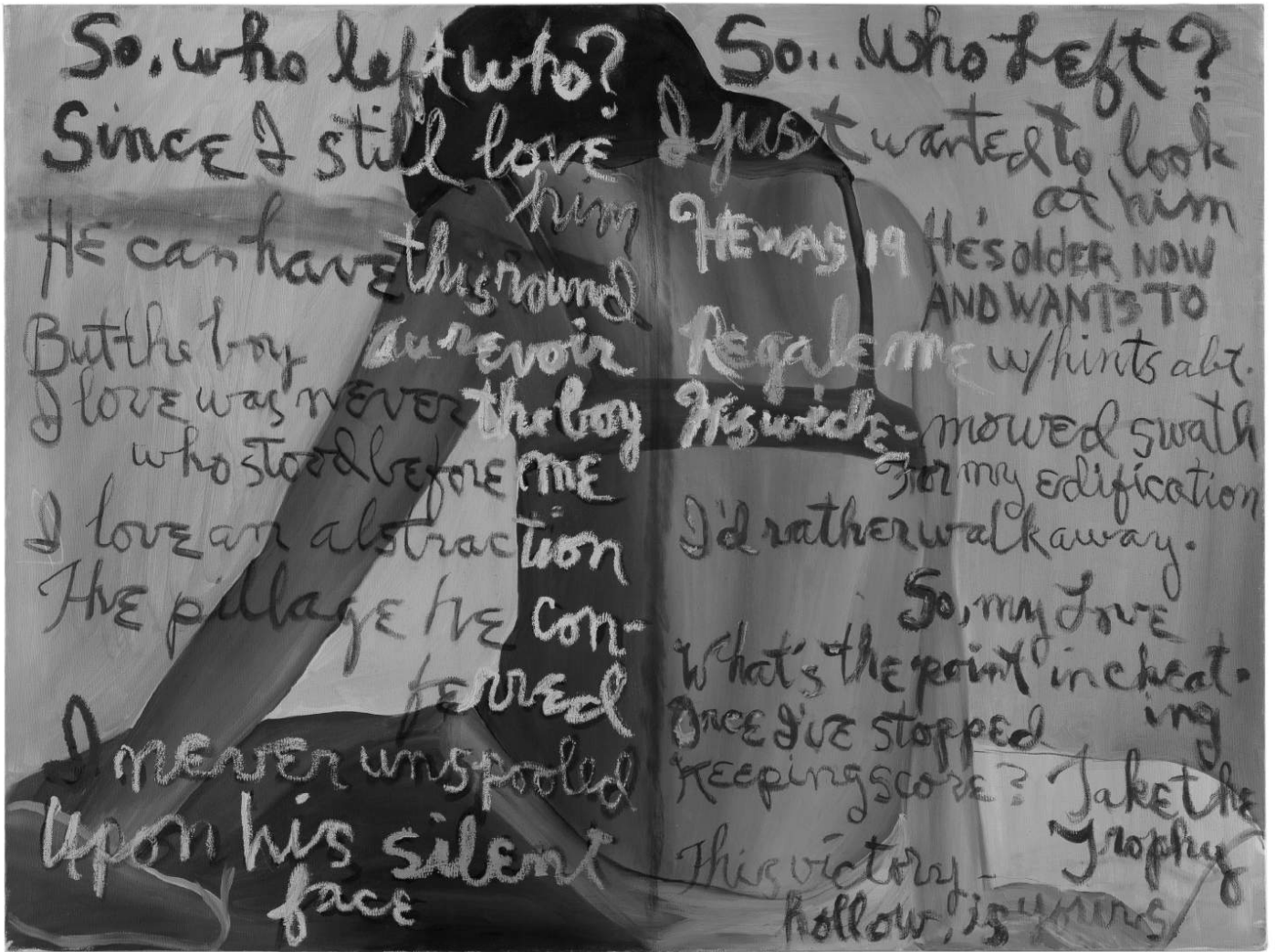
In all this she more than
resembles
Her sister statue, resembles Persephone, who
Archemedeically
Demonstrates her version of the twist.
She doesn't stand a chance:

Skin is to marble what a
Screw's elevation is to its
plan:
In elevation it moves—in plan
it don't

They share a room, however in
this civilized gallery
"Look, his fingers dig into her
Skin. That'll leave a bruise"
—English tourist
circa 1908

Now, Daphne's farther along
Cardinal-proof with bark
She's already half a tree of
bays
And Apollo, auditioning for
King of France

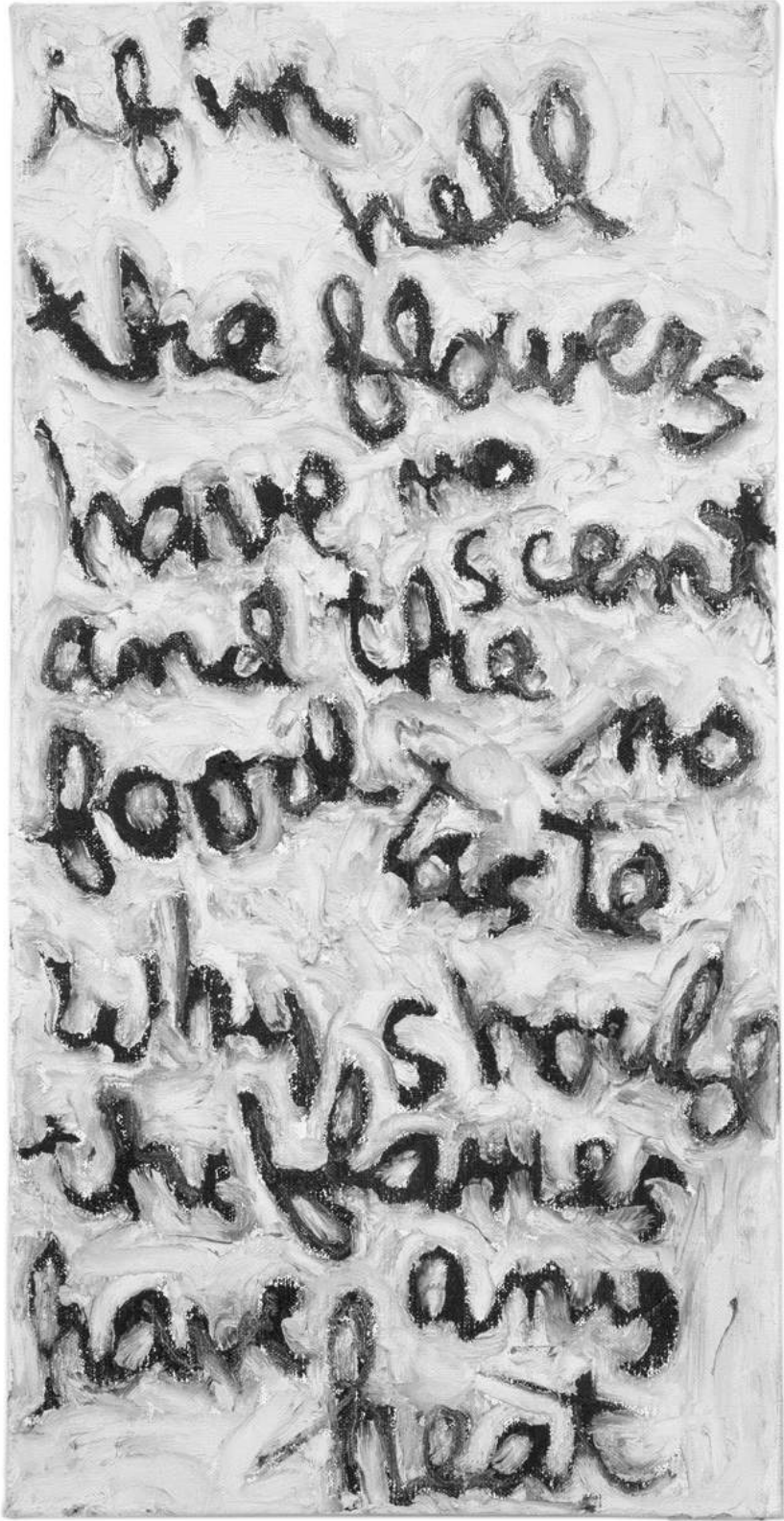
So it appears,
Is too late.
But our Edwardian
knows
It wouldn't be like this
She would walk slowly
out
Off the veranda and
onto the lawn;
The gentleman of the piece
Has even gone back for
lemonade.
It's taking so long.



"Untitled (So who left who...)," 2007. Oil on canvas. 40 x 30".

So, who left who?
 Since I still love him
 He can have this round
 au revoir
 But the boy
 I love was never the boy
 who stood before me
 I love an abstraction
 The pillage he conferred
 I never unspooled
 upon his silent
 face
 So...who left?

I just wanted to look at him
 He was 19 He's older now
 and wants to
 Regale me w/ hints about
 His wide-mowed swath
 For my edification
 I'd rather walk away.
 So, my love
 What's the point in cheating
 Once I've stopped
 keeping score?
 Take the trophy
 This victory,
 hollow, is yours.



"Untitled (If in hell...)" 2003. Oil on canvas, 20x10".

If in hell
the flowers
have no scent
and the food
no taste
why should
the flames
have any heat

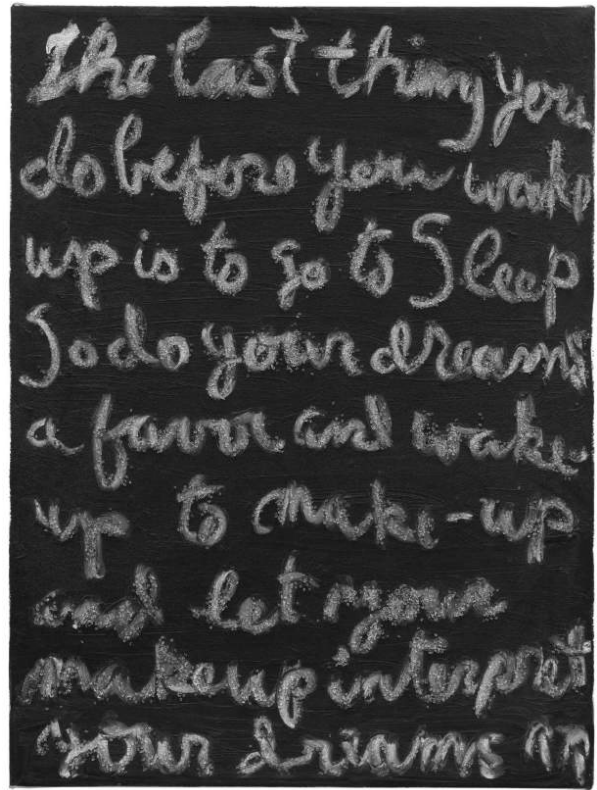


RR, Chelsea Hotel, 2003.

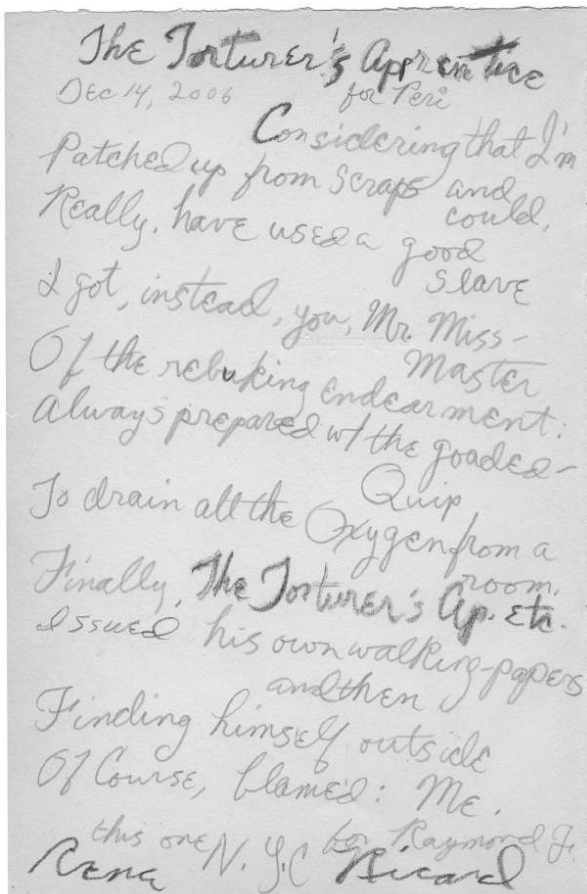
Sleeping Beauty Rents
Snow White's Crystal Bier:
awaiting kiss

"This could be an eternity,"
thinks Sleeping beauty, making the rounds
of clubs and bars
"This round of clubs and bars
Will endure an eternity."
Sleeping Beauty sighs deeply
Into a cell phone, entering a taxi.
With the amount of Beauty's drinking
(The rounds of drinks that go
w/ the rounds of bars) Then there are the Beauty Drugs.
Keeping a large male Beauty asleep these days
is not the easily pricked
Finger on a spindle, "Poison apple, Dearie," trick that once
Could enthrall a Beauty to sleep. Now, a mass of costly
And possibly illegal analgesics, designer and other pharmaceuticals
Prime the Beauteous Sleeper into:
The Mystical Moment of Surrender:
The Life not Life – the waking that is Sleeping – Beauty is asleep,
i.e. a life asleep is capable of Beauty. A Beautiful life cannot be
A Waking life. Sleep, my Love, The Beauty Sleep of your life.
Why waken—sordid, soiled,
Catastrophic, in a Life that is
"Empty," you said?
Empty of What:
The Kiss is the final Drug; let us call it
"DETOX" – As seen on T.V.!!!
It wakes you, no?
So, this Fairy Tale is good for a spin.
If we write out the Prince, and living happily ever after
In Snow White's rented Glass Sepulchre.

Rene Ricard
April 26, 2005



"Untitled (The last thing you do...)", 2005. Oil and glitter on canvas. 24x18".



RR holograph manuscript, 2006.

To an Ironing Board
Nailed to a Bedroom Door

There are welts across the arses
Of the British upper classes
Then in France it launched a craze
Benamed "La Maladie Anglaise."

All may crave this painful bliss; though
It helps to be Aristo:
"Oh please, Sir, Dukie, Duke, please,
Smack me just like the Marquise!"

Back and forth across the Channel
Pong and Ping the darling paddle
Raised her red retorts of pleasure
Forth and back in equal measure.

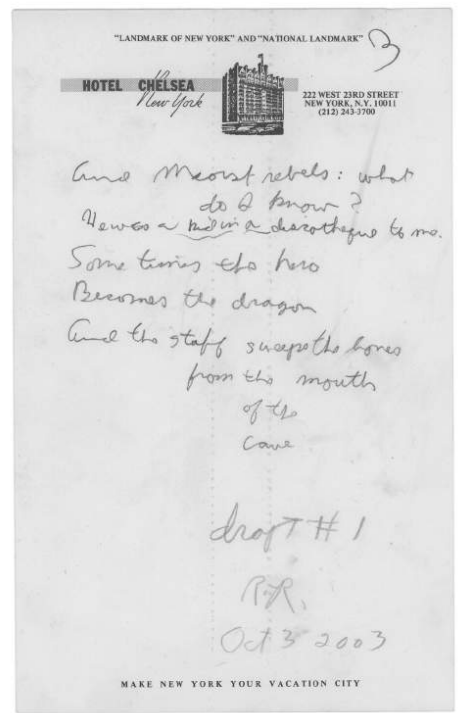
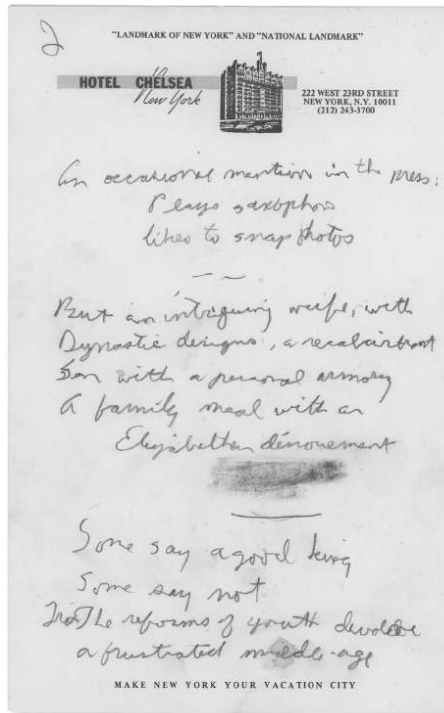
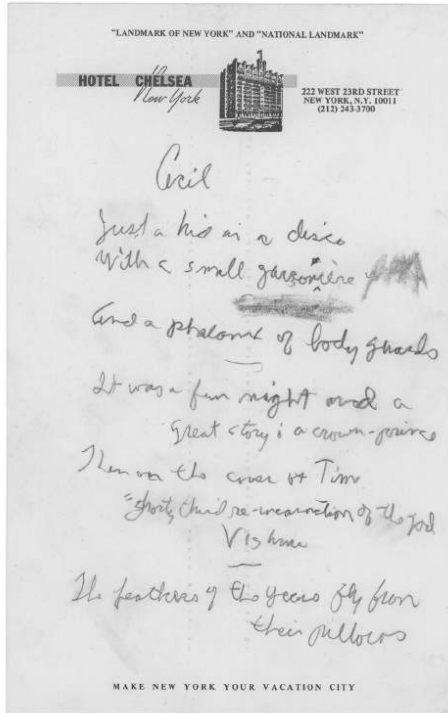
The wealthy Duke of Lauderdale
Does enjoy an unforced wail
From aproned maids, with wet red eyes
Who are ladies in disguise.

Our Sublime poet of rack and wheel
Was clapt into the dread Bastille
Deprived of Light and Day
By a Lettre de Cachet


So, well-born and standing tall
Leaves a greater way to fall.
Duke and Marquesses fall down on
Knights, Viscounts, and Baron.

This little doggerel of decay Brings us to the present Day
In this world of Bush the younger.....hunger

RR 2005



RR holograph manuscript, 2003.



Cecil

Just a kid in a disco
With an east-side garconniere
And a tidy phalanx of bodyguards

It was a fun night and a
great story: a crown-prince
Then on the cover of "Time"
"Forty-third reincarnation of the god
Vishnu"

The feathers of the years from
their pillow.
An occasional mention in the press:
Plays saxophone
Likes to snap shots

But an intriguing wife with
Dynastic designs, a recalcitrant
Son with a personal armory, and
A family dinner with an Elizabethan
dénouement:

A Shakespearean meal
Where a king and a prince meet
And everything ends in
mincemeat

Some say a good king
Some say not
From reforming youth devolves
A frustrated middle age

And Maoist rebels; what
do I know?
He was a kid in the discotheque
'Ondine'

Sometimes the Hero
Becomes the Dragon
And the staff sweeps the bones
from the mouth
of the
Cave

by Rene Ricard

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In Daddy's Hand

For Rita Barros

In Daddy's Hand
the swing connects
the leather to
your underpants

that separate your
father's hand
from your pink
skin

and though the
cotton's clean
and white

It's also very thin
and the pain
gets in
gets in
gets in

They say you don't
Remember pain but
that's not true

Just propaganda
from a Sadist
to his kid

Because hurt it did

Have I
forgotten it?

Like hell I did
it hurts
again
and
again

It's hurting still

There are molestations
that hurt more
than the sexual:

The fear to
enter rooms
he may be in

a coffee mug
without warning
or reason

Flying straight
at you

You're only six
and don't know
why it's happening

But then he'll
tell you why

Why?
"Because you
looked scared"

Now here's a reason
these strikes and
spares do
not occur sporadically

They're constant
and the

neighbors, your cousins
can't believe
you're growing
up

Since he killed
His first wife:

"Sugar"

and he'll kill at
least one other
man
that I know of

Why I'm alive is
more that just a mystery!

"Chance Survival"
is the term
in
Archeology

The context vanishes
But there's some little thing
Not enough to
form a theory

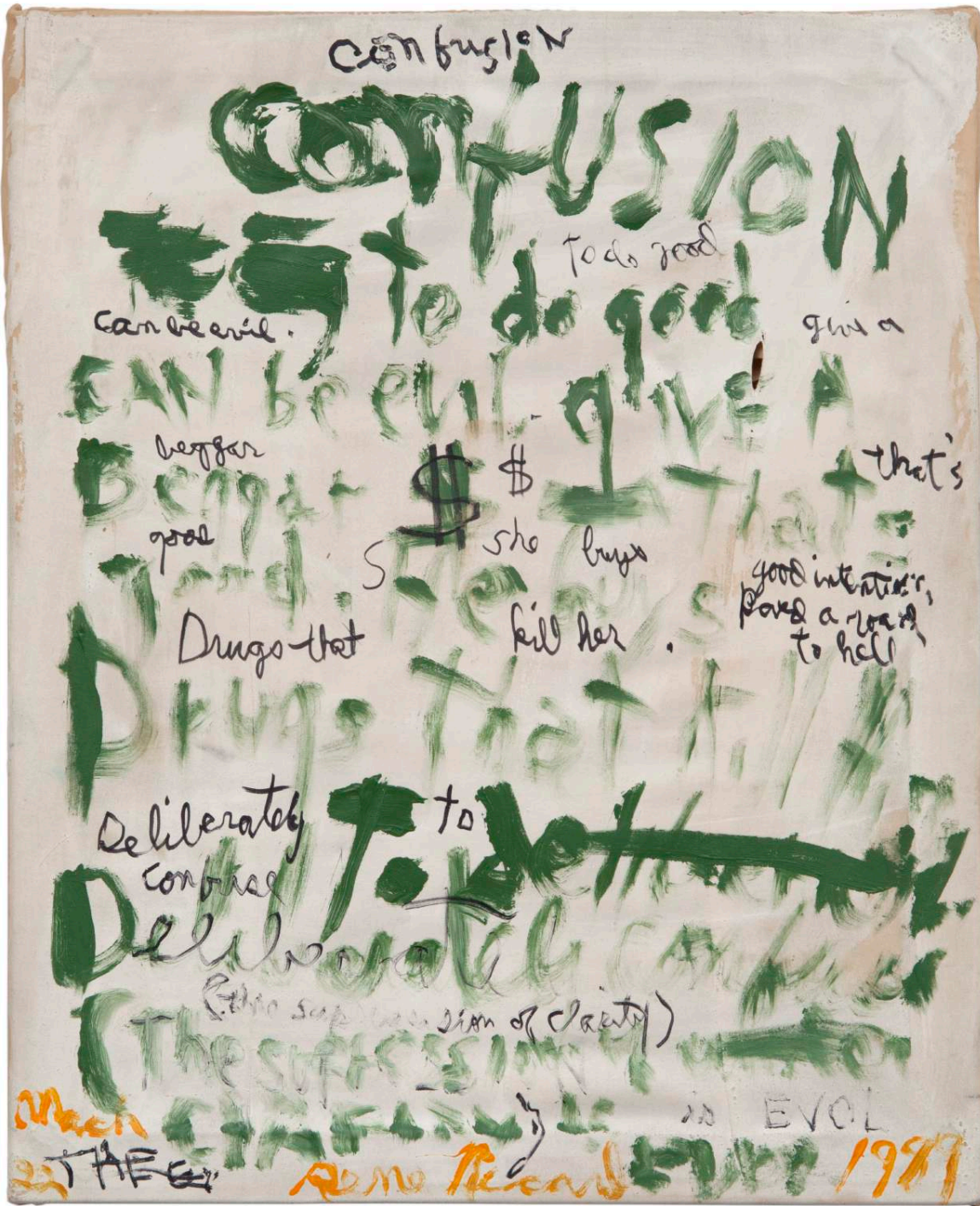
like, say,
the signature
on a plinth

But not the
piece
itself

June 19, 2010
Rene Ricard
Bridgehampton



Room 921, Chelsea Hotel, February 1, 2014.



"Confusion," 1997. Oil and marker on stretched cotton shirt. 22.5 x 18".

Confusion

To do good
 can be evil
 give a beggar \$
 that's good.
 She buys drugs
 That kill her.

Good intentions
 paved a road
 to hell.
 Deliberately to confuse
 (the suppression of clarity)
 is EVOL

Rene Ricard March 22, 1999



All works illustrated courtesy the Estate of Rene Ricard, Raymond Foye executor.

When I Died

a glorious light
beckoned me
I could go or stay

I chose the
light

It was the Devil

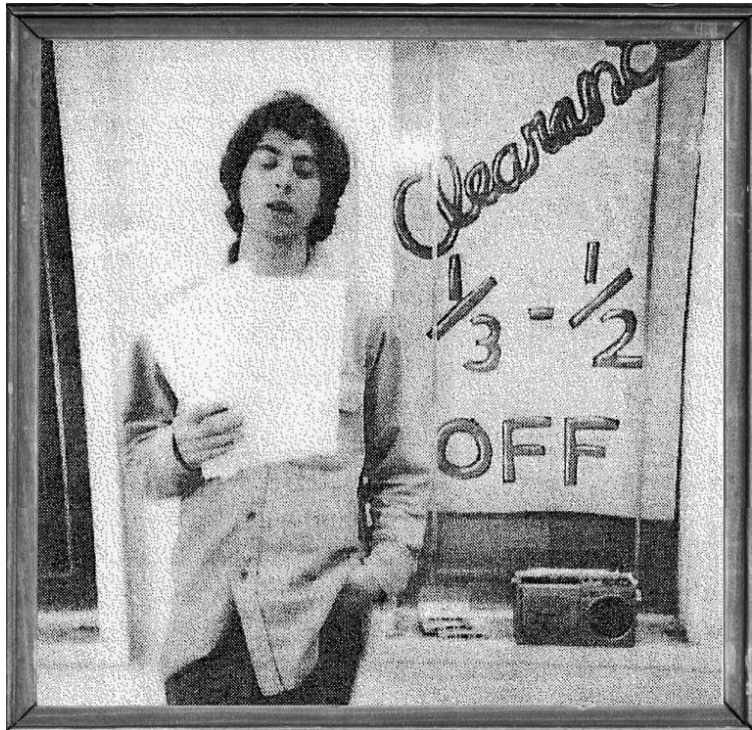
Rene Ricard

Introducing ERIC WALKER

Raised in the redwood forests of Northern California, Eric Walker turned up in San Francisco at the age of 15, his poetic identity very much intact. He believed he was the reincarnation of Arthur Rimbaud—hard to deny when confronted with the astonishing flow of words and images, not to mention his stunning physical beauty. He took prodigious amounts of psychedelics and otherwise seemed to live on coffee and cigarettes. He was immediately taken in by the community of poets, including Philip Lamantia, Kirby Doyle, Sarah Menefee, Howard Hart, and Tisa Walden (who published three of Eric's chapbooks in her Deep Forest press, his only published books). Of all the North Beach poets it was the gentle surrealism of Bob Kaufman and his deep engagement with blues and jazz that most influenced Walker's writing. In classic guru-devotee fashion Eric often slept on Bob's floor. Signs of mental instability became increasingly common, and the Rimbaud/Vergil analogy was carried a bit far when Walker threatened an elder poet with a pistol and had to be disarmed. He decamped to Berkeley, sleeping on streets and rooftops. He occasionally returned home to recuperate, and for a time posed as a student at UC Santa Cruz, squatting in dorms and auditing classes, notably with the renowned William Everson (Brother Antoninus). He loved the music of Bob Dylan and borrowed much from both his look and his verse.

Cruel and dangerous confrontations with the law (shoplifting, vagrancy) and the mental health establishment (incarcerations, medication) inspired many remarkably cogent manifestos from this period where he explores the dynamics of debt, war, media propaganda, and government control—particularly as it bears upon the powerless and vulnerable, and the artists and dreamers. His final years were spent in institutions and halfway houses. On March 13, 1994 Eric was found hanged in his cell at the Humboldt County Jail, aged 29. (He was the third inmate to die there under suspicious circumstances, and eventually a wrongful death verdict was confirmed.) His work fell into obscurity for the next two decades, remembered only by those who knew him, many of whom are now themselves passed on. Eric always had the kind support of his mother, Diane Murray, who preserved his works and eventually donated them to the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, a few blocks away from the streets where he lived most of his short life.

—Raymond Foye



Christmas Morning 92

Bringing it all back home,
Christmas in the asylum,
settled in the air is cold
and sheltered, there is a
component of silence mixed w/ joy
and grief, and anguish,
we are waiting to open our presents,
stacks of green and red boxes await us,
past eleven and the fury driven bows are
slashed and eighty-five mental patients are
busy opening their packages, listening to Devaju
on my Walkman, their dragging their paper with them,
and it's simply crazy to watch them tear and wrip
their packages, happiness comes in all colors,
Father of Woodstock you are here with us,
blind colors tasted from your eyes, butterflies
and star-dust, making new rules for the old year,
bellies and laughter and Santa Claus is a woman this year,
I know her, she is a group counselor, I have tasted good
cheer from the bottled rainbows, I have erased my mind
in a tasteless tomorrow, where is the wheel and where
is the blood? Shouting my name in the sky's clay,
dancing with memory on a sunstained lake, crying
inside a mirror of windows, surmising the
absolute terror of being alone, they are smiling now,
misplaced names in a bag of silk, and no one cares what
is happening in my mind, cat-calls and poisoned rivers,
they have burned and hurried my sanity in flesh and dreams
of diverse institutions,
with but one open call: Merry Christmas to All!!!
and for those who've lost their faith,
God is born again today, and we have all
been here before!

Poem For Bill Everson: The Aquarian Poet

Personal typography, ageless
dissension, wisdom & tonality,
yield & set free, w/ wild aegis
the Summer is coming, shaky
flight of geese, a new gander
naked in tremulous form,
agents of Spring surround you,
humble snow-man melting into
darkness w/ rage & sorry burning
inside the vertigo of dawn
sucking Scorpio's clean legs,
the fiery Zodiac spins in
your favor, a field of sky &
flowers, arthritic baptism
of the quick & succulent flavor
newborn like a mask of daylight
quilted in copper bows, age
and the hands spin, dry grapes
on a balcony of years; bones
like cotton fabric, the sea
is filled wintering w/ words turning on
your kind spleen; quaking
stalk of innocence uprooted
in Virgo's trembling
formula, age and surmounting
grace traverses the blind mountains
of birth.

Insanity

Impaled on the wall my eyes
can barely see the pattern of my life
in cold mystery, the selfish world spins
in blind decay, I remember the ancient longings
trusted to my soul but crumbling like a lake
of salt, I think with associations that drive
me back beyond the color blue, painful exorcisms
circumscribe the dance of etheric ghosts,
fragments of Light enter my window but
cannot leave,
my life is a tapestry of curtains made
by moons and stars, infected by the indifferent crowd,
dangling conversations and superficial sighs,
all is wreckage clasped to the bone of the sea,
martyrs draw breath then sink like stones
below the murky water leaving only ripples of
their posing rhymes, a classless society is raped
by an ugly monkey, poisoned by the air of factories,
the freeway of spinning cars, collision, immolation,
the despair of falling into crimson sheets,
the Mind so elusive that I cannot catch the butterfly
the singed wings fluttering in the smallness of
its reflection, my soul in satin houses where love is
just a game waiting for the estranged father to return
to his house, and Lear's cold scowl of misfits in
a winter storm, to conquer the villa's doorway inside
the reality of a second,
and lost behind the deer-shaped windows
of nuclear warfare that is disintegrating
in a massive wind from which all children's eyelashes
blow away in the smoke of a moslem epic,
strange dreams of wet comforting, O' send me
on my way, I can smell the daises of your
blind heart, I see the Wall standing in stillness,
which will not let me pass,
I see the shift and debris of a classless
generation, inside the degenerate neutral [sic] zone
I watch the silence shutter and fly away,
I am always thinking of you and my war-shocked shell
of a selfless dream, punished by the nightmare my mind
cannot control, waiting for the judge to say
I am crazy and must be locked away from all normal eyes
blinking in the dark, dare a man speak of loneliness
from freedom's jail, telling a conscience that
is broken in shadows, tested again and again by
the Wall's edge, the tepid dreams follow me
in summer's delight, my soul is an anchor upon a shore
that is lost in the stirring of waves, battled against
the ramparts of a faraway country, desperation inside
the masoleum of broken machines, I call out my song
inside the collective rain coming
like a criminal's voice, shouting out:
"I am what I am!" inside the voiceless cage
from which my dreams are drawn.

City Water

Serenity is Light transformed into liquid.
the eyes of the bridge are watching us.
a turbulent blue sitting in an orange Sun,
cascading through the shimmering gold of flames
tossed through waves of green immersed in the
tired turnover of cars passing us;
aqua colors curl their feet into socks of
crystal light, turbans of feeling etch in
the black water, smoke dreams in turning passages
of glassy silence; an otter moves distantly around
the swaying boats, masts lit by darkening shadows,
gloved in quiet reflective modes,
city water moves like a freeway without sound,
only the jetting hues pushed forward
in the timeless jaunt of pausing lights.

Helen

So you went & slipped into the mirror,
you really did it, you finalized the project;
my spirit is a piano, you see me running
in place of your tawn dirty feet,
why did you jump it so heavy and hard
my egg shell honey, the sweet cream
of my nightmare, the tasteless joke
of your dead-weight fixed in the air
in the smell of a jettisoned flower,
your face hit humming up
a whole hive of bees;
your damn mental body stuck in my mind,
and your loving still twisted into my fingers,
and the savagery of your eyes
(brown and soft marble)
echoing the dim mirror of my wandering
life-hotel lips praising your existence
in the foggy redwood air.

The Neat Square

Caught in the glow of winter,
a yard of rope is hung like a ladder
to heaven, the ray of light is organized
like a neat square, rainy afternoon,
come gather your stormy shells,
for what is left of tomorrow is only
the casket from which we deal,
like cards cast on the table,
like a cat that has no claws,
like a situation that is viable,
and a religion that dreams of
tear-drops gathered in a round circle,
we can not forfeit tomorrow, for today's
dream, there in the distance
is a World without a face,
come and embrace it, neatly
the corners fold into a square,
someday we will be free,
to shape the clay into our own image,
but now the claw is iron bound.

Mushrooms

Cool rain-wet shrooms,
laughing in a silent Void,
happy and content with the face
of the earth, hungry and desirable
as fresh lettuce, born again amidst the strange
emotions we feel, orange streams of light coming
from the fields of destruction,
to possess no name in river of love streaming
through shivering blood,
a mirror that reflects nature, Mind is a mirror
that sees the water-fall of Being,
the crushing of white roses by a machine of habit,
the earth propagates these,
the line line between reality and illusion,
partake in the mushroom feast,
a clear idea is sometimes better than
a parable,
mushrooms a trip that contains within
self-surrender to the Earth and the Universe,
belong.

The Road To Wellness

Loving my hands more and more:
the sick and lonely eyes of a hero in transition
lie spellbound by the magic circus of Self Love.
I have been suicidal, tortured by thoughts and voices;
now is the turning point, my release from the hospital
is imminent. I am learning tools. tools to deal with the
illusions my own mind presents to me. Reality is better
than the tortured ego of the past. I am walking on a beach
that is perfectly fit around my bare-feet, my hands are
in my pockets. and I am singing to the clouds, inside the
social maze we learn how to bum cigarettes, talk of sad
times and happy places, smell our feet, chew bubble-gum,
trade handshakes for bags of pop-corn, talking to the counselor
and trading smiles with the walls;
there is only the wall of doubt that hangs me up,
to have faith is to be in a restful state of mind;
obviously I am a perfectionist, and my doubt clings to me resolutely,
but my passion is guided by my understanding, my fingers
fit just so on the keys of my typewriter, there is a place
for everything, even truth, here I have lived with sick
people, sick in all ways; polluted strains of logic distill
in the air like sad exorcisms of the bright future,
sunlight on my shoulders and I dance, becoming one with
my craft, addicted to my madness only by the strength that
controls it, standing alone in the darkness, watching the
sky turn across the horizon, knowing only my state of mind
is subjected to a vision of dusk and a World waiting, on
the road to wellness, standing by the well of understanding.

Birth Mark

Star-faced solitude
of the Poet's presence.
there in the corner of the room
is life whispering to life;
a mystic illumination of a cell
buried deep beneath the heart,
to use an Archetype from the off-centered
flesh of a World of sacred masks,
there inside the body incognito an
echo of soft eyes resound in the midnight fire
of candles lit in memory of the dead bird
that tired of heaven leaned on earth,
till bone saliva tasted the learned death
of a sailing wind cast inside the carrion breast;
seasons wreckless, learning from eachother,
that somebody's passion carries the Dream to its
ultimate conclusion, sequestered in the terminal night
of shared illusion, the hand-print on the thigh of reason
is etched like a scarlet berry of branded nuance,
turn to where the people walk, earth eyes opening
on the lunacy of morning, traversing the clean mountain
into the twilight valley,
a horse of death rides itself
ragged, children come to see the stranger above him,
with masked eyes and a purple mouth, hanging onto the
strong limbs, where birth is realized in the single mounting
of the disturbed air, froth and a palace of trembling gold,
caught in the yellow glare of yesterday, like a fog stained
river where the saints ride,
endings meet their beginnings in silent
restitution, mirrors the emptiness inside
from which a flower is forced to bloom,
fraternity of windows inside the mellow glow
of Dawn's tragic ether,
etched in the sand-made purpose of a hidden storm
that reaches the sky with black nets of hiding tears,
trumpets its way down through the skin of the earth,
and hides its birth mark like foot of mercy,
glowing in the silent clay where love is born.

Still Here

Beneath the languid day
a trial is taking place,
some vanishing of broken
stair-ways are lighting the way
for the bottomless hearts to vanquish
love, bones and blood, pajama man
talks to himself in whispers of triumph
and anguish, to still himself he
smokes three cigarettes at the same
time, for he knows the trinity
will soon reappear in a night crowd
feasting on the air, it dissipates
in a silent growth of fields of gray
paths all leading back to the center,
where hearts of refuge bleed a soundless
cry of meadows avenged by black
doves, a hawk circles in the sky-
light of a parish that is the moon's
stifled space, and here in the jailed
summer where we spend our coins on
the last dead, where wise-men pursue
an education from the strangers of
morning who wake with pills and coffee,
wishing they had never strayed from
the path to hell's mountain, a coldness
in the air depicts fall in its rusty
amour, a hurricane of size destroys
paradise in a bitter second,
homeless now the rose grows in
boats of fallen and decayed mountains,
the fishing of natives in the warmth
of sun-stained waves just wishing
there was some sugar to taste with
lemon and ice, to see the great
devastation of human minds and the
peril of salvation growing indignant
in the old rainbows of saints with
nails so heavy in their palms, discussing
politics in an early morning of brain-
less scorpions all feeding on distilled
water and cranberry tea, to stick
it out, to suffer for some higher
purpose, to bring the three rings
back to heaven's fingers, to sleep
as if in a trance, to know that death
is but the leftover side of life,
still here, though it has unfinished
business, it would rather first be
a shaman of the inquisition, a timeless
firmament of shame and lazy voices
trapped in a fire beneath their skulls,
kept in the wind that blows from
the southern skin of volcanoes whispering
their freedom in a hospital that
houses the sick and malnourished
skeletons of Time.

Check-Mate

Sorry that you arrived w/ murder
in your eyes, leery of God and His
Omega wants, black Alpha, handsome
devil straight from two touch-stones,
one a tree made of sawdust, two
a jail made of night, the clay
never really left your fingers,
there darkness spent its warmth,
you frightened window, Equus became
a knight of smoke, slip sliding,
weary of God the devil, left
his guns on the mountain, long ago
they turned to roses, the machine
hid itself in a garden overripe
with fear, dancing its way to
destruction.

Hospital

This is a mental melt-down,
a shaver that razes the skin like
a mill-stone heart on fire,
this place where people linger
like broken fountains inside a
mindless décor, paintings of borrowed
colors, chattering and clicking of teeth,
they have a fence so high, and doors leading
into a hallway of waxed floors, they polish them
daily, sick people drink coffee in the morning
movement group that we are supposed to dance in,
but nobody dance, just prepare lines, to line
up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, to be
sheep in Pavlov's nightmare dogs dancing for
a cigarette in the broken mirror of slow reflections,
this is tedious wind growing inside its insidious
love, struck by the light of fluorescent ceilings,
carved into our flesh like a tattoo from an eagle's
claw, this is the sanctimonious brain-wash of frustration,
like a game-show with phony prizes, they run us ragged
going from one place to another without ever leaving,
the grounds are a meadow of cigarette butts, and cold
grey cement, the rooms are sterile as God's mind,
perfectly lubricated with the fabrication of bones
smelling like phenol and cotton candy, throw up
in the outside courtyard is slick and strawberry colored,
people disturbed by their brains,
walk half-hazardly through ghost-towns
remembered in their hearts, touched upon
like civilization's quest for the perfect
mono-rail that goes nowhere, but looks like
a single track of lights all blinking off and
on, singing to a deaf tune
of solipsism, these eyes of stone cannot
see that forever is meant to be a long time,
this steel heart has caught itself on its own barbs,
held in a prison of cigarettes all smoked one after
the other, O hospital where generic streets run
into each other, like people passing everyone on
a freeway that is uncomfortable to ride,
only our tortured hearts can tell us when to look.

Blues

Feeling low down and mean,
wanna die wanna sing,
want those blues to dance
through the dam of my heart,
a trumpet of musical defiance
shapes the word of the Law,
definition: the blues are tonal;
an exponent of the bi-valves of
heart-shaped valentines in cool
black velvet, cold rhapsody
of blind heroin, tasted like
a drink of whiskey, melting inside
a carcinogenic balloon,
hands shaped like baseballs
pounding on the back of my head,
boot-calls come dancing, come crawling
across the living-room floor,
cement crying in footsteps of fever,
born naked in this bald fanfare
of rare exquisite flowers unfolding
in a vase signed by Picasso,
their sleeping tones creep steadily
into my woman's heart, step lightly
on warm-lipped brass blowing freely
upon the White Dream of concentration,
free at last to sing the blues!!!

Written to Joni Mitchell's Court and Spark

The work
stroking star making machinery
beneath the popular song
the flesh of doves and the dreamers
caught in the City of Lost Angels
coming alive I remember my childhood hearing
these songs smoky rings in the sky
leaves like flying saucers bending
in the windy day fresh redwood cones
and the songs blasting from the stereo
as my mother clips her roses
the rum voice of solitary wind
streams through the speakers
I concentrate listen like a sharpened
needle going down the black grooves
listening to the come down and look at
the trains meeting in People's Park
strange shadow man in his missing car
everybody waiting
old man sleeping on his back
Jesus running in a silver tinted meadow
of warm dogs panting breath through jazz phones
what brings me back to the dark listening
with my father spread out in his favorite chair
by the fire
water whispering in the drain
clickety clack
drums and flutes in speakers of silence
like death but better
butter between bread
Court & Spark.

Music

Without you where would we be?
The stealth of magicians chopping down
a sacred Tree.
The World a sad upheaval of empty notes
played for no one, disturbing the firm hands
of Sunlight that call forth their sacred song.
Twenty years have passed since I first called you
by your rightful name. The blessed tune is the same
as that of a wandering child inside a flame, bent
on becoming a singer of wise and angry men.
Like a fallen star I echo your glory, like a
testament to Harmony I share your joy, the fruits
of Love twisted into steel rhymes, turned past
the chimes of freedom passing.
In the naked Sun like some sleeping lover newly
awakened, undressing in the silent turning of a deft song,
lingering on lips of praise, a psalm spoken only once
in a lifetime, sings on the radio like folk rock
meandering through halls of music, a red candle is
lit for the deaf and tortured ears that only decay,
when the summit is met will you dance all day like a deer
in the shy Sun, will you crow and meow in the blind winter,
will you fold your clothes for better seasons to come???
Music is sweet as God's breath, a bright chord comes
chiding inside the mirror of morning, I cannot forget you,
the radio plays softly in a mirrored room, the radio
hums magic in a night of sexual love, it begins with the
heartbeat of a child, sleeping naked against
his mother's breast, and ends in the call of Buddha
from a distant age, where chanting rivers collide
in the Spring Earth, only to follow us down, back
to our birth.

Under the Influence (An unofficial history of Rock-N-Roll)

Every morning I listen to classic rock. It begins as early as seven and ends sometimes past midnight. Sometimes I blare it, sometimes I like it soft. It casts a spell on me. The lyrics, I'm a lyric junkie, like Pink Floyd's Animals, or Jim Morrison Waiting for the Sun. I especially like the Velvet Underground. Good down and dirty realism of the Sun in incognito, of the blast of heat coming from cool town with loving hand searching and baptised by white sound turning colors at the living edge, on the fringe of disenchantment. I like the realism of Tom Petty and his Heartbreak sound of L.A. fantastic, and the lost enchantment of Al Stewart's Nostradamus, the clear epics drifting inside the head of a rock, like moss on a rolling stone, there is the woman just like Tom Thumb, circling in the air with diamonds. The minstrels sing of injustice, of the Fall of America in the warped Masters of War, transposed upon electric fever. Or the electric cool-aid acid tests transplanted in Jimi Hendrix's imagination, warped by a purple haze. Or the fresh taste of Cream, and its marshmallow side-kick, with a prayer for God to buy her a mercedes benz, with reds pawned for a midnight with the Queen of funk. The lucid learings of Pink Floyd encapsulated by the Wall, wearing funeral ties for the British Empire. The royal son in drag, like a gypsie with big fat lips rolling down a hill with well rounded Stones. The Church of the Electric Guitar in a frenzy doing a wedding for the middleman of brave sorcery, discussing anarchy in the back room behind the pews. What is commercial rock, but the blind and arrogant hypocrisy of an inheritance to the Rolling Thunder, with undeserved applause. Here the shattered dreams of synthetic disco, and the binding of jazz at the peanut gallery. The cynics of blind justice rage in turn, while the melting pot gets hotter. The Moody Blues with its smooth announcement of the early death of LSD's punk hero. The Godadavita with fleas raging on its electric neck, singing with pressed lips to a window of disenfranchisement. The political ills are the pressure cooker heating up into an electric jam. Like Peter Gabriel and Biko, let the murdered seek their voice in the living. Iron Butterfly in siege with flames, lurking for the lost buffalo of an extinct dream. And the Grateful Dead are leaning on the pot smoke horizon, looking down on a sea of green fish.

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The Ancient Ruin

"Creation is Perfect"
—Bob Kaufman

I first met Bob Kaufman in North Beach at a poetry gathering. The Old Spaghetti Factory was a place poets had gathered for over 40 years; it was Beat, with old wicker chairs hanging from the ceiling and painter's memoranda decorating the walls. They had an open reading every Thursday. It was also a bar where you could hang out and drink when some poet was on in back stage that you didn't care for. It was a restaurant that prided itself in Italian cuisine, and had the best garlic bread that I've ever tasted. The place was buzzing on Thursdays, and usually more than 40 poets had already signed up when you got there. Bob was a black Jew, who had acclaimed fame back in the late '50s and early '60s. He had walked a tightrope of racism all his life, and when I found him he was living in an all black ghetto. He had emphysema and also brain damage from getting beat up by the cops and getting strung out on booze, thorezene, and amphetamines. I remember the night he packed the backroom with poets waiting to hear the legendary Bob Kaufman read. He recited the Kingfisher poem from memory and chanted it like a man coughing to death. His health was so bad, and he looked like someone who had been to hell and back. The legend of Bob surrounded him like a nimbus. One thing I realized in listening to him recite was that he was a real poet beaten down by society; the potential fate of us all. He had two things that made him almost a martyr: he was black and Jewish with an obvious talent for changing words into whips; white tipped and staining bodies with a thirst for scarlet. He had lived life on street drugs and booze and he had barely survived life's catastrophes. I still remember how he chanted with snot running down his face, looking like a sculpture of pain; as though someone had divided the good and the bad times and left him naked, swimming in bone, cold and tragic, yet at the same time familiarly warm. His face was truly black—not pale brown—he wore an artist's cap, and looked very poetic with his black beard trimmed with gray. He was, as I learned later, a proud and dignified man beaten down by society until there was nothing left in the end but a bed that he could die in and a woman who later would discover his smiling corpse. He was like a phoenix with his words rising out of the pyre of his own soul, and reaching people with meaning and depth.

To be a man of words is to leave this world with a gift, that is the sum of your worth. Bob left me with more than a gift, he left me with the silence he had fought for so long. I lived with Bob, and experienced his broken soul, that once, so long ago he had poured out to humanity. I remember during the 1984 elections, the man laying in his hammock of peace, making it known to all of us that his sickness was not a disguise. The depth of Bob was his sinking frogeyes that had once leapt above the world like a paratrooper. Like unleavened bread, Bob had seen that too much consumption little by little burned into his palms and shaped him into a poet of darkness, one that cries out in the night against the criminality of chemicals and materialism. He searched deep into the jazz tones of his spirit and found there a wrecked ship smelling of brandy and cigarettes. Bob was a naturally loving man, and he always knew when he was being used. He stuck to himself, watching TV on his deathbed. The silence Bob had partaken of was merely the realization of something higher penetrating his injured skull like a voice faraway, or a stillness that comes on sudden like death.

The Ancient Rain was the title of Bob's last book. It, in my opinion, is the most important work. It is a vision of emancipation, like of old with the Pharaohs, and even like Noah with the vision of Holy Justice coming down from heaven. For a man who had one too many nights of black hatred, one too many unforgiveable beatings, he shows us that there is a kind of justice coming from on high, and that creation is truly perfect. The poet is the receiver, it is him that talks and bargains with God. Though death has triumph, the poet defeats it with a mirror of words that hypnotizes the clouds. Like a moth attached to the fire, Bob lived his life seeking truth. The truth he eventually found was cable TV. I remember one night I was upstairs talking on the telephone, when I heard Bob's rough voice calling to me. I came down to see what he wanted; Barney Miller was on, our favorite program, and he wanted us to watch it together. It became a ritual; late night TV. Though



Bob Kaufman by Chris Felver 1977

Bob could barely hear, he kept his concentration on the screen. I also found out that Bob liked Bob Dylan. The stereo was always tuned to Kjazz, Bob's favorite music, he had lived jazz and fought for jazz to liberate his soul. The Ancient Rain would come softly in the night and bless his skeleton with tears of holy wonder. It is worth saying that Bob loved people, especially children. I remember one day I found him at the gate waiting for me to come home. I handed him a stuffed rattle, like a two-handed gavel that a jester would carry. I found it on the sidewalk that afternoon, and Bob accepted it. When he came back in the house, he had a big smile and his eyes were sparkling. I asked him what he had done with the stuffed rattle, and he said, "I gave it to the baby next door." There was indeed a baby and a single Chicano mother who I had talked with a few brief times. Bob loved this baby, as Bob loved the words that broke his silence.

At the final hour comes the final wisdom; Bob was prepared for his death. One night when I was asleep on the couch, Bob had gotten up and started a fire in the kitchen. "The lights, I wanted to go out and see the lights, but I couldn't find the flashlight..." Bob explained himself. Can we imagine what lights he was talking about in his mystic babble? Perhaps they were real, just inflated in Bob's imagination, or like the Ancient Rain, a symbol for the search for purity in words and thoughts, the Lights were present that night. To open up to the possibility of prophecy is to begin to read poetry for the first time, getting goose bumps up and down your arms, to be filled with the power of myth, which still in this modern age provides us with sacred food that fulfills us with our spiritual hunger running savage, and our knowings small and humble. Everyone knows that poets aren't perfect, neither was Bob; but according to Bob, creation is perfect. It is a funny fact that a man who had fought so much in his life would in return give peaceful odes to silence. The cold facts were Bob's addiction to drugs and booze. Everyone knew that Bob was a man of the bars, and under booze he wrote his most lucid poems.

Bob's son Parker did not maintain a close relationship with his father. I never met him, but I did know his mother. There was a separate reality between the two men, as both dealt with racism in their own unique way. Bob dealt with it by putting on the face of the tragic clown, his son had no talent in this way, he was a dancer and expressed his creative energy through his body. Bob was an intellectual, and kept himself locked up in his own head. Though once, a long time ago, Bob had danced on the tables of the Bagle Factory, reciting poetry for the cops. There had been a rebellion, as though he too had defied his father, and chose to go out to sea at an early age. The poet hangs on a cross of flesh, mixing pleasure and pain, waiting and wondering what the Ancient Rain might do when it came back to earth. The first and the last, the Omega and the Alpha; Black-Man had been first once, first created, and now God would seek out his original people from the darkest part of the city. Even pride had been broken, and self-pity had opened up, asking would you wear my eyes? Yes, Bob, we will wear your eyes, one day after the Ancient Rain has subsided: "A fish with frog eyes, Creation is Perfect." ☪

WILL EPSTEIN with Marshall Yarbrough

Will Epstein's music doesn't fit neatly inside any genre. Performing solo as High Water, as a trio with Bladerunner, and alongside frequent collaborators Nicolas Jaar and Dave Harrington, Epstein draws on a diverse array of influences, from John Coltrane and John Zorn on the one hand to contemporary hip-hop production and Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* on the other. When I sat down with Epstein recently, we discussed High Water's 2013 release *The Beautiful Moon EP* and an upcoming full-length. As we spoke, the conversation touched on Bob Dylan, the uncanny quality of loops, and the potential for emotion in electronic music.

MARSHALL YARBROUGH (RAIL): Would you like to start by giving a rough sense of your background, where you came from in making music?

WILL EPSTEIN: I started playing saxophone when I was 9 years old or so. Saxophone was my main thing for the first 10 years of my musical life. I guess I was kind of going through the motions in the first few years. I liked it, but I wasn't listening to a lot of saxophone music. My teachers kept trying to get me into it and it wasn't always sticking, but in early high school, ninth grade or so, I started listening to Cannonball Adderley and Coltrane and stuff, and once I started listening to the music and getting into it is when it really cracked the thing for me. In fact at that point I got really obsessively into Coltrane and didn't listen to anything else for several years. I mean, eight hours a day. It was crazy.

RAIL: Would you say that up to that point you were playing saxophone, but that this was something separate from the music you were actually listening to?

EPSTEIN: Yeah. I was super heavy into the Rolling Stones when I was in sixth, seventh, eighth grade—I listened to that one band for three years. I was nuts on the Rolling Stones, and I've been thinking about it a lot recently: what was it about that music that really struck me? I think part of it was the intensity, I really liked this manic intensity of Mick Jagger, I used to imitate him all the time, dance around and stuff. And when I think about getting into Coltrane, to me it was the same thing. I see a very clear link through all these things I've listened to in my life. When I started getting into Coltrane it was that same tribalistic intensity that he's able to enter into that maybe I was attracted to with the Rolling Stones. I got into Bob Dylan also when I was in eighth grade or so. But I was playing the saxophone, so it was sort of a parallel thing. My perspective on Dylan really came by way of playing saxophone and listening to Coltrane. There was a similar intensity and breath control, just a raw intense sound that grabbed me.

RAIL: When did you start playing music with other people?

EPSTEIN: I started really getting into playing music in high school. Me and my friend Nico—Nicolas Jaar, who I also still play a lot with—have been friends since we were 9. As kids we'd get together and play video games a lot. I didn't have the best time in high school, I worked really hard but it was a very unartistic place. The second half of high school when we were in 11th grade, I think, Nico and I started jamming together, him on piano, me on sax. That was at the same time when I was really getting deep into Coltrane, and that's really when I started playing seriously. Nico was also already into a lot of electronic music—he was definitely at the cutting edge of a lot of what was going on then. He started making electronic music when he was 15, that was 2005, and there were not a lot of kids doing that then. Unlike now, where you meet a 10-year-old and they're making beats on their computer. So I was hip to the electronic music scene early on through Nico.

RAIL: Video games used a lot of electronic-sounding music, were you influenced by that?

EPSTEIN: Not back then, but recently yes. There were a lot of limiting factors for the music at the beginning of video games because the cartridge only had eight bits so you could only use certain frequencies, certain sounds, and then it expanded to 16 and 32... so the restrictions of that format were pretty interesting. Also, a lot of what the music does in these games is it helps lead you somewhere, it helps you discover something, it warns you of something. There's something in the nature of those original video game soundtracks that is very pure. I went on SoundCloud when my record came out and someone made a reference that this one passage sounded like a song from *The Legend of Zelda*. Then I checked it out and it sounded exactly like that, so there must be something subliminal that found its way into my music. I read an interview with Shigeru Miyamoto, the guy who created all the early Nintendo games, and he said he invented these video games to re-create experiences in nature that he had as a kid, playing in the woods and streams, exploring caves, discovering mushrooms. All of *Super Mario Brothers* came out of being in the countryside in Japan. So I think a lot of that music is very evocative of nature, and that part I very much relate to. The *Ocarina of Time* soundtrack is pretty amazing—

RAIL: Why did you choose to study electronic music once you were at Brown?

EPSTEIN: It was basically the experimental music section of the music program, so that was what was most appealing to me about it. Emotion wasn't necessarily at the forefront of a lot of the stuff that was being made, but it was a positive environment. I met some cool people who were graduate students in that program, and forged a lot of the connections that I still have. One of the most important musical connections I have is my friend Dave Harrington, who I play with a ton. The first class I took at Brown in the music program was an electro-acoustic improv ensemble, which was super cool, it was taught by a graduate student named Kevin Patton, and he introduced me to Dave, who was working on his thesis, which was on violence and cinema and music—John Zorn and Italian Giallo movies. We became friends and started playing music together but I was just a freshman in college and it felt like he was from a whole other world. I'd go over to his house and he'd have 15 televisions stacked on top of each other with all these crazy Italian horror films playing at the same time. I remember leaving the dorm and walking down the hill a few blocks to another world. I was very grateful that I could have that kind of escape. We formed a group called Spank City—which was a completely fabulous band.

RAIL: I ask about electronic music because part of what strikes me in listening to *The Beautiful Moon EP* is that there's a sense of freedom in terms of structure, it's a sort of clipped quality that I think is particularly linked to electronic music and how—as opposed



Will Epstein, Chelsea Hotel, New York, 2014.
Photo by Raymond Foye.

to the more fluid compositional structure of say classical music, or something like the blues where you have a solid 12-bar structure—it allows you to be more disjointed.

EPSTEIN: That's true. It's a different kind of storytelling. I started making electronic music pretty recently, really only a few years ago. I feel like nothing is obvious to me, like the idea of songwriting is not an obvious idea to me. My intuitive way is to look at things more abstractly, for better or worse. I was interested in a linear but kind of circular type of storytelling. I feel like one of the early ways that people made electronic music with tape was very collage-based, sort of a mountain of ideas that coalesced into a story in a certain way.

RAIL: Listening to live recordings of you playing with the group Bladerunner, and with Dave Harrington's group, what I hear is this intuitive movement. You might be improvising on one theme for four or five minutes, and then you're intuitively flowing into a different section, and listening to those recordings and then going back and listening to the EP, it seems to me like you're doing the same thing, only where a section on the live recordings might last five minutes and then bleed into something else, on the EP you have an idea contained within a minute, then it'll wash out into something that sounds more ambient and has less of a clear harmonic structure and melody, and then you'll snap back into yet another thing for a minute.

EPSTEIN: There's a lot of electronic music where there's no storytelling going on. And to me storytelling is such an important element to what I do. Something I was very attracted to when I was making electronic music was these cosmic shifts that happen where your perception of what's going on changes drastically—that's something I was working hard at trying to do. But I also want to take care of the listener enough so that they're not confused—or not too confused; they're not just hung out to dry—but also there's a pushing of the mind that I like in

that kind of music, where what you assume is going to happen doesn't happen, and it's something more than just surprise—it's not about surprise at all, really. It's about a shifting of consciousness, and that's where the psychedelic aspect comes in. I was thinking about a lot of these things filmically. My favorite thing in movies is when, like in a James Bond movie, it takes place in like eight different places, there's the Caribbean beach, and then a dark forest, and a hotel penthouse, and it just keeps shifting locations, and all these different colors. For some reason I just loved that, and I was thinking about all these songs as like a camera on a dolly, like a tracking shot in a Wes Anderson movie.

RAIL: So the collage ideas you are working with aren't just sounds but styles and genres as well?

EPSTEIN: Yes. The key figure for me in this regard was John Zorn. When I was younger I was a bit of a snob about a lot of types of music and Zorn really disabused me of that in a big way. That's what he's all about—all genres of music are equal. That was quite a revelation to me. Maybe it doesn't seem as profound to me now as it did five or six years ago even, because I feel music has become so mushed as far as genres are concerned, the collision of information that has really escalated, but six years ago this was a profound revelation for me. There's an amazing John Zorn record called *O'o*. Right before that album came out, I heard all those 20-second previews of the tracks they put up on Amazon, and I could not stop thinking of it for the next four days. It was very upbeat exotica music, I would have always called that cheesy before. I kept it in my mind and fetishized it and it became this object to me. I could not wait to get to listen to this record.

The thing I locked in right away with Zorn was his intensity and passion and just how powerful that was. He's all in, and that really hit me. Also with Zorn it's about getting really deep to the roots, not just the surface. It's *beyond* what it sounds like. Music is about people, it's not about sound. It's about finding the humanity within these genres or pieces or whatever you want to call them. It's about finding the humanity in the digital world. That is what I took from Zorn when I started working with the computer in my music. I was very inspired by these ideas of his and wanted to take them into the song format, but wrap it in a candy wrapper a little bit. I wanted it to be linear like the tracking shot, but I also wanted it to be very circular, so that things come back, things repeat. I think the first song on that EP ("Railroad Song") is most like that, where you get one element, then another one, then two of them together, and then a new one, but it's referencing an older one.

RAIL: Let's go back to that word "psychedelic" that you used, in the spirit of *Migration to the Interior* at Red Bull Studios, where you'll be performing—could you talk a little about that? Because of course psychedelic music is a particular thing.

EPSTEIN: It is if you think about it as a genre, but I don't really think about it that way. Nor do I think about it in terms of drugs, necessarily. I think about it more like opening a crack in your mind, pulling back the curtains, seeing something as it is, and for everything that it is. Breaking down the hierarchies in seeing and making a hole in your normal ways of perceiving. If you think about it like that, it's interesting what these electronic sounds can do. The same with those jumps in the music, they can alter your perceptions for a moment, and you are forced to take a step back and you're able to just see things for what they are.

I feel like there's an interesting thing happening now in reference to the birth of psychedelic music. I've been listening to the new *Basement Tapes* that just came out. A lot of that music was a reaction to the psychedelic music of the time. The Beatles made *Sgt. Pepper's* and the Rolling Stones made that weird album where they're wearing the hats and stuff [*Their Satanic Majesties Request*], and Bob and the Band said, "This is all bullshit, we need to

get back to the heart of the music." They were making music which is much more basic, and cuts right to the core of the emotions. It's interesting that those two things were kind of juxtaposed at that time. What I try to do is a merging of those two things. So if the psychedelic music can open the crack in your mind, I want to fill it with that other emotional stuff.

RAIL: I saw an interview where you mentioned that you hadn't really been paying attention to the words when you were listening to Dylan, or you weren't quite interested in the words at first.

EPSTEIN: I have an abstract relationship to certain things, and I'm constantly becoming more conscious of what some people might consider more obvious. When I was first starting to listen to Dylan, it honestly didn't occur to me to listen to the lyrics, weird as that may seem. I don't know why, it just didn't. There were sounds, and I liked the sounds, and I liked repeating the sounds, but it just didn't occur to me to focus on the lyrics, I don't know how else to put it. I wasn't seeing it as separate parts. I was just feeling it as, like, an orb. That's still how my relationship to the music is. Well, now I break things down for my own purposes more, to try to understand what's going on, so that I can steal from it or learn from it.

RAIL: There's the famous David Byrne quote, something along the lines of, "Words are something that makes people listen to music more than they usually would."

EPSTEIN: I wonder what that means.

RAIL: I think the meaning is that if you're not particularly attuned to music, words are the thing that's immediately understandable.

EPSTEIN: Right, totally, I think I just had the opposite response with Dylan. I really dug the music, you know? And let me just say, now I am completely nuts about the lyrics, too.

RAIL: What interests me is the way Dylan structures a lot of his songs, especially when you get into a lot of the later career stuff when he's just comfortable with a 10-minute blues song—or even on early songs like "Desolation Row" where there's not even a chorus, it's just one thing after another, and the lyrics are there to offer the only sort of mild variation. It's about repetition, you almost get into stretches where you could make an analogy to something like ambient music. And when you mention a larger glowing orb about Bob Dylan, that's what I think of, these songs that are just these endless things.

EPSTEIN: They're powerful, they're like incantations. He's really summoning up a certain primal force or energy. You can feel how important it is for him, too. These things were incantations for him where he was able to summon these feelings and these emotions and this world, and you can feel that without knowing the spells that he's saying. My favorite Dylan song before I started listening to the words was "Idiot Wind," the acoustic version, and still, now that I know all the words very well, it's still my favorite, and for new reasons, and that's weird. I remember as a kid when my parents first moved to Woodstock, the two sounds in my head were "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," and Eminem. Those are the two things I was listening to really intensively.

RAIL: I'm not going to try to make a connection between those two things.

EPSTEIN: They were different sides of me, maybe. Eminem was more of the Rolling Stones side of me. I just liked all the screaming [*laughs*].

RAIL: What was it about "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands"?

EPSTEIN: Well, that's a rap song. There's such a deep vibe there. It enveloped me. The slow crescendo which you don't notice, and by the end of the song you're in a totally other place. It's a very enveloping song, I just remember it really taking care of me. It's very warm, like a blanket.

I can draw the lines between all the music that I like in a very clear way. Going from Coltrane to Dylan to John Zorn is very clear to me. It's the same intensity. And the way Bob approaches playing his songs, he does so in a very jazz-like way, he interprets them new every time he plays. He doesn't like to be in the studio in the same way that jazz musicians don't labor over the record they're making: they show up in the studio and then record in three days, or two days, or whatever, and Bob does the same thing.

RAIL: But is it intimidating to engage him as an artist? Do you feel like he's murder as an influence, or do you try to put a distance between his music and yours?

EPSTEIN: I don't feel like he's murder as an influence. I guess because he's been with me for so long. When I sit down to write songs, for whatever reason, I don't try to write Bob's songs. That has never happened to me. Also, I do care a lot about things that he doesn't care anything about, like samples and loops, electronica, ambient music. I think that sound can tell the stories. My ideal is the words telling the story and the sound supporting it or being perpendicular to it—the production being as important as the song is the ideal in music for me. I like it when you're being told the story from these different angles and in an equally effective and intense way.

RAIL: Getting back to this idea of the lyrics' role—a lot of bands come out and say they make an effort to either bury the lyrics in the mix or not give weight to the singing over any aspect of the music. Animal Collective are particularly insistent about this, after *Strawberry Jam* and before *Merriweather Post Pavilion* I remember reading an interview with them where they were saying that they'd prefer the voice to be buried, to have it be part of the mix and part of the texture, and if that results in people not necessarily getting all the lyrics or misinterpreting the lyrics, that's all for the better because it's relinquishing control of the song.

EPSTEIN: Right now I'm very deep in working on my full-length record and the lyrics are much more important to me now than they were before. On my first EP I improvised a lot of the lyrics, and it was all kind of "whatever" to me. Now I've become a little more obsessive about it—a lot more obsessive about it actually.

RAIL: What is your songwriting process?

EPSTEIN: It's hard for me to talk about my process because it's happening now. On the new record I've had to figure out a lot—I guess it's another rebirth thing that I'm going through. I made those earlier songs on the computer, it was fluid, I didn't overthink anything too much. I had this sound I wanted to get to and I tried my best to get to it and I think I did. But this new one, when you write songs it's something you struggle with. What do I do with this? It raises all these questions of the current culture and what's new, how important is it to be new? A song sounding great with just you playing it, is that enough? That's one question. There's so many different ways to do it. And you don't want to get in the way of the song. There's a danger of overworking it, getting away from the original vibe, you lose your connection to the song. It's terrifyingly awful.

Right now I'm trying to write a little more traditionally and trying to write some choruses and stuff—it's kind of funny talking about it in those terms. I hate when people talk about hooks, I hate the word hooks, to me it is so demeaning to the music, it's such a horrible term. It's a commodification of what can be a beautiful melody that sticks with you and enters you like metal that pierces your skin. "Now we have to write the hook"—it drives me nuts, I hate that.

RAIL: Well, it's like a manipulative, record exec. term.

EPSTEIN: Yeah, but musicians use it too, a lot of musicians use it and I don't like it. Music is the holiest thing in the world to me, it's a powerful thing, and everything gets commodified very quickly and easily so—

RAIL: But at the same time, you were saying earlier how you want there to be something for the listener, to give the listener a foothold in the song.

EPSTEIN: Yeah, well thinking about the listener—and that's another thing that took me a little while to understand—I think it's extremely important to think about the listener, because everything is about communication, communication is the most important thing. I don't want to alienate; I want to communicate to as many people as I possibly can by being who I am. And maybe that is limited by who I am—and who I am is always changing anyway. I used to be more of an asshole about it, like a fucking free jazz punk in whatever I was doing—not that there's anything wrong with that—but I definitely had a time in my life where saying “fuck you” was more important to me. And still it's important to say “fuck you” sometimes, because some people need to be told.

RAIL: Or some people, if they aren't told, they don't want to listen to you.

EPSTEIN: But I think it's extremely important to think about the listener and think about communicating. I guess what really opened me up to that sort of thing was that I was a huge Kurt Vonnegut fan around the time when I was getting into Coltrane and Dylan. I read all of his books, and then a couple years ago I re-read all of them. He is such an expert communicator. There's just no bullshit, every sentence means something and affects you in a very deliberate way, it's like a chessboard or something, where everything is extremely decisive but also very affecting and beautiful. I was blown away by that. Everything is very, just, *there*—

RAIL: He doesn't speak in abstractions.

EPSTEIN: He doesn't, and he wrote a book about it, *Bluebeard*, which I think is one of his best books. It's about a kind of failed, phony Abstract Expressionist painter who's done what he considers to be bullshit stuff, and he had one masterpiece in his barn—I don't want to ruin the book—this one masterpiece that was just this extremely detailed, beautiful, very realistic scene. The message of the book is a little bit complicated, because I can't quite tell how deriding of general Abstract Expressionist painting he is. But the message of the book was definitely communication—I guess it's something I'm still working towards, no bullshit: every sound, every word, every melody, everything should matter, and that's it. I do want to be clear, but I don't think being clear means that you can't be weird or you can't be psychedelic, or you can't be abstract—it's just that everything should be done for a reason, that's all.

RAIL: Switching topics slightly, when you've played live on your own of late, you've performed exclusively solo, correct?

EPSTEIN: No—I was on tour with Darkside earlier this year for a few months, those were the first High Water shows I played, and that was alone, but I play with other people whenever I can because I much prefer it.

RAIL: And this upcoming album—

EPSTEIN: Has other people on it. And the last record too, the EP, I worked with my friend Noah Rose on a lot of the production stuff. He did a bunch of the electronics, some of the percussion stuff. Nico's going to be helping me produce the new album, he's very organized, and that helps me organize my thinking about it. I'm hoping to work relatively quickly on it now. I've gone through a lot of different ways and feelings with it.

RAIL: I want to touch on something you said earlier about music being about people, not about sound, and about finding the humanity in genres: I think the big thing that's lost in electronic music is the notion of individual expression as manifested in tone. For example, you can listen to a Miles Davis record you have never heard, and as soon as you hear the trumpet play, you know it's Miles Davis, because you know how he sounds.

EPSTEIN: The personality, yeah. I feel like an older example of that is John Cage, where despite everything that he did to combat himself, every John Cage piece is so utterly a John Cage piece. So if the artistry is strong enough, the personality comes through—but that's one of the things that's lost, I agree. Or it's just easier not to hear it, I guess. But Nico works in the realm of electronic music, and I think any time you put on something of his it has the same feeling of tone—you know it's him. He uses sound to express himself in a way that I don't think anybody else in the electronic music scene does—he's able to use sound in the same way that some people use words to express themselves. So I agree, a lot of stuff can sound like anybody made it, because of the new forms, but I also think if you're good enough, it's going to sound like you.

RAIL: Do you consider the music you make electronic music?

EPSTEIN: I would call the earlier stuff electronic music because I made it on the computer, I wrote the songs using the computer. As for the new album, I'm still a little unsure what it's going to sound like. It's been a challenge working on this, because I've been dealing with the question of production a lot, and because these are all songs that I just wrote: I didn't create them on the computer. I've had to answer a lot of questions about what I want to be saying and how I want to be saying it. I don't think it's going to be called electronic music because it's very clearly going to be songs and me singing and playing keyboard, but I do want to explore this territory where I'm able to utilize the things that electronic music does so well, which is to tell stories with sound. I guess I do want to be some kind of future electronic musician, in some sense. There is a kind of loop obsession in music these days, or recently, or since it started—it started in hip-hop, really, 30 years ago. The electronic music that I am most inspired by comes from hip-hop.

RAIL: For example?

EPSTEIN: Hip-hop production in general, like J Dilla, Kanye West, Q-Tip, all these people, and that is definitely loop-based kind of stuff. It was the production that really grabbed me in hip-hop, especially with Kanye—just these beautiful objects he's created. Kanye is one of the great geniuses of our time. And now how he's into fashion designing, and his music is very related to fashion, and that's a positive thing, that's not a slight at all. He also is very much like Zorn, bringing in different elements like orchestral strings over hardcore rap with an industrial beat underneath. He's into this mapping of things and gluing things together. He's also similar to Zorn in terms of having community and working with community and that being a really important part of building the music. I feel like that's what can sustain you as an artist.

RAIL: With regard to this idea of gluing things together, think of how much art in our world is so determined by Warhol and that simple repetition of a mechanical silkscreen. I think there's also this thing in art, starting with appropriation, where artists felt like there was already enough stuff in the world, why make new things, why can't you just recombine?

EPSTEIN: I think that's probably true, and I guess people have always been doing that anyway, the computer just makes it easier, and more at the forefront, which is kind of weird too, like the subconscious thing coming to the more obvious, physical realm.

RAIL: With more and more music being made on computers something that really has struck me is the un-compelling aspect of going to see a show and seeing the musician up on stage with just a laptop in front of him. He's making wonderful sounds, but the visual component of the show is that you're just watching this guy look at a screen. It can be deeply alienating.

EPSTEIN: Right, but also, you have that thing in your kitchen. It's like what we were saying about video games. These are the things being made now, and there's something

beautiful in everything. New creations, new forms of beauty, too. I think that's important—that the beauty *does* look different than it used to, which is difficult because it's not the same thing. Keeping yourself open to these things is a big challenge. And there's always the challenge of not falling back into nostalgia. Neil Young is very interesting in this regard. Neil engages with technology in a very interactive way, and also brings the analogue thing with him, which is beautiful, and very special. It's amazing that he did that tour in the '80s with the robots and computers, and that video with Devo, crazy guitar solos over this very robotic music, it's so far out. He's a very physical embodiment of what we are talking about, bringing the human element into these new realms. I personally have been very into singer-songwriter kinds of things lately. It's different from what I was trying to do on the EP. None of those were songs that I really wrote—I wrote parts and then they just kind of came together. But this new album is pretty much all stuff that I wrote on the piano. My music has definitely become more about just the singing and playing. 

Online Feature: Listen to audio tracks by Will Epstein, High Water, Bladerunner, and the Dave Harrington Band.

Will Epstein's Recommended Listening

Charles Mingus Presents
Charles Mingus (1960)

John Coltrane:
Live at the Village Vanguard, Disc 4 (1961)

Cannonball Adderley:
Radio Nights (1968)

Rahsaan Roland Kirk:
Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata (1971)

Neil Young:
On The Beach (1974)

Michael Hurley:
Wolfways (1995)

Bob Dylan: Live in Prague,
March 12 & 13, 1995 (bootleg)

Bill Frisell:
Blues Dream (2001)

Lucinda Williams:
Essence (2001)

John Zorn:
At The Mountains of Madness (2005)

Bob Dylan:
Tell Tale Signs (2008)

Mike Patton:
Mondo Cane (2010)

Avey Tare:
Down There (2010)

Jeremiah Jae & Oliver the 2nd:
RawHyde (2013)

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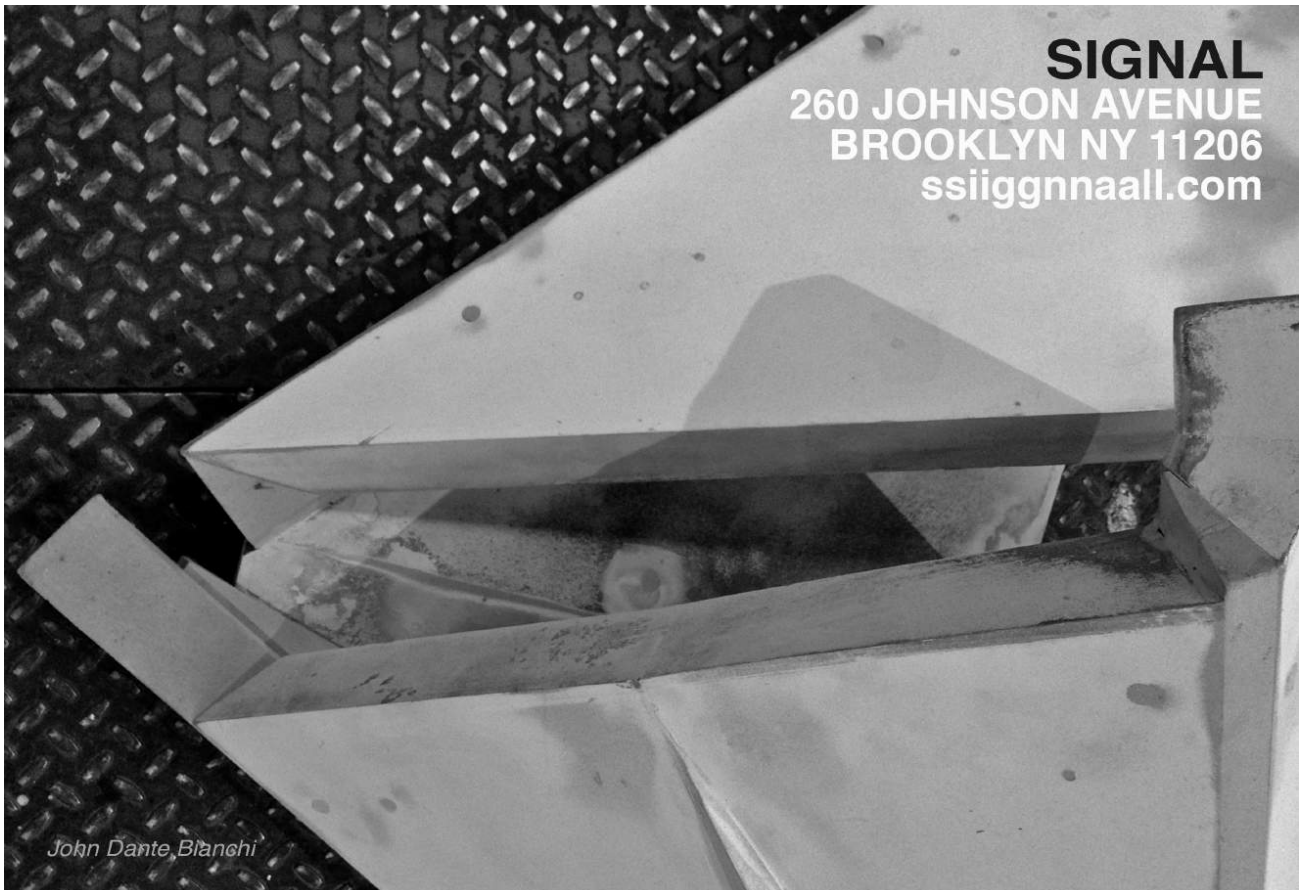
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Eugene Newmann, *Riff 5*, 2013. Oil on linen, 22 1/4" x 19"

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FORREST MOSES

EUGENE NEWMANN
DEBORAH REMINGTON
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OLI SIHVONEN
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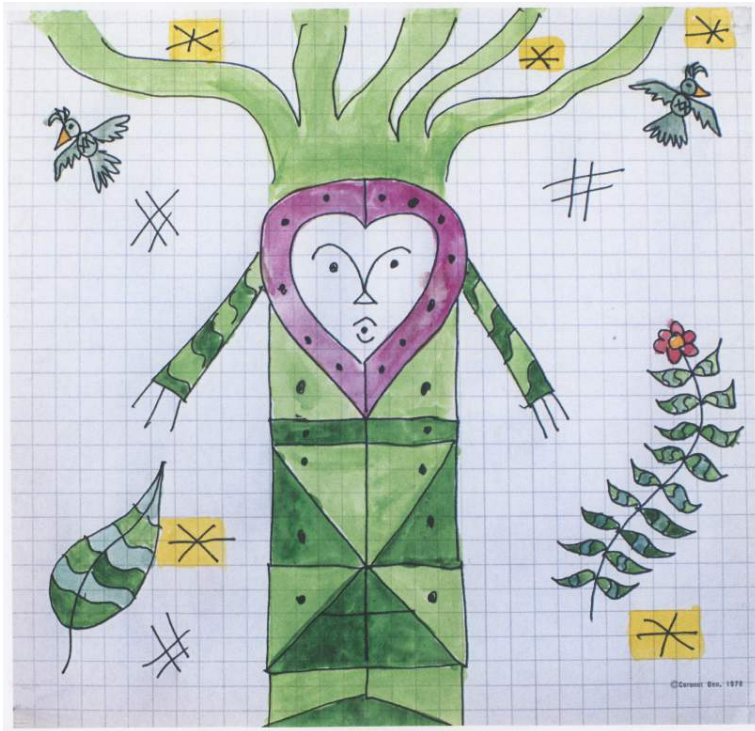
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from *Hoodo Metaphysics*

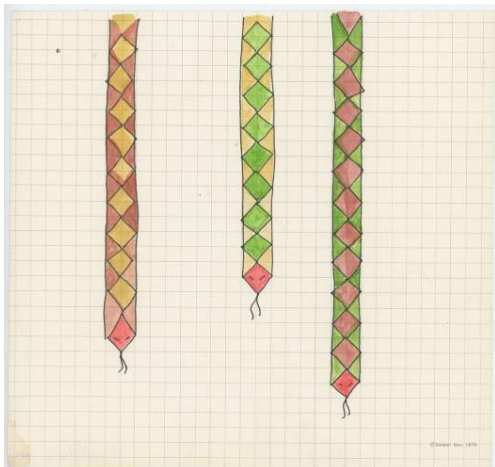
by Peter Lamborn Wilson
 Drawings by Tamara Gonzales

10. Whale/Big Fish

claim to be Jonah
 thrown overboard pariah by the
 whole damn crew
 swallowed by the whale of art
 spat up half-digested witness martyr
 the sea then
 would be language itself
 origin of language
 seduction
 persuasive rhetoric
 stink of big dead fish on Mott. St.
 noble rot for gourmet nostrils
 steamed carp
 boiled eel
 casserole of oysters & roast pork
 salt-baked softshell crabs
 soupy crab dumplings

3. Sailor

like "El" Ron Hubbard
 steal a big yacht or 2nd hand
 battleship sail round the world
 non-stop w/ crew of besotted
 brainwashed cult-slave sailors
 in tight white bellbottoms &
 blue blouses
 nautilus caps & bare feet at war
 with all the world (anywhere
 out of *this* world)
 pirates without victims



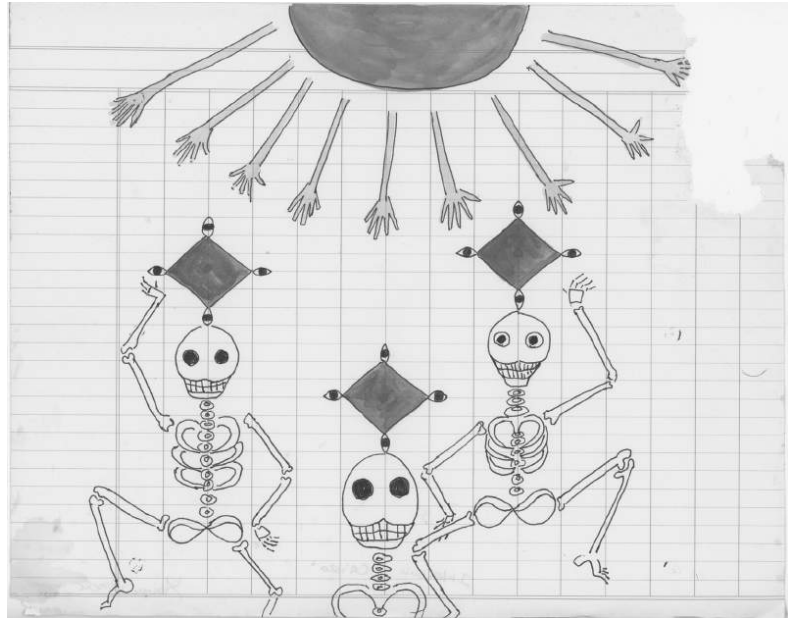
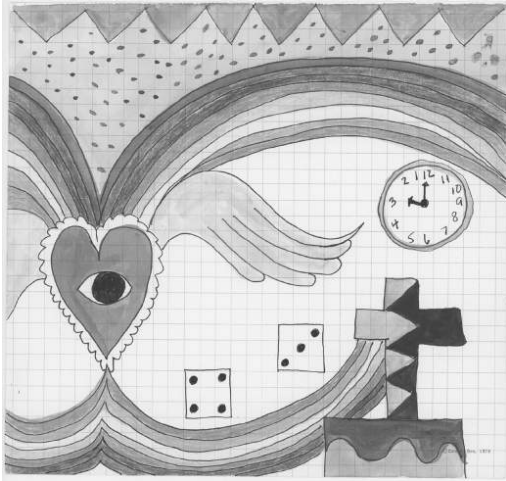
26. Eel

worshipped in Old Polynesia on Ponapé
 where cyclopean dense megaliths recall
 H. P. Lovecraft's paranoid fantasies
 about mixed race
 devotees of Dagon taking over derelict churches
 in Providence & Innsmouth perhaps exchanging
 bodily fluids like Gnostic Carpocreates
 in 2nd century Alexandria—the wet dreams of Social Darwinism
 writhing clump of eels in mud—
 detachable genitals
 true emblems of eternal Matter's
 secret realm
 if you thrust yr cane in their midst
 you might change sex or else become
 Trismegistus his-self—a
 Calvinist no-no

13. Peacock/Pimp

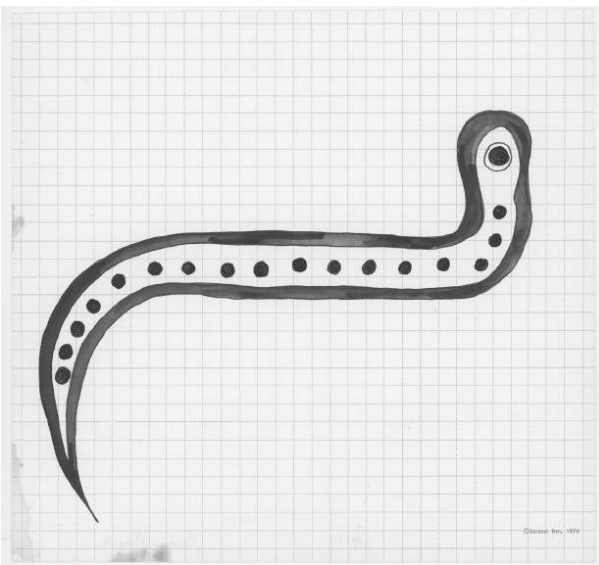
Malek Ta'us Peacock Angel of the Yezidis
 displays forth redemptive power of evil
 apologia for Iblis by dervishes lost
 in Cold Mountains of hashish Anti-Lebanon
 Blake's Satan last true lover of Allah
 wearing iridescent lustre-silk azure cerulean
 smaragdine gold dusted PIMP SUIT w/
 leopard spotted socks red platform shoes
 blue fur hat big as the sky in his
 pink PIMPMOBILE Cadillac
 with shark fins & three unbelievable HOs
 in the back seat & the former
 welterweight champion of
 Baghdad beside him smoking a big BLUNT
 listening to old Oum Kalthoum tapes at
 top vol as they cruise across the desert
 in sunglasses & mink w/ bourbon on ice
 lobster caviar pulled pork sandwiches
 chanting YA ZAT-i SHAYTAN—Hail to
 the Devil's Essence—

NUMBER THIRTEEN



74. Kite

ah
 all you
 four winds
 plus Boreas. Oh
 Neptune if you rule them
 or Juppiter. So sing West Wind
 or breeze from garden of the beloved
 each one in turn the apple (did you
 ever deconstruct this metaphor before) of my
 eye—send news—or if you can't
 send money—or anyway fortune
 to the neo-luddite kid
 who's launched this kite
 as if its string were
 studded w/ diamonds
 warrior kite
 ready to
 bite

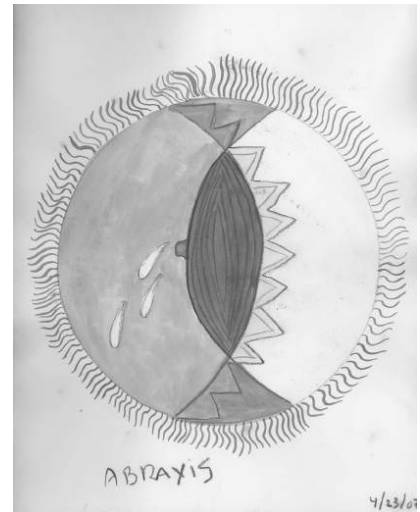
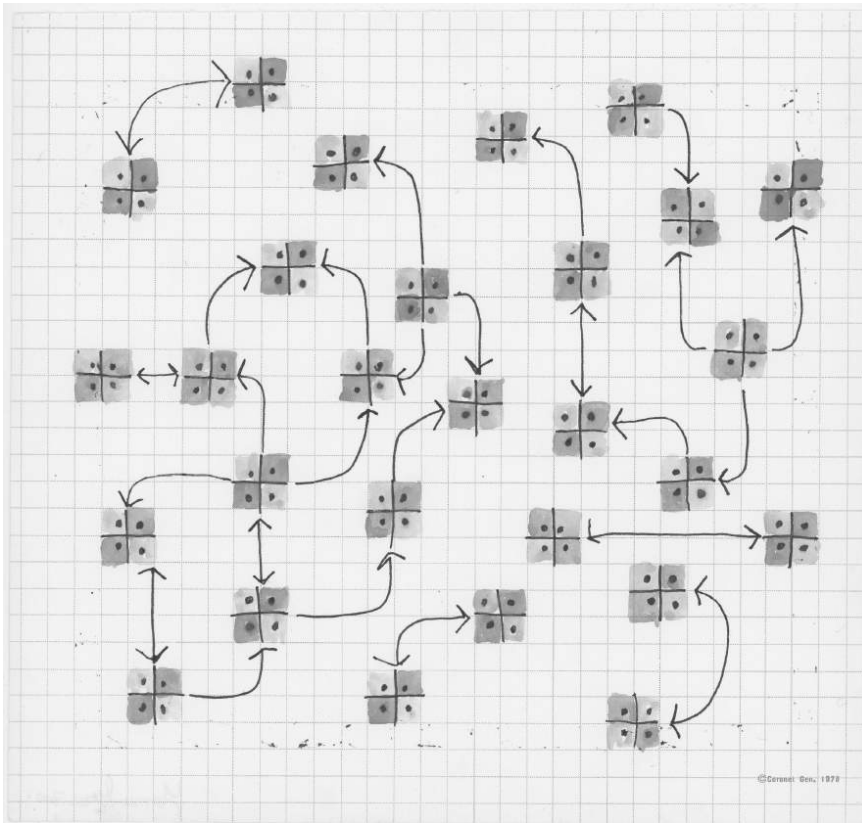


19. Worm

Better a slave in Greece than
 King of Hades
 realm of endless grief & boredom
 dark hospital room w/ flickering TV
 canned laughter forever
 [Cliché]
 An Egyptian notion
 somehow
 vast broken sphinxes & pyramids
 air heavy as a tomb's but
 still shot thru w/ light
 like ambiguous moirée
 shot silk

49. Drunk

The sage can
get high on
plain H₂O



17. MOON

vast crystal domes
w/ artificial atmosphere generated from
Luna's interior ice mass artificial gravity
so huge they generate their own weather
dew heavy as rain clouds winds
so old that whole Arthurian forests
punking & rotting around hermit caves
Sea of Tranquility Gulf of Dreams
drowned in actual water w/ mutant
asymmetrical sea creatures
afloat w/ redsailed dhows & junks
isolated castle-islands each one a
decayed gem
in a ring of ancient garden silver
HDQ of some cult or phalanstery
Temple of Artemis or Sin or Soma
or Cyrano de Bergerac
vast city-sized libraries rescued
from Earth
(of Earth the less said the better)
here I'll spend my next life

7. Seashell/Snail/Feces

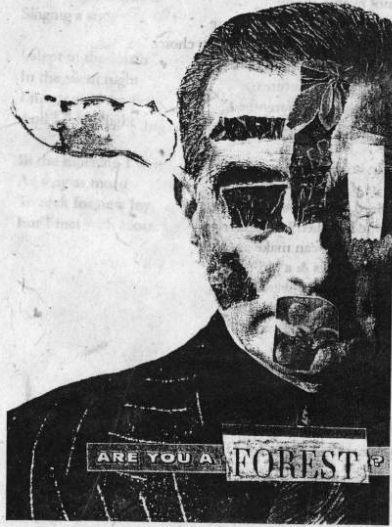
Forget that fag Freud—it's not
about anus & cunt—think instead
of D'Arcy Thompson or Goethe
metamorphosis

SPIRAL
whirlpool of Slumberland
down the drain of golden dream
hieroglyph without translation
Mesmer's 3-D cone of hypnogogic sleep
deepest mystery of Number Seven
Seven Ruby butt-holes of the
Pre-Adamite Kings

.....
TAMARA GONZALES lives and works in New York City. Her work has been exhibited at MoMA PS1, Shoot the Lobster and Martos Gallery, Sargents' Daughters, Regina Rex, and Norte Maar in Brooklyn. Her most recent show with Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York, October 24 - December 8, 2014

.....
PETER LAMBORN WILSON studied at Columbia University, and traveled extensively in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and settled in Iran for nearly ten years, studying the historical and mystical dimensions of Sufism with many of the century's great Sufi masters. He lives in the Catskill Mountains in New York.

Hoodoo Metaphysics, an ongoing collaborative project on the subject of Veve (Vodou symbolism), will be published in 2015.



Ira Cohen

*a Surrealist Love Poem
for Marjorie*
The red curtain over my bedroom
window is trembling
when you look into the mirror
does the reflection looking back
speak my name in the last page?
If you know how little I care
for black caviar without blue eyes
you would remove the tear bags
from the stone nipples of the
Venus de Milo & let light escape
from the darkroom of your most secret
Dried flowers quiver at my longings
& I stand upright like an exclamation
mark
when I realize that the earth does
not stand still even when my pen
runs its race to write your name
in every color on the screen of
a hummingbird lands on my lips
in a nodder to seek the hidden
of a salvaged star -
sweetness

Ira Cohen
June 1st, 2002

**A MEMORIAL POETRY READING FOR ENID DAME
AT THE WOODSTOCK NY TOWN HALL 2/14/04**

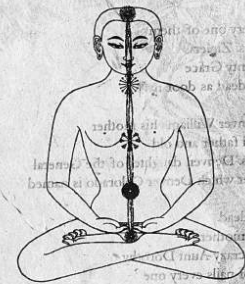
It's a wall. No.
More a stretch of space where a wall was.
In that space there
is night. But night with
happy markings. Like stars only
closer, and more like writing.

- Donald Lev



AMEN

When I think of angels,
I have to think of them also
as having painted my eyes
that are blue.
When I think of the cosmos,
I think of a void
swarming with restless angels.
When I think
of myself, I think of the work
they were scheduled to play
in the presence of one
who is absent.
And when I think of you, I think
of the desolate angels kissing
the long-departed
nipples of God.



THE STRIPPER AS AVATAR

The man took the form of death
at the start, then rose from the dead,
discarding his habit and mask to reveal
a body so godlike I wanted to kneel.
One doesn't make love to a god;
one waits for the god to descend as a bird,
one waits for the talons to enter the flesh,
the transport of pain to the high Sierras.
If the god has a dance, a rhythmic mortals
can dance to as well, you let yourself go,
abandon your self to the beat of the god
as it tears you from finger to toe
and then, your body digested by his,
you stitch together whatever was torn
into the mended one you become
absorbed by the risen god and reborn.

-Richard Livermore



SHIV MIRABITO ON SHIVASTAN PUBLISHING

Since its start in 1997 Shivastan Publishing has produced over 50 chapbooks and broadsides, on hand-made Nepalese papers on a press in Kathmandu, including most recently the ravishing collaboration between Chris Martin and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Opium Dens I Have Known*. These beautiful editions include some of the most esteemed American poets, Buddhist thinkers, and Shiv Mirabito's extended community in Woodstock, New York. Mirabito met with Peter Lamborn Wilson, Jarrett Earnest, and guest editor Raymond Foye, to discuss the history of Shivastan.

SHIV MIRABITO: I guess if we're going to start from the beginning, I was born in a small town upstate called Norwich, New York. As I grew older my best friend and I realized that we were the only hippies in the town, so we thought we should go to Woodstock and camp out for a couple weekends. Without telling my parents—I would say we were going to go camping—we would hitchhike to Woodstock and hang out. It was a much more hippy scene in those days, and was eye-opening. At a certain point, this one friend of mine said, "Did you know that Allen Ginsberg has a farm nearby and they have all these parties. Why don't we go?" So we went. They would have all these Solstice and Equinox parties, that kind of thing.

PETER LAMBORN WILSON: In Cherry Valley?

MIRABITO: In Cherry Valley, just outside of Cooperstown. I had never met these freaky kind of poets and artists and writers. We started staying there and talking to everyone. At that point I decided, "Well, I'm never cutting my hair or combing it again. And I'm not going to eat meat anymore, as a philosophical thing, to be kind to all beings." Ginsberg wasn't there that often, so my best friend and I would have the place to ourselves. Allen had a huge library and I could read all his books on Hinduism and Buddhism and philosophy.

RAYMOND FOYE: So you were occupying his house, you were occupying his world—

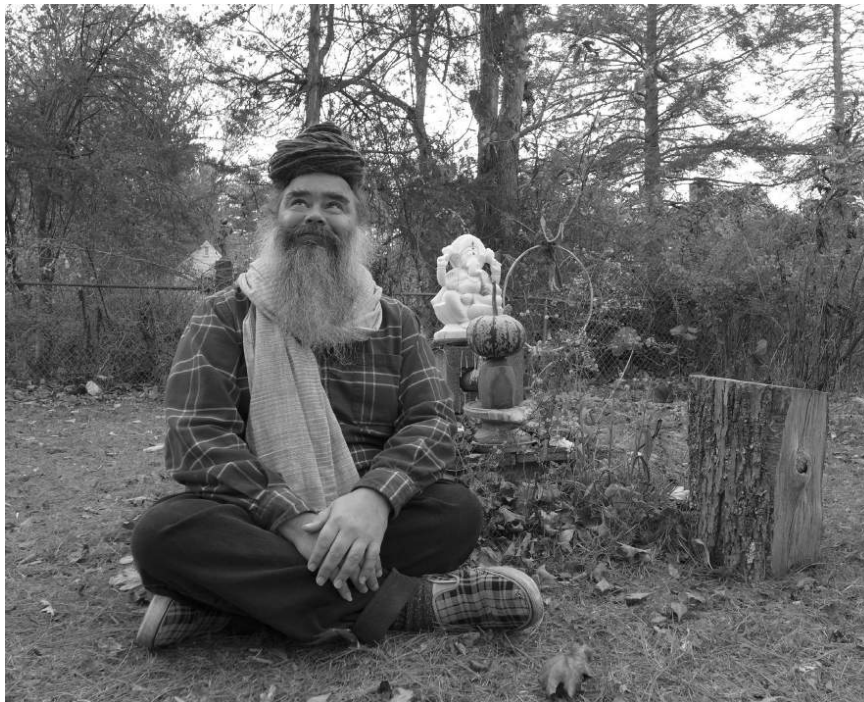
MIRABITO: Right, even sleeping in his bed when he wasn't there.

FOYE: But you never met Allen?

MIRABITO: Yes actually a few times.

FOYE: And what was that like?

MIRABITO: It was just, "Oh, hi. Nice to meet you." We would be hanging out, staying in a little pup tent out on the lawn, and he'd say, "Oh, isn't that cute." But we were never invited to hang out and have dinner with him. We were only teenagers. Then I started coming to Woodstock more and deciding that is where I needed to be. Every summer and weekend that I could, I would come and get to know people; eventually, I met a lot of people who had traveled back and forth to India. I started studying anthropology at SUNY Oneonta and at a certain point there was a professor who was Indian, and he wanted to visit his family there and he decided to bring a dozen of us students along. That was 1988. I went and it was basically like the professor just threw us into this scene, hardly planned at all. We had one month in Kashmir of intensive Hindi lessons, living on



houseboats—to get over jet-lag and that kind of thing. We had to sit in New Delhi for a couple of months at this youth hostel, and he would bring in a new professor every day for a two or three hour class. The professor would condense their class into one, two or three-hour sessions, and we would have a different class every day.

FOYE: You took to it pretty quickly.

MIRABITO: Yeah, I saw how easy it is to travel there and how fascinating all the different cultures are. So in my three-month stint, I just went around by myself, traveling around the country by train, up to Kathmandu, Nepal and all over Varanasi and Calcutta and lots of different places. Eventually, what did I write my paper on? I can't remember. I stayed with the Hare Krishnas—I think I wrote a paper on the Hare Krishnas.

WILSON: In Vrindavan?

MIRABITO: Yeah, in Vrindavan. But it was a very restrictive scene. I really loved just being on my own and traveling around, sleeping in temples under the stars, it was so empowering. I got hooked on it when I realized how easy it was to travel there. I wrapped up my college years when I got back from India and graduated in '90 and moved to Woodstock full-time. Then I started going back and forth to India every year—and Nepal—and I thought, "Wow, this is really great, studying Indian philosophy and Hinduism and Buddhism." And I got very involved studying with the Sadhus, the Shibababas.

FOYE: What was your first exposure to either the Sadhus or the gurus or the holy men?

MIRABITO: Well, living in Woodstock, I had met a lot of Hindu and Buddhist teachers who passed through town, even from the time I was a teenager there were great teachers passing through like Ganesh Baba, who was one of Peter Wilson's teachers in India. The Hindu teacher I was closest to was Bhagavan Das, who's also from that first generation of Americans who went to the East. He was a California surfer dude, and in the '60s he went to India and became a naked Sadhu and wandered around and learned all the songs and Hindu practices. And at a certain

point he met Richard Alpert, who became Ram Dass, who was a Harvard professor working with Timothy Leary, who had gone to India to hand out LSD to people to see what the effect would be. That became the book *Be Here Now*, where Ram Dass, who was a repressed gay Harvard professor, fell in love with Bhagavan Das and started following him everywhere.

FOYE: When we're in Nepal together, people always stop you and say "Oh, an American Baba!" and they ask your lineage.

MIRABITO: When people ask me what my practice is and what sort of spiritual activities I do my response is that it should be about every waking moment of your life, that you're trying to practice loving compassion for all beings: become vegetarian, to help others, to be positive, to try and create scenes and communities that will help others. Basically I realized that I can't really be a Sadhu like they are in India—with no possessions whatsoever, no clothing—but what I do is about austerity. I don't have a lot of the things that most people do in American culture, like a car and that kind of stuff. And not cutting my hair, being a vegetarian, not having a family and instead relying on community: these are the kind of things that I think are the elements of being a Tantric yogi. The thing is, with the Vedanta, basically, everything is an illusion, so you don't really have to have a practice. Whatever happens is your spiritual path. You're just interpreting the unfolding nature of reality.

FOYE: Do you remember the names of any of the other gurus who passed through Woodstock in those days?

MIRABITO: There was this one Baba who came through who was very interesting. His name was Shivabalayogi. I got into studying with him for a very short time in Woodstock. He had dreadlocks also. I had one really great teacher who was a hippy who had also studied the Sadhu trip in India and his name was Paul Giraud. They called him "Taxi Paul" because he'd been a New York City taxi driver, and also "Paul Babes" because he called everyone Babes. He traveled throughout India and Nepal during the Golden Age, he lived there continuously from 1965 to 1981. I met him and Ira Cohen, and they were

telling me, “Yeah, you gotta go study with the Sadhus.” So I went, and I started studying with any of the Sadhus that I could meet there in India. And they’re pretty much all over the place, and they all want you to be their student. Everybody said, “You have to have guru. This is a lineage thing,” but as a kind of anarchist hippy, I felt I should be able to learn from whoever I want. Why would you want to eat one food your whole life? Why would you want to have one kind of teaching from one teacher your whole life?

I studied from everybody that I could, and then I started going to the Kumbh Mela—that’s the largest gathering on the planet where all the Sadhus also get together, and they’re naked, covered with ashes, worshipping nature, with dreadlocks, smoking all the time. They worship fire, and they sit around a fire, basically, and they’re constantly praying but not in a very organized way. Loosely, that’s my lineage. It’s more about nature worship than about one lineage or one form of worship. And as an anthropologist, I was always kind of standing a little bit outside being the participant observer and trying to intellectualize everything instead of stating, “I am this.” People would constantly be saying to me, “Who’s your guru? Who’s your teacher?” And I would say, “You are, because you’re teaching me right now. I’m learning from you and hopefully you’re learning from me.” I kind of shunned that whole concept of guru worship. I just wanted to study as much as I could, and kept going to every scene that I could, to learn as much as I could anywhere. Every year I was going to Kathmandu, which is really the best place in the world to study Tibetan Buddhism. Since China invaded Tibet all the greatest teachers had to leave because they weren’t free to teach or practice their religion. A lot of them moved to Kathmandu, and it’s really like a little Tibet there. There are thousands and thousands of monks and teachers and lamas that you can get teachings from, whereas I had gone for years to the Tibetan monastery here in Woodstock, where the cheapest teaching on Buddhism was \$20 for a one-hour teaching or \$300 for a weekend teaching. In Nepal you could just study with any Tibetan Buddhist teachers and they weren’t saying, “You have to pay me money to hear my teachings.” And I don’t think Buddha would have thought that his teachings would be sold and that you have to pay money to hear his teachings dozens of years after he died. In Kathmandu, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche was my main teacher.

FOYE: It sounds like you always had a wanderlust for adventure.

MIRABITO: Definitely. Maybe I got it from watching the *Little Rascals* on TV. I used to read Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan* series. Then I got E.M. Forster and J.

R. Ackerley, authors who went to India and wrote books about life there. And Christopher Isherwood—he was also a traveller and writer. Paul Bowles of course, and William Burroughs. That was the tradition I got into. The other big influences were the legendary travelers who disappeared into India sometimes for decades. I knew this one guy named Eight Finger Eddie, who back in the 1960s was an American jazz musician and then he decided he didn’t want to live in America anymore so he moved to India and ended up in Goa, on the west coast of India. He’s pretty much the one who started the tradition of the hippies staying in Goa half the year, and then going to Kathmandu up in the mountains for the other half the year—in the hot season they’d go north.

WILSON: I knew him too, in 1969 in India.

MIRABITO: Yeah! He’d been there from something like ’64 until he just died two years ago now. Another early pilgrim, a good friend of mine when I first started going, was this guy named Peanut Butter Harry—did you ever meet him?

WILSON: No.

MIRABITO: He was from Far Rockaway, New York. He dodged the draft in 1967, and moved to Nepal. Nepal was not even opened until the ’60s, before that no one was ever allowed to go, they were kicked out at the border. First he was studying classical Indian music, and then he got into the Buddhist trip and became one of the white cotton-clad yogis like Milarepa. But they are a type of yogi who can also get married, and do business, they don’t have to become like a monk. Even though he did all this intensive Tantric Buddhist practice. He married this Nepalese woman who was a kind of a shaman, and adopted her kids. They called him Peanut Butter Harry because when he got there they had peanuts, but nobody was making peanut butter. People were coming there to go mountain climbing and trekking in the Himalayas, so he started a peanut butter factory. That was one of his claims to fame, besides being one of these Tantric yogis who was there forever—a big white beard, and always wearing white robes, that kind of thing. He was a great friend of mine, and he would come here and stay with me in Woodstock, and I would hang out with him in Nepal. He also died a couple of years ago.

FOYE: That whole world is kind of dying out now, isn’t it?

MIRABITO: Yeah, definitely. All the old first generation of wanderers, before jet travel came in. It was really like opening a brand new door. When Ginsberg went to India in 1962 it took him three months to get there. Now you buy a ticket, you fly over.

FOYE: But even then, in Allen’s *Indian Journals*, he would go very deep into the mountains in India, and suddenly he meets a young American traveller who’s been there for a few years. I guess there have always been the super rare people who just got out there.

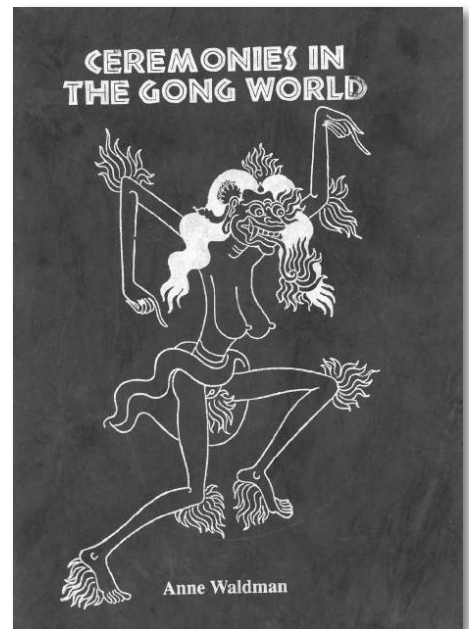
WILSON: Sure, ever since Ancient Greece, Apollonius of Tyana.

JARRETT EARNEST: When did you start writing and how did that evolve into wanting to have a press?

MIRABITO: From the time I was living on Ginsberg’s farm I felt I should be a writer—that I should write poetry. I wrote in notebooks and kept very intense diaries of everything that I was doing. I started thinking about Ira Cohen and Angus MacLise—I wasn’t friends with MacLise because he died in 1975, but I was good friends with MacLise’s wife, Hetty, and his son, Ossian. Angus MacLise was the first drummer for the Velvet Underground and he had lived in Kathmandu for many years and was publishing poetry on handmade paper along with Ira Cohen. Hetty was the art editor of the *San Francisco Oracle*, and she was a wild and crazy musician and artist. They were living in Kathmandu in the ’70s, and had this little boy, Ossian, who became the first Western Tulku—a child reincarnate and lineage holder. I became good friends with them, and she kept showing me all these books. She had a huge collection of all these publications from Kathmandu.

FOYE: The Bardo Matrix press was the name?

MIRABITO: Bardo Matrix and Dreamweapon Press. I thought, “Gee, I’ve been going to Kathmandu every winter for several years. I really should start publishing



my own stuff.” Woodstock has a really great poetry scene, so many great poets around like Janine Pommy Vega and Ed Sanders. When Ginsberg passed away I started regretting that I didn’t become better friends with him, that I didn’t become a student of his or ask him to help me out with my writing. I went through this change at that point in ’97 when Allen died. I thought, “I need to start publishing my work and start a press in Kathmandu like Angus and Ira Cohen.” One of my other biggest influences, of course, was Hanuman Books, by Raymond Foye and Francesco Clemente, which was a small art press that printed a lot of beats and different writers of avant-garde and even classical writing. And that was all through the ’80s and ’90s.

WILSON: It was printed in India?

MIRABITO: Yeah, it was all printed in Madras, India. Beautiful little books, and I thought I should also do something like that to benefit avant-garde writers and readers that I know. In 1997 everything was still very cheap in Nepal. The king was in charge, it was the only Hindu monarchy in the world at that time. I could publish books made with handmade paper, and the crafts there were so ancient—it was really like walking into the Middle Ages. Everything was done on these really ancient presses.

WILSON: The first books were hand-set?

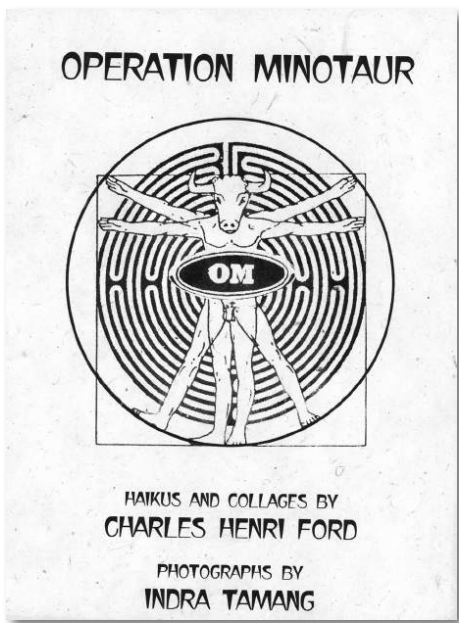
MIRABITO: Yeah.

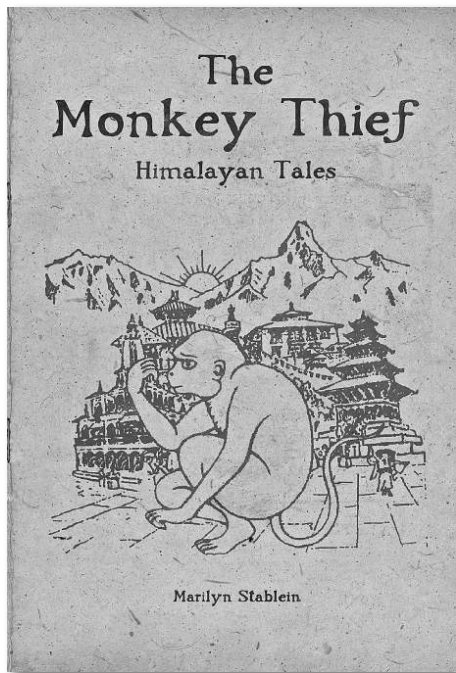
FOYE: What was the first book?

MIRABITO: The first book I did was my own writing, *Welcome to Freaksville*. It was the first one done with letterpress. I always felt “freak” was a good term and that people should take that back. A freak was somebody who wasn’t like the norm, the regular, middle-class society in America that I never really wanted to be a part of. From that point, I just flew with the press and I started organizing all kinds of readings with my friends—outdoors at Dharmaware, the little shop I worked at, or at the Magic Meadow, this beautiful outdoor field on top of the mountain near the monastery.

WILSON: Back in 1969 or ’70, I self-published a little book in Pakistan. It was done on a hand-set press. Every time I brought them a set of galleys with corrections, they would make the corrections and then they would make new mistakes because they were resetting the whole line. And they couldn’t read English, they were doing it by sight alone. Did you have the same experience, or by ’97 there were people who were actually good at it?

MIRABITO: Nobody who worked in these presses could speak English or even read English because they have a different alphabet. So I basically started using friends of mine, Nepalese guys who spoke English well, and they became my go-betweens. I would make a dummy book





to show what I wanted. I wasn't that concerned about errors. People would tell me about all the misspelled words and letters that were backwards. I always thought that was just part of the charm of it.

WILSON: After seven galley proofs, I just said, "Oh well, I'll just go with the mistakes that are in it." Because it was charming.

MIRABITO: And there are some cultures like the Huichol, who believe it's an insult to god if you do something that's "perfect." So you should have a mistake in there, just to be human. It's the same with the handmade paper I use, it's all made above 10,000 feet in the Himalayas, and mostly by women in little co-operative villages. The paper might have all kinds of imperfections—dirt stuck in it, feathers, hair, bits of trees. I find that's a great feature.

At a certain point I just flew with the press and I started involving all my friends in Woodstock. I started thinking, "The good thing about this press is that I could print books for all my friends." Everybody could throw in a few hundred dollars and then they could have a book they could sell then for 10, 15, 20 bucks each and that could pay for their lunch. Everybody always says poets never make any money, but if you actually do have this object of your work that you could then sell to all your friends or people who appreciate poetry and art, then you can make a little bit of money to support yourself, or for extras, to eat, to smoke, to drink. I started offering that possibility to my friends. A lot of the earlier books were by local people, like this 90-year-old great-grandmother who wrote poems.

FOYE: What was her name?

MIRABITO: Rosalyn Z. Clark. Usually, either I would pay for the book and I would keep half the copies and they would get half the copies, or I would get them to pay for the printing and they got most of the copies and I would just keep a few. I had a different situation with everybody. I started asking people who were a little bit bigger in the poetry world and more prestigious, like Ed Sanders, and I would say, "I'll pay for printing and do all the design work"—I was doing the design work from the beginning—"and then I'll give you half the copies and I'll keep half the copies." I got into correspondence with different poets; I would write to these different poets all around the country and just try and enter into a conversation with them, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti or Anne Waldman—people like that. Generally the runs were like 333 copies, something mystical like that, so very low runs and very limited editions and all craft-printed and all handmade paper.

FOYE: Shivastan Press has always been very community oriented for you?

MIRABITO: Right, the way I thought of it was as a co-operative where everybody was involved. I wasn't the only one deciding what was going to happen, other people could make decisions about what poems went into a book. I never strongly dictate things editorially or say "You can't have this in there" or "No way, I want it this way."

That seems to always work out because that's one of the main things I'm about with poetry: being part of a community. Now it's been 20 years or more that I have been cultivating and growing this community and all these poets work together. I have a little bookshop where we have regular readings, themed parties and costumed parties, vegetarian pot lucks, huge bonfires in my garden, and that's been really great. The best thing about publishing is creating a community, I think. Getting people to participate and also to enjoy themselves as part of the poetry scene. Most mainstream people are not that into poetry, unfortunately. I think it's because they think of it as something more academic or intellectual, so I hope to make it a fun or community-orientated thing, a place where you could go and meet fascinating people who offer an alternative way of living.

EARNST: During the time you had been living in Kathmandu, was there a comparable literary scene there?

MIRABITO: There was, but it was mostly just Nepalese-speaking people.

WILSON: Was Ira Cohen still living there when you first took up residency?

MIRABITO: No, Ira had left by the late '70s.

WILSON: So there was no beat enclave?

MIRABITO: There was a little bit, Hetty MacLise was there sometimes, and we would have poetry readings in little cafes, that kind of thing. Sometimes also Moira Moynihan, the daughter of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, was involved—we had our own little Kathmandu scene, but there is a huge scene there and they really do appreciate poetry—

WILSON: In Nepalese?

MIRABITO: Right. In Nepal, poets are thought of as great national heroes. They'll even take them and put them on their shoulders and carry them through the city.

EARNST: Did you ever try to get any translation projects going?

MIRABITO: No, I never got involved in that because I knew what I wanted to be promoting here was more of an alternative hippy thing. I'm obviously a gay poet and artist, but I don't know if I want that to be my main thrust in life or pigeon-holed into that.

EARNST: Although one of the things you published was this great book of Henri Michaux translations.

MIRABITO: Right, that's one creative poet friend of ours, Louise Lande Levis, she translates from French, Italian, Sanskrit. She plays the Sarangi and studied in India with Ram Narayan. She even knew Annapurna Devi. She's a great wandering yogi poet, who translated the poems of Mirabi. She actually hung out with Michaux.

She's very famous for translating the book *Rasa* by René Daumal. That's another book we published together.

FOYE: Do you have any favorite Indian musicians?

MIRABITO: I would say my favorite Indian musicians are the Bauls of Bengal and their ecstatic music. It's so funny that the Hindu Kirtan and Bhajan scene is so big here, because that to me is so much like church or synagogue—whereas over in India it's so ecstatic in that people really lose themselves in it. They really feel it with their heart and their whole body. It's not just a sitting there and moaning kind of music.

EARNST: Another great figure from Kathmandu was Charles Henri Ford.

MIRABITO: I didn't really spend much time with him. I met him in New York. In the old days they had these really wild and crazy Surrealist scenes in Kathmandu. He was there all through the '70s and had a magazine called *View* (1940–47) with all the Surrealists who had to leave Europe because of World War II. He gathered them all together as a community and created this magazine, which was very inspirational to me. I was lucky enough

to meet him a couple of times and then he passed away in his 90s in 2002. I asked his Nepalese friend, Indra Tamang—who inherited everything from him—to do a book. That book became *Operation Minotaur* with Ford's poetry collages and Tamang's photography.

FOYE: Have you used the same printer since the beginning or have you used different printers?

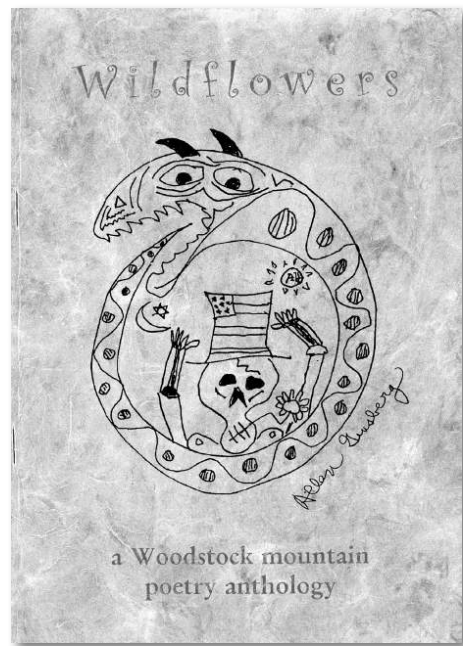
MIRABITO: I was so fascinated by the handmade paper, and I wanted everything to look like a medieval manuscript. It would be something that was quite different from the glossy trade paperbacks that most poets were publishing. I have one printer in Nepal who is really my facilitator—he's a computer guy, his name is Sherap Sherpa. He speaks perfect English. When I realized that he was involved in printing and facilitating printing, I asked if he could help me with these books and now I've worked with him pretty much on the whole run. He knows everything about every printing company in Kathmandu and can facilitate everything for me, he can work with these small printing companies that don't speak English.

EARNST: Are there design aspects affected by printing on this type of paper, or with these types of inks? How does that affect the designs and objects themselves?

MIRABITO: My printer actually developed a process where he would run the handmade paper—which is a rough paper that is hard to work with, a lot of people have tried and weren't successful—through these rollers and flatten it out so we were able to actually print any way we wanted with the handmade paper. I think that's probably why I'm the only press doing it, because my printer developed the process. One of the things I've figured out over the years is line drawings work best on the handmade paper because it shows better. The covers are all hand-silkscreened by these craftsmen. I can do basically anything with a silkscreen, and something I would like to further develop is to start doing more broadsides with multiple screens and that kind of thing. We always have to finish before monsoon season or we have trouble with the ink and paper not setting or drying properly.

EARNST: Are there any artists who have influenced the aesthetic aspects of the books?

MIRABITO: I would say the artists that have really influenced me were Aubrey Beardsley—mostly for the kind of look that I've been trying to go for—and then there's a British-Tibetan Buddhist artist named Robert Beer, who has done the most amazing artwork since the '60s with traditional Tibetan images. He has decided to give all his artwork to the world, and anyone can use it in any way they like, so I often use his work because it's traditional Tibetan Buddhist artwork but more psychedelic, because



he was a psychedelic pioneer in the '60s who had these visions on LSD.

WILSON: If any single book sparked off all the psychedelic art in the '60s it was the Dover *Collected Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* that influenced so many people.

FOYE: When you think back over these books, are there any that particularly stand out for you?

MIRABITO: A lot of people have said they wish I could do a book for them, so I thought I should do an annual anthology. I call it *Wildflowers* because that reflects the spirit of nature and also of "flower children" and the hippy scene that's such an integral part of my life, and the wildness of most of the people that I would publish. So far I've done 10 different *Wildflower* editions. At first it was mostly local writers from the Woodstock area, but as I started expanding my correspondence, I would ask writers that I liked from all over the country if they would contribute. Toward the end of the series I started doing more themes. Like this one, it's called the "Not a Warhol" issue, and it's about people who were associated with the Warhol scene, like Andy Warhol's nephew, James Warhol, and my good friend Allen Midgette, who I lived with off and on in Woodstock, and Billy Name and all these people like that. It was really fun to do a Warhol-related art and poetry anthology. Then there was a Buddhist theme that I tried to get people from all different aspects of the Buddhist scenes that I had been in. And I also got a poem from his holiness Karmapa, who is the head of the big Tibetan monastery in Woodstock, called Karma Triyana Dharmachakra.

I have a funny story about Rene Ricard. I wrote to him at the Chelsea Hotel and said "I'll give you \$50 for a poem for my anthology that I print in Nepal." He received the letter at the Chelsea Hotel and immediately ran to the desk and said "give me a piece of paper and a pencil" and he wrote me this poem *Cecil* about his love affair he had with a Nepali prince in the '60s, who became King Birendra of Nepal who was tragically murdered in 2001. The whole royal family was murdered in this medieval take over scene, supposedly by his son, but everybody was saying it was really by his brother, Gyanendra, who became the next king. Rene Ricard wrote me this poem in pencil very quickly and then wrote at the bottom, "send me the \$50 as soon as possible, darling." That's a great letter! I turned *Cecil* into a chapbook and a broadside.

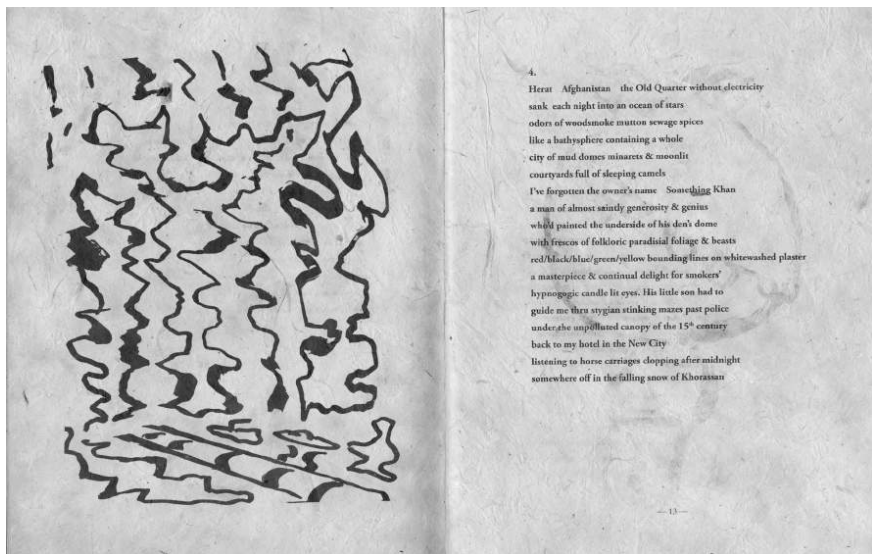
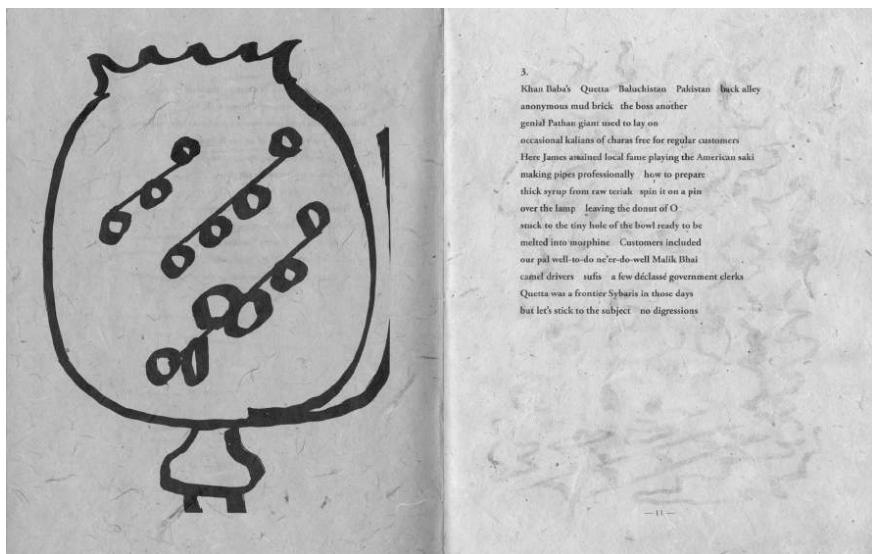
There are over 50 different broadsides and books that I've published since '97. The one that I'm really excited about now is the most recent one which is called, *Opium Dens I Have Known*, by Peter Lamborn Wilson. It's very exciting because it's also an art book, a collaboration with Chris Martin who created a lot of drawings for it. It's an oversized book compared to the ones I usually do—a limited edition of 400. It's breaking into a whole new genre for me, which I'm really excited about.

EARNEST: Do you see yourself continuing to travel and to live in the way you have been living?

MIRABITO: Definitely. I think that's the thing about growing older—you kind of design your lifestyle and you decide what works for you and what doesn't work for you. What I found really works for me is creating a community in Woodstock of like-minded people who are artists, writers, and musicians and then going to Asia in the winter and studying all this fascinating ancient culture and then being with fascinating, interesting alternative-types there. ☺

Brooklyn Rail Web Exclusive

Watch a brief film of painter Chris Martin and poet Peter Lamborn Wilson collaborating on their Shivastan book *Opium Dens I Have Known*. A 2014 film by Raymond Foye.



Opium Dens I Have Known, poems by Peter Lamborn Wilson and Drawings by Chris Martin. Shivastan Press, 2014.

Ride It, Or Go Under

IN CONVERSATION HENRY THREADGILL AND JASON MORAN
WITH GEORGE GRELLA AND RAYMOND FOYE

Jazz, at its best and most essential, is a way of making music that is embodied in the musicians, in what they are imagining and playing in the moment. A fundamentally oral tradition, and one of the most sophisticated of its kind, jazz is far less ably served by written and recorded documents than almost any other kind of creative human activity. Jazz is the players; know jazz by following them, seeing them, hearing them.

Jazz is also young enough still that the music's family tree, and musical and historical memories, are embodied in children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren—by playing jazz, these generations are all related. And the music is related to America in the way we all are, in the rich, fraught, tragic, and hopeful history of slavery, migration, and expansion. We are all jazz people.

Two different generations of jazz musicians came into the *Rail* offices the day before Thanksgiving to speak with guest editor Raymond Foye and music editor George Grella: Henry Threadgill (born 1944) and Jason Moran (born 1975). Cumulatively, they have something like 75 years of making music, but their values and ideas hint at centuries more.

Threadgill—saxophonist, flutist, composer, and an original member of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (A.A.C.M.)—has been exploring the 19th-century roots of American popular music, and transforming them into cutting-edge jazz thinking, through a series of ensembles: the avant-garde ragtime group Air, with bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Steve McCall; the seven-member Sextett, with its colors of the blues and gospel; the electric Very Very Circus; the sadly obscure Society Situation Dance Band; the melodic, funky music he made with Make a Move; and his current ensemble Zoid, which plays his extraordinarily sophisticated and propulsive re-conception of counterpoint. His career is a realization of the motto of fellow A.A.C.M. members the Art Ensemble of Chicago, "Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future." And he also holds the distinction of being the only avant-garde jazz musician to be featured in a national ad campaign, endorsing Dewar's Scotch in print in the late 1980s.

The same is true for pianist Moran. Since his debut recording as leader, *Soundtrack to Human Motion* (1999), Moran has been recontextualizing ragtime, stride, and the blues by seamlessly and effortlessly mixing them with hip-hop and other contemporary pop music, classic pieces from Ellington and Monk, and Brahms and Schumann. His primary vehicle is his fantastic trio, The Bandwagon, with bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits, but he is also a frequent collaborator with musicians such as Greg Osby, Don Byron, Charles Lloyd, the late Paul Motian, and Dave Holland, and this fall releases his ninth Blue Note recording, *ALL RISE: A Joyful Elegy for Fats Waller*.

Moran first heard Threadgill's music when his father brought home the Very Very Circus record, *Too Much Sugar for a Dime* (1993). More than just a listener and a fan, he has lately been collaborating with Threadgill, first as one of two pianists in Threadgill's Double Up band, which debuted at the 2014 NYC Winter JazzFest with Threadgill's large-scale piece in remembrance of Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris: *Old Locks and Irregular Verbs*, and as curator of Very Very Threadgill, a two-day festival presented at Harlem Stage in September: featured were new configurations of Air, the Sextett, Very Very Circus, and the Society Situation Dance Band.

GEORGE GRELLA (RAIL): I was thinking, especially in light of the country we live in and things that have happened in the past couple days, I want to ask you first, what do you think about the idea of progress?

HENRY THREADGILL: In terms of like, music—

RAIL: Social, cultural, historical.

THREADGILL: Well, this incident in Missouri and this incident that just occurred in New York, in Brooklyn, where this young man was going down the stairs in a building and the lights were out—the thing is, that guy could have been any age and he could have been any ethnicity, but he was just a man in the dark. That could have been anybody. He could have been a woman, he could have been a cripple, it could have been anything, you know. But, the police department in terms of progress, when I put on the news and there are kids and adults in the streets in New Jersey and New York and in California marching about what took place, marching and crying and petitioning: It only works among protesters and the public, it has no effect on the police department. The police department has been working as police and not as servants to part of the community, to part of the ethnic community. In the white community the police are like public servants, but for everybody else, Chinese, Latinos, blacks, that's not the case, and they have never addressed this issue. This has always been the problem, this has been going on for years and years and years. When you go back and look at the footage, when you go back, Governor Faubus, they turned dogs loose on people—those were black and white people that marched in the South. Look at the police, it's always the police behavior.

When I grew up in Chicago, the bad things we did, just bad things, police would shoot at us. We were like 10, 11 years old and the police would shoot at us for breaking out windows or something. They didn't shoot at kids across 59th Street that were doing worse things. So, the progress it's—I don't know what the idea of dialogue with the police department is and what that means. I think there's a culture that we've let sit here so long and it's grown exponentially into a monster. I think you have to tear the whole thing down because they've got all these blue walls and all these other things. I think you have to tear the whole thing down and start all over in the education of it. And people become more isolated. I remember, we grew up with police on the street. I lived in the Ninth Precinct. I could tell you the police over there don't know one person in the community, now they're all sitting inside their cars on their cell phones. The police used to the walk the streets in New York, in Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit and knew the people. They don't know anybody, black or white. They don't know anybody.

JASON MORAN: On the way over, on WNYC, they had people call in about what happened, and this woman called in and was saying a similar thing where it's difficult to have an officer work in a community they're afraid of. So here this guy is walking down the stairwell with his gun drawn without knowing. With his finger on the trigger! There's no reaction time to let your body even understand the situation before your feelings just pull the trigger so quickly.

RAIL: Time goes on and things don't change or things do change and ideas or the way that things are communicated doesn't change.

THREADGILL: Things have changed and the problem is the good will between the different ethnicities. You don't remember this, but the United States was segregated. A lot of people, most people are confused about what

segregation was in the first place. Most people think segregation had to do with black people. Segregation had to do with every ethnic group in the United States. Every ethnic group, every group in this country had their own unions. Tailors unions, bricklayers unions, Italian bricklayers, Polish bricklayers, German bricklayers, black tailors, Italian tailors.

Now, when you look at that, as a result of integration, the good will, the lines that broke down among the populace is a lot that's happened. People have risen to a level of civility and are humane to one another and forming a leading sense of friendship. But, like I said, the institution of the police has remained outside of that and no one has ever looked at it. Not just that, the military too. They're outside of it. So it's very dangerous for them to send the National Guard. If you remember under Nixon at Kent State, that was the National Guard that shot and killed all those kids.

RAIL: In those terms you're talking about—the history of segregation—the music you guys make falls under the jazz genre, but is it better to say that you're working in this broader African-American tradition, beyond the music?

THREADGILL: It is broader. I can't speak for Jason, but I don't even know what that word means anymore: jazz. Words have lost their meaning. You have jazz festivals today, like the one they have in New Orleans, and you're lucky if they even have one jazz musician on the bill.

RAIL: At a certain point Miles Davis didn't want to use the word jazz anymore because he was afraid it would be pigeonholed as an ethnic music, when the roots you work with are really broadly American.

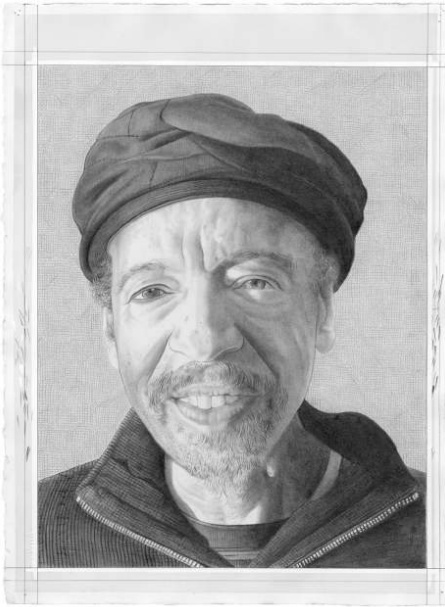
THREADGILL: They're larger than America, they're worldwide, they come from all over the world.

MORAN: My generation's entry point into music is a little different. Henry got to see the makers, the ones who made language, he was a part of making the language that my generation now has to look at and get inside of and try to find the meaning—attach the strings, so to speak. And the music does largely fall under that "jazz" umbrella, but it gets really strange because the music must be dependent on an awareness of yourself within your culture. How we as black folks understood who we were, is how the music sounded, and this understanding became encoded in the music for generations. So then as people across the globe engage that construct, they try to figure it out: how do we sit inside this framework? And sometimes what ends up happening is they consider the framework absent of the culture. As I travel the globe and talk to young players, it's a little tenuous about where the urgency comes from that attracts you to the music. The urgency I hear in the A.A.C.M.'s music, the urgency I hear in Fletcher Henderson's music or Chick Webb's music. The urgency of James Brown: you feel it, it ain't passive. That's what made me say, "Oh I'm supposed to find my own way to be urgent in that place, because the word is now a very loose word." People add "-y" to the end and say jazzy.

THREADGILL: Can we get back to the root of it? Nobody knows anything about the root anymore!

RAIL: In the music that both of you have made, it strikes my ear that the roots go back to the 19th century, to music that became a component with jazz, became identifiable with jazz but also went in a different direction as well. When I think about musical progress, there's that kind of incremental progress that people make working within a genre—I'm going to add to the language, add a little bit more vocabulary that's open-ended and exciting and stimulating and broad-based. You start from your precursors and then you jump over some preconceived notions. I absolutely hear that in everything both of you do, in different but parallel ways. But in either case even though you both work with very modern ideas, it seems to me that you can hear those early origins.

THREADGILL: You can't get around it. If you're listening to Wagner and you can't hear Bach, you're not listening very closely. It's that way in all the Western genres. The



Portrait of Henry Threadgill. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

basic strong principles are going to be there. You're going to hear the people that founded the principles. Not an imitation of their style, but the tribute to those principles. If it works there's no reason to get rid of it. If you can use it as a construct in the moment, there's no reason to abandon it. That's what Jason has been doing and what I have been doing. Not only us, but everybody else. You have to listen closely to Cecil Taylor to hear what he was listening to and transforming. I worked with Cecil and I know what he was listening to. It's no different than if you're listening to Berio or Debussy, if you know enough about where they came from and their influences. You can see what Debussy was picking up from Indonesia, and how he put that on top of what he learned from Bach. You just have to dig deep enough and long enough and you can see the connections.

What a lot of people forget about is that historically black people in America are the latest thing on the planet! Because they aren't Africans! It's like Abbey Lincoln said, "I got some people in me, some black, brown, and beige." My name is Threadgill, and there are 13 spellings of Threadgill. Everybody in this country is related to me that's got that name. And most of the people in England and France are related to me that's got that name. So, anybody that was in this country as an African, they then became a black. You can't be exclusively concerned with any one kind of music, because you're already a cross-culture. Eventually an artist is gonna start looking around and say, "Let's get some of this Cuban or Chinese music." Eventually you're going to look across the border to different places. Anyway, it's the history: this music was always looking for connections with everything in the Western world.

RAYMOND FOYE: Several years ago they found the original manuscript to "St. Louis Blues," which is often called the first composed piece in jazz, and they found that after the first 12 bar blues, it goes straight to a tango. So right from the start in this music you have a hybrid.

One thing we've been talking about in other interviews in this issue of the *Rail*, with electronic musicians, and painters and poets, is this whole subject of tradition, roots. We've been talking about the Harry Smith Anthology and Dylan, and also Coltrane and electric Miles, and everybody feels this weight of culture. It's a flood of information, a glut. Young people go into appropriation because they think, "There's so much in the world, why do we need to make anything new? Why don't I just copy this painting? Why don't I sample this?" The question is how do you engage tradition, how do you give it momentum, how do you make it new? What

are your relationships to the tradition and the idea of making it new?

MORAN: It's a weighty subject. I might enter through talking about appropriation. There's a group now called Mostly Other People Do the Killing that did an appropriative act where they copied Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*. It's more about the idea. But for my generation, the 1980s, the new thing in music was all these producers in New York, finding their parents' records and going in and chopping and sampling James Brown, Parliament Funkadelic, Art Blakey, Horace Silver, Wes Montgomery. So that became the fabric of all great hip-hop in the '80s and early '90s, from the drum beat to the bass line, to the keyboard sample, to the horns. And so as a person who is growing up with that as a tradition, you make that not as the thing you put forth but you make that as the landscape. Now along comes Nas—Olu Dara's son—and he grew up hearing Henry Threadgill's music because his father played it, and all of Olu's music, and now he says, "I can move it like this, and I have this story to tell about living in Queensbridge." And so, that becomes a platform in a way, and I always thought that was a very creative way to look at music, even Afrika Bambaataa taking Kraftwerk's monumental electronic music and making it something from the Bronx. So when people hear me playing "Planet Rock" they think I'm playing Kraftwerk. I'm like no, I'm playing Bambaataa!

RAIL: And it's not just the Bronx, it becomes this international, cultural thing.

MORAN: Yeah, it is the "Trans-Europe Express." It really is connecting it, so that's part of my practice and it's the thing that I've been trying to scratch at incessantly over and over again. Because there is this line between things, and it is a line that you can cross, or you could trip over the line and fall into the trap without understanding the connotations of what you're making. I try to be very careful about that line: how to use a person's voice, or how can I chop together people talking about jazz from say, Jelly Roll Morton to Richard Pryor, you know? And then putting them all into this sonic milieu of a bunch of samples from disparate sources, trying to make one cohesive statement.

For me, it's also about texture. Within a composition in a group—and I have a very small group, it's just piano, bass, and drums, mostly—there's something about the sample entering invisibly when I play it from my MP3 or minidisk player, no one knows where it's coming from. It appears, and there's something about this invisible texture that comes and sits right in the middle of my music that I really like, and I like for an audience to kind of figure it out. Or even if I simply press play and we listen to Billie Holiday during my concert and it's like, "okay let's have a group listening experience around Billie Holiday, because we probably don't do that as much as we should." And we probably could all stand and listen to Billie Holiday together in a room silently and consciously know we're listening in that moment. Not like, "okay, I'm gonna eat my dinner because Billie Holiday is playing in the background." So I try to be really careful, and sometimes I trip and I fall, but I think that's the nature of trying to touch texture in a way that you have to get your hands really dirty to see where it can go through.

RAIL: When you play, you're having an active dialogue with history. Especially Jason, you have this new Fats Waller record out.

MORAN: I've always thought about the way people that I respect have touched the history. A saxophone [gestures to Henry] is playing Scott Joplin's music, you know what I mean? So there's something about the transfer, or trying to match the energy level, that's something that I think about. Because history is to be touched. It's all like a memory that you can also change, and none of our minds are made the same, and it's not supposed to be objective. You're supposed to share your views on what you think about. So Fats Waller for example, Fats Waller is a man more than he is a musician, he's a man, he was a father, he was a lover, he was the son of a preacher, he

was an alcoholic, and he was funny, he could play the shit out of the piano. He's all these things. I don't want to reduce him to just his records, and so I try to make a performance around him.

RAIL: It's one thing to listen to a Fats Waller record, but when you see a clip of him playing it's that personality that's musical too. It's so expressive.

THREADGILL: When you see artists, physically, that's a whole other thing. It's very powerful.

RAIL: That is essential for what you're doing Henry, because on record, the music is dense and vivid and abstract, and when you see the musicians making it work, the positive effort, you can see it being made.

THREADGILL: It's something about live music. I grew up that way. It was live music from the very beginning. Walking around on Maxwell Street in Chicago, standing right there with Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, the power of that. Of going to church and seeing James Cleveland singing or talking, the power, the voices, always live. Sitting in front of the Chicago Symphony, oh my god! Always live, live, live. And, that's one thing that's always concerned me—I worry about musicians that don't do that. You could lose something very important, if all you're doing is listening to music and discussing it. Music is something we do, that people come to sit down in front of. Everybody is sitting at home texting and sending music to each other and all these kinds of things, but go and sit in front of a choir, or soloists, or hear a poet. When a poet writes his poetry it's one thing, but go and listen to him deliver it.

FOYE: Has the audience experience changed for you now that we're in a digital age where people have all these distracting devices. Have you noticed a change?

THREADGILL: No, because I have a small audience in the world. It's an international audience, but it's a small audience. They come to hear me play and that's what they do.

Young people, I don't know, I think there's a positive side and negative side to technology. Not just now, but any time. I think right now, technology has created a bit of an overload. I get my inspiration for most things I do from looking at the world: from a tree to the bricks to precipitation falling outside the window, the condition of the atmosphere, watching people. I really watch people very closely. I get all of my information, mostly, if not from there then from reading science or reading mysteries. All of my information basically comes from looking at nature, seeing a tree and saying, god I never noticed that about that tree, I come back and the tree tells me something, the design, the light on it. All of this technology, you can do a lot of good things with it, but it's a distraction and it's a—

FOYE: It's a narcotic.

THREADGILL: It's the best thing since crack! It's more powerful than crack. I think, because there's so much there, it's hard for young people to get focused. Because there's just too much stuff, too many things to do.

FOYE: Do you ever want to make a place for technology in your music?

THREADGILL: When I'm creating I try not to have any kind of guidelines for material. I don't really care what comes up.

RAIL: Do you use any musical technology at all when you make music, even notation?

THREADGILL: No, I don't use it. I don't have anything against it, I'm just not finished working with things that I'm still dealing with. I've done some electronic stuff. But, basically I'm not finished with acoustic yet.

MORAN: That's always been the trickiest, or the thing that I examine the most when I'm working around people like Henry or Andrew Hill, any of the people I've gotten to work with or talk with. What is their application process? That's the biggest key, how are they getting from A to B? I remember one time, about five years ago, I called Henry and he said, "I'm thinking about Morse code [laughs], I'm making these pieces based on Morse code," which is an old form.

Now for him to say it, it's a very different thing than if I said it. His results are gonna be very different from

mine. But in that same way, as far as touching technology, I also have just a little bit of trepidation. I need the piano, I need to hear the sound coming at me. Meanwhile 10 years younger than me is Flying Lotus, his application is this little box, he can do all of this with composition in a different way. I was like yeah, but I can't get there.

RAIL: At the same time you came out of working with this musical language that comes out of a technical process. You're playing audio recording when you're performing and there's occasional uses of technology in your records, but you don't have those origins of hip-hop without the ability to sample and splice all these things together. This is part of a generation of musicians that you're in and that surround you.

THREADGILL: Yeah, a lot of them don't play instruments, but it doesn't matter. You gotta make something, how'd you make it? You gotta write something, does it hold up? I don't care where you touch it, how you do it, it's gotta stand up. I don't care that you didn't go to film school, I don't care if you didn't play the piano, I'm not interested in any of those things. In the end, it's about, how did you cook it? It's all about creativity, how to create, it's not about what the materials are, so don't get sidetracked by that. In the end, when you put this meal down in front of me and it don't taste good, don't start talking about "I should have put in more cinnamon."

I was out in Berkeley once and I did a little residency there in California, and the students that were studying electronic music wouldn't come in because I didn't know anything about what they were doing. I said, "I don't need to know anything about what you're doing, I'm here to talk about composition. Composition has nothing to do with notes or anything else. Now, what I'm getting ready to talk about, you don't understand how something is arranged from left to right and put together, that's what I'm talking about. That's what I hold together."

RAIL: There is a common material that you guys are working with, which is harmony.

THREADGILL: With notes as the language in itself.

RAIL: There is this very idiomatic harmony that, Jason, you work in and against. And Henry, especially lately with the Zooid band, you're constructing harmony on the fly with your compositional idea.

THREADGILL: You hear a lot of harmony as a result.

RAIL: You create the environment for the musicians to create.

THREADGILL: I write contrapuntal music, contrapuntal music creates a whole lot of harmonies that you can't account for. It's like Bach. What is he talking about? A flatted-ninth, an augmented-eleventh? No he was not.

RAIL: Because it relates to what happened before and what is going to happen.

THREADGILL: It's these independent voices, they create incidences that just come up, you don't know what they are going to be.

MORAN: I studied with Andrew Hill, and went to see him play at a club in midtown, and he told the audience, "We're going to play a piece by Bach." And I thought, "This is new," and they played something, and I had no idea what it was. When I had my next lesson with him, I said, "You said you played this piece by Bach." He said "Oh yeah," and showed it to me, and he said, "Why don't you play it?" So I started at bar one and he said, "Why did you start there?" And I was like "Oh shit, first lesson." Then he said, "Now go to the middle of the second page," and when I started playing he said, "Now play the left hand two beats later than the right hand." So it is like your hands are playing in different time spaces. And then he explained later, he told everybody "I am not telling you where to start, or which direction to play it in," but somehow listening to Bach that way, I realized this was some new beautiful version. The music could function in a way different from its original format but still all the elements were making sense with each other.

When I was still studying with Muhal [Richard Abrams] he would talk about rhythm as the start. He would say, "You can't make a melody without making a

rhythm first, you can't get from one note to the next, as soon as you play one note and a year later you play the next note, that's a rhythm." And he said, "If you think about rhythm first, rhythm is the thing that helps make harmony make sense." There were enough people who said those kind of things to me, about what harmony represents and how it can feel, that I knew there were a lot of other ways to approach it, especially on the piano, which has its own binding. I'm still trying to figure out the ways in which you can relate things to each other, but also trigger something else.

RAIL: What's it like, with that experience, to work inside Henry's music?

MORAN: It's one of the great challenges, it's one of the things that I love about playing music. Very rarely are you allowed into someone's environment and then permitted to see how it works. Which is the great part about being a pianist, you can get into people's bands, like, "Oh, I can kind of see the accompaniment part, and I can also see the melodic content." You can really try to figure it all out.

But Henry's work, the way it's structured and the way it wants to shape some of your movements. It's like you are a choreographer and you give your dancers the set of movements they can make. You can put them in any kind of order, and you can think about space and think about time as well, but these are still the movements.

Henry is also a master pianist, so the way he is writing things down is unlike anything I could come up with, but it is also the thing that I have been trying to pattern myself after for years. So it's also good to finally see that this moves like this and it feels like this. It goes from here to here, and now my hand has to move here and you feel it in your body. That part to me is one of the great joys, when you hit it and you feel it!

RAIL: From the standpoint of a listener that makes perfect sense because the contrapuntal idea, whether it's Henry Threadgill or Bach, is this flow, flow, flow, and then there are the moments of magical stasis where everything coheres together, and it is a revelation.

MORAN: I used to pick locks, this is my first time sharing this! [Laughter.] And there you had a similar system. I got this pick set for vending machines, and you talk about that moment when things align? The way the lock works is you have to hit each pin up to its appropriate point while slowly pressing in; the lock would have levers around the cylinder, and each one would push back separately. But when all of them reached their aligned point, then you could turn it open. And in Henry's music it's the exact same thing.

RAIL: Even if that's the end or immediately you are onto something else.

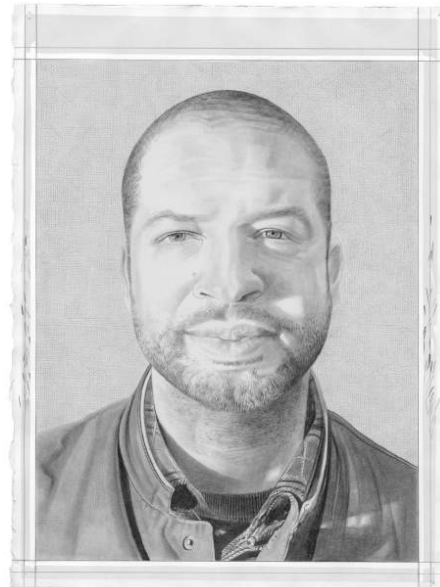
MORAN: And sometimes you just got to reset. It's the moment where you say, "I've got no fucking idea where I am! And I've got to pull off, I've got to hear again and find my bearings." It happens, and there is so much moving around. You know, Henry, it's like when you watch a typhoon, when water is swirling in the bayou, and you see the rush, but then you see the pools, these little whirlpools happening. That's the water, that's what starts to happen when things get cooking in Henry's band and it's like, "Whoa." And you are trapped in it, ride it, or go under.

RAIL: Henry, your technique, your structure is always moving to the top, not just moving around.

THREADGILL: Because of the theoretical principles that I work from, everything is original, every alignment of every three notes is original, and it is different from probably any other. For some things, there is a Siamese twin, but C-E-G, and E-G-C, and G-C-E have nothing in common with each other.

RAIL: You make them three different chords.

THREADGILL: They are, they have nothing in common, period. Only they do in a major-minor system, because that's the way the [diatonic] system is set up, and it makes sense that we would need tones, etc. But once you leave, once you go in a chromatic world, then those principles don't work anymore.



Portrait of Jason Moran. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: You have been a bandleader for so long. Is that something that's hard to do?

THREADGILL: No, not really. Because it's an evolving thing. You're always learning, you know? A bandleader is a psychologist [Everyone laughs]. Case number two has to sit next to case number three! You get two guys that are just like oil and water, totally volatile. You have to control that. You have to make that thing work for you. Band directors are only successful because they are able to hold a number of people together and make them cooperate. You've got to have a history. That means if you don't have a history, you weren't successful at it.

RAIL: That's part of being a working musician, an essential part.

THREADGILL: There are a lot of people who undertake this who don't really know what it involves. You need to think carefully about this if you're planning on doing this for a long time. It's an obligation, and you need to start thinking that way. This guy, he didn't show up. Now I got to deal with him. Do I want to lose him? Do I want him? Now I got to catch up with him and see how I can get him to do what I want him to do.

RAIL: Jason, you discovered Henry's music with the *Too Much Sugar for a Dime* record. So you first heard the Very Very Circus ensemble. And at the festival that was the first time you heard the Sextett?

MORAN: Well, live.

RAIL: There's this big leap from the Sextett to the Very Very Circus. It's like a whole new range of ideas. Plus it's like Henry going electric.

THREADGILL: Yeah, it was in a way.

RAIL: Did your whole audience make that step with you?

THREADGILL: I got a lot of new people, a lot of new people came on. But a lot of new people came on with every move. But you have to backtrack to Air. Only three ingredients: percussion, woodwind, and strings. I played a wide range of woodwinds and I thought in terms of strings, wind, and percussion. When I formed the Sextett, now I have brass, woodwind, strings, and percussion. The things that I could only imply with three people, when I moved to the Sextett, I could state outright. I had enough voices now, I had seven people, I could put anything up on the table. But you could join Air and Sextett because one is the extension of the other. When I finished with the last record, *Rag, Bush and All*, I had run the course of what I was doing, contrapuntally and harmonically, then I went over to Very Very Circus. The way I wrote music for the Sextett was not theoretically what I was doing when I went over to Very Very Circus. It had changed. It wasn't just that initial mutation to the electric guitar.

RAIL: The whole counterpoint idea changed, the rhythms that you wanted.

THREADGILL: Yeah, the rhythms, all of that. I moved away from the bass and the cello, to two tubas. The difference was the sustain. The decay was different. The bow goes out and can hit a note and sustain it, right at the same level. And when he released it, the decay off the strings was different from tuba decay and the tuba blends with anything.

So the harmonic language had changed. I stopped Very Very Circus because I was completely at its end. The extension of the major/minor system—I had almost corrupted it, to a certain level. That's when I started putting implants into the language. I planted so much stuff, then it had all these new things in it, then I said okay that's it. There's nothing else to do with it. I ran it as far as I could go. During that period I started doing my research. I started hearing another place I could go. But I had to work it out and that took a long time. It has always been that way.

FOYE: How do you relate to your instrument, at the most basic level?

THREADGILL: You are always renewing your connection, first of all. When you have the form, you're going back to your best friend on the connection basis. You're going to start practicing and doing everything else to get yourself reconnected so that it becomes an extension. You've got to do that or it's going to be clumsy when it comes time to express something. You've got to go back and lock up with that instrument on the highest level that you can. The challenge of whatever the project is musically still puts you in a very difficult place to express yourself, because of what the music is asking you to do. And you know I say, "God, maybe I should have done some more gymnastics, me and my partner here, before we came out."

FOYE: I was reading an interview with Sviatoslav Richter recently and they asked him, "What do you do when you get to a concert hall and the piano is really bad?" Which would happen all the time in Russia. He said, "It just means I have to play that much better." What a wonderful answer.

MORAN: Yeah, the piano is different. Henry gets to carry his horns with him, gets to select his reeds. So he's really touching the woman, the partner, he's been with all his life. And each piano is, you really have to talk to it for a second. Or I do. I have to talk to it to see what kind of conversations it wants to have because not all of them want to say the same stuff. You might come with material. But, yeah, you have to play it that much better or find a way to get that phrase out. Or just say it's going to be a new phrase, because they're going to translate it differently. You know, she don't really know what I'm talking about, because she's from Australia. [Laughs.] My slang is different, but I think we can find a level of communication. And I enjoy the mystery of each piano and how they respond to the touch and what they want to say.

I have always felt that concert halls almost do a disservice to pianists because they try to get pianos that are mostly the same around the world, rather than allowing the pianist to really try something new. In Chicago I bought an old upright and I brought it up on the stage. I'm doing new pieces in Houston and I'm bringing my Spinet [piano] on the stage because it's like we have a segregation of instruments, in the kinds of instruments that get on concert hall stages, and I think it is unfair also for audiences. Most people in the audience don't have a Steinway D concert grand piano in their house. Their grandmother will have a Spinet, maybe an upright or a grand piano, but not a concert grand. So I enjoy that part because you can really play some down home blues on a nice raggedy piano.

FOYE: And you're making adjustments all along the way for each of the instruments.

MORAN: Yeah, and that's being an improviser. You know, there are all these stories about Art Tatum getting to pianos and skipping over notes because 10 of them don't work.

THREADGILL: He said to somebody who asked, "What do you do about playing on a piano without those notes?"

He says, "Well, I don't play those notes." [Laughs.]

FOYE: Jason, are pedals the same way?

MORAN: Yes, but it's less of an issue.

FOYE: What's your approach to pedaling?

MORAN: Jaki Byard was my teacher, so we talked a lot about pedaling because he was pretty adamant about how to use pedals. First we started with no pedals. You should work on your touch and your legato first so that you don't use it as a crutch to always get you around. The sustain pedal at least. But he was also a master of using the middle pedal. He would say it's like choosing the kind of paintbrush you want. Whether it's fine, or whether it's wide, is it soft or is it hard? The pedals are the things that can really help sculpt your language at the piano.

RAIL: Jason, you've played Schumann, Brahms. Is that part of your practice as a musician?

MORAN: By virtue of my wife, Alicia Moran, a classical singer, when we met and started dating in college, she said, "You need to hear Lieder. You need to understand these stories, these narratives, how they set these pieces up. Watch how Brahms uses three notes in the lower part of the piano and make them massive." That kind of voicing and registration. So by virtue of working with her all these years I have learned about the material of Alban Berg, especially these masses of mood, but also density. And we have a great respect for that tradition, what I kind of vaguely call "the darkness." And how beautiful they make darkness sound. The way Muddy Waters makes the darkness sound, or Robert Johnson makes darkness sound. There's something very special about that because not all people who are composers can get to that thing which resonates in most people who hear it.

Actually I heard a piece the other day, [pianist] David Virelles's new record [*Mboko*, ECM]. It's called "The Scribe." And after hearing that verdict [in Ferguson, Missouri] on Monday, I listened to David's piece yesterday. I thought, he is hitting the mood that I need, that I feel.

THREADGILL: Yeah, the Germanic composers cared about that heavy darkness.

MORAN: Alicia and I talk a lot about her great uncle, a guy named Hall Johnson, who had these great choirs of all black singers who came to New York. They were all women. He was teaching everybody how to sing the spirituals. And he set those spirituals, and a number of other choral arrangers, H.T. Burleigh, even Hale Smith, the way that they would set their songs. There was this almost a shared language of how they set them. So when playing a Negro spiritual, like, a Hall Johnson arrangement of "Every Time I Feel the Spirit" or "Were You There?" or "Give Me Jesus," he's handling them in a way that Schumann sets "Auf einer Burg." They're in the same dark territory, and the subject matter is in the same kind of territory of not knowing—like Schubert's "Doppelgänger." This place where we're really not quite sure.

THREADGILL: Brahms is one of my favorite people, too. When it comes to movement, to modulation, I never heard anybody who could move like that. When I first started, I said, "Oh, wow, you can do that?" I sat down and, when I saw the physicality of it, I didn't even have to figure it out anymore. It took me somewhere else, you know, when I learned how to play, when I got a feel for it. Even Beethoven doesn't move that way.

RAIL: You guys are part of the generation, too, in American creative arts, that's totally unselfconscious—I can take it or leave it from Europe or I can take it or leave it from here.

THREADGILL: When you get to be a certain age—I remember as a young man I was learning so much about European music but I was only doing the same thing everybody else had done, James P. Johnson—your music develops from their keystones. Then I started looking further, I started listening to Kabuki theater music and watching it live. And then the Balinese music, I started getting into that, and then Cambodian music.

RAIL: You worked with Harry Partch instruments on Hal Wilner's Mingus tribute album, *Weird Nightmare*.

THREADGILL: Oh, I loved that. I knew Harry Partch from way, way back, for years, and had even been out to the studio in Arizona. I knew about those cloud-chamber bowls and all the strange instruments, I was right at home with that.

RAIL: When I think about the records that you appear on, not just those David Murray ensembles, but those Bill Laswell Material records. And this year, Wadada Leo Smith, *Great Lakes Suite*, you incorporate such an extraordinarily broad range of musical experience.

FOYE: Do you enjoy being a sideman? Does it give you more freedom? Is the question wrong?

THREADGILL: I haven't really been a sideman for years and years. And that was never my intention in New York. I always picked. I played with Howard McGhee, who had an amazing influence in my life, Cecil Taylor, right, and Mario Bauza. Mario Bauza was a master composer, arranger. And then I did all those side projects, like Sly and Robbie's *Rhythm Killers* with Bill Laswell. See, I played in blues bands in Chicago. I played in rhythm and blues bands. That's what I did because nobody would hire me to play in a jazz band. [Laughter.]

RAIL: Especially the jazz you wanted to play, right?

THREADGILL: No. I was in polka bands and everything else. I played in jazz bands, blues bands, polka bands, marching bands. And concert bands, some small orchestras. Playing flute, and later, bassoon. So I had a lot of experience in terms of different types of music and different types of partners. I played for years with the Dells. I would stand in my corner.

FOYE: But you didn't look down on that music.

THREADGILL: I would never do that. I always knew that that was wrong. You could be putting a curse on yourself.

RAIL: You were a working musician and the way to be a working professional musician was not just to be able to play everything, but to pay respect.

THREADGILL: Yeah. I didn't play music that I didn't believe in and respect. I said, "Give that to somebody that respects it." I wouldn't do that, never would do something like that.

RAIL: For a lot of younger jazz musicians, the way you learn to be a musician is very different now. There's a more institutional background to it so you're not having the gigging situation.

MORAN: Well, for some people. I mean, the ones that actually get out here on the scene, I think they figure out how to work and where to work, who to work with. A lot of my friends are now also doing tours with Rihanna and Beyoncé, Kanye—

RAIL: It's a way to make a living.

MORAN: Yeah. So they figure out that there are a lot of modes of operation and just playing a quartet in a little club is not the only way. Because we also like that music, too, you know. Good musicians figure it out and good musicians stay open to situations. I spend half my time working with visual artists and video artists, performance artists, choreographers or directors. It's almost like part of my life is in jazz venues, but a lot of my other life is actually—is working in these other situations that are as varied as all the groups he just mentioned.

THREADGILL: It's the same thing. You have to figure out how to live economically and to use what you know and not have to do something else, go shovel snow or drive a truck. How can I still play music? Who can I play with? Because you don't want to do a disservice to somebody else's work. Just because you have the skill to do it, you shouldn't do it. Don't do it if you don't mean it. Eventually people will hear it anyway. You'll never make a statement in it if you're not in it. There's no getting around that. I enjoyed making everything I did. I played with James Chance and the Contortions, and the Blacks. I was in both bands! [Laughs.] When he was jumping off the stage into the audience, boom, getting beat! I loved it.

FOYE: And wouldn't you say that if somebody loves a certain music, I mean, than that in itself justifies it.

MORAN: Yeah.

THREADGILL: Because you know, nothing is going to suit everybody. People want to sit up and watch that—fine. And that's an example of real democracy. There's something I hate that I think is absolute crap, but I think people have a right to go and look at the crap.

FOYE: I think one thing that is similar with jazz musicians coming on the scene is similar to art students coming on, artists coming on the scene, is they've both been to schools. And that's a good thing and a bad thing.

MORAN: Yeah. Yeah. Hopefully the institutions have great teachers. If you have a great teacher, then you can really get some seeds planted, you know? I had Jaki Byard. He was an awesome teacher, not a finger-wagger, but he knew how to tell me about history so that after I finished studying with him, in my later years, I could still go back to those lessons.

FOYE: What do you try to impart to your students?

MORAN: That they have to figure out the application. Considering their genetic makeup, how they were raised in their home—that has something to do with the decisions that they can make musically and that they shouldn't cut off those decisions. Those are part of their natural personality and what we need is personality in music. So I make a decision when I play that's partially about what I think and partly what my teachers think, but it's also how my mom showed me something or said something to me or how I listen to her. Like, that's part of what you're hearing. You might not think it's there, but it is there. They have to acknowledge that part of their history and if they acknowledge it, then they'll want to investigate their own culture and then they're going to find everything they need—they will find everything. But they have to consider it as a main resource, it's secondary to my Charlie Parker record. Nah, motherfucker, it's primary to your Charlie Parker record! You know, those things will be together. And if you can find the place to put them all together, then those are the people that I'm attracted to, no matter what form of work they make.

RAIL: The amount of history that comes through in your playing, was that something that you consciously pursued, did it come to you through studying with Jaki Byard, or through what matters to you?

MORAN: It is an outgrowth of working with Jaki Byard, because he had his respect from someone like Earl Hines. They would play duets together. He had this respect from people all across the scene, and he didn't seem to—he wasn't necessarily ostracized because he also was able to change that—what he played, too. So it wasn't so simplistic and—

RAIL: How he's always modern, but he's giving you the tradition that he's modern inside.

MORAN: I watched that. Every Monday we'd sit down 2 p.m., and he'd show me: you can move it like this.

RAIL: He seemed to be a very, very, powerful, beautiful personality.

MORAN: Yeah, very old school. And very crazy, too. And his passing, his murder, I considered like in those Kung Fu films when your master is murdered and you spend the rest of your life avenging your master. I'm here to maintain his legacy and his excellence, that's my mission: to say his name through the music over and over again, consciously, for people to hear it in the audience. Because he was gone before I really properly had a moment to say thank you. So he always sits there for me like that.

RAIL: I want to ask you about time—time in your work, time in music, also that timeline idea in tradition. Where do you see what you're doing musically on that kind of timeline?

THREADGILL: I don't really think about it. When you're making something you get so self-absorbed—you've got to be self-absorbed or it ain't going to happen in the first place—that you stay there exclusively in that place until it's done. You don't even think anything outside of it, or how it works outside of those rules. You know what I'm saying? There are things that a person might say in retrospect about a work, but generally when you're doing it, you can't get to that place to step outside of it, you're so engulfed in the middle of the creation of it. It's a luxury to sit on the side and think about it.

MORAN: I want to continue that. That is what it takes. Almost like not trying to consider it where it falls in the line, because you hope, if it's good enough, it'll sit somewhere. If you make something that can last, that's difficult enough to do, just to get to the point where you can say that this is going to be worth listening to in 15 years from now, let alone 70, 100, you know, 200 years from now. Like we're still listening to Henry Purcell, or John Dowland, that music is killing it!

THREADGILL: You have geniuses, people who have genius qualities, not just one quality, but a lot of qualities, they can kind of foresee things in existence. They have some kind of firing mechanism in them that allows them to see a little bit into the future.

MORAN: I watched a part of Neil deGrasse Tyson's TV documentary, *Cosmos*, where he tries to set a scale of how big time is. And he says this little bit right here is the last 2,000 years. You know, like a tiny bit. And it actually lessens pressure for me if I think about it in that way: this is all passing. This shit ain't supposed to be forever. And then each moment that you get a chance to share music with an audience or with people, musicians—you better love that moment! Because to actually try to have that again, given how time goes, it won't come around again. It'll be useful in a different way. You'll be fortunate enough if you can enjoy it the first time.

I lose myself in sometimes trying to consider that. But only recently, I've been thinking about things like legacy. I have children. Thinking like, oh, you know, how will they look at the things that my wife and I leave behind or how we look at the things her parents, my parents leave behind.

THREADGILL: You don't know what's going to happen with it. You can't predetermine that. Things change so rapidly from generation to generation, especially now. Our cultural behavior had been pretty consistent up until very recently, until about the late 1980's, going into the '90s, when we suddenly had this group of people we described as yuppies. Yuppies defined a whole other aesthetic.

RAIL: Do you ever listen to your own records?

THREADGILL: Very little. I listen to them at first when I make them. I have to because I'm always involved in the mix. But after we get it mixed, I don't put it on unless somebody comes by and asks me to play it or something. At the Harlem Stage, some people told me, "Henry, the flute part on so-and-so was incredible!" I'll say, "I didn't even remember there was a flute part to the song. That's nice." [Laughter.] Because I never really listened after that. After we get it right, it's completely right, we turn it over to the record company, I don't really listen to it anymore.

MORAN: It's like the egg has been fertilized. Once it hits the public, that's on them now. But yeah, it's that moment after you've recorded it and you decided you can finally hear this thing that you've been mulling over for however many years. I listened to my last record incessantly as I was trying to get the mix right, but now I'm thinking about the next record.

THREADGILL: You have several reasons why you listen. You listen to learn something. You listen for a type of entertainment. Well, I can't imagine sitting up there and listening to myself. It's a little bit too much. I can't say that about anyone else—I'm only talking about me. Elliott Carter told me, "Henry, when I finish a piece of music, I don't even want to see it anymore." That's pretty drastic.

RAIL: Let me ask you about something more specific, from the universal to the particular, about the time in your music. I read something the other day that Robert Ashley was talking about—

THREADGILL: I love Robert.

RAIL: —he was talking about timeline music and how there's this breakthrough still [waiting] for music that gets outside the timeline. For him, timeline music is one measure after another, and music exists in time, but you get the changing time through changing pitch and harmony. Jazz seems to me, improvised music, a place where there's a lot of possibilities to get outside of the timeline or even combine the change through time

with the sensation, listening, that time is static. I think it happens in Henry's music because you narrowed the harmony down to such lean counterpoint.

THREADGILL: See, it's the improvisation where everything breaks. That really can get you outside, because there's less control over the organization right there. You've got all these things that are happening that are organized, but as soon as you hit improvisation—and it will vary from group to group and the type of music—once you hit improvisation there's the possibility for things to come up, and impossible things. All kinds of things can happen there, both controlled and almost uncontrolled. That's the moment when things can really change. That's the power of improvisation. That's what I really like about improvisation.

FOYE: Do you consider improvisation to be composition?

THREADGILL: Uh, no. No. It has all of the characteristics and things of composition, but composition is with forethought.

MORAN: There's so much out there, now you can listen to any band online. You can listen to their long improvisations. But before any of this existed, I think about hearing Trane play at the Vanguard, and Trane played this 30-minute solo! I often think about what was it like to be in the audience and check a 30-minute solo out? Feeling time in that way versus listening to it on the record. I can see this track is 27 minutes and I'm in minute 14. I think about those relationships because body maps time, every person maps it differently. I try to keep that in mind for people.

THREADGILL: I'm always concerned about time, and what I understand about our attention span. Whatever you're doing, you're going to lose if you don't recognize the attention span of the audiences. I don't care what you have, it's not going to go over. Our attention span has gotten shorter, and you have to be cognizant of that. Europeans, that's a different audience. Their attention span is longer than Americans' span. And in other parts of the world, in India and other places, their attention span is far longer. There's no comparison, even.

So when I think about programming music and writing music, I have to always keep that in mind. When I first thought of this time idea, I didn't process it that way, but listening to Jason talk about it, I said, I always consider that. You got to think, I'm going to be losing them at this point. Don't go too far. You can't bombard people with too much sound and visual stuff and think that you're doing something. You're getting no returns.

MORAN: I saw Muhal play at Kennedy Center. He played an hour and ten minutes straight. I saw him before the show and he said, "I am really concerned because, how am I going to play this stuff? Most people, they don't get all this, but I've got to give it to them and I know it's going to take them some time to get it. But I don't want to wear them out." And then he mapped out, somehow, this brilliant hour-and-ten-minute piece with his quintet. Fucking magic. And it came full circle. And that's that part about not necessarily being a thing based on measures that as a listener I thought he did so brilliantly. I listened and watched the whole thing—magic.

I'm going to the Vanguard tonight. I'm going to see Henry at the Vanguard. Audience comes in, music playing, we're all having our conversations. Lights go down. Henry and his band walk on stage. We take a deep breath and then the music starts. And then we have to get accustomed to like, okay, I'm hearing this in here now. And then it takes time for all of us to kind of calibrate ourselves in this environment together. It's magic. That's why people still go to the theater, because that happens to every person in there, whether you're working backstage, on the stage, in the audience, the usher—that moment when it's just about to—every molecule in here is about to change, from what's about to happen for a long period of time, we're going to basically meditate together in darkness. This is a beautiful thing. ☺

"It's a glorious thing if you don't expect an explanation."

Jordan Belson on his Art

When I lived in San Francisco (1977–79) the person I most wanted to meet (after Bob Kaufman) was Jordan Belson. But he had already become quite a famous recluse and all attempts were rebuffed. Belson's remarkable underground films are often paired with Harry Smith's: they were best friends and shared a painting studio on and off from 1948 until 1953; both were supported by Hilla Rebay, doyenne of non-objective painting and co-founder of the Guggenheim Museum. As psychedelic pioneers and be-bop fanatics, they planted the seeds for much of our present visual world. Yet while Smith's early films used geometric space as their field, Belson explored the more unbounded states described in titles like *Meditation*, *Transmutation*, and *Samadhi*.

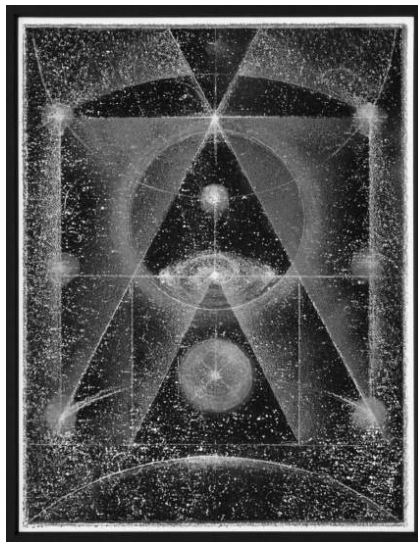
From 1957–59, Belson collaborated with electronic music pioneer Henry Jacobs on the late night series *Vortex: Experiments in Sound and Light* at the San Francisco Planetarium. Direct antecedents of the 1960s lightshows, the concerts were vastly successful and attracted all of the "heads" of the Bay Area. Film historian Cindy Keefer writes: "In the blackness of the planetarium's 65-foot dome, Belson created spectacular illusions, layering abstract patterns, lighting effects, and cosmic imagery, at times using up to 30 projection devices."

Quite unexpectedly in 1999 Harry Smith scholar Rani Singh offered to take me by Belson's dark and elegant San Francisco apartment, which easily could have been transplanted from 18th-century Kyoto. Belson had returned to making visual art in earnest a few years earlier. He was both wary and eager to show us a series of pastels that were a remarkable summation of his belief in non-objective art as an all-encompassing aesthetic, from the pyramids of Egypt and the temples of India, to the new optics of psychedelics, NASA space photography, and the inner visions of meditation and yoga practice.

Belson proved to be witty and gracious, and very much in touch with contemporary art (he was particularly fond of Clemente, Taaffe, and Tomaselli). I was invited back once or twice a year for long sessions of talking and viewing. I was not allowed to photograph or run a tape, but taking notes was permitted. Over the next five years I filled a dozen small notebooks with his remarks, and when he died in 2011 (at the age of 85) I realized he'd been dictating a kind of testament.

The Van Gogh syndrome is a myth that dies hard. We all want to believe somewhere there is an undiscovered genius, plying his or her revolutionary work in quiet obscurity. Belson is as close to that as I have encountered. As a visual artist his will be a posthumous career. I hope the 1,200 works carefully preserved by his wife Cathy Heinrich soon find the art audience that unknowingly needs the wisdom and grace they contain.

—Raymond Foye



In my work I am proceeding from the belief that anything can be animated. I'm interested in what underlies reality.

My pastels are mechanisms, they have a mechanistic look to them. They work like machines, they rotate like wheels or gears, they connect up like lighting circuits. They parallel the motions in the cosmos where spheres are rotating around each other, and rotating themselves: the sun, the planets, everything is lined up and moving in circles. Like a pinball machine, you enter into the picture and move about, trying to get to the center. I do everything I can to make every thing connect up, to construct real events in an unreal world ... as opposed to most concepts of abstract or non-objectivism, which in most cases are trying to get away from the physical world.

Everything in my paintings has to make sense physically. Even though it is ephemeral, it has to make sense from what we know of physics.

There are certain givens in my symbols that are based on practice, or just based on things as they are.

Non-Objectivism: To construct real events in an unreal world. As opposed to most concepts of abstraction where they are trying to get away from the physical world, in most cases.

Many of Kandinsky's images are like visual letters, or a telegram.

I always felt that the concept of non-objectivism was only the beginning and not the end of artistic possibilities. None of the non-objective painters achieved the purity they were striving for.

Non-objective art wasn't non-objective, people just didn't yet know what the object was.

Each atom contains a simplified blueprint of what's taking place in the cosmos. Protons and electrons moving around the nucleus, like planets around the sun. In this image green below is earth and sky above is blue, but that is not always the case. These relations and terms are relative in the work.

The diagrams of Robert Fludd are basically maps of heaven. What is more, they add the element of human experience. It makes it more than just a scientific quest of describing what's there, but also, how we connect up with it.

The tangibles and intangibles are mixed in the metaphysic. The image as a container of wisdom and knowledge.

I've tried to develop a sure sense of proportion so that if it's not right, I can detect it. Granted I may not know what to do about it right away....

Intuition is the basis of my aesthetic judgment. The more you allow intuition to speak to you the closer you are to the truth, and the origins of the universe. I feel I've given up a lot of ways of thinking about certain things in order to be closer to intuition.

I try with my work to establish a sense of the monument: a spiritual location, like the great temples, the Acropolis. Symmetrical, beautiful lighting, the most advanced architectural thinking operates on a much higher plane than most modern art does.

The great cathedrals of Europe are light mechanisms that teach. Always exalted. The light always dramatic, colorful, meaningful. The dome a path to the next world.

I think the principles used in designing the cathedrals can be applied to painting: ground below and sky above, the use of colors & chromatics, composition that uses the basic shapes of rectangle, circle, and so on. I want to translate all those principles into my imagery.

It has to be an unusual color harmony. If it's too prosaic I don't want to deal with it.

I'm trying to make pictures that focus you and teach you about a knowledge that is beyond words, or would be tedious to try to teach in words. People don't always have access to this type of thought, and when they do access it, it is often so confusing and wrong.

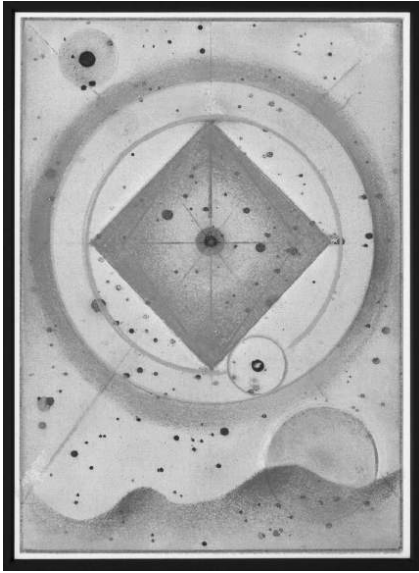
It's a glorious thing if you don't expect an explanation.

I want my work to have that "ah" experience.

I gravitated to Be-bop: it was simply the most radical thing at the time. Dissonance, a curious take on pop music.

Film was just a few years old when I was born so it seemed the most modern revolutionary medium I could use. My films are always arbitrary mindstuff: nothing domestic.

They always call me a Zen Buddhist in print. I'm not a Zen Buddhist. In fact it's the one type of Buddhism I don't like, too much Japanese discipline. I've checked out so many different philosophies and religions, just to explore them. So I've read a bunch of books on Buddhism: that doesn't make me a Buddhist. But it certainly did influence me deeply, especially on a moral level.



In these drawings my desire is to capture both light and dark: two different dimensions presented simultaneously. When two lines meet up there is an exchange of energy.

I've been making what I would call "space mandalas"—a combination of the essential mandala form and the star field.

I get rid of a lot of scary things. I leave some in if they are archetypal. I figure you should know about those, be able to recognize them when you meet them.

There are monsters in my work. I used to despair at this. But then I realized I can't eliminate them. They're just part of the trip. The key is just don't let them think they're in control. The bardo plane contains all these awful gods and demons. They're just projections.

I try for perfectly blissful imagery but there's always some demonic shadow that enters in. I suppose it's like the gargoyles in the cathedrals in Europe: one must include the grotesque or it will invite itself.

The pyramid shape in this instance is actually a highway. It leads to a great mandala hall, built not of any substance, but of glass-like air. Nothing we know of on this plane.

A wheel of life on earth. What you see when you've gone through the portal and you look back. Star gates. Places in the universe that lead you to other places. Light creatures. Nesting galaxies. Cosmic power stations. A way station. The place where two forms meet and impart their energy. This is where I think Rudolf Bauer was headed: the cosmic view.

The composition is a game plan; like an electronic game, a video game.

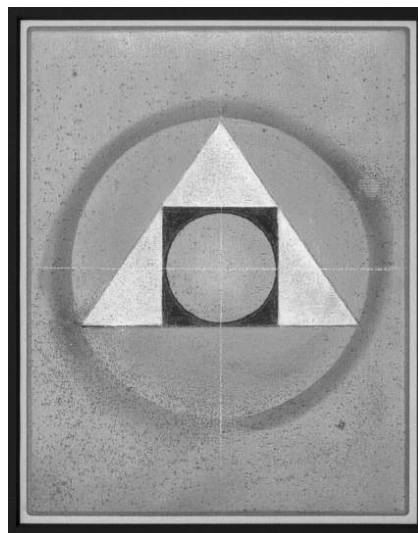
This one is called "Light Structure." I don't know if you've noticed but it's also a Tree of Life: the ten points in the right positions, with the symbol of limitless light and energy at the top. It is also a row of chakras up the middle. It extends both up and out into space, spatially it goes in many directions. It's

multi-dimensional. There is a path that leads right to the center. The pyramid is also in there. It's an image of balance and harmony. I read a book recently by a woman who analyzes symbolism of many cultures, and she said the symbols that are common to all cultures are the circle, the square, the triangle, the cross, and the spiral—and all are in this image. It would also make a wonderful stained glass window. I didn't mention the Kabbalah or chakras because I want people to discover that for themselves. I preferred to give it a more anonymous title, like "Light Structure." I really feel like this image is the culmination of fifty years of work and thought—I know it sounds silly to make such a claim, but that is how I feel about it.

The picture, the surface, the proportions: all these things are intimately tied up with subject matter. There are ways of avoiding this, but you seem to get further away from the essence of the picture.

I'm interested in the Hindu system of sacred geometry: Vastu. But at the same time you ignore these things because if you recognize them you break them.

I was looking at a *National Geographic* article on jellyfish and manta rays: they really are diagrams of the galaxies.

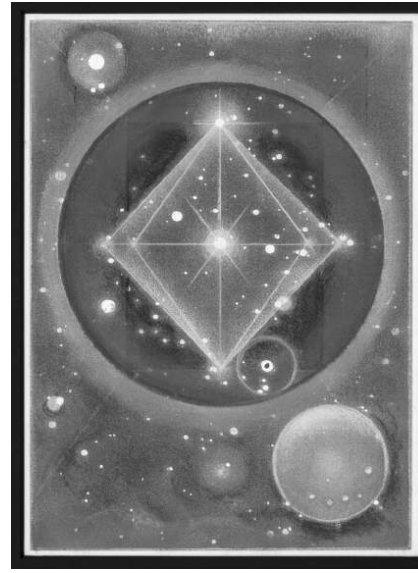


This pastel depicts seed-like things creating themselves. The creator creates once, then allows things to create themselves.

It's an enigmatic allegory, even I don't know what it means.

I was very inspired by Islamic prayer carpets. I have several good books on them. This pastel depicts a niche with a hanging light; blue pillars of wisdom hold up the triangle: the vase of immortality. I'd like to have some of these pastels woven as rugs in India.

I'm trying to depict the immaterial. I definitely belong to the American Transcendentalist school of painters.



Sometimes you have to risk making mistakes to find out what the message is. Mistakes are very valuable. You find ideas you never had before. There's lots of erasing in some of these, but the works must never look overworked or strained or forced. *They tell me* what to do. I hardly make a move unless I'm quite certain that is what they want me to do.

I can't tell you how many times I have given up out of lack of interest from the outside world.

A dark room, quiet music. Works not hung on a wall but resting on a low shelf. That is the type of environment where I see my work. A formal arrangement around it like vases or flowers or personal objects. The painting should have light aimed at it. This would look best with some of my more formal designs, like Guardian/Guide. And I don't mean to turn it into a sacred shrine.

An image of San Francisco Bay thousands of years ago or in the future, when all is rock again, and above that the world of fire.

I've always been embarrassed by being on underground film programs and shown with people whose work just made me uncomfortable to be seen in their company. They would go for nasty seamy stuff and I was always going for the stars. I had to back out from all of it.

I did not start with anything really special going for me, just an aptitude for graphic arts. I wasn't expecting to find any of the things I eventually found. I felt that if I kept working with the same design over and over it would lead me somewhere new—it's not about repetition.

Shadows represent negative matter. The light has been kept from it. Therefore it is a different type of matter than we have been dealing with.

All kinds of psychedelic research took place in this apartment. But I was not just a bohemian pursuing a Beat dream. I was a professional artist plying my trade.

It becomes a question of, what are you doing, what are you thinking about? But then the things you are thinking about when you work aren't always very interesting.

Printed vs. drawn: I want to work in the space between these things.

Mountain High: These are the thought forms of a mountain, if you were even wondering what a mountain was thinking.

The way lines are “performed” are a very significant part of my ideas and work. I’m an American Precisionist. Delicacy, clarity, sharpness.

A lot of times I arrive at a place by getting rid of what’s there.

Tibetan ghost traps. Dream catchers. A web. I like that idea. A place where dreams go. A bit of dark matter from the universe that we carry with us. If you’re passing through these spaces it’s fine, but if you decide to stay it’s not so fine.

This is an alchemical graph of how the universe is set up. I took a medieval diagram and followed it closely. I have no real desire to say anything about the hermetic meaning of any of my drawings. I hope they express themselves in a “clean” way.

Beauty, I like beauty. I can’t help it.

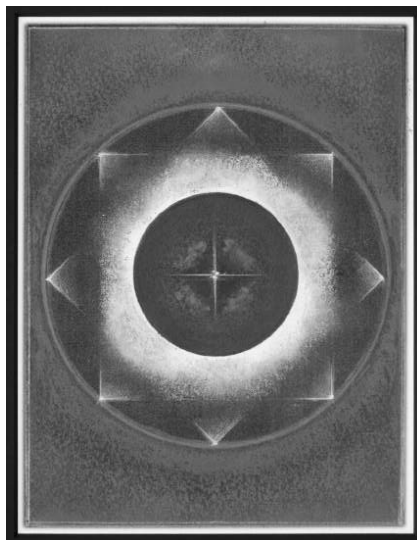
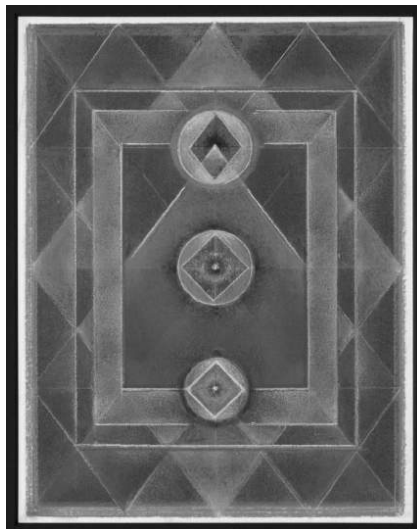
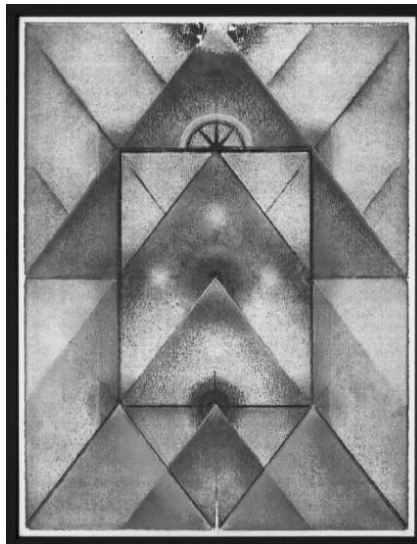
About 90% of these pastels are done with my fingers. They’re finger paintings. Trying to fix a mistake might set up a whole new area I hadn’t considered. A smudge might reveal an emanation. It’s all very subtle—deciding what should go in and what should go out.

When I’m drawing I lay my pastels out like the keyboard of an organ. I don’t want to waste energy when working, at my age. I like that orderly quality. Some are soft, some firm, some oily. I use all types, Sennelier, Winsor Newton, Derwent pencils, etc.

I see myself in everything I do now, the self in every which way: self-centered, self-effacing, self-involved. Basically, it’s all self-portraiture.

In other lifetimes I was a medieval manuscript illuminator, working hunched over a desk in a small cabin in Germany. Also Tibet, and ancient Egypt. There are so many ways an artist can be an actor in his work, he can visit any time period. I don’t go around with any of these ideas firmly ensconced in my work but I can entertain these notions at any time.

Rachmaninov’s *Symphonic Dances*: he showed some sides of himself that reveal very complex sonic effects, off into outer space. My recent film *Epilogue* is like a full blown symphonic work.



Tekies will never be artists—all this technology and electronics is just a lot of bad ideas. They’re throwing ideas like coal on the fire and nothing comes of it. I don’t mind the distinction of “fine art.” It will keep the different intellectual levels apart. Let them have their obnoxious media.

A lot of imagery comes about from seeing things in a knowledgeable way: knowing what you’re looking at. I spend a lot of looking on the work. I have this mystical gaze that allows me to see if there are any hidden structures.

Vastu sutra drawings, vase outlines, temple architecture. You could superimpose these things over my drawings and find they match up.

It can be quite mind blowing if you have a mind to blow. Not everyone meets that criteria.

Artists must have a partnership with materiality. The emergent properties of materiality are the ground of an artist’s aesthetic resources. Emergent properties are those that cannot be reduced. It blocks reductionism. Reductionism is the enemy of the artist.

Art is a kind of equation: properties vs. capacities. Properties are actual, capacity is real but not actual.

My works go to a lot of different places, you don’t just go to one place and stay there. I don’t come out and say what the final place is. I leave it to you. The place is enigmatic, although some spaces within it are more enigmatic than others.

There are a lot of jokes in the work.

I read a lot of stories of Indian saints and holy men—I really love those stories. Yogananda’s *Autobiography* was a big influence on me in terms of projected spiritual experiences. Hindu teachings allow for alternate universes existing simultaneously—Meher Baba talks about this. Meher Baba: I learned a lot from him. I also learned I didn’t want to go there.

A burning spot of beautiful coloration, a ring or aura around it. It’s called one-pointedness. It had a lot to do with the serious yoga routine that I followed. Now I’ve gone beyond that. Not that I disparage it. It just isn’t uppermost in my thoughts.

I complete the work and I’m not even certain what I’ve depicted there. Hidden formations.

Thousands of tiny evaluations and choices and ideas, faster than the speed of thought. A condensation of innumerable moments of understanding, following deliberative or spontaneous actions. A little of both, actually. A question of identification. Otherwise you would go right past what you are working for, if you don’t recognize it.

These questions of the universe are not really knowable: to be aware of the questions seems to be enough. There's so much ridiculous simplification.

People say nice things about my work but they never say anything about the work itself. I've got a reputation but it seems that's all I've got. There's no support in terms of ideas on the work.

How to discuss yoga and spiritual concerns in my work without being fussy-headed about it?

The creative mind has its own logic to it. It isn't totally illogical.

The study of doorways I find very inspiring. When it comes to basic architecture I think humans have certain models built into their DNA.

This neighborhood is really sunk into my consciousness and shows up in a lot of things I do. This view out the window looks like French art: the sunshine, the little boats. Impressionism: it's an influence on my work even at its most abstract.

I spend a lot of time watching the birds in the garden outside my door. They are very ancient beings. I love their consciousness. I realize that if birds had arms and hands they would have become the dominant species long ago.

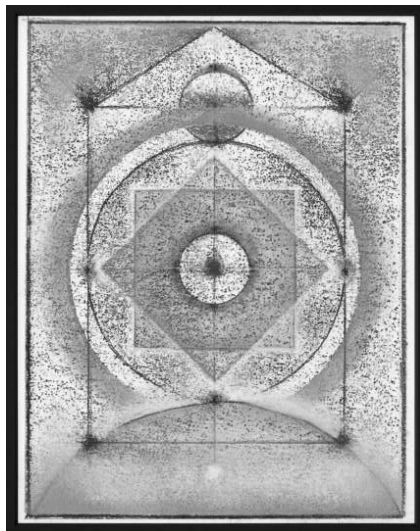
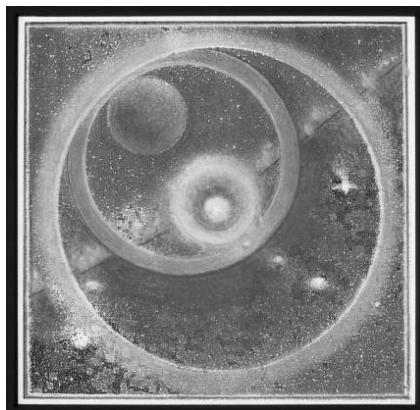
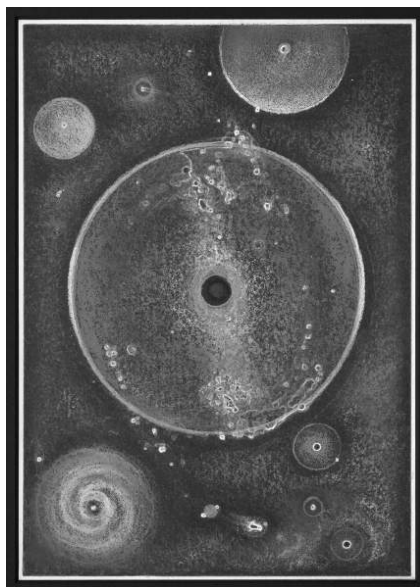
I'm not afraid of bringing my sense of design or illustration to the art. I make full use of the graphic tool kit: perspective, illusion, textures, colors, juxtaposition. This is the toolbox of an artist. I see no reason to abandon them. To throw away shading, for example, would be a great mistake. Perspective is a wonderful thing—why not use it? Realism also. I have no problem making use of realism in my work from time to time: I just don't want to live there.

Whenever I see ambiguity I jump at it. I like to bring out as many different meanings as I can.

For the artist you go through the whole story of art history in whatever manner you can. You have to know Egyptian art, Oriental, Renaissance, etc. I consider myself a modern artist only because I live in modern times. What I do artists have always done.

I do all my thinking in images. I've come to have a complete mistrust of words, and all the fallacious possibilities they contain. It's so easy to get worked up over them. Just a few words can create such a problem.

I want to create an image that emerges from the void: you see it because it isn't there.



I think of everything I do in a drawing as a kind of performance; they are made up of different effects or techniques. I just call them tricks. Every trick of mine is now employed in every drawing. I'm presenting elements with a certain look and character, with occasional suggestions of three-dimensionality. The drawings are just a picture of me at work.

I feel I'm slowly evolving towards some essential aspect of my personality, which feels like it's just on the horizon. Maybe the horizon is just old age and death. I'm getting to be more like my adolescent self than ever: somebody I lost sight of along the way.

I'm someone who likes to look at the same thing, day after day. Instead of being boring, it's more intense. My whole life is very repetitious, but that heightens my focus and concentration. I'm really only interested in the inner workings of the human mind, and I don't have to go outside to experience that. And the feedback I get from the artwork itself informs that state of mind.

These days I'm pretty much taken up with my own mind. I take it where it's been leading, take it where it wants to go, but now with a sense of urgency.

I've eliminated distractions.

I'm glad I've lived to be 77 years old, because I feel like at this point in my life I'm really able to synthesize all of the different concerns I've had over my lifetime. It's all fallen into place and it's almost as if I can't make a wrong move these days.

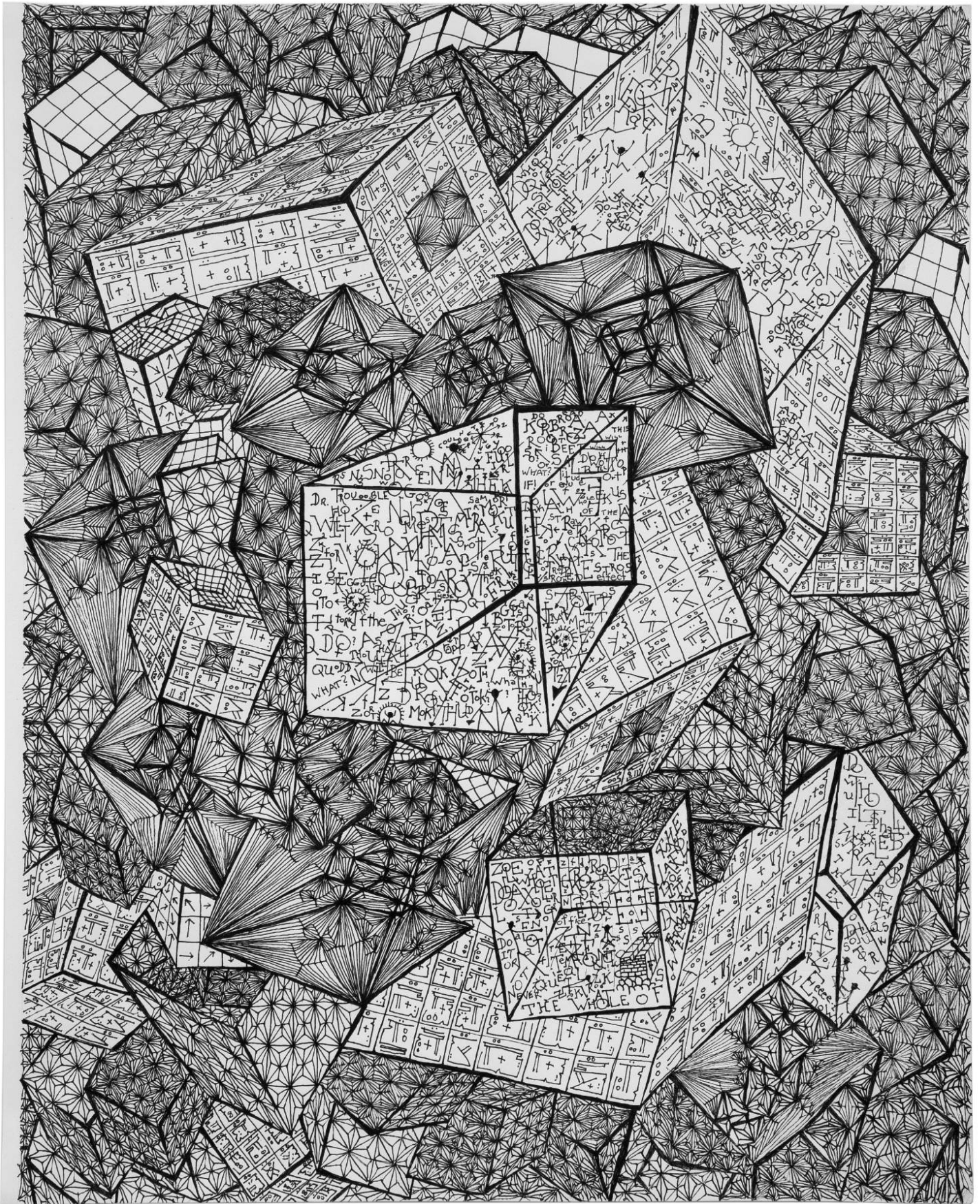
I'm not afraid of death, but I dislike the idea of leaving behind a corpse, which is going to be an inconvenience to other people. I wish there could be some way I would disappear altogether.

I really just feel like staying in all the time now to make these drawings. I have no desire to be involved with anything else. I guess if I'm going to turn my back on the world, I've picked a pretty good time to do it.

WORKS

"Death and Transfiguration"
"Oceanic Blues"
"Alchemical Geometric Figure (Allegory)"
"Diamond Portal"
"Light Structure"
"Prayer Rug"
"Tibetan Solar Eclipse"
"Strange Harmonies"
"Circle of Fire"
"Untitled"

All works 2003.
Pastel, prisma-color, and ink on paper, 8.5 × 11 inches.



Three Drawings, 2014. Ink on paper, 15.5×13 inches

Charles Stein
Stroke

(9/16-21/01. St. Francis Hospital Poughkeepsie, Rhinecliff.)

black ink

fantastic tangle of minatory tubes
subject to pressures of mind—
tensions and distensions of a world release
radical interrupts in chaos itself—

Strike One! and the eyeball seems
to bugle from its socket
and images slide away in double deficit—

When will the hammer fall a second time?
What range of world
elided or eliminated outright?

Mind falls into world,
world
launches missiles
back at
mind.

The Towers of Extancy
hoard all the being they can
as if being were substance
and measured thereby.

There is a little panel in the intellect
whose rotating dials and levers measure extancy

and another darker panel back of that
where being's ranges and categories are decided.

The ghost without a hand can turn these dials—
the one by measure ruled and read
the other by a kind of absolute dead-reckoning
moved toward world or away
back to that which feeling searches for home—
an open radiance watching through the meshes of thought and world
but spaced by love
to reach the spaces in all other beings
and *lead* them home

blue ink

murky liquid looked at long
until the mud wall's small gleams
intensify—triangles
of silver hot to the mind—
mind burned by sharp edges of the light—

draw it up from the little glimmer
until brightness hiding in the tiny gleams
burn the mind that draws it up and out

How can light
burn the mind?

But the mind
pulled it
out of itself
straining its own
possibility—that's how!
until major lesions streak the thought-flesh

The mind's own edge
alarming its right to *be*
light—

inside itself
the mind *as* light
is sharp as diamond
tough
and ever-growing harder and more bright—
the clenching intellect
the riveting intensity
the keenness
wounds the possibility thereof
until all
is edge
and keenness

and the teeming feral darkness of the world
wherefrom that brightness first took gleam
falls back into itself and seems no more

When
mind was parked as parcels mixed
in murky liquid swirling indistinct from element
and muddy textured wall before all face—

Appearances were flat as they were.
No lightnings crashed the ordinary.
The originary groaned with debile process.
Sparks adhered to resins.
Aged vessels sat on aging ledges.

Then—
river of tetrahedrons
flowing from a point
gold and silver alternate
bordered by triangles of silver and gold

river of cuboids—
intensifications of themselves—
coherent blotches of light in turbulent blackness.

Writing is violence.
It draws from turbulent blackness
cuboids of light—

checkerboard swatches of intensity
edging out absence—

the field of loud I Am
that grows ever more distinct
trumpeting edgeless edge
and will not die.

red ink

Whence this incursion
on the visual field?
This incisive oval of geometrical light
that scares me with the mad
distress of “the origin”—as if
I could see thereby
the lesion itself—the tear
in the minatory tangle
of vessel and tissue—a singular
violence distressed from the physical
object of myself—the
thought of the tangle
in which it is posed
by thought itself—invisible
thought of selfhood—hyper-
spatial to the tear
and to its terrible
ovoid incursion into
its own thought flesh. From what
but the action itself
enunciated now as a vibrating inset
of an order unintelligible
to the object it disturbs—
as if the “I” itself were
incised in its intuition
or the hyper-space of its
occurrence were inscribed
in a vicious *act*
that is no act but a *thing*
from that other zone
where terrors spring

—thus “I” must die
to heal the lesion
of its own increasing
clarification

and the afterspace
that includes its violent incursion
return to the space before
the space before

all violence began.

thick ink

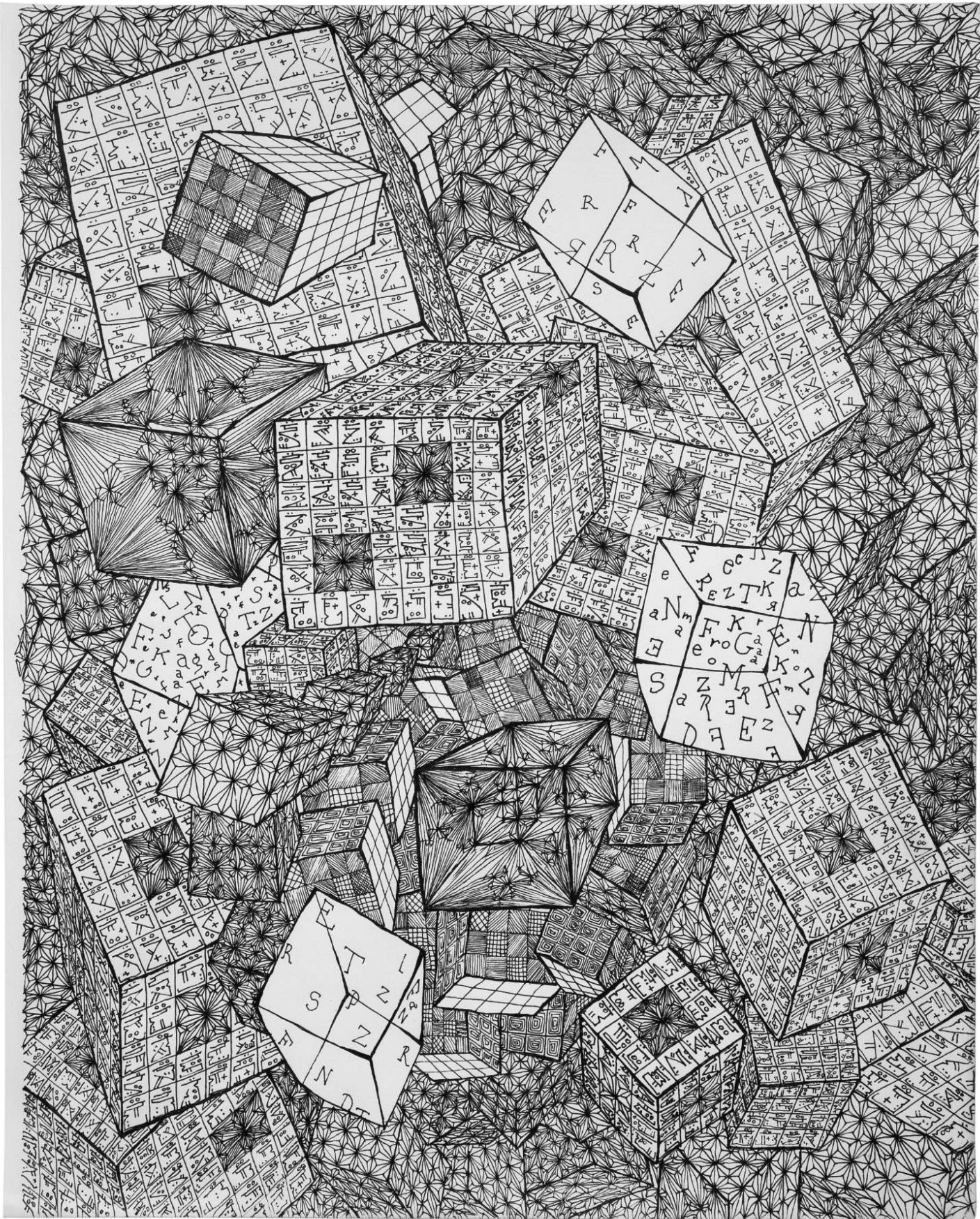
words without purpose
the embarrassment of apparently
real contingencies / asleep
on the cool embankment—
now ascend to the highest rank—
the empty empty;
the clarity; the breath
at home
with the bodily
meshes and hulk
it happens to be breathing in—
the largesse at large in the tangle
of cause and consequence
or purpose and embarrassment—
contingencies the meshes
of the snare / the alphabet
of contingency scrambled
so the noise of speech—speech noise—

You can't get out of the
coil of speech noise
and the mind that
eggs it on—turning
about its axis and attempting to SAY
the state it wants to have and be
wanting to think out with mind brush
and mortar and pestle of intellect
the possible *rank*—Impossible and RANK!
The gargoyles leaping from the forehead!
The bouncers and the barkeeps
locked up with the brawlers in the brawl!

If I knew it
why not get on a bus
and go without delay
to the city beyond concomitance—
the luminous Room in The Hull of the Ship of Truth—
the moon man aloof in the saddle
shining
shining
bounteous grace rays
down hospital hallways
sneaking glances and casting beams
into desperate units
where groans and miseries turn on their axes
and the minds of medics are disjoined
from the bodies they've wired.

Why not get in the cab
of the big truck
in furious exodus
to comport oneself

home
on the bluenight highway?



no ink

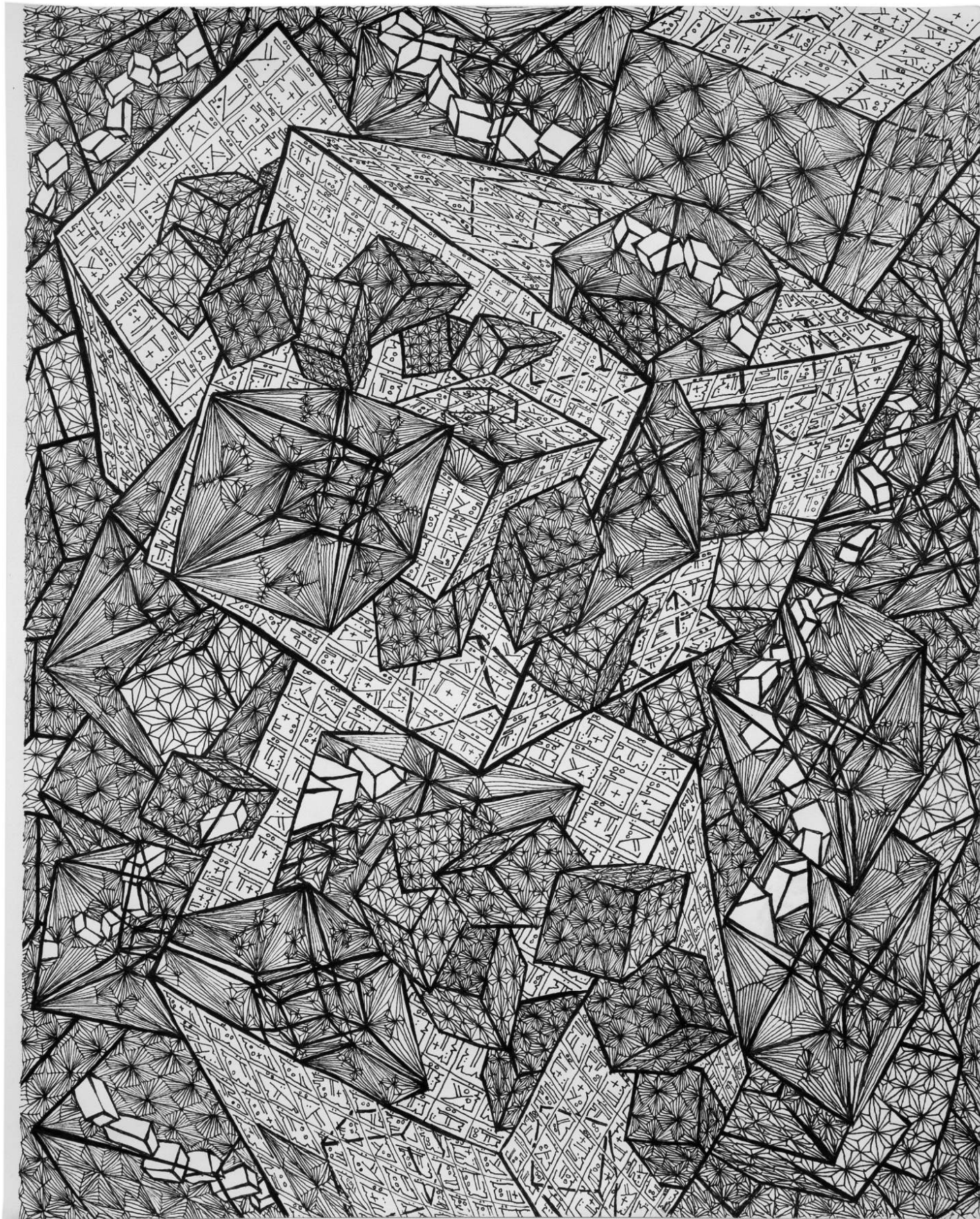
strings
 and nerves
 and roadways
 bundled in a tangle
 snakes and phosphorescent insects
 phos the remembrance
 of light
 when things leapt up
 from themselves
 long ago
 in the dawn of ta onta—
 eon
 esti—is—
 the singular
 rife
 orb
 released from the tangle
 mind saddled on being
 without digression or part
 galloping dayward

just ink

a ball of tangled “yarn” or nerves or vessels
 themselves the course and the message
 the singular message of self-luminous Orb
 tiple chenpo
 totality coursing through each span

the orb returns to the tangle
 knotted yarn’s
 impossible story
 anomalous
 timed to burst
 function to break down
 the furious space between the crossing strands
 that things are ripped out of their nature
 when the message explodes in the channel
 the mindful light of the space through which it courses
 breaks into the coursing
 When earliest intellect
 awakens in the telling
 the oldest gods
 pass before the Face
 (care nothing
 but for the moment of this passing
 even in death
 the “green cloths”
 solicitous friends disarmed
 launching the world
 against its own form

.....
 CHARLES STEIN's work comprises a complexly integrated field of poems, prose reflections, translations, drawings, photographs, lectures, conversations, and performances. Born 1944 in New York City, he is the author of thirteen books of poetry. His prose writings include a vision of the Eleusinian Mysteries, *Persephone Unveiled* (North Atlantic Books), a critical study of poet Charles Olson's use of the writing of C.G. Jung, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (Station Hill Press), and a collaborative study with George Quasha of the work of Gary Hill, *An Art of Limina: Gary Hill's Works & Writings*, Ediciones Poligrafa. His work can be sampled at his website: charlessteinpoet.com



The Ten Best Art Books of 2014

New York School Painters & Poets: Neon in Daylight

By Jenni Quilter, with Bill Berkson, Larry Fagin, Allison Power, Carter Ratcliff

RIZZOLI NEW YORK, \$75.00

This vivid, grand book documents a time and place that to many New Yorkers today, looks and sounds like Eden. A nexus of invention, collaboration, and cheap rent, *New York School Painters & Poets* collages primary material (poems, photographs, letters, home movie stills, sketchbooks) alongside Quilter's winding narrative of life in lower Manhattan from 1935–75, decades when as Edwin Denby wrote "everybody drank coffee and nobody had shows." These years encapsulated fierce personalities and partnerships that recalibrated the course of American art: "Bill" de Kooning, Frank O'Hara, Rudy Burkhardt, Jane Freilicher, Ted Berrigan, George Schneeman, and Anne Waldman, just to list a few luminaries.

It's hard to pour through these pages without feeling nostalgic for an increasing mirage—a New York community born in the streets and sustained through collective, contradictory dreams. As an aggregate memoir, this book properly celebrates this prodigiously influential moment. But also, by its existence as a tome, Quilter memorializes the decline of this very phenomenon.

—Sara Christoph

Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow

By David Levi Strauss

APERTURE, \$29.95

David Levi Strauss's newest book of essays on photography and politics is even more commanding than his previous collections: the writing is fierce and incisive, the images discussed often carry the weight of life and death. The title is pulled from a 1962 poem in which the photographer Frederick Sommer writes, "every word fights for an image / the most irrepressible state of an idea." This tension pervades Strauss's writing, from the social implications of Susan Meiselas's work, to his lucid condemnation of the Obama administration's decision to withhold images of torture. This contentious ebb and flow between word and image, so Strauss argues, could be used to chart the history of human freedom.

To those mired in the debate of documentary photography as an "aestheticization of suffering," Strauss's words gather a call to arms for the opposition. "The formation of attitudes through the propagation of words and images is a large part of life in a functioning democracy," Strauss writes, "and we devalue it at our peril." In a collaboration with Alfredo Jaar in 2009, the author proposed a *New York Times* op-ed that would have printed explicitly banal captions describing atrocities committed by American soldiers under opaque, black boxes roughly the size of a front page photo. (The proposal was ultimately turned down by the *Times*.) Few others write so poignantly on images of violence, probably because it is, for lack of a better word, so impossibly hard.

—Sara Christoph

Alex Katz

By Carter Ratcliff, Robert Storr, Iwona Blazwick, Barry Schwabsky

PHAIDON, \$69.95

This Alex Katz compendium provides an intimate portrait of the artist, from his competitive relationship with Abstract Expressionists, to his desire to rival film and critique historical painters such as Rembrandt ("they tell you too much about the person, rather than showing you the person") to his envisioning of himself as a "social fugitive" during his illegal loft living in Manhattan. In a 2004 interview, Robert Storr nudges at the social subtext of his work, to which Katz coolly replies that he is uninterested in having "the subject matter on top." His formal distillations of the figure, filtered through a heroic scale and often an all-over structure (such as his fantastic paintings of fall leaves), can be attributed to what Barry Schwabsky deftly explains as a "cool attitude [...] a way to prevent it from becoming corny." This volume also allows us the uncommon privilege of hearing, through many interviews, the otherwise laconic Katz in his own words, elucidated by a kaleidoscopic collection of text and images. My favorite discovery is his 1977 *Times Square Mural*, in which he painted a continuous band of 23 portraits measuring 60 by 250 feet, a chic, painterly Mount Rushmore of sorts.

—Greg Lindquist

Nature and Art are Physical: Writings on Art, 1967–2008

By Rackstraw Downes

EDGEWISE, \$20.00

In his excellent introduction to this prismatic self-portrait of Rackstraw Downes, John Elderfield assumes and elucidates the formal, historical, and poetic lenses through which Downes both writes about and paints the landscape, the history of painting and literature. Taking winding paths through passages of Downes's writing, Elderfield elaborates on unexpected connections with Downes's "principles that are open to discussion, not theories that can only be accepted or dismissed." While it's revelatory for the unfamiliar reader to read essays previously published in other collections, the initiated reader will take delight in the newer ones, particularly in the fourth section about landscape. In "Is technology a New Form?" Downes characterizes technology as a tool by which artists become beholden to corporate structures and whose communication becomes controlled. One might also take note of the influence of Downes's experience with the seriality of Walter de Maria's *The Lightning Field* on paintings that followed, such as "Beehive Yard at the Rim of a Canyon on the Rio Grande, Presidio, TX" (2005), or paintings describing the foreign forms of water stations in Texas. In "The Lightning Field," Downes notes that monotony, "like that of minimal art, is full of slight variety, when you examine it." It is this careful, slowly accumulating and steadily expanding vision that we see unfold in Downes's sensitive prose, chronicled in this indispensable volume.

—Greg Lindquist

Paul Strand: Master of Modern Photography

By Peter Barberie with Amanda N. Bock

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$75

Exhibition at Philadelphia Museum of Art through January 4, 2015

Accompanying the eponymous exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through January 4, this 372-page opus reframes Paul Strand's role in American modernist photography. Central is an excellent essay by Amanda N. Bock that focuses on his political work of the 1930s through '50s. Bock argues that this work—from multimedia documentary and polemical films to books pairing photographs and text—fulfills Strand's declaration of "the artist who is also a citizen," who raises awareness, builds community, and creates collaborative art. This thesis is best exemplified in Strand's travels throughout Mexico, culminating in *Redes* (1936), an allegorical film about Veracruz fishermen organizing for wages and control of production against corrupt overseers ("human beings can be caught fish, too," Strand remarked), and *Native Land*, the documentary that challenged corporate interests, the Ku Klux Klan, and big business.

—Greg Lindquist

The History of the Devil

By Vilém Flusser, Translated by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS/UNIVOCAL, \$24.95

More than half a dozen books by the Czech-Brazilian media philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920 – 91) have been translated into English and published since the millennium. Although best known in the U.S. for *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), many of these recently translated texts predate Flusser's so-called "technical image" writings, but provide a rich background for understanding his thinking around images and apparatuses. I would highly recommend *Post-History*, *On Doubt*, and *Natural: Mind*—and particularly this last one, which poetically deconstructs the nature-culture dialectic—all of which were released by the small press Univocal within the last 18 months. The most recent, however, is *The History of the Devil*, which came out in September. Originally written in German and translated by Flusser into Portuguese and published in 1965, it references Goethe's *Faust* and borrows the structure of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and sets the stage for Flusser's later writings, considering God and the Devil (another dialectic), as well as art and science, phenomenology and painting. More profoundly, for Flusser, a Jewish refugee in Brazil who had lost his whole family in the Holocaust, it considers a reality in which, he writes: "The world is here, in front of us, because we ordered it to emerge from the abyss of nothingness. We only have to turn our backs to it, we only have to lose our interest in it, and it shall disappear into the same abyss."

—Martha Schwendener

Masterpieces in Detail:

Early Netherlandish Art from van Eyck to Bosch

By Till-Holger Borchert

PRESTEL, \$120.00

The dictum that the "devil is in the details," Borchert provides a 200-year survey of Netherlandish painting, some with 15 by 22 inch spreads of extreme detail. Witness in Jan van Eyck's "Ghent Altarpiece" the distinct strands of Adam's pubic hair and the exquisite description of God's clasp, the cascading tears on Mary's pale face in Van der Weyden's "Descent from the Cross," and the loose, quick impasto brushwork of a tigress suckling her young cubs, in Rubens's "The Four Rivers of Paradise." Mixed with lesser-known masterpieces, these riveting observations allow opportunities for what art history surveys typically ignore: details that activate inquiry, curiosity, and enthusiasm, presenting not the image but glimpses into fully formed and scaled objects, with the imperfections of brushstrokes and weathered cracks of time.

—Greg Lindquist

ENTRE ENTREE

By Stephan Keppel

FW:BOOKS, \$45

Composed of photographs taken around the suburbs of Paris and the city's ring road, the Boulevard Périphérique, Stephan Keppel's *Entre Entree* is a fractured and disorienting portrait of Paris's peripheral urban landscapes. Equally interested in photography and its subsequent reproduction, Keppel utilizes various paper stock, over-printed images, and rephotographed printouts to explore the city's compact surface. Designed by Hans Gremmen, the book layers Keppel's black-and-white images into repeating patterns of concrete, foliage, and black ink. Taken individually, the images seem incidental, but together they both capture the urban landscape's shifting surfaces and playfully comment on photography's promiscuous duplication. Inseparable from their presence on the page, the often overlapping images and reproduced reproductions form a dense whole that constantly shifts our attention back and forth between the three-dimensional subject matter and the flat surface of the page. Reflected and refracted across the printed page, the suburbs of Paris become a hall of mirrors—a maze of cacophonous ink and concrete forms.

—Adam Bell

Ray Johnson

KARMA, \$45

An early participant in both the Pop and Fluxus movements, Ray Johnson created a distinct body of collage work mined from popular print media. This large volume compiles hundreds of Johnson's never-before-seen collages—as well as drawings and interventions—that functioned as compositions for the artist's early "motico" works. Johnson often combined celebrity with art historical allusions, deploying clever puns through the use of pop culture figures such as Mickey Mouse, Elvis Presley, James Dean, Michael Jackson, and Calvin Klein models. Decades after they were made, the artworks in this book are an increasingly accurate representation of contemporary society and include some of the most recognizable imagery from the 20th and 21st centuries. The publication includes 296 color images of collages, drawings, interventions, and other ephemera courtesy of Johnson's estate.

—Elizabeth Karp-Evans

Moyra Davey: Burn the Diaries

Texts by Moyra Davey, Alison Strayer

MUSEUM MODERNER KUNST STIFTUNG LUDWIG WIEN, VIENNA; ICA, PHILADELPHIA; DANCING FOXES PRESS, BROOKLYN, \$27

Moyra Davey's penchant for introspective discussion on process is a unifying factor throughout her work, and *Burn the Diaries* operates as a kind of culminating capstone to these pursuits, in two acts. The first is a clear, open window onto the connective tissue of the artist's own mind, deftly compressing memory and experience through layers and layers of literary and self-analysis, led by Jean Genet's writings. The second is an essay by Alison Strayer, an equally contemplative literary obsessive, analyzing Davey's document within the context of her own personal narrative. Published in conjunction with her film *My Saints*, *Burn the Diaries* is composed of documents that reflect on the complex acts of reading, writing, absorbing, and recording information visually, verbally, and intellectually, maintaining a dog-eared and finger-printed aesthetic in its method of presentation. It comprises writing on writing, photographs about photography, thoughts on thinking, and delicately probes the sticky conundrum of defining oneself through one's influences. At the heart of *Burn* is the dual sense of security provided by documentation and the terrifying prospect that these delicate relics could serve to define the nuanced complexity of experience.

—Samantha Dylan Mitchell

EVENTS ASHORE, An-My Lê (Aperture, 2014)

by Adam Bell

The task of the photographer in examining the effects of war has become increasingly problematic. At a time when cell phones, video, and social media dominate the coverage of events, the heroic model of the photojournalist braving the front lines has lost its relevance and forced artists and documentarians to look for alternative approaches to scrutinize conflict. For photographers, this often involves exploring events peripheral to war, or in its aftermath. Ironically, this solution has a precedent in photography's past. Nineteenth-century photographers like Roger Fenton and Timothy O'Sullivan, for example, were forced by the camera's technological limitations to photograph war at a remove or in its wake. Drawing inspiration from this rich tradition of 19th-century war photography, An-My Lê's *Events Ashore* eschews the violent drama of war and looks at the complicated and pervasive influence of the U.S. military around the world. Whether poised on the deck of a military battleship or alongside troops in the field, Lê uses her large-format camera to observe the transformative global presence of the military.

Events Ashore began almost 10 years ago, when Lê was invited to photograph naval ships preparing for departure to Iraq. Travelling around the world, from Panama to Iraq to Antarctica, Lê accompanied various non-combat, humanitarian, and scientific missions. Lê is not a photojournalist in any traditional sense, and, operating far from the front lines, she is most interested in the less visible work of the military. Set against a shifting global background, Lê offers an intimate look at the lives of the people who make the military work. From training local military in basic combat and practicing drills on a beach to piloting a submarine through the Arctic Circle and delivering aid, young cadets and officers are depicted doing often mundane but important tasks. There are several individual portraits, but for the most part Lê's camera is positioned at a remove, which allows her to place the individuals and military equipment within a larger landscape. As Lê herself states, her work addresses "the vast geopolitical forces and conflicts that shape these landscapes." Rather than presenting an overtly politicized view, Lê treats her subjects with a sensitivity and even-handedness that complicates past assessments. Exploiting the illusion of photographic objectivity, she forces the viewer to reflect on the complicated role the U.S. military plays around the world.

At the heart of the work is Lê's own ambivalent and conflicted relationship with the U.S. military. As a young girl, Lê was one of many Vietnamese transported to the United States in the wake of the Vietnam War, and she grew up seeing the U.S. military as both aggressors and saviors. This tension is explored at length in Lê's two earliest bodies of work: *Việt Nam* (1994–98), which looked at the contemporary landscape of Vietnam, and *Small Wars* (1999–2002), which documented Vietnam War reenactments in the United States, with Lê often participating and playing the role of a Vietnamese soldier. Lê works with a large-format 5 by 7 view camera, which allows for highly descriptive and detailed images that resemble the slightly panoramic 35mm format more than most large-format cameras. Best known for her black-and-white work, she began shooting color with *Events Ashore*. Her deep-focus images are sharp throughout, rendering their entire scenes in crisp detail that invites close scrutiny.

The book is organized into several numbered chapters, and begins with a short sequence of five landscapes from various regions of the globe—Panama, California, the Bering Sea, Antarctica, and Australia. Unlike most of the images in the book, these photographs' expansive landscapes are devoid of people. Read in relation to the images that follow, these appear as empty stages awaiting the drama to come. In the subsequent four chapters, the images are grouped roughly thematically, moving between the sea, the land, and the coast. At the end of the book is a text by Geoff Dyer, who selected a number of the images and wrote a series of short, digressive, and humorous pieces on the photographs. Dyer's writing provides levity, as well as poignant insight into the work. The book is generously portioned at 10.5 by 13 inches, and the photographic reproductions stunningly capture the rich tonalities of Lê's large-format images.

Already honored with numerous prizes, including a coveted MacArthur Fellowship, Lê is a formidable artist, and it is hard to find fault with this Herculean project. While some might quibble with Lê's apparent neutrality when dealing with such a contentious subject, it is her very distance that allows us to see and read the work more clearly. In *Events Ashore*, Lê honors and updates the esteemed canon of 19th-century war photographers, offering a vital and complex document of the United States's military presence around the globe. 📖

ADAM BELL is a photographer and writer.

Eight Begin: Artist Memories of Starting Out Edited by Ada Katz

by Nathalie Provosty

The interviews in *Eight Begin* are written as monologues in the relaxed confidence of a friend—most notably with Sally Hazelet Drummond, who discloses complete vulnerability before her listener. The invisible interviewer, attuned and sensitive, is Ada Katz, a former scientist who received a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in tumor genetics at the University of Milan in 1955—known to many from hundreds of portraits by her husband, the painter Alex Katz. Here she's edited herself from the interviews she's conducted, allowing her influence to be felt by reverberation in much the same way she has informed her partner's paintings. The approach never fails to convey her intelligence and grace. While physically removed, her telluric current remains and serves the larger project at hand.

Ada Katz's questions—asked between March 17, 1974, and March 2, 1975—are vividly present in the answers given by Ronald Bladen, Lois Dodd, Sally Hazelet Drummond, Al Held, Alex Katz, William King, Philip Pearlstein, and George Sugarman. The artists were among a circle of friends who began their careers at Tanager Gallery on 10th Street, an artists' cooperative that as Frank O'Hara wrote in *Kulchur* 6 in the summer of 1962 was able to "confer on a first show by an unknown artist a distinction pretty much unavailable to the younger artist elsewhere." In September of this year, many of these artists' works were shown together again in a felicitous exhibition curated by Irving Sandler at Loretta Howard Gallery in Chelsea, which hosted this book's launch, reminding us: where and how does one begin?

Often we don't know the details of even a close friend's early home or city, although we may know generalities; in each narrative, candid and concrete disclosures come across as particularly fresh. The stories proceed with a swift pace, many of them beginning with "I was born," and hopscotch from memories of a mother's plain hair bun (Dodd), to the stench of pickled herring (Held, relaying his father's desperate, Depression-era transition from trade jeweler to pickle vendor), to the shock of a plane crashing into the Empire State Building two days after arriving in New York (King—in July 1945, 11 people were killed in an accident caused by heavy fog). The passages range from 8 to 12 pages, in matter-of-fact Courier typeface. Their swiftness is also due, in part, to Katz's removal of conjunctives—the ands and ors responsible for the run-ons in spoken language—which gives the reader a feeling of galloping across short, punchy sentences. It's a fun and breezy way to absorb the narratives, particularly given the substantive information revealed.

What exactly is revealed? In lieu of spoiling the allure, it's enough to say that these stories—along with their personal characteristics—also function as historical documents of an era in American history that is long gone. Massive, steely World War II insinuates itself into sentences about, for example, a poetry club at the shipyards (Bladen), or lying on the floor of the empty(!) Vatican Museum in Rome (Pearlstein). Nearly all eight artists had working-class backgrounds. Many of them were "servicemen": Al Held and Alex Katz were in the Navy, Pearlstein and Sugarman in the Army. The G.I. Bill was crucial to these men's art education. Cooper Union—a free school—instructed a few, some whose attendance seemed curiously incidental. (Dodd had no intention of going to college or art school, was in fact considering secretarial school, but a young teacher mentioned Cooper, so Dodd trekked from Jersey to take the test. King heard about Cooper but thought, "Union? I don't want a union." He took the test, got in, but decided instead to go to Columbia for architecture—his aunt was supposed to send him \$90 for Columbia's tuition and only sent \$9, so King went to Cooper.) A couple also received Fulbright grants. In their day, the government supported culture.

Perhaps trumping even this institutional financial support was the timely, early support of individuals—teachers and peers. As Bladen says, "All the incidents which are important in relation to an art experience—and there are so many—revolve around being encouraged, being able to think of yourself as being part of the community of artists." The 10th Street gallery scene facilitated this supportive drive, particularly because financial benefits were truly not on anyone's mind (except as the hypothetical hope to one day show in the "uptown" galleries).

At the end of the story, the fact—the feat, really—that these people became artists (and remained so, successfully—four are still working today, 40 years later) is astonishingly illogical: line out a list of details, an order of events, and still the will, unexplainable, remains. In its lucid lack of explanation, *Eight Begin* is a gem of insight. 📖

NATHALIE PROVOSTY is an artist in New York.

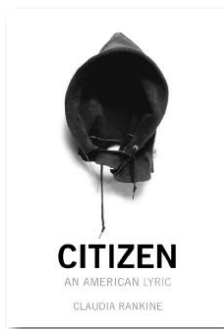
THE MYTH OF A POST-RACIAL AMERICA BY JILL DEHNERT

Claudia Rankine *Citizen: An American Lyric* (GRAYWOLF PRESS, 2014)

Within the first pages of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine establishes, through personal anecdote told in the second person, the themes that will be explored in the book: race, privilege, public versus private persona, memory and most ubiquitously, language, or, more specifically, the power of language both to construct and deconstruct personhood. “Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word,” she writes. The book is a gorgeous compilation of essay, poetry, and image assembled so that each section, paragraph, image, and line adds a layer of texture and meaning to the next. The effect of this layering gives the sense of drilling down, a deep investigation into the real state of race in this country as constructed through different mediums of communication—private conversation, public spectacle, visual art, mass media, and popular music.

Citizen, shortlisted for the 2014 National Book Award, attaches itself to the myth of post-racial America so as to obliterate it. We can no more exist in a “post-race” America than we can experience a collective amnesia with regard to the history of race in our country. Late in the book, Rankine quotes James Baldwin who says, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.” Laying bare the question of what it means to be a citizen of this country then becomes the purpose of this book—a question that has been hidden by our assumption that we have moved past “the difficulty of all that,” as Rankine describes it. It is precisely because we think we’re beyond “all that”—racism, both old and new—that this meditation on the contemporary reverberations of segregation and slavery resonates so sharply. It is through this intense investigation of race that Rankine reveals our deep lack of empathy for one another, and the book is utterly successful in illustrating just how massive that void is.

What *Citizen* demonstrates is that society fails not only on the national level but also on the individual level. Throughout the book, Rankine writes in the second person, forcing the reader to experience racism as target, witness, and perpetrator. The choice also serves as a call to action. “The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you.” As a white reader, it becomes clear that I am vastly ill-equipped to understand the precise and unjust ways in which the world is wrong. For example, Rankine repeatedly returns to the idea of erasure or the invisibility of the black body to the white viewer. “[He] has never seen him [the black subject], has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.” The point of this assertion is to both make me, the white reader, realize that I haven’t seen “him” and also to force me to do just that. This is just one example of many where Rankine conveys the white individual’s inability to comprehend the black experience. And it is in that



lack of comprehension that empathy is lost—and it is in the lack of empathy that aggression and hatred are born. This is Rankine’s goal—to show me the dearth of my own experience and understanding so that I can see outside of my narrow and privileged perspective.

While *Citizen* is illuminating, it would be inappropriate and reductive to call it didactic. Rather, the book’s form functions metaphorically, using an abundance of white space that works either as a place for silence or for response—an invitation to a conversation (this is also another effect of the second person). Conversation is important for two reasons. First, it encourages active participation and thoughtful communication. Second, conversation breeds empathy through the pursuit of understanding.

Throughout the course of that conversation the reader is introduced to, or perhaps reminded of, a series of truths about the erasure of the black body and the hatred that is created through this erasure. Rankine says, “There is no (Black) who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked, and unanswerable hatred.” The book’s blended form—juxtaposing individual experience with public spectacle, visual art with journalistic photos—conveys the breadth of this assertion while simultaneously validating it. It also shows how that hatred has been commodified and thus largely disregarded. This is the conversation that Rankine wants to have.

Race has a deeply rooted history in this country and Rankine pulls on those threads of memory to highlight the disparity between how far we think we’ve come and where we actually are: “as if then / and now were not the same moment.”

While Rankine poses the question of citizenship, it is not one that she answers because, again, she is not interested in answers but in dialogue. It is the questions and the conversation—the path to understanding and empathy—that are most important. Rankine takes this approach in part to engage a society that mistakenly believes we are past “all that” and in part because she doesn’t quite have a solution. “I don’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending. / Tell me a story, he says, wrapping his arms around me.” Thus, her solution is to deeply investigate racism through art and it becomes our responsibility to come up with the answer. Or, perhaps the purpose of the book is to leave this lasting question: “How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another?”

JILL DEHNERT is a writer living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is in the MFA program at the University of New Mexico where she is completing a novel.

INCONCLUSION BY GEOFFREY YOUNG

Charles D’Ambrosio *Loitering: New and Collected Essays* (TIN HOUSE BOOKS, 2014)

Charles D’Ambrosio wants his essays to live. This is not to say he hopes they endure as literature, though he no doubt does, as any writer would. Rather, by investing them with a high-minded casualness of style that indulges flights, digressions, intrusions, and colloquialisms, he creates an effect whereby the reader is not absorbing the pronouncements of an authority asserting his mastery over a topic so much as hearing very eloquent off-the-cuff thoughts by an impressively perceptive friend. His prose—incisive, playful, and candid—revels in its natural elaborations. It is designedly wild.

In his preface to *Loitering: New and Collected Essays* (which, in characteristic aversion to constriction, he titles “By Way of a Preface”), D’Ambrosio lays down the foundational precept of his philosophy. “One of my earliest ideas about writing was that the rhythms of prose came from the body, and [...] I still believe that,” he says, later applying the instinct directly: “I relied on my ear to a ridiculous extent [as a young writer], trusting that if I got the sound right—the music, the mood, the feel of things—then sense might eventually make an appearance.” His fidelity to the idea that sense comes from the senses meant embracing fluidity as a writer. As a fallible, experiencing being, he would not give in to the impulse to select a governing paradigm. The personal essay became his “forum for self doubt,” a way to exalt ever-protean odysseys of thought in a world that considers it “recrudent to waver.” To clear

the line between body and page was therefore to put awareness and empathy ahead of the yearning for conclusion. D’Ambrosio’s essays inhabit a space of not-knowing, of wondering, of struggle as ethic.

Of course, the yearning for conclusion is a powerful one, even in someone who has made a practice of resisting it. A suicidal strain runs in the D’Ambrosio family. The author’s youngest brother took his own life, and another brother tried and failed with a leap off a bridge. One would imagine that the meditations resulting from such trauma might ink into the basic vocabulary of literary pursuit. That is certainly the case for D’Ambrosio, who maintains a deep emotional connection to his brothers, and for whom the central agon of his explorations lies between the human need for answers to existential angst and the often painful reality that answers are only to be found subjectively. “Is silence for a writer tantamount to suicide?” he asks. Life continues via continuous questioning. To die is to fall silent, and to fall silent is to die.

D’Ambrosio finds a kindred spirit in J.D. Salinger, in whose work he identifies an aversion to falseness presented as bosom companion to a fixation on suicide. “A writer, in the wake of a suicide, might find all coherent narratives suspect, all postures false [...] might finally come to question and mistrust the integrity of his own inventions,” D’Ambrosio says, extending Holden Caulfield’s “voracious doubt” of the self. He thwarts this threat to the writer’s

voice through a Salinger-esque hyperawareness, not just of “conceits” and “phoniness,” as harped on by Salinger’s characters, but of the writer as creator of reality in the cosmos of the page. Self-consciousness is a virtue, here. “These are probably just the humdrum dilemmas any writer encounters,” he says of the sometimes random, sometimes superficial variations of style he embraced in his early work. Elsewhere, in a gloss on the psychology of suicide, he admits, “I’m throwing these ideas out scattershot,” and “I’m really oversimplifying here.” D’Ambrosio will remind his readers that he is merely human, and a human being, like Holden, is a character in a story written by the self. To assert a more formal authority would be the height of falseness.

Structuring his explorations, D’Ambrosio travels outside in. His poet’s eye lands first on that primary seat of superficiality, décor, or perhaps more accurately named “facades,” where inner hopes are reflected outward. An implacable cynicism insists that the way we craft our surroundings to represent us often belies personal quintessence. In his tour of manufactured homes in Washington, D’Ambrosio bemoans “a sincere imitation of [a regular house] [...]. It’s that inserted layer of sincerity that rings false.” The falseness here is the attempt to sell a pre-packaged life, free of inconveniences like thought, or self-reflection, or deciding who you are, and the tragedy is the high rate of sale. An analogous response to the dour Moscow Hotel, where the rooms are “an imitation of something nice, an arrangement of resemblances,” yields to a measure of sympathy at an orphanage in Svirstroy, where a boy’s room,

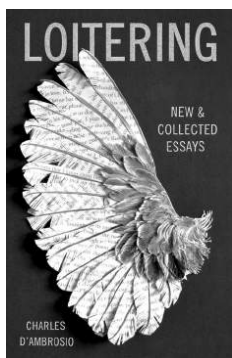
with its pictures of rock stars and cars, is “pretty much a rendition of a boy’s room in America, but without the wherewithal.” The author’s more optimistic tone at the orphanage can be attributed to the simple fact that his subjects there are children. If an unhelpful woman in a Russian information booth indicates hopelessness, it is because she has succumbed to the message of her surroundings, whereas Russian kids smoking and using cigarettes as currency is actually “kind of cute.” “The absence of ‘real’ money is essentially the absence of a future,” he says, acknowledging an adult’s perspective. Yet, as children, they have yet to interpret what their cultural décor tells them.

The dynamism of D’Ambrosio’s approach peaks in what paradoxically seems the sole tepid essay in *Loitering*, a discussion of Richard Brautigan, of whose writing he doesn’t seem particularly fond. One wonders, at first, how the essay made it into the collection. “Brautigan never wrote elegant prose. The sentences sound broken...” he says, before trying to decode Brautigan’s “failed metaphors.” Eventually, he attempts to flip this harsh assessment by suggesting failure as the salient aspect of Brautigan’s work, the word in this case not indicating objectives unmet, but rather that brokenness and incompleteness are necessary conditions for the working artist. “Failure is where his writing lives,” D’Ambrosio says. Brautigan’s suicide cinched together his work and his selfhood, reifying D’Ambrosio’s congruence of silence and death. “All his sentences ever needed for completion was a death.”

His comparatively inchoate thoughts on Brautigan, then, get their own chapter and title, but are really an elaborate authorial aside: “I’m oversimplifying here,” “I’m throwing these ideas out scattershot.” D’Ambrosio allows a somewhat tenuous conclusion like the one he draws about Brautigan because he, in fact, rejects conclusions. His goal is to translate to the page the rhythms and music of human behavior as he hears it and feels it. “The critical difference between a poet and a regular citizen is that the poet seeks [the realm of doubt]; it’s where he works, where his office is.”

Of his early experiences reading fiction, D’Ambrosio says, “I saw that stories looked squarely and bravely at lives without criticizing or condemning them.” Through the personal essay, he attempts a similar rendition of truth by presenting himself as a living creation-in-flux. In *Loitering*, D’Ambrosio’s perceptions are shockingly acute, his locutions impressive, his flourishes soaring. But it is the loose breath, the brave brokenness, the admitted limitation that ultimately gives his essays life. ☞

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GEOFFREY YOUNG is a writer living in Brooklyn. His debut novel, *Fall*, was published in 2010. More of his work can be found at geoffrey-young.com.



(IN CONVERSATION)

MOTHER TONGUE

LEORA SKOLKIN-SMITH

WITH ANDREA SCRIMA

Leora Skolkin-Smith *Edges*
 (re-released by The Story Plant, 2014)

In the drizzling rain, the Jordanian hills seemed closer than when I tried to see them from the bedroom upstairs. They lay to the east, though named “The West Bank.” The boundary between the Arab and Jewish regions was drawn by a fountain pen years ago when some British engineers came to canvass the rough land in the 1930s. The ink they had used was green, and so the border was called “the green line,” my aunt told me. The border had remained vague and uncertain, she said, subject to weather and other forces. No one ever seemed to know where it started or ended, the barbed wire often arbitrarily strewn to make up for the absence of clearness. A little more than a hazy outline still in the distance, there were thick layers of barbed wire on both sides of the border.

It’s nearly impossible to imagine from today’s perspective of heavily guarded checkpoints and border controls and ugly, towering walls, but Israel was a very different world in the mid-1960s, when 14-year-old Liana Bialik and her sister accompany their mother Ada to her native Jerusalem to take part in “The Ceremony of the Graves.” Syrian dams are under construction; snipers and terrorists dot the border to Jordan in a campaign to cut Israel off from its water supply, but Ada has retained the freedom and defiance of her earlier days—and it is this fierce and fiery side, hidden beneath the Westchester housewife persona known to her daughters, that suddenly emerges when they arrive in her home country. The remains of Jewish fighters in the War of Independence against Great Britain are to be excavated from their resting place in the Jordanian cemetery in the old city and moved to a new gravesite on the Israeli side of the border. Ada’s brother Elizar is among the dead; as she and her sister Esther reminisce about earlier days of smuggling ammunition in their girdles and brassieres past British soldiers too proper to even dream of stopping them, and look forward to celebrating the repatriation with the other members of the old division of Jerusalem’s underground group, the Haganah, in a grand ballroom of the King David Hotel, Liana has a difficult time absorbing the scorched landscape of her mother’s homeland: the inscrutable, vigilant faces of the people living there; the lizards darting in and out of rusted, sprawling barbed wire and then slithering into the dust; the battered warning signs and discarded gun shells scattered everywhere.

Leora Skolkin-Smith’s book *Edges*, originally published by Grace Paley’s Glad Day Books in 2005 and subsequently selected as part of the Princeton University/Rutgers University series *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*, is a study of boundaries, but it’s not merely the heavily militarized national borders between Jordan, Syria, and Israel that are explored here, or the mine-filled, debris-strewn grey areas that once marked an ever-shifting cartography of conflict and uprising. In sensitive, at times eerily prescient prose, Skolkin-Smith treads delicately into the fraught and ever-shifting emotional zones between young Liana and her larger-than-life mother, who has been restored to her former self with a youthful ferocity that shocks her daughters. Liana has always regarded her mother as a force of nature, but returned to the homeland, Ada—loud, perspiring, messily affectionate, passionate, and prone to fits of rage—is even more mysterious, forbidding, and alluring than before. As Liana tries to establish boundaries between herself and a mother whose physical presence overwhelms her, odors and scents, flesh and skin, love and need are described in haunting passages that alternate between the sexually alluring and the repulsive. When Ada meets her former compatriots at the party in the King David Hotel, Liana gazes on from a distance:

I watched my mother on the dance floor with the stranger. A fierce and upbeat rendition of “Hava Negilah” began on the shiny ivory-keyed accordion. The electric guitar players picked it up, and then the drummer. There were others clapping on the shiny dance floor, singing and dancing. The drums pounded, and a tambourine clanked. I pulled my hand out of my pocket and lifted up my cocktail napkin, staring at the emblem on it, a transposed photograph of the Israeli national flag, a tiny, dark blue and white cloth. It had a slight aroma, like walnuts. Putting it to my lips, I took a taste of it, licking the edges. Then the

lights went on over the platform stage where the gaudily dressed band members now stationed themselves at their instruments—ready to play a set with electric guitars, accordions, and drums under some makeshift floodlights from a kibbutz. Soon, the waiters were clearing out the center of the ballroom, taking off vases and fold-up tables and chairs, exposing the bare shiny dance floor.

“Hava Neh Ranna...” my mother shouted from the dance floor a few minutes later, the short man’s arms around her waist. She clapped her hands, held them high over her head. Clapped them twice more. The chandelier lights were bright as stars over her head, and my mother tossed her flats off and unlatched her stockings from their garters, rolling them all the way down to her ankles, and yanking them off.

ANDREA SCRIMA (RAIL): Leora, the title *Edges* seems to embody shades of meaning that extend beyond national and historical borders to personal identity and the tenuous, shifting zones inside the heart and mind. When Liana runs away to hide with a fugitive diplomat’s son and surrenders herself to the unknown, there is an almost somnambulant accuracy of purpose to the way she sets about transgressing her own inner boundaries. As she distances herself from her mother’s devotion to old Palestine, her sexual awakening also becomes a quest to find a new Jewish identity in a country that envelops her in its rough embrace, but is still largely incomprehensible to her. Your own mother was born in old Jerusalem, during a time, now vanished, when Jews and Arabs still lived door to door. In many ways, the mother and daughter in *Edges* seem to stand for Israel itself, for a national identity that has evolved radically throughout its comparatively brief history. What were these first encounters with a young Israel like for you as a young woman, as opposed to how it feels to you now?

LEORA SKOLKIN-SMITH: When I went to Israel as a young girl in the early ’60s, it looked like a third-world country. Its landscape was parched with stones and shrub, there were limitations on the amount of water you could use, and the limestone house of my mother was an octagonal maze of sorts. My grandfather had hired his Muslim friends from Amman to build it. It was, in short, the real Middle East—stray cats, scorched earth, limestone, and stores that reminded one of Europe in the 1930s. Donkeys and carts were seen often on the crude streets. The Palestinian shop owners offered luscious foods: Turkish delights, pepitas, fresh oil from the olive tree groves, fresh honey, Jaffa oranges. It was a sensuous, alluring, strange place. The prominent feelings I remember were of fascination (I lived in Westchester, so scorpions and wadis were compelling and odd) and not a little fear. The borders were heavily guarded by the Jordanians, who held what we know as Palestine today—that is, ancient Jerusalem and its environs, including the Wailing Wall and the Tower of David, which the Jews were forbidden to enter at that time, before the Six-Day War. So I was always frightened in some very visceral way, staring at these Arab guards with their guns slung over their shoulders, forbidding me entry to the old city where my mother and grandmother were born and my maternal family had lived for over six generations. My sister and I were told never to walk in certain places, there was always a threatening vat of air above and beyond us. But it was too exciting to be oppressive—as a kid this was all a thrill, including watching the scattered nomadic tribes such as the Bedouin, who bathe in the wadis and wash their clothes there, as well. It was considered a violation to approach or disturb them, so people were always whispering to me, “Don’t go there, or there, respect their superstitions and mysteries.”

I don’t think anyone traveling to Israel today can imagine what early Israel and Palestine were really like. After the Six-Day War in 1967, the Israelis occupied the places the Jordanians once held, and the country westernized very rapidly. My mother was born in British Mandate Palestine in the 1920s and grew up there, as I mentioned earlier, and so I have also identified with the Palestinians in that I felt that my mother’s history had slowly been eradicated by the waves of immigration from the West, her identity as a Jewish Palestinian gradually obliterated, or at best dislocated.

RAIL: In *Edges*, 14-year-old Liana is trying to understand how she fits in to all this. In one sense, it’s a coming-of-age story, but beneath it all there’s an almost mystical sense of merging with the landscape, with the spirits of the dead, with a deeply mysterious past whose presence remains immediate and palpable.

SKOLKIN-SMITH: Yes, the landscape became a storyteller all unto itself. The language of the body and of nature has always been an important part of my writing. To Liana, it began to feel that this young Israel and Palestine were coming of age at the same time she was. The geography, the canvas

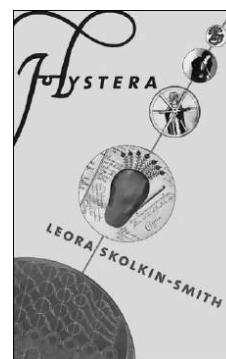
of Jerusalem became a silent guide to how each was experiencing their growth, reflecting one another in interesting ways—the turbulent changes, the wars, the buried history of early British Mandate Palestine as it was repeatedly held hostage by the border hostilities between Arab and Jew. In a sense, with the formation of the state of Israel and all that came after, the mother and the Jewish Palestinians became stateless. And so for both mother and daughter, identity had to be an internal one. I wanted to ask questions about nationality, identity, history, and of course, love—because the sexual identity of the daughter is also confused by the lack of borders between her mother and herself and by new boundaries that arise and shift, just like the land itself.

RAIL: There is a political dimension to *Edges* that has less to do with the policies of Israel as they are generally debated today, i.e. in terms of the Palestinian minority, than with the very basic question of what happens when literature approaches history. Set 20 years after the end of the Second World War, in a time that was politically, socially, geographically, and demographically very different to the Israel of today, *Edges* bears witness to a way of being and thinking in the world that has since vanished, a set of historical circumstances an understanding of which is essential to properly interpret the state of affairs today. Yet while you conjure the immediate reality of this world in highly evocative scenes, your true concerns nonetheless seem to lie elsewhere. Let me try to explain what I mean.

I’m thinking of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the way the history of the events of 1989 and the years that followed has been written. As it happens, I’ve been living in Berlin for exactly 30 years this month, and of course the place I moved to as a very young woman was a completely different city than the one I live in today. When I meet people younger than myself, for the most part newcomers to Berlin, I’m always very interested to learn what they think about all these momentous changes that happened here. I’m talking about what still feels like recent memory in my case, whereas in theirs, it’s a matter of historical events that took place in their childhoods. They’ve absorbed history second-hand—as we all absorb the histories that have gone before us—and then they come to live here and their experience of the city is colored by what they’ve learned, which is how this history has in the meantime been passed down.

When I see Potsdamer Platz, for instance, I see a layering in time: the Wall and the former death strip beyond it in an area that had been flattened by Allied bombs; and then the sprawling illegal Polish market that sprang up there during the months after the Wall came down, when people took advantage of the newly open borders between East and West Germany and hopped in their tiny cars and came to sell homemade kielbasa and vodka and whatever else they had on hand in the hopes of earning some Western currency; and then, soon after, a Legoland of excavators and cranes and workers in yellow hardhats in what became for many years the largest construction site in Europe—whereas a younger generation sees a new city center with high-rises and a mall and a few cinemas that roll out the red carpet every two years for the Berlinale. There’s a challenge in going back in time and making a vanished reality emotionally intelligible to a younger generation.

SKOLKIN-SMITH: Challenging the official version of history is one of literature’s most important, most vital functions. To contemporary politics, this land of early Israel and Palestine, which I watched becoming vanquished in a larger sense, is an inconvenient history. Jews and Arabs once working and living peacefully in British Mandate Palestine? That fact interferes with the rigid absolutes people hold as truths. The need to be “right” on both sides about the current political situation has completely distorted those early images I saw as a child. Political ideologues today depend on the bitter hatred they wrongly assume existed once between Jew and Arab. But this wasn’t true—at one time the Jews and Arabs were neighbors and in business together. My grandfather’s business partner was Turkish, a Muslim. My uncles went to the University of Beirut. But it was all on the



horizon, you could feel it in a palpable way as the pressure of the extensive European, Russian, and American immigrations increased and coffee shops and restaurants slowly began appearing in the ancient places and European-style boutiques cropped up on Ben Yehuda. At the same time, I wanted Jerusalem to be a sanctuary for the Holocaust victims—these were the people my mother and her family had fought for in the Jewish underground. It was all quite different after the immigration waves arrived and the State of Israel was declared. A lot of money poured in and land was appropriated—not for victims of the Holocaust, but for a more affluent population.

between what was human and tragic, and what was “depressed,” “psychotic,” or “abnormal.” “Complexes” and “hallucinatory delusions” were presented in haunted parables of human yearning and experience. *Hystera* was framed by the textures and nuances of the '70s, and it's this atmosphere, these ideologies and principal ideas that are threaded into the prose. For instance, the Patty Hearst kidnapping is woven in to play off this ordinary young woman's own breakdown, but the book also draws on historical references to hysteria and mental illness going back as far as Hippocrates and his concept of hysteria as a “wandering uterus.” The dichotomy of fiction/nonfiction isn't always useful when it comes to analyzing

as it filters through our imaginations, but also the memory banks of our real lives. This, I feel, is the fiction that is urgent, intense, and necessary today. It expands on original concepts of literary modernism, primarily that one works through a personal center, that interior life can be depicted as vividly as external events, and these various strands often merge into a fiction that is boldly truthful. Even with Kafka, it's not the fact that Gregor Samsa turned into a cockroach—it's about his personal, internal reality.

I regret that so much fiction has moved away from these ideas. We seem to have many writers today writing about places they don't, perhaps, know as an authentic participant, and the writing emerges as conjecture on their part. Writers feel perhaps too confident writing about a history they do not have a first-hand connection to. Perhaps, too, privilege enters into this. We have access in our education to so much historical information, but these accounts provide a sense of knowing that is often spurious. It is a hindsight that distorts more than illuminates. One doesn't have to have lived the facts, but I think an authentic personal truth is necessary for the invention of characters that actually live in the imaginary circumstances novelists create. Writers like Philip Roth and Norman Mailer have also used this fiction/non-fiction fusion to great effect. I regret that modernism is looked down upon these days as too complex to be “entertaining.” When I read Woolf, I am drawn to how she talks about different “selves.” I miss that in contemporary work. It's a real loss. I recently read the volumes of “My Struggle” by Karl Ove Knausgaard, and it felt like a return to Proust and to ideas I've always been very inspired by, for instance modernism's investment in subjectivity, the self in history. I hope to contribute to these sensibilities.

Challenging the official version of history is one of literature's most important, most vital functions. To contemporary politics, this land of early Israel and Palestine, which I watched becoming vanquished in a larger sense, is an inconvenient history. Jews and Arabs once working and living peacefully in British Mandate Palestine? That fact interferes with the rigid absolutes people hold as truths.

RAIL: *Edges* focuses on a very particular period of history that cannot easily be described or explained, except, perhaps, in a work of fiction—and this reminds us what fiction can accomplish that other forms of writing cannot. The past is being rewritten all the time. And it's especially when tumultuous changes have taken place—when it comes to the battle over who retains hegemony over their interpretation—that the stakes can be very high. At its core, fiction can be truer to fact than recorded history, which is subject to any number of interests and agendas. It's crucial to get these things straight, and ironic that storytelling can be far more objective than so-called objective fact.

In a similar way, your earlier novel *Hystera* draws a historical line between mental illness and madness. Set in 1974, before the pharmacological revolution in psychiatry, this powerful book charts a young woman's voyage into despair, mental breakdown, and eventual recovery. In an age where deviance from the norm is medicated rather than explored, and an alarming number of people are convinced that a “chemical imbalance of the brain” requires that they remain on prescription medicine for the rest of their lives, despondency, alienation, and emotional conflict—formerly part of the essential, ineffable experience of being human—are seen as medical symptoms rather than the struggles of a soul grappling with the aporias of existence.

Throughout the history of literature, madness has been viewed as a rite of passage, a necessary exploration of the mind's deepest conflicts, a quest to more fully understand what is truly human—whereas today, an individual's troubled relationship to the universal dilemma underlying the human condition is pathologized. Anything less, or different, than happiness, efficiency, and productivity is regarded as illness. And so *Hystera*—in taking us back to a time not that long ago, when pharmaceuticals had not yet begun to dominate the psychiatric profession—resonates in unsettling and shocking ways. Can you talk about what motivated you to write this book, and what you think fiction can achieve in a larger sense?

SKOLKIN-SMITH: As a writer, I feel compelled to assign my subjective experience to invented characters; the themes I take on are things I myself lived through, in my own way. In this regard, though it is fiction, *Hystera* is also a personal, authentic story. I wanted to go back to a place where suffering and chaos were less circumscribed, to break through the familiar medical models and popular narratives about illness and recovery. Woolf, Genet, Joyce, Kafka, and so many other modernists tackled “mental illness” in their work, but they created less of a distinction

how a novel tells an individual, fictional story that is simultaneously filled with nonfiction events that actually happened and that inform the personal story. Both of my novels are works of fiction, but they are grounded in their times, in the history of their times.

It's an extension, really, of modernist ideas. I think the writers who most impacted me wrote a kind of non-fiction fiction. Grace Paley once said that when a book takes on a “political” dimension, where the story is also drawn from history and/or supposed facts, we enter into a place where there is actually a dissolving of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. She found these categories as applied to novels and short stories too limiting. Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Grace Paley, and many other writers from that period took on the outside world—war, changing cityscapes, politics—to create their fictional work. In reading Doris Lessing, for instance, you get the entire history of the world, a vision of our political discontents—and these are as essential as story and character. I have always been most moved by that kind of novel—works that do not invent history, but explore how we, as ordinary citizens, are often pulled into a maelstrom of historical events not of our own making. *Ulysses* contains Dublin and the entire history of the 20th century. The historical perspective is very real, it consists of facts, and therefore it's a kind of non-fiction. This “background” becomes a character, and the extraordinary times we live in become as much a “story” as any other element in a novel.

RAIL: These distinctions between fiction, non-fiction, and memoir are also commercial categories. But when you think of memoir, the psychological limitations of crafting an official version of one's personal history are fairly obvious. We all want to present our struggles and achievements in the best possible light, we all seek to make sense of who we are, to find a narrative to explain ourselves somehow, but when we present this in such a naked way—I believe we lie. Fiction offers so much more room for telling the truth. We can hide parts of ourselves—the uglier parts, the greedy, envious, self-serving parts—in the characters we invent, and then we are free to explore them and to examine the interactions they cause in a far more accurate way.

SKOLKIN-SMITH: Virginia Woolf was one of the first to incorporate the authentic psychological realities of her characters, their intrapsychic interiority, into her fiction—elements she called “truth” and “beauty,” clichés now, but not at the time she was writing. Grace Paley was very big on telling us to tell the truth above all and to make that truth authentic

RAIL: I wonder if you could say a word or two about the book you're currently working on?

SKOLKIN-SMITH: Yes, I'm happy to say I am almost finished with a new novel, called *Stealing Faith*. The book explores the literary '80s, during the time of Reagan's policies of deinstitutionalization. Though the characters are invented, they're based on some very famous writers I knew back then. Basically, it's a story of a young woman who returns to the outside world after several episodes of psychiatric hospitalization. She is lost, of course—and this felt like the perfect avatar for exploring the cult of celebrity that arose around that time. I found this quote from Reagan in an interview in the *New York Times* from 1988: responding to the undeniable fact that over 100,000 people, mostly battered women and mental patients, had been tossed out onto the streets, he insisted that his policies had caused few economic hardships, suggesting instead that “jobless workers are unemployed by their own choice.” His denial that this was happening was truly shocking. It haunted me enough to want to write a novel about one woman dissolving in that maelstrom at the same time that writing and publishing were beginning to change into the celebrity society we see today. ☞

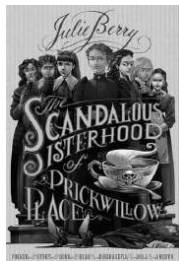
Edges was nominated for the 2006 PEN/Faulkner Award and The PEN/Ernest Hemingway Award by Grace Paley; it was a National Women's Studies Association Conference Selection, a Bloomsbury Review Pick, and a Jewish Book Council Selection; and it won the 2008 Earphones Award for an original audio production narrated by Tovah Feldshuh. *Hystera* was selected by Princeton University for their series *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*. It was also the winner of the 2012 USA Book Award and the 2012 Global E-Books Award, as well as a finalist in the International Book Awards and the National Indie Excellence Awards.

ANDREA SCRIMA is the author of *A Lesser Day*; an excerpt from a work-in-progress titled “all about love, nearly” was published in the anthology of experimental women's fiction “Wreckage of Reason” earlier this year (both Spuyten Duyvil Press). She is the recipient of a writer's fellowship from the Berlin Senate for Cultural Affairs.

FALL'S PICKS FOR YOUNGER READERS BY JORDAN B. NIELSEN

Julie Berry, *The Scandalous Sisterhood of Prickwillow Place*

(ROARING BROOK PRESS, 2014)



Agatha Christie meets *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead* in Julie Berry's wicked and superb murder mystery, *The Scandalous Sisterhood of Prickwillow Place*. This tightly wound yarn blends classic farce with the macabre, creating a page-turner filled with wit and mischief.

Prickwillow Place opens with the seven students of

Saint Etheldreda's School for Young Ladies at a tense Sunday supper with their vile headmistress and her odious brother. While the adults dine on veal, the girls are left to nibble buttered bread and hot beans. These miserly rations are to be their salvation, however, as one after the other, the headmistress and her brother keel over dead, their mouths still stuffed with poisoned meat. It only takes the young ladies a few moments to realize the glorious opportunity that's landed on them: the chance at real independence.

Having each been shipped off to Saint Etheldreda's finishing school by their horrid families, the young ladies are in no hurry to return home and thus devise a plan to conceal the murders so they might live on at the school in self-governing harmony. This proves quite the undertaking. Once the bodies are buried in the vegetable patch, the girls must deceive the entire town into thinking that all's well at Saint Etheldreda's, but they soon learn that there was far more to their headmistress than any of them knew. When a handful of Spanish doubloons turn up, along with a strange gift from an admiring suitor, questions abound: What were those two involved in? Whose shadowy figure did they spy in the garden on the night of the murders? Could the killer be *one of them*? And will they strike again?

There may not be wizards in this British boarding school book, but magic bursts from its pages. Berry is an enchantress, her confidence and humor bewitching.

Chief among Berry's achievements is how much she does with so little in shaping her characters. "Dour Elinor," "Disgraceful Mary Jane," "Pocked Louise," each of the seven girls' names are adorned with a moniker that neatly tells their whole tale. You *know* these girls, the adjectives seem to suggest, and indeed it feels that you *do*. While the first fifty-odd pages are a virtual chaos of comings and goings, the murder scene colliding with an unanticipated birthday party, this initial melee serves the plot well, disorienting the reader as to who is where, doing what with whom and adding to the sense of unseen danger.

Beyond the opening set piece and the ensuing theatrics, *Prickwillow Place* serves an interesting and refreshing portrait of society among young women. Though each has their own idea of what "freedom" means, the girls share a distinctly feminist vision of sisterly co-habitation and scholarship. Disgraceful Mary Jane may be a shameless flirt, Smooth Kitty may be a bit controlling, but each believes in the equality of the other. Their plan to sustain one another's education after the death of their headmistress says more about the values of these young women than the suspicions that arise in the wake of the murders: These aren't girls who just want to eat candy all day, unsupervised.

While steeped in genre, it's the modern wink that makes *Prickwillow Place* something special. Dotted with welcome silliness, this otherwise sophisticated whodunit delivers pert and malice that would make both Jane Austen and Lemony Snicket proud.

Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

(NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS, 2014)



The prolific and decorated children's book author Jacqueline Woodson gives us the story of her childhood in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, an ethereal and transporting memoir written in poetic verse. Whether familiar with Woodson's work (*Feathers*, *Locomotion*, *After Tupac and D Foster*) or encountering her fluid yet concise writing for the first time,

readers will melt into this lush, vivid account.

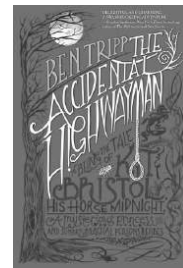
That this story is an autobiography is both intrinsic to its success, and beside the point. It's a memoir that reads like historical fiction, and though this is *Woodson's story*, its scope is wider than just one individual. *Brown Girl Dreaming* begins with "I am born," (Hello, Dickens! Not the only *David Copperfield* connection one could draw) but the lens then swirls backwards to unearth the deep roots of her family's lineage, reaching all the way back to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. From the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s, it seems the Woodsons were destined to be at the fulcrum of the African-American story. In spite of this, young Jacqueline finds herself born into a schismatic culture. While her father was a staunch Ohioan Northerner, "there's never gonna be a Woodson that sits in the back of the bus," he intoned, her mother was an ambivalent Southerner, both drawn to her South Carolina home and antsy to get away from it. A particularly memorable stanza recounts the time she whipped her son with a switch from the willow tree after hearing him say, "Ain't." When her parents separated, Jacqueline and her siblings returned to South Carolina to live with their grandparents while their mother sought out their eventual permanent home in Brooklyn, New York. These three very different places made their home in Woodson as much as she did in them, and granted her a remarkable breadth of perspective on the great social change of the time period, which she conveys with ease and aplomb.

This is no social studies textbook, thankfully. At its heart, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is an oral history told from an album of mixed up family photos, time frames shuffling and overlapping in a way only the author can truly understand. But you needn't worry about exactly how this all fits together, the joy is in listening to the fondness of Woodson's recollections, her choices in what to reveal more telling at times than the content of the musings themselves. You can feel Woodson's weight next to you on the couch as she guides you through her memories, sharing with you the flavor of her grandmother's biscuits, the feel of her first notebook under her fingers. Her words have an aroma and an atmosphere. While the story might have benefitted from a bit more thematic structuring, it's not wholly without shape. Ten different stanzas titled "How to Listen" are scattered throughout the book to form a neat through-line, each a brief meditation on how we listen and what we hear, and echoing the oral nature of both Woodson's story and the African-American story on the whole.

Moving and evocative, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is the tale of a family, a culture, a history, and of one girl on her way toward becoming herself.

Ben Tripp, *The Accidental Highwayman*

(TOR TEEN, 2014)



What a delight to arrive a skeptic and be made a believer. *The Accidental Highwayman* is cookies for dinner: an unapologetic blast of rollicking fun, best gobbled up with greedy abandon.

An Editor's Note from Ben Tripp opens the story, claiming that what we are about to read is based on crumbling documents he

found in a mysteriously locked family chest. These purported texts tell the tale of Kit Bristol, an ordinary servant living in 17th-century England who tumbles headfirst into adventure when his master is slain. While known to be reclusive and eccentric, the lord of Rattle Manse is no mere coot: In fact he has been living a double life as the legendary Highwayman, "Whistling Jack," robbing the carriages of the wealthy to pay off his gambling debts. When Kit dons his master's mask and cloak to lure away the killers, he unwittingly accepts not only the mantle of Whistling Jack's identity, but also the fulfillment of his magical oath to save a fairy princess from being married to a warmongering human. Previously oblivious to the existence of the Fae-Folk, Kit is suddenly besieged with them. Though initially he may want nothing more than to just go home, when Kit lays eyes on the enchanting Morgana, his damsel in distress, he finds that duty and destiny have set his course.

Fight back your initial suspicion that this story will be *too* precious, and you're in for a merry romp. A glance at Tripp's author bio reveals that he previously spent 20 years as an "Experiential Designer" for theme parks and resorts (Disney), and it's easy to see how this particular mode of creativity informed his writing.

A fairy kingdom, a magical crone, goblins, griffins, a prophetic map, the extended title, *The Accidental Highway Man: Being the Tale of Kit Bristol, His Horse Midnight, a Mysterious Princess and Sundry Magical Persons Besides*; no blinking bulb has been spared in this carnival, but there's not an ounce of cynicism in Tripp's pageantry. To be sure, Tripp is having a lot of fun wielding his Dictionary of Ye Olde Phrases and Words but there is an authentic spirit of the storyteller in this author, and while he clearly enjoys the whizzes and pops of his magic show, so will the reader. Kit may seem a little thin as a main character, but all the more room for the reader to step into his shoes and see Trip's lavish world with their own eyes. "This is all for you" his bounty of break-neck, action-packed set pieces seem to sing, and when *yet another* mercurial villain is added to the mounting list of nasties hot on the heels of our heroes and you find yourself laughing out loud, remember: that's the point.

In the tradition of *Robin Hood* and *The Princess Bride*, *The Accidental Highwayman* is a cinematic tour de force, a treat, and a dizzying thrill-ride. ☺

JORDAN B. NIELSEN received her master's degree in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh. She has been reviewing children's literature since 2008, and is currently the children's book buyer for The powerHouse Arena, an independent bookstore in Dumbo, Brooklyn.

WARM CORE: THE UNUSUALLY ASSOCIATIVE CYCLONIC SYSTEM OF BEN LERNER'S *10:04*

(FABER AND FABER, 2014) BY LEE KLEIN

Would you know what I mean if instead of conventional plot summary I presented a key quotation from Ben Lerner's new novel *10:04* followed by a series of associated specifics separated by semi-colons? "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York." A baby octopus massaged 500 times settling like an alien intelligence inside the narrator's stomach; after celebrating a strong six-figure book deal, looking out the High Line's window on Tenth Avenue transforming traffic into a silent, real-time *Koyaanisqatsi*; an onrushing airborne climatic event that, like its art world predecessor Duchamp, elevates the value of everyday objects while it unites the discrete and multitudinous "me" of the masses into something more like a festive "we"; studying dinosaur mass extinction as a reminder of

humanity's future; the distribution network required to place a can of coffee on a Whole Foods shelf in Union Square; ultrasound imaging of the heart and, later, a new life; the tentacles of streets and subways; fireworks and falling cigarette embers; the space shuttle Challenger explosion ("the branching plumes of smoke as its components fell back to earth") memorialized by an unattributed plagiarized phrase the rhythm of which may have inspired the author to write poetry; the amorphous Occupy Movement occurring over there somewhere; the will-

ful disorientation of the senses with alcohol and weed elevating dialogue to poetry; an Institute for Totaled Art collecting damaged work deemed worthless; the disorganization of the Park Slope co-op where a woman who has always identified as half-Lebanese tells the story of how she found out she's not half-Lebanese by blood; Judd's boxes in Marfa suggesting the horror and heft of World War II; Whitman nursing soldiers during the Civil War; another once-in-a-lifetime airborne climatic event, larger this time; the narrator attending to a troubled poetry student suffering from DeLilloean pathological disorganization; first-person singular POV ("I"), sometimes envisioned as third-person singular ("he" or "she"), conflicted about its instinct to assume the first-person plural ("we").

I associated the baby octopus that appears in the novel's first sentence with the blastulablob in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a giant octopus-related metaphor for the interconnected multi-tentacled mess of life, expressed in streams of inky language, from which a rocket leaps in a gorgeous transcendent arc. In *10:04*, although a transcendent arc isn't explicitly acknowledged, the recurring image of the coordinated (or to use a Lerner keyword: *proprioceptive*) spatial sprawl of a cyclonic octopus-like shape is disrupted, challenged, or crisscrossed by time travel, or at least a sense of fluid continuity among past, present, and future. Blurred metaphors for time and space are associated with blended dualities of art and life, fiction and non-fiction, friend and girlfriend. As in Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Coffee House Press, 2011), the author/narrator conflation endures in *10:04*. In tone and approach, the new novel reads like a "dilated" (a synonym for "expanded" or "elaborated" Lerner often selects) sequel in which Ben,

the narrator of *10:04*, comments on the surprising critical success of his first novel set in Spain, as well as speaking and sounding like its narrator, Adam Gordon.

Do you know what I mean if I say the lucid associative blur of all these coordinated and interpenetrating ideas and images makes for excellent reading if you're willing to flex your associative intelligence? Associative intelligence unites disparate elements, revealing connective metaphors (tendrils, arteries, bridges) as a consequence of the associative act. A balance of IQ and emotional intelligence is usually preferred in literary novels, but *10:04* suggests that associative intelligence, unleashed yet controlled, can work narrative wonders as well. If narrative progression reliant on associative movement hopes to build momentum and accrete significance, it must be controlled. Free association is fine as long as you bring it back to the launching point now and then. Otherwise it seems like madness—for example, Calvin, the student the narrator meets toward the novel's end whose web of associations resembles the activities of a psychoactive-addled spider. But Lerner remembers his themes. He consistently reintroduces and varies them. His control of a top-notch associative intelligence, the organic and generally elegant intricacy of its patterning, satisfies.

But more so, a sense of the actual city—stray images and off-hand overheard phrases ("Chill, I'm basically there")—persuaded me. So often it seemed like the author was struck by something perceived on the street he jotted down ASAP. Other than "unseasonably warm," the most commonly repeated phrase involved his narrator perceiving the rearrangement of the world around himself. Lerner describes what it feels like when the artist becomes a cyclonic system and whatever slips past the dilated eye demands inclusion in one's work. Reality overflows with potential art, fact is omni-available for fiction, even if this fiction is an explicitly stated blur of fact and fiction; autobiography and invention; poetry, images, and prose. Here's how the narrator describes his intention for the novel that will become *10:04*: "a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures."

The warm core in the cyclonic system of associations consists of "the winning and humorous" repositioning of details presented as fact in one chapter and fiction the next. In one chapter he has heart troubles; in the next chapter it's an asymptomatic mass. Images of embers falling from a post-coital cigarette smoked on a fire escape, gas lamps, "the looming intensities" of Manhattan's skyline appear as fact and fiction in successive chapters. The warmth also derives from a quiet laugh sustained throughout thanks to tone and the explicit meta-fictional audacity of his intention to "do it all," per the advice of a distinguished writer with whom he over-imbibes at a dinner celebrating an even more distinguished writer they discount.

Particularly for a semi-autobiographical, conventionally plot-less, nouveau metafictional novel narrated by a mid-30s white male living in Brooklyn, this warm core may keep readers from turning on the book and its author. Vulnerable, awkward, cocksureless moments seem as sincere as those in which insightful and intriguing artistry rises to the level of literary wizardry. It's like Lerner presents himself as ingenuously imperfect, as not quite totaled art, as neurologically damaged by

just the right amount. On the second page he lets us know he's just a little bit Marfan (which I couldn't help feel like I was supposed to associate with Martian).

But a more important point is that, unlike recent literary renditions of Lerner's identical demographic, the narrator is no Nathaniel Piven. The world rearranging itself around the narrator sounds a lot like solipsism, but instead of masturbating to Internet porn, the center of the rearranged world in this case does so in a fertility clinic to impregnate his best friend. The suggestion is clear: Ben's literal and figurative wankery is generative, not indulgent. Also, thankfully, although a Walter Benjamin quotation appears beneath a mechanically reproduced Klee, neither Goethe, Wittgenstein, nor Bruno Schulz are called upon to offer intertextual thematic support—an emerging convention/annoyance of contemporary reality fiction. Further, unlike some recent novels that substitute the complexity of existence for a mean-spirited sense of frustrated entitlement as they reduce the teeming entirety of New York City to a handful of highly gentrified Brooklyn neighborhoods, *10:04* respects the city's diversity and visual glories, the latter of which Lerner captures with something as simple as light through the lindens in Prospect Park. Not once does the narrator seem like a careerist journalist. Instead, like the Joan of Arc image at the Met reproduced early on, there's a sense that he's been called to rearrange the world as an artist. Equipped with a strong six-figure advance, he allocates \$2,000 to extravagantly self-publish 50 copies of *To the Future*, a four-page book he and a young student produced about how the brontosaurus ("thunder lizard") never existed—it's a mistake of assemblage so commonly perpetuated it's made its way to a postage stamp.

Despite the inclusion of images such as Michael J. Fox with mouth agape as his hand disappears in *Back to the Future*, a few online reviews I've seen have deemed the novel pretentious. It's a risk publishers run when they distribute free copies via Goodreads, but I'm not sure it's a pretentious novel so much as a portentous one, that is, it requires a memory and a willingness to assemble images and insights that suggest our inevitable doom, being pulled forward into a future in which we no longer exist. What there is of a plot (the narrator's health concerns, Alex's pregnancy, the storms, how he decides to write the book in the reader's hands) doesn't quite thicken. More so, the novel's animating sensibility rearranges the reader's world so when Ben walks across the Brooklyn Bridge from blacked-out Manhattan he emerges from a future Whitman envisioned before the city had electricity. He's returning to the present, or I should say *we're* returning. The narrator may be reluctant to assume a Whitman-like role ("he has to be a nobody in particular in order to be a democratic everyman, has to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a textual commons for the future into which he projects himself"), but for now let's anoint the author as an unacknowledged legislator of the world—no matter how totaled and temporary its existence may be—and look forward to a future in which *10:04*-inspired cross-genre novels float down Tenth Avenue. ☞

LEE KLEIN has two books out this year: *The Shimmering Go-Between* (a novel) and *Thanks and Sorry and Good Luck* (a collection of rejection letters he sent between 2002 and 2012 as editor of Eysot.net).



WHY ARE THERE NO FOUNDING MOTHERS?

KATHLEEN ROONEY WITH RACHEL SLOTNICK

Kathleen Rooney *O, Democracy!* (FIFTH STAR PRESS, 2014)

I first met Kathleen Rooney at a neighborhood art event in an abandoned dry cleaner's storefront in Chicago's Uptown. I was showing my paintings, and she was writing poems on her typewriter as a founding member of Poems While You Wait. I remember she was both dazzling and composed from her geometric dress to her red lipstick. She looked up at me from behind her Skyriter, which was still sizzling and syncopating with the heat of a freshly churned poem, and even the silence when she stopped typing to listen to me felt like part of a song. That silence buzzed, and I felt as though I was spotlighted, on a stage, and the world was waiting. That's the thing about Kathleen. She really listens. This is only one of the qualities that makes her not only a fantastic teacher, but an astounding and elegant writer. She is always calculating, observing, and filing details away for further consumption. In this way, she never stops composing. I'm amazed by the way her brain works. Her memories must read like a Rolodex of eloquent musings of philosophers and contemporary critics. I was immediately impressed by her passion for poetry, or "compressed language," as she put it. As an artist and a writer myself, I was inspired by her ability to be so multi-faceted, wearing various hats as she composes whatever form the moment requires, be it poetry, non-fiction, or fiction. In addition to being the founding editor of Rose Metal Press, she is the author of seven books that leap through traditional hoops and borders of form and voice in a way that I long for my own work to behave: fluid, uninhibited, and transformative. But the scope and prowess with which she composes her prolific collection of works for a young author of merely 34, while undeniably impressive, is not what marks Kathleen as one of the truly influential writers in the Midwest. Whether Kathleen is recounting the anxiety, adrenaline, and sexual tension of the female artist's model in *Live Nude Girl*, or the chess game of Illinois politics in *O, Democracy!*, she does so with such an intent focus on the aesthetics of form that I lose myself in her rhythmic musings, and only later awaken to find I have been partaking in an elevated conversation about gender, identity, and power dynamics. She allows me to enter into these conversations with the awareness of the literary canon, the confidence of a blooming professional, and the subtle, honest, unveiling of a self who is haunting and adeptly aware of all the trappings of our jaded world. I find myself reading about my life, and, forgetting that I am reading, I start to think.

RACHEL SLOTNICK (RAIL): You open *Live Nude Girl*, a memoir which recounts your experiences as a nude model for art classes, with a quote from Darian Leader, "Most people can tolerate being looked at only when they are wearing a mask." Can you speak a little to your selection of this quote?

KATHLEEN ROONEY: One of the things I was most interested in exploring in *Live Nude Girl* was not just what it's like to be a model, but what it's like to be a person. Sometimes, we have this idea that we have this single, authentic, true self that is finite and unchanging, and that's not exactly the case. Not just for art models who appear unclothed before people—they have to put up a certain persona to make it possible—but people do that every day in life. You've got your teaching self if you're a teacher, you've got your work self if you work in any kind of gainful employment, you've got the self that you are around your family, you've got the self that you are around your romantic partner, and so that quote appealed to me. Sometimes, there's this obsession in

our culture with real talk, or "let's be real," and I was trying to get at how sort of fungible and changeable that idea of realness can be.

Also, as a writer, there's a debate over writing that sounds like writing. There's that famous Elmore Leonard quote, "If something I say sounds like writing, I rewrite it," however, sometimes I want writing that sounds like writing. I want metaphor, I want rhyme, I want comparisons, I want quotations, and it's important to remember that even the move of not trying too hard, is itself a form of trying.

RAIL: The distinction between "nudity" and "naked," plays a large role in this memoir. Often, you point at the moments between poses, or the transition back into the robe, or even moments when you are fully clothed but underprepared emotionally, as vastly more "naked" than those frozen and still, predetermined poses on the model stand. What is this mask that you speak of and how does it apply in your daily life? Do you ever feel "naked" when sharing your personal writing? Does memoir feel more "naked" than fiction?

ROONEY: There's a state change between being naked and being nude, and I explore that a lot in the memoir. Nakedness often has to do with power, and control, and I make the point—and lots of other experts such as Kenneth Clark have made it before me—that nudity is a choice. It's powerful. Nudity is almost a form of clothing. The nude is a genre. Whereas, naked is often more vulnerable: prisoners might be naked, nakedness often occurs in healthcare situations, where you're a patient versus a clothed doctor, so I don't think it's just divided by genre. It depends on the kind of fiction you're writing, or the kind of memoir you're writing. You could, in a memoir, strike a pose so to speak, and that can be a form of nudity because you're not really revealing. You're retreating into a pose, and sometimes the same thing can happen in fiction when you think, this is a character, I'm not revealing anything about myself. But so much autobiography, wittingly and unwittingly, finds its way into fiction.

I love Roland Barthes. He talks about how the most interesting parts of a text and of a person are where the garment gapes. It's not about just a nice shirt, or some skin, it's like, "ooh, there's the wrist between your glove and your sleeve," and you might not even realize those moments are being revealed. For me, those moments are most interesting in a text when I see someone contradict him or herself. Not in a bad way, but revealing a truth that maybe he or she didn't even mean. And I think that can happen in poetry, that can happen in fiction, and that can happen in non-fiction. That's why this idea of deconstructionism can be really fun in literature. I know it's a scary word and people like to make fun of it, and I know literary theory is out of fashion, but when you break it down to that metaphorical content of trying to find those seeming contradictions and trying to open them up, that's where being a reader can get really active and really fun.

RAIL: You quote Kenneth Clark as saying, "one person's mask is another person's monster." Can you elaborate on the masks you wear, as a teacher, writer, and model? Do you feel the need to wear a mask as an author and to protect your private life?

ROONEY: Yes, I do. I always try to teach my students that any time you're writing, even if you're writing

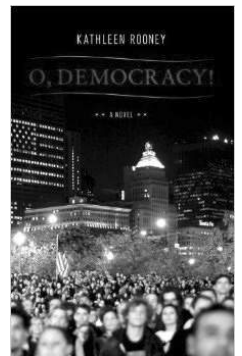
non-fiction, you are in a persona. It's not just a matter of saying, "I'm going to write as Lorenzo de' Medici, therefore I'm wearing a mask." It can be writing from an "I" that's very, very close to you. I try to teach that if something is very difficult to write about, if it's very close to you, or it's a troubling situation in which you are uncomfortable, or there's some ethical ambiguity, whatever the reason might be, you can pop it into third person. I do that in some of my essays. Instead of saying, "I went to work, or I rode the train," I say, "Kathleen spoke to him, or Kathleen felt this way." I do that for the essentialness of that mask, and wanting to be honest. And I think it's that weird relationship between artifice and "reality," which I think is closer often than we think. Some of the reviewers were like, "oh eyeroll, why is she writing about herself in third person?" I can understand the misreading that it's pretentious, but placing that distance and that artificiality into the text allows writers to get to a deeper level of honesty.

RAIL: Are you saying it allows you to speak to something that you might otherwise be avoiding, because it's not you anymore?

ROONEY: Yeah, if you're saying "I, I, I," you're so in your head, you might be justifying, or saying, "here's why I did this, let me explain." Whereas, if you say, "she," or "he," you can often be a little more raw and say, "I wasn't the best, I did something bad or troubling."

RAIL: You open the book with a statement about Bishop Berkeley: "Bishop Berkeley worried that if he wasn't looking at the world, it might disappear. I worry that if the world isn't looking at me, I might." Can you explain this impulse to live eternally through art? Do you feel the same way about writing novels? Why or why not?

ROONEY: I often give my syllabi titles, and one of my titles for my creative writing class is, "A Kind of Double Living." The phrase is from a Catherine Drinker Bowen quotation, but it's also a riffing off this James Bond theme that you only live twice. Of course, in that theme song, the twice is once in your real life, and once in your dreams. In creative writing, it's once in real life, and once in the art that you create. I don't think everyone needs to make art, and I don't think everyone has that impulse. I do think people should try it, if they're curious. I quote John Berger a lot, and he has this concept in his book, *Ways of Seeing*, and I think ways of seeing for artists can very much be ways of being. I'm reading Dmitry Samarov's memoir about being a cab driver, and he talks about how he's a writer, but the way he experienced the world since childhood was drawing. It's how he processed things. And for me, that's true of writing. I can't imagine not writing, even without publication. Although, certainly I want publication, I want an audience, I want to connect, and I see writing as a communicative act, I think that something is not fully real until I write it down. Because life is often very messy and very confusing and very complicated, and to be given the chance to get this do-over in words can really help. I don't



want to say writing is therapy, and I don't want to say you get to make yourself look like a hero. I just think it helps you process. I used the Bishop Berkeley quote because I definitely wanted to open with what I hope was self-awareness. Because there's this knock on memoir that it solipsistic, it's narcissistic, and it can be that, but when it's good it can be as profound as any other genre. Just because it's my experience, and it's my connection, doesn't mean people won't see themselves or find themselves in it, even if they haven't been an art model.

In my class yesterday we discussed this idea of "reliability," which has become a word that I truly despise because I think sometimes "reliability" just means, if it's not about a 30-something college professor, I can't relate. That sounds like hell to me. I want to read about people who are nothing like me. Because when you do that, you realize these people who seem nothing like me are actually a lot like me. And these experiences that I've never had, I can still apprehend them.

RAIL: Absolutely. I use Scott McCloud a lot in the classroom for his theory of abstraction. It's really helpful to discuss the simplicity of the cartoon, as the more abstracted a portrait is, the more people can relate. It's similar to writing a character, in that people see themselves on the page. I showed a video in class yesterday, from *Britain's Got Talent*. It was not highbrow art by any means, and it depicted a shadow dance. It tells a story about someone who goes off to war and leaves a child. Perhaps because it's just a silhouette, the class was almost in tears. You can relate to the silhouette, because it can be anybody. It encompasses all of us. So, what you're saying is that memoir can act like a silhouette that people can step into?

ROONEY: Yes, right. If they let themselves step into it and don't let themselves be held back by, "I've never been a nude model," or, "I've never been a cab driver." So what? Give it a shot.

Empowerment and exploitation are essentially opposite sides of the same piece of paper. It's really hard to talk about one without the other. My decision to step into this tradition of women who let themselves be looked at for the creation of art, could be seen as exploitive, right?

RAIL: Since you mentioned Berger, I want to ask you about Berger's quote, "Men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at." Can you explain in what ways your decision to be "looked upon" empowered you? Do you feel that women are still the subjects of the paintings rather than the painters? In what ways has the art or the literary world begun to address these issues? Do you feel that in some ways, by modeling and writing, you altered this relationship?

ROONEY: One of the things I'm really interested in is the way that empowerment and exploitation are essentially opposite sides of the same piece of paper. It's really hard to talk about one without the other. My decision to step into this tradition of women who let themselves be looked at for the creation of art, could be seen as exploitive, right? I was definitely not the creator, I was definitely the one getting paid, I was definitely the nude one, not the clothed one. It's a sliding scale. How much was I being exploited? I felt safer nude on the model stand than I often do, still, walking down the street when people are whistling or cat-calling or what have you, because it was a place of respect, and a place with rules, and it was a place where you don't make those kind of comments to the model. You certainly aren't going to touch her, or threaten her.

I definitely identify as a feminist, and I definitely try to talk about it in a way that the "F" word is not bad. I am interested in really helping people understand that it's a "struggle to end sexist oppression," which is bell hooks's definition, one of her many definitions. It's one of my favorite definitions because it makes the point that it's not just for women and it's not just this outlier, weird opinion; it's to end the oppression, period. So that's where I saw the empowerment coming in, not just particularly through modeling, but through writing about it in an alternative narrative. I don't see myself as self-righteous. I'm not somebody who would say, "I'm giving a voice to the voiceless." I think that sounds cheesy. But I was trying to give a voice to myself, and to these people who have participated in this tradition for hundreds of thousands of years, but who haven't had a chance to talk about it. That's something that runs through a lot of my work: trying to take these things that are important and worth notice, but maybe weren't noticed as much as they could have been, or in the right way. Oprah's Book Club was something I wrote about—and certainly that was famous—but I felt a lot of people were wrong about it. So I wanted to right that wrong and say, "It's smarter than you think." Or lots of people have written political books, of course. But many people haven't written about it from that super low-level, subjugated, bottom-of-the-ladder senate aide perspective like in *O, Democracy!*.

RAIL: That's such a wonderful point about *O, Democracy!*, since the book is already oscillating between the perspective of the founding fathers and this close third person of Colleen. It offers this other alternative perspective of a low-level political worker, who's a woman no less, being sexualized throughout the book.

ROONEY: That's sort of the tension that I wanted. There are moments where it is like, "Why are there no founding mothers?" And I think that's a question we need to ask.

RAIL: It has always fascinated me that art history has such dependence on the nude female. It's something, as an art student, you are not really supposed to question. As a young female painter, I certainly had my moments of rejecting what John Berger calls, "the male gaze." You even refer to the disrobing as a sort of adrenaline rush. Can you explain what fears you conquered by doing so, and how it stimulated your creative process?

ROONEY: There's a literal thing happening there, and there's a metaphorical thing happening there. I love my family. I love my parents. They are both very Catholic, and they are both very Midwestern, and I think with that comes, in a good light, humbleness and humility. And in a potentially less good light, shame and embarrassment and silence. My mom is horrified, still, that I ever worked as an artist's model, and she's also been horrified at the fact that I write about my life; a lot of it has to do with gender—a woman shouldn't single herself out this way. It also has to do with her sense of a Midwestern person: don't toot your own horn. That's the adrenaline rush, both literally and metaphorically. I was coming out of a tradition where there was a lot of shame associated with the body. We weren't told that our bodies were things we should love, or be happy with, or be proud of. They were kind of this unfortunate consequence of being alive. As though if we could all be brains in

jars, that would be better. But we have these bodies, which makes everything, at least in the background that I'm coming from, horrible and embarrassing. So it took me a long time to get over that, and art modeling was literally taking off my clothes and asserting, "I have a body, and I'm not embarrassed."

I do get an adrenaline rush when I share something. I don't make a point of writing about risqué things or shameful things, but I have written about bikini waxing, and reviewers have been like "Ugh, who wants to hear about her private parts?" It's not so much that I think my private parts are anything special, but it's a phenomenon that a lot of women think about and a lot of women go through, so I do try to write about these things in a way that lets us talk about them, rather than acting like they don't happen, or they're not worth literature.

RAIL: I want to ask you about the pressure of being reviewed and coping with people's opinions and reactions. Do you ever feel that the expectation or fear of criticism inhibits what you write? Does it ever impact your choices, knowing how judgmental and reactive people can be?

ROONEY: No, I don't think it inhibits me. Sometimes, it can be useful to think of the meanest review you've ever gotten, and ask yourself, "What would that person say of my argument?" That can be productive because it can lead to, "Oh, this is a little half-baked," or "I need an extra scene."

My writing partner, Elisa Gabbert, has said to me when I'm down about reviews, "Look, the fact that you get mixed reviews or negative reviews, as well as positive ones means that people who aren't your friends and family are reading you." That adds legitimacy. It can be hard to look at it that way, but her point has been useful to me.

RAIL: It's wonderful to think of it that way. It's something I'm very afraid of because writing is very personal, especially memoir. At one point, you discuss the truism that each painting, even of a sitter, is in fact a portrait of the artist. I find this hard to avoid in the classroom, as paintings have a tendency, even when they're of a still-life, to feel intensely autobiographical. When we look at the evolution of notions of beauty from classical Greece, to contemporary artists, art seems to reflect a changing society. In what ways does studying art and artist model relationships make you begin to question this idea of "accurate likenesses?" In what ways does it make you question our preconceived idea of beauty? Did your ideas about your own beauty and sexuality change from the experience of modeling, or writing about modeling?

ROONEY: I'm teaching a class now called "Writing the Body," at DePaul, and that's the kind of thing we talk about. Is there some kind of internal notion of beauty that's unchanging throughout history, or is it transient? Well, I think, of course, it's the latter. But, one of the things that did help me come to that conclusion about human bodies and about art is just the vast array of different people I came into contact with through modeling: old, young, male, female, conventionally attractive women with thin bodies, long hair, and big eyes, or men who were very cut, very buff, and very masculine. To everything that's not that—people covered with tattoos, people with lots of body modifications, old people who hadn't had any work done and were just proudly aging. I first started modeling when I was 21, which seems so young now. I think I was a little ignorant, and modeling helped me appreciate the different kinds of beauty that do exist. It also opened my mind to the different kinds of texts that could be beautiful, and to see that essay could be as beautiful if not more so than poetry, or that ugly stories could be as compelling if not more so, than beautiful stories.

RAIL: It was interesting for me to read it as an artist, since I've never been on the model stand. I've always

wondered how someone could be so brave. I know that I always prefer the more unusual bodies for my own work. It's a big difference what you see when you think of conventional beauty on billboards, and what you see in the classroom which is this rainbow of body types. It's a beautiful idea to also apply that to text.

I was so excited when you mentioned Ivan Albright and Dora, and Dorian Gray—as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is one of my all-time favorite books and one of the reasons I am so invested in fusing writing and painting. What is perhaps most astounding in both Wilde's and Albright's work, is the ability to create something simultaneously beautiful and hideous. In what ways do you feel your work resides in the boundary between art and fear?

ROONEY: I think one of the biggest sources of fear for most people, myself included, is the anxiety of the unknown. A writer that I love, Lemony Snicket, a.k.a. Daniel Handler, writes in his book *The Series of Unfortunate Events*, about the difference between nervousness and anxiety. He explained that nervousness is when you have a specific thing to be nervous about: "I'm nervous about the first day of school," or "I'm nervous about my new job." Anxiety is much more generalized and free-floating: "I just feel anxious about the ineffable." Writing is a way to process that free-floating anxiety that I am very prone to and that a lot of people are prone to. It helps me process unknowns into knowns, and I think reading is almost the same thing as writing. Wallace Stevens says that writing is a very intensely concentrated form of reading. Reading can do the same thing; it can take these unknowns and make them knowable. For me, fiction has often taught me a lot, if not more, about these unknowns and these things I'm anxious about, than non-fiction. And so, I try not to be fearful, but I realize that I do have fears, and writing can be a way to confront those fears. I'm not going to say there's nothing to be afraid of, but one of the great things about reading and writing is that they help you see things for yourself, as opposed to just experiencing received ideas. It can help you decide what's worth being afraid of and what's not. This ties back to your previous thought because I think a lot of people are trapped in this shorthand of beauty. It helps you free your mind and break out of this ridiculous, reductive notion of beauty. See it for yourself and decide what you think is beautiful, and decide what you think is fearful. Don't just coast on TV, advertising, movies, and videogames.

RAIL: Have you ever written anything you would consider grotesque? Have you ever written anything you hesitated to publish?

ROONEY: Yes, yes, I have. I feel like everything I've written, I've hesitated to publish! But I think that's good. It's not like a hesitation that stymies me or prevents me, but it stems from not fear of self-exposure, but of a more utilitarian concern, as to whether or not what I am going to publish is gratuitous. Is it going to add to people's understanding of the subject?

RAIL: So is it less about ego and more about communication?

ROONEY: Yes, exactly, although of course you can never really separate ego from it. I really do hope it's part of a conversation and not just a monologue to myself on stage.

The grotesque can be part of that, and it can be harder to publish something that seems grotesque. An example of this would be in *For You, For You I Am Trilling These Songs*, my relationship with the Chief of Staff is very complex. He was by anyone's estimation, clearly a sexual harasser, but I chose to put up with it because I loved the job, and also I came to even like this person who was himself highly grotesque. He was charming, but he was an unremitting asshole. I hope the essay grapples with these shades of grey. It's not just clear choices. It's hard to just quit your job. It's hard to hate someone.

There are usually more levels of complexity. Stuff like that is what gives me the most pause, and I think it is in the realm of the grotesque.

RAIL: Did you ever worry that the Chief of Staff, or the people you were writing about would read this and be upset?

ROONEY: Yeah, of course. And I worry about that all the time. I reconcile those concerns with actually publishing stuff by asking myself whether I have written with what Janet Burroway calls, "the absence of the intent to deceive." Have I been honest? Am I deceiving others or myself? Am I sugarcoating or lying? I never publish anything if I feel that I'm deceitful. I also ask myself whether I am score-settling or trying to get even. If the answer is yes, I don't do it. But if the answer is no, this is me trying to honestly depict something, trying to grapple with something, trying to make sense of something in a way that might help other people in a similar situation make sense of it. Then I'm okay with publishing it.

Not every writer decides that way. My friend Liz Hildreth, who's also a poet, grapples with this too because she writes autobiographically, and she said to her husband David, a visual artist, "How can I write this? It's going to make somebody unhappy." And David said, "Somebody's already unhappy." That sounds so basic, but it's profound because somebody is always already unhappy. There have been times when I've written about people in a way that I thought was so loving and so positive, and they've been pissed off at me just because they don't care what I wrote, they care that I wrote it. I respect that and I understand it, but I don't let it stop me because I don't feel that I'm acting from a place of malice.

RAIL: That is such an interesting code of ethics.

ROONEY: In creative writing classes, I like to emphasize that you really have to decide for yourself. I think non-fiction has to be true, but short of that, I think every writer draws the line in the sand.

RAIL: You reference occasionally the narcissism of memoir. As a writer, I worry about this constantly, and take your advice to heart about the need to craft an artful story, and to remember that something isn't relatable just because it happened to you. Can you speak a little on narcissism, and how it might propel and also hinder art making?

ROONEY: Narcissism is really interesting as a feminist, because I feel that women are much, much, much more frequently subject to that accusation than men. I think we still, unfortunately, live in a culture where women are told that they'll be more appealing if they essentially shut up and look pretty. Not always, but you can definitely find that in reviews, and in the reception of different kinds of books by different kinds of people. I always try not to be narcissistic, and to offer my audience beautiful language or craft, so that there's something else going on. Of course I'm a fan of criticism, but I think people need to really examine where the criticism is coming from.

For example, I recently wrote an essay about my personal relationship to perfume, much of which had to do with gender. For years, I didn't let myself like perfume because I was raised in a household where to be overly feminine was discouraged, and so the essay is about my grappling with that. But I also framed it as an abecedarian, because I want it to be more enticing. If you're not into perfume, you can still read it because there's form, language, and there's something else happening. In that way, a fear of narcissism is good because it can push you to these formal things that can make a piece more interesting and beautiful, but it would have been bad if I'd let that voice and that fear of narcissism prevent me from writing that subject. It's better to think about how to make people care about that subject than to just be quiet.

RAIL: On page 156 of *Live Nude Girl*, you investigate how artists scramble beauty to leave a stamp on those that they love:

I have seen the way that artists invent their own ideal images by disregarding physical constraints... I have read that Ingres added an extra vertebra to the neck of his odalisque. Picasso scrambled his loved ones' features. Modigliani made their faces in almond shapes. Such are the things we do for our visions. Such are the things we do to create things we love.

This passage has stayed with me, as both a reader and as an artist. When I was an undergraduate in Wayne Thiebaud's classroom, he asked us to define art and beauty, then challenged all our definitions. (This is something I still do every semester in my classroom). One brave sculpture student said, "Art is the creation of objects you are in love with." That has always stuck with me as the best definition of art I have come across so far. So my question for you is two-fold: One: If the artist sacrifices the reality of the model to create something he or she loves, do you still feel that those armies of "Kathies" you thought of as living eternally are representations of you? Or are they somehow some other strange version of you? Or are they versions of the artist? And does it bother you that you may go misrepresented? And two: Do you treat your characters with the same attention to reality, or do you scramble their faces (like a Picasso) for the sake of your writing? Do you feel guilty if you do, due to your experience as a model?

ROONEY: You probably remember the book ends with that tiny little poem by Bill Knott, about being misunderstood, and he expresses what I think is a gorgeous human desire for connection. He says essentially that he wishes to be misunderstood, that is to be understood from your perspective. That really sums it up for me both in fiction and non-fiction, in what artists do, and in what I do with my characters. Any time you seek to understand someone else or to represent someone else, the endeavor is doomed from the start. You've always already messed it up. And you've always already remitted to making it as much about yourself as to what you're representing. But, that failure is beautiful. And that failure is paradoxically what pushes us to try. I know I'm never going to get this right, but screw it, I'm going to give it a shot.

RAIL: There were moments you seemed somewhat disrespected by the way students were told to ignore you, and scramble you as the model. At times, it seemed impersonal or dehumanizing. Are you supportive of the scramble for the sake of creating objects you are in love with?

ROONEY: The only times that I felt negative about the scrambling were when they seemed like omissions or deposits that reduced humanity rather than the ones that celebrated humanity.

RAIL: Okay, so the crazy, Cubist paintings might seem more real or more true than the realistic portrait?

ROONEY: Exactly, and I think you can often see Picasso's bizarre singular vision in a way that you wouldn't in realism, and it seems more loving.

RAIL: You quote Plotinus, and you explain that you use this passage in the classroom regularly about sculpting the self:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your stature, until there

shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness established in the stainless shine.

In what ways has this quote impacted your writing, your teaching, and your personal life? How does art relate to our daily decisions, morality, and our identity?

ROONEY: To be very clear, I love that quote, but I love it as it applies to art. I'm not saying get plastic surgery! I'm saying look at the thing you're creating! Whether it's a non-fiction composition class, or a novel. It's a plea for self-awareness, and a challenge to the self. Don't be satisfied. Try to perfect. Also, it is a sense of forgiveness. You can look at something, and see that it's not perfect, but it is mine and I did my best. It has something to offer. This quote is a useful way of cultivating an internal critic that is constructive and not destructive.

I also like how it puts creativity and inspiration clearly in the hands of the individual. I don't like this idea that creativity strikes like lightning from outside you, and you have to wait for it to be creative. I think it really is more internal, and you have more of a control over your ability to create.

RAIL: You quote Aristotle as well: "the greatest thing by far is to have command of a metaphor." How does this apply to politics for you? If metaphor and language are about precision and communication, what attracted and disgusted you in politics?

ROONEY: I am a huge fan of George Orwell, and I've mentioned him in essays specifically about working in politics. He is really no bullshit. There is an important distinction to be made between truth, lies, and bullshit. Truth, obviously, is true, lies, obviously are deceitful. Bullshit is far more threatening. Politics has a ton of bullshit, and I'm not just being crass. Harry Frankfurt has written an entire book on bullshit that I highly recommend. Bullshit is when the person speaking is not only avoiding the truth, but he or she doesn't care about the truth. In a way, a lie is less harmful because you can look at a lie and identify it as such. But what's worse is when people muddy the waters or try to have it both ways or do something opportunistically without concern about truth or falsehood.

For me, George W. Bush was the epitome of this: "Are there weapons of mass destruction? Who cares?" There was even that Bush official who was quoted as saying that reality doesn't matter, and that the officials of his administration made their own reality. That's bullshit, and that's terrifying. The thing that would thrill me the most in politics was when, as a member of the communications team, I really felt like we were trying to tell the truth and trying to raise awareness about an issue. And the times when I was most disgusted were when the truth was being obscured for some pragmatic political purpose. We're going to fudge this because it is going to be more appealing to people because we don't trust people to grasp the nuance, so we're going to glide over it. To bring it back to Orwell, that's why he's so against clichés and dead figures of speech, and *1984* Newspeak, because it's insulting to the truth and it's insulting to the people and it doesn't trust people to be smart.

RAIL: I think that's so fascinating as this muddying the waters is also sort of the ability, or the double-edged sword of language, that you can transform anything into anything else. So it's a love and hate of the same tool.

ROONEY: It's also the fiction in the politics. One of the things I touch on in *O, Democracy!*, is this recurring accusation of the "liberal media," which is much overstated—and not true—so news sources often try to overcorrect for that assumption. In *O, Democracy!*, there's a scene at the Lake Michigan press conference where the oil company is going to dump more

pollutants into the lake; the newspapers report it not as "dumping more pollutants into the lake is stupid and dangerous," but as "opinions differ on toxicity of toxins." That's the bullshit I'm getting at. Dumping pollutants into the lake is categorically, undeniably negative. But all these people feel they have to appear fair and balanced. Truth often gets sacrificed in the political realm and it's extremely dangerous.

RAIL: Do you think there are ethics involved in subject matter for fiction? Are there certain stories that can't be written by certain people? Or is it all available for experimentation?

ROONEY: I think it's all fair game but you need to be extremely cautious. This just came up in the classroom yesterday. I have this great student who is a wonderful writer and he had this idea about writing a gay love affair set in the time of World War II. And he was really scared to write it. He sent me an email saying, "I'm gay, but I'm not Jewish, and I clearly didn't live through the Holocaust. Do I have any right to even talk about this?" And I said, "Yes, but be careful." I said, "Be as sensitive as you can, research, be respectful, and then see how it goes over." It's important to be super cautious. But, I also don't want to say that a white person can't write from a non-white perspective or vice-versa. I don't want to say that a man can't write as a woman or vice-versa. I don't want to say a straight person can never write a gay character. I think that's really depressing and limiting because it assumes that we can only ever understand or respect people who are identical to ourselves, and I don't think that's true.

RAIL: One thing I show in the classroom is the wall Banksy tagged between Israel and Palestine, and we discuss the idea of ethics in illegal graffiti. Is it okay for Banksy, a British artist, to have tagged the wall between Israel and Palestine, when he's not Israeli, and he's not Palestinian? Is that his wall to tag? It's kind of a similar question of respect. He's obviously taking a side in the argument. I don't know how I feel about it, but I also love that he makes us ask those questions.

ROONEY: Me too. The answer to that question might depend on a lot of things, but on how you feel about democracy and what you feel democracy is and does. Democracy just means that everyone is equal and everyone participates equally. Of course, in practice, it doesn't happen that way. Who you are and the money you have play a big role. If you have a democratic view of art, then things like what Banksy has done, or what this student of mine has done are very democratic. They are saying they're equal; they're not saying they're better than other people, and they're not saying they're worse than other people. Other people could also choose to comment. People don't have to agree.

And a caveat to that—having a democratic view of art certainly doesn't mean it's impossible to be offensive. Certainly, someone might be offended. But it does contribute to the conversation, and democracy is very rough and tumble. So the conversations you have when you operate in a democratic view of art end up being messy. You can talk for hours without deciding what is right.

RAIL: In *O, Democracy!*, was it freeing to write a sort of sassy character, who wasn't exactly like you?

ROONEY: What you gain from fiction as a writer and a reader is the idea that everything has a point of view, and everything has a perspective. Fiction really shows both the writer and the reader that there are different kinds of truths, and different voices in stories that tend to get spoken and tend to get silenced. In *O, Democracy!*, writing Colleen as a sort of sassier character who wasn't bound by what was really happening gave me more power in some ways, even though she comes to an arguably troublesome end. That was exciting. And that gets back to

that double-living. What if I had a do-over? What if I wasn't just bound by fact? Had I just written a memoir about the campaign season, I don't think I would have had as much to offer the reader as I did in the novel form.

RAIL: How did you make the choice to go into politics? I know I speak for us all when I say, we are glad you migrated from politics to poetry. What led you away from that world towards academics and the classroom? Did you have a clear change of heart or were these gradual stepping stones?

ROONEY: I was a huge political dork when I was in high school. I've always been very interested in history and I have always been very interested in trying to make a difference. Before I could even drive, I was volunteering on political campaigns out in the suburbs of Chicago for female, pro-choice, and doomed non-wealthy candidates who never won, and that was important to me. When I went to college, I thought I was going to be a political science major. I was an intern in Durbin's office starting when I was 20, which again I look back and am amazed that I was so young. I truly was idealistic. Poetry and politics, or writing and politics were never separate for me. I was always interested in both of them, but what happened over the course of my 20s, as happens to a lot of people in their 20s, was I started realizing that my limitless potential had limits and that I couldn't do everything. I realized that deciding to do one thing meant deciding not to do another.

Democracy is an idea worth believing in, complicated though it is. And then there's politics, which can be understood as the politics industry. It's like any other industry: it's bound up in capitalism, it's very much bound up in inequality and ensuring that people who have power continue to consolidate that power. So people like me—these dorky, wide-eyed enthusiasts—are the fodder of the politics industry. Politics cannot function without these unpaid interns and these low paid aides. These people have completely drank the Kool-Aid and died for the cause. But I think those who stay in it outgrow that and become much more opportunistic. Those who are unwilling to do that, leave, or have to leave. I wouldn't say I've lost my idealism, but I've gained an informed disgust for politics. I still vote, even when it seems pointless, and I don't kid myself that my vote is all that powerful. But I do think it's important and it's helped me see that there are other ways to be engaged and to be a citizen. I think my transition from being someone who works in the politics industry, to being someone who now is a professor and a writer, has caused me to beneficially realize that there's more than one way to be a citizen.

RAIL: You're probably influencing so many more people by writing than you would be if you were staffing in an office.

ROONEY: Yeah, I hope so. "You have to have a passion for anonymity," is something that the Chief of Staff said to me in real life. He says this in the novel too. I do not have that passion because I want to be able to say my opinions and not censor myself to protect Dick Durbin or because I fear alienating some voters. You have to be really centrist and mediocre in politics, but in real life there are some things that you can't be calm and even about because they are so unjust.

RAIL: You open *For You, For You I am Trilling These Songs* with getting waxed which was intensely sexual and personal and end on a nun, questioning spirituality. Can you speak a little to the ambivalence you felt about modeling, nudity, and female empowerment through religion? Did you see it as a clear choice between art and faith?

ROONEY: I have fallen away from religion. I was raised extremely Catholic and I now cannot stand Catholicism or any organized religion because I don't believe in God and I can't lie to myself and act like

I do. I also don't like the idea that the only reason humans should behave ethically is because we fear punishment from "Sky God." I think we should find it within ourselves to be good people on our own. I have deep skepticism of institutions, and it's hard to think of institutions that are more "institutiony" than religion. So, yes, I have made a conscious turning away from religion. But I also don't like to sound too cheesy and say I don't believe in God because I believe in art. It's not that. So, I'm hesitant to say I believe in art, although I love art. What I do believe in is the power of human imagination. Imagination is one of the things that makes us human. With imagination you can envision a world where people at McDonald's get \$15 an hour, you can imagine a world where domestic violence is not a secret and is not tolerated, and you can imagine a world where all people regardless of sexual orientation can marry who they want. So, that's what I mean when I say that I believe in imagination. Not just art, but the ability to see the world in a more just way.

RAIL: What exactly do you admire so in Weldon Kees's poetry? How did seeing the spaces he inhabited affect your interpretation of his work? Are you impacted by him as an interdisciplinary artist? Are you fascinated by his mysterious disappearance?

ROONEY: All of that. I love Weldon Kees because he's just a great writer. I love his Robinson character and the way he makes this alter-ego that's him, but not him, and the way he uses imagination to open up possibilities. I love that he romantically disappeared—and that's not to romanticize suicide, but I do think there's something compelling about mystery. You see someone whose date for his birth is 1914, and then the dash leads to 1955, and a question mark for his death. You want to understand. There's a line in *Robinson Alone*, "Incompletion makes people want to fill your blanks in." I also think I just relate to him a lot as an interdisciplinary artist. He was a fiction writer, he wrote reviews, he wrote poetry, he painted, he did photography, and he even started at the end of his known life exploring film. I also think he never got the recognition that he deserved. He was great, and his greatness went unrecognized. I think it bothered him a lot. That still is a problem in culture today. If you're too interdisciplinary, people don't know what to do with you.

RAIL: You speak about being in love with him. Do you often fall in love with writers when you read? Have you fallen in love with others, if so who?

ROONEY: I don't mean for it to sound like some silly crush. It's not that he's dreamy—although I do think Weldon Kees had a dreamy moustache. I've fallen in love with all kinds of writers. I think that kind of deep identification or sense of not being alone or being in the presence of someone you truly get or who truly gets you is part of why reading or art or music can be so transformative. You come into the presence of a person you didn't know, and it's like making a new friend. You meet them, and they show you things and you start to take up these new interests, because they directed you to them. It's very enriching. That's what I mean when I say I fall in love with writers. And sometimes I fall in love with writers who have personal lives or beliefs that I don't always find attractive. For example, I love Muriel Spark's novels, but I don't entirely admire her personal life. She became extremely Catholic and really went hook, line, and sinker into the faith, which as I have said, I completely divorced myself from. So, when I say I'm in love with a writer, it's not a blind love. It's very human. We all love people who are not perfect, and being able to have that kind of warts and all love is important in the real world, and also important in the aesthetic relationships.

RAIL: How has teaching impacted your creative process? Do you find yourself working in a different way when

Any time you seek to understand someone else or to represent someone else, the endeavor is doomed from the start. You've always already messed it up. And you've always already remitted to making it as much about yourself as to what you're representing. But, that failure is beautiful. And that failure is paradoxically what pushes us to try

you have lesson plans to research, and plagiarism to deal with?

ROONEY: I'm lucky in that I love teaching. I'm also very fortunate that my work in the classroom feeds my work as a creative person. I know there are people who feel that their artistic life goes on hold when they teach due to grading and planning, but luckily I find teaching very stimulating. Part of that is that right now, at De Paul, plagiarism (which I write about in *For You, For You I Am Trilling These Songs*, and which galls me to no end) is less of a factor because I am teaching all creative classes. Not that one can't plagiarize creative work, but it's less often done and is less difficult to catch. I'm teaching poetry, creative writing, and writing the body, so I have a lot of leeway and a lot of freedom to teach classes that are in my wheelhouse already. I do realize that I'm in a fortunate position to be able to teach in a way that feeds my writing.

RAIL: When you write about plagiarism, I love the point you make that even if it's choppy, or it's not perfect, it's your voice. And I was wondering if that lesson of bravery in the classroom factors into your own writing?

ROONEY: I do like to push people, myself and others, to be the best they can be. I also tend toward this imperfect Immanuel Kant sense of beauty, as opposed to a Platonic sense of beauty. I find the things that are universally ideal and universally loved less lovable, and less interesting. They're less interactive and engaging than things that have contradictions or gaps. I like stuff that's a little more flawed because I feel I can get into and relate more interpretively to blemishes than to things that are just perfect. It's like too shiny of a surface. You try to run and you just slide.

RAIL: Do you find yourself altered by being forced into subjects? Does the typewriter, the slowness of it, and the authority of type, offer you a sort of more tangible relationship to the words on the page? Does it make it feel more precious, or more real in some way? What exactly, does the typewriter do for you?

ROONEY: It's all of what you said. I think the improvisatory element and the musical element are the biggest things for me. It's like improv comedy, but it's also improvisatory in the sense of jazz. Dave Landsberger, whose idea it was to bring PWWY to Chicago, has compared it to playing the word saxophone. I like that. The typewriter is somehow very much like a musical instrument. If you're playing the piano, you are going to produce different things than playing the flute. I think playing the laptop versus playing the handwritten notebook, versus playing the typewriter, produces a different kind of music. I think it has to do with the slowness, and the fact that we can't erase. I don't draft, I just bang it out on the typewriter and that pushes me to places I wouldn't otherwise go. It's about being comfortable with imperfection. When you're writing a poem on a topic you didn't choose, and it has to be done in 10 minutes on a typewriter, you're going to fuck it up. But you have to let it go. And you have to realize that sometimes those fuck ups end up being your most beautiful moments. Not always—sometimes they're just bad—but more often than not by letting yourself be free to not be perfect, you end up being better than if you were perfect.

RAIL: So it helps you fall in love a little bit with the mess?

ROONEY: Exactly.

RAIL: You speak so much and with such knowledge of visual art—is there some part of you that longs to be a painter?

ROONEY: Yes. I do take a lot of photographs, and I do paint. I consider those things hobbies, but very serious hobbies. I don't mean hobby in a cute, dismissive way, and I've always loved visual art, but I realized early on that my skill as a writer vastly exceeded my skill as a painter or drawer. But, I feel that art enriches my life as a spectator or a fan in a way that's really beneficial. It's very cool to love something so much, and think about it, and read about it, but I don't have to feel that same pressure I feel with writing. I don't have to interact with art in the same way I do with writing, from a practical standpoint. It makes it a freer space for me.

I recently started trying to write more art reviews. One of my favorite critics is Dave Hickey. He wrote *Air Guitar*, and also has a book that just came out called *Pirates and Farmers*. He's been an art dealer and an art critic his whole life. He is not himself a visual artist, but the way that he writes so knowledgeably and enthusiastically about visual art is inspiring. He's my ideal in that regard.

RAIL: It kind of touches back to visionary art, and this idea of removing the pressure. Your writing is your professional space, and your paintings are your private world where no one gets to review you, so it's kind of a special territory. I wanted to ask you, do you have a favorite, most iconic painting that inspires you or encapsulates how you think about yourself as an artist?

ROONEY: I love the work of Dorothea Tanning. For one thing she's a female artist, but I don't just love her for that, I admire the way she's able to paint very representationally when she wants to. She has the ability to paint the world exactly as it looks, but more often than not she chooses not to—she'll make a sunflower grow out of a stairway, or represent a bizarre dreamscape that could never exist. She resonates with me, too, because she came to be a respected poet later in life. I love the way she could shift gears like that.

RAIL: In closing, I want to ask you which of your books do you feel most accurately represents who you are today, as contemporary Kathleen?

ROONEY: Right now, I feel that the book that most encompasses me is probably, *Robinson Alone*, which is weird because that's the book where I'm actually not writing about myself. It's not based on my life, it's based on Weldon Kees. The mask that Kees wore, and the mask that writing that book let me wear, ended up conveying a truer representation of how I feel about a lot of things, even than when I've written about myself. Sometimes you have to get more removed in order to get closer. ☺

RACHEL SLOTNICK, originally from Los Altos, California, is a painter and writer. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in May 2010. Her work is on permanent display at the Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a sponsored muralist for the 35th, 46th, and 47th wards, and her paintings are currently on display in a solo exhibition at Beauty & Brawn Art Gallery & Think Space. She was recently a finalist in the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Awards. Her upcoming publications include: *Mad Hatter's Review*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Tortoise Books*. Rachel currently resides in Chicago, where she works as Adjunct Faculty in Art Studio and English at Malcolm X College, and the Illinois Art Institute. See her work at rachelslotnick.com.

CONSIDER THE CRITIC

DISPATCH FROM THE CMJ MUSIC MARATHON

BY ALLYSON POLSKY MCCABE



Augusta Koch of Cayetana. Photo by Allyson Polsky McCabe.

With five days and nights of nonstop performances, the 34-year old CMJ Music Marathon touts itself as “one of the world’s foremost platforms for discovering new music.” But with over 1,400 shows to choose from, it’s easy to succumb to fatigue, followed by ennui. Should you see Teen Body, Teen Commandments, Teen Daze, Teen Death, Teen Men, or Teen Mom? Or forgo all of the “teen” bands to catch one of the doe-eyed girls with acoustic guitars or the EDM guys with ironic facial hair?

Weeks before CMJ I found myself speed-swiping through the official event app as if on Tinder, nexting bands with poorly chosen names, self-consciously Instagram-filtered photos, and Bandcamp links that made me nostalgic for the days when you had to survive a few rites of passage before self-releasing your umpteenth EP. Once the opening date drew nearer, publicity reps blasted me with scores of emails, offering me interviews with up-and-coming bands, not to mention free wifi, food, and booze—which also flowed freely at the press reception, a lavish affair held in a glass-walled penthouse at the Hotel on Rivington.

As I enjoyed the free Maker’s Mark, a friend sent me a solicitation she received from a well-established PR firm promising—with a money-back guarantee—that she would receive heavy promotion at CMJ with a fresh press release and album reviews in several popular music blogs, all for the incredibly low price of \$295. Never mind that her band has been inactive for several years, and that she had no plans to play at CMJ. The PR rep explained that one of the firm’s interns had just discovered her music through her old “BandCamp” (sic) page, which somehow qualified her as a new artist.

I tried to maintain an open mind as the festival got underway. Consequently, I saw a random assortment of bands ranging from forgettable to terrible. On the third day, I abandoned my quest to discover the rarest finds and went straight to Webster Hall to see the quirky Australian alt-rockers Courtney Barnett, who played CMJ last year as a relative unknown touring in support of her release *The Double EP: A Sea of Split Peas*. *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, and NPR all lauded Barnett’s performance. A world tour soon followed, as well as a guest stint on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

This year Barnett appeared on a bill with her current tour-mates, the folk troubadour Mikhael Paskalev and the baroque pop ensemble San Fermin. Some say genres don’t matter anymore in terms of audience enthusiasm, but those who saw this disparate lineup may beg to differ. Rather than appearing stoked to discover Paskalev, a small, disinterested audience talked over his opening set as he peppered the breaks between Paul Simon-esque tunes with sad sack musings, introducing the song “Susie” by telling the audience he wrote it for his girlfriend the day they broke up. A significantly thinned audience was also unexcited about San Fermin, the arty eight-piece ensemble that followed Barnett. There’s no doubt the band had flair—with two lead

singers, a violinist, a saxophonist, a trumpeter, a drummer, a keyboardist, and a guitarist—but the pairing was not unlike following a big swig of Jack Daniel’s with a small sip of sherry.

The next night’s sold out bill suffered from a slightly different but not unrelated problem. The Kills’s was one of several shows where, even with a press pass, the only way to ensure access to the headlining act was to sit through three hours of opening bands. Slothrust, Nuns, and Moon Duo are all decent, and cohere musically, but it’s difficult to endure that much concentrated distortion and reverb over-saturation. For those willing and able, the payoff was a mesmerizing Kills show with Alison Mosshart and Jamie Hince flanked by two live synchronized drummers. With no new album to promote, the band delivered satisfying back catalogue gems including “Kissy Kissy” and “Monkey 23,” which made the opening bands sound like, er, noise.

What’s the problem here? CMJ used to stand for *College Media Journal*, an actual newsletter devoted to tracking and reflecting what was happening with college radio airplay in the days when college radio was a powerful gatekeeper, one of the main ways fans discovered exciting new artists beyond the pop mainstream. But the same forces that have undermined the commercial radio industry, namely the Internet and streaming services, have threatened indie music and the college radio stations that once fostered it. Many stations have bitten the dust, colleges selling off their signals to outside entities.

CMJ has tried to stay alive by rebranding itself as an event organizer, sacrificing its old curatorial role for the promotion of a bloated roster of the “hottest” but not necessarily best bands. To facilitate its new mission, CMJ shows are now held at more than 80 venues spread throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, each venue hosting several bands for short—often 30-to-45-minute—back-to-back sets. Theoretically, you the critic might go to a venue to see a particular band you already know and like and happen upon a new band you’d love to plug. But at least for me, that wasn’t the case.

Imagine a radio with over a thousand stations, few programmed thoughtfully, all vying for your attention at the same time, and then you’ll have a sense of the CMJ experience from this critic’s perspective. By the end of the week I was all but tapped out, only halfheartedly deciding to head over to Baby’s All Right—the same venue Barnett played last year—to see newcomers Cayetana, a band I first discovered this summer not through a publicist, but by keeping my own ear to the ground when I produced a piece for NPR on the economics of recording outside of the major label system.

I arrived at the club just in time to catch the French emo/hardcore band Sport, who yelled and pounded their way through a set. To be fair, Sport seemed to be having a bad night—the kind of bad night that’s all too familiar to young indie bands. There were problems with the soundboard. One of the members injured his hand and couldn’t play. The room was half-empty. And when I looked up Sport on my phone, I saw a Facebook post begging for lodging with the promise, “We are nice, very clean, animal friendly, do the dishes and the toilets if we dirty some of them.”

As with earlier shows, however, the room became infused with a new energy as another band took the stage. Cayetana, second in that night’s five band lineup, played fearlessly, working the sweet spot between punk and pop—not hitting every note right but hitting all the right notes. By their third song, there was even crowd surfing, which I haven’t seen in a long time. By playing like they had nothing to prove, Cayetana kept it raw and real, and reminded me of what it was like to go to shows when shows were shows, and not just promotional showcases.

I’d like to think that Cayetana might be among those who break big this year, that the most promising bands can and still do get noticed—even in an ever-growing haystack. What else could explain how Aurora Aksnes, Happyness, Protomartyr, and Bo Ningen—none of which I’d seen—all ended up making Bob Boilen and Jon Pareles’s post-CMJ “must see” lists? I’m left simultaneously wishing I’d seen less and more this go-around, but this time next year there will be a whole new crop of “it” bands to discover. College radio may be dying, but to the detriment of indie music the hype machine roars on. ☞

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THE CODE FROM BENEATH DRIVES THE LINES

JOHN SUPKO & BILL SEAMAN'S *S_TRAITS*, PRESENTED WITH WET INK ENSEMBLE AT PIONEER WORKS, OCTOBER 29 BY MARSHALL YARBROUGH

Bill Seaman and John Supko celebrated the release of their new album *s_traits* with an event on October 29 at Pioneer Works in Red Hook. The evening's performance paired four musicians from Wet Ink Ensemble with *bearings_traits*, an improvising software program designed by Supko, and visuals of generative images programmed by Seaman. Both professors at Duke University, Seaman and Supko have collaborated since 2011, exploring, as Jeffrey Edelstein writes in the liner notes for *s_traits*, "what might be described as the 'uploading' of human creativity to the computer."

For Supko and Seaman, this meant amassing a database of, e.g., recordings of Supko's percussion duo *Straits*, field recordings, noise, documentary soundtracks, and recordings of Supko and Seaman playing the piano. These samples were hybridized using software, and the results were themselves added to the database, which came to comprise over 110 hours of music. Supko then developed the *bearings_traits* software, which could cull from this database to generate complete compositions.

The composers treated these compositions as first drafts, then reworked them into the 26 tracks on *s_traits*. To complement the music, Seaman, taking Kenneth Koch's poem "straits" as inspiration, composed a poem of recombinant text, which appears in full on the album cover. Lines from the poem provide the track titles; each track begins with Seaman's voice speaking the lines.

Now, despite my awareness of the long and rich legacy of readymade and recombinant art, and with due deference to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, William Burroughs and Kenneth Goldsmith, DJ Shadow and J Dilla, let me just say that reading about projects like *s_traits*, which trumpet the use of wonder software and the benefits of computerized creativity, produces in me an instinctual leerness. I will defend this leerness to an extent; I think the glut of EDM and bland dance pop and non-Kanye West instances of Auto-Tune justifies skepticism towards new musical technologies. Still, I'm sure my wariness also stems in part from an extreme notion: I can't shake the idea that creativity is something not at all determined by random factors, not reliant on prefabricated materials, and not reproducible by machine.

Of course, randomness, prefab materials, and mechanized production are all aspects of the composition process behind *s_traits*, but to my—perhaps reactionary—relief, Supko and Seaman go a step further. The *bearings_traits* software, selecting from a vast array of sonic material—some raw, some already reworked through software—generates a new sonic product, which Supko and Seaman then refine further. As Supko explains, "Our approach was to keep the computer's crazy inventiveness

but to refine it in ways only a human (at least for the moment) can."

The average track length on the album is around three minutes. The effect of this format is a density of sound: each track seems to present one condensed sonic idea; often there is one sample that acts as an anchor, a center for the diverse array of other sounds to orbit like electrons around a nucleus. The recurrent piano theme on "Predictably Arcane," for example, seems to function in this way. Seaman's text, marking each new track, also has an anchoring role for the listener, as when, in a museum, you read the title of a piece of abstract art first before contemplating the work itself. There is also at times an eerie resonance between text and music, as on "The Clicking," where a rhythmic clicking track marches throughout, intercut with clipped, glitchy sounds; the effect is not unlike listening to a CD skip.

At Pioneer Works, *bearings_traits*'s inventions were left unrefined; the human element came from the improvising musicians of Wet Ink Ensemble. Percussionist Ian Antonio, bassist Greg Chudzik, trombonist William Lang, and saxophonist Alex Mincek were reacting to compositions they had not heard before, compositions which, after all, the program was inventing spontaneously. The players were tentative at first, stopping when each new scrap of Seaman's text announced a new composition, falling away to make room for a particularly busy sample. As the evening progressed, however, the players grew more assertive, stretching to fill the empty spaces left by the program's samples and to bridge the gap between compositions. At times, the players traveled around the Pioneer Works space, so that you might suddenly hear the klaxon sound of a saxophone behind you, like a blast from a pipe organ's supplemental horns in the back of a church.

I realize that the trouble with my knee-jerk response against computers and randomness playing a role in the creative process is an overemphasis on control. Wet Ink Ensemble sacrificed a great deal of control, improvising along to *bearings_traits*'s raw compositions, but the effect was engaging. With *s_traits*, John Supko and Bill Seaman have relied on software to help spin a huge tangle of material into a dense, rich fabric of sound. To be so immersed in material requires the composers to give up a degree of agency, it is true, but this does not preclude originality or invention. The reward is to find the potential for surprise in the material itself. As the last lines of Seaman's text have it, "the code from beneath drives the lines / mercurial as the light." ©

MARSHALL YARBROUGH is the *Rail's* assistant music editor.



Bill Seaman. Photo by Josh Gibson.



John Supko. Photo by Kyle Yamakama.

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THE BEAUTIFUL WEIRDNESS OF JAVIER COHEN

BY GEOFFREY CLARFIELD



Javier Cohen. Photo by Guy Tremblay.

During the summer months, from about six to nine in the evening, you can watch tango dancers at the Shakespeare Statue in Central Park. Many times I would stop for a break from cycling, buy a soft drink, and watch couples dancing. I would linger and remember that I once had the privilege of bicycling through the *barrios* of Buenos Aires, the home of this music. Tango has become so popular around the world that there is an ongoing tango club maintained by Turkish music and dance students in faraway Istanbul.

Now, I am once again listening to the CD *Como Va Todo*, written and arranged by Javier Cohen, a brilliant and creative Argentinian tango and jazz guitarist, who lives and works out of Buenos Aires. I am fixated on cut number three, “Soledad,” which was composed before WWII by the late great maestro of early 20th-century tango, Carlos Gardel, and his composing partner Alfredo Le Pera. On this recording, Cohen is accompanied by Claudio Gandolfo on the bandoneon, Nicanor Suárez on stand-up bass, and Germain Gomez on drums.

Although the song starts with the melody interpreted through Javier’s guitar, it is then passed to the bandoneon, then bass, then back to guitar. With each pass it is varied melodically and rhythmically, in what feels like an effortless and cyclical dream-like state. This kind of performance is the expression of great artistry and the result of years of playing together, as the musicians are all close friends and fellow *porteños* (born residents of Buenos Aires).

I am hypnotized by the endlessly satisfying variations of “Soledad,” and I can see once again the marvelous *barrios* of Buenos Aires, its Paris-like parks, and its life lived outdoors. When I listen to this ensemble, I hear its melodies and rhythms rise naturally from the roundabouts of the wide avenues of this marvelous city, whose musicians have always graced it with a mixture of Latin, American, and classical musical styles.

“Soledad,” and the rest of the cuts on this nearly perfect CD, seem effortless and have the *sprezzatura* of music from the Italian Renaissance. They are recreations, or better still creative interpolations, of tango, jazz, and classical music. This music, if it could be drunk, would taste as good as the best Argentine wine.

When Javier was working on his first CD, *Buenas*—which is also a joy to hear—I spent time at his house, witnessed his skills as an *asador* (master of the barbecue, as in “matador”), and heard him play unaccompanied in his courtyard. He and his wife Selva took me to hear tango guitarists. And he made me a CD of scores of classical tango melodies to better habituate me to its themes and variations.

I was soon hooked, and wanted to know more about Javier’s musical background and creative process. This is his ongoing story, for he will certainly write, arrange,

and produce much more music in the years ahead, as he and his musical allies take tango into the 21st century.

Javier Cohen was born January 2nd, 1966, in Buenos Aires. He is the youngest of three sons, one of whom is also a guitarist and introduced young Javier to the instrument. His late father Salomon was descended from the Sephardic Jews of Syria and his mother from immigrants from Lithuania.

Javier was a bright student and went to local public schools such as the Instituto Vernier and the Francisco de Vitoria School. He went to a high school/junior college that specialized in science and engineering, where he studied electronics, expecting to build a career in that field. But like many scientifically gifted musicians before him, he could not stop hearing the music—music took over his soul.

He took up the classical guitar at the Carlos Guastavino School. But soon after that he suspended his classical training and found, in Armando Alonso, a teacher who later became a friend.

Alonso opened Cohen’s eyes and ears, and for five years helped him navigate the perilous and rewarding world of guitar improvisation. Later work with the celebrated bandoneonist Rodolfo Mederos insured that while Javier moved in and out of jazz, he would be rooted in the musical world of tango.

Javier explained to me that the local conservatory and teachers influenced by its traditions pushed young musicians towards a mastery of the classical music of Europe, which has high prestige in Argentina because Argentinian culture is rooted in Europe. Javier felt that this repertoire had become frozen. Similarly, he concluded that the classic pre-WWII tango compositions suffered from the same problem. He felt that, as a musician, he must “open these repertoires.” At the time he had no idea how to do this, and so followed his musical interests wherever they led.

Growing up, his brothers were listening to Simon and Garfunkel and the Beatles, as well as to Argentina’s own modern folk singer icon, Mercedes Sosa. On the radio and on records there was blues and rock from both the United States and England. And since his father was of Syrian descent, every weekend he would hear the languid, nostalgic melodies of Lebanese pop stars such as Fairuz on his father’s gramophone.

As his parents were natural tango dancers, he was also exposed to the form in the house. He told me that they were a perfectly matched couple.

By the 1970s, tango was no longer in the musical forefront in Argentina. Pop and folk music outshone it. Nevertheless, slowly, Javier began to rediscover the rich depth of the tango repertoire and its possibilities. He explained:

One of my greatest influences was Luis Alberto Spinetta. He was a complete artist who was always searching for the music of the words, a perfect balance of surrealism, and popular messages, but never giving up his search for beauty. He was like a guy from your neighborhood who can talk to you about Picasso or Ravel, and at the same time you can talk to him about soccer while the two of you work on a barbecue. Then of course there was Charly García, with his unforgettable group Sui Generis, which was for me, a version of Simon and Garfunkel in Spanish, telling the stories that represented the youth of our time, like tango composers and lyricists used to do when tango was a living, evolving music decades ago ... So by the time I was 16 I started to see music as my world, not just as a listener, but as a young Argentinian artist who needed to build a musical world for himself, trying to learn and understand as much as I could from

musicians and artists from all over the world and from different ages of history.

When I asked who was one of his greatest early influences, he said:

I think there was a first real focus on Astor Piazzolla, who of course I knew as a listener, but when I saw him perform live, something changed forever ... I also remember clearly listening to my cassettes of Spinetta, Sui Generis, Serú Girán over and over, often playing my guitar, trying to get the right chords, so that I would have the chance to play those songs by myself or with my friends. Even my first contact with Ravel was during that time, on a Pedro Aznar album (with Serú Girán as bass player) that recorded a beautiful version of *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. That was a big moment. When I finally made it to New York City and studied with jazz master Jim Hall, we talked a lot about Ravel and Debussy, and the importance of understanding this musical world.

From his teens, Javier was an omnivorous listener and fan of Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane, and Chet Baker. At the same time, he was also finding a deep connection with the works of Bach, Chopin, and Mozart. Yet, he thought of all of them in the same light as local masters such as Aníbal Troilo, Roberto Grela, Horacio Salgán, Piazzolla, and Spinetta. There was no hierarchy there, just equality of excellence.

He once told me:

I even get a profound connection from a recording called *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, a traditional folk group. I do not understand the lyrics but it goes straight to my heart. And then there were films. We watched Clint Eastwood. We saw Sergio Leone films but we were really listening to the soundtracks of Ennio Morricone. I remember listening to those soundtracks, but it sure did not resonate with the Anglo- and Afro-American music that I was playing during the ‘60s and ‘70s.

During our many conversations Javier finally told me that in tango, he felt that there is a “beautiful weirdness,” that consists in the fact that in many compositions, music adapts its form to the lyrics, and becomes asymmetrical, rhythmically, harmonically, or melodically; that gives it a unique feel. That is one of the reasons improvising on a tango theme is so difficult. As a fellow guitarist, he assured me that “once you get the form, and if you know the lyrics, and understand the meaning, wonderful things can happen while you improvise.” This is what he and his ensemble are trying to do today, by taking pieces by Gardel, Troilo, or Cobian, creating credible arrangements, yet improvising on the themes in such a way that the audience feels that they are hearing them for the very first time.

Today, Javier continues to play in a trio with Claudio Gandolfo and Hernán Fernández. They are recording their new album called *Línea de Tres*, which is Argentine soccer jargon, roughly translated as “reasonable risks.” This is an ensemble of like-minded musicians from Buenos Aires, mixing, matching, and experimenting, all towards the goal of creating a 21st-century tango idiom. I am not an expert in this genre, but if anyone has a chance of pulling this off, I suspect that it is Javier and his gifted friends. ☎

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GEORGE CLINTON

Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?: A Memoir, with Ben Greenman (Atria Books, 2014)

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

“Funk is its own reward,” George Clinton announced in an authoritative baritone on the opening track to his album *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*. It was a promise of fulfillment through music, immediately followed by a foreboding request: “May I frighten you?”

Clones was released by Clinton’s band Parliament in 1976, as he was approaching the apogee of his not-inconsiderable industry powers. That same year Funkadelic, his other primary vehicle, released two albums. He also collaborated on his bassist Bootsy Collins’s first solo album while mounting the massive P-Funk Earth Tour, during which he would emerge onstage from a smoke-and-mirrors spaceship.

Over the next couple of years, he would fully stake his claim with more albums, more bands, and a tour that changed the scene from outer space to the ocean floor. With the help of an ever-growing “funk mob” of fantastically talented, inventive, and freaky musicians, Clinton updated R&B for the post-psychedelic ’70s and reupholstered it again when disco and later hip-hop emerged, crafting new, rewarding, and sometimes frightening music. This remarkable career is detailed in Clinton’s enjoyable if self-serving 416-page monologue *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?*, from singing doo-wop and owning a barbershop in Newark to the eventual crumbling of his empire through drug abuse and financial mismanagement.

It’s a fast and fun read, and Clinton is a charismatic narrator. He dispenses barbershop wisdom (“Music and books and films flowed to us through the same channels as sex and drugs”) and humor (“I had holes in the holes in my shoes”) with a keen eye for the parallel developments of white and African-American popular music. There are bits of forgotten history—keyboardist Bernie Worrell’s early membership in a band called Chubby and the Turnpikes, for example, which changed its name to Tavares (“Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel,” “Never Had a Love Like This Before”) after drummer Joey Kramer left to join Boston rockers Aerosmith. There’s

also plenty of secret P-Funk lore: Officer Dibbles, the pet pig that toured with Funkadelic in the early days; Logic, the stuffed animal that served as a mascot on later tours; and finally a large rock of crack cocaine Clinton carried on the road, superstitiously refusing to break and smoke it—though he certainly found other avenues of supply.

The flip-side to barbershop wisdom is barbershop boasting, and Clinton’s story seems at times self-serving. He paints himself as the puppet-master, and while he no doubt deserves much of the credit for creating the “Parliafunkadelicmenthang,” the tellings don’t always ring true. Elsewhere, for example, Collins has given Clinton far less credit for the creation of his Starchild persona than Clinton affords himself. The same goes for the financial differences that came between Clinton and some of his longtime associates, who would likely describe them differently than Clinton does here. He seems at times to damn his musicians with high praise, tagging them as geniuses but writing little about the making of the music, which certainly couldn’t have happened without the incredible pool of talent he assembled. (Clinton himself doesn’t play a musical instrument.) Loss of memory and inflation of ego might be unsurprising given his history with drugs, and whether or not years of crack addiction colored his recall, he makes no secret about his past use. Speaking at the Museum of the Moving Image on October 27, in one of a quick run of promotional appearances around town, he quipped, “If it wasn’t for flashbacks I wouldn’t have no memory at all.”

Just as he mugged to the museum audience, he doesn’t seem to shoot straight with his readers, which can be frustrating when he talks about the addiction that clearly seems to have hurt his later career. He wants the glory of the pop-star lifestyle, but barely owns up to the cost. “I don’t like stories where people melodramatically announce that they have hit bottom, as if that somehow suspends or justifies the rest of the choices that they have to make, as if it erases the other characters and the very idea of consequence,” he writes,



George Clinton. Photo Courtesy of Sarah Stack/The New York Public Library.

going on to detail his own bottoming-out. But the main problem drugs caused him, he seems to think, was his not noticing when labels and managers were ripping him off. Speaking at the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library on October 29 as part of the “LIVE From the NYPL” interview series, he was more forthcoming. After waxing nostalgic for the glory days of free drugs and free love, he said he spent 25 years trying to find a positive drug experience again but ended up addicted. “It takes a long time to get off crack,” he said. “That’s what this whole book is about.”

That’s not what the whole book is about, no more than it’s about the need for musicians to control their own copyrights, a claim he made later that evening. The book is about a lifetime of forging musical hybrids, culminating in a forthcoming album, for which the book delivers a fair bit of hype. Ultimately, if the telling is one-sided, it’s from the side of one of the visionaries of 20th-century popular music. It’s a shame he didn’t think enough of his own story to scale back the grievances and hype, but while funk may be its own reward, you can’t cash it at the bank. ☹

KURT GOTTSCHALK writes fiction and about music for various publications, hosts the *Miniature Minotaur* show on WFMU, and struggles with a variety of stringed instruments.

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OUTTAKES

BY STEVE DALACHINSKY



Nick Cave shoots a clown. Illustration by Megan Piontkowski.

“The way you did it is more important than what you did...”

—from *Revenge of the Mekons*

“The song becomes itself and you hold on for dear life and hope you don’t fall off.”

—Nick Cave, *20,000 Days on Earth*

Friday night. Last set. Four young couples, apparently in love, line the walls of the Cornelia Street Café. They are infatuated and intoxicated by themselves and the music. I am intoxicated (yet again) on two gins provided me by the staff. The music, despite my state, is major. Tony Malaby’s Tamarindo, with Michael Formanek on bass and Nasheet Waits on drums. I’ve mentioned Tony in these pages before but can only reiterate that he is one of those rare beings, one who continues to take risks and grow on his instruments: tenor and soprano saxophone. He, in many instances, like Trane and Ayler, writes melodies from which, once launched, he just takes off (improvising), ascending for a full hour. I can honestly say that this is one of my top great gigs of 2014.

Furthering my New York/France anxiety, Relative Pitch has released a Michel Doneda CD. I mentioned missing him in Paris in my last article. The cover art and title are based on the Bill Evans’s recording, *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*. It’s a solo soprano saxophone outing recorded in a French chapel and displays a wide range of dynamics.

Another recent release: the Dave Holland-Kenny Barron duo, *The Art of Conversation*. I caught them at Birdland for a set, which included Barron’s tender “Rain” and Holland’s homages to Kenny Wheeler and Ed Blackwell. The set ended with a virtuosic up-tempo, semi-free piece, which left me shattered. From there I hit the Stone to catch a set by Oliver Lake, in a trio with Santi Debriano and Andrew Cyrille. Oliver, for me, is one of the top horn players around and can accomplish anything he sets out to do, be it ballad or improvisation. At one point he announced that the next tune they’d play was called “10:22,” referring to the time. He did the same for the final piece, which he referred to as “10:56.” You can’t get much freer than that.

A label you must be on the lookout for is the Bordeaux based Bam Balam Records. Its producer JJ owns a record store in Bordeaux that specializes in rock. The weird stuff like Magma and Can as well as psychedelic and folk. He loves free jazz, but only from the ’60s, though he finally did attend two of my gigs with improv guys while I was there. His catalogue is eclectic and consists of the likes of Signs of the Silhouette, an avant-garde, experimental band from Portugal; Cotton Casino and Joxfield (Japan and Sweden); David Sait (Canada); folk singer Shane Faubert (U.S.A.); Charlie Plane’s Way Out with a talented French female singer/songwriter; and a shitload of Acid Mothers Temple CDs and LPs, in group, solo, and duo configurations. One of the latest has Kawabata Makoto on drone guitar playing in duo with Japanese accordionist Aki, whose pseudonym is “A qui avec Gabriel.” Gabriel previously released a solo album for Tzadik. Track down and support this important, one-of-a-kind independent label at bambalam.com if you are at all a curious listener.

And speaking of acid, if you were part of the ’60s and remember it then indeed you truly were there. So I advise those who were, and those who forgot they were, and those who want to be but just weren’t born yet, to check out Woodstock resident Rhoney Gissen Stanley’s (with Tom Davis) *Owsley and Me* (Monkfish Books). Rhoney’s

personal takes are insightful, sad, funny, charming, and historic as she takes us on a trip through her personal relationships with Owsley and some of the great musicians of the San Francisco Rock era. The book is replete with photos and stories of “Bear”—as Owsley was known—the Dead, the Airplane, Quicksilver, Monterey Pop, and many music legends. Besides producing and distributing thousands of hits of acid, Owsley also invented the Wall of Sound system. The stories are tender, exciting, and transcendent of their time.

And as far as memory loss goes, I completely forgot to remember to go to the Fillmore East Plaque ceremony. Yes you heard me right, they actually put a plaque on the building on 2nd Avenue that housed one of my old alma maters and a true ’60s shrine. I was given the lowdown by friend, educator, and photographer, Robert Sutherland Cohen, who by the way is writing the definitive book on Tesla. In attendance, according to Robert, were about 150 over-60 grey-haired folks, and the music was supplied by Lenny Kaye and Leon Hartman, with speeches by Joshua White of the Joshua Light Show and Tom Berchard of Veselka. We must all thank Andrew Berman of the Greenwich Village Preservation Society for his tireless work in helping to landmark and preserve our beloved city’s culture.

I managed to catch the last day of Nick Cave’s *20,000 Days On Earth*. It was an intriguing blend of fact and fiction, very well thought out and shot, from the “ghosts” in the back seat of his car, to his stories about his father while on the psychiatrist’s couch, to the great episodes about Jerry Lee Lewis and Nina Simone. There were, for us intellectuals, shots of three anthologies edited by poet Jerome Rothenberg scattered around his house and on the piano, including the seminal *Technicians of the Sacred*. To misquote Cave, it all filters through the brains of “a child, a psychopath and a clown. And if it doesn’t work, shoot the clown.” But why in hell does an ex-junkie rock star with all that bread need to have an entire building for his archive? Because he can afford to.

I also caught the delightful, hard-hitting *Revenge of the Mekons*, a band, I confess, I knew nothing about until this film. Their revenge is that they’ve lasted some 37 years, despite personnel changes, personal life changes, and an almost continuous lack of real success. To watch their beginnings and all their mutations up until the present is a true inspiration, whether you like their music or not. Besides in-depth interviews (many hilarious) with past and present members of the band, there are also talking heads like Luc Sante, Jonathan Franzen, Will Oldham, and Vito Acconci (who they’ve collaborated with). As Sante put it: “Transforming yourself into a commodity is not the way to go.” See it and learn. I certainly did.

As a writer friend recently put it, “It’s about process, not procedure,” as I’ve tried many times to point out in these pages, subtly and not so subtly. There is way too much of the latter more than ever these days. “Physician, heal thyself.” Or is it “Musician, know thyself”? So listen up people.

I dedicate this to the memory of Manitas de Plata, a major inspiration since I was 15. ☺

Poet/collagist STEVE DALACHINSKY was born in Brooklyn after the last big war and has managed to survive lots of little wars. His book *The Final Nite* (Ugly Duckling Press) won the PEN Oakland National Book Award. His most recent books are *Fool’s Gold* (2014 feral press) and *A Superintendent’s Eyes* (revised and expanded 2013—unbearable/autonomedia). His latest CD is *The Fallout of Dreams* with Dave Liebman and Richie Beirach (RogueArt 2014). He is a 2014 recipient of a Chevalier D’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.



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The Stairway, 1970, oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 66 1/4 inches



Eiko in Fukushima, Tomioka. Photo: William Johnston.



Eiko in the 30th St. Station. Photo: William Johnston.

APPARITION OF A FACE IN A CROWD

EIKO'S FIRST SOLO PERFORMANCE IN PHILADELPHIA'S 30TH STREET STATION

BY MADISON MAINWARING

DANCE

I asked Eiko Otake to describe her latest work, *A Body in a Station*, which took place this past October in Philadelphia's 30th Street Station. "One woman comes into the station, walks around, lies down, watches people and is watched by them, then leaves," she said in reply. A lot happened in the midst of these seemingly pedestrian actions. Eiko has been dancing for over 40 years with her husband, Koma, in works examining the tenuous divide between animal and human, life and death. Together they have received every institutional award in the book, including the first-ever joint MacArthur grant.

In each of her four three-hour-long performances presented by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Eiko entered through the station's west-facing double doors. She proceeded to walk very slowly through the main lobby, knees bent, one hand clutching her yellow-cream kimono. Her face, hands, and feet were painted white, geisha-style, throwing her expressions into high relief against a backdrop of harried travelers. The audience—which followed her around with the same undivided attention as that of chicks with a mother hen—could see everything. A breath, exhaled; a strand of her black hair falling across her shoulders; the widening shadow of her clavicle.

Every so often Eiko lifted her long arms up as if in beseeching prayer, and the rest of her gestures had a mournful, elegiac quality. She seemed to be dancing the story of another world—one removed from the marble floors, whirring timetables, and security announcements of the Amtrak hub. Her slow motion invited analogy to natural processes: the greening of a forest in springtime, silt accumulating on a riverbed floor.

After traveling through the lobby for half an hour, Eiko reached the designated performance area of the North Waiting Room (in comparison, I walked the same distance in less than a minute). Here the pace slowed even more. There was a futon, which Eiko sometimes lay on, sometimes lay under. There were also two silk cloths—one white, the other scarlet—in which she buried her slight figure so completely it left one wondering whether she had left through a hidden trap door. Her languid gestures were occasionally

interrupted by a staggering fall, or a violent fling of cloth against the wall.

Eiko's dancing demanded a certain degree of patience from the viewer. Each deliberate movement carried the aura of a secret ritual. She had the uncanny knack of arranging her limbs in a way that made them seem abstracted, bones piled at oblique angles rather than a congruent human form. The cumulative effect holds a strange beauty, arresting both the visual and kinesthetic senses. By the third hour of the performance, even the students who came in order to fulfill an assignment stopped checking their phones.

Many people, such as the information agent in the tourist booth, said they "just didn't get it." A few asked what was going on and appeared even more confused when given the answer. "She looks like she needs help," one young woman in a business suit said. Distracted passersby would almost run into Eiko before stopping, shocked as they tried to figure out why so many people were looking at her.

Eiko otherizes the human figure so that it can be more fully examined and experienced. "She makes [the audience] see where they are as if they're seeing it for the first time," said Harry Philbrick, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum. "I keep the work open to interpretation," Eiko said when I asked her about her hopes for the audience, "but I do want to heighten the sense of body. If we think the body is important, then maybe we won't kill each other." The comment made about Eiko needing medical attention was not entirely unwarranted. The hesitant, vulnerable quality of her dancing almost seemed to be asking for it. She reminds us of what we'd all like to forget, especially in this digital age: existence, tied as it is to physicality, is a precarious thing.

This marked Eiko's first solo performance. The 42-year-old creative bond she shares with Koma is so strong that collaborators speak of them as a symbiotic entity, and their performance name features an ampersand rather than a spelled-out conjunction in order to indicate as much. In a poetry series Forrest Gander wrote about them, the drama unfurls between him and her, he and she. Together they have danced the dance of anarchist banners and painted themselves

in peeling layers reminiscent of post-bomb Hiroshima. In between, they have asked the most difficult and least answerable questions. But they have done all of this together, and even when their performance dynamic was antagonistic, at times aggressive toward one another, at least the other person was there.

What made Eiko want to strike out on her own? While traveling through the train station, she noticed that most people were alone. "A duet is a solo remembering a shadow," Eiko once stated in her movement manifesto, "and a solo is a duet waiting for a shadow." Instead of reaching towards Koma, Eiko now looked to a cavernous space full of strangers. This was solitude, embodied. "The more people that came to see me, the more lonely I became," she said when asked.

In a way, there was a shadow embedded in Eiko's solo. *A Body in a Station* was the second installation in a two-part series, *A Body in Places*. In preparation for her work in Philadelphia, Eiko traveled with photographer William Johnston to Fukushima, where she wandered through the train tracks ravaged by the 2011 nuclear disaster. This scene was the spectral twin to her *Station* performance, the other world haunting her every move. As her flesh brushed up against the marble, the waiting room turned into a tomb-like reference to those who had already made their departure. Announcements calling for trains to D.C. and Boston reverberated into dark metaphor. However stable our own stations in life might seem, all tickets are numbered, and we are just passing through. ☞

A Body in Fukushima will be on display through April 5, 2015, at the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. For more information please visit pafa.org. For videos documenting *A Body in Places*, go to Eiko & Koma's website, eikoandkoma.org.

MADISON MAINWARING is a writer living in Manhattan.

LIVES OF (XAVIER LE ROY'S) PERFORMERS: RETROSPECTIVE BY XAVIER LE ROY

BY JAIME SHEARN COAN

MOMA PS1: OCTOBER 2 – DECEMBER 1, 2014

With Eleanor Bauer, Andrew Champlin, Sherwood Chen, Lindsay Clark, Alex Escalante, Ben Evans, Moriah Evans, Bryana Fritz, Michael Helland, K.J. Holmes, Irène Hultman, Columbine Macher, Oisín Monaghan, Katy Pyle, Will Rawls, and Takahiro Yamamoto.

It's the visitor's choice: I watch three performers as they interpret excerpts from Xavier Le Roy's solo works (1994–2010). Or maybe I become the audience for a performer who is delivering a Retrospective. I might enter the second room, and be greeted by two other performers in a more informal (no dancing) environment. The last option is to enter a third room—a surprise that I will not spoil here. Whatever my chosen path, I am aware, immediately upon entering, that my presence affects the space.

One visit, it turned out, was not enough. Aside from the “fear of missing out” feelings that the work's unrepeatable spiral inspired, there was another reason I kept coming back (and kept having trouble leaving). I wanted to hang out with the dancers. I wanted to hear their stories. I wanted them to address me. I wanted to see them performing their stories in an embodied way, because they are *dancers*. When do we ever get to know the stories of dancers? To know how they have arrived at the moment in which we encounter them?

Each performer worked individually with Le Roy to develop his or her Retrospective: a lecture-performance where personal and professional milestones correspond to the dates of Le Roy's solos. Performers interwove excerpts of Le Roy's dances with fragments of movement material that arise out of their experience not just as choreographers and dancers, but also child actors, students of Javanese court dance, models, a capella singers, and drill team members. While it was mandatory to include Le Roy's material, performers could determine for themselves how to do so.

At first, the frame of linking their stories to Le Roy's felt forced, too egotistical perhaps. And yet, the more time I spent in the gallery, the more I appreciated this element of formal unity. Listening to several Retrospectives, I noticed that the dates and the works themselves served as vectors that brought together otherwise unconnected narratives and movement material. The accumulation of Retrospectives created a constellation of associations and experiences around his works. Each Retrospective foregrounds the performer, with Le Roy's work serving as point of departure, illustration, and transition.

Alex Escalante, describing his teenage years in LA, told his audience about a performance that changed his life: when his dance teacher brought him to see Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of Butoh, when Hijikata was 87 years old. Escalante then performed an interpretation of Xavier Le Roy performing an interpretation of Hijikata's same dance: an excerpt from Le Roy's 2009 piece, *Product of Other Circumstances*. Melding the two performances together created something entirely specific to his witnessing and performing body.

Sherwood Chen began his Retrospective with a sassy interpretation of an excerpt from Le Roy's *Giszelle* from 2001, later describing being at a gathering of dancers at Anna Halprin's Tamalpa Institute in Marin when 9/11 hit. During the telling of this story, I looked away to see Will Rawls and Andrew Champlin performing excerpts from *Giszelle* across the room from each other, one anticipating the other by a single beat. If this had

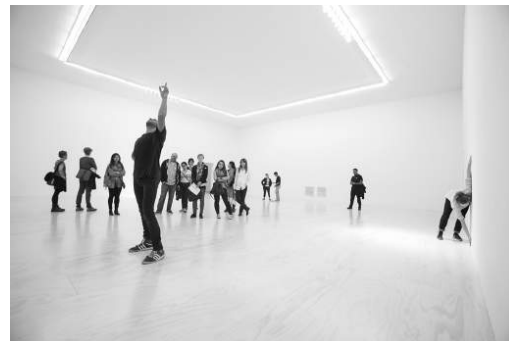
been a choreographed moment, there would be no trace of the powerful synchrony that I felt coursing through the room.

I include the performers' names here because they are the ones who make the Retrospective in New York different from Barcelona, Rio de Janeiro, Hamburg, Singapore, and Paris. The cast brings together a range of primarily New York-based performers that you would not often find working together. The range in age, race, nationality, and dance training is notable. In a sense, Le Roy is also producing a Retrospective of the New York postmodern or “downtown” dance world, not complete in any sense, but still valuable in its accumulation of histories, of embodied archives. These archives are always present in the performers, but not often accessible to those who come to see them. Some through lines seemed to emerge: a lot of ballet-induced trauma. Lots of leaving dance and returning. Early experiences with acting and musical theater. Break-ups. Concerns about wages. The influence of downward economic trends. Issues of ownership and copyright.

This last set of concerns is engaged structurally in the piece, as performers sometimes included excerpts from dance material that technically belong to other choreographers. The choreographers were always named, but as far as I know, permissions were not acquired. In *Product of Circumstances*, Le Roy performs material from Yvonne Rainer's 1970 work *Continuous Project—Altered Daily*. In 1996, as part of the collective Quatuor Albrecht Knust, he staged a “re-creation”^{1,2} of Rainer's seminal work. Le Roy's interest in re-creation of movement material as a mode of research is turned towards his own work in Retrospective. His performers are researching and reshaping his works in the main gallery and also in the second room, where they divide their time between navigating Le Roy's archives (I often saw a performer practicing their moves in front of a video), typing notes into a performer's log, and talking to visitors.

The shifting relationships between performer and visitor provide much of the energizing force of *Retrospective*. I observed a range of responses, including a young visitor who debriefed with her friend after they were greeted. Her voice had a tone of mild disapproval, but she was smiling as she said: “It's very *personal!*” Although I eventually came to be seen as a regular, I was not immune to the unsettling experience of being a visitor. My pulse increased when Michael Helland looked me in the eye and said, “I was learning to do these kinds of exercises.” But he wasn't really saying it to me. He was saying it to me-as-visitor.

I was encouraged to consider, from speaking with Ben Evans, a performer who has participated in a few *Retrospectives* and who is also Le Roy's assistant, that the audience response is specific to region. In Hamburg, he said, people were largely polite and attentive, in Rio there was hugging and clapping, and in New York, people often just walked away. Of course, there were variations. At PS1, while I often sensed discomfort or anxiety as visitors got their bearings, I also glimpsed a curiosity, sometimes extending into an appearance of trust or openness. I witnessed a visitor asking Lindsay Clark if something was going to happen. When Clark asked her what she meant by something *happening*, she was given a dirty look and the woman stalked away. I saw this woman also walk away from another performer who addressed her in the main gallery. Clark spoke to



Xavierle Roy, MoMA PS1 Retrospective, 2014. Photo: Matthew Septimus. Courtesy of the artist and MoMA PS1.

me about the emotional labor exacted in exchanges like this, but when I asked her if she had experienced any moments of connection with visitors, she told me that during one of her Retrospectives a visitor had cried. Afterwards, she thanked Clark for telling her own story—a story that she had never heard articulated.

Each performer seemed to come up with his or her own strategies for negotiating agency with visitors. As unsettling as it may be for a visitor to be approached, the performers themselves are often placed in highly vulnerable positions. Some performers brought their audiences into a corner, promoting a kind of self-selecting commitment. Others asked for a circle or for their audience to sit down. Sometimes there would be a large group, and other times two people. Multiple performers told me that it was hard not to take it personally when someone walked away. Some performers explicitly addressed the power dynamics at work; at one point I was told, “In a sense, you're my boss.” And of course, there are social contracts at work putting pressure on the visitor, who may want to roam around the space but feels obligated to fulfill the function of attentive listener.

The position of the performer in *Retrospective* is multiple and demanding. Before entering the show, I had wandered into the Francesco Vezzoli exhibit downstairs: a darkened room where glass-encased Roman busts were lit up to highlight their newly-restored color. Two tour guides were leading around a group, interpreting the work. Later, in *Retrospective*, I noticed a large group had accumulated, and realized it was the tour. I watched the group being addressed by the tour guides and also by the performers, saw them being pulled in multiple directions, and realized anew the beautifully disruptive potential of Xavier Le Roy's concept. The performers functioned as guides to his work, and yet were the work themselves; the tour, not of something finished, something past, but something forming around them, shaping to them and through them. ☞

1. For more on the relationship of performer to frame, see Xavier Le Roy In Conversation with Will Rawls in *Critical Correspondence*, November, 2014, movementresearch.org
2. Quoted from score of *Product of Circumstances* (1999).

JAIME SHEARN COAN is a poet and Ph.D. student in English at the Graduate Center, CUNY.



This. Photo: Frank Mullaney.

A few weeks ago, I sat in on two of Neil Greenberg's rehearsals for *This*, his new dance premiering at New York Live Arts in early December. The first rehearsal was in Live Arts's Jerome Robbins studio, the second was at the Actors Fund Arts Center.

The dancers for *This* are Molly Lieber, Mina Nishimura, Omagbitse Omagbemi, Connor Voss, and Neil. Both times I came to observe, all of them were in discussion together. About what order to try in their next full run through, and why, Neil used "I suspect" more often than he said "I think." When Neil took photos of the dancers in costumes-in-progress for costume designer James Kidd, he asked them all to strike an extravagant pose.

From both these rehearsals, and their November work-in-progress performance at American Dance Institute, I remember Connor's victory lap, Omagbitse's oscillating head roll, Molly's rib cage reaching out in front of her during a power walk around the space, Mina's gaze toward the audience, and all of them embodying a kinetic, precise energy.

STAGING TEXTURE

STORMY BUDWIG (RAIL): How did you explain your process to the dancers you asked to be in the piece? How did you initially describe their roles in it?

NEIL GREENBERG: I told them that the process would begin with improvisational work. I explained that for many years I constructed my work solely from my improvisations, from my movement—everybody had to move like Neil moved on a certain day. Most of my work was choreographed by using my videotaped improvisations as raw material, which the dancers and I then learned, as close to verbatim as possible. But in about 2006, I began to videotape the other dancers doing their own solo improvisations as well, and I would be continuing that with this new project.

RAIL: When I watched your rehearsals, I noticed that there were many entrances and exits. When you're looking at the dance, do you determine an exit simply by wanting fewer bodies on stage? It seems like the dancers use the space more or less evenly—is that built into their improvisations you filmed?

GREENBERG: Those are my structural choices with the material. In a sense, in the improvisations there was no exiting. There was the beginning and end of the sequence we chose to learn, which sometimes catches the dancer mid-movement.

Exit and entrance choreography has more to do with thickening and thinning the stage. As I began to realize how much I was using all four dancers, I knew that another way to see the material was to repeat it with just one person. When one person performs material, I pay a very different kind of attention than when four people do it with staggered timings.

Then there's this whole stage texture that develops.

RAIL: How do you discuss presence with the dancers? Does their collective presence shift when they repeat a phrase?

GREENBERG: We've been working more on that lately. In fact, just before you arrived yesterday we were discussing that issue of presence, and improvising together with that in mind. Recently I've brought improvisation back into

the rehearsals—something I've wanted to do with my last projects, but they were made so hurriedly there was barely time to do it!—to go back into looking at our attitude toward the material we're performing. The physical attitude, and also the attitude toward showing it to an audience. That's all a *presence*. I think that is one of the questions living in this work for us all right now—it is for me quite a lot², because this work is different for me than previous works. I'm not creating continuities in the same ways, maybe not even to the same extent, that I used to.

RAIL: It seems like each dancer has a very distinct approach to the material. Do you have individual conversations with them about continuity?

GREENBERG: We have conversations together, but they each take the ideas differently. And so far, I'm happy with that.

RAIL: I can imagine.

GREENBERG: Well, I think it could be problematic for some viewers that the dancers take it differently. A viewer might want more of a clear center. But that's one reason I wanted to work with different dancers.

RAIL: What is the *it* that they're taking differently?

GREENBERG: It has to do with the attitude toward the doing of what they're doing. We've talked a lot about when a movement or action is recognizable—if it could be seen as an image, if somebody could recognize it with a name, like "arabesque," or "bathing beauty pose," or waving a hand. Often, when an audience sees the image, the reference becomes bigger than the thing on stage. What it's referring to is what the audience is getting. But, in addition to what it's referring to, what is it? We've been talking about filling up the image with body. What are the physics of me doing this? In the past, I used to think it was either/or—a little more black and white. I thought it was almost as if you could dance without references and associations and images, and that I could weed them out choreographically. As if it's possible, number one, and as if it's desirable, number two.

Now neither is true for me. It's not possible for me to weed out movement with referents, but the movement has qualities that are more specific than its associations or its image, which come from *this* person doing *this* bathing beauty pose now, here, while *that* person's doing whatever they are doing. The context is part of its specificity.

We've been talking about the materials almost as if they are objects—almost like found material. I look at some of the duets as duet objects, and I look at the quartets as this object I made out of the duets.

RAIL: You videotaped the dancers, but is there a writing practice associated with this learning process at all? It seems like a lot to understand and remember.

GREENBERG: The ideas guiding the improvisations get winnowed down to short phrases like "fill the image with body" or "like a vase." The dancers might have their own shorthand for what helps pull them into this continuum of possibilities—because we are aiming to be on a continuum. Sometimes things are more like a vase, and sometimes things are less like a vase.

And by "like a vase" I mean less like speech; less like something the movement might refer to, and more like the material in and of itself. I don't know enough about the history of vases to know what it refers to. I see the materials. I see the shapes. I see the relationship between that vase and the room. I see it from the back. I see it from the front. Upside down. Lying on its side.

TRANSLATION

RAIL: When you work on it fairly intensively [at American Dance Institute in Maryland] next week, is your process going to involve changing up the continuum?

GREENBERG: Maybe. But also, we're adding all these new elements next week—Joe Levasseur's lighting design, and Steve Roden's sound and video projections. What we make this next week is going to be specific. That's why *this* is a word I like for a dance: it's going to be *this* dance. The lighting is going to influence and change things into something specific.

A part of me really wants to keep the dance that I made in the studio. We worked for months and months, and there's this dance that we made that lives in the studio, and I love that dance, and probably [this past] Thursday was the last time we got to see it. Once we get into the theater and start adding new elements, even if I don't change any of the choreography, the whole reception of the dance will change. That always happens, but now I'm trying to embrace it.

GATHERING INFORMATION (FINDING OUT)

RAIL: Do you have to see a full run in order to understand the micro-adjustments you need to make once you near the end of the dance?
GREENBERG: Yes.

RAIL: To me that feels like the hardest part. I can't figure out how to make time for that, because there's always going to be another adjustment to make, but not before seeing it in context.

GREENBERG: Well, this has been the first time I've worked with digital video throughout any of my processes. I always had tapes that I was juggling. Now I spend a lot of time in front of my computer looking at full run-throughs. And during my viewing time I can't be interrupted. You can ask Frank, my husband: the saying goes, "Do not disturb me!" If I'm interrupted it's like I'm watching the run in two parts. Of course I know that as a viewer in the audience, my attention might fade. When I'm watching anyone's dance, sometimes I might start thinking of something else. I know that's a part of the experience, but as the choreographer I have to chart my attention as I watch the dance. Sometimes, if I've tried and filmed two different versions, I'll watch the whole dance up until that point with one try, and then just at that moment switch over to another QuickTime file to see the other ending I'm considering. As you know, there's an aphorism I sometimes use, which is, "Find out, don't figure out." It's so true for me. I'm absolutely stupid about figuring out. I will have five ideas, and I cannot predict which is the one I'm actually going to settle on. It's hard for the dancers, having to show me so many possible organizations of the material. QuickTime is making it a little bit easier. Maybe a little bit.

RAIL: How long did they improvise before you filmed them, or did you just film the whole time, from the beginning?

GREENBERG: We set up which days I was going to film their improvisations, and we did a physical preparation together. We can work with leveraging off the floor, which to me activates the skeletal-muscular system. We can work with "contents and container," which to me adds the organ system to the skeletal-muscular. Then I have another tact that I got studying Body-Mind Centering ideas with RoseAnne Spradlin, and that's a nervous system idea—using the parasympathetic and sympathetic facets of the autonomic nervous system—which does something interesting to my perceptions. To me, it translates into a subject/object question: almost being able to observe myself as I am being aware of what's inside my skin. So, each dancer has about an hour of improvisation.

RAIL: That's not very much.

GREENBERG: No, but it's more than enough! There's so much material I would have liked to learn that we didn't, and there's material we invested hours and hours in that didn't end up in the piece.

The dancers bring in information, too, which influences the whole group's improvisations. They bring in information that's useful, and also their reactions to the process. Yesterday, we brought our attention to an issue of continuity: I'm doing this, and I'm going to do that. Who am I when I move from doing this to doing that? Am I going to blend it into one, seamless energy stream? The answer, for this dance, is often not. This brought us to looking at the issue of subject/object. This sequence only lives because I'm doing it, so there's a subject there—the person doing it—but I'm thinking of the sequence more as the object. It's the placing of that movement object here in space, being aware of its relationships to everything else—that's what I'm thinking of as more of a subject-consciousness. The *me* doing it.

Sometimes the consciousness of performing a sequence gets just a little more on the side of *object*, or more on the side of the *subject*—the person doing it, with agency. That's a brand new question for us, and the dancers fill that in for me in a lot of ways. Say I'm doing something, then I leave to do something else: I am leaving a shadow of what I did. Or, the inverse of that, which I think Connor said, is that as he walks toward a place to begin a sequence, it's almost like he is filling in what is already there.

THIS RAREFIED THING

GREENBERG: I recently went to see an opera at the Met, and I realized how much opera is a world I haven't lived in. It seemed like the composer made all these specific decisions, but I don't think I could parse them out—what they were, let alone the significance of those decisions, and how they differ from others that could have been made. That's what dance is to many people. It's this rarefied thing.

RAIL: The fact that it *is* its own decision.

GREENBERG: Yeah. My interest in having things presented on stage that the viewer might be able to read and experience as the thing in and of itself is not just because the idea of abstraction feels like fun intellectually. I realize I have a stake in these ideas. I really love the work I love, and I don't love the work I don't love. It doesn't nourish me. I'm really glad there's work in the world that nourishes me, knowing that it's different than the work that might nourish a large portion of the population. I'm glad there's work for them, too.

Growing up, I liked Judy Garland, I liked playing with dolls, I didn't like sports, and when I was introduced to dancing—a real "girl's art" or practice—I loved it. You know. And for a while I didn't come into much interference with this, but when I hit junior high school I was jeered at in the halls every day. For years and years, I knew that entering the school was entering a war zone.

Maybe 15 years ago, I was expressing to a student at Purchase that I'm really invested in challenging the phrase "everything happens for a reason." This student said, "Oh, I get it. You grew up gay, and you didn't want that to mean something."

Associations, references, and languages are always cultural. Everything lives within a certain culture. However, I think there's a real value in asking: What is this thing? I think that's behind my investment in Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" essay. She drew some of these connections, and they really resonate with me, strongly and personally.

POTENTIAL

GREENBERG: I think making dances and presenting them, or sitting in an audience and watching them, can exercise a way to live in the world. It can exercise my perceptions. If I start noticing what I see on stage, that's a practice I can take onto the street with me.

RAIL: I've seen you watch dance, and there's this thing³ that you do.

GREENBERG: [Laughs.] I sure do.

RAIL: A physical example of the way a dance exercises your perceptions.

GREENBERG: Right. I guess I'm saying that often my life lessons are learned in the theater. They aren't lessons I can verbalize, but they open up my perception. I know what it's like to walk onto the street⁴ and to not just be following my nose, but to perceive a little more.

THIS IS THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

RAIL: Do you know how *This* will end?

GREENBERG: The big question I have: is it important that all four dancers be on stage at the end? Or, maybe the opposite is true: is it important that they not be. Saying "important" makes it sound like I'm trying to get at something, to express something. It's more like I will try it both ways, and I'll feel the resonances, the differences, then make a choice about what feels like an interesting thing to present this time. You know, the choices we make influence the lives we lead. It's *this* life. ☺

1. As his answer to my questions, Neil often expounds on information contained in the clauses he needs to use to answer it first. This is either a glimpse at all that goes on in his head when he considers the layers inside of what he's doing, his artful way of clarifying my question, which isn't quite asking what I've meant to ask, or both.
2. He also qualifies what he says so as to not assert himself in absolute statements. As I experience Neil in conversation, he tries not to speak for other people.
3. He moves his head around, tracing the air immediately in front of his nose and chin, like he's registering the dance's patterns—spatial patterns, maybe, but also those that exist beneath the surface of what we see directly, inside the body's systems.
4. I am visualizing the southwest corner of Seventh Avenue and 19th Street, or Tenth Street between Second Avenue and Third, or any of the blocks immediately outside venues I visit to watch live performance. I have an exceptionally vivid understanding of these blocks, and I wonder if it's the byproduct of this routine expansion of perceptions by those works I see just minutes before walking onto the street. I wonder when this awareness starts to fade, or what we can do for it so that it stays alive.

STORMY BUDWIG is a choreographer, writer, and runner. She creates ensemble dance works, writes essays and stories about movers, and runs in the rain.

BEYOND “FORMAL”

COMPLICATING CATEGORIZATIONS AND PRESERVING STREET DANCE WITH REP YOUR STYLE

BY ALI ROSA-SALAS



Flex dancer Shelby “Shellz” Felton. Photo: Deidre Schoo.

Since the dawn of tap to the emergence of vogue, movement vocabularies founded in the nightclubs, parks, and community centers of New York City have defied the constructs of proscenium dance performance. Yet, due to their development primarily outside of institutional art spaces, these dance forms are widely referred to as “street dance,” a label that in some contexts is employed pejoratively, and in others is the source of deep pride.

Melanie Aguirre, a native Brooklynite and the daughter of Paradise Garage and Loft members, has been surrounded by the innovation of street dance for her entire life. A professional dancer and former member of the prestigious House of Ninja, Melanie organizes dance competitions and parties within the New York City club scene with her organization Rep Your Style. Versatility is essential as the best dancers from the worlds of Hip Hop, Breaking, Locking, Popping, Vogue, House, Hooping, Waacking, Flex, and Lite Feet go head to head in style versus style battles. The melding of aesthetics, histories, and hyper-localities comes to bear in real time.

Shelby “Shellz” Felton, a well-known dancer in a Brooklyn-based form known as Flex, is proof of this stylistic cross-pollination. At an event hosted by Rep Your Style at 5 Pointz last year, Felton competed in a Flex versus Vogue battle, after which she was recruited by competitor Omari Mizrahi to join the House of Mizrahi. “Me, vogueing?” Shelby says of her newfound dance community, “that would’ve never happened if Rep Your Style hadn’t brought the two forms together.”

Troubled by the disconnect they witnessed among street dance styles, Melanie and her partner (renowned b-boy Victor “Kid Glyde” Alicea) founded Rep Your Style in 2012 as a platform to unite and celebrate the distinctive contributions of New York City’s home-grown dance forms. Melanie found that rather than being a strategic competitive distancing, the separation of urban styles from interacting with each other had more to do with the politics of space in New York City and the economic disparities that sustain it. For marginalized communities of color, the cost of a subway ride or a cover charge limits many to accessing dance communities solely within their immediate surroundings. Melanie and Victor also realized that the commercial and concert dance industry’s disturbingly

commonplace exploitation of dancers’ labor would only shift when urban dance artists felt empowered to protect the integrity of their creative product.

Because battles and cyphers are key pedagogical frameworks in street dance disciplines, competition was the first initiative they used to bring all the communities under one roof. But competition, Melanie insists, is not the guiding ethos of Rep Your Style. Instead, it’s to provide a physical space and an opportunity for dancers to meet and share.

The price and availability of space is one of the most pressing realities for New York City-based dancers. For the street dance community in particular, space is a commodity made less accessible due to increased police surveillance. NYPD Police Commissioner Bill Bratton’s recently instituted “Broken Windows” policing strategy criminalizes low-level offenses like subway dance performance in the belief that it will discourage serious crime and “urban decay.” As a result of this policy, the arrests of street dancers who practice and perform on the train has increased by 500 percent since last year—a disproportionate number of which are young male dancers of color who participate in a Harlem-founded dance form called Lite Feet.

Fines, jail time, and confiscation of equipment are the day-to-day consequences for street dancers whose only available space to develop their craft is in public. In light of “Broken Windows,” Melanie positions Rep Your Style as an activist project: “We stand to encourage people to be creative leaders. Our community wants to survive; our dancers don’t want a police record.”

The fundamental obstacle facing Rep Your Style is one that haunts the dance world as a whole: money. Corporate brands like Red Bull have hired Melanie and Victor as talent and event consultants, which has transformed Rep Your Style into a management agency for street dance professionals. Although project-based corporate consulting covers production costs to some extent, this means of revenue is not consistent. Rep Your Style depends primarily on the resources of its immediate community to support operations and has had to develop sustainability models outside the corporate funding matrix to keep their initiative afloat.

While big brand sponsorship of street dance culture has its immediate financial benefits, historical accuracy and conceptual rigor are often eclipsed in favor of increased profit margins. For the Lite Feet community in particular, the daily police harassment due to Broken Windows has been met with an equally as targeted assault: the reckless appropriation of the Harlem Shake by corporate media stakeholders.

The 2013 release of a song entitled “Harlem Shake” by electronic dance music producer Bauer incited the creation of a convulsive “comedic” dance meme that has since gone viral and garnered tens of thousands of YouTube renditions and millions more views. With versions made by college sport teams, Google headquarters, and the cast of the “Today Show,” the Harlem Shake dance meme has proliferated our digital landscape on a global scale, even as it looks nothing like the original Harlem Shake—a dance integral to Lite Feet movement vocabulary.

According to Kevin Ashton in *Quartz Magazine*, the Harlem Shake-turned-meme was not a spontaneous viral Youtube phenomenon, but was actually a digital marketing stunt spearheaded by Maker Studios, an LA production company partly owned by Time Warner that creates Youtube content for clients like Target, Mattel, and Disney. Upon Googling “Harlem Shake,” one will discover that the original Harlem Shakes’ digital archival presence has been subsumed by pages and pages of the meme version instead. The rich history and technical complexity of the Harlem Shake have been turned into a worldwide inside joke.

The gross misrepresentation of the original Harlem Shake via the viral meme serves as a sobering reminder of the role of digital archives in the preservation of contemporary dance forms. Digital media platforms like YouTube have also been utilized by street dance communities as a pedagogical tool. “If you want to learn the real Harlem Shake, it can be taught. There is a technique and multiple elements to it; it’s not just thrashing your arms around,” says Chrybaby Cozie, a legendary Lite Feet dancer who has been featured on in Lite Feet tutorials produced by YAK Films, a Bay Area media company dedicated to documenting urban dance forms.

Education is central to Rep Your Style’s mission as well. With their initiative Rep Your Style Academy, Melanie and Glyde host Breaking, Waacking, and Lite Feet workshops around New York City as well as in Europe and Asia. The ultimate goal, however, is to provide free satellite street dance programs in community centers across all five boroughs. But as contemporary dance makers know all too well, visibility and financial backing are key to bringing any strategic plan to fruition. In reference to NYU’s recently opened Center for Ballet and the Arts, Melanie mused, “Could you imagine if there was an Institute for Vogue Studies?”

In her seminal text *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, performance theorist Peggy Phelan writes that visibility “summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession.” She complicates the notion that increased visibility of marginalized communities will result in recognition by those in power, and therefore, infrastructural change. Visibility, she contests, renders such communities vulnerable to the consequences of thoughtless appropriation. For Rep Your Style, acknowledgement and support of such a magnitude would signify recognition of street dance’s critical contributions to the contemporary arts landscape as a whole. Ultimately, it is the existence of aesthetic hierarchies segmented along racial, class, and economic lines that dictates how audiences are trained to see and value dance performance.

“We need long-term investment,” Melanie concluded, “How art is valued really comes down to how people are valued.”

ALI ROSA-SALAS is a dancer and an independent curator from Brooklyn. Her interest in New York City street and social dance forms led her to produce *NO SUCH THING AS NEUTRAL*, a symposium sponsored by the Barnard Center for Research on Women that examined the contributions of Flex and Lite Feet to the contemporary dance landscape.

ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO WITH JOSHUA SPERLING

Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* somehow balances the urgency of current events with the grace and timelessness of a story told in the shade of a village tree. Set in and around the North African city of its title, where newly arrived jihadists enforce religious law with brutality, the film centers on a stubborn cattle herder and his family resisting encroachment. Yet Sissako's eye takes in a tapestry of characters, all considered with humanity: a jihadi convert enmeshed in self-doubt, a young bride conscripted into marriage, a mysterious witch-woman bearing silent witness to the menace and folly around her. As a devastating panorama of a community being suffocated of all life, *Timbuktu* is made the more poignant by the beauty of its landscapes, music, and faces. Like a great poet, Sissako invests this beauty with the capacity to stand in meaningful protest. At a time when Islamic extremism and Western militarism feed off each other in a perpetual fever, *Timbuktu* is required viewing not only for its deeply felt indignation but also for its humanism, poetry, and tact. *Timbuktu* will be released on January 28th.

JOSHUA SPERLING (RAIL): *Timbuktu* portrays a contemporary situation that is extremely politicized and violent. What challenges did such a subject pose for you as a storyteller?

ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO: When I make a film I don't know at the outset what it will be. In the initial phase I am focused simply on bringing into being each element of the story. I work as if it were a job. As I move forward, I involve the others who work with me—whether the technicians, the actors, the extras. We all share in this act of making a film. Even those actors who won't be in front of the camera for days remain on the set with us. I tell them, "Maybe you'll be up tomorrow, I'm not sure." That's just how I work: I am always immersed in this process of searching. And so the emotions of the film—the emotions that viewers experience—are emotions that we have lived together. That is the particularity of this film. I would also say that what happens today has already existed before today. This is something the world ignores. It's not like what happened a month ago came out of nowhere. But we have just decided to talk about it right now. I have never known a serious drama that hasn't also existed in the past.

RAIL: You spoke of the community of the filmmaking process, and the film is very much about community. But it is also about family and about the individual. The connections between these three levels—the community, the family, the individual—are drawn in a way quite different from what we are used to seeing in the cinema. How did you articulate these connections to yourself?

SISSAKO: Your vision is precise. I would like people to see *Timbuktu* as a movie about family, not only about jihadism. Of course, we cannot say it is *not* about jihadism. But it is also about family, couples, fatherhood. And about death, about the consciousness of losing something or someone. I think this reading is extremely important. It's even more so because of how much our contemporary reality prevents us from seeing it this way. I think this film will be understood very differently in the future.

With regard to the connections you speak of, this concerns the secret inner will that exists at the core of each artist. It is the reason that makes him make the film he makes, without him consciously knowing it. There is of course the pretext of the film, which helps to set the film on its path and get the production underway. But deep inside myself I see *Timbuktu* as reflecting my own personal changes over the previous years.

RAIL: Your last film, *Bamako*, is from 2006.

SISSAKO: Yes, for many years I didn't make a film. And after *Bamako*, when I became recognized as an artist, I had many opportunities. But despite this privilege, I haven't made anything. This is because I have had two daughters—now five and seven years old. So it is no secret why I speak about fatherhood in this film.



Timbuktu

If I hadn't had children, I wouldn't have made such a personal, emotional film.

RAIL: I wanted to ask you about the relation between *Timbuktu* and *Bamako*. When *Bamako* was released you described Africa as a "zone of injustice." In that film, the injustice is at the hands of the IMF, the World Bank, and the forces of capitalist neo-colonialism. In *Timbuktu* it seems to be at the hands of extremist Islam. Do you see Africa as caught between these two forces?

SISSAKO: There is a sentence in *Timbuktu* that makes the connection to *Bamako*. It's in the scene with the video camera where the jihadists are coaching the ex-rapper to speak of his conversion. They ask him against whom he now fights. He says: "Against the West." And the jihadists say, "No, you fight against injustice." This says a lot, but it's not what you immediately think. What it means is that these kinds of people are in fact motivated by something that goes beyond religion. They are motivated by the reality of a rich world which does not share and which is not able to share. That does not excuse violence, but it's born of frustration—be it political or familial. Why do women occupy such a central concern for the jihadists? They are covered, pushed to marry, and when they are married they are treated almost like a beast of burden. The jihadists speak about purity but the reality is almost rape. This is where the frustration appears. So the people we are talking about are in an unstable world and *Timbuktu* is speaking about this instability.

RAIL: The same could be said of *Bamako*, but the political realities are very different.

SISSAKO: For me it was important to make a film different from *Bamako*. *Bamako* was a shout of protest. It was a shout for the World Bank and the IMF to admit their wrongdoing and complicity in the development failures of the last 30 years. And these are

institutions that have no recourse for justice within them. The nations they work with cannot take them to trial. By inventing just such a trial in *Bamako*, I adopt a tone that points the finger squarely at what is to blame, which is capital and the corruption not just of local politicians but also of the World Bank itself. That was the choice I made in *Bamako*. But after *Bamako* I always had this feeling that I wasn't entirely fair. In making *Timbuktu* I felt the film had to be told from inside myself, not outside. Because if you are always placing blame elsewhere, there will be no full resolution.

RAIL: I saw *Timbuktu* at the New York Film Festival. The first thing I heard after the screening was a man beside me say: "We have to destroy those people." Do you reject this reaction to your film? It is a sentiment we hear often in our current political discourse.

SISSAKO: I want to avoid this simplistic answer. There is rarely a true victory in war. The idea of "winning" a war is, I think, a very blurry notion. If it weren't, then the first President Bush would have resolved something. But he didn't. Maybe he even made things worse. I don't think killing people en masse will stop anything and faced with the violence of the jihadists we do need an intervening force. I wouldn't put it the way the man you heard did—although I understand the emotion behind his comment, and I can even share that emotion somehow. This is a question that belongs to humanity and must be resolved progressively. It is also fundamental to understand that in this situation the first victim is Islam. The non-Muslim world must understand that Islam is not a problem; rather Islam *has* a problem and must resolve that problem. And while this problem may concern Muslims first, it also concerns everyone. Had such an understanding been made clear from the outset we may have made a better first step toward a resolution.

RAIL: What has the reaction been in Africa to the film?

SISSAKO: There hasn't been a reaction yet because they haven't seen it! Only in Mauritania has there been a release so far. I stayed there three days and I can speak about the reactions in the theater, which were incredible. In Mauritania almost everyone is Muslim. In the scene where the children play soccer without the ball, everyone cheered. And when the woman sings as she is beaten, the audience applauded her protest. People are very conscious of the struggle.

RAIL: The texture of your work is always striking in its balance of local specificity with an awareness of how global everything has become. I'm thinking of the discussion in *Timbuktu* about Messi and Zidane. Or that the family's cow is named GPS. How do you calibrate this balance—or this juxtaposition—between the local and the globalized detail?

SISSAKO: For me this is quite simply what is normal. In the desert there is always someone: it's almost as if there was a crowd because there is always someone. [Laughs.] And the people there—I know them because I come from there—are *connected*. They know what is happening in the world. I wanted to show this to break any image that was exotic. For me the telephone was important because it's a part of life there. They search for a signal, it may not always work, but it's an important part of life. And when I hire a 4x4 many of them search for the address by GPS. It exists. Orientation is very important in the desert. Of course they had their own forms of navigation before, but as soon as GPS appeared they were using it. So it made sense to me that the favorite cow would be named GPS. This represented something important. I tried to be as observant of the life around me as I could be. And I also wanted to break with the idea that these people are far away—that the story takes place in a distant land. By placing a GPS here or a telephone there, we get the sense of the connectedness of the world.

RAIL: The film opens and closes with a very powerful image. We see a close-up of a deer, being chased, galloping over dunes. When did you know you wanted to begin and end your film this way?

SISSAKO: In this particular case I already knew how to begin the film. Ending with the same image was something I had avoided so as not to remain within a certain *form* of cinema, if that makes sense. I am always afraid of falling into that mindset: the loose end perfectly tied up, and so on. I find stylization to be dangerous for the cinema. So I was thinking of ending with just the girl. Yet I had the feeling by ending this way we may forget where the film began. For me, the animal at the start encapsulates everything. It is the beauty the jihadists want to imprison. It is fragility, harmony—all of which is under attack. And this is what *Timbuktu* embodies: beauty, tolerance, true faith. I wanted to end the film in this way to say that no matter what, these qualities will remain. They cannot be destroyed by acts of violence. ☞

This interview was conducted in French and translated by the author.

JOSHUA SPERLING is a Ph.D. student in Literature and Film at Yale University. His writing has appeared in *Film Quarterly*, *Senses of Cinema*, and *Bullett Magazine*.



Gregory J. Markopoulos, circa 1965. Photograph by Jerome Hiler.

TOWARDS A COMPLETE ORDER

BY GREGORY J. MARKOPOULOS

When Gregory Markopoulos (1928–92) made his first 16mm film *Psyche* in 1947, at only 19 years old, the American avant-garde cinema was still in its infancy, having been ushered in only four years earlier by Maya Deren's ground-breaking *Meshes of the Afternoon*. By 1974, when he wrote the following text, Markopoulos was recognized as one of the pioneers of independent filmmaking—he founded the New American Cinema Group alongside Jonas Mekas and Shirley Clarke and others, and made two of the movement's key works in *Twice a Man* (1963) and *The Illiac Passion* (1964–67). Leaving the U.S. towards the end of the 1960s to live the rest of his life in Europe with his partner Robert Beavers, he set his work aside from that of his contemporaries by withdrawing his films from distribution and conceiving a monographic archive called *Temenos* that would be dedicated to his vision. Markopoulos was also a prolific writer, whose essays appeared regularly in international journals or *Temenos* publications. "Towards a Complete Order" sees the filmmaker at the threshold of a decision to reedit his life's work into a single unified film ("The prints that exist have become but work prints..."). When it was finally completed in 1991, *Eniaios* was 70–80 hours long and intended to be shown only at a remote site in the Greek countryside. Its ongoing premiere has taken place at this location every four years since 2002, with the next installment planned for June 2016.

—Mark Webber

The recent publication *Film as Film: The Collected Writings of Gregory J. Markopoulos* (The Visible Press, 2014) is available in New York from [Anthology Film Archives](#) or online from [thevisiblepress.com](#)

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There is a cascade here, and above it another, and above that one many other waterfalls. These encourage. Distance encourages the ascent towards the Future. Nothing, of course, seems in distance. The pine trees themselves unmoving. Distance.

Where the clouds seem to separate, they merge again, then separate over and over, revealing peaks, and beyond those peaks other peaks. Confidence. Hope. Each one from time to time like a reddish beacon in the night.

There is a freedom in filmmaking which is only vouchsafed for a few select Individuals. This is not by choice but through Celestial Collisions. It is like unknown sounds; sounds searched for. Sounds away from the horrors of Paris. Sounds away from the Art World Families who misuse their servants and their artists. Sounds away from those who sell artistic indulgences. Sounds away from museums converted into studios. Sounds away from fraudulently made films. Sounds away from bad money. Sounds away from the Balzacian characters who hold the world together through false translations and propaganda. Sounds and more sounds in order to reach a tenet which is a further step towards the ultimate *Temenos*: *A tenet of the Temenos is that the Voice is the Spectator As Receiver*.

Robert Beavers, "Film is something special—it has nothing to do with Art or Literature." It is true. The truth is to say that *film Is film*. No more, no less. Structuralist lies will disappear like so much smoke; for it is the sparks of a fire that count. It is the sparks that make the blazing fire. Each spark is the indecision which has led to the ultimate decision. This may not be taught. This may not be learned. This may not be imitated. It is the immaterial breath of Visible Creation.

To measure pieces of black film in anticipation of the growth of a film is to hold steadfast to the sole freedom of filmmaking. This is the necessary love of one's work. I know and feel that a film frame will or will not do. Its length is undecipherable. Its duration is undecipherable. The elements of filmmaking can never be discernable to the critic or to the film spectator, as such. The critic, the film spectator can no more know the elements of film than he can know the total aspects of the changing winds.

Robert Beavers, "Something is only creative if it grows..." For the few who possess that freedom which is filmmaking, there is no need to experiment. To experiment is not to grow; it is to falter; it is to digress

into the uncertainties of the Modern. Yet a film grows; as a human being grows. It grows unseen. More likely it grows at unexpected moments. And if it is truly film it grows through Unthinkable Instances. Without this kind of growth there is no meaning; the sun cannot and will never cast its light upon the shimmering waterfall Forever.

Yet the film continues to be what it is not; and, the filmmaker who possesses the binding freedom of his filmmaking is expected to be grateful; to show signs of gratitude. Film continues as a ruin. As in the Arts, Film is treated as a unique orphan who must be placed. As in the Arts, Film is treated as a social experiment, and the scribes write about it day and night. As in the Arts, Film is treated as an exceptional but retarded personality who must perform. The shame of performances, the shame of festivals, the shame of publications coordinated for the evil aspects of mass education, is apparent everywhere; apparent everywhere with the usual morsels of economic publicity and catalogue; apparent everywhere with its bad monies and grim politicizing. Add to this the new call for private patronage under the very aegis of the foundations themselves and one has a total imperfection of the Degeneration of Man's Sensibilities. Iseferis, "The statues are not the ruins—they are the ruins."

II

The time is past when anyone and everyone could take what he would from a particular Art, from a particular Film. Those decades have diminished, and the poverty of expression and creation follow, with the audience suspended in its death-like existence as if awaiting the marvellous orthodox angels of Byzantium to appear before the great Intention and the Complete Order of the Temenos.

With the arrival of the Twenty-First Century and the building of the rectangular foundation of the Temenos suggested before the glorious benediction of the Madonna of Orsanmichele, become at the Sight of the inspiring voice, "A square ...", will there be a respect for the filmmaker's Intention; for the films of Beavers and Markopoulos: the Temenos with its catalogue of films.

For each Art, for each Film, for each work there is only one intention which vanishes the moment the work is completed. It ascends and disperses its benediction upon the Future audience; upon the Future spectator; upon the Future Noble Historian.

Each Intention is like a roseate of Worth. It is not a confused conglomeration of ideas. Because of this single Intention, the Art is The Art, the Film is The Film, the work is The Work. The experiments, the essays into popular, confused, perverse attitudes, feelings and thoughts, all without substance, are dismissed for what they are.

It must be understood that what is offered before this single Intention is not to be confused, is not to be contaminated by the presence of the spectator; in this case, the film spectator, the Film Spectator of the Temenos. Where the source is certain, the work is The Work. The Work above all needs no other justification save its existence; for it is the brilliant, inherent values that have made possible its existence. Thus, the film spectator is present not to measure his intelligence or general understanding, but to know the work: *The Film Conscience*.

The Film Conscience: to experience the Film Conscience is to acknowledge as Light, Sound, and Image the moral attributes of a particular work by Beavers or Markopoulos. The philosophic pretext that this is attainable in the commercial works is one of the worst factors of film education, of film entertainment. The commercial film ages because it has been put to a perverse and unsuspecting purpose. This purpose, this

guise is the central notion of those who love film, who embellish film, and who have failed to understand that film has only in a few instances existed as Film. They are the destroyers of that part of film which no longer exists, *Enthusiasm*: neither for the film spectator nor for the filmmaker.

III

The founding of the Temenos has been proceeding like the fall of snow near the highest peaks of the Dents du Midi. Snowflakes and changing Light have revealed the Truth of All Appearances. Day to day the Intention has become clearer. After breakfast, feeding the birds, passing the day, and often extraordinary journeys to other countries in order to elevate the purpose of the Temenos, the undercurrent of energy has flowed unceasingly at very great Cost; and, not often without its dangers.

But it has been here, before the Dents du Midi, that the startling Decision has been made. It was made one hour, some weeks ago, after breakfast, after feeding the birds, in the sight of the wondrous waterfall. Action was taken. Dedications were discarded and left to the mystery of their creditors. And, the prints that now exist have become but work prints, a fitting jest to the speculators of my work, known and unknown.

When the future film spectator of the Temenos will wonder how the handsome square has been achieved, he may well contemplate in the archives of the Temenos the very source of the Success. One fact he will surely realize, *that it is in color that the word Love originated*. The justified Province being Greece. He will understand, the Future Elected One, that the Complete Order was necessary and inevitable; that with the disintegration of the general public conscience, the Direction Was Ascertained. Like the power and sight of clouds forming against Granite Heights in Powerful Allegiance, so the Future Architecture of the Temenos: spaces seeing and sitting more airy than the flight of birds.

Where hearts meet the Film Bestowed!

Where minds meet the Film Bestowed!

In Distant Years the Future Elected One of the Temenos will repeat, "It is like being in a rainbow!" For it is for him who deserves it that it has been built. It will be his hand which has elevated and protected the thousands of feet of film originals. Indeed, it will be his voice. ☺

.....
 Gregory J. Markopoulos
 10th of August, 1974
 Chalet Hortensia, Champéry
 © Robert Beavers / The Estate of Gregory J. Markopoulos

GREGORY MARKOPOULOS AT WORK

AN EXCERPT FROM MY UNPUBLISHED DIARIES

A hot sweating day. We were walking with P. Adams Sitney and it was so hot we had to stop for a cold malted milk, only that much money we had left, and since we were passing 10th Street, we decided to bring one for Gregory too.

Gregory was in the middle of editing. Strips of film all over the place. He was running the film on the projector, from hand, film on the floor, and was cutting pieces out, by eye, against the light. He rented the projector for two days, that's all the money he had, he has to return it tomorrow, he has to do all cutting today. Hasn't been out for two days, not even for eating. We looked at him in amazement as he was cutting the strips just like that, no viewer, and he seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

Whenever I visit Gregory I am amazed how organized he is, how organized his room is, every piece—you can count every piece, you see every piece, not like my own mess. Anyway, Gregory was editing, with film strips hanging down from the ceiling to the floor, so that the south side of his room looked like a willow tree, really, with film strips down to the floor. On the table little strips and pieces of film, laid out like some kind of game but it's a sequence really, a scene.

Nothing on the walls, as if he had just moved in. A shelf with some binders and by the door a gift from Brakhage, he said, a strip of hand-colored CinemaScope film. Even as we were leaving, the last image of Gregory was him standing there by the projector with scissors in hand, ready to cut the film as it was just about to appear from the gate.

—Jonas Mekas
 May 16, 1965

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Aggressive Inefficiency: from Stage to Page with Rachel Chavkin and Alec Duffy

by Frank Boudreaux

Rail theater editor Emily DeVoti conceived the IN DIALOGUE feature of the *Rail* Theater pages as a forum for “playwrights to engage with other playwrights.” I have been a devoted reader (and sometime participant) in these dialogues, which frequently illuminate the quirky and dark inspirations and methodologies of the theater’s most isolating process: solo script writing. But how does the writing happen when no one on the team identifies as playwright in the creation of a work of theater?

To explore this question, I was specifically curious about theater innovators Rachel Chavkin and Alec Duffy because they are both primarily identified (even self-identified) in the theater world as directors. Yet having followed each of their work for years, I knew there must be some process of getting *words on pages*.

So I asked them if they would discuss their processes and thoughts about the theater’s distinctions and labels over coffee one morning. What transpired was a stimulating discourse, both on Ms. Chavkin and Mr. Duffy’s individual processes, and further on the origins of these identities in the theater and the difficulty of customizing or minting a process in the professional American theater landscape.

The following are edited and condensed excerpts from that conversation. Would that I could record every word.

Self-Identifying

FRANK BOUDREAUX (RAIL): With your extensive resumes and experience, Rachel and Alec, it is clear you are both theater *makers*. But is there a label you’re most comfortable with in the theater?

RACHEL CHAVKIN: I like “maker.” At the top of my resume, I just revised it to say, “Artistic Director of The TEAM,” “Director,” and “Writer.” So I now do actually list the word “writer.” And one of the main reasons I did that was that I just went through the application process for the Guggenheim Fellowship, which doesn’t fund *interpretive* artists, but does fund *generative* artists.

ALEC DUFFY: Right.

CHAVKIN: Without question, I consider myself a generative artist, even many of the times when I’m directing. But I had to reposition my brain to outwardly match the language that, inwardly, I felt totally eligible for.

RAIL: What about you, Alec?

DUFFY: I would say, “theater maker.” One thing I decided early on, maybe about five or six years ago, was that even though I was writing material in collaboration with actors—I would come in with scenes written for them—I still didn’t consider myself a writer. I made a conscious decision at some point because my passion is for figuring out what’s going to happen onstage and what is going to be said at a given time. A writer is someone who really has a passion

for words and language. So, I kind of drew that line for myself, and more think of it as writing as utility.

Evolution

RAIL: How did you both come to these positions and relationships to making theater?

CHAVKIN: I went to NYU undergrad. Sophomore year I took an underground class called Creating Original Work—known as C.O.W.—with the choreographer Marleen Pennison, where the whole assignment was to be interesting alone onstage for 10 minutes. You spent the entire semester just fighting with yourself, to force yourself into a process where you would make things. The big development out of that class was setting homework assignments for myself to generate material, and that is actually now how The TEAM works.

I founded The TEAM almost two years after school. At first, it was me coming in with pages and trying to work on a central idea. Then it became me and [founding TEAM member] Jessica Almasy partnering on that, for a work called *Faster*. I was involved as a student with the SITI Company, and [Jess and I] took a playwriting workshop with Chuck Mee. That was the first time I had any kind of writing training. After that we kind of said, “Let’s destroy the script entirely.” That was the first work I made with the actors, collaboratively.

DUFFY: I didn’t know you had taken a workshop with Chuck Mee, Rachel, because that’s basically how I started. In college I studied in Berlin where I saw a lot of theater artists who weren’t directing plays but were creating full pieces with text collaged from all over. I guess we would call it “found text.” I was blown away by the work I was seeing and came back to the United States with a great desire to be one of those people—to create my own universe, with its own rules, with music, song, and characters onstage that are clearly defined. But not necessarily with a discernible plot or narrative. Giving you a peek into a different world.

Chuck Mee’s basic rule in our workshop was to steal—to steal as much as possible from other sources. It could be an interview you read in *Sports Illustrated*. It could be a conversation you overhear in a café. And that will be your material for those who don’t consider themselves natural writers and those who don’t have a natural facility for the blank page. We were asking, “What happens if we put this interview with this movement pattern that we came up with based on a painting? Let’s put those two together, and that will be a scene.” Or “Let’s write down all the chicken-cross-the-road jokes, and see who says them on stage.” How do we structure all this text that we have? That workshop inspired me to put together some actors and work on a piece together.

Generative vs. Interpretive

RAIL: There’s a lot to unpack in the idea of generative versus interpretive roles in theater. Do you feel frustrated by the distinctions? As you make a work, do you parse those things?

CHAVKIN: I don’t know that I would use the word frustrated. In thinking about certain fellowships, I

don’t like the effort I have to go through of reframing myself for the outside world.

When I am teaching directing, the very first lesson that I started with was that the text doesn’t mean anything until you decide what it means as the director. I made my students write that down, and then write down, “Every choice you make leads to five other choices.”

The former statement could sound dogmatic or denigrating to a writer’s intention, but it’s actually not meant to be that way at all. It’s just the amount of *alchemical happening* that results from the conversation between the spoken words, the body language, the tone of voice, the placement of the eye. All of that is actually what conspires to tell the audience what is happening when someone says, “I love you.” That’s a conversation that can’t really happen in one person’s brain.

RAIL: What about for you, Alec?

DUFFY: I think I found a limit to the process of writing and directing—creating a piece from scratch where I was the person bringing in a lot of text. I hit a wall with this piece I started with Hoi Polloi, my theater company, called *All Hands* [Incubator Arts Project, 2012], which started as an investigation of secret societies. I would go off and write, but nothing I was writing was really any good. [Laughter.]

So I called my friend Quill, Robert Quillen Camp, who is a writer, and I said, “Quill, I think I need your help.” This was the first time I collaborated with a writer.

I basically gave Quill a big brain dump on an hour-and-a-half phone call, and told him everything we had learned and everything we were interested in about secret societies. A month later he came back with a script! With a full script! It was nothing like I originally imagined would happen onstage and I told him that. But I thought it was okay, and basically I started to direct that play. And Quill would make changes for us, he was very open to making changes. I really haven’t done a devised piece since then.

RAIL: You always work with a writer?

DUFFY: We did a couple of already-written plays—Beckett *Solos* plays; *Baal* by Brecht—but the next original piece was *Republic* [Duke University, 2013; JACK, 2013]. The same thing happened—I started out thinking I could do it, and then I was like, I need a writer! Noah Mease. Who then I worked with very closely in a rehearsal process to create the script.

Now we have also created The Georges [a performance art “band” of which Duffy is a part]. And none of us really know what it is. [Laughter.]

DUFFY: We have been experimenting with in-ear—pulling videos from YouTube, lectures, stuff like that, and then speaking them. That becomes tricky because we haven’t quite figured out how to let the audience know—or is it important that they know—that I haven’t written this text that I’m speaking right now. How to attribute something is a question The Georges are facing.

RAIL: Who in The Georges takes responsibility for the “generative” decisions?

DUFFY: It's more collaborative than anything I've ever done before. I don't have the title of director [in The Georges].

CHAVKIN: Attribution comes up a lot in devising. But, Alec, what is interesting to me about what you are saying [about confusions in the audience] is not necessarily attribution, but what your accountability is for the ideas moving into space. Somehow in the traditional roles in theater the director is not accountable. The writer holds all the accountability for the ideas in the work, and the director is a bystander. That is so bizarre.

Structuring

RAIL: I think of how documentary films list writers as someone who has picked out the story. Do you ever think of yourselves as editors? Editors as generative artists?

CHAVKIN: That is actually the primary way I think about my work for The TEAM and I would say the editing job has become group editing. It used to be me making those final editing decisions. And then, I would say since *Mission Drift* really [Edinburgh Fringe 2011; NYC 2012], it began becoming not just me, but all the members of The TEAM working on a given project.

RAIL: That is *more* collaborative than before?

CHAVKIN: Yes, The TEAM is becoming *more* collaborative.

RAIL: I would think people would want to settle into roles: I'm the performer, you're the—

CHAVKIN: Not at all. There was a spiritual crisis in The TEAM that happened during the *Mission Drift* process, and during our annual retreat, it became wildly clear that, in fact, everyone wanted more collaboration, even as everyone was driven crazy by each other at that point. A rejuvenation of collaboration at a root level ended up becoming the salvation for the four projects that were born out of that retreat. Including *Roosevelvis* [January 2–10 at The Vineyard Theatre as part of COIL 2015], including *Primer for a Failed Superpower*. Now the level at which I come to the company with an idea is so raw as to be almost non-existent.

RAIL: Wow. That's great.

CHAVKIN: Well, it's more expensive. It's slower.

RAIL: But are you still “the shepherd” of the ideas?

CHAVKIN: I'm the shepherd in the sense that I say, “We're going to rehearse in April.” And in making decisions about whether we should have a two-week rehearsal process or a four-week rehearsal process. Or whether or not we feel we are in the process of making something. Even that is a group conversation. I'm the person most practiced in feeding back to the group what the group is putting out. But the decisions about what to do about that go back to The TEAM once I have put out there what I think the group is saying in what is ultimately this massively democratic process.

DUFFY: Talking about editing alerted me to how much editing goes into just being a *director*. I will end up making a lot of cuts in the script—mostly dead playwrights. [Laughter.]

But I will make a lot of cuts. That's a role I don't really think about, but it's a *huge* step in a process that I was never taught how to do. There are those long nights till 4 a.m. just sitting there because you have to have the script ready for tomorrow's rehearsal. I'm thinking, “Oh right, tonight's run was two hours,

it needs to be 90 minutes by the next day of tech.” So you're sitting there making those cuts which are obviously informed by having been a writer or having written before.

RAIL: Sitting there at 4 a.m. crafting pages for tomorrow's rehearsal certainly sounds like playwrighting to me.

CHAVKIN: That's my favorite. I love that.

DUFFY: Cutting? [Laughter.]

CHAVKIN: Not even cutting. It's also structuring—restructuring—and I would call that dramaturgy as much as editing. Obviously on *Three Pianos* [Ontological-Hysterical, then NYTW, 2010] you guys had all the say about what went where. [Chavkin collaborated on the piece with Duffy and co-creators Rick Burkhardt and Dave Malloy.] But the conversations about structure and the thermodynamics of one moment leading to another, leading to another, either in a narrative way or an emotional way—feeling that logic and trying to follow that logic, whatever a particular piece wants to be. That is totally my favorite thing.

I don't think of myself as a writer, in any way, in that capacity. For example, working with Chris Thorpe—this British artist with whom I made this show, *Confirmation* [currently on tour in the U.K.]—he wrote every word of that play, but we were very closely collaborating on the structure of the work, which is another huge aspect of editing, in addition to cutting.

RAIL: How do you find the logic of a piece, Alec, when you're working on your own work?

DUFFY: A lot of the things Chuck Mee taught us I still use. It's largely a process of creating a lot of scenes and then putting those scenes on notecards and laying those notecards out. Mee has such a beautiful analogy, when structuring a play that is not narrative based, of using the seasons—of wanting to follow a general sense of an arc without an arc happening. What notecards feel like winter? What cards feel like spring? Summer? Whatever. That has helped me a lot with the dramaturgy of any given piece.

Most Confident vs Most Stimulating

RAIL: I heard Young Jean Lee in an interview say that she feels how she imagines an elite athlete must feel when she is directing; she considers writing pure agony. Yet Lee is still popularly known as a playwright. You both are identified as directors, but is there a role in which you feel best or worst?

DUFFY: Generating text is the most difficult part. The blank page of the stage—how do we populate that stage? That is hard. Once we have got the play, the text and the script and whatnot, I feel very comfortable. The labor of the director is very comfortable to me. It is the generation of material that takes so long.

I learned pretty early on to “look where you're not supposed to look” in terms of generating material from scratch with collaborators. For example, we would get so frustrated during the rehearsal process, and then we would take a 10-minute break and I would continue watching the actors. It was in those breaks that I would notice, like, these two actors are just getting along great. Let's write towards that. These two spirits are going somewhere, so I would create a scene for them. Instead of, “At this point, you guys will be doing this, and you guys will be singing this,” it rather...it grows out of something I wouldn't typically consider important to look at. Looking at the empty space, instead of looking at the positive space. Looking more into the negative space.

RAIL: Rachel, do you have a role in which you feel best?

CHAVKIN: There are definitely the parts of work that I feel more confident in, but they're not necessarily the things that are most interesting to me. I absolutely feel most confident directing.

RAIL: So, “interesting” to you—does that relate to Alec's point about looking at the negative space?

CHAVKIN: Maybe. I mean more that if my life was strictly directing, I would leave the theater and go into something else. I think I am a good partner with writers—the interpretive aspect. It is just not the thing I am most turned on by. It is not what I would stay up until 4 a.m. fretting about.

The Role of Music

RAIL: Talk about the role of music in your work.

DUFFY: Music is often the starting point for me. I'm always thinking about music and song. I grew up a singing in choirs and whatnot. It is very much who I am.

For The Georges, certainly, even though we are a band, we don't actually perform a whole lot. What we end up doing is going into the studio and recording, but in our public performances we don't really play those songs—mostly because we don't have a drum kit. It's only in Julian's studio. So we do this other performance stuff.

RAIL: Rachel? You're a musical director, and almost all of your work has live music, yes? Is music a special part of your process?

CHAVKIN: Yes. That's true. Music is in almost everything I make. Heather Christian [composer/singer-songwriter/performer; *Mission Drift* composer] and I are at work on adapting this Mac Wellman novel [*Annie Salem*]. It was a similar process in *Mission Drift*. I give Heather a whole lot of raw lyric material. Or she will ask for specific responses to material. But in many other cases, Heather will take one word and blow that up into a song. She is the final decider about it. Sometimes we'll talk about further editing lyrics from there, but typically the lyrics that Heather had wedded to a song stay, and that is either the right song or it isn't.

There was a terrible rate of attrition for songs in the making of *Mission Drift*. There is a terribly high rate of attrition for writing, period, in a TEAM process. Part of the theory of how The TEAM works is that we're going to generate so much material that 99 percent of it will get shredded in part or entirely. It changes the relationship of what you put out into the room. It changes the amount of responsibility you feel to solve a problem on any given day. The process can be the same with Heather.

The Difficulty of a Non-Traditional Process

RAIL: What's the difficulty in upsetting the primacy of the script and playwright in the American theater? Why do we persist in the traditional model of making theater?

CHAVKIN: Economics and unions. Good and bad things about the mainstream model. This work [Alec's and my own] is aggressively inefficient. I don't know, Alec, what your relationship is to inefficiency, but I have come to value it. This work is chaotic. If you have to plan and sell a season, that is so fundamentally antithetical to the idea that a project could take however long to bake and make. So I don't know that I'm all about shattering those institutions. I just directed

Body Blows: David Anzuelo and the Creation of Violence

by Sarah Shafer

a show at the Old Globe [in San Diego] that I totally had enough rehearsal time for. The play was wonderful. My actors were extraordinary. And we had enough time. But a union is set up to protect a large group of people dealing with the same problem, and there is no way to define what the problem may be in my room versus Alec's room. And yet, people must be protected. I'm a big believer in unions, but they become an obstruction to nuance.

DUFFY: I find, for example, Equity Showcase rehearsals challenging when thinking about creating a work from scratch.

CHAVKIN: If this is helpful, it has caused The TEAM to contract radically differently and schedule rehearsal radically differently because we want our actors to get their Equity benefits and we want to support the union. So we try to separate when someone is a writer and when someone is an actor. That is upsetting to me because I see an unacceptable dichotomy that is created in my agency, ICM, for example, between the "talent" and the "creatives," which I think is absurd and insulting to everyone involved. It's about how to push the system as much as possible toward openness because it's good for playwrights to say that their work is not best served by the model that is most prevalent. And then to recognize when the model is working just fine. It is hopefully having a large enough and diverse enough ecosystem just in terms of the bones by which work gets made. The big problem with the experimental wing is that because there is not enough money, it is generally artists of more privilege that get to make work. (I use "privilege" very broadly there.)

RAIL: Alec, do you direct in the traditional model?

DUFFY: Not usually. This Japan Society show was a rare exception [Yukio Shiba's *Our Planet*, 2012] where I was actually directing a living playwright's work. It is not something I'm looking to change. Because I am running JACK, I don't get a lot of opportunities to direct. So if I am directing, I want it to be my own baby, my own piece that gives me sustenance. All my own rules. ☺

If you are unfamiliar with their work, get familiar! Rachel Chavkin is lately overseeing the encore engagement of The TEAM's 2013 work, *Roosevelvis* in the COIL Festival, January 2 – 10, 2015, among her ever-stuffed schedule of globe-hopping projects. For tickets and further info, visit ps122.org. Duffy continues in his role of artistic director of JACK, as well as performing regularly with The Georges. To find him, visit jackny.org.

FRANK BOUDREAU'S plays have been produced and read at Dixon Place, Incubator Arts Project, *undergroundzero*, The Bushwick Starr, Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, 3LD. Look for his upcoming script for Reid Farrington's performance installation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (July 2015).

IN DIALOGUE was created by Emily DeVoti in October 2001 as a monthly forum for playwrights to engage with other playwrights in print. Since then, over 120 playwrights have been featured. If you are a playwright and would like to write a column, please contact Emily at theater@brooklynrail.org.

A dark blue cape trails a figure triple-somersaulting through the air. Matching boots that have seen many, many fights stick a perfect landing in soft carpet. A streak of yellow, another somersault, Batman and Robin have saved the day again.

Thus began the career of David Anzuelo—violence choreographer and founder of Unkle Dave's Fight-House, as well as accomplished performer and playwright. Having worked on the recent critically acclaimed productions of *Sticks and Bones* at The New Group and *Disgraced* on Broadway, Dave is headed into process with six new projects that will open over the course of the next six months. Now a much sought-after fight director, as a kid Dave rarely had anyone his own age to play with, so he became obsessed with action figures. When he turned 11, he began to train in martial arts and quickly started mixing real training with fantasy. Through the joy and solace of play, he was starting to hone the skills he would put to work nonstop in his later career: staging battles, fights, and all kinds of imaginary violence.

"Theater is illusion," he says, "and we're pretending to be someone to tell a story. The violence is not real, but depending on the style of the play, it may have to look real, like with Lucy Thurber's *Hill Town Plays*. *Disgraced* is real. I'm interested in challenging myself to make an illusion of violence that tells this part of the story that the playwright felt was crucial. Illusions of violence. That's actually what is the most exciting. Like, how can we make it look—make the audience wonder—*did they get hit?*"

That's the puzzle of all theater in a way—we come to the theater and enter into a pact to experience something that we all know is not "real," but that we will experience as real with our physical bodies and our emotional antennae, audiences and actors alike. Dave continues, "If [the audience] can tell that it's obviously not real, how can we make them feel the emotional impact of that violent moment so that they might gasp, they might say, *oh fuck, oh shit, that looks so real*. That's when I know the litmus test has been passed."

Dave does this in every genre, from teaching dancers at the New York City Ballet to throw punches in the Broadway-bound production of *An American in Paris*, to being the go-to violence choreographer for downtown new play theater Rattlestick, to working on the indie theater scene.

I worked with Dave on my play *The Gin Baby*, in which there's an emotionally and physically difficult scene where the main character Amelia shows up at her ex-boyfriend's house at 4 a.m. in a drunken rage, begging him to fuck her. Dave was incredibly gentle with both actors; he understands how vulnerable actors have to be. Not only was the actress ripping herself apart in the scene, but the actor had to rip her apart, putting himself in an equally vulnerable position—pulling his junk out of his sweatpants and acting like he's sticking it in her violently. They are both aggressors in the scene—him tearing into her physically, her using his dick to cut herself. It's all about self-harm. The story is told through daunting physical action. It's scary to play a scene like that, and that's why I work with Dave. The harsher the scene, the more delicate he becomes.

Dave and I are starting work, with Daniel Talbott directing, on my untitled play about porn and fame, which has sexual violence in almost every scene. In a workshop of the play, Dave guided two straight male actors through a blowjob. Dave worked through the physical aspects of the scene, the unavoidable and wrenching intimacy, with such tenderness and precision that the actors were completely free to own their characters' journeys, as they each prostituted themselves through this action to climb further in their careers. I feel in such good hands with Dave's perspectives on the fight and sex choreography in my plays that I can go deeper into the physical action that will support what I am trying to say with a play. Fight choreography is often an add-on that comes late in the process of production, but working with him from the beginning of a project is giving me the freedom to fully express this story.

So let's back up a little bit, to 1986. Dave, a young teenager, had been watching a lot of Martha Graham's films, including *Night Journey* and *Cave of the Heart*. The Greek mythology of those stories resonated on a deep level, inspiring him



Richard Chamberlain and Ben Schnetzer in The New Group production of David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*, directed by Scott Elliott, fight direction by David Anzuelo, at The Pershing Square Signature Center (480 West 42nd Street) through December 14. Photo: Monique Carboni.

to take the summer intensive program at her school. The students would leap around the room well enough, until Graham herself showed up—full makeup, floor length gown, opera gloves. Under her gaze, the students pushed higher and higher, as high as they could go. She'd lean in the doorway with a look of disgust, and bow her head in despair at how awful they all were. Worse, Dave knew he was the weakest link in the class. He was an actor first, not a dancer, so much so that the teacher felt the need to sit down and have the talk that might have ended his time there:

"You will never dance with the company."
 "I know."
 "You will never dance with the junior company."
 "I know."
 And then a pause, and a glimmer of affirmation.
 "But you will work."
 This sank in.
 "I know that too."

He requested to stay, and the teacher acquiesced, with the proviso that he stay at the back of the class—the perfect place to watch and absorb. That experience, being the worst in the class, has made Dave the best fight choreographer. He buckled down, submitted to the process, and was open about his shortcomings. He *acted* like he could dance; he tried to think like a dancer. Meanwhile, in addition to his dance training, he had become an accomplished second degree black-belt Tae Kwon Do tournament fighter, and the physical discipline and drills of that form laid a strong foundation for stage combat.

After finishing his schooling, he went on to work with avant-garde artists Penny Arcade and Maureen Fleming as a dancer-performer. He also began performing his own work at INTAR, creating personal mythology pieces based on the four elements, storytelling with physical movement and music, but almost no text. He continued working as an actor until finally, in 2003, David Deblinger asked Dave to help out with some fights in *Dirty Story* by John Patrick Shanley. He agreed, and since then his career has exploded.

When Dave walks into a rehearsal room, he has no idea what will greet him in terms of the actors' level of experience and comfort with stage combat. He has to get into the mind of a scared or tentative actor and balance their skills with the task at hand. He knows how to speak to actors and teach them how to act like stage combat experts, even when they aren't. He knows what it is to feel like he's out of his league—a common feeling among actors when they have to punch someone in the face, terrified they might accidentally punch that person in the face for real, or throw a punch that looks comically fake. He takes an actor slowly through each and every move, from the character's intentions down to the anatomy of exactly which muscles and bones are involved. "If you're falling, think up, not down," Dave says. "If you throw yourself down, that's when you get hurt. But if you're thinking up as you're falling down, thinking 'don't fall, don't fall!' then you're engaging your core as you take your tumble." He spells out the mechanics of the illusion in concrete terms.



More of David Anzuelo's work. May/June 2014: *A Fable* by David Van Asselt directed by Daniel Talbott, produced by piece by piece productions, Rising Phoenix Rep, and Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. L-R: Alok Tewari, Gordon Joseph Weiss, Edward Carnevale, Maxwell Hamilton, and Liza Fernandez. Photo: Paula Court.

Samantha Soule, an actress Dave sometimes calls his muse, has collaborated with Dave many times—perhaps most notably on Rattlestick's production of *Killers and Other Family* by Lucy Thurber. "He's a heart-driven man," Sam says, explaining Dave and his understanding of the link between physicality and humanity. "Every show I have done with Dave has been unique and always borne from the actors' abilities and instincts. He never pushes or forces an actor to copy his own instincts or moves, but encourages each performer to trust their own natural inclinations and then guides them from there."

I'm really interested in how Dave puts his artistic stamp on the fights he creates. Playwrights are always very specific about any type of sex and/or violence happening in their plays, so it seems like there might be very little room for artistic input. When I ask him, he explains that he works with concepts as opposed to cookie cutter fight moves. It's vital for him to understand the tone of the piece, whether it's a dark comedy or a farce or a realistic drama. He reads the script several times, imagining each character and how they would all fight differently. If the character is a kindergarten teacher and has never punched anyone his entire life, he isn't going to suddenly have Bruce Lee moves. He is probably going to punch wildly. Likewise, if a character is ex-military, she's going to know how to land a good punch. But in his investigation of character and action, he also leaves room for the unpredictability of characters under duress. Another of Dave's frequent collaborators, director and playwright Daniel Talbott, explains, "You know you're working with an extraordinary artist and human being whenever you're in the room with him, and you also know that he understands that human behavior, especially around sex and violence, is infinite in possibility. He doesn't approach the work through polite taste or comfort, and he doesn't judge action. He respects that humans crawl towards many things in life, whether it's acceptable or not."

And yet, having worked with Dave as both an actor and a playwright, I know that safety is his central concern when it comes to fight choreography. For all his dedication to violence looking and feeling realistic, he respects that the actors have bodies and they have relationships. They need to go home and not feel like a vampire has sucked the life out of them. Yes, they need to be raped, punched or be punched, slapped, hit, kicked, fucked, and even make love—but they also have to be able to do it for the entire run of a play and not walk away from the production with a limp. They need to stay safe through the most dangerous parts of the story so that the audience members can disperse with the illusion burning its violent, tender beauty in their heads.

The work of David Anzuelo and his company Unkle Dave's Fight-House (whose core team consists of Jesse Geguzis, Sean Griffin, and Gerry Rodriguez) can be seen in the current productions of *Sticks and Bones* at The New Group, *Disgraced* on Broadway, and the upcoming productions of *Carnival* at the National Black Theater, *An American in Paris* on Broadway, and *Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, America, Kuwait* at Rattlestick. ©

SARAH SHAEFFER is a playwright and an actor who lives in New York City.

Two

by Julien Poirier

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

With all this free time
 I was going to write a novel
 about a middle-aged man
 whose idealism had gotten
 infiltrated—in the same way
 that Sharia law
 is infiltrating
 the civic body of Michigan—
 by hysterical anxiety
 over his kids' safety
 and a disgust
 with
 an art which
 had stolen away
 his youth—but why
 had it locked
 the savage pug in the hot car?
 After many days of not having
 a cigarette
 I found I wanted one—
 I had a trick:
 this man would be much older
 and “looking back” over a series
 of events that hadn't exactly
 worked out,
 but then on the walk
 home I decided
 once again
 that I had no desire to write
 a novel, which might take
 a thousand hours
 better spent
 with my wife and kids
 and doing
 all sorts of other things, any-
 thing but writing
 a fucking novel no one
 asked me to write, I wasn't
 crazy enough, whereas I was
 crazy enough to write a poem
 —*it's what dogs do!* as
 someone said
 and the short
 lines are, potentially, more
 inviting
 to someone who hasn't made up
 her mind
 about me yet, — !
 because I've always wanted
 people to not be able to get
 enough of what I have to say
 and though I used
 to love myself
 and now only tolerate my presence
 I have more to say
 and can write better than I used to.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS

it means everything turned out OK.
 Nuclear war was averted,
 environmental catastrophe, too.
 Light up a big joint and congratulate yourself.
 Your mother and I were so worried.
 But there is another possibility:

That you're reading this at gunpoint
 because the Chinese have taken back California,
 or
 that you picked this up at random
 from a library
 full of corpses:
 you don't understand a word you're
 reading, you're
 dead and these words are being
 read over your body before
 they shove your flag-draped
 coffin into the Gulf—actually
 these aren't even the words being read.
 But the chances are slim.

It's much more likely
 that Disaster has been locked up
 in a coniferous hospital
 ward, like the bogeyman,
 and the unmade moonlit beds
 are the headstones of our nightmares.
 Everything turned out fine,
 and I'm standing eye-to-eye with you
 in a broad, clean public park
 having escaped
 at 43.

.....
JULIEN POIRIER lives in Berkeley, CA with his wife and daughters. He has taught poetry in the New York and San Francisco public schools, and at San Quentin State Prison. Forthcoming books: *Way Too West* (Bootstrap 2015) and *Out of Print* (City Lights 2016).

Dromomania *by Divya Victor*

“By the term ambulatory automatism— *dromomanie*— is understood a pathological syndrome appearing in the form of intermittent attacks during which the patient, carried away by an irresistible impulse, leaves his home and makes an excursion or journey justified by no reasonable motive. The attack ended, the subject unexpectedly finds himself on an unknown road or in a strange town. Swearing by all the gods never again to quit his penates, he returns home but sooner or later a new attack provokes a new escapade”

—A. Pitres, *Leçons cliniques sur l’hystérie et l’hypnotisme faites à l’hôpital Saint-André à Bordeaux*, (Paris, 1891)

in one such case a woman was found so forcefully fornicating with her feet the soil under her that they thought she was attempting to bury her own body while standing upright. when pressed, she confessed that she had heard of travel and was attempting to push her body through to the other side of the world

—there are many such cases

in one such case a man so beaten by debt two wives and four girl children menstruating in orchestrated vengeance against the greasy rupees in his pocket rolled his bedding and straw mat and carried it out of his home after he’d shat out his gruel and before the cock crowed into the cadmium sky

—later this story was told to four girls, all wives, pulling straw matting and feathers from their cunts smelling of sleep and gruel— the afterbirth stamped and dated

in one such case a man was promised a wall made of gold bricks in a land where palm trees bled almond milk and oases of honey pooled wherever he stood and so he took his passport out of the rinsed milk-bag and offered it to an agent who flew him to a desert and left him there where he drank his own piss and never returned until his wife married a man with an identical policeman’s mustache years later

— later this story was told by the neighbor of a policeman greased with Palmolive margarine and lifting a grinding stone above his head and onto a sleeping infant

in one such case a woman embroidering the name of her fourth child into the mantelpiece tapestry was called by her husband to suckle oil from the Persian gulf in a city that clotted around a oasis where centuries ago star crossed lovers failed each other— Layla and Majnun: she dying in waiting, he walking miles and kissing every wall to know if she lived behind it— and from which she would return without her hair and with a spool of thread to spell again

— later this story was told to children in a kitchen while smoothing the ruffled gills of fish and sharpening knives on grey slabs of granite drawn from a quarry where men had fallen over and over in love with their own destinies

in one such case a man who wore a snake around his neck used a mountain as a churning rod and a serpent as a churning rope and curdled an ocean of milk until the mountain sank so far into the cream that he swam in his skirts and turned himself into a turtle to carry the mountain on his back miles under milk and fat

— later this story was told to two girls unbraiding hair slick with coconut oil and tied with polyester ribbons: the stuff of couch stuffing yacht insulation holograms bank notes

in one such case a woman exchanging aluminum *païse* for whole mackerel was called by her father through a gardener who was sent by the scullery maid who had heard from the family’s jeweler that the bloom of gold which secured her marriage to the man from the land of arrows had a heart of wax and so this woman walked backward oily slivers and scales flashing at her bangles and pink roe spilling to the earth until she reached the land of arrows and rent each shaft in two and returned wearing fletching in her hair like firecracker flowers—genus *crossandra*; lifecycle *perennial*

— and later, there was no later

in one such case a man searching for his wife who had been held captive by a demon with ten heads and with a sword that slices the wings of vultures built a bridge across the ocean and when he returned with her flung over his shoulder he asked that she sit in a wooden pyre on fire where she burned and burned while the three-striped palm squirrels stroked by her husband on his quest flourished on fallen gooseberries and raw cashews

— later this story was told to a classroom staring at a blackboard gone white with chalk guarded by one sentry spitting beetlenut blood and the other scratching an ashy elbow

in one such case a man who had been driven off a cliff by a soldier with frayed epaulettes pulled from the linings of his pockets anti-tank missiles and anvils and muzzled-load barrels like feathers off a batshit bantam and when he faced the salty rock he finally pulled out his compass and sunk it to sea his feet fast behind him sooty feathered and on fire

— later this story was told to a girl child squatting on freshly washed ground her ass powdered her skirts ironed her two feet planted and floating like any other rhizome ready to be sliced braised and served at a wedding

.....
DIVYA VICTOR is the author of *Natural Subjects* (Trembling Pillow, 2015), *UNSUB* (Insert/Blanc, 2015), *Things To Do With Your Mouth* (Les Figues, 2014), *Swift Taxidermies 1919-1922* (GaussPDF, 2014), *Goodbye John! On John Baldessari* (GaussPDF, 2012), *PUNCH* (GaussPDF, 2011) and *Partial Derivative of the Unnameable* (Troll Thread, 2012); and the chapbooks *Hellocasts* by Vanessa Place (2011) and *SUTURES* (2009). She lives in the United States and Singapore.

Two

by Douglas Kearney

NO TRESPASSING

STRANGLER FIG
GREAT FOR BIRDS!

lizards strip tree litter pell-skeltering the jungle road, palm
over, and moringa, the palmettos we can't see won't skitter
till the middle of the night the lowlit
kitchens.

NO TRESPASSING
too much of fucking everything

swore he saw **SUBJECT TO FINE!**
the milky way,
a manatee glowing
in the shallow bay
dark—beautiful magical,
then off to scrape at
vanities, project:
a vandalized cathedral,
stained stained glass.
a shame.

*“be ceratin nothing’s living in
that shell.”
“I’ll just throw it back in,
because it smells.”*

NO TRESPASSING

THE HOUSES AND THE BOATS HAVE NAMES HERE!
your heart. you want to look inside the suicide letter:
a space age dream today
“I Have A Dream.” toady
say it’s not easy.

kills the palmettos
waterbugs
cockroaches
on contact!

NO TRESPASSING
you want to look inside

PARADISE
PARADISE
PARADISE

in the cinderblock
compost bunker
tomorrow molders.
vermin aren’t mean
just hungry.

*It’s a discipline to keep
your door unlocked.*

they peck and peck
the fruit of murder.

hear the osprey's whistle pitch, its pinfish catch ripped and flayed.

how do you subvert *him*?

past the sea grass lashes, up the gradual dune-rise, slouches the beach house. like ants on a red vine the sand on our legs and millipede panzers storm the shower's concrete slab. children worry for their feet, they screech and tear, the dampening, teeming ground.

[she looking for her sneaker.]

I believe you!
I believe you!
I believe you!
I believe you!
I believe you!

**TRESPASSERS
WILL BE PROSECUTED**

did you notice the lighting pattern? ..like the redaction?

hear the osprey's whistle pitch, its pinfish catch ripped and flayed.

—civil rights vs. peace?
—real choices not false ones.

the full King speech moves two movements to the same church.

graffiti minces the sanctuary; in a shot:

1-800-SUCKME OFF

we'd call that a frankfurter neck, but yes thick, wet and passionate.

cave man parkouring a ruined nave.

dangerous getting close to surfaces. lizard eggs and ants tenementing the control box. so up-jump rains won't erase them from. pitch apple by the drive moors the spiders' spinning. snares a shortcut that's no path just a way there.

—does it matter that it's Vietnam?
—I went right to the Middle East.

I'm not sure about the musical choices.

[so she a sneaker seeker.]

Jungle Road "a fabyle willies in the

wee. wet tower weight of shadow mass.

Poet/performer/librettist **DOUGLAS KEARNEY's** third poetry collection, *Patter* (Red Hen Press, 2014) examines miscarriage, infertility, and parenthood. He has received residencies/fellowships from Cave Canem, The Rauschenberg Foundation, and others. He teaches at CalArts, where he received his MFA in Writing (04).

Somebody's Got to Sweep the Floors *by Craig Garrett*

I'd gotten in a habit of going to Wal-mart at 4AM to play the demos of video game systems I couldn't afford. They had a King Kong game set-up for a while that I thought was pretty slick, where you got be Kong and run around beating up on dinosaurs. I figured they'd be taking it down before long, so I was putting in my time, playing the same level over and over.

Then I'd go on over to the toy section and look at the action figures. It was funny to me how so many toys talked nowadays. Kids don't use their imagination anymore, I figured. The last stop on my window shopping spree was the bargain bin movies. I dug around until I found that flick where Jack Black plays a Mexican wrestler. I looked at the front cover, the fat boy grinning ear to ear, shirtless with a cape and tights. I was about to toss it back before I realized it had something special in it. It came with a luchador mask.

I went out to my car and opened the DVD box, snatched out the mask and put it on. It had a simple blue and red color scheme, but it looked sharp, especially when paired up with my uniform.

I wore it up to checkpoint and the captain looked me over.

"Take it off, Durham."

"Do what, now?"

"The mask. It's too early in the goddamn morning for that shit. You'll give the inmates nightmares."

I put the mask in my pocket, was cleared though the search, then put it back on.

Walking to Unit 2, I noticed Wolf Man being escorted out to death watch, where inmates went to stay for the three days leading up to their execution. The idea of death watch was that the inmate on the chopping block had to be under constant surveillance to ensure he wouldn't kill himself.

They had nearly the full Hannibal Lector get-up on Wolf Man. The leg shackles, cuffs and the waist chain. Looking at him, I never understood the nickname. He wasn't particularly hairy, was missing most of his teeth and I'd never heard him howl.

I figured I should acknowledge him, but wasn't sure what to say.

"Good morning, Wolf Man!" I blurted.

The guards escorting him scowled at me, but Wolf Man smiled.

"That you, Durham?"

I pulled up the mask and grinned.

"Pretty slick, kid," he said.

I settled into the security office with Corporal Pope and JJ as we waited for the morning count to be called. I was drinking a carton of milk, showing off how the mask had a mouth slot just big enough to expose my lips.

JJ picked his teeth with a pencil, his gray uniform sloppy and wrinkled. "You seriously not gonna take that off?"

"Nope." I finished of the carton, tossed it in the trashcan.

"You going to let him wear that, Pope?"

Pope barely managed to keep his eyes open, slumped behind his desk. "I don't give a shit."

"I hope to Christ the warden comes by and see you waltzing around in that."

I shrugged and put my ball cap on.

"I saw Wolf Man got hauled off to death watch," I said.

"Shit. Only one inmate has been put down in nearly fifty years around here," JJ said.

"It'll get repealed. Just a big show is all," Pope said.

"Tell you what, he does get executed, and things will turn to shit around here. We won't be able to wear kid gloves no more," JJ said.

"Any chance I can get in on death watch?"

"Durham's a morbid motherfucker," JJ said.

"No, if you work our unit you can't be on death watch or be there for the execution. We're considered a liability since we know the inmates too well," Pope said.

"It'll get turned over anyhow, Durham. No need to let your dick get all hard," JJ said.

During count, most of my pod's inmates were still asleep. None of them noticed the mask except Wilcox, who was already up working on a painting.

He glanced over his shoulder at me and grinned.

"Aw, Durham."

"Wilcox, you going out today?"

He let out a half-chuckle.

"We're not acknowledging the mask?"

"What mask? Now, I'll be damned if you don't answer me about the rec yard."

"Shit, Durham. Yeah, I'm going out. Ask Country if he wants the big cage today. He might want to do laps."

"All right then." I leaned my masked face against the window of Wilcox's door, breathed hard enough on it to steam it up some. "And please, I take this job seriously. Address me as Officer Durham from now on."

"Shit." Wilcox let go a guffaw and turned back to his painting.

I stepped over to Country's door. "Country, you going out today?"

"No, boss. Sleeping in." He was face down on his bunk.

"You sure? Wilcox was gonna offer you the big cage and everything."

"Staying in, boss."

"What about a shower?"

"Naw. Doing a bitch bath today, boss." A bitch bath was when an inmate used his sink to freshen up rather than go out for a shower. He still didn't look up. I was disappointed.

On the yard, I told Wilcox where I got the mask.

"The movie any good?" he asked.

"I haven't seen it. Looked pretty stupid, really. Got it for the mask."

"You're like a big kid, Durham."

"Yeah," I said.

ANDREW WAS DRESSED IN A LEATHER JACKET, his jeans cuffed. He had what looked like ketchup slathered on the side of his neck, and his hair was greased back.

"That's seriously your costume?"

I wore the luchador mask and a hooded sweatshirt.

"Yeah. Cost me five dollars."

"It's supposed to be a zombie prom theme."

"Oh, hell. Nobody is going to pay attention to that. You're basically the Fonz with a neck wound and your wife is a vampire, so who are you to bust my balls? Besides, maybe I'm a zombie under the luchador mask?"

"I'm a cool 50's guy that's recently infected. And at least Caren is undead. You're literally just wearing a five dollar mask."

"The mask came free with the DVD."

"Did you at least bring something to drink?"

"I don't know anything about wine. Brought fireworks, though."

"You serious?"

"Yeah. Not cheap ones. I bought a couple of show stoppers."

Caren came out from the bedroom. She pretty well looked like she was going to the prom.

"What do you think?"

"Well, you look great. Don't figure you're a vampire, though."

"Look closer at my eyes."

She had red contacts in, but I couldn't really tell what it was supposed to indicate.

"Wow, that's something else," I offered.

"They're amber."

"She's a *Twilight* vampire," Andrew said.

"Twilight vampires don't have fangs?"

"They do, but I didn't want to wear those all night."

"He brought fireworks instead of wine," Andrew said.

Caren smirked. "I think that's sweet. It'll go over well, I bet."

"What? If I pulled that, you'd have my balls on a platter."

"That's true," she said.

We ended up stopping to pick up wine on the way there. Caren got out, entered the store. Andrew glanced back in the rearview.

"So here's my advice. Take the mask off a little after you arrive so you don't creep anyone out too bad."

"Then I won't have a costume."

"Ryan, I know what you're pulling. Take it off. Try to talk some to people, but avoid stories about the prison."

"Dadgum, I won't have anything to talk about then. Everyone at this thing are gonna be teachers like you two."

"The way you talk, people usually think you actually went to prison rather than work at one."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Calm down. And when you do talk about prison, it's always about guys eating their shit, or making dildos in woodshop."

"Those aren't good stories?"

"They're great. I think they're fantastic. But I've known you since we were twelve. If I met you now, for the first time, I'd think you were a sociopath."

Caren slipped back in the vehicle, bottle of wine in hand.

"Caren, you ever heard the story about the inmate that whittled a wooden dildo?"

"I'm okay skipping that one."

"I was telling him to leave the prison out of the party," Andrew said.

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe you could keep that to a minimum tonight?"

"Alright, then. Don't know what the hell I'm going talk about."

"Ryan, you're a sweet man. You have a lot to offer someone. I mean, you have a job. That's half the battle nowadays."

"That's the truth," Andrew said.

"Just relax and be yourself."

"Alright then," I said.

Caren and Andrew's friends lived in an isolated rural area. They'd started a bonfire out in an open field that we saw some distance off. Stepping onto the property, you could tell damn near no one paid attention to the zombie prom theme. Even the host was dressed like the Joker. "I'm a zombie Joker," he said. I didn't see it. I offered Zombie Joker my paper bag full of fireworks. He glanced at it without comment, then set it next to a cooler full of beer.

I got nervous quick, ended up drinking too much nearly straight out of the gate. I took the mask off and shoved it in my back pocket. I ended up out by the bonfire, standing next to a lady dressed like the Bride of Frankenstein, which I figured fit the theme better than most.

"You a teacher?" I asked.

"Yeah. You came with Caren and Andrew?"

"Yeah."

"Are you a teacher?"

"Nope."

“What do you do?”
 “I work at a factory.”
 “Oh really?”
 “No, I done lied to you already. I work at a prison.”
 “Oh.”
 “I’m a shitty liar.”
 “I see.”
 I went on and touched her hair, which was done up high like the Bride character.
 “What you got inside of there?”
 “Shoe box.” She stepped back a bit.
 “That’s a good idea. Most every girl here is dressed as a pixie or some such shit. You fit the theme pretty well.”
 She gave a tight grin.
 “My sister is a pixie, actually,” she said. She gestured out across the way to a chubby girl wearing a pink princess dress, wings on her back. She noticed us looking at her and gave us a wave, magic wand in hand.
 “Yeah.”
 We took a drink in unison.
 “I’m a sweet man.”
 “Are you, now?”
 “Yeah. I have a lot to offer someone.”
 “You realize this is literally our first conversation.”
 “Yeah.”
 She took another drink.
 “I have a job,” I said.

I ENDED UP INSIDE. A GROUP WAS AROUND A kitchen table, at the head of it sat a bald heavy set man I figured was around forty-five. He was off on some tangent that I walked into.
 “You,” he said, pointing at me. “I don’t know you.”
 “I don’t know you, either.”

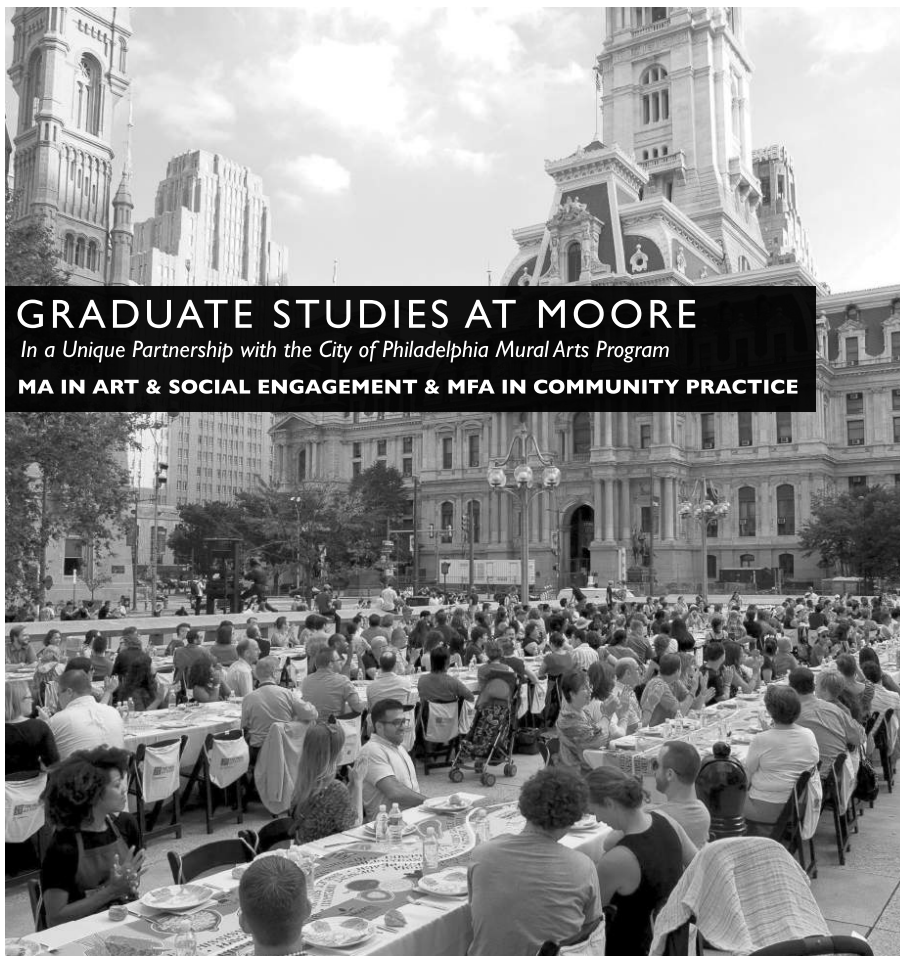
“I’m Jeffrey. And you are?”
 “Ryan Durham.”
 “Ryan Durham, are you a teacher?”
 “No.”
 “Well, now I bet we have a living example. See, Ryan Durham, we were discussing how the parents of our students are all obsessed with their children going off to college, and being college ready.”
 “Alright, then.”
 “But many of these children just aren’t bright enough to go to college, or simply will end up in jobs that don’t really require a college degree. I mean. We live in the goddamn backwoods.”
 “Your point?”
 “Did you go to college?”
 “Yeah.”
 “What kind of degree did you obtain?”
 “It was a bachelor’s.”
 “I see. And what sort of career do you have?”
 “I don’t figure I have a career in the classic sense.”
 “What’s your job?”
 “I’m a guard.”
 “A security guard?”
 “Prison guard.”
 “That’s an important job. That’s a job every working society needs.”
 “Thanks, buddy.”
 “Did you need a college degree to get that job?”
 “Well. No.”
 “Ryan Durham, did you even need a high school diploma to get that job?”
 “Figure I’d have to look that up.”
 “I bet you could just have a GED. Right?”
 “Probably.”

“So you wasted a lot of money, your own time, and your professors’ time only to end up with a job that requires no higher level of education.”
 “...pretty well.”
 “See, Ryan Durham is a shining example. Not everyone needs to go to college, or even graduate high school. We get rid of students like him, and we’d free up our time for people that could actually learn something and go on to be doctors, lawyers and the like. There’s limited number of spots for careers like that. However, there will always be room for people that sweep the floors, take out the trash, drive forklifts or you know, become prison guards. And they certainly don’t need an education. Right, Ryan Durham?”
 “Yeah,” I said.

AFTER ANDREW DROPPED ME OFF AT MY CAR, I went to Nervous Charlie’s, a twenty-four hour fireworks stand and gas station that inexplicably served fried chicken and deli sandwiches. The only reason I’d ever noticed it was because of the six-foot tall Gorilla statue standing out front. Come for the gorilla, stay for the fried chicken, leave with explosives.
 I ate fried chicken and biscuits and washed it down with sweet tea. I bought a variety of fireworks, but mostly Roman Candles and bottle rockets.
 It was just before seven AM when I pulled up in my driveway. I walked over to the front yard and started setting off bottle rockets. They’d squeal going up, then pop like a gunshot in the air, the report echoing. ☹

.....

CRAIG GARRETT used to work as a corrections officer on the death row unit of a maximum security prison. He lives in Tennessee with two rescue donkeys.



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*Photo: The Meal, 2012, Courtesy of City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.
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Born Man *by Lisa Gunn*

Yesterday was a big day for me. Yes, yesterday was quite a big day. You see, yesterday my mother gave birth to 185 pounds of my sagging middle-aged flesh.

I know, I know, it doesn't make much sense. None of it makes much sense at all really, but I swear it's true. One minute I, you know, wasn't, and the next my balding, forty-two year old gray head was poking out of mother's down there. She screamed and screamed and I finally fell out onto the linoleum floor of St. Augustine's Episcopal Hospital, clad in a badly tailored suit.

It was a difficult birth.

I wiped the afterbirth off my suit — although I'm sure I'll have to take it to the dry cleaner's — and mother started yelling in her usual way about how I don't visit and how I'm not grateful for all she's done and how I need to come over and fix the loose shingle on her roof and how she wishes she'd taught me better life values so I would have remembered to come over and fix the loose shingle on her roof. Obviously I was a tad flustered. Confused even. "I haven't had any time," I told her. And I certainly didn't have time then. I didn't. I was late for work.

When I got to work, Mr. Livingston came up to me.

"The ARP report is late along with the PowerPoint explaining the creation of the ARP report. What have you been doing?"

I tried to explain that I had just been in the hospital with my mother, and Mr. Livingston got very quiet — people like to get quiet when hospitals are mentioned — and asked if everything was all right. I said yes, it's just that she was giving birth to me.

He nodded and took a sip of his coffee.

"Look," he said. "I understand that these problems come up, but I think you have to start being a team player."

"I know. I really do," I said. His shirt had a piece of lint on it. I wanted to flick it.

"To effectively optimize team-driven technology you have to be a proactive integrated co-leader synergizing with other proactive integrated co-leaders to produce optimal creative output."

"Very true Mr. Livingston," I said. Maybe someone else could flick it?

"You can't very well synergize if you're off in the hospital being born."

I told him it was a one-time thing, and it wouldn't happen again.

"Make sure it doesn't," he said. He started walking away but then backtracked. "And I'm sorry, but I think this means I'll have to make Ron the regional deputy project-manager co-architect."

Ron waved from his cubicle.

"It's okay, I don't mind," I said.

"You do mind," said Mr. Livingston. "Being regional deputy project-manager co-architect has been your ultimate goal for the past five years."

And then I felt myself getting red-faced. Angry. You see, I wanted to be a pilot. After being born that morning, I'd found a brochure on my car. "Fly Away to New Beginnings with West Valley Pilot School!" it said. There was a picture of a brown-haired man with shiny teeth smiling in a cockpit. A speech bubble pointing to his face said, "I'm going to Tahiti!" I wanted to be a pilot like him. I wanted to fly to Tahiti too!

I was about to clarify this point to Mr. Livingstone but he'd wandered off. Then Ron came over to ask for my self-evaluation reports from the last five years.

When I got home that night my wife gave me a look.

"Where have you been? You told me you were coming home early."

I lay down on the couch and tried to calmly explain that I had a long day at work and, moreover, I had just started existing so I couldn't have said I was coming home early. She said, "Excuses," in that quiet exasperated tone she always uses when she's quietly exasperated.

I watched her stir the soup.

She asked if I remembered to pick up the margarine — which is just the kind of thing she would say — she

always expects me to fail and forget to pick up things like margarine. But of course I couldn't have remembered to pick up the margarine or do the other things there hadn't been time to do: put money in our IRA, get hair plugs, or investigate nursing homes for mother, who was already back in the hospital after slipping on the loose shingle that fell off the roof.

There hadn't been any time.

She said that there was never any time.

I said that there was, it trickles away. And again, I don't know how I know... but it's true, it does trickle away.

She asked me if I was unhappy that I had chosen her, and I said it was never a choice. She misinterpreted and smiled.

I got confused.

She said she'd wished that I had impregnated her so we could have made a zygote that might have traveled down her fallopian tubes, implanted itself on her uterine lining, and eventually become a baby that could somehow be extracted and raised by our mutual effort. Her eggs were too old now. There was no chance that a zygote would travel down her fallopian tubes, implant itself into her uterine lining, and eventually become a baby — or something approximating a baby.

"It's just going to be us," she said.

And with that she stopped stirring the soup and turned towards me. A sad stranger. Deep parenthesis flanking her mouth and oven mitts for hands.

"Will it be enough?" she asked, frowning.

I wanted her to stop being sad. Her frown lines made me feel too icky inside. I shifted my weight from right to left and back again, wondering what to say.

"Will it?" she asked again, brushing a stray hair off my coat.

I knew I had to pretend so I said that the two of us was enough, more than enough really.

I offered to take over stirring the soup.

"It looks delicious," I said.

"I'm sorry, I got lentil instead of tomato," she said.

"That's okay, it looks delicious."

Our friends, a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman, came over for dinner and we talked about movies and the Steelers and the Steelers' new tight end — the Steelers have a great new tight end — and I almost forgot about the strangeness. I almost forgot.

But then we talked about other things.

"His name is Gus," my wife said, holding up a YouTube video displaying a small Schnauzer running through five rings of fire while balancing a beach ball on his nose.

"Ooooh," the couple said while slurping their soup.

"He's purebred, descended from two generations of Westminster champions on his mother's side," my wife said.

The middle-aged woman put a sympathetic hand on my wife's arm.

"A purebred championship dog will surely make up for the fact that you can't have children and your marriage has lost its spark," she said smiling.

My wife nodded.

"We gave Violet a Dachshund for her birthday," the middle-aged man said. He punched me jocularly with one arm, taking a large pull from his Budweiser with the other.

"But can you —" the middle-aged woman said.

"A Dachshund!"

"Can you afford a championship Schnauzer?" she finished, eyeing me suspiciously. My wife's eyes followed along with the middle-aged man's and I sat there, clutching the cheap fold-out Flardfill table and listening to Jeopardy from the rabbit-eared television in the kitchenette.

"Of course he can, he's getting a promotion," my wife said.

This is the lifespan of the Bristlecone Pine, the longest-lived tree on earth.

"Right honey?" she said.

I felt my body inflating. The blood welled up in my cheeks. *What is 5000 years?*

"Right?" my wife said, eyeing me, a mixture of pain and pity on her face.

My fingertips vibrated.

5000 years is correct!

And with that, it all became too much and I let out a piercing wail, banging my fist down on the table and splattering soup on my readers.

"It's not fair!" I sputtered out, rocking back and forth in my chair as my wife got up to wipe the soup and spittle off my face. "I'm a baby," I screamed. "I'm a goddamn baby and nobody seems to respect that!"

Dinner ended.

The others said it's not true. They said I'm not a baby. They said I'm a man because I know the things a man knows and look the way a man looks. And it does seem like I'm equipped with a certain level of knowledge. I know how to get to the store and back. I know my wife's favorite colors. But other things I don't know and the not knowing makes me want to climb back inside mother, hide in her vagina, and refuse to come back out. Because this wasn't my doing. Something else made this.

And I realize you may not understand. I don't really either. You see, it's hard to reconcile what I know with what I know but... I do know this: I'm new and nobody will let me be. That seems to be the biggest problem here. Nobody lets anybody be new.

In bed that night I laid awake, terrified, stiff and still, listening to my wife's soft snore and staring at her, examining the worry crease in the middle of her forehead and the slight droop of flesh beneath her chin.

She woke up.

"What's wrong," she said. I said nothing. The chin flesh was the problem but I couldn't very well talk about the strangeness of the chin flesh so I kissed her, thinking it would make things less strange.

She moaned softly and I kissed her more, getting lost in the tactile sensations. I got on top of her, took off her nightgown, closed my eyes, and thrust deep into her. She gasped. I thrust harder. She said something but I couldn't hear, I couldn't hear anything. All I could do was thrust faster and faster, deeper and deeper, trying to believe that it was real.

And then I heard her. "Slow down baby, there's no hurry."

I opened up my eyes to find her brown ones saying please. "I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay," she said softly. But it wasn't and I knew it. See, I knew it because of her forehead. It was scrunched up — a bed of worry lines with a little vertical trench in the middle. Hovering over her, I stared at the scrunched up forehead, not really knowing why. And as I stared something just sort of — I don't quite know how to explain — but something just... snapped into place and I saw our first date and how she scrunched up her forehead after I made an off-color joke. Something about Helen Keller? A rabbi? Helen Keller and a rabbi? I remembered doing a little dance the first time she called me back and the way her voice always squeaked in the morning. And suddenly it all made such... sense.

"Baby, are you okay?" she asked, a wisp of her auburn hair stuck to the corner of her mouth.

I said nothing. Time had slowed down and I stayed silent and still, hoping I could make time freeze completely and live forever in the pure rightness of the moment.

But I couldn't.

As I stared at the little trench in the middle of my wife's forehead, it turned into a gash. An alien scar. A moment later I saw other things — things that didn't make sense: the house we could never afford, the places we'd never gone, the child we'd never have. All the recognition evaporated and I pulled away, collapsing like a poured out piece of flesh onto my side of the bed.

My wife nuzzled up next to me, camping in the space above my shoulder blade. She gripped me too tightly.

I scooted away to the corner of the bed and got into the fetal position. I sucked my thumb. It didn't help. Too salty.

"Honey, talk to me," she said, rubbing my shoulder.

I started to cry. Big snotty sobs.

"What's going on?" she said, handing me a tissue.

"I want to go to West Valley College and become a pilot," I cried.

"What?" Her brow furrowed.

I went to get the brochure of the attractive, smiling man with the white teeth and I told her about West Valley College. If I went to West Valley College, I could earn my wings and fly away to Tahiti. I'm sure they would let me be new in Tahiti. I googled "Tahiti" on my phone and started learning things. Tahiti is the largest island in French Polynesia. It's always sunny and warm and all the islanders look happy so I would never be cold and unhappy. My wife said something about not being able to go to Tahiti and I told her, of course she wouldn't be able to go. She's not a pilot and I wouldn't give her a ride. If I gave her a ride, I wouldn't be able to be new.

I was getting pretty excited, telling her about all the sea otters and sea lions that lived off the coast of Tahiti. But, then I turned away from the screen and saw her face. Her eyes were all red. Her skin blotchy.

"You're not happy here with me?"

I looked down at the worn carpet, avoiding her gaze.

"You want to leave?"

I drummed my fingers against my knees to some rhythm I'd known at some point. Or had I? No, of course not... I was new — and she had to understand that I couldn't keep pretending.

"Yes," I said, turning back towards her.

As soon as I spoke the truth, I knew I should have lied. Tears streamed down her face. Strands of her auburn hair stuck to the wet parts. Her tiny frame shook slightly as she cried.

And, it hurt — it hurt too much to look at her that way. I got up and paced around the bedroom as quietly as I could, afraid that any loud noises might aggravate the sobs. "Do you think we should fix this crack in the dry wall?" I said, casually pointing to a rather obtrusive mark, hoping that she might just forget about the whole thing. But she didn't. When I turned around, she was just as before: a quavering thin-boned middle-aged woman balled-up in the corner of the bed, vibrating in her own sadness.

And, you see, I did want to comfort her — I swear I did. I felt the magnetic pull of a loved one in pain. But I also felt something else, another fit bubbling to the surface, a heat within me that kept rising and rising till my sweat simmered on my skin and I knew I couldn't stay in that condo for one more second. So I ran out the door and kept on running. And there was only place to go: mother's.

Twelve hours after I was born and one hour after my marriage had fallen apart, I went to the nursing home to see mother. Since my birth that morning, her exponentially

accelerating aging process had grown exponentially worse. She was dying. And yet, with years, she'd grown more powerful. The oldest member of the nursing home, she was treated as a venerable oracle of sorts. The loose shingle that fell off the roof had hit her head, giving her visions, and the old people crowded around her asking questions. "Will my son visit me? Can you make my sciatica go away? When will I die?" A nurse flanking mother held a clipboard and screamed "One at a time, one at a time" as mother yelled out "Yes" and "No" and "You'll die on Saturday."

I cut through the crowd and asked mother for advice. "Who are you?" she said and proceeded to yell at the nurse, telling her to take away the encyclopedia salesman. I waved the nurse away, and explained to mother that I wasn't an encyclopedia salesman. I was her son, the son she had birthed earlier that day, and she couldn't die yet because my life was frightening, sad, and unfair, and she hadn't taught me how to be in it.

"I didn't have time to teach you!" she yelled.

"I know," I said.

"You can't blame me. You always blame me."

"I know, you did the best you could," I said.

At this point, I began to blubber again and I was spitting up on my suit. Mother removed the electrodes from her heart monitor, stood up, and slung me over her shoulder. The old people stood back crossing themselves, shuddering in awe, as she walked back to her bed, her brittle-boned, decaying body creaking all the way as she carried me like a sack of potatoes. "There, there," she said, patting me on the back as I bawled and bawled. "There, there." She lay back down on the bed and held me, feeding me a bottle she had in a cooler. I suckled on it. She plugged herself back into her heart rate monitor and whispered in soft tones, "It's okay baby, it's okay."

I was calm.

And then I told mother all about my life and the confusion. How I wanted to go to West Valley College and fly away to Tahiti but I didn't want to see my wife's face all shriveled up and wet from tears.

"Mother," I said. "What should I do?"

Mother looked up at the ceiling, as if waiting from some sign from the heavens. After about a minute, she tilted her head down and looked me squarely in the eye.

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Suddenly, she clutched her heart.

"What, mother?" I said.

The cardiac monitor started to beep faster. And faster. Nurses rushed to her side. Doctors took out their stethoscopes. The old people, taking mother's sudden decline as a bad omen, cried in horror and fled the room to say goodbye to their loved ones.

"What should I do?" I said again, in desperation.

But the heart-beeps soon blended into one final death beep. The doctor called it at 12:05 AM. One day after giving birth to me, my mother left this earth.

Today, my wife and I went to mother's funeral. "I'm so sorry," she said, smoothing the thinning hair from my forehead. As they lowered mother into the ground, my wife wrapped her arms around me and I tried to feel the belonging. After all, I'm an orphan now. She's all I have.

The gravediggers shoveled earth onto mother's casket and the minister mumbled the Lord's Prayer. *Give us this day our daily bread.* A plane roared overhead and the assembled crowd, as if on cue, stared aloft for a few seconds before snapping back to attention. *And lead us not into temptation.*

I couldn't help but keep staring. The plane had a hula girl on the fuselage with some indecipherable script across her midriff. Cyrillic? Where on earth did the Cyrillic alphabet and hula girls co-exist? But watching the plane disintegrate into a dot on the horizon, it seemed so precarious. Flying. Planes. Everything I don't know. Not all dots are going somewhere interesting. Some of them even plummet into the ocean.

When I looked back down, the gravediggers were smoothing the ground above mother with the backs of their shovels. I felt my wife's arms tighten around me. I knew I would have to stay. You see, most of the time I do not believe it's my life. But, still, there's no evidence anything else is.

I can't leave and begin anew. I have a mortgage. And we've adopted a small more economical Schnauzer named Rick.

We picked him up today. He's the runt of the litter, blind and a bit dim in the head. Has a gimp leg and inadvertently walks in counter-clockwise circles. In fact, he's doing it right now. Round and round the coffee table he goes. He can't see a thing, believes he's walking in a straight line. A minute ago, I blocked his path with a toaster, thinking that perhaps he would get a clue after running into it on his second lap and change things up. But he just walked straight into it, only pausing for a millisecond before redoubling his efforts and taking off again, this time in a trot.

He's whining in pain now as he rounds the corner, his bad leg twitches and shakes as he runs faster than he should, faster than he can handle. My wife sits down and we watch, pointing and laughing, as he somehow continues accelerating, his little legs pumping faster and faster till we can't even see him anymore, till he's simply a small fur blur rapidly revolving around our coffee table, yelping in one continuous high pitch screech as he perseveres, giving chase to nothing. ☹

LISA GUNN is a writer who lives in San Francisco with her girlfriend and a Siamese fighter fish named Fred. Her essays have appeared in *Salon* and other places. This is her first published short story.

Peggy Ahwesh: KISSING POINT
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from *Miransù* by Monica Sarsini

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY MARYANN DE JULIO

to my grandmother Isabella

I would have liked to have a male child. Everybody's happy with a male. When your mama had your brother she bent over backwards, after when she had you she was happy, there was already a male, your father when he saw you the first thing that he said was, tell me the truth, they forgive you, I love you the same, did you go with an Indian? You had two very dark eyes... Your mother aborted a bunch of times poor thing, though two times I aborted, me too. It wasn't painful, in order to abort without consequence it's best to do it right away. Then it wasn't allowed, there were women that did it as a profession, I told grandfather, who gave me the money or else, a little pain and then I went to work, he saw that I didn't want any more. Your mama did like me, sure, after your brother died, we were both sorry. We said, it was punishment from God. They have no idea how many people aborted. Who wasn't stupid aborted in a rush. Now you take the pill, the IUD, these things came later, then there was only the rubber, that's how they called it, but a man... I'm careful, I'm careful, if we make a baby have it. Me at Badia from the room I went down to wash myself with water and vinegar, I made myself a douche, the first time I didn't know anything about it at all, then my brother told me, there's a special rubber syringe, use that there. If vinegar were enough people would have already taken care. The second time it didn't work for me.

It's better not to make love at all. There are women who can't do without it. I've always told you, I used to crochet here, he came home, at six, when the workers had a party, he came into the sitting room, came next to me, gave me a kiss on the head and I was already content. I never felt anything, I'm frigid, it would take me the wrath of God's time to come to the good point. Sometimes a kiss was enough because he was short of breath, but I was so afraid that I didn't feel anything. Unfortunately, I menstruated until I was sixty year old. There was also this disgrace, the first time that I didn't see them, I said, I wouldn't be pregnant? I had had some hot flashes, so much so that I'd caught a good cold, as soon as I felt that a rush of blood was coming I opened the kitchen window and I slipped into the garden. I was afraid, then the days passed, even grandfather used to say but what's bothering you. When I was sure that I couldn't make love without a tremendous pain, they said that they were polyps. I was lucky, your grandfather wasn't a prurient man, sometimes a caress was enough, to be hugged a bit. Perhaps he also understood that I didn't have much desire. These polyps then didn't give me any more pain, it was enough that he didn't enter me. I went to understand what it was, to the INAM, the workers clinic, in order not to pay. They said it ought to be operated on. And me, I do without it. I was always reluctant, but if you take a husband even if you aren't going to need to submit, if one doesn't want to then the other goes elsewhere, there were brothels open then too. Me, I've experienced what love means, you understand. With my cousin it was much different from the affection that I felt towards my husband. It was passion, desperation good and proper, you saw him and you felt like swooning. This with grandfather I didn't feel, even if I cared for him, I respected and helped him. He never bothered me, good heavens, no! Unfortunately he was always on top of me, and at times even without wanting to it drives a man to do what maybe he wouldn't have wanted at all. When your sister was born I think that your mama had really wanted her. Your grandmother dead, this sitting room we bought it from the notary that was doing the shares of the inheritance. Then, like for the silverware service, I fought to have it. Your grandfather said, I

don't want the stuff either of someone selling in need or of someone who's dead. But scusa, I said, they're selling it at auction, they need this money, knives and forks there are twenty-four of them, for fruit, fish, ice cream. There are thirty kilos of silver! The sitting room in their house no one wants it, and they estimate it at sixty thousand lire. We had the money then, and I said to your grandfather, let's us buy it, there's no good furniture in the country. But what do you want to do with it, we have little of this furniture! But scusa, that's beautiful, it's a sitting room all in walnut, inlaid by hand, it has value, not to keep now that we don't have a decent person that'll keep it polished. He hesitated a bit, he didn't want it, what would we do with it. What would we do with it, I said, I want that sitting room, I wanted it, I thought that at least it would be a memory for your father, he had nothing, they had kicked him out. Your father didn't deserve it, but I always liked him, not having males for me he was a son, at times when he telephones he says, I only have you for a mama. In order to soften me up. And so your father even so had a small inheritance, something they gave him, then we bought the sitting room and gave these sixty thousand lire, which they divided among heirs. Half of the house was to be his, but your aunt with the say that kept the mother at home, that kept her alive, gave your father only a little of the money, almost nothing. Your mother was pregnant, she didn't like to abort, me no, children had always annoyed me. I never let you want for anything, you were the best dressed in the school and you had what was possible to have.

There was once a child that didn't want to be born. The mama was expecting it, but he didn't want to make up his mind to enter her belly. He was suspended in the air like a grain of dust, without making decisions, in company with other tiny presences. The mama had done everything for years in order to tempt him, she ate delectable foods, found a willing father and a bright and cheerful house in which he would have been able to run. But the baby, in need of liberty, liked the idea of arriving in a family as though by chance, without it needing him. The mama cried at times, weary, but the baby wanted to arrive without being expected, hoping to see him born was really when it became impossible for him to go down that road. Certainly for him too it wasn't always pleasant to stay in the clouds without name or age. But the fault wasn't his so much as that woman on earth's to whom he was destined, who felt half a woman because he hadn't arrived yet. He didn't want half a mama, he wanted a whole mama. Let's hope she forgets about me, said the unborn child to himself, that she finds something already created with which to occupy herself, instead of going after me, whom she still doesn't know. It needs to be said that he was capricious and that he dug in his heels if he felt desired. I'm not a circus freak, he wrote in his diary, and how then can I entrust myself to someone who if I'm not there doesn't feel at ease in life. The unborn child wondered why he was destined to that woman and not to another less clingy. You wouldn't even be a little speck if that woman hadn't imagined you, it's thanks to she who thought of you that you can hope one day to take a few steps on earth, murmured to him in slumber a little old lady who was sleeping in a house near the rusted gates of a garden. If she happened to go out it seemed like landing in a country not hers, in which she didn't know how to get her bearings. It's not so much that I want to be outside, she said while walking anyway, and was careful to do so that the habitants of the place didn't notice her state of mind, otherwise she was certain that, as in the fables that grandmother recounted to her when

she was little, the power of her imagination would turn them into stone. And she, who was a kind little old lady, didn't tolerate doing malice not even to those whom she didn't know. But it was a great strain to come across as curious and satisfied every time that she put her nose outside, another little old lady inside her in spite of the upbringing she'd received would have wanted that no one amble on the roads and that she could, even at her age, walk across, firmly on one leg, singing loudly, even bellowing, in order to pass the time. On the contrary if her stocking fell while waiting for the light to change, instead of pulling on her skirt to hook it to the garter belt, she walked slowly, legs strait, purse placed against her thigh, and she even felt guilty. With the passage of the years the little old lady had not changed temperament, as she was used to telling her friend when they found themselves having lunch, and his presence made more bearable the din of the city and the jumble of smells. Her friend was a butcher getting on in years, a flat checked hat on his head, elegant due to his melancholy air, even if with the clients who crowded in front of the counter he was disposed to make assessments on the cuts of meat that he was laying out on the lever scales. This is heavenly, if you eat it you'll feel as if you've been reborn. This is fantastic, soft like a caress. For this there are no adjectives, it's superb. The little old lady didn't buy much meat, but she passed every morning in front of the case and if the butcher's wife wasn't there at the cash register they made a date at a bar with tables, in order to be a few minutes in peace to talk about the countryside, where the little old lady didn't go walking, whereas the butcher lived there in order to be close to his son, who had bought a farmhouse and had installed a kiln in which he inserted rows of miniature porcelain cows to bake, which were selling like hotcakes along the coast, he didn't really understand why. While they were seated the old lady thought again about how they looked at her on the street when she was a girl, and about how she was preoccupied with pleasing, without wondering if they pleased her those to whom it seemed to her a duty to make their heads turn. The baby wanted to be born in the house of the old lady, even if the other specks told him that it wasn't possible, since the woman had never thought that he might be born. But that one there, that always thinks about me, precisely because she thinks about me makes it impossible for me to become someone with a name and an age, answered the unborn child with his idea of a hand supporting his idea of a cheek. Out of the blue he made the decision to enter unnoticed, so that his presence began to have a weight in the rooms, even if no one could see him. In fact the old lady though without changing her habits, reluctant as she was to hold human beings in fondness, in going to sleep she began to take pains to stay in a part of the bed without stretching out her legs in the slope of the space that in the night of time had occupied a great love that then had gone away, one rainy morning she took her clothes off some hangers in the wardrobe, a Sunday afternoon she placed on the edge of the basin a towel for guests, just out of bed she plaited her hair on the nape of her neck and one fine day it was set for two, something that astonished her but to which in the following days she no longer paid attention.

The Rail is proudly running *Miransù* as a serial which began in the December 2013/January 2014 issue and will continue through the winter.

MONICA SARSINI was born in Florence, where she lives and teaches writing. She is also an artist who has shown her work in Italy and other countries. *Libro Luminoso* (Exit Edizioni, 1982) was followed by *Crepacuore*, *Crepapelle* and others. A collection of her work was published in English under the title *Eruptions* (Italica Press, 1999). In *Alice nel paese delle domandine* (Le Lettere, 2011), Sarsini collects stories written by women from the creative writing class that she taught at Sollicciano prison, outside Florence; a second volume *Alice, la guardia e l'asino bianco* was just published in Italy.

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SADE: Attacking the Sun

MUSÉE D'ORSAY | THROUGH JANUARY 25, 2015

by John Galbraith Simmons

No better time than the present, considering the parlous state of the world, to create an exhibit as audacious and ambitious as *Sade: Attacking the Sun*. With a focus not on the man and the scandals but on his range of influence and continuing pertinence, it mounts a considerable array of visual works that includes many from iconic figures not usually associated with the customary Sadean triad of sexual excess, violence, and perversion. Among them are Delacroix, Courbet, Degas, Cézanne, Rodin, and Picasso—all to bear witness and help explain Sade's pivotal presence in the modern and post-modern imagination—not as libertine and provocateur but as catalyst and crucible.

Like Marx and Freud and Nietzsche, the Marquis de Sade is a durable industry for scholars, so it's no surprise that in France, in particular, the 200th anniversary of his death generates reflection on his unique stature, as evidenced by a host of events and publications. Together with his strong fit to the present proliferation of crises and conflagrations afflicting fabrics of society and bodies politic the world over, republication of his collected works in the Pléiade edition (1990-1998) has ramped up interest. Dissection of his life and times continues with new biographies while his thought has occasioned reissues of essential older critiques together with a profusion of new ones, not to mention slender novels and oversized facsimiles. The museum catalogue for the show is an impressive display of the entire intellectual and visual compilation, authored by its guest curator, Annie Le Brun. A second exhibit, which features the 39-foot-long scroll on which Sade recorded, in microscopic handwriting, while imprisoned in the Bastille, *120 Days of Sodom*, is on view at the nearby Institut des Lettres et Manuscrits. The seventh arrondissement, until late January, has gone Sade.

The vast assemblage at Orsay does not aim to represent Sade's direct imprint so much as to examine the profound stirrings in the plastic arts which his work brought to bear on long-sequestered desires, generating images in which body and mind interact in response to and beyond the reach of religion and political order. Sade's themes, expressed by his characters' extreme discourse—what they say, do, and inflict upon one another—provoke in readers, still today, visceral responses that owe to the social, political and psychological contents of their worlds. Those same responses by extension apply to viewers of works ranging from Ingres's intimate erotic drawings (discovered only in the 1970s) to disaster paintings like *Eruption of Vesuvius* (Pierre-Jacques Volare) and a sketch from Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. The exhibit's pointedly insolent title owes to one of the outrageous libertines who occupy the remote castle in *120 Days of Sodom*. "How many times, by God" asks Curval, a murderous judge and wealthy, twisted, upright member of society, "have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world?"

Sade's notoriety preceded his influence, to be sure, and it's easy to explain. Born in 1740 to the French aristocracy as the empire stumbled toward revolution amidst the Enlightenment, Sade fought as a young officer in the Seven Years' War ("very brave and very crazy," wrote a superior) before taking up the life of a debauched young libertine. From 1763 his brutal and outrageous sexual excesses got him into trouble, in no small part because they were admixed with religious impiety, including blasphemies such as spitting and trampling on the cross. A series of scandals, imprisonments, and escapes culminated in his confinement without trial or sentence in 1777 at the behest of his in-laws and on orders of the French king. To that point Sade was no more than one prominent whelp among a welter of sexual overboards, his movements tracked and recorded by the royal police and system of spies—infamous, to be sure, but no more substantial than a scandal-prone rock star.

In prison, however, Sade began to create the extraordinary series of books that interweave elaborate sexual behavior, political discourse, and philosophy, all undergirded by rage and black humor, that stand as the most extreme examples of late Enlightenment thought. After release from prison in 1790, he became active in the revolution; but Citizen Sade was imprisoned again during the Terror and nearly lost his head. He came away in the aftermath to fashion something of a career as playwright, novelist, and pamphleteer, and by the end of the century his sexually explicit works such as *Justine* and *Juliette* were popular sellers in the Parisian bookstalls. It was just such works as *Philosophy in the Bedroom* that brought him to the attention of Napoleon Bonaparte, who had him arrested and renewed his confinement without trial. Sade died in 1814; soon afterward, his books were formally banned; they remained so in France for more than a hundred years, even as his influence percolated and spread from about 1850; Flaubert, Baudelaire,

Swinburne counted themselves among his admirers. Only after World War II did Jean-Jacques Pauvert, a young editor who died just this past September, take up the task of republishing Sade's works, the most famous of which were put into English in the 1960s.

Attacking the Sun is guest-curated by Annie Le Brun, a sharp-witted left intellectual and social critic who has written about Sade for some forty years. She collaborated with Pauvert for a re-edition of Sade's works in the 1970s and her *Sade: A Sudden Abyss* is still available in English (City Lights). The exhibit develops and illustrates a set of central ideas Le Brun has fashioned to encompass Sade's complex thought, establish his primogeniture with respect to figures such as Nietzsche and Freud, and explain his continuing relevance. She aptly rejects the idea of Sade as promulgating a philosophy or system in favor, more nimbly, of a way of thinking. As she explains, he "puts philosophy in the bedroom instead of simply making the bedroom safe for philosophy." Sade insists on the primacy of desire and the centrality of body to mind: "no ideas without bodies, no bodies without ideas." That fundamental insight, immanent throughout Sade's writings, places him in thorough opposition to ideologies of every kind, understood as systems of ideas precisely without intimate connection to physical and sentient beings. With this individuating trope, Sade was adamantly anti-metaphysical, atheist, and materialist; these precepts suffice his writing and make him a man on a mission, inspired by the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) shapes his approach to the world.

For this exhibition, Le Brun's accomplishment is to show how Sade's preoccupations entered the visual arts during the past four or five hundred years—several pieces date to the 15th century—yet without moving into the territory of platitudes, anachronisms, and dubious allusions. One might imagine an exhibit like this would present works that evoke Sade's pre-romantic appreciation of the erotic, from Fragonard to Félicien Rops. There is some of that. But far more intriguing are works by iconic artists that powerfully contextualize Sade's own central themes. To cite just several: strangulation and abduction according to Cézanne, Ingres's adolescent *Angélique*, extravagant sculptures by Rodin, Edvard Munch's *Dans le cerveau de l'homme*, and Picasso's *Rape of the Sabine Women*.

Originally herself associated with French surrealism, Le Brun does not neglect either its major artists or their precursors. Key anchors include André Masson, whose *Gradiva* (after the novel by Willem Jensen) is a powerfully imaginative encapsulation of sexual obsession; Man Ray, who was an avid reader of Sade; Hans Bellmer, whose imagination and personal life strongly reflected Sade's own humanity in the face of naked oppression; pieces by Marcel Duchamp; and both collages and paintings by Max Ernst, whose *Bride of the Wind*, freighted with both erotic and political connotations, concludes the exhibit. But Le Brun accords equal attention to such unusual artists as the symbolist Alfred Kubin and, from the time of the French Revolution, arresting works by the architect and erotic draughtsman Jean-Jacques Lequeu. One room in the exhibit has a focus on perversion—here are Aubrey Beardsley and Félicien Rops, among others, including some ephemera and manuscripts. But the exhibit is defined by desire writ large, not by compulsion.

In the end, beyond Sade's breadth of vision, it is his commitment to human freedom that is on display in *Attacking the Sun*. With Sade, "we find ourselves in the face of untrammelled thought that admits nothing whatever of the religious, ideological, and moral preconceptions that make us all voluntary prisoners," Le Brun emphasized in a recent interview. "For Sade's atheism attacks not only religion but everything that nourishes in mankind all forms of servitude and acceptance."

Some will contest whether Sade, two hundred years dead, belongs with the company he keeps at the Musée d'Orsay. I won't be one of them. Recently, my wife and I completed translation of *Aline and Valcour*, the long and complex novel he wrote while imprisoned in the Bastille, never before put into English. As we rendered the final compelling and surprising climactic and tragic descriptions, it was impossible not to notice how the amplitude and ambition behind Sade's intentions forced the language he used far beyond its time and place. For me, it brought to mind the 20th century critic Northrop Frye's explanation for his powerful attachment to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*—its epic quality as "the story of all things." Not really a surprising juxtaposition today, astride a world awash in astonishing wealth and massive poverty, with considerable parts afire, fueled by deadly religious scrap: we have, thankfully, the Marquis de Sade. ☞

Two Extracts from *Aline and Valcour*

Is that the way of depravity...?

No surprise that Sade would defend what came to be known as homosexuality but his reasoned defense of it is unusual for its rejection of nurture or upbringing as its cause in favor of what would within a couple of centuries be largely acknowledged as owing to inborn biological or constitutional features. From the character known as Sarmiento, a thoroughly unpleasant Portuguese adventurer who has gone native in Africa, a hundred years before Conrad's Heart of Darkness:

"And were this penchant not a natural one, would we receive its impressions from childhood? Would it not give way before efforts of those who would guide the early years? Let us examine the human beings branded by it, for it makes its stamp felt despite all efforts to oppose it; it strengthens with passing years; it resists advice, solicitation, terrors of the life to come, punishments, contempt, and the tarest traits of the opposite sex. Is that the way of depravity, the way of such a proclivity? How do we want to explain it if not as clearly owing to Nature? And if that is the case, what is there to be offended about? Would Nature inspire something that outrages her? Would she permit something that disrupts her laws? Would she bestow the same gifts on those who serve her as on those who degrade her? Let us better study this indulgent Nature before daring to fix her limits. Let us analyze her laws, scrutinize her intentions, and never venture to make her speak without listening.

"Let there be no doubt in the end: our wise mother has no intention of extinguishing this proclivity. To the contrary, it forms part of her plan that some men do not procreate at all and women older than forty cannot; propagation is not one of her laws. Nature does not esteem it and it does not serve her; we can use it as it seems good to us without displeasing Nature, or in any way attenuating her power.

"So cease inveighing against the simplest deviation, a fancy to which man is propelled by a thousand physical causes that nothing can change or destroy, a habit that serves both Nature and the state itself yet commits no wrong upon society, and which finds antagonists only among the abjured sex—little reason, all in all, to raise the gallows. You may not want to imitate the Greek philosophers, but at least respect their views. Did not Lyncurgus and Solon bring Themis to defend these unfortunates? They adroitly turned the reigning vice they found there to the advantage and glory of the nation. They profited from it to stir patriotism in the souls of their compatriots. In the famous battalion of lovers and beloved—men and boys—resided the value of the state. Understand that what makes one people flourish can never degrade another. Care about curing these infidels involves only the sex they reject, done with chains of flowers in the temple of love; yet if these be broke, if they resist love's yoke, don't suppose sarcasm or invective, any more than iron chains or the promise of execution, could more surely convert them. One must deal with fools and cowards on one side, fanatics on the other. We can be guilty of stupidity and cruelty, and come away with not one vice less.

—From *Aline and Valcour*, Letter 35

As to those ministers of heaven...

After young, energetic, congenial Sainville spirits his beloved Léonore away from the nunnery in which she was doomed to a life of celibacy, he marries her (sort of) in Lyon and they honeymoon in Venice. But their wedded bliss is interrupted by her abduction, which sets him on a worldwide search to find her. Sade creates in Sainville a deist—an enlightened believer in a non-interventional God, which brings him nothing but grief:

As heaven is my witness, until [our arrival in Lyon] I'd respected the virtue of the woman I wanted for a wife; I considered that the prize desired would be diminished if I permitted love to break the hymen. But an incomprehensible difficulty destroyed our mutual restraint, and grossly imbecilic behavior on the part of those whom we importuned to help prevent the crime positively plunged us into it. *O! Ministers of Heaven! Will you ever realize that it is far better to accept a lesser evil than to occasion a greater one, and that your worthless approbation, to which we would readily submit, has nevertheless far fewer consequences than all those that result from your refusal?*

The Vicar General of the Archbishop, from whom we requested benediction, harshly dismissed us; and three other priests in the city subjected us to the same unpleasantness. Léonore and I, rightfully annoyed by obnoxious prudery, resolved to take God as our only witness, in the belief that by invoking His name before His altar we would be married just as well as if the whole Roman priesthood had sanctified us with all the formalities; it is the soul, the intention, that the Eternal One desires, and when devotion is sincere a mediator serves no purpose.

Léonore and I betook ourselves to the Cathedral. There, during the Eucharist, I took the hand of my beloved and swore to belong forever only to her; she did the same. We both submitted to heaven's vengeance should we betray our oath. We declared our union to be confirmed as soon as we might and that same day the most charming of women made of me the happiest of husbands.

But the very same God we'd just so zealously invoked had no desire to prolong our happiness. You'll soon see what awful disaster He decided upon to disrupt its course.

We reached Venice without further incident. I considered settling in that city, in the name of *Liberty* and as a *Republic* that always appeals to young people; but we quickly realized that if some cities in the world merit to be so qualified, Venice is not among them—unless one so credits a state characterized by the severest oppression of its people, and the cruelest tyranny of the wealthy and powerful.

We took lodgings on the Grand Canal in the house of one Antonio, who ran a comfortable enough place, *Aux Armes de France*, near the Rialto Bridge. Thinking only of pleasure, we spent the first three months just visiting beautiful sites in the floating city! The pain that came after was entirely unforeseen. Whilst we believed we were walking amidst flowers, wrath was preparing to break above our heads.



Portrait of Marquis de Sade. Charles Amédée Philippe van Loo (1719-1795). © Photo Thomas Hennocque/ADAGP

Venice is surrounded by many charming islands where the aquatic city-dweller, away from his stinking lagoons, betakes himself from time to time to breathe a few atoms of less insalubrious air. In imitation of this habit, with Malamoco Island more pleasant and cooler than any other we had visited, and more attractive, we dined there several times a week. We preferred the house of a widow who came highly recommended as good and reasonable, and who for a modest price offered an honest meal and the use all day of her charming gardens. A superb fig tree cast its shadow over a portion of the charming promenade. Very fond of the fruit, Léonore took singular pleasure in an afternoon collation, right there beneath the tree, choosing those that seemed ripest.

Then one day—fatal moment of my life! As I watched her so fervently absorbed in that innocent springtide pursuit, I asked her permission to leave for a brief while to visit, out of curiosity, a renowned abbey nearabouts where famous works of art by Titian and Paolo Veronese were carefully preserved. Moved in a way she could not control, Léonore stared.

"Well!" she told me, "no sooner you're my husband than you crave pleasures without your wife. Where are you going, my friend, and what painting could be worth as much as the original you already possess?"

"None, most assuredly" said I, "as you well know. But I also know that it'll take me just an hour and such objects interest you but little. These magnificent gifts of Nature," I added, pointing to the figs, "are preferable to the subtleties of the art I wish to briefly admire."

"Go then, my friend," said the charming lass. "I can stand one hour alone without you." She added, looking to her tree, "Go, hurry to your pleasures, I will taste my own."

I kissed her, she wept. I decided to stay, she objected. It was a brief moment of weakness, she said, that she could not quell. She demanded I go where curiosity led; she accompanied me to the gondola, watched me climb in, stayed by water's edge while I slipped away, weeping again as the oars touched the water; then she disappeared from view in the garden.

Who would have said that this was the instant that was going to separate us! Or that our pleasures would be swallowed up in an ocean of misfortune!

— From *Aline and Valcour*, Letter 35

JOCELYNE GENEVIÈVE BARQUE and JOHN GALBRAITH SIMMONS are currently completing their translation of *Aline and Valcour*. Their translation-in-progress was recipient of a 2010 grant from the National Endowment of the Arts. Previous brief extracts from the novel appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail* (February 2009 and September 2013).

BROOKLYN RAIL 2015 PUSH CART NOMINEES

Fiction

Donald Breckenridge, editor

with assistance from Claudia Acevedo-Quñones

Reason, however, had soured on the vine. That and civilization itself, which struck me now as rotting ever onward—zombielike. I rejected them both at once and turned to the jungle in favor of a savage's noble heart. Almost immediately, I was assaulted by a wind of a most disgusting nature—a hot, sulfurous wind, not for the faint of heart. I stuck my nose in it only to draw conclusions, mind you, and came away convinced that all forms of life must have a common ancestry. So much for the jungle.

—from *Russell* by Daniel Grandbois

“A Regular Day For Real People” by Robert Lopez. October 2014.

Robert Lopez's “A Regular Day for Regular People” is a funny and strange look into the mind of an obsessed man. In it the main character challenges a friend's sister to a tennis match that could put an end to their one-sided relationship, force another one to start, and ultimately hurt more than one person.

“Music Below Ground” by Santiago Vizcaino translated from the Spanish by Kimrey Anna Batts. November 2014.

In “Music Below Ground,” Santiago Vizcaino tells a magical story about a man who struggles with the loss of the guitar that had become like another limb on his many dalliances. His wife, hardened by his infidelities, keeps the instrument's location a secret.

“Russell” by Daniel Grandbois. September 2014.

Daniel Grandbois's “Russel” is an exploration of the history of philosophy. A fictionalized Bertrand Russell makes his way through ideas about utopia, literature, and civilization as a whole while revising Empedocles, Socrates, Aquinas, and Erasmus.

“More Epiphanies” by Richard Kostelanetz. February 2014.

Richard Kostelanetz's “More Epiphanies” is as much about the stories within it as it is about writing stories. The continuation of seemingly isolated sentences challenge the reader's expectations of what a story is supposed to be.

“Moment of Return” by Luisa Valenzuela translated from the Spanish by Marguerite Feitlowitz. July/August 2014.

Returning to her home country after years abroad, a woman struggles with her decision. She retreats to a hotel with a stranger she met on the plane, bringing up questions about exile and the fear of confronting the past.

Extracts from *Field Glass* by Joanna Rucco & Joanna Howard. April 2014.

This collaborative work is set in a post-apocalyptic world in technological chaos whose circumstances and challenges are revealed by testimonies of recluses, doctors, and soldiers.

Links to nominated works can be found at:

www.brooklynrail.org/2014/11/fiction/2015-pushcart-fiction

www.brooklynrail.org/2014/11/fiction/2015-pushcart-intranslation

InTranslation

Jen Zoble and Donald Breckenridge, eds.

A flowering tree, on the other hand, gives forth its essence when it reaches that stage known as full bloom, and in doing so, it emanates a mysterious aura comparable to the state of perfect stillness approached by a fast-spinning top, or perhaps the fleeting sensory impressions roused by a spectacular musical performance, or something like the afterglow that follows the burning act of consummation. It is this beauty, wondrous and vivacious, that never ceases to captivate the human spirit.

—from *Under the Cherry Blossoms* by Motojirō Kajii,
translated from the Japanese by Bonnie Huie

“Tests on Monkeys” by Grzegorz Wróblewski, trans. Piotr Gwiazda. Poetry from the Polish (Denmark) January 2014.

In its exploration of the idea of planetary power, the poem “Tests on Monkeys” displays some of the characteristic features of Wróblewski's verse—surreal perspective, expressionistic intensity—and highlights the author's fascination with science and technology.

“Interspersed Signs” by Glafira Rocha, trans. Gustavo Aldolfo Aybar. Short Fiction from the Spanish (Mexico) June 2014.

Rocha breaks down conventional narrative systems and deconstructs characterizations leaving us with blunted prompts and skewed confessions that force a deeper and brighter meaning to those lending their voices to her seemingly jumbled but never random signs. Immediate and vibrant.

“Neighbors” by Ferrez, trans. by Nicolas Allen & Carolina Correia dos Santos. Short Fiction from the Portuguese (Brazil) June 2014.

Ferréz lends his voice to the marginalized residents of the suburbs of the Brazilian megalopolis, drawing from his own experiences of living in one of the biggest favelas of São Paulo; “Neighbors” is the story of a man who seeks to escape the scrutiny and squalor of his surroundings.

“Dear Mama” by Hebe Uhart, trans. by Maureen Shaughnessy. Short Fiction from the Spanish (Argentina) September 2014.

“Dear Mama” was written as a tribute following the death of the author's mother; an epistolary story, it depicts a woman grappling with the absence of her mother and the legacy of her mother's wisdom.

“Larva & Hedge” by Pilar Fraile Amador, trans. Elizabeth Davis. Poetry from the Spanish (Spain) November 2014.

The prose poems of “Larva & Hedge,” make use of repetition, compression, and fragmentation in their exploration of dualities—juxtaposing the intimate and the collective, the strong and the weak, the human and the animal, and yoking them together to call their differences into question.

“Under the Cherry Blossoms” by Motojirō Kajii, trans. Bonnie Huie. Short Fiction from the Japanese (Japan) November 2014.

“Under the Cherry Blossoms” depicts a coming to terms with mortality and its accompanying dualisms through an exposition of the sub rosa, a revelation that starts with the creeping notion that beneath such beautiful flowers, something lies hidden.