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**ABOUT**
Founded in October 2000 and currently published 10 times annually, the Brooklyn Rail provides an independent forum for arts, culture, and politics throughout New York City and far beyond. The Brooklyn Rail, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, distributes its journal free of charge around New York City, and ships to a growing list of national and international subscribers. The Brooklyn Rail distributes 20,000 copies to 88 cultural institutions in New York City every month and our website is visited by 12,000–15,000 readers daily.

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**THE BROOKLYN RAIL is published at Industry City**
Dear Friends and Readers,

“It is a wholesome and necessary thing for us to turn again to the earth and in the contemplation of her beauties to know the sense of wonder and humility.”
—Rachel Carson

“Two may become enemies, when their ideas are the same.”
—Burmese Proverb

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”
—Gandhi

“The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.”
—John Dewey

By now, all of us are most definitely familiar with the word quarantine, the origin of which is quarantena, simply meaning “forty days” as Venetians took the lead of this preventive measure, requiring all ships in port to wait this amount of time to inhibit the spread of the Black Death between 1348 and 1359. Many of us are also too familiar with how the phrase social distancing has been detrimental to our psychological frame of mind. We at the Rail understood social distancing and its negative connotations as soon as Trump announced his 15-day plan to slow the spread of COVID-19 on Monday, March 16; viruses are only transmitted when we get physically close to someone, not when we’re talking on the phone, video calling, or for that matter having a Zoom meeting. Our team responded swiftly and launched the next day, on Tuesday, March 17 our New Social Environment daily lunchtime conversations at 1pm (ET) with one unified aspiration: utilizing technology as a platform to welcome and bring together our friends and colleagues from all the creative fields in the arts and humanities while infusing front and center the impending and critical issues of our current social and political lives.

In all truth, being forced to slow down by COVID-19, all the while waiting for nature to heal her body from humanity’s aggressive abuse for far too long, most of us see this situation as a cogent opportunity for long-awaited self-contemplation about our individual lives in relation to our world. In our political contemplation, we’ve gained a better grasp of how Trump has fancied himself after Mussolini. (Here we’re reminded that Mussolini’s first name Benito was not an Italian name; it was rather given to him by his socialist parents after Benito Juarez, Mexico’s national hero. Additionally, Mussolini’s fascist doctrine was a replica, a political materialization so to speak of Futurism’s advocacy of speed and technology, especially after having met Filippo Marinetti, its founder, as soon as the Futurist political party was formed after WWI ended in 1918. Mussolini created the Fascist Party a year later in 1919.) Trump’s mobilization of speed has been his power and his ability to synthesize this animalistic instinct; on one hand, like a hyena sniffing out its prey, as he breaks the conventional decorum of political debate and from every scripted speech. The opposite of Hillary Clinton—whose overt confidence transpired her decision not to visit Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, all the while her bureaucratic rigidity and business-as-usual speech revealed her inability to counter her opponent’s improvisation—Trump walks around while talking, thinking on his feet, ready to pounce. On the other hand, knowing that politics-as-usual is synonymous with politics of a monopolistic competition, this is reflected by the two-headed monster of technology and the news media, co-existing and codependent—while the speed in the former includes the various functions of Twitter, Facebook, texting, etc., this communication is incapable of independence from the endless deployments of phrases such as “Breaking News,” “Alternative Facts,” “Fake News,” among other rampant cacophonies, and whereas in the latter Trump has successfully devised an effective political tactic in tweeting as fast and unpredictable as humanly possible, irregularly throughout each day. This tactic has proven to be the GOP’s last white hope for survival in US history, distracting news media and social media addicts alike, while they analyze Trump’s 5 a.m. tweet from the night before during their morning “Breaking News,” Trump is in fact already at the height of another tweetstorm by noon.

Being forced to slow down has revealed to us that slowness is naturally required in our beautiful tradition of humanistic inquiry. Slowness is essentially required to write or read a poem, to compose or listen to a piece of music, to make or to view a work of art. (These are facts, not alternative facts. What is a fact after all? In most languages, the word “fact” usually relates to a product of labor.) Slowness is timely, and reminds us to respect time and allows us to heal ourselves. This is a time for us to collectively mobilize slowness in the works of the arts and humanities that in turn become an antidote to Trump’s toxic deployment of speed. This is a time for us to amplify the beauty of our language against Trump’s verbal vulgarity. In fact, we’re more alive now than we ever were.

In solidarity, ever onwards and upwards,
Phong H. Bui

P.S. This issue is dedicated to the extraordinary lives of Heléne Aylon, Maurice Berger, Germano Celant, David C. Driskell, and Paul J. Smith, whose profound contributions will perpetually nourish our art community for years to come. We also send our deepest gratitude to Emily DeVoti who, as editor, created and shaped the Theater section from the very beginning, even when the Rail was a bi-weekly pamphlet (1998–2000), then co-founding and naming the Brooklyn Rail after the L-train as our most popular distribution location. The same gesture is extended to Donald Breckenridge, who has single-handedly formed the Fiction section to what it is today with admirable labor and discerning advocacy for experimental writing. We wish them great prosperity and luck in their next journeys. Meanwhile, with pleasure and enthusiasm, we welcome Lucas Kane and Shadi Ghaberi as our new co-editors of the Theater section along with Will Chancellor and Kaitlyn Greenidge as our new co-editors of the Fiction Section. As the batons are passed on, a new chapter has begun, we’re thrilled to also welcome Helen Lee as a new member of the Rail’s Board of Directors. We’re indebted to Jeremy Zilar, our beloved Board Member and technology wizard, whose support has made our New Social Environment possible. Thank you. Last but not least, we’re grateful to our dear friends at Metabolic Rail’s Board of Directors. We’re indebted to Jeremy Zilar, our beloved Board Member and technology wizard, whose support has made our New Social Environment possible. Thank you. Last but not least, we’re grateful to our dear friends at Metabolic Studio for their companionship and support, especially just this last month having launched their weekly Interdependence Salons, dedicated to to nature and her sacred resources, among other hidden alchemies, which will surely embellish the cross-pollination between here in Brooklyn and there in LA, elsewhere in between, and beyond indeed. We consider this pandemic to be our most profound shared experience among our fellow human beings, hence we are determined to cultivate and nurture the arts and the humanities as our formidable armaments against any kind of political tyranny.
The Plague and the Wrath

By Charles Reeve
Translated by Janet Koenig

How do we make sense of the strange and singularity of our time? Given its tragic side, this period throws into sharp relief the weaknesses and the limits of the global capitalist system, weaknesses which only yesterday seemed to be its strength and power. Subjected to an endless loop of toxic discourses, we are present stuck in an atmosphere of anxiety; we are helpless by the very fact of our isolation. We feel menaced by an environment where every object or individual is perceived as hostile, potentially fatal. Human relationships themselves are undermined by danger. We assiduously follow the numbers and projections of “experts” in death like stock market reports; they overwhelm and weaken us; added to these are conspiracy theories, speculations, and supposed certainties meant to reassure us. The critical spirit must blaze a trail for itself through this magma. This is the only way to reach open air and to rise above the abdication of thought in the face of fear.

In rich societies, the cult of well-being and the myth of progress, of the individual triumphing over nature, appeared to have decisively pushed away the idea of death. But this march of progress is nothing other than a by-product of the enemies of the productivist ideology like Walter Benjamin and other emancipatory “pessimists” feared already a century ago. The fragility of life and societies had been allocated to people living in poverty, in constantly expanding territories of barbarious warfare, in communities still waiting for the fruits of this terrible progress. Death had become a consumable image—a source of revolve, of course, but far away. In rich societies, the incessant reinforcement of walls of repression and xenophobia had bolstered a sense of security. Images of refugees, the tens of thousands of people drowned in the Mediterranean, came as daily reminders. Then, without warning, the virus got around the police, the barricades and borders, and imposed itself on us. It took the easiest and most up-to-date route, that of the circulation of commodities and people, including—ironically, the one disguised as playful leisure: mass tourism. Here people, including—ironically, the one destined as the general strike of the virus,” to use someone’s apt expression. The stoppage of “business as usual” has happened without us, outside any of the schemas we have always envisaged, desired, struggled for. This is a mass strike without “masses,” and worse, without any collective, subversive force. It is probably fair to say that we are living through the first rumblings of a general collapse of this society organized around destructive production for profit. This collapse, without any conscious collective action, is not the bearer of a new world, of plans to reorganize society on new bases. It is a product of capitalism within the limits of its barbarism, with no prospects other than those of collapse. Here stops any resemblance to the general strike, the creation of a collectivity that reclaims its power.

However, the shock that has hit us, announcing a chain of breaks in the world order unconnected to our social system functions; it cannot be separated from its contradictions. Recent developments in capitalist globalization, in the acceleration of market exchanges, in the enormous concentration and rapid urbanization of populations, have accelerated an ecological upheaval, the destruction of the fragile reproduction of the plant, animal, and human worlds, breaking down the last barriers between them. The advent of global capitalism was not the heralded end of history, but the inauguration of a new era of ever more frequent epidemics. After the avian flu, after SARS, the imminent of a new epidemic has been feared and almost predicted. But the logic of profit in the capitalist mode of production has ruthlessly continued on its course and the emergency brake was not applied; the brake could only be applied by social forces opposed to this logic, which are still struggling to come into existence. Before us are the consequences of this logic and our powerlessness to block it. This seems to me a path for reflection: we should not separate the viral crisis from the nature of the system. We must oppose facile explanations that accommodate the existing limits of capitalism and which barely hide the intentions to restart the infernal machine. Good examples of this are the various conspiracy delusions, including the seductive conspiracy theory of “the virus created in the lab,” where the most improbable explanation parades as if for the most obvious. While we know that biological warfare is one of the criminal projects of the ruling class, and that disgruntlement and accidents are inherent in every bureaucracy, military or otherwise, the fact is that the conspiratorial vision leaves out of the equation the deadly logic of the capitalist mode of production itself. This virus was indeed manufactured, not by secret forces but by the destructive process of modern capitalism.

It is often remarked that today’s lockdown measures and the limitation of social and individual freedoms undermine class relations. Once again, this time in a macabre manner, formal equality melts away in the glare of social inequality. The viral crisis accelerates inequality. But the crisis also reveals the nature of modern capitalism and its contradictions. The everyday reality of the upheaval includes the collapse of the financial system, the collapse of stock markets, the widespread insecurity of salaried workers, the vertiginous rise of unemployment, and mass impoverishment. One breath of fresh air: the economists, who had downplayed the instability of the system and are now confused by the unexpected and short of forecasts, have practically disappeared from the landscape. While millions of unemployed add to the tens of thousands of deaths in the pandemic, gigantic fortunes jockey for government protection. The freedom? In historical experience, a state of emergency is compatible with the reproduction of exploitation and the pursuit of production for profit with strong state intervention. It is no accident that one of the great theoreticians of the state of emergency, Carl Schmitt, was a brilliant admirer of the Nazi order, which for a dozen years established the legal framework for a modern European society at the cost of horrible suffering. Closer to us, it

We can ask if the implementation of freedom-killing measures is linked to a conscious project of the powers to construct—a permanent state of emergency, to be permanently accepted.

By its global size, the viral contamination quickly created a blockage of trade and an economic collapse, the disorganization of production for profit. One crisis led to another, one replaced another, one nestled another. Today, everything is global. In the space of two weeks, what could hardly be imagined has become a reality: in the US alone, in one of the very centers of the infernal machine, more than 20 million workers have found themselves out of work. Among the issues that concern us is the response from the political powers on the terrain of formal rights: the freedom-killing restraints that are shaking up the legal framework of our existence. The possibility is tempting—the “Chinese model” as the reference point for a state of emergency was sketched very early in Europe and then concretized with the adoption of repressive methods and techniques for the control of the population. If this were added to the plight of those calling into question provisions of the laws governing labor. In Portugal, the Socialist government has gone so far as to suspend the right to strike, giving the state “legal means to force companies to operate.”

From experience, we have reasons to fear that once the viral crisis is over, these forms of the state of emergency will quietly “pass into common law,” to use the discreet phrase of Le Monde, the newspaper that supports all governments, especially as the end of the lockdown may be slow and lengthy. The urgent need to return to business as usual, for which the capitalist forces already clamor, will undoubtedly justify the perpetuation of these freedom-killing restraints—a new legal framework for new forms of exploitation. This means that the only opposition to this new authoritarian rule of law will be inexcusably tied to the collective capacity to oppose the resumption of the logic of capitalist production and its destruction of the world, which has brought us to where we are today.

That said, the inescapable question remains: can capitalism—a powerful and complex system capable of unexpected rebounds—manage in the long run to accommodate itself to functioning in a society ruled by extreme constraints on freedom? In historical experience, a state of emergency is compatible with the reproduction of exploitation and the pursuit of production for profit with strong state intervention. It is no accident that one of the great theoreticians of the state of emergency, Carl Schmitt, was a brilliant admirer of the Nazi order, which for a dozen years established the legal framework for a modern European society at the cost of horrible suffering. Closer to us, it
FIELD NOTES

“Now doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger, but above all less well-behaved. THE STATE WILL PAY!”
Photo: Philippe Gonnet.

What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger, but above all less well-behaved. THE STATE WILL PAY!

political representation, which we have been experiencing for years, is the immediate consequence of this. This being said, we can ask if the implementation of freedom-killing measures is linked to a conscious project of the powers to construct a permanent state of emergency, to be permanently accepted. Or is the adoption of these measures the only response available to the political leadership to deal with the social consequences of the pandemic? As in any crisis, the ruling class must juggle between the idea of the general order-givers: the capitalist class. In every difficult situation, the only plan B available is the reinforcement of authoritarianism, a policy of the immediate and immediate. The immediate...
BY ANA V. DIEZ ROUX

One of the most remarkable aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the way it has made visible and concrete the links between the social, economic, and political systems we have created for ourselves and our health. These links have been manifested both in the effects of the pandemic itself as well as in the ways we have responded (or failed to respond) to it. A second no less remarkable aspect is the sheer magnitude and unprecedented nature of the global response, a response that has perhaps made it possible to experience glimmers of ways in which we could live and be organized differently. Whether the response will lead to real change, or whether after deaths begin to drop (and the disease settles into endemic transmission among the most vulnerable) we will all return to business as usual remains to be seen.

On a very practical level, one striking aspect of the pandemic response has been how unprepared we appear to have been, despite decades of pandemic preparedness exercises. A striking example has been that a country like the US, one of the wealthiest countries in the world and the one that spends the largest percentage of GDP on health care, failed miserably to respond to basic needs generated by the growing spread of the virus. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the lack of access to the tests needed to identify cases and the scarcity of protective equipment needed to protect health care workers from becoming infected themselves. Given the critical importance of case identification and contact tracing as the core public health approach to controlling epidemics in early stages, it is likely that the scarcity of testing was a major determinant of the ineffectiveness of stay-at-home orders. The inability to ensure even the most basic protective gear for health care workers (so-called PPE or personal protective equipment) has placed many at risk. The ongoing saga regarding the availability and distribution of ventilators, which even had US states bidding against each other is yet another example.

It could be argued that the surge in cases was faster than anticipated, yet even well into the pandemic it has been extremely challenging to provide these basic resources when and where they are needed. Where is “the invisible hand of the market” when we really need it?

Of course, the lack of testing and PPE are manifestations of a much broader problem: the lack of a coordinated and cohesive public health response for the country as a whole. As a result, jurisdictions all over the US have responded as best they can, often piecemeal and with minimum (if any) coordination across adjacent geographic areas. To make things worse, the limited access to testing has meant not only that case identification for purposes of isolation and contact becomes impossible but also that basic statistics regarding the epidemiology of the disease are just not available. We have limited data on the rate at which new cases are occurring or on the proportion of the population that has already been infected. Some suggest that in some settings cases may actually be as much as 10 times higher than those reported. Lack of testing may also be skewing key measures like the case fatality rate (the proportion of cases that die) as well as information on the proportion of all infections that are asymptomatic, and on how long after acquiring the infection people can transmit the disease. Data like these are critical to modelling efforts that attempt to predict the number of cases, the number of hospitalized cases, and the number of deaths that we can expect within specific time periods. Lack of information on these very basic aspects of the epidemiology of the virus are behind the highly variable estimates of the impact of the pandemic generated by various modelling groups.

The unequal impacts of COVID-19 by social class and race has quickly begun to emerge as the pandemic progresses. Initial comments about “COVID-19 affecting everyone equally” while well-intentioned were, not unsurprisingly, grossly inaccurate. And contact tracing as the core public health approach to controlling epidemics in early stages, it is likely that the scarcity of testing was a major determinant of the ineffectiveness of stay-at-home orders. The inability to ensure even the most basic protective gear for health care workers (so-called PPE or personal protective equipment) has placed many at risk. The ongoing saga regarding the availability and distribution of ventilators, which even had US states bidding against each other is yet another example.

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Of course, the lack of testing and PPE are manifestations of a much broader problem: the lack of a coordinated and cohesive public health response for the country as a whole. As a result, jurisdictions all over the US have responded as best they can, often piecemeal and with minimum (if any) coordination across adjacent geographic areas. To make things worse, the limited access to testing has meant not only that case identification for purposes of isolation and contact becomes impossible but also that basic statistics regarding the epidemiology of the disease are just not available. We have limited data on the rate at which new cases are occurring or on the proportion of the population that has already been infected. Some suggest that in some settings cases may actually be as much as 10 times higher than those reported. Lack of testing may also be skewing key measures like the case fatality rate (the proportion of cases that die) as well as information on the proportion of all infections that are asymptomatic, and on how long after acquiring the infection people can transmit the disease. Data like these are critical to modelling efforts that attempt to predict the number of cases, the number of hospitalized cases, and the number of deaths that we can expect within specific time periods. Lack of information on these very basic aspects of the epidemiology of the virus are behind the highly variable estimates of the impact of the pandemic generated by various modelling groups.

The unequal impacts of COVID-19 by social class and race has quickly begun to emerge as the pandemic progresses. Initial comments about “COVID-19 affecting everyone equally” while well-intentioned were, not unsurprisingly, grossly inaccurate. And contact tracing as the core public health approach to controlling epidemics in early stages, it is likely that the scarcity of testing was a major determinant of the ineffectiveness of stay-at-home orders. The inability to ensure even the most basic protective gear for health care workers (so-called PPE or personal protective equipment) has placed many at risk. The ongoing saga regarding the availability and distribution of ventilators, which even had US states bidding against each other is yet another example.

It could be argued that the surge in cases was faster than anticipated, yet even well into the pandemic it has been extremely challenging to provide these basic resources when and where they are needed. Where is “the invisible hand of the market” when we really need it?

Of course, the lack of testing and PPE are manifestations of a much broader problem: the lack of a coordinated and cohesive public health response for the country as a whole. As a result, jurisdictions all over the US have responded as best they can, often piecemeal and with minimum (if any) coordination across adjacent geographic areas. To make things worse, the limited access to testing has meant not only that case identification for purposes of isolation and contact becomes impossible but also that basic statistics regarding the epidemiology of the disease are just not available. We have limited data on the rate at which new cases are occurring or on the proportion of the population that has already been infected. Some suggest that in some settings cases may actually be as much as 10 times higher than those reported. Lack of testing may also be skewing key measures like the case fatality rate (the proportion of cases that die) as well as information on the proportion of all infections that are asymptomatic, and on how long after acquiring the infection people can transmit the disease. Data like these are critical to modelling efforts that attempt to predict the number of cases, the number of hospitalized cases, and the number of deaths that we can expect within specific time periods. Lack of information on these very basic aspects of the epidemiology of the virus are behind the highly variable estimates of the impact of the pandemic generated by various modelling groups.
The link between poverty or social class and infectious disease rates is not new, and is caused in part simply by increased exposure to the virus. Housing conditions that result in overcrowding tend to be more common in poorer neighborhoods resulting in greater disease transmission. Lower income workers are more likely to have jobs that increase their exposure to others who are infected and do not have the luxury of adopting the remote work arrangements that many of us benefit from. Underlying health conditions and psychosocial stress can also affect immune responses, making the poor more vulnerable to developing disease when exposed to infectious agents. In the case of COVID-19, the poor and working classes will not only get more disease, they will also get sicker when they get it and will likely die more from it. Decades of data demonstrate that chronic diseases like respiratory and heart disease and risk factors like smoking, which make persons more vulnerable to severe and deadly COVID-19 disease, have a clear gradient by social class. In the US access to healthcare and quality of care received also differ by income and race, and are more likely to be implemented in the poor and communities of color who are more likely to have underlying health conditions making their prognosis worse, may not fare well. The poor and working classes will also suffer the greatest consequences of the measures we are taking to stop the pandemic. They are more likely to be laid off or lose income because businesses close or because their jobs simply do not allow remote work. They may experience delayed health care for other (and highly prevalent) chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes because routine visits to health care providers are being cancelled or because the health centers they depend on are cutting back services. Their housing conditions may increase adverse mental health impacts of social distancing. All these things will not only make the pandemic worse (more cases and more severe disease), they may also magnify the burden of other health problems. At the same time the poor may also benefit from some of the hidden benefits, like reductions in air pollution, in traffic and in violence. The bottom line is that the pandemic has made even more visible the fact that health depends to a large extent on factors outside the health care system: income, racism, employment and work conditions among others. These factors, sometimes referred to as “the social determinants of health” are rooted in social and economic structures, and have been fundamental drivers of many epidemics, including AIDS in the 1980s, the opioid epidemic in the 2010s (“deaths of despair”), and will today strongly affect the impact of COVID-19.

The big question is of course what will come after this. Based on what we know so far, this virus will not go away anytime soon, and a vaccine will not be available for many months, some say years (although remarkable efforts are being made to accelerate the process). Treatments (if they are identified) need to be scientifically efficient and need to reduce population transmission. How and when will social distancing be lifted? It appears that the most likely scenario is a combination of selective relaxation of social distancing coupled with a much more intense effort at disease surveillance, case identification and contact tracing. But this will require significant investment in public health infrastructure (which has a long history of inadequate financing and repeated cuts, even in a rich country like the United States). Of course, globally a major question is what will happen when the pandemic fully reaches lower- and middle-income countries. Many of these countries have also adopted stay at home orders, without necessarily considering their full implications. Large proportions of populations in these countries have limited access to water and live in slums where social distancing is impossible and where stay at home orders can have dramatic adverse consequences. There have already been reports of mass migrations returning to rural area from the cities in India for example. Many of these populations work in the informal economy. Will they stay at home orders be used by governments to quell social protests and repress political movements? How will the global economic recession affect these countries? There are already emerging signs that food supply chains could be affected. What about increasing social unrest if stay-at-home orders and curfews are maintained? How will the fragile and very minimal health and public health systems of these countries deal with this? Will all populations have equal access to the vaccine once we have one? How much will it cost and who will pay?

But will we learn anything from this? Will we see that grand scale changes are actually possible? Will we see that the solutions are not the ones we have been fighting for over decades or the ones dictated by environmental threats, and environmental impacts (these things are related, as some have traced the origins of the virus to environmental degradation) is nothing “natural” but rather something of our own making? Many of you will say we will not, and you may be right, but indulge me for a minute. Perhaps this crisis will open our eyes and make starkly visible what has been there all along...Chances for significant change are slim, and yes, many structural factors remain unaltered, but we have never seen anything like this: a global economy stopped to protect health, an end to frantic global travel, dramatic reductions in air pollution and carbon emissions (“the steepest full fall in CO2 in history”), 15 people who should never have been incarcerated being released, unprecedented (albeit admittedly very minimal) health redistribution via direct payments in times when most of us would have said the likelihood of this happening was zero. Call me a naive optimist, but despite the hardship and the chaos, some of the things the pandemic has triggered will give me a glimmer of hope.

2. www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/italian-coronavirus-cas-es-wn-10-times-higher-than-offi-cial-tally/index
3. www.who.int/gph/publ/out- door_air_pollution/burden_text/en/
11. www.njmij.org/boll/hil.1056/NE/Mai/96710114

ANA V. DIEZ ROUX is the Dean of the Dornsife School of Public Health, at Drexel University, Philadelphia.
It might be asked: when is the perpetually postponed reckoning coming due? The answer is that it has been coming due for decades, with the steady worsening of working and living conditions of the world’s wage workers, allowing for the concentration of wealth—real and fictitious—in a diminishing percentage of hands, despite a stagnant economy.

little New Zealands of billionaires amidst a sea of growing impoverishment.

In reality—and this is the second aspect of the crisis, nearly hidden from view by the sudden check to economic activity in response to the medical catastrophe—an economic recession was well on the way before the coronavirus tipped us over the edge. During the last quarter of 2019 Japan’s GDP slumped by 6.3% to a growth rate of -1.6%, while Germany’s GDP growth (and this is the world’s fourth-largest economy) fell to zero. Europe as a whole claimed 1.1% growth in 2019. Among the economically stronger countries, China’s growth rate of 6% was the lowest in 30 years, and US GDP, with flat growth in the last quarter, increased by only 2.3% in 2019, the lowest since 2016, and economists were expecting a fall to below 2% in 2020.1

What made such developments especially meaningful was the fact that the debt load of non-financial companies had reached an all-time high by the end of 2019, attesting to their failure to generate profits sufficient for their needs. And 51% of bonds issued that year were classified as BBB, the lowest rating, 25% were junk bonds, unraveled because below investment grade.2 Global finance has increased since the 1980s to four times the value of world production; China’s corporate debt alone grew to $2 trillion.3 In the United States, against the backdrop of decades-long access to cheap money, non-financial corporations have seen their debt burdens more than double from $1.2 trillion in 2007 to $6.6 trillion in 2019.4 Many firms turned from public ownership to private equity to avoid financial regulation; today private equity firms have debts equal to 600% of those firms’ annual earnings. The result is a global economy spectacularly threatened by any freezing up of credit—such as that happening in response to the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, inequality reigns among corporations as it does in society at large. The top 10% (in terms of revenue) of non-financial corporations have led in downsizing while increasing shareholder wealth; the bottom 90%, facing stiffer competition than the big firms, still need capital investment to stay in business while satisfying their shareholders.5 This result is large numbers of “zombie” firms, with low or negative profits, maintaining a simulacrum of life thanks to constant infusions of debt via the junk bond market.7 “Zombies now account for 16 percent of all the publicly traded companies in the United States, and more than 10 percent in Europe, according to the Bank for International Settlements, the bank for central banks.”8 These firms face extinction as credit dries up or becomes expensive.

This row of dominoes was not set up in a single year, or in four years. The recession of the early 1970s brought an end to the 30 years of post-war prosperity that had seemed to promise a henceforth crisis-free economy. Since then, through the ups and downs of the business cycle, each recovery has been weaker, and rates of investment in plant and equipment declined. It was this that led to the steady increase of debt, which had tripled by the eve of the collapse of 2008, to keep the world economy growing after 1980. Central banks responded to the Great Recession with an especially large flood of newly-created money, to replace the debt vaporized in the crash. This easy money went, however, not into an expansion of production—in fact, large firms increasingly downsized—but into buying stocks, bonds, and other speculative assets.

Government borrowing grew alongside private debt, in efforts to contain the damage done by recurrent recessions and financial crises. The inability of the economy to grow as a productive mechanism did not, however, inspire governments to step into the workbooks left empty by the private sector, with infrastructure projects, say, or the expansion of health-care facilities or low-income housing. Instead, government money flowed through financial institutions to corporations which recycled it, via stock buybacks and acquisitions, into fortifying the income and wealth of their owners.

Though the stock and bond values vaporized by the onset of crashes like the present one can be replenished by central banks, what keeps capitalist society going over time is the steady production of goods and services that can be sold to yield profits reinvested in plant, equipment, and labor able to generate yet more value and profit. Financial instruments represent claims on the profits of future production; for those claims to be realized, goods must be produced and sold. That investors understand this on some level, however much they may believe in the magic of creative finance, shows in the collapse of the stock and bond markets in response to the economic freeze.

It might be asked: when is the perpetually postponed reckoning coming due? The answer is that it has been coming due for decades, with the steady worsening of working and living conditions of the world’s wage workers, allowing for the concentration of wealth—real and fictitious—in a diminishing percentage of hands, despite a stagnant economy.

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It might be asked: when is the perpetually postponed reckoning coming due? The answer is that it has been coming due for decades, with the steady worsening of working and living conditions of the world’s wage workers, allowing for the concentration of wealth—real and fictitious—in a diminishing percentage of hands, despite a stagnant economy.

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Marseilles, France, workers at a McDonald’s restaurant took this step by occupying the premises—of course, against the protests of the company—to prepare meals for local people, using supplies donated by shopkeepers, residents, and food banks.\(^{11}\)

The shutdown of business as usual had other positive effects: blue skies over Beijing; dolphins in the canals of Venice; a relatively traffic- and smog-free Los Angeles. Due to the decrease of pollutants usually produced by various industries, many thousands of lives statistically doomed to what is called “premature death” have already been saved. According to the World Health Organization, “Air pollution kills an estimated seven million people worldwide every year.”\(^{11}\) Within China alone, calculates Marshall Burke, a professor in Stanford’s Earth-system science department, “a pandemic-related reduction in particulate matter in the atmosphere—the deadliest form of air pollution—likely saved the lives of 4,000 young children and 73,000 elderly adults . . . over two months this year.”\(^{11}\)

The businesspeople and policymakers dreaming of a swift revival of the economy once the medical emergency has come under control no doubt do not specifically regret the longer lives of Chinese and other children. In the weird, upside-down world of economic theory, such matters can be considered unimportant, in terms of dollars and cents: Economist Michael Greenstone of the University of Chicago has calculated—on the basis of EPA estimates of the monetary value of life—‘‘that the economic breakdown is deep and long enough people may be inspired or even forced to invent new social arrangements for meeting the requirements of existence, when waged labor has become hard to come by. After all, even if jobs are scarce, work still needs to be done, and the resources to do it with still exist.” Without the pressure of wealth preservation and profitability, decisions favoring the survival of humanity rather than that of corporate capital might get the upper hand. Perhaps a lasting disruption of business as usual will open ways to considering the long-term welfare of humanity even while people fight for day-to-day survival.

The workplace actions that have responded to the sudden shock of societal semi-collapse and the incompetence demonstrated by those who currently dominate social decision-making demonstrate people’s capacity to grasp when their lives are in danger and to understand the weapons at hand for defending them. Whatever their views on the forthcoming presidential election, those GE workers understood clearly the importance of turning their skills to the building of ventilators. If, as seems likely, the slow-moving depression we have gotten used to calling a stagnant economy speeds up and deepens even as the medical emergency comes under control, such experiences can provide the basis for further-reaching responses to the social crisis that lies ahead.

April 13, 2020

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5. Ibid.  
A Disaster Foretold

BY PAVLOS ROUFOS

This article would not have been possible without the tremendous help of a number of people and groups to whom I met and discussed in Athens and Lesvos, shortly before the lockdowns were initiated. I cannot thank them enough. But I do wish to offer my deepest gratitude and respect to M.P., a legal counselor on international protection status, and Artemis, who has spent the last four years working with unaccompanied minors in the Moria camp, not only for their help and comments but, above all, for the incredible work they have done all this time at the frontline. All mistakes remain, of course, mine.

When the Greek Government Council of National Security declared that it would be closing down its borders with Turkey on March 3, 2020, the language used nothing short of one announcing a military operation. A representative of the government claimed that “sudden, massive, organized, and coordinated pressure” on Greece’s borders necessitated such a response, adding that the country was facing an “asymmetrical threat.” This militarized escalation came two days after President Erdogan announced that Turkey would “open its borders to Europe” to ease the burden of a new “wave of people fleeing war-torn Syria.”

Leaving aside the ease with which officials adopted the monstrosity of describing migrants/refugees as an “invasion” force, a form of discourse monopolized until recently by the extreme right, a parallel observation is warranted: there was nothing sudden about what happened in March 2020. What came into the open during those days was, instead, an entirely expected and consistently predicted consequence of a situation that has been building up for at least five years. The pretence that this was an unexpected served only as a pathetic attempt to deny this simple reality, and as a diversion from the inevitable conclusion that the migration policies of the last five years make such events unavoidable. Contrary to the underlying principle that appears to guide decision-making in today’s capitalist world, delaying the inevitable is not a strategy for avoiding it altogether.

Fragments of a “migration policy”

In tandem with the logic of the wider organization of global capital, the situation of migrants/refugees corresponds to what Mike Davis recently described as an ongoing “triage” whereby significant parts of the world population are effectively made invisible and written off.

In tandem with the logic of the wider organization of global capital, the situation of migrants/refugees corresponds to what Mike Davis recently described as an ongoing “triage” whereby significant parts of the world population are effectively made invisible and written off.

And settle it did. From the end of 2015, a gradual but unmistakable doubling down on the trusted strategy of externalization kicked in, with the small variation that circumstances now demanded that the geographical position of the “transit” countries paid to keep migrants/refugees away from the EU would be considerably closer. This very relocation made the Greece-Turkey border the “interface” between the “inner and outer rings” of the EU’s policy of externalization.

As in 2015, the epicenter of the crisis of March 2020 was situated on the Greek islands closest to Turkey (with Lesvos and Chios in prominent positions), though this time around the northern mainland border line was added, a triangular pocket split between Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey, sliding all the way down to where the Evros river meets the Aegean Sea. Contrary to 2015, however, EU officials were “prepared.” Immediately situating the events within the official narrative that treats migration as a one-sided security issue, the response was an escalated militarization with the enthusiastic support of an EU that went as far as to send representatives of the European Commission to the Greek border. For those who had not gotten the memo, this select committee of bureaucrats and EU leaders made it explicit. The film propagating the EU’s response to the situation that was produced on the spot was a formidable exposition of the overall policy: a lot of talk and promises were present, but not a single migrant/refugee was anywhere to be seen.

Among the most repeated promises present was the mantra that “2015 will not be repeated.” Again, nothing new. European politicians have massaged the public for the last five years, trying to firmly embed the narrative that the summer of 2015 was nothing but a failure. Had they been speaking from the perspective of migrants/refugees, we would have no trouble agreeing; the death toll in the Mediterranean; the state-sanctioned inhumane treatment along the route and in the borders; the impromptu or permanent prison-camps with appalling conditions for children, women, and men who have committed no crime; the shocking disregard of any semblance of legal guarantees; the widespread illegal pushbacks: all of these are crimes that will remain unpunished and yet forever carved on people’s bodies and memories. But this, of course, is not what politicians want to avoid. Instead, we are being asked to internalize and accept as our own the pressure that they felt from the misanthropic corners of the extreme right, to which they felt obliged to respond by adopting its tropes.

Don’t look back

How far we have come from the days when mainstream newspapers would publish heart-breaking letters from little Syrian girls urging the world to “open its eyes,” when Greek old ladies would share their minimal provisions with refugee kids, when Lionel Messi or even the Pope himself would make a small detour from their busy schedules to visit Lesvos and celebrate its inhabitants and solidarity. Even a Nobel Peace Prize for Lesvos was thrown around as an idea at the time. In lieu of such warm-hearted spectacles, what we have today is an inability to differentiate between the language of EU officials and that of excited neo-Nazis, whose proclamations “I stand with Greece” mean that they stand behind any state that militarizes its borders, sends out vigilante patrols alongside the cops, and promises to brutalize any “intruder.”

What we have today is footage of local thugs obstructing the landing of a boat full of refugees on a small beach in Lesvos, showing a Greek man in his sixties reacting to the sight of a pregnant woman on the boat by shouting: “I didn’t get her pregnant, she
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should go back to where she came from.”

Hardly Nobel Prize material there.

After the “failure” of 2015, the reignition of the recipe of externalization found its institutionalized form in the EU-Turkey deal signed in March 2016. Focusing on the consistent aim of expelling migrants/refugees to invisible locations, the deal was enacted to make sure that “all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey.” A whole year later, Amnesty International summarized the underlying aim in simple terms:

Before even considering asylum applications on their merits, applicants are individually examined to assess whether a previous country of transit—in the case of people arriving at islands in the Aegean Sea, this means Turkey—can be considered a safe third country (i.e., can provide protection to the readmitted person) or a first country of asylum (i.e., the person has already been recognized as a refugee in question or would otherwise enjoy sufficient protection there). The aim of these changes was to enable Greek authorities to return even asylum-seekers who have, prima facie, a well-founded claim to international protection.

The EU Dublin Regulations had functioned as a means through which asylum applications were automatically transferred to the first EU country in which the migrant/refugee had arrived, a rule practically abolished in the summer of 2015 when said countries refused to register new arrivals. The EU-Turkey deal was meant to replicate the policy by shifting the “burden” (i.e., the legal obligation) away from EU countries towards Turkey. In exchange for billions of euros in the form of aid for refugees, a “liberalization” of visa applications for Turkish citizens towards Europe and an (essentially unrealistic) renewal of EU accession negotiations, the EU-Turkey deal effectively banished migrants/refugees inside Turkey, disregarding the fact that the country hardly fulfilled the legal requirements of being a “safe third country.”

Among other legal problems, which the architects of the deal knew full well, Turkey’s signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention maintained a clause of geographical limitation, allowing Turkey to offer full protection only to refugees coming from Europe. Especially for Syrians, this meant that, when not illegally imprisoned and/or deported, they would be granted the status of “temporary protection.” Aside from being a known form of undermining their living conditions in the “safe third country,” the temporary protection status effectively strips them of the possibility of applying for further protection, “as international agencies are not geared towards international protection because they are not believed to be in immediate danger and are considered to be safe under temporary protection.”

This convenient loophole was not, of course, without gaining prominence as a concept during the 1990s, when thousands were fleeing towards Europe to avoid the war in Yugoslavia, the temporary protection status was created to circumvent integration obligations and was openly geared towards facilitating repatriations. Accelerated during the Kosovo War in the end of the 1990s, the approach was hugely accelerated in 2001. In an attempt at shielding an “indefinite temporary residency” for millions, but in the context of “migration management,” it was declared a success and institutionalized by the EU in 2001. By 2014, the UNHCR itself would describe it as a “pragmatic tool.”

One of the other sides of the EU-Turkey deal stood the transformation of reception centers along Greece’s islands into closed internment camps, the euphemistically called “hotspots.” By closing the borders along the Balkan route, and thus making it extremely difficult (though not impossible) for migrants/refugees to continue towards northern Europe, the primary aim of the new arrangement was to expedite the process of returning Syrian migrants/refugees to Turkey (without considering the merits of their individual cases). Unless recognized as belonging to a vulnerable group (unaccompanied minors, single parents with children, elderly, traumatized, or people with serious health care issues), which would take place for family reunification (with a member of their close family, residing under protection status in another European country), the deal was meant to speed up a process of declaring inadmissibility decisions while avoiding the dangerous legal territory of mass expulsions. Initially applying exclusively to Syrians, but expanded in June 2016 to include all nationalities through the use of a pre-existing bilateral readmission protocol, there is perhaps no better example of a legal requirement (the deals’ major objectives) that the EU “reception and identification” detention centers, where a first screening would be performed and their main data collected. In accordance with UNHCR practices, a further selective process would determine a “vulnerability status,” as well as those eligible for the family reunification provision. Those who received a “vulnerable” status would either remain in the camps or be transferred to the Greek mainland where, depending on a variety of other bureaucratic hurdles, they would either be sent to a different camp or would be housed under the UN Emergency Support for Integration and Accommodation (ESITA) program. The asylum applications, originally submitted in peripheral units of the Asylum Service, would eventually be handled by the Greek Asylum Service (GAS), whose directives to conform with the EU-Turkey deal was obstructed by the fact that from 2016 until the end of 2019 the majority of migrants/refugees were recognized as belonging to a vulnerable category. In response, and more forcefully from 2018 onwards, a consistent attempt is made by the Syriza government to exclude PTSD from the vulnerability criteria, a process culminating in the 2020 decision by New Democracy to entirely overtop the exemption from forced return that vulnerability status ensured.

Until these changes were implemented, and for those who fell short of this exemption, the so-called “border procedure” would be initiated, again handled by GAS but with the assistance of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and tasked with determining admissibility status. Once again, in accordance with the spirit of the EU-Turkey deal, and by establishing procedures that received tremendous criticism from human rights organizations, first instance decisions were overwhelmingly negative.

Nonetheless, and considering that an unavoidable element of legal procedures that deserve the name necessitates a second instance ruling, the rejected cases from both GAS and EASO would be examined by the so-called “Backlog Committee.”

Established to clear the backlog of cases that the previous asylum system (managed by the “Aliens Division” of the police) had left pending, the composition of these three-person committees included one member recommended by the UNHCR and another from the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR). Not without irony, it was the EU itself that had forced the creation of these Appeals Committees back in 2010, in light of the fact that until that moment, the process of appeal carried an administrative cost that burdened the applicant, a profoundly illegal and shameful practice.

Not dominated by state officials who were expected to implement government/EU policy, and with the necessary legal knowledge and experience to follow the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Backlog Committees managed to throw a cog into the wheel of the EU-Turkey deal simply by following the letter of the law (case-by-case examination and careful examination of the legal issues) and not its spirit (mass returns). Of the 393 decisions that the Backlog Committees issued, 390 rejected the first instance inadmissibility decisions, in 2016, as directly challenging the notion that Turkey is a “safe third country.” The Syriza government responded by initially slandering the committees and eventually transferring jurisdiction to the Appeals Authority, naming the new organ “Independent Appeals Committees” to add insult to injury. Given that the composition of the new committees gave a majority vote to the two state-appointed judges, a complete reversal of the admissibility decisions followed suit. Shortly after, and confident that these obstacles were overcome, Greek authorities and the EU started applying pressure to remove the vulnerability groups from exemption.

A collapsing deal

Although coined “a temporary and extraordinary measure which is necessary to end the human suffering and restore public order,” it should be clear by now that the EU-Turkey deal was neither temporary nor concerned with ending suffering. But how successful it was in its underlying aims of reducing irregular crossings and redirecting migrants/refugees to Turkey?

One look at official statistics shows that, so far, the deal has more or less failed. The total number of migrants/refugees who had been “sent back” to Turkey from March 2016 until December 2019 is barely over 2,000. The reasons are a combination of the unavoidable lengthy procedures of decision making, the chronic understaffing of the organizations responsible, together with the existence of vulnerable rights that could not be circumvented despite political pressure.

At first sight, the only real success of the deal has been the reduction of irregular crossings, which did in fact decrease in the months after the deal (having reached an overall high of 173,450 people in 2016, reaching the lowest point in 2017 (at 29,718 crossings). But these figures represent the Greek borders. In reality, the EU-Turkey deal was neither temporary nor concerned with changes in the very countries from which migrants/refugees flee. Thus, for example, the escalation of war and violence in Syria and Afghanistan in 2019 definitely played a key role, while the “deterioration of the Turkish economy in the same period (with the GDP of Turkey in inflation of the 764 kilometre-long wall along the Syria-Turkey border that was completed in 2018.

La isla bonita

When Syria lost the election of the summer of 2019 to New Democracy, the incoming government had a lot of difficult issues to wrestle with. It knew, for example, that its promises on the economic field (cutting taxes, increasing spending, and other such fairy tales) would immediately stumble against the automatic fiscal stabilizer that the austerity wave had put in place and the commitment to balanced budgets and fiscal surpluses that the eurozone continues to directly monitor despite the absence of a Memorandum of Agreement. Considering that the Syriza government had proven that it could implement austerity measures unhampered by those included in the agreements, the new administration knew better than to risk its relationship with the eurozone, especially as it was presenting itself as more pro-European than Syriza. Little by little,
the only option left for a government of the Right was to demonstrate its historical commitment to law and order. In this context, and after a ridiculous but nonetheless resilient promise to ‘clean up’ the anarchist areas of Athens’ suburbs, the most obvious topic to focus on was migration. And here, they did deliver.

One of the first laws to be passed by New Democracy in July 2019 was a circular that cut access to the Greek health system for asylum applicants. Alongside, the government announced a series of new measures geared towards the acceleration of the procedures of returning migrants/refugees to Turkey, that included a promise towards the decongestion of the border islands. As noted, numerous obstacles had prevented the proper implementation of mass returns to Turkey. Combined with the rapid increase in the number of new arrivals, the limited amount of housing provided by the UNHCR and the local communities in Greece, and the overall bureaucratic obstacles related to mainland relocations, the situation in the islands was becoming critical. In the camp of Moria alone, situated in Lesvos and designed to ‘house’ 2,600 people, the population had reached 20,000 by the end of 2019, overflowing the camp and forcing its inhabitants to set up impromptu tents in the vicinity. To a certain extent, of course, the authorities had no problem with tolerating such appalling living conditions. If anything, governments around the world make use of such conditions as deterrents for other migrants/refugees, confident that the news travels through the migrants’/refugees’ own communication networks. At the same time, however, such a high concentration of people in such conditions with malfunctioning safety valves is a ticking bomb.

Contrary to common belief, the promoted spectacle of the Willkommenskultur, visible from Munich all the way to Lesvos during the summer of 2015, mystified the fact that what we saw in those days, however remarkable it was, was not solidarity. At least not in its substantive sense. It was, in any case, a bare-knuckle beating of the authorities, as a commentator noted recently, “solidarity towards a transit population, hastily making their way through the islands and the national territory on their way to northern Europe.” Having said that, the most difficult question cannot be avoided: could it have been different? In some ways, after all, the impromptu and temporary character of the real help provided at the time corresponded to the desires of the migrants themselves. There is little doubt that when most of them embarked in that dangerous journey to avoid war, violence, and police brutality, hardly anyone considered Lesvos or Chios to be their final destination. Considering the poor state of the economy in Greece and the clear lack of infrastructural support, it is only logical that migrants/refugees would prefer to continue towards places where more (or the hope of more) opportunities existed.

By 2019, the voices of a minority of the population became rallying points, eventually producing a complete reversal of perspective under the widespread and seemingly benign slogan “save our islands,” a discourse that did a lot to erase the fact that it was migrants and refugees who faced the biggest problems.

In the aftermath of such events, a new pattern started to develop. If grievances until that point had mostly been presented as being “against policies, not people,” the spewing of hate that these fascists generated, in collaboration with local authorities, changed the atmosphere. Gradually, the fact that there was no inherent contradiction between what locals, migrants/refugees, and those in solidarity demanded (the decongestion of the camps and the increased transfers to the mainland), and even though those responsible for not meeting such demands were neither locals nor migrants/refugees, the discourse and actions of a small but effective group of fascists dominated. By 2019, the voices of a minority of the population became rallying points, eventually producing a complete reversal of perspective under the widespread and seemingly benign slogan “save our islands,” a discourse that did a lot to erase the fact that it was migrants and refugees who faced the biggest problems.

By 2019, the voices of a minority of the population became rallying points, eventually producing a complete reversal of perspective under the widespread and seemingly benign slogan “save our islands,” a discourse that did a lot to erase the fact that it was migrants and Refugees who faced the biggest problems.
The acceleration of events and of historical time forbids any speculation about how the situation will develop from now on, but existing signs are far from reassuring.

Closed prisons, open conflicts

A pivotal moment that brings us back to the March 2020 events was directly related to another part of New Democracy’s new “migration policy,” i.e. the decongestion of existing camps by creating new closed ones. Taking their cue from the way a Syriza minister had justified the suggestion some years before, the proclaimed “benefits” of such facilities was that it allowed for closer surveillance and disciplining of the migrants before, during, and after their asylum cases have been examined. But if Syriza had refrained from implementing such plans, New Democracy now felt forced to proceed. Among other considerations, they were guided by the assumption that their “law and order” approach and their supposed swift “solutions” to the question of migration enjoyed wide support from the local population, which had just voted for the local governments and therefore, with the new prisoners (the main slogans were “no prisons here on the island or elsewhere”) through the rejection of imprisonment itself, the actual composition of those who participated transformed this somewhat abstract call into something scarily more concrete, that landed squarely from their boats in a military parade in full gear) did nothing to strengthen any sense of those who participated transformed this somewhat new-imagined sense of community: migrants/refugees and those who help them.

The worst month ever

Erdogan’s announcement of opening the borders, and the militarized response of Greece/EU, came a few days after this “victory.” The overall climate could not have been worse: feeling as protagonists (instead of ignored, as was the expressed sentiment), a significant part of the local population hungrily ingested and repurposed the combination of a nationalist revival against Turkey that enjoyed the full backing of the EU and a new sense of purpose which fused the “save our islands” rhetoric with the “defense of Europe’s borders.” Any potential of joining forces with migrants/refugees who did, after all, also request their evacuation from the hurdled camps, disappeared. Instead, large swaths of the local population in Lesbos and Chios resorted to the exact opposite: setting up roadblocks across the islands, stopping and terrorizing any migrants who dared leave their camps, assaulting and beating NGO members. And they did so with the open participation and support of the local authorities, who often provided municipal vehicles to form barricades and policemen to man them. Around Evros, the situation escalated more. There, local vigilantes from “hunters” associations and other fascist elements created patrols who took it upon themselves to supplement (or, quite often, take the place of) official military deployments to “guard the borders from the invasion.” Golden Dawn members recognized the potential and hurried to show their support, a form of solidarity quickly picked up by European Nazis who organized (mainly) propaganda excursions on “Europe’s borders.”

The acceleration of events and of historical time forbids any speculation about how the situation will develop from now on, but existing signs are far from reassuring.
from the minimal benefits migrants/refugees receive from the UNHCR.


4. Sonja Buelck, ibid.

5. Of the three traps concerned the oft-pe- pealed claim that, during the March 2020 crisis, migrants/refugees were “used as pawns for geopolitical games”—a seem- ingly descriptive comment that was even meant as a critique of the powers that be, and therefore was almost always de- signed on the left too. Deprived of their agency, the horrific reality of the movement of migrants/refugees in Turkey gets side-lined, while their constant attempts to escape this hell (in increasing numbers since last year) are also disregarded. What remains is an image of passive subjects whose faces depend entirely on the decisions of the various stakeholders who gamble with lives, unable to think, decide or move on their own.

6. It is possible to trace the intellectual inspiration for the EU-Turkish deal in a forgotten suggestion by the Slovenian government in early 2016 to make “an amendment to the new International Protection Act [that] would declare all asylum applications automatically inadmissible if the applicant had entered Slovenia through any other EU country.” Given that Slovenia only borders with EU members, the amendment would automatically make all applications inadmissible. (Bodo Weber, “The EU-Turkey Refugee Deal and the Not Quite Closed Balkan Route,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2017, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/buero/sanjuro/113436.pdf).


9. “To bypass this challenge, the European Commission (2016a) released an official Communication that allows a so-called ‘Communication of EASO caseworkers conducting interviews, as well as their understanding of procedures.’ The RC, the IRC, and Oxfam received reports and saw transcripts from interviews illustrating that caseworkers lacked the necessary understanding of asylum procedures, the basics of the armed conflict in Syria, and the political dynamics in Turkey to assess a claim for international protection or recognize a well-founded fear of being returned. Due to this lack of understanding, as one lawyer put it: ‘the minute an applicant undergoing an admissibility interview utter a word about Syria, they are stopped by the caseworker and told that the interview has nothing to do with Syria, even if in fact it does.’ We also received reports of translations that were evidently wrong.” International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Oxfam, “‘The Reality of the EU-Turkey Statement,’” Joint Agency Briefing Note, March 17, 2017, https://oci-files-filesystem.s3-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3/files-public/bn-eu-turkey-statement-migration-170317-en.pdf.14.

10. “According to an EU source, the first decision by the backlog committees that said Turkey is not a safe country created a major upset in Brussels and in other EU capitals, prompting fears that the EU-Turkey deal could unravel. ‘They are seen as the enemy of the deal,’ the source added.” Estier Zalan, “EU pushes Greece to set up new asylum committees,” EU Observer, June 15, 2016, https://euobserver.com/migration/133841.


13. “The power to declare a threat to ‘public order and security’ and suspend the right to asylum for six months by denying asylum-seekers entry and automatically expelling those who entered irregularly.” Weber ibid.

14. Similar events in the past demonstrate the danger. “In November 2018, a protest escalated (in Bulgaria) into what was the most serious riot so far, resulting in a massive, violent police intervention and the detention of 400 asylum-seekers. The protest was prompted by a decision by the State Agency for Refugees to impose a quarantine on the camp because of the alleged spread of an epidemic, even though Bulgaria’s Chief Health Inspector categorically denied the rumor as unfounded. Domestic human rights observers claimed that the protest was instigated by right-wing groups spreading the rumor. Nevertheless, the government decided to turn several camps into closed ones, thus risking violation of international and EU law that sets very strict conditions for detaining asylum seekers.” Weber ibid.


17. PAVLOS ROUFSOS lives and writes in Berlin. His book A Happy Future is a Thing of the Past was published by Reaktion Books last year in the Field Notes series.
Viral Biopolitics: COVID-19 and the Living Dead

BY RACHEL NELSON

As soon as power gave itself the function of administering life, its reason for being and the logic of its exercise—and not the awakening of humanitarian feelings—made it more difficult to apply the death penalty. How could power exercise its highest prerogatives by putting people to death, when its main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order? For such a power, execution was at the same time a limit, a scandal, and a contradiction. Hence capital punishment could not be maintained except by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others. –Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1976).

It seems likely that we will come to see in the next year a painful scenario in which some human creatures assert their rights to live at the expense of others, re-inscribing the spurious distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, that is, those who should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death.

—Judith Butler, "Capitalism has its Limits."

A letter from Tim Young, written in late March from San Quentin State Prison’s death row details his fears of the spread of COVID-19. According to Tim, one of the people in an adjacent cell was recently given a long swab through the meal tray slot on his cell door and told to insert it up his nostril. He was also instructed to do a throat swab. The next day, the man was taken to the Hole for quarantine—for the flu, according to the staff.

Tim writes that dozens of people in his unit have been similarly tested and quarantined, all diagnosed with the flu. In the letter, Tim’s frustration and fear is palpable. He writes about staff handling his food trays without gloves and sneezing and coughing as they walk along the walkway, stopping at each cell to unlock the slot in the door and push the food through the narrow spaces. The flu diagnoses and the cavalier attitudes of the staff towards hygiene have left Tim oscillating between concerns about the inadequacy of medical care in San Quentin and possible cover-ups. While, Tim explains, he is filing a legal request/complaint to be provided masks and gloves, and to require staff to wear them, the pervasive sense in his letter is that anything he does will be futile. This is most apparent when at the end of the letter he writes, “I feel like they are actually trying to spread the virus to us … it would be a solution on death row, after all.”

The coronavirus pandemic places in stark relief the complicated relationship, in the United States and globally, between the state and public health. The current conditions of what Michel Foucault named biopower—the exercise of power through “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life”—is called into question in the US as hospitals run out of ventilators and protective gear for their workers and as mass unemployment sweeps the nation, leaving people unsure of how they are going to keep feeding themselves and their families, or whether they will have housing in which to shelter-in-place. If power is, as Foucault defines it, the ability to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death,” what happens within the relationships of power and biological life when death runs rampant?
In modernity—roughly, since the 18th century—as power begins to operate through the management of life, capital punishment took on a different role. Foucault points out a seeming paradox: the death penalty exerts its highest prerogatives by putting people to death, when its main role was to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put life in order.”

The iniquity is resolved as execution becomes a social sorting mechanism. As Foucault explains, the death penalty comes to invoke “less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrousity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others.”

Tim’s letter is a stark reminder that, even without a pandemic, death row has an uneasy relationship to bio-power.

This is the real paradox; the death penalty provides the answer for how power can hold authority without an ever-present threat of death. People now adhere to the workings of power thanks to more nuanced methods of coercion. This is the key to the most essential aspect of bio-power. When power becomes management—the ordering of life—it is exercised through the production of classifications that come to feel natural to people. Those condemned to death are the subjects of the ultimate classification within this system; they are those who are so monstrous they must die, even if their death is deferred. They serve as the end limit to all other classifications.

With death row’s death penalty has served power in the US, and I believe it an apt description, the question returns: Within emergent viral biopolitics, how is death row being repositioned—made, as Tim fears, another solution—with the changing relations of power and biological life? What roles will the living dead, those made monsters and left to molder in modernity’s cages, play as the end limits of the social order necessarily adjust to a pandemic? Tim details the odd perversities of this shifting ordering. Although the governor of California issued a statewide shelter-in-place order on March 19, until March 27, when Tim and hundreds of others on death row received notice that a guard had tested positive for COVID-19, they were still given the option to go to the yard each day. When he describes the process of how people are taken to the yard, Tim moves into writing in third person as he explains why he has been choosing to stay in his cell for 24 hours a day and forgo going outside.

The protocol for yard release is as follows. The officer unlocks the tray slot, and instructs the prisoner to strip completely naked. They have the prisoner open his mouth, stick out his tongue, and instructs him to wipe his hands with a hand towel after that, lift up his genitals. They instruct the prisoner to turn around, show the bottom of each foot, and then squat and cough. After the strip search, the prisoner is instructed to run his fingers through any clothing or items that they are wearing or taking to the yard. The officers do a manual search of the prisoner’s property. After the inspection they return the prisoner’s property back through the tray slot and instruct the prisoner to get dressed. Once the prisoner is dressed he is handcuffed through the tray slot. At that point the cell door is opened. The prisoner is physically escorted downstairs to where he is met by a hand-held metal detector, and his belongings are trolled through an x-ray machine.

Tim notes that neither the guards nor the people being searched wear gloves or masks as they repeat this ritual of debasement. In a time of social distancing, the intimacy is shocking—all that touching. With both the staff and the people on death row unglowed and unmasked as clothing is taken off, passed back and forth, and put back on, the people who talk about COVID-19 as the great equalizer come to mind. No one, in Tim’s letter, seems safe from the pandemic, regardless of who is clothed and who is made to squat and cough.

When Tim details the procedure that would allow him to leave his 10 x 4½ foot cell, however, he makes it clear that there is nothing equal about the spread of the coronavirus in San Quentin. As he explains, visitation has been cancelled for weeks, and it is only through contact with the staff that the virus could wreak its havoc on the lockdown unit. This means the elaborate performance of safety, with the strip search enacted through a slot in the cell door, the handcuffs, and even the final extra step of the metal detectors, is a charade of security. The ritual of contact actually fosters the spread of the virus from staff member to prisoner, staff member to prisoner, all the way down the long metal walkway of his 54-person tier and through the 540-person unit. Who is safe from whom?

In the time of COVID-19, what Tim recounts is not the procedures of security made ridiculous, or obsolete. It is, rather, the viral remaking of the death penalty. The intrusive measures ensure that death row and its inhabitants are not immune from the pandemic. With each strip search—a true enactment of biological inscrutability—they are instead centered within it, made probable carriers of the virus. If the death penalty delineates those at the end limits of the system supposedly served by the care and maintenance of life, the seemingly inept technologies of power that Tim describes ensures that those end limits are still operational within viral biopolitics. As the maximal variance within the social order, Tim and the other 736 people on California’s death row continue to make more palatable the vast inequities of that ordering, including normalizing who lives and who dies within the pandemic.

The emergent viral biopolitics encapsulated in Tim’s letter might be a solution. In 2003 Achille Mbembe challenged Foucault’s idea that the maintenance of life is central to modern biopolitics by pointing to power’s propensity for killing and maiming. “This could be seen in European colonial projects and slavery in the United States, and in “the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective.” Mbembe argued that the maintenance of life is certainly not always the object of power. Instead, “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”

While this seemed a vital revision of Foucault’s ideas at the beginning of the 21st century, the pandemic now brings into question the first part of Mbembe’s definition of bio-power. The ability to “dictate who may live and who must die” becomes more and more fraught. As death is rampant, with bodies piling up in morgues and hospitals, social and political structures all around us are being revealed to be incapable not only of the maintenance and care of life but even of the ability to allow persons to live—the “letting live” at the crux of bio-power in all its forms. The US healthcare system is crumbling, with insufficient beds, respirators, and testing capacity. Millions and millions of people file for unemployment each week. And the estimated 55,000 people who are unhomed remain unable to shelter-in-place. The government is not “dictating” life in these conditions. COVID-19 reveals that all that is left in the US of technologies of power that once could either “make live or let die” or prescribe “who may live and who must die” is social ordering—the ability to make sense out of the lives and deaths in a pandemic. In emergent viral biopolitics, whether by design or through the crudest of necessity, the state maintains life, something the coronavirus has not caused but instead reveals. The maintenance of life falls now entirely within the realm of economics, decided by capital’s investment decisions; the socio-political serves primarily to demarcate those who can die without social remorse. And, with more and more statistics revealing the racialized and class paradigms in which is dying in the US, the system is hard at work.

In late March, Judith Butler warned that the coronavirus was sure to be another opportunity for “re-inscribing the spurious distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, that is, those who should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death.”

Those who are already the living dead—who can already be made dead within the social imaginary—are an obvious place to start. The emergent viral biopolitics that takes weeks for guards in San Quentin to be supplied with masks and gloves.
By the beginning of April, after Tim had spent 27 days without the yard or visitation and an uninterrupted 648 hours in his tiny cell, his hesitation to talk on the phone came up in a letter.⁴³ Tim prefers writing letters to talking with his friends in San Quentin, which he finds always frustrating. He has to first sign up for a time slot. Once his day and time come up, a guard wheels an ancient phone booth to his cell and passes the receiver through the slot in the door. The call is processed by GTL, a private corporation and “Corrections Innovations Leader,” and the system makes it difficult and costly to accept his collect call.⁴⁴ When calls do get through, Tim has 15 minutes to have a conversation that is closely monitored. An automated message breaks through the call every few minutes to explain the monitoring process, and the person doing the monitoring will sometimes end the call randomly. The bars of the prison never recede very far during these brief and fragmented conversations.

With the severe social distancing that Tim is now subjected to, however, phone calls are a necessity. Mail service is more disrupted in San Quentin by the day, letters are taking longer and are sometimes lost, and the isolation is extreme. But now the phone has become perilous. As Tim explains, next to contact with staff, the phone is sure to be the biggest conduit of the virus.

“The phone is not being cleaned and sterilized between uses,” Tim writes. “I would guess it never has been really cleaned, in all the years it’s been pushed around the prison. And, we aren’t being given gloves to handle it with. Instead, they have a towel attached to it now. We are supposed to use the towel to wipe the receiver before we use it.” Tim continues, “I have no intentions of touching that shared towel.”⁴⁵ He has instead come up with his own method to clean the phone and a plan to avoid touching it with his bare hands. He also has a makeshift mask to wear when he uses the phone. Meanwhile, the towel hangs off the phone as a warning—or a message in code. What it is saying is that it does not matter if Tim touches the towel. All through this terrorized passage to Tim, no one needs to die on death row from COVID-19. Tim and the rest of the living dead are already playing their role within emergent viral biopolitics. Those squatting and coughing to go into the yard, those who swipe the towel across the mouthpiece of the phone, and, even those who refuse to do this, have been remade once again as biological dangers, monsters who fall outside of structures of empathy and care. They are made to perform their monstrosity and normalize the shifting parameters of viral biopolitics.⁴⁶ In fact, maybe it is better for those who exercise power that no one on death row does die because of the coronavirus. The living dead, remember, are monsters because Tim does not mention his innocence claim in the letters he writes. Instead, his letters usually are about strategies for organizing against the death penalty. Tim well knows that the position he inhabits—a monster who will not die—is necessary to power in a time in which socio-political systems are no longer in place to maintain lives. So Tim, in what he calls his “coffin-like cell,” is made to both embody and hide the workings of emergent US biopolitics.⁴⁷ This is a horrific position even outside the daily threat of life and death confinement. To be the one who acts as the end limit of society’s ability to care is to be the proxy through which huge swatches of the population are made to join Tim as the dead.⁴⁸ Tim has been forced to figure within all of this suffering.⁴⁹ His small cell is now the biggest conduit of the virus.

When Tim organizes against the death penalty instead of around his own claims, this is not selflessness. It is instead an acknowledgment that against the potency of this power, even those deemed innocent within this system are still subject to its sorting. This means that what is required now is not organizing on any one person’s behalf. Instead, as Tim demonstrates, we must act on behalf of all whose lives will not be maintained by power, even as the deaths will certainly be made instrumental. We must fight back against both the impending waves of death and also resist the reanimation of the living dead.

1. Since August 2019, I have been corresponding with Tim Young, who has been on death row in San Quentin since 2006, as part of an art project by Jackie Sumell called Solitary Garden. Tim is a prolific writer and is very much my writing partner on this essay, which could not have been conceived without him. Many of Tim’s letters and essays can be read at https://ias.uchicago.edu/ timothyjamesyoung. Tim Young, “Letter to Rachel Nelson,” March 23, 2020. See also Tim’s recent essay: “Tim Young, Coronavirus: The Invisible Enemy Behind Enemy Lines,” SF Bay View National Black Newspaper, April 2020. https://sfbayview. com/2020/04/coronavirus-the-invis-ible-enemy-behind-enemy-lines/ 2. What Tim calls the “Holocaust” is officially named the Adjustment Center (AC). It is the highest security unit in San Quentin and typically used to house people who have been found or alleged to have broken the rules of the institution. Tim Young, “Letter to Rachel Nelson,” April 2, 2020. 3. Tim Young, “Letter to Rachel Nelson,” March 23, 2020. 4. Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 140. 5. Ibid. 6. In an article written at the very first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Italy, Agamben characterized the exercise implemented on the COVID-19 pandemic as an exercise in the biopolitics of the “state of exception.” In an argument that was both political and dangerous as more and more people succumbed to the virus, Agamben wrote that the “invention of an epistemology should follow the ideal pretext” for further limitations to basic freedoms. Recognizing that dehistoricizing the problematic framework of the argument, that question about the biopolitical regime emerging in response to the coronavirus did warrant attention, the European Journal of Psychoanalysis put together a special section on “Coronavirus and philosophers” with a translation of Agamben’s polemic and the responses to it (February-March, 2020): http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/ coronavirus-and-philosophers/ 7. See also Panagiotis Sotiris’s (now unbriefed, and rebuttal, of Agamben’s writings on COVID-19, which includes some examples of biopolitics within this current state of exception. Panagiotis Sotiris, “Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?”, Viewpoint Magazine, March 20, 2020 https://www.viewpointmag. com/2020/03/20/against-agamben- democratic-biopolitics/. 8. Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76 (New York: Picador, 2003).

9. As I will discuss below, this is related to what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics, the form of biopolitics born of colonization and slavery that assigns this authority from “the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” There is a difference, however, that will be discussed subsequently. Achille Mbembe “Sapirism,” Transil. Libris Magazines. Public Culture 15, 1 Winter 2003: 11-40.


13. Ibid.

14. It is imperative to note that in the lectures he gives towards the end of his life, Foucault names racism as another technology aimed at permitting the “sovereign right of death.” And, this is an interlocking point. In the US, not only are people of color disproportionately incarcerated, studies spanning more than 30 years covering virtually every type of crime that uses capital punishment have found that race is a significant factor in death penalty cases.


16. Politicians and people insulated by wealth, including NY governor Andrew M. Cuomo, have been seemingly impressed that celebrities, wealthy people, and politicians of different races and ethnicities—including elite White people—also contract the virus, leading some to call it the great equalizer. Of course, access to medical care and the ability to socially distance is clearly unequal, with employed poor people and people of color largely working as “essential workers” in food service, transportation, etc., with vastly different rates of infection and mortality: Bethany L. Jones and Jonathan S. Jones, “Gov. Cuomo is Wrong. COVID-19 is Anything but an Equalizer,” Washington Post, April 5, 2020 https://www.washingtonpost.com/ outlook/2020/04/05/gov-cuomo-is- wrong-covid-19-is-anything-an-equaliz-er/ and Akilah Johnson and Talia Buford, “Early Data Shows African Americans Have Contracted and Died of Coronavirus at an Alarming Rate,” ProPublica, April 3, 2020 https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate.


18. Mbembe 11

19. Ibid.


23. This related this process both through a letter postedmark April 2 and a phone call on April 4, Tim Young, “Letter to Rachel Nelson,” April 2, 2020.

24. Ibid.

25. The racialized history of this kind of politics of performance is key here with much that could be said about the relationship between power with people enslaved. See Saídí V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).


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MAY 2020

FIELD NOTES
Although I was first introduced to Guillermo Kuitca in New York in the early 1990s by *Lacanian Ink* editor Josefina Ayerza, whose SoHo loft served as an unofficial salon where young artists from her native Argentina made contact with the New York art world, it was only in 2019 that I finally visited the artist at his Buenos Aires studio. The reason for my long-delayed visit was a monograph I was writing on his work for Lund Humphries’s Contemporary Painters Series. The conversation we initiated in Buenos Aires amid his recent “Family Idiot” paintings (shown in May–August, 2019 at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles) were picked up again during his visit to New York last fall when we sat down to talk at the Rail’s offices. As well as asking about his paintings, old and new, and the shifting reception of Latin American art in the US, I wanted to hear about Kuitca’s curatorial collaborations with the Cartier Foundation, the latest of which was a project for the Milano Triennale. (Originally scheduled to debut in April, the Triennale was postponed to an undecided future date when the COVID-19 pandemic began to devastate Italy.)

**RAFHERALRUBINSTEIN (RAIL):** I was listening to the news this morning and heard that the Peronist Alberto Fernández has just been elected President of Argentina. This comes at a time when Argentina is in the middle of yet another economic crisis. I was wondering, from your perspective in Buenos Aires, how the endless series of economic crises has affected or shaped the Argentine art world. Audiences in the US may know something about the Argentine art world, how the endless series of economic crises has affected or shaped the Argentine art world. What do you think? Are you able to map the world. Were they in some way a response to Argentina’s economic collapse?

**KUITCA:** It was a time when it was hard to ignore geopolitical realities, and not only because of the Argentine crisis. There was also 9/11. But how art relates to the political isn’t always obvious. I often give the example of a work I did in 1989, a very large mattress with a map of Afghanistan. After 2001 that work was completely transformed by history. It became a very geopolitical statement.

**RAIL:** That happens even more dramatically with the “Luggage Carousel” paintings, which you showed on the eve of 9/11 and which took on a totally different meaning once airports became scary, sinister places. You rarely make work that’s explicitly about a historical or political subject yet your work is often interpreted that way. It’s seen as being about Argentina’s Dirty War or about the Holocaust. I’m impressed by how you accept those readings, even while you make it clear that this wasn’t your intention. It’s an admission that the artist doesn’t really control the interpretation of their work, that what happens to the work once it goes out into the world is unpredictable.

**KUITCA:** Actually, I don’t know what my work is about. There is at least one painting, *House with AIDS* (1987), which is more specific, but in general there aren’t any specific references. As for controlling the life of the work outside the studio, I understand how partial and personal it would be to impose my own interpretations. So it’s not only that I don’t reject other people’s interpretations, but also that I don’t want to impose my own. Yet, I do have a vision of what I’ve done, and a sense of what it was about. It suddenly strikes me that you and I have been talking together for a long time and we’ve discussed my work in so many different ways, yet somehow we didn’t address what it was about!

**RAIL:** It’s true. I’m aware of that. I feel that to ask you what the “House Plan” paintings, for example, are about is so reductive. For me, a lot of the power of your work comes from the fact that you’re not explicitly telling the viewer what the subject is. In some ways that’s an old-fashioned approach, a way of communicating through symbolism. You’ve said somewhere that the idea of open symbolism is something you got from looking at Pina Bausch. That makes so much sense. After all, what is a Pina Bausch dance about? What is *Cafe Müller* (1985) about? It’s about everything and nothing.

**KUITCA:** One of my first impressions with *Cafe Müller* was that it felt like it was my own work. It was a very strange kind of epiphany. It seemed to me that I disappeared as an artist and she just appeared and her work was mine. Obviously I had nothing to do with the creation of *Cafe Müller*. [Laughter] It was the kind of experience that happens when you’re 19 or 20. I don’t know if we keep that flexibility and openness as we get older. What I got at that moment was that when you don’t know what you’re doing, in a way you know everything. If you’re a painter, everything you do is specific even if’s in a vague or an accidental pictorial situation.

**RAIL:** I think your ability to be in that position of not knowing is related to the fact that over and over you’ve changed your approach to painting.

**KUITCA:** Like the cycles of economic crises [Laughter]!
I felt that I didn’t have much to add. to work, and somehow once I completed that cycle, didn’t know what I was going to do but I put myself through the years and when it’s time to do a show, I edit what I’ve done and somehow that ends up of going in a different direction means that after I am the same artist. I am doing different works “Today it’s time to change my work.” I feel that that consciously. I don’t sit in the studio and say, “Oh that could be a new body of work”? I wonder what are the events or feelings that lead up to that “okay it’s time to change” moment. Is it an accidental discovery? Do you do something in the studio and think “it’s pretty much what you said about the doors. It’s also about lack of curiosity in the old work and how curiosity leads you to something else. Though my work is quite different from a couple of years to the next, it moves in a kind of circle. Some subjects never really go away, but I don’t do that consciously. I don’t sit in the studio and say, “Today it’s time to change my work.” I feel that I am the same artist. I am doing different works but I’m not a different artist. I think the curiosity of going in a different direction means that after a certain amount of time I stop being engaged in what I was doing. I try to go as deep as I can but I can’t if there’s nothing new there. Normally I work through the years and when it’s time to do a show, I edit what I’ve done and somehow that ends up being a body of work, but it was different with the “Family Idiot” paintings. For this particular suite I didn’t know what I was going to do but I put myself to work, and somehow once I completed that cycle, I felt that I didn’t have much to add.

RAIL: If you had continued to make “Map” paintings, or “House Plan” paintings, or the “Beds,” as I’m sure lots of people would have been happy to have you do, you would’ve been in increasingly familiar territory. Instead, you close one door and open another, and suddenly you’re making a completely different kind of painting. I don’t think you consciously make those decisions but I wonder what are the events or feelings that lead up to that “okay it’s time to change” moment. Is it an accidental discovery? Do you do something in the studio and think 

RAIL: The “Family Idiot” paintings obviously reconnect with what you were doing in the early 1980s, like those vast theater stages in the “El Mar Dulce” series. In both “The Family Idiot” and “El Mar Dulce” you rely on illusionistic space, which is so different from the diagrammatic space of the “Maps” and “House Plans.” It’s rare to see you look backwards. You’re always starting anew.

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RAIL: I wonder if when you were working on the “Family Idiot” paintings you were thinking about how they would look in Hauser and Wirth’s Los Angeles gallery?

KUITCA: I knew that the space was quite monumental, that the walls were very big, so I decided not to try to compete with the space and go with smaller sizes, and activate the scale. That happens in my paintings all the time, small things in large vast spaces. That was probably the only decision that was made, to reduce the size of the work.

RAIL: The “Family Idiot” paintings obviously reconnect with what you were doing in the early 1980s, like those vast theater stages in the “El Mar Dulce” series. In both “The Family Idiot” and “El Mar Dulce” you rely on illusionistic space, which is so different from the diagrammatic space of the “Maps” and “House Plans.” It’s rare to see you look backwards. You’re always starting anew.

KUITCA: I didn’t plan to go back. It’s in a forward that I’ve found connections to the past. These are new paintings, completely affected by the experience of the “Cubistoid” works I began in 2007 as well as the diagrammatic paintings of the 1990s and 2000s. The spaces constructed in these new paintings happened in a more organic way than the paintings from the 1980s where I was working with figures and dramatic situations. These spaces are a lot more angular and less prop-y, less simple.

RAIL: Maybe because there’s no necessary limitation to the Cubistoid paintings. A map is of a specific area, either small or large, and a house plan or a theater seating chart is that space and nothing else. It has limits and boundaries. In the Cubistoid paintings there’s no inherent, intrinsic stopping point. I love that you describe them as viral.

KUITCA: Because I basically couldn’t stop. Painting murals, you get very conscious of accidents in a room, like when the wall turns or folds. Angles were fine but folds weren’t. Whenever I get to an architectural detail that would make the painting look like wallpaper, or something that is wrapped, I’ll stop. I once tried to sort of camouflage some of the electrical sockets or switches for fans and it didn’t work. In this paradoxical way, camouflage makes things more visible than when you ignore them.
All those little gestures in rooms were the echo of the limitations I had with the architectural plans.

RAIL: So no trompe l’oeil effects. You want us to be aware that we’re in a room surrounded by solid walls with paint on them.

KUITCA: Yes. I also like that the work only exists in one place and can’t travel. I’d like to continue to do murals, maybe on a different scale, and more public.

RAIL: Murals also resist the camera, resist photography. It’s easy to have the illusion when you look at the photograph of a painting, even on your phone, that you’re somehow seeing the painting. But in the photograph of a mural, you always know you’re only getting a very partial, limited sense of the experience. Staying with the Cubist/Sr. paintings, you once mused that they could have been painted by some obscure early 20th century Latin American Cubist. I think you imagined an artist like Alfredo Hlito, even though wasn’t a Cubist. There’s a great Hlito from the Cisneros Collection in the new MoMA. I remember you saying to me in Buenos Aires that you didn’t have a chance to see much Argentinian modernist painting when you were growing up.

KUITCA: Yes, those works didn’t become visible until maybe 25 years ago. The only Latin American modernist art I might have seen was some Brazilian Neo-Concrete work. When I was 16 or 17 my mother took me on a vacation to Rio de Janeiro, which was a popular destination for Argentinians at the time because of the currency exchange rate. We happened to go to the Museum of Modern Art at the time because of the currency exchange rate. We happened to go to the Museum of Modern Art there. This was before the big fire that destroyed most of the collection. I have the very strong impression of seeing some Neo-Concrete art. But I didn’t see anything Argentinian. When I met Hlito in the late ’70s he was doing a very different kind of painting. I was very, very young, but I was able to visit him in the studio. I hadn’t seen the concrete works he’d done in the ’30s. It’s only more recently that avant-gardes in Argentina started to be recognized. When I was a young artist there was not much of a ground, not really a past. We weren’t working on the shoulders of anyone. It was kind of a wasteland. Of course, there were some masters that I had happened to see in galleries, but those were more expressionistic paintings from the ’60s.

RAIL: Like Jorge de la Vega?

KUITCA: Yes, like de la Vega, who was so good! By that time de la Vega was probably dead. But as for the Argentinian concrete work, it was something that only became part of my history when my history was already written.

RAIL: ‘This raises another question about your identity as an artist from Latin America. When you first started showing outside of Argentina, first started showing the United States, in the second half of the ’80s...

KUITCA: No, it was actually later, almost 1989.

RAIL: I don’t mean solo shows but group shows. In 1987 you were included in The Art of the Fantastic. KUITCA: Yeah, that’s right.

RAIL: At the time you and other artists like Julio Galán, who was also in The Art of the Fantastic, were categorized under the theme of magical realism. This supposedly was the only way a US audience could view a Latin American artist. I think that’s something you resisted.

KUITCA: Yes, strongly.

RAIL: Could you talk about that?

KUITCA: I had nothing to do with magical realism. At the time Latin American art did not exist beyond the Mexican muralists and Frida, who was a rising star. I was warned when I started showing outside of Argentina, first in Brazil, and then in Europe, that in order to make an appearance in New York I should avoid any galleries that specialized in Latin American art. I was also advised that if I was going to make a show in Europe it should be in a gallery that didn’t show Latin American art, but was more international. If you were from Latin America there was the idea that you could only do two types of work: so-called magical realism or political art. There was pressure that if you were an artist from a specific place your work should either address specific issues or look a specific way. My work did not fit into either magical realism or political art, even though I was in The Art of the Fantastic, which drew on a certain tradition of Latin American art, like Wifredo Lam, Botero, Tarsila do Amaral. At some point Julio and I were starting to have shows in similar galleries and we both ended up showing with Annina Nosei in New York. Maybe he had his first show in ’89 and I had my first show in ’90, but I had met Annina before and I said, finally, “Okay, maybe this is a place where I could see my work in a different context.”

RAIL: Had you been spending time in New York before then?

KUITCA: No. I first came to New York when I was seven or eight years old. Then I came by myself after a long trip in Europe when I was 19 and I was kind of lost. That was the trip that took me to Munich and I had been in London.

RAIL: Is that the same trip when you saw The New Spirit in Painting at the Royal Academy?

KUITCA: Yes, but I didn’t return to New York until almost 10 years later, which was strange because I was traveling a lot in the ’80s in Europe and Latin America. In Latin America I traveled mostly to Brazil. In Europe I traveled mostly to Holland and Spain because those were the places I was able to show more of my work. Obviously, I am a Latin American artist. I never had a problem with being Latin American. I had a problem with being...
categorized. So in the '80s I was not in New York at all. It took a long time to come back here.

RAIL: But New York is important to you in other ways. For instance, you used to go to the Rand McNally map store to stock up on maps.

KUITCA: Once I started to come back I visited three times a year.

RAIL: Did you ever think about living here?

KUITCA: No, I never thought about living anywhere other than Buenos Aires.

RAIL: Was discovering the Rand McNally map store like being a child in a toyshop?

KUITCA: Yes, exactly! I bought so many maps but not compulsively because I was very specific about what I was buying. I like to put myself in the eye of the salesperson at the counter saying “Where is this man going?” because there were maps from everywhere and at every different scale. I was looking at maps because of their density or the opposite of the density. I was looking at maps in a way that had nothing to do with destination. In New York I started to grow my library of maps. Obviously things were very different in the pre-internet era.

RAIL: I don’t know if the Rand McNally map store still exists. Probably not. We were talking before about how the meaning of some of your paintings has changed because of historical events. In one way the meaning of all the “Map” paintings has changed. Printed maps were still in common use when you made them, but now they’ve almost disappeared. In addition to all the geopolitical events that have changed the way we might look at a map, the map itself is now something that we mostly experience digitally.

KUITCA: Plus, with our digital devices we have become so aware of where we are at all times. I’m very happy I did the “Map” paintings then, otherwise I might have lost the subject completely. I don’t think I would be able to do those paintings now.

RAIL: There’s a closer relationship in the translation of a printed map to a painting than how painting might respond to this virtual, digital, invisible network. How do you depict or respond to something like that in painting? It’s not impossible, but it is different.

KUITCA: It’s important, I think, that I made maps where you could get lost. Not because they were tricky or were wrong but simply because I don’t think those maps were about location. In a way, pictorial language dislocates pretty much everything, even if you copy something perfectly. If you translate it in identical terms it’s still a big painting. It’s somehow a crazy referential space. So in a way I always thought that those paintings were a place to get lost in.

RAIL: Yet your paintings are still maps. They contain and convey information. They are real and concrete. To me, that’s a fundamental part of a lot of your work. Andreas Huyssen talks about how your art is a way of knowing the world. Even though stylistically your work is very different from Jean-Michel Basquiat’s I think both of you draw concrete information into the work. You said, a long time ago, that your paintings are about trying to understand the world in which you live.

KUITCA: I’m happy that you put an accent on these things. Because I’m an artist it was often assumed that those maps were invented, that they are fantasies. But they are not. They contain real information. People forget that my maps are of real places not invented ones.

RAIL: They’re not Borgesian.

KUITCA: No, they’re not. In one painting I switched one name for a repeated name but that’s the only time a “fantastic” place appeared. The interesting thing is that this fantastic place appears in a very realistic context. It’s a transpolitical name in an accurate geographical space. But most of the maps were not invented. When I painted genealogical charts or maps with the names of people instead of places, those names were concrete. I took them out of a telephone book. Very often people ask me, “How did you come to put this name in this painting?” How should I know? [Laughs]

RAIL: It’s an example of people wanting to pin things down and say, “Oh, this is what the work is about.”

KUITCA: I think it was sometimes unnerving for people that I almost never painted any places in Argentina, that there was no autobiographical reference in the work.

RAIL: There is an almost impersonal quality to your work. It’s recognizable yours in terms of style, but you explore the world as it’s mediated through institutions and systems of representation. This is why your work resonates so much with Foucault. But let’s come back to your recent “Family idiot” paintings. It’s an unusual title, which I know you took from Sartre’s book on Flaubert, L’Idiot de la Famille [The Family Idiot].

KUITCA: When I started I didn’t have a title. Oddly enough, the book I was reading then was Le Mots (Words), Sartre’s beautiful autobiography. Then I came across the title L’Idiot de la Famille and it was magnetic. It was such a good title for these paintings, but it was more than a title. It gave me a structure. Of course, I’ve never read L’Idiot de la Famille. It’s beyond my abilities to focus on such a long work, but I knew about it, and I started to read about it, which I realize is a superficial way to address a book, but the paintings aren’t meant to be about Sartre’s book. Ultimately Sartre’s study seems to be a kind of machine that applies all sorts of knowledge that he had at the time, from Marxism to psychoanalysis to philosophy to sociology to politics, a compendium of knowledge which he applied to Flaubert, a writer he was fascinated by but also despised. So many ambivalences. I thought it was such a fascinating project. I wanted to put these paintings in a domestic context, which obviously involves the family. This work isn’t self-referential, but I believe that family situations are crucial to most artists, regardless of our success or our failures.

RAIL: So the paintings are in some way about being an artist, about becoming an artist?

KUITCA: Yes.

RAIL: The fact that you haven’t read Sartre’s book reminds me of Martin Kippenberger—though I’m sure that you’re more of a reader than he was. Kippenberger would have other people read books for him and then tell him what they were about. For instance, he never read Kafka’s Amerika, which inspired his most famous artwork. He just had someone explain it to him.

KUITCA: Actually, I haven’t dealt with too many people who have read Sartre’s book.

RAIL: Well, I certainly haven’t. It’s famously unreadable. Since finishing the Family idiot paintings you’ve been working on a curatorial project for the Milano Triennale. Can you talk about that?

KUITCA: It goes back to 2014 when I was invited to curate a show at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. I had been impressed with David Lynch’s 2007 installation at the Cartier Foundation where he created a living room. I revisited his installation. He also intervened with my re-creation by adding paint over my painting. Also I asked Patti Smith to record a text. It became a very immersive installation. I also included works by Vija Celmins and Artavazd Pelechian, who is an incredible Armenian-Russian filmmaker. I consider him to be a missing link in cinema history. I also brought in works not in the Cartier collection. For instance, I knew how important Francis Bacon was for David Lynch—

RAIL: And for you?

KUITCA: Yes, for me, too. So we had a small, beautiful Bacon portrait and also a painting by Tarsila do Amaral. The show was called Les Habitants, which is the title of a film by Pelechian. In 2017 I did a larger version in Buenos Aires titled Les Visités, a word that doesn’t really exist in French but is very evident and understandable in Spanish. There it was mostly in monographic rooms. In one room I interacted with some photographs by William Eggleston. In April, the third installment will be at the Triennale building in Milan. I’m structuring the show in a different way. It won’t have monographic rooms. Instead there will be more interactions between different periods and geographical backgrounds. Curating is something I truly enjoy doing.

RAIL: Maybe because of the theatrical aspect. In the early 1980s, when you returned to Buenos Aires after your time in Wuppertal with the Pina Bausch Tanztheater, you threw yourself into creating theatrical productions. Since then you’ve designed sets for operas and plays. And of course you have made many paintings based on diagrams of theaters. In some ways, curating, creating an environment for people to come into, has more to do with theater than with painting. You’re telling a story with works of art instead of with actors and props.

KUITCA: But I still have to figure out which story it is that I am telling. [Laughter] For me, curating has come to feel very connected to the artists. In this project I don’t change the works, as I did with David Lynch. He had a very funny approach. I asked him to make a painting, and the painting that he made was completely different from what I had in mind. He said in a very sweet way, “you ruined my work, now I get to ruin yours.” [Laughter]

RAIL: Recently I asked Sonia Becce who is something of an expert on your work whether there were any contemporary Argentine writers I should read to better understand your work. She mentioned Ricardo Piglia’s book Artificial Respiration (1980), which tells the story about a man who is pursuing this mysterious uncle who’s left Buenos Aires for a small town on the Uruguayan border. The uncle himself is obsessed with researching the life of an obscure political figure from the 19th century. Piglia’s book is full of absences and missing people. It is seen as a kind of allegory of what happened in Argentina in the 1970s. Does it make sense to you that Sonia mentioned this book?
KUITCA: Yes, it does, but I thought you were going
to say César Aira. When Aira visited my studio
once he happened to see some of the cubist pain-
tings I was working on. Afterwards he sent me this
little book titled "Triano" (2015). I don’t think it’s
been translated into English.

RAIL: Was "Triano" inspired by your "Desenlace"
paintings?

KUITCA: Not inspired by them, the book and the
paintings just happened to converge. That’s why I
wanted me to read it. It’s the story about him going
with a friend of his, a great poet named Arturo
Carrera, to take classes at a Cubist painter’s work-
shop in the little town where they are from. I found
the book very lovely. As for what Sonia said about
Piglia: I read "Respiración Artificial" when it came
out and it made a very, very strong impression on
me, but I never thought about it in relation to my
work. As you say, it takes an allegorical or meta-
phorical approach. I’m not so sure how I would be
related to that. I knew I had a very hard time trying
to take account of what was going on in Argentina
until I made the "Nadie Olvida Nada" paintings.
Other works that I did in an almost adolescent way
to address the period of dictatorship I con-
sider crap. I never show them. I also made From
1 to 30,000, which counted the missing people.
All those years were very tense and very strong,
each year for a different reason. There were days
I would go to my studio — this was the first time
I had a studio — and was only capable of writing
out numbers. The “Nadie Olvida Nada”
paintings were a sort of elliptical way to address what had
just happened. Because of the Malvinas War and
the dictatorship, 1982 was an extremely dramatic
year, the most crazy year of all. I was in a more
introspective mood. Maybe I found an echo of that
feeling in "Respiración Artificial".

RAIL: I think that From 1 to 30,000, where you wrote
out every number between 1 and 30,000, is a work that
you had to make in order to free yourself to respond not
just obliquely but also more emotionally to events
in Argentina. I also see From 1 to 30,000 as a farewell
to the anti-painting of the 1970s. All the things that have
characterized your work ever since, especially how you
privilege space, are absent from that painting. It’s a very
conceptual work. I feel like it allowed you to draw this
line and start from zero as a painter and as a citizen of
a country that had gone through a traumatic period.
After that you could start to do the work of mourning
and memory in works like "Nadie Olvida Nada." After
the "Nadie Olvida Nada" series, which was done with
house paint on scraps of wood from around your studio,
your paintings became much more sumptuous. I see
them as connected to the "return" to painting that was
happening in so many other places. After the austerity
and reductivism of the 1970s, history and autobiography
and art history and emotion and the seductive power of
oil paint come flooding back in.

KUITCA: I see that, and obviously I can see my work
in that context, but I also felt that my work did
not come from the joy of painting. Maybe later the
paintings became a little more grand and started
to bring in theatricality, but the works that were
formed out of that moment were so reductive that
in a way it carried with it the reductiveness of the
previous decade. I wanted to make something that
was not necessarily a celebration of painting in the man-
nner of Neo-Expressionism or Transavanguardia.

RAIL: The idea of "Oh, now we’re painting again!"

KUITCA: I think I did not have that aspect.

RAIL: Not everyone gets that. I think the biggest mis-
interpretation of your work has to do with the "Beds."
I was guilty of this too in the beginning. A lot of people
look at them and when they see these small beds and
they think, "children’s beds" and that sets off a whole
train of readings. It was something of a shock when I
read an interview where you explain that they’re small
not because they were made for children but because you
want them to be perceived as if they were far away.
When you were making them it probably didn’t occur to you that
they would be seen and interpreted as children’s beds.

KUITCA: When you do the work you have no idea
what’s going to resonate. I thought the idea that
these were shrunken beds made a lot of sense
because of the "Maps" and "House Plans" serieses.
But I guess children do seem to turn up in my work.
All those small figures, for instance.

RAIL: Or your painting titled "L’enfance du Christ" (1990)
or the "Nadie Olvida Nada" paintings, which evoke
childhood. On the subject of interpretations, and mis-
interpretations, have you noticed differences in the
reception of your work in the US versus in Europe or
Latin America?

KUITCA: In the US there seems to be an urgency to
create a very specific context and specific mean-
ing around the artist, to say what the work is
about. There’s not much time to let work breathe
and develop.

RAIL: I believe this is connected to the expectation that
artists be able to offer a total interpretation of their work
to the viewer. And this, in turn, comes from the way
artists are trained in MFA programs. You’re expected
to explain what you are doing in a quasi-academic
language —

KUITCA: And in a short time —

RAIL: Say why you made the work, what your references
are, what it’s about. I find that not-so-interesting because
where does it leave the viewer? Is this predictable cycle
between work and interpretation there’s no room for
surprise. Maybe that’s what you’re encountering.

KUITCA: Yes, totally. I also found this attitude as a
teacher and a visiting artist in the US. Ultimately
that’s why I created a two-year program for young
artists in Buenos Aires. Most artists I know don’t
address things like they are preparing something
in school.

RAIL: But institutions — I’m thinking about museums
here — want to be able to justify why they are supporting
you, why they’re presenting your work. They feel they
have to make it accessible to an imagined audience.

KUITCA: Art education and art institutions are
so problematic. Of course, there are great artists
who teach. What bothers me is the pressure you
feel when you visit a student’s studio and there’s
this preset discussion of the work. Sometimes it feels
so disconnected from what the work is really
about — if the work is about anything at all. For me,
as a teacher, it’s very important that I always try to
find time and space. One visit won’t forge a bond,
or create a pedagogical experience.

RAIL: What about you? I know you studied privately
with one artist for eight years, and you didn’t go to art school.
So you had a non-academic, non-institutional formation.

KUITCA: That’s actually something very idiosyn-
cratic about Buenos Aires, which has a very rich
story that I hope someone addresses one day. I was
sort of talented as a young child, and even my par-
ents were alert enough to keep me away from the
art school. It was somewhat common knowledge
that art school, at least in the ’70s, was not the place
where artistic creativity would grow. Of course,
the risky part was not being among your peers.
Ultimately, however, you find your place. In Buenos
Aires we created a network of workshops where
artists work with other artists. So it’s not usual
for artists not to be academically trained, like me.
In the US I can recall great real encounters with
artists for short periods of time — for example, when
I was at Skowhegan, which is such a great school.
But the general idea of visiting an artist once and
thinking about what you see is problematic. Empathy
has to be born from addressing what the artist is not
seeing as well as their intentions. Dialogue comes
from you sharing the same incapacity rather than
simply offering a different illumination.
XAVIERA SIMMONS
with Marcia E. Vetrocq

I spoke with Xaviera Simmons on March 10, which is to say during the final days when one might reasonably and honorably have a conversation without mentioning the ferocity of the coronavirus. On that day, her work was on view in a recently opened solo exhibition in the Great Hall of NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts, and she was planning the fabrication of a monument commissioned by Socrates Sculpture Park for a three-person show scheduled to open on May 16. The former show closed early, and the opening of the latter has been postponed. Yet Simmons’s remarks about her determination to foreground racial injustice, reparations, and prison abolition as fundamental issues in her art have only come to seem more urgent since March, as deaths from Covid-19 have been disproportionately high among Black and Latinx Americans, and prison reform activists and journalists have detailed the cruel vulnerability of incarcerated individuals.

Born in New York in 1974, Simmons has exhibited her work since 2005, following experiences that include earning a BFA at Bard, participating in the Whitney Independent Studies Program and the Maggie Flanagan Studio Actor Training Conservatory, and—even before all of that—completing an 18-month walking meditation organized by monks that retraced the transatlantic slave trade from Massachusetts across the Caribbean and the Atlantic to Africa. Resourceful and prolific, Simmons makes art that ranges across media—photography, performance, painting, video, sound, sculpture, text—as if there had never been any boundaries between them in the first place.

MARcia E. Vetrocq (RAIL): Let’s start in the present, which is busy and vivid, and draw your earlier projects into the conversation as we go along.

XAVIERRa SIMMONS: My political interest and investment has grown and my practice has expanded exponentially in just these last three years or so. I have always been engaged politically, even as a younger person, but now I am always pushing and pulling against aspects of the political inside my practice, with politics as clearly foundational. I feel like the political—being a citizen and thinking about the intricacies of the United States and its engagements across the globe—that’s all percolating at a faster pace. I am contemplating how to both work politically and hold on to a rigorous creative practice at the same time.

RAIL: You’re participating, with Jeffrey Gibson and Paul Ramirez Jonas, in MONUMENTS NOW, which Socrates Sculpture Park has characterized as an exhibition that seeks to address the role of monuments in society and commemorate underrepresented narratives.

SIMMONS: For me, first of all, I think at this point we have to regard language as labor, right? And we have to continue shifting the narrative. When I think about monuments, it’s not that indigenous or First Nations people or the descendants of American chattel slavery have never had monuments of any kind. It’s that white America, particularly as represented by the local, state, and federal governments, has terrorized the impulse of monumentality out of those groups, in which my own ancestry rests. I think that it’s important to frame it that way, because there is an impulse, it seems, across cultures and generations and time, to imagine, dream, or construct bigger than the self. I’m sure that has to do with group myths and spiritual practices and relationships to land and community, and other ideas pertaining to the body, personhood, humanity, or reaching toward something beyond ourselves. I think that whiteness has worked consistently as the force of terror and the police state in the United States, and therefore it has worked against monumental thinking when it comes to the first people who inhabited this place and to mixed race, quote-unquote Black people. I think it takes labor to undo not only this ideology but also the language that forms who gets to construct the monument. Then, hopefully, you can see the monument anew and the idea of these monuments at Socrates not as someone being given the opportunity to do something that a group has never been able to do before, but almost like a natural release or an impulse that is a part of the kind of thinking in which we are all indoctrinated, especially in the West. The pressure of oppression and suppression has built up in the United States, and it can’t really hold any longer. I don’t know if White people comprehend that their very privileges rest on the pressure felt by the others. This pressure has been maintained by physical, legal, and violent forces across the spectrum of our existence here. And this exhibition is one way to reduce the pressure just a little bit.

RAIL: I’m wondering about the difference between “monument” and “monumentality” and the significance of scale in Monuments Now. I’m thinking of the memorial in Mississippi to Emmett Till, which has been vandalized repeatedly although it’s little more than a roadside marker. On the other hand, when Trump proposed an executive order in February to impose classicism as the style for federal buildings—an expression of whiteness if ever there was one—I immediately imagined the daily affront to Trump of David Adjaye’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, which was constructed during the Obama administration. So, in terms of form, scale, and sheer presence, how have you been thinking about your own design for a monument?

SIMMONS: I’m going to take it back a little bit. In 2008, I did a community-oriented project with the Public Art Fund in conjunction with the Bronx Museum called Bronx as Studio. It was a free portrait studio. I went throughout different neighborhoods in the Bronx and made photographs inside the communities. The end result was the interaction between the community members and me and the photographs that I hand-printed and sent to the participants afterward. Last year I participated in a wonderful Public Art Fund podcast. We were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I participated in a wonderful Public Art Fund podcast. We were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization participated in a wonderful Public Art Fund podcast. We were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization were a group of women—myself, Kate Gilmore, and Paola Mendoza—and in that conversation I said that with my 2008 project the organization pushed and pulled against aspects of the political and its engagements across the globe—that’s all percolating at a faster pace. I am contemplating how to both work politically and hold on to a rigorous creative practice at the same time.

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of large-scale works) to produce “community based works,” organizations showed almost a mistrust of non-White artists with respect to the material and financial resources that support work on monuments or to work in a monumental way when it comes to creative forms. I have a problem with that, obviously, because artists constantly need to hone their skills and experiment in different ways. So for me, it is really important to be invited to construct and contemplate monuments at Socrates and other spaces. And I have really run with it at Socrates. I’m making three large-scale works that use heavy materials, like steel, plaster, or large chunks of wood. It’s a challenge, but I feel it’s something that has to happen on this landscape from an artist like me.

RAIL: Can you share more about the design of the three works?

SIMMONS: I was interested in looking at how I could make a work that bodies could move around. I wanted to think about the viewer’s interaction with the outer parts of the work, the texture and shape, as well as the interior of the work, as in the presence or absence of text. But I was also thinking about policy, political potential, and promises—the promises that the United States government and public intellectuals have given and haven’t kept, especially those lofty promises that would have changed the trajectory of the material conditions of the descendants of chattel slavery. The government of the United States has made untold numbers of promises that have just not been kept. As for the form, I’m thinking of modern artists whose practices I am excited about, from Richard Serra—a complicated figure but one whose works and thought processes I think about as a sort of pinnacle of white power structures and creativity and capitalism—to Louise Bourgeois, Mark di Suvero, Giacometti, Elizabeth Catlett, Kara Walker, and so many of my peers who work large-scale. I am thinking about their ability to experiment and work with a range of materials. I am thinking about materials that I am really attracted to, materials that have a sturdy softness to them: clay, earth, plaster, etc. But then text works make up two of the monuments, and one work is simply a pause that is really about looking at the materials, the different shades of the color black, and thinking about the different textures and the formal conversation my work is having with some of the works by artists I mentioned before. So I am trying to work both ways, thinking about the content and thinking about the forms. One work is overtly politically engaged and one is about promises. And one is much more abstract.

RAIL: When I looked at the Socrates website yesterday, I saw a photograph of a large, four-panel text work by you—labeled untitled and from this year—in which the word “rupture” is reiterated. Is that new painting related to your 2017 text work called Rupture, which took as its starting point the House bill for reparations introduced by the late John Conyers? Is the new text painting related to the monument for Socrates?

SIMMONS: No, it’s not part of the monument. Rupture was produced at the Wexner Center. Usually my text works are a lot more abstract, or rather I would say they’re not linear in how the language is formed. But Rupture was the first time I mostly used a single text, the bill H.R.40, which John Conyers and others had been putting forward for 25 years or more. I say “mostly” because I changed the language of the bill a bit. I wanted the audience to be really overwhelmed by the text and its possibilities and to contemplate the rupture of contact, the rupture of this union, the rupture of massacres, the rupture that whiteness has caused and the rupture of all things related to the institution of slavery, which ruptured humanity itself. Rupture is one text work that is very specific to the harms that have been perpetrated by the United States and to the need for repair. I called it Rupture because we are a fractured, under-compassionate society as a whole, and I am an optimist.

RAIL: I’d like to introduce a couple of brief quotes from Zadie Smith’s essay in the February 27 issue of the New York Review of Books on Kara Walker’s Fons Americanus, the monumental work that opened last October as a six-month installation in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. In a discussion of the pros and cons of permanence, Smith writes, “Monuments are complacent; they put a seal upon the past, they release us from dread.” She also quotes Kara Walker’s observation on the anesthetizing effect of permanent monuments: “When you have monuments or commemorative things that just exist, they sit there and they disappear.” What’s your response to that?
RAIL: To clarify, the observations that I read, which suggested certain problems of the permanent monument, were quotes from Zadie Smith, a writer with Jamaican and English parents, and Kara Walker, a Black American artist. Smith was discussing Walker’s *A Subtlety* and *Font Americanus* in terms of the expressive and symbolic value of permanence itself.

RAIL: This year you’ve been a visiting professor at Harvard, where you were named the inaugural Solomon Fellow in the Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies. In November, you engineered an ambitious event on campus. How did you structure that event and what did you intend for the participants to experience?

SIMMONS: It’s interesting right now that you’re asking me this question about permanence or permanence when you’re talking to me as a Black person who’s a descendant of chattel slavery on all sides of my lineage. It’s so interesting that I infer the term “permanence.” I can’t think about “impermanence,” when there aren’t many permanent markers in terms of my cultural narrative. I feel it’s very Eurocentristically dominating in a way to ask that question, because it’s almost refusing to allow the idea of a permanent marker produced by a Black person in this country to remain, to even have the opportunity for the mind of the producer to think about permanence.

RAIL: It may still exist in government archives somewhere. But that monumental object is gone from where it was. Things leave and they decay, no matter how weighty they are.

SIMMONS: It was called *Malleable Forms—Define Abolition*. As the first Solomon Fellow, I was asked to talk to different classes and also to give a lecture. But, as is my practice, I’m going to push it to do something else. I invited 15 speakers plus my students in the class, which is a rigorous and highly concentrated class dealing with the political and the creative. We talk about everything from prison abolition, which was the crucial, to the divesting of whiteness and everything in between, because that’s really what we’re dealing with—whiteness as an object and oppression as an object.

Harvard has the most amazing thinkers. It has influenced our entire world. It is the oldest higher education institution in the United States. Obviously, it was founded with the help of much slave labor and slavery-derived monies. There’s no point in me going into an institution like that and being meek or not being my true self as a teacher. My true self is going to be there as a teacher to investigate, interrogate, and try to understand first, why I would be teaching there and, second, what limits I can push inside that space. They told me that no one had really ever done what I did with *Define Abolition*. But what I did and what I hope that the group did was to push the acknowledgment that Harvard benefits from the prison-industrial complex through its investments, and that the students must push the institution for change. The institution also perpetuates whiteness beyond itself, because it is seen across the world as this most fundamental institution. But it barely acknowledges slavery as its foundational asset. And it doesn’t acknowledge that it continues to keep whiteness alive at the highest level. Harvard embodies white supremacy, which is a difficult thing to shake, but then again, most institutions in the United States are objects to keep white supremacy intact.

When you talk about abolition, you also have to talk about nourishment, because abolition means not just, “okay everybody, you’re free from all oppression and prison.” It’s about what other world you would want to build. So while we dissected the institution of Harvard and prison abolition, we also nourished ourselves with food, with sound, with collaboration, and with rest. As for what the students got out of it, some of the participants were mature, so they had their ideas about abolition or about white supremacy. There were some White speakers who had never spoken about whiteness before. One White curator at Radcliffe College who gave a presentation had never broken down their clear relationship to whiteness in the Harvard community of students and colleagues beforehand, which is mind-blowing to me, because that community is the epicenter of whiteness. What I mean by whiteness is not just confined to physical complexion. I also think of it as an object, even a goal. Most people come to the United States to assimilate to some aspect of the construction of whiteness. No one comes to the United States to be part of the bottom and to struggle to liberate people. They come here for the advantages that this country has, which are questionable unless you already have whiteness as your particular foundation.

It was important to have my students mix with thinkers, so that they didn’t feel like the thinkers were above them, and they wouldn’t get into the hierarchy of a lecture, just listening as part of an audience. So the “performance” was layered—a student and a thinker, a student and a professor, a student and an activist. I wanted the students to know that you have to engage on multiple levels in order to feel more pleasure, some form of happiness and less despair, and also to understand that this is all intermingled, and that you can actually shift systems, though it takes coordination, collaboration, and a lot of effort. So how do you work to shift those systems, whether you’re going to be an artist or you’re going to go off ten years from now and be a politician, but with an artist’s mind? I know that these students are not all going to be visual or performing artists. But I want them to think much more abstractly than they would if they hadn’t taken my class no matter what they decide to do later on.

RAIL: Let’s turn to *Posture*, your current installation in the Great Hall at Duke House, which is the Upper East Side home of NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts. Let’s begin with the composition. Your museum and gallery exhibitions are emphatically multipart. They involve photography, video, sculpture, painting, performance, and sound, and they lay claim to spaces that visitors move through. For *CHORD*, your solo presentation with David Castello Gallery at the 2019 Armory Fair, your installation was necessarily restricted to the area of the booth’s platform. Now, with *Posture*, you’ve positioned multiple elements as a frontal tableau in a narrow space. I understand that the design was inspired in part by your study of Brâncuși staging his studio for photographs. Can you share more about how *Posture* came together for you?

SIMMONS: The Institute invited me to show works in the exhibition space, which is not a formal gallery but a small area in the entrance hall with no walls for hanging works. This was an interesting proposition, because when I produced *Archive of Impetus* at MoMA in 2013, the museum requested that I not produce anything that would exist on the walls there. So I have experience with that type of exhibition condition.

I travel to Europe, and particularly Paris, quite often as my partner lived there for many years, and I would go to the studios of historical artists, the ones we all learn about in our Eurocentric art history classes. Even though they’ve staged now, even though Brâncuși staging his studio for photographs and his clients, it’s still amazing to see it as a set, as a space to imagine an artist working in. With Brâncuși, I was most attracted to how he was using the pedestal, thinking about how I can work with the pedestal to make my work shift. I kept ruminating about how the large-scale photographs could come into the Great Hall. It came to me that the pedestal would do that. And then it became about the minute details, like how to offer that works and sculptural works, and how did I want to be seen? For the paintings, I got really interested in a specific kind of cord. There are the paintings themselves, which I really love, because they hold the space front and center. Behind the paintings, there are these really soft, beautiful cords that remind me of ships’ sails. I like the idea of working with different heights in *Posture* to bring all the different parts of my practice into one frontal, straightforward intervention inside this very ornate, historically fraught space on that corner across from Central Park. I want to say that I produced that work for myself, yes of course, but really for the audience.
and the students that were coming in and the security guard. I thought a lot about the security guard who had to look at that work every day. He was on my mind, part of my audience. How do you keep this person’s attention with a series of works? How do you keep turning the imagination with a variety of objects and insertions?

RAIL: In Posture, you use the white geometric pedestals associated with the white cube gallery, but there’s a nod to Brâncuși as a precedent. Ever since at least 1989, when Scott Burton organized a Brâncuși show at MoMA, we’ve been alert not only to the sculptural qualities of the bases designed by Brâncuși but to the suggestion of a near-equivalence between sculpture and base, as if the two could exchange places. In CHORD, you presented your photographs on modular structures made of African mahogany. Now, in Posture, one of those modular bases is itself placed upon a white base.

SIMMONS: I’m happy that you brought that up. Originally the curators asked me to show CHORD in the Great Hall. I really don’t enjoy reshowing the same thing, especially after just a year. I didn’t put that wooden piece in Posture until the very last minute, but I took that as, “okay, how can I go into the next phase beyond CHORD?” I produced the wooden pedestals with the photographs attached to them because I wanted those to feel like furniture or design objects, things that you would just own, things that engage with images in a home. With Posture, in that narrow space, I was thinking I can control how the photographs are seen, and I can think about how the videos are shown, what height and form the pedestals are going to take. And I can play with the photographs not being on a wall, and how the paintings continue to be their upright selves in a different way—how to make the paintings sing in their posture, if that makes sense. All the elements came together, but they really are an extension of CHORD. My studio tends to work that way. I keep thinking, the conversations keep going, and I try to let one work or series inform the other, as if friends were engaging in some form of dialogue or disagreement.

RAIL: How did you arrive at the title Posture for the installation?

SIMMONS: I had been reading a number of early writings by Richard Serra, thinking about how his close romantic, creative, and physical relationship with Joan Jonas influenced his work in terms of the relationship between the body and the object. I love the works of Martin Puryear—always one of my favorite artists—and I’ve been thinking about Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson, how they talked about bodies moving around their works and how that inspired their processes. I also think about engaging with repetition inside the studio, and so many moments of movement, dance, and performance in my own non-performative works. I have been obsessed with simple gestures since I started out as a photographer, and now I love working both on and off the wall. So, how are bodies engaging with the works in Posture besides looking at them frontally? You can kind of squeeze your way in. The guard doesn’t let you, but I have photos of people—I won’t name them—who have gone through, and I’m happy they did because they got to see the backs of works from the floor level and also from above, as the works are situated underneath a grand staircase which is very dramatic. I think about all of those interactions.

RAIL: In some earlier interviews, you’ve noted that you do a great deal of planning in sketchbooks, and that the sketchbooks generally contain a lot of text—your design thoughts, journalistic writing, other notations—and drawings that take the form of stick figures. Did the sketchbook stick figures serve as the basis for the animation in Posture?

SIMMONS: Totally.

RAIL: Is this the first animation you’ve done? And if so, what prompted you to get those stick figures moving?

SIMMONS: This is the first. A lot of the time when I work, even with text works, I can’t make “images” of these things. I wanted to show labor, and these animations show a lot of labor that never accomplishes anything, futile labor. At the end—I don’t know, should I give it away? [Laughs]

RAIL: Let’s just say that there are moments which are very Sisyphean.

SIMMONS: Exactly. The animations are tied to image-making. I wanted you to see the labor, but that’s physical labor that I can’t produce with actual physical bodies because they would just die, right? The characters in the animations are extinguished. And I wanted the labor to be almost . . . I think the
word I want to use is “uncanny.” How does it rest on you to see these figures experiencing this much fruitless labor? You can tell that they’re non-White characters by their physical shapes, hairstyles, etc. All of their labor is monotonous, fruitless, mind-numbing. And for me—I’ll be honest—I sometimes feel that there’s a repetition within art world practices, a repetition of labor from all types of groups, and we within those groups reproduce domination and suffering; this repetition of ideas and this fruitless, monotonous continuation of narratives. I’m interested in shifting the narrative, but I am also excited to see the fruitlessness of the labor as well. It’s a little overwhelming even for me to try to get myself out of it.

RAIL: There’s a significant contrast between the labor in the animation and the action in certain stretches of the second video in Posture. Different characters are seen arranging flowers and leaves, working very deliberately, very calmly at a table. I saw a parallel between those arrangements and your art-making procedures involving assemblage, making grids of found photographs, and, in the largest sense, creating the installations themselves. Do you see these as related? Is there something darker in the second video, too?

SIMMONS: No, that part for me is definitely about pleasure. Like I said earlier, when you really start to do research into contemporary abolitionist thought, it is not all about the hardness of it. It is also about joy and pleasure and forming the self, the community, and the “government,” and how bodies organize themselves or not in new ways.

I think it’s really important to consider new ways of seeing and new ways of living, new ways that can become politically tangible, should we act as a group with compassion and creativity. If you look at those two videos together, if in one there are characters who are under complete duress at all times, where are the characters in complete contemplation and joy, constructing and presenting a new reality, a new beauty, a more refined era?

RAIL: To continue with thoughts of joy and beauty, I’d like to ask about gender and bodies in your work. When you staged CODED at the Kitchen in 2015, you incorporated found photographs of male go-go dancers and videos of daggering, the Jamaican dancehall moves that simulate sex. For your contribution in 2014 to Pier 54—a show of women artists responding to Pier 18, a legendary 1971 exhibition with male artists—you studied homoerotic moves and queer codes and then choreographed an hour or so of five women performing those movements and gestures. Found imagery aside, there seems to be a scarcity or even an absence of male bodies in your photographs and performances. Have I just missed them?

SIMMONS: I am actually obsessing over male bodies now. But I think with Pier 54 and Coded, in particular, I was really interested in how to process the enjoyment of looking at men loving each other, especially right before the AIDS crisis, processing those figures and thinking about how to respond to that pleasure of looking at others giving and receiving pleasure. In Coded, there actually is a male performer who narrates the hour-long performance, and it’s really about a love affair between a man and his lover. So yes, I’m interested in male figures. I’ve had male figures in some of my photographic works, and I’m also really excited about the female as male and all of it. It’s more that I can’t keep up with what I want to produce, and I’m still producing ideas and things from sketches produced a bit ago. I’m really excited about the male figure now, because I haven’t explored it enough in terms of how I’ve presented my work. So the male figure is coming—the male figure as sensual, as tender, and as complex as I can imagine the “MALE” to be.

MARCIA E. VETROCO is a writer, educator, and a visiting associate professor in the fine arts department at Pratt Institute.
“The map is not the territory.”

James Prosek’s love affair with trout fishing at age nine has turned into a life-long obsession with the natural world. After consulting with biologists about trout species at age 11, he realized that there was a profound mismatch between the way scientists classified trout and the way trout actually appeared in nature. As a junior at Yale University, he produced his first book Trout: An Illustrated History (Knopf, 1996), an achievement that led the New York Times to dub him a prodigy, declaring he was “a fair bid to become the Audubon of the fishing world.”

Prosek hasn’t slowed down since. As a naturalist, he has authored over 15 books on fish, fishing, and nature, and is currently working on another. His research has taken him to every continent, except Antarctica, and the seas in between. Skilled as a taxidermist and painter, he has built a body of work that combines meticulous observation with deep insight into the rhythms and processes of the natural world, as well as our alienated relationship to it.

We met at Prosek’s studio in Easton, CT to discuss his latest exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery. James Prosek: Art, Artifact, Artifice. The show combines his art with objects from the collections of the Gallery, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale Center for British Art. Prosek put his work in dialogue with these objects to question the divisions of “art” versus “artifact,” or “natural” versus “manmade.” Since his awakening at age 11, his view has always been that these distinctions impoverish our experience of the world around us, to our peril. Unfortunately, Yale had just closed down its Art Gallery the week before due to the Coronavirus, forcing us to make do with a virtual tour of the show.

RAIL: Who knows? Well, as the saying goes: “Never let a crisis go to waste.” The Coronavirus makes a great jumping off point because so much of your work has been about dealing with nature as it is, versus the urge to somehow impose order on it, by naming or other means. Maybe we could just start off the conversation with this great quote that you begin with in your writing for the catalog to the exhibit: “The map is not the territory.”

PROSEK: Yeah, well, I think that came from a quote from a conversation with a biologist when I was working on a book that was going to be a list of all the trout in North America. If you asked 10 biologists to put together a list of all the trout in North America, you would get like 10 species. If I asked another one to put together a list of all the trout in North America, I would get 50 species. Not only could they not agree on how many there were, they couldn’t agree on what a species even was.

That was the beginning of my love affair with the natural world. After consulting with biologists about trout species at age 11, I realized that there was a profound mismatch between the way scientists classified trout and the way trout actually appeared in nature. As a junior at Yale University, I produced my first book Trout: An Illustrated History (Knopf, 1996), an achievement that led the New York Times to dub him a prodigy, declaring he was “a fair bid to become the Audubon of the fishing world.”

I began to lose faith in the reliability of names and language to describe the world that I was living in. When I pulled back and started learning more about the processes through which animals react to their environments, and how the forces of evolution shape the organisms we have, I learned that things evolved on this continuum over time. The tree of life is this misleading metaphor, because over long periods of time, it might look like a tree with branches that come off of a central stem and then continues to branch, but within those branches it’s very messy and web-like.

If there is an overarching statement or thesis for what my work has been about, it really all stems from this original revelation—and I was maybe 11 or 12 years old—that the world is this interconnected system that is also constantly changing. Not only are we related to every organism going back hundreds of millions of years, through common ancestry, but there is another interconnectedness and it’s happening in the present day where every organism in an environment is affecting everything else. To separate one organism from another and call it a separate unit is a little bit misleading. In the Yale exhibition my “bird spectrum” is meant to illustrate this—it’s an installation of over 200 bird specimens from the Peabody Museum collection pinned to the wall in a color spectrum. In the color spectrum as in the evolutionary continuum there are no clear lines between colors or species, we draw them. Colors like red or yellow are simply segments of the spectrum, we determine where one ends and the other begins.

So, we have nature, which is a continuum or a web-like interacting system. But in order to communicate that system through language, we have to draw lines between things and label the pieces. And I feel like once we do that—because humans like the feeling of control and prefer to live kind of habitat that trout like to live in. I told them I wanted to put together a book on all the trout in North America, and I was painting the fish.

I don’t know why I fell in love with these fish, but they were colorful and beautiful. And back then, I really loved the works of Winslow Homer. He painted these beautiful trout and stuff. So anyway, I got these nice responses back from different biologists who studied particular kinds of trout-like fish, in different states. And I tried to put together a list of all the trout in North America to make what I hoped would be a definitive work on trout, because, again, I couldn’t find a book on the trout of North America in the library.

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I began to lose faith in the reliability of names and language to describe the world that I was living in. When I pulled back and started learning more about the processes through which animals react to their environments, and how the forces of evolution shape the organisms we have, I learned that things evolved on this continuum over time. The tree of life is this misleading metaphor, because over long periods of time, it might look like a tree with branches that come off of a central stem and then continues to branch, but within those branches it’s very messy and web-like.

If there is an overarching statement or thesis for what my work has been about, it really all stems from this original revelation—and I was maybe 11 or 12 years old—that the world is this interconnected system that is also constantly changing. Not only are we related to every organism going back hundreds of millions of years, through common ancestry, but there is another interconnectedness and it’s happening in the present day where every organism in an environment is affecting everything else. To separate one organism from another and call it a separate unit is a little bit misleading. In the Yale exhibition my “bird spectrum” is meant to illustrate this—it’s an installation of over 200 bird specimens from the Peabody Museum collection pinned to the wall in a color spectrum. In the color spectrum as in the evolutionary continuum there are no clear lines between colors or species, we draw them. Colors like red or yellow are simply segments of the spectrum, we determine where one ends and the other begins.

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So, we have nature, which is a continuum or a web-like interacting system. But in order to communicate that system through language, we have to draw lines between things and label the pieces. And I feel like once we do that—because humans like the feeling of control and prefer to live
in the illusion of permanence instead of the actual dynamic, changing world—we believe that the world we’ve named is the actual world.

So, getting back to the original question about the quote “The map is not the territory,” we create these maps, or systems, so that we can orient ourselves in the world. Take a name like “brook trout,” which describes the native trout for this area. The best the name can do is to describe a segment of evolutionary history. There’s this organism that has certain characteristics that we call a brook trout. But the idea of this fish reduced and separated from the other organisms that it evolved in concert with, that helped shape what it is by simply existing with it, is a kind of myth.

We can’t forget that those systems and tools we use to navigate and to communicate aren’t the actual territory. And we’ve come to depend on language so much that I think we forget that nature doesn’t actually have language on it. We put it there. Because we can’t create a map that is as complex as the actual world, all our systems of communication are necessarily reductions and simplifications of nature, which is totally fine, but we have to remind ourselves constantly that these reductions aren’t real. But they’re real enough that we’ve been able to use those reductions to survive pretty well because if the human brain actually could absorb all the complexity of the world, we probably wouldn’t be able to get through the day because we’d be too overwhelmed and distracted.

So, the brain’s like this reducing valve that allows us to just filter out what we don’t need and keep what we do need in order to survive.

That love of order and the preference to live in an ordered world and “the map,” as opposed to the actual experiential world, has manifested in some dangerous ways, like when we grow one species in a monoculture. We now know from devastations like the Irish potato famine, that because it was just one species that was being cultivated, that it was more susceptible to disease. If the crop had been multi-species or diverse the entire population of potatoes wouldn’t have been eliminated by one blight. Take another example: our need to fragment forests by cutting roads through them or to create arable land. Or building dams on rivers to harness the power of water for hydroelectricity, to hold water for irrigation, or channel a river with levees so we can build cities in river deltas. All these sorts of boundaries that start as mental boundaries in our heads, that we manifest on the ground, can have real world consequences. The virus that shut down the museum is a good example of how nature will trespass across the boundaries that we think are there. Scientists hypothesize that the virus jumped from a bat to another intermediate mammal, a civet cat or pangolin, and then to a human. How did a bat virus incapable of directly infecting a human get into a human? We’re not exactly sure. But nature is creative—it found a way. How quickly the world economy can be crippled by something like a virus, something we can’t see with our naked eyes—scientists still debate about what a virus is, whether or not it is a living thing. We are being forced to embrace nature as it is, messy and beyond our systems of understanding. It’s a little bit of a tangent, but it’s a current day example.

RAIL: But it has to do with your art in the way that you have been exploring these spaces that open up in the gaps where the map doesn’t exactly fit onto the territory. I think that was the point of the chapter in the catalog entry for your current show. The one you titled “The Spaces in Between?”

PROSEK: A lot of artists that I really love show those spaces that we ignore when we fragment the interconnected world in order to label the pieces with language. Charles Burchfield is an example of that. I respond to that most in his watercolors, where the trees are pulsing. Even the telephone poles and wires have these sorts of echoes that are visually manifested in his work. One of the works in the exhibition is called Marsh in June (1952–56). And he’ll actually draw the heat and humidity or the sound of woodpeckers, you know, pecking on a tree, with these lines coming off the shapes. Or in Van Gogh’s work like The Night Café (1888) in the Yale Art Collection, with the pool table. Around the lamps hanging from the ceiling there are actual brush strokes that show emanating light, which is not how light is seen. Maybe he had a sense that those spaces were visually available. Science is starting to bear out that there are a lot of things happening in the unseen world affecting everything in the environment. There’s been a lot written lately about how trees communicate...
through the overstory, through hormones, and underground through matrices of roots and fungi. All are networks that help the whole community of trees actually communicate with one another, or warn each other of dangers that are coming, or getting through climate aberrations like droughts.

RAIL: One of the things that’s really interesting about what you do is that so much of it comes out of this intense direct observation. That you’re trying to actually see what’s there in front of you, which is so hard to do because we have all these filters, language being one of them.

PROSEK: Right. I love language, obviously. I like to write.

RAIL: Well, you’re a very good writer.

PROSEK: I appreciate that. I spend a lot of time thinking about writing, and writing. And obviously, there are also times in the best writing where you transcend the boxes around the words and maybe even go into a little trance. In good writing, the boxes that words create can be transcended. In my writing, I have a relationship with nature that has a strong sense of place. In the exhibition catalog, there’s a picture of a sugar maple with a “No Trespassing” sign on it. I live adjacent to a drinking water reservoir and you’re not supposed to walk down there, so this is what you see when you reach the end of my dead-end street. I remember when they changed the signs. Probably 30 years ago. Since then, I’ve observed the tree’s growing around the “No Trespassing” sign and kind of obscuring the words and the boundary that that sign represents. The tree and the sign illustrate what I’ve been trying to express in my work—that the boundaries we draw between things in nature may be real to us and helpful, but they are all ultimately ephemeral.

RAIL: There was this terrific conversation that you had with Mark Dion about New England in the Fragile Earth catalog from the Florence Griswold Museum. There was a shared sense of regionalism between you. I wonder how New England with its industrialized past and deforestation, and then this kind of extraordinary turnover that’s happened with its reforestation, has played into your view of nature?

PROSEK: Maybe the history of human interaction with nature is especially visible here, partly because of the history of this region having been glaciated all the way down from the North Pole to the Long Island Sound. And through the movements and migrations that could be cultivated was to get the rocks out of the soil and build walls. But the walls, some of them, are 200, 250, maybe even 500 years old. In this immediate area the walls show the physical presence of people working the land, and I think they’re beautiful. A preservationist might want to return the land to the way it was before humans and bury the rocks back in the soil. Now, I am very conservation minded, but the landscape is the way it is now. And I think these rock walls are really beautiful.

But my father also had this connection to New England. He was born and grew up in Brazil, outside of São Paulo, and he fell in love with birds down there. And when he moved up here, originally to New York when he was 12 or 14, he brought that love of birds with him. After a career in the merchant marine, shipping cargo around the world, he settled in Easton to become a schoolteacher. But he always loved these little birds called warblers that spend the winters in Central and South America and then come up here to New England to nest in the summer. There was this connection with this organism that also migrated from South America to North America. He loved them and thought they were beautiful, but they also reminded him of the little birds that he grew up with seeing in Brazil. Some of them may even be the same birds.

Well, that gave me a sense that, even though I’m here, that through the movements and migrations of animals, I’m connected to other parts of the world, like the eels that live in the pond across the street from where we’re seated here. They were born thousands of miles away in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in the Sargasso Sea. And then when they’re 15 to 30 years old and ready to reproduce, they go back out of the pond to the reservoir, or somehow find their way. They go down the Mill River, to the Long Island Sound, and then from the Sound to the Atlantic Ocean to a thousand miles east of Bermuda. No humans have ever witnessed eels spawning, the only reason we know they spawn in the ocean is because baby eels have been caught far offshore in fine mesh nets.
Part of the way through the research for the book, I couldn’t name it. It’s like the spaces between thoughts. I knew about eels. If you don’t know it, then you can write about their natural history, so I knew even to navigate to get there. There’s really not a lot of cases, or how they aggregate to spawn, or how they do it. We don’t know where they go to reproduce in most cases, or how they aggregate to spawn, or how they navigate to get there. There’s really not a lot of information on eels, which I envisioned being a book more about what mystery means, and unknowing, since we don’t know where they go to reproduce in most cases, or how they aggregate to spawn, or how they even navigate to get there. There’s really not a lot you can write about their natural history, so I knew that writing a book about eels was going to be more about what we don’t know about eels than what we do know about eels. If you don’t know it, then you can’t name it. It’s like the spaces between thoughts. Part of the way through the research for the book, I was talking to a friend, David Seidler, who had lived in New Zealand for 25 years. He was married to a Maori woman, and he said, “Oh, you’re working on a book about eels? Do you know about the sacred eels in New Zealand?” I said I didn’t. So, he set me up with one of his Maori friends, D.J., Daniel Joe, to do some research. I went down there and D.J. introduced me to his cousin Stella, who was my guide to the Maori world. Stella introduced me to Maori elders and people who told stories. And around the time I was there, I took several trips, but on the first trip, it was in the news that scientists were putting satellite tags on the eels to see if they could figure out where they go to spawn. The eels in New Zealand are some of the largest freshwater eels in the world and they migrate to some ocean location that nobody knows where. The Maori were unsettled, they said, “why do we need to know where they go to spawn?” For the Maori the place the eels went was sacred—not knowing was important, and something very different from ignorance.

So, my eel inquiry extended to other parts of Polynesia and Micronesia. Eels are very important in the culture of the people in these Pacific islands. One of the most prevalent stories involves a young girl named Sina who goes down to the little freshwater source—freshwater is highly scarce on some of these islands—to get some water for cooking or something. In these little freshwater streams, there are often five or six-foot long eels. When she gets back to the village, in the vessel she notices there’s a baby eel in the pot. So, she starts to raise it as a pet and the eel keeps getting bigger and bigger. She’s also growing up, becoming an adolescent. Her parents become more fearful of the eel because it’s big, and eels are just kind of freaky. So, they decide to put it back into the freshwater stream where it came from. But in the meantime, the eel’s developed an affection for the girl, and the girl has also developed an affection for the eel as more than a pet. There’s an amorous aspect to the relationship. In a lot of these stories, eels can change into people and back. So, there’s this seamless hybridity between the human and non-human world.

One day the girl goes down in the stream again, getting water or washing clothes, and the eel that used to be her pet, that’s now back in the stream, comes up to the girl and wraps his tail around her leg and violates her with it, essentially rapes her. The eel, obviously, is a very phallic fish. She runs back to the village because she’s shocked, but probably also conflicted because she loves the eel. The warriors in the village go down to the spring and capture the eel. They’re going to chop off its head. Right before they chop off its head, the eel says to the girl, “bury my head in the sand and watch what grows from it.” The first coconut tree grows from the eel’s head. When the girl drinks water from the coconut, it is as if she is kissing the eel. So that’s the story, but there’s many variations of it.

In the exhibition, the painting that I made accompanies an engraving by this guy, Hans Baldung, who was a student and friend of Dürer, of an Adam and Eve scene with the serpent around the tree of knowledge, and then next to that there’s a painting by Gauguin called Paradise Lost (ca. 1890) that has two figures leaving the Garden of Eden. In my painting, Paradise Lost, Ponape (2019), there’s a male eel creature that is half human, half male and a female that is half human, half eel. And there’s a large banana tree over their heads and breadfruit. So, on the island that I wrote about in the book called Pohnpei, this tiny island in Micronesia, there’s a clan of people called the Lasialap that actually consider eels to be their human ancestors. The eels are sort of their totem. And, so, they don’t eat eels because they’re sacred, and they’re in their stories.

In the Pacific Island stories, what I found interesting is that they share similarities to the Adam and Eve story—there is a fruit tree, a serpent-like creature, and there’s an awkward seduction that leads to a shift or transition, something is lost and something is gained. In one story Eve is seduced by the snake into eating the forbidden fruit and gains knowledge, a form of sustenance, but as a consequence she and Adam lose their innocence and must leave Paradise. In another, a girl is violated by an eel and loses her innocence, but gains the most important food plant of a particular island—usually the coconut, breadfruit, or banana. So, I found those kinds of parallels intriguing, and the
fact that this limbless, snake-like creature seems to produce these feelings of fear and awe, but also reverence universally around the world. The eel is a symbol of resilience and giving, but also, the eel can be a monster that takes things away like your life or your virginity. Through its beauty and seductiveness, it represents a different kind of world, or enables passage between worlds, not black and white, but a liminal area where things can be in the spaces between things and not be a thing yet, that’s why I think I’m really attracted to hybridity.

RAIL: Great, great! I wanted to weave together the connection you made between your fascination with eels, and also by extension, I guess, the story of Adam and Eve, and the difference between what’s knowable and what’s unknowable—how those two, at the end of the day are miscible—there really isn’t a boundary between them. And I wanted to relate that to hybridity, so you did my work for me. So, please say some more about your hybrid works?

PROSEK: Yeah. After years and years of painting trout, I was obsessed with the diversity of these fish and also the idea that they couldn’t be contained by names, that nobody could really classify this group of fish.

I mean, I’d been thinking a lot about these things, about nature not being easily divisible into discrete units, questioning whether our taxonomies could be reliably used to describe the beauty of the world. So, I began to make hybrids, because if you put a horse and a bird together, it’s no longer either of those things or both of those things. It lives in this liminal or in-between place until we give that hybrid a name like Pegasus or Mermaid. For whatever reason, hybrids have been incredibly important in human history. They’ve discovered that nature inherently pulls any walls down. And I’ve come to accept the irony of the poem is that they wouldn’t have even gotten together to have the conversation had the wall not been there. So, the wall could be looked at as something that separates, but it actually is something that brings people together. There’s a beautiful irony in walls. And I’ve come to accept that as humans on this planet, we need language and the boundaries that it creates. But we also have to keep in mind the nameless world, the unnamable spaces between things. And I feel like that’s what I want my work to do, to remind us to live in the actual world.

But the other irony is that I’ve also come to accept that it’s where language fails, that some of the most beautiful creations of humans come from, when there is something we can’t describe that’s beyond words. We use other forms of expression like dance or music or visual arts to fill those spaces in between or try to manifest those spaces. Or maybe it’s not even about creating something visual that’s beautiful to look at, but the way for the person producing the thing to cope with that space. They want to share and express it, but they can’t because language has a limit to what it can do. I used to think that it was a failure of names. That was a bad thing. But it’s actually possibly the most beautiful limitation that humans have.

RAIL: You know what that makes me think of? It makes me think of that myth because, when the young woman was violated by the eel, that’s a feeling that we all have. It’s like, my God, these systems that we have, they don’t work. But then he says, plant my hand and then you get this beautiful fruit.

PROSEK: Well, and why? Why couldn’t she have had a relationship with the, you know, eel, and it’s not really clear from the story, is it? From my point of view, you’re never clear that it’s a violation or a rape. It’s maybe an interspecies relationship that can’t happen because he’s an eel and she’s a woman. But why can’t they have a relationship? Clearly, she’s conflicted as I think Eve was in the Garden of Eden when she is facing her own limitations in the garden by listening to the snake.

RAIL: Well, you seem to travel very easily between the visual and the verbal. I see you as a hybrid between the artist and the writer. About not putting things in boxes, I see an irony in this museum show that you’ve done because these institutions fix things in our mind, you know. If anything puts things in boxes, it’s museums.

PROSEK: But again, I’m going to play the Frost card and say that I’m ambivalent. You know that without the walls of the gallery, you wouldn’t have this opportunity to make a condensed statement about why some objects end up in the natural history museum and some end up in the art museum. Without these gallery walls we would not have come together to have this conversation.

RAIL: Should we leave it at that? I’m sorry we can’t continue and discuss the trout flies that you tied in the exhibit, in the section called “Representation and Artifice.” I told you in an email that it reminded me of Roger Caillouet’s article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” since you discuss how human and non-human animals both make representations, whether it’s through painting a landscape, making a lure or decoy, or one creature evolving to mimic another.

PROSEK: We can. I can go on and on, but OK.

HOVEY BROCK is an artist and has an MFA from the School of Visual Arts Art Practice program. He is a frequent contributor to Artsee.
AUDREY FLACK
with Charles Duncan

Alongside Mary Cassatt, Audrey Flack (b. May 30, 1931) is one of the first women artists to be included in the seminal art history survey text, *Janson’s History of Art*. Her *Leonardo’s Lady* (1974), similarly, was the first Photorealist painting purchased for the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Beyond her role as a pioneering Photorealist, Flack has worked extensively in bronze sculpture, reshaping —figuratively and in conception —the treatment of the female body within monumental public commissions. Her recent return to large-scale painting has seen her develop a body of work she refers to as Post Pop Baroque. Throughout her career, she has interwoven feminist and biographical signifiers within consumer and pop-cultural tableaus that often are colored by political overtones. Recently, the genesis and synthesis of her sources was adroitly retraced in the award-winning feature-length documentary film *Queen of Hearts: Audrey Flack* (2019) guided by producer/director Deborah Shaffer.

I first met Audrey Flack in 2008 when acquiring an installation of her papers for the Archives of American Art. We immediately connected through a common love of stringed instruments (she: banjo; me: guitar) and irreverent humor, and soon I was indoctrinated into her History of Art String Band, performing with her onstage at events like autism awareness fundraisers at Caroline’s Comedy Club. In the present, I am honored to be part of the team that is helping Flack form a namesake foundation that will, as part of its mission, offer support to visual artists challenged by the demands of caring for disabled children. This winter I met with Flack at her Riverside Drive, New York City studio for the *Brooklyn Rail*, and subsequently we continued our conversation by telephone.

CHARLES DUNCAN (RAIL): It is a challenging moment for us collectively. You had been teaching this semester at The New York Academy of Art and at the end of March, after classes were cancelled, you sent an email letter to your graduate students titled “Days of Reckoning.”

AUDREY FLACK: Yes. Here’s part of what I said:

What does it mean to be an artist in the days of reckoning....the days of the Coronavirus?

The days when we face illness and death....when our mortality looms before us and fear is around every corner and in everyone’s eyes? When we are alone in our homes, unable to touch or connect? I think of Verdi’s *Requiem*, Michelangelo’s *Last Supper*, Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Carlo Crivelli’s *Pieta*, and Düer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

Amazingly enough, our frantic pace has suddenly come to a halt. We are now in slow time. We have time to think, draw, paint, sculpt, write, read, study, play music, and dance. We have time to create meaningful and beautiful work, for beauty can be found even in devastation.

RAIL: Very nicely said. And prophetically, you have been working on a painting based on Düer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* woodcut for the past four years.

FLACK: I am very excited about the galloping horsemen. I like bringing back the masters. Drawing, drawing. They are incredible draftsmen! There’s nothing new. Nothing new. You know, you look at Düer, he was a cartoonist, an illustrator. He drew wild, crazy images that looked like comic strips. The Japanese are creating manga comic paintings. I like them when they’re not too slick.

RAIL: About three or four years ago you returned to large-scale painting, launching a new body of work you call Post Pop Baroque. Tell me a bit about how that came about.

FLACK: About 30, or maybe even 40 years ago, Chuck Close and I were wet-sanding our canvases. We were preparing our own canvases through a special process. We wanted a very smooth surface, very polished, smooth. So those canvases were leaning against the back wall of my studio since I stopped painting and began sculpting.

RAIL: What got you to pull these canvases out and start painting again after such a long hiatus?

FLACK: I don’t know! [Laughter]
I think I did what I had to do with sculpture; that’s the kind of artist I am. I’m not an artist that just tends to repeat herself.

What got me involved with this painting… This painting sort of foretells what happens. This painting is about global warming. It’s about an apocalypse. It’s about the opioid epidemic. It has crack and coke in it. It has fires—like the fires in Australia. It has ships sinking. I started it four years ago and it is a “day of reckoning” painting. I think artists are in touch with a collective unconscious and they have to paint it. They have to sculpt it.

**RAIL:** Tell me a little more about what’s happening in the painting. Start with this woman in the foreground with long arms.

**FLACK:** She is semi-drowning, trying to pull herself up. There’s an old rubber tire and some pylons of a pier and goo is hanging down from her. Phosphorescent goo. I used phosphorescent paint. I’m having fun with different types of paint.

**RAIL:** And does this woman originate from your own imagination?

**FLACK:** From a comic. I am enamored of comics now. You know, something that we were supposed to look down on. These artists were supposed to be lesser. But you know, the *Biblia pauperum*, which was the poor man’s Bible, was nothing but sort-of-comic-illustrations for people who couldn’t read. They looked at these little paintings that to me were like comic strips. And I think some comic artists are really terrific artists. Also, I’m very involved with black and white drawing, and I used to ink Spiderman, so I’m familiar with comics. It was a lovely profession, but things are changing rapidly.

**RAIL:** When you inked Spiderman, you mean professionally?

**FLACK:** What happens with comic strips, the artist draws them in pencil and there’s this inker who makes this wonderful calligraphic line, almost like a Zen calligrapher, who inks over the pencil. When my studio was on 8th Street and 3rd Avenue in a condemned building, I was on the third floor, and there was a professional inker on the second floor. There was a hole in the middle of the studio floor where the wood had rotted so I could look down into his studio. And when he got very busy I would ink for him. And when he got very busy I would ink for him. There was something wonderful about a professional inker then. They had great technique. Today, when I go to shade Dürer—cross-hatching and various shades of gray with nothing but black and white lines—that type of work is still amazing. And of course Dürer and Rubens—all of them—they had favorite craftsmen who carved their etching lines.

**RAIL:** What’s going on in *Day of Reckoning*?

**FLACK:** This has two of the horsemen in Dürer’s *Apocalypse*. It has Death on a pale horse, and he is holding a trident. There are two children that are about to get covered by the Hokusai wave. She’s sort of electrocuted. Her hair is on fire. And their genitals are exposed because they are totally innocent. This is Adam and Eve. This is male and female. This is the future generation that we’re poisoning. Falling down from the sky are these gold bricks. It’s a total collapse. The world is exploding. It says “Baroom” in the middle. Pestilence is coming from the other horseman who holds scales from which the goo is spilling down onto this plump naked little girl next to the word “Kkraaakk” and she’s spilling a can of Coke. And down at the bottom a bishop is being swallowed up by a dragon. It’s the fires, the floods, the greed running rampant over society that I am in touch with.

The painting should have been done in a year, but after I started, my husband Bob had brain surgery. I had a serious illness. My daughter broke her hip. It was its own horror show for me. And every time things got better and I would go back to the painting, something else would happen.

**RAIL:** Did it occur to you that maybe you shouldn’t do this painting? [Laughter]

**FLACK:** No. That never occurred to me. What it did do… The painting could contain everything. It was
big enough—it had enough room—so that every time I went back to it I could put something else in. Some paintings happen very fast. This one really had to bake for a long time. Artists in the past worked on paintings for 10 or 11 years—something unheard of these days. But why not? There’s something beautiful about that kind of extension.

RAIL: Tell me about this idea of the Post Pop Baroque.

FLACK: I love the Baroque. It got a bad rep with Minimalism, because Minimalism is supposed to be very elegant. And from Berenson. Berenson liked the classicism of Raphael. Classic simplicity. Calm. Symmetry that is very soothing and calm. Baroque was, I think, to him, lower-class. Not WASP-like. I am decidedly not a WASP and I love the Baroque and Spanish passion art, and I’m going for it. Now. Pop. Pop has a kind of sarcasm. This is not sarcastic. It is more quirky humor. You know, we watch these ads on television where they tell you to take—these are very funny—she will cure you or help you, however, it might kill you. You might get a heart attack, or cancer, or diabetes. So the contrast of something serious and ridiculous is with us all the time. I think Andy Warhol putting a soup can up as a work of art is ironic and sarcastic. I don’t think that this is.

RAIL: In your painting 

FLACK: You are talking about the sparkling donuts that the angels are dropping—I mean, why not donuts instead of flowers?

RAIL: Here you’re starting with Rubens, and you have Superman and Supergirl...

FLACK: In 

RAIL: I enjoyed seeing it at DOC NYC Film Festival in Chelsea. It is not a simple puff or promotional piece; it really delved into some of the struggles you’ve personally and as an artist over the years. Much of it centers around your family life. Your daughters are a lesser. You were a little woman. And turns out he thought out. It was just in the air. You were just there.

FLACK: Yes, because my older daughter is severely autistic. At that time not only were mothers blamed for their child’s autism but women artists were not taken seriously, no matter how hard they tried. Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, and Helen Frankenthaler were serious artists and an important part of the scene but they were considered secondary to any male. And turns out he thought out. It was just in the air. You were just there.

FLACK: I happen to like the two women filmmakers, Deborah Shaffer and Rachel Reichman. Otherwise, I couldn’t have done it. I’m an artist that likes to work alone, although when I did my public sculptures I worked in foundries and needed assistants, and I’ve also had assistants with some of my large Vanitas paintings. I know that Rubens had a big studio and had some great artists working for him. Artists of all kinds and large working studios. They had people around. I think for the most part the greatest of them did their best work on their own. I find my time in the studio alone is—what’s the right word? Out of this world. There is something sublime about it when the work goes well. Art is like making love; you can’t have some- one else do it for you. The Garden of Love

RAIL: Queen of Hearts has been very well-received.

FLACK: Yes, we were thrilled—actually surprised. Amazed! It was screened at the Hamptons Doc Fest last December. Screenings took place on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, with films shown all day. We had the honor of being the opening night film, which was a mixed blessing because Thursday night in the winter in East Hampton—who’s there? I was sure there would be maybe 20 people but it turned out that the place was about 85 percent filled. We were up against some really great films. The Ralph Lauren film opened Saturday night. Prime time. Ralph Lauren was there. Paparazzi were there. People were hanging from the rafters. And there was a terrific film on Roy Cohn made by Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s granddaughter and son. There was a great film on poaching in Africa. Another on Russian oligarchs called Citizen K. These were all big money films. Ours was not. Here’s the amazing thing: the audience voted ours best feature film! And it also won the Art and Inspiration Award. Can you believe it? I was terrified concerned because those two women understandably wanted total artistic control and wouldn’t let me see it until it was completed and previewed in a small theater. Only then did I realize what an amazing job they did.

RAIL: We were more—I don’t like using that dirty word, bourgeois—most of us had families and kids.

FLACK: I grew up in Washington Heights, a very bourgeois neighborhood. I remember being concerned about Marberger’s visit. I was concerned because my studio was nothing but the dining room. It was a big room but it was a dining room right off the kitchen. I had put wood beams across the ceiling and installed clip-on incandescent flood lights because it was an extremely dark room fac- ing a back alley with bars on the windows. It was not an impressive artist’s studio and I had these two kids. He said he was coming at 12. I got a babysitter and got those kids out of the house. I ran around like crazy and hid every diaper, every toy, every sign that I had a child in every closet and every drawer. Marberger arrived on time and I ushered him into the studio. I tried to take his coat but he refused. I figured it was because if he didn’t like the work he could make a quick getaway. And I prayed that the babysitter wouldn’t come back with the children while he was there. I remembered that was such a pressure for me, because then he’d see them and what would he think of me? Can you imagine that in your mind?

FLACK: I think that art was not your highest priority.

FLACK: Probably. I don’t even know if it was thought out. It was just in the air. You were just lesser. You were a little woman. And turns out he was actually very impressed with the painting. He sat down and then took off his coat. I worried even more because we didn’t have cell phones so I couldn’t call Clover the babysitter and say, “Stay out!” But luckily he left before she returned with the children. Marberger put the painting into a terrific show at Fischbach which was on Madison Avenue and was a very hot gallery at the time. Little did I know that the show was called Six Women Artists. I had no idea, I had never been called a woman artist. I didn’t think I was a woman artist, I thought I was an artist like everyone else. When the time came for the opening, I put on my best tight jeans, black turtleneck sweater, high heel shoes, and hoop earrings. I was all ready for the opening. We lived in a second-floor apartment and I was halfway down the stairs when I heard the babysitter yell in the hallway frantically, “Come back! Come back! Hurry!” I came running back, Melissa was standing in front of the bathroom looking started. She had apparently somehow stuffed every block and toy into the toilet which was overflowing, and turned on the sink faucets.
which were overflowing! And things were bobbing up and down on the floor. She was standing there in a very autistic state. I tried to calm her. I saw she was alright and proceeded to put my hand down to the towel and pick out all the wads of Play-Doh, toys, and a couple of old diapers. I turned off the water valve, sopped up all the things I could, calmed the babysitter down, dried myself off, and ran out the door hoping to make the opening before it was too late.

It was raining, I forgot my umbrella and was soaked when I got there. Madison Avenue was basically closed except for the glamorous, gorgeous glass swinging doors of the Fischbach Gallery, and luckily the opening was still in progress. I went in, tried to act calm, pulled myself together. I saw a crowd around my painting discussing the merits and the problems of using photography. That was considered blasphemy. I was so happy to be with artists. To be in my world because I had been isolated with the autism with two kids and no money. We were broke. Then the lights blinked, the gallery was closing, and it was time to go. Everybody said, “Come on Audrey, we are going out for dinner, join us.” I said I had other plans. I had to run home, take over the kids, pay the babysitter, and, you know, go back to my life; but I could never tell anyone, I couldn’t mention it.

Most of the Abstract Expressionist women didn’t have children—the only one who did was Grace. They bought into the line that you can’t be an artist and have children. I think Grace did a terrible thing. The author of *Ninth Street Women* lauds her and thinks that she’s a great artist because she sacrificed her only child for her art, but you don’t sacrifice a child to get more painting time or more drinking time. When you have a child, you have a responsibility to that child.

**RAIL:** As you went through your career, often you worked in almost exclusively male situations. One was your sketching club and the other was the loosely defined group of pioneering photorealists. In both cases you were the sole female artist.

**FLACK:** I never thought of myself as a woman artist. I was just an artist. I remember being part of that sketching group with Phil Pearlstein, Harold Bruder, and Sidney Tillim and a few others—all men. One night the model didn’t show up, so all the guys looked at me. I thought, no matter how much they respect me as an artist I am still a woman and I am the one to take my clothes off, I said to Sid: “Why don’t you pull your pants down?” And so he started to unzip his fly and I said, “Okay, go ahead!” Then he got cold feet and took his socks off and said we could draw his toes.

Grace, Helen, Joan, Lee, Elaine; they really weren’t that friendly with each other. They were for themselves and they were very competitive about promoting their men. Lee did not like Elaine. She used to say to me, “Just look at her, she calls herself Elaine de Kooning not Elaine Fried. I never changed my name, I’m Lee Krasner. I’m not Lee Pollock.” So she was very mad at Elaine, and Elaine got back at her by calling her dog Jackson. She would say, “Come here Jackson, Now, sit!” She always loved to do that. So there was a lot of competition between these women and they certainly didn’t band together and help each other.

Of the photorealists, I was closest to Richard Estes. We saw each other a lot because he also lived on the Upper West Side in an old building on Central Park West. It’s important for artists to know—that they don’t have to live the stereotypical glamourized, mythologized life of the drunken, crazed, debauched artist in a barren loft. The mythology is so old around that. There are artists who live a more stable life. Who live in an apartment, who have kids and take care of them and behave like decent human beings. You don’t have to be an alcoholic or hang out in bars. You don’t have to be insane.

**RAIL:** A couple of years ago in the *New York Times* there was a profile on you that revisited the scuttled planned public sculpture for the Borough of Queens, for which you won the commission. We’re at an interesting place today—in this little, primarily-white town in Upstate New York—that was in Times Square? **FLACK:** Yes. The big difference between Kehinde Wiley’s *Rumors of War* that was in *Times Square*?

**RAIL:** But atypical for a monumental sculpture. **FLACK:** Yes. The big difference between Kehinde Wiley’s and what I was trying to do is that I wanted to bring harmony. I want to bring some kind of peace between people. What I see happening now is that there’s such anger. Deserved anger. There’s no excuse for what we’ve done to Black people, to Native Americans—it’s horrifying. So his sculpture is very confrontational and angry. Both of us as artists want to right the wrongs. I am also sick and tired of these generals on horses that we have statues of at that time were the Statue of Liberty and the Alice in Wonderland statue by José de Creeft in Central Park. So, I mean, you’re looking all over the place and there’s some general on a horse—either holding a gun or a sword—or a soldier going to battle. If there’s ever a woman, she’s looking up at the general adoringly, with one breast hanging out. I wanted to put more strong and intelligent women out there. I didn’t want them to have the bodies of a Maillol or a Lachaise. A size triple D, 8x4 bra and a tiny little waist. And Lachaise statues always had these tiny little feet. Full-breasted and big round-bottomed women with feet that could barely support them. I wanted my women to be beautiful, strong, and intelligent. I sculpted them in a 19th century representational style, which I loved and was thrown out with the onset of modernism.

**RAIL:** What are your thoughts about the Kehinde Wiley’s *Rumors of War* that was in *Times Square*?

**FLACK:** It’s a great placement! People certainly got to see it.
ART IN CONVERSATION

but I wanted to put forth the female principle, balance the planet. Kehinde Wiley is making an aggressive political statement. I like the idea of his Black general on a horse but mine would have a different demeanor. That’s the great thing about art. We artists can say what we want and create it in the way we want. That makes me stop and think, “Well what exactly is the role of art today? What has happened?” I hear that they put it up in Richmond, Virginia next to a confederate—

RAIL: —Yes, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts had a hand in that, I believe.

FLACK: That’s interesting. That in itself is a valid confrontation. As you know, I’ve made my share of confrontational images, including a painting of Hitler.

RAIL: How was that received?

FLACK: It’s at the Oberlin Museum [Allen Memorial Art Museum] and I don’t think anyone ever sees it because I don’t think they ever put it up. He looks kind of fiendish. He doesn’t look like a nice guy.

RAIL: And what was your impetus for making that painting?

FLACK: I think about Hitler a lot, and I read a lot about him. I’m Jewish. I grew up during World War II, and my brother was one of two soldiers left alive in the Battle of the Bulge. I did a series of political paintings. I did Kennedy, Rockefeller, the Tehran Conference, Hitler. I was doing political work. My work is political. I painted Anwar Sadat’s portrait for the cover of Time magazine in which I subtly combined the Egyptian and Israeli flags. When you think of putting a woman—a heroic woman—out there where you’ve never had one, that’s pretty damn political. To me, political art doesn’t necessarily have to be antagonistic. Is the statue good enough—is Wiley’s statue good enough to last? Is it beautiful? Does it transcend? In the case of Wiley, is the idea and the political intent more important than the art itself? You need years of study and experience to realize large realistic sculpture. It takes tremendous amounts of trial and error. And it can’t be done mechanically or mainly by technicians if it is to be great.

RAIL: This, of course, was the criticism of photorealism. That it was mechanical. But I found it really interesting when I did an archival collecting initiative for the Archives of American Art and observed the working methods of some of the greatest photorealists: you, Richard Estes, Tom Blackwell, John Salt, Don Eddy, Ron Kleemann. Everyone’s process was working methods of some of the greatest photorealists: you, Richard Estes, Tom Blackwell, John Salt, Don Eddy, Ron Kleemann. Everyone’s process was—

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FLACK: You chose your own camera. Richard and I used totally different lenses, different cameras, different printing processes, and we looked at the photograph in different ways.

RAIL: ‘Talking about the transformative nature of art, you tell the story of an experience you had going into a Thomas Kinkade store during a highly difficult period, and how you found the work soothing. When I look at your career, you’ve always unabashedly embraced art that treads heavily on what Greenberg would consider the wrong side of the tracks in the avant-garde and kitsch duality. Art that references or embodies any tinge of consumerism was anathema to Greenberg, as was art that recalled 19th-century academicism. He would, of course, consider Thomas Kinkade...

FLACK: 100 percent baseline kitsch. Well, you know, that’s a big question because that goes along with academicism, which gets thrown out with modernism. It’s still not accepted.

RAIL: But you’ve stayed with it. What is the place of figurative and narrative art today?

FLACK: It’s interesting. At the High School of Music & Art, I was taught strictly abstraction. Picasso; the Cubists, and modernism prevailed. I was taught to scorn realism. No decent art school taught it.

RAIL: And, of course, one of your teachers at Yale was Josef Albers, who ultimately gave you something to push against, more than to follow.

FLACK: You get the Bauhaus. You get modernism. You get Abstract Expressionism. Realism and figurative art is out. Pop art is based on modernist principles.

RAIL: Most would say it’s postmodernist.

FLACK: But it’s flat. Any modelling, any romanticism, that’s out! I mean, the fact is, people love it.

RAIL: Where do you think it fits today?

FLACK: People still love it! You know they love Andrew Wyeth’s Christina’s World (1948). There was a painting hanging at the Modern years ago called Hide-and-Seek (1942) by Pavel Tchelitchew. People adored it. Stood before it for hours. It is now hidden in the basement. So I think people have been brainwashed.

You know, Thomas Kinkade is not a 19th century academic, he’s just a super sentimental populist. But I think a good deal of the public is starved for that. The public loved photorealism, but that exists in an entirely different realm. It has not yet received its full recognition. It brought back realist painting as well as photography. I remember there was a show—I think at the Guggenheim and there were lines of people waiting to get in—and Hilton Kramer said, “Well now we know it’s no good, and I began to take notes and that was the start of the book. It will be illustrated.

I want to put out another point of view of what I think. Because very often we’re controlled by what the “powers” want us to think. Like the days when everything was abstract and representational art was considered inferior. There’s a lot that needs to be straightened out. Ultimately, I say: you are yourself. Nobody will ever take your originality or creativity away, so don’t be afraid to honor your masters and mistresses.

CHARLES DUNCAN is Executive Director of the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation.

MAY 2020

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In 1793, during the French Revolution, the French kings’ art collection housed in the Louvre became the property of the French Nation, and was opened to the public. Although there had been earlier European museums prior to the Louvre, this was a most decisive beginning in the history of public art museums as we know it, which is found now in almost every country. In 2018, the Louvre had more than ten million visitors. It is the most visited museum anywhere. And so, when, some years ago, we inaugurated this series of interviews with museum directors, naturally we wanted to interview all three living former Presidents of the Louvre: Michel Laclotte (1987–95), Pierre Rosenberg (1994–2001), and Henri Loyrette (2001–13). In February of 2019 Pissarro talked with all three men in Paris, in French separately, in interviews. Carrier did the preliminary editing and provided this introduction.

Here, then, we present the 16th museum director we have had the pleasure of interviewing. Our consistent discovery has been that museums everywhere share some concerns, and that, in some important ways, national differences matter enormously. Almost all museums have to expand and add to the collection previously unrepresented visual traditions. All of them have to contend with increasing numbers of visitors. But how these expansions of the buildings and the collections are supported financially considerably varies from one country to another. As will be made clear here, some of the differences in American and French funding systems are dramatic and important.

We have consulted with profit Michel Laclotte’s A Key to the Louvre: Memoirs of a Curator, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Abbeville, 2004).

JOACHIM PISSARRO (RAIL): The premise of this set of three interviews is to have a conversation with the three President-Directors of the Louvre, who each greatly contributed towards opening this institution and helping it transition towards the 21st century. The modernization of the Louvre has gone through several chapters. It began to take shape under the aegis of Laclotte. What would interest me is to hear your perspective with regards to this modernization, and to the transition of this antiquated institution into the present and into the future.

HENRI LOYRETTE: I inherited in 2001 a Louvre that was already very much up-to-date. There were of course many things that still needed to be done. This was the case, namely, with the Department of Islamic Art and regional projects such as the big project of Louvre-Lens. We were really still under the impetus of the Grand Louvre. This momentum was born in the 1980s with an architectural expansion that allowed a much broader presentation of our collections—35,000 objects on display! But even with this considerable transformation, there were still some departments, some collections, that had not yet obtained the space they deserved. Thanks to all these efforts, however, the Louvre had truly entered modernity.

On the administrative reform side, it was more tentative because indeed Laclotte’s admirable efforts had primarily focused on supporting the Grand Louvre architecturally and with regards to the expansion of its collections. A certain number of things had not been done for very simple and normal reasons—compromises with people who did not necessarily follow this movement and who may have attempted to restrain it. Proposals had to be made, it was necessary to find arrangements and to postpone all matters of administrative reforms. Pierre Rosenberg continued, but in a situation that was similar to what I had been faced with at Orsay, where I was the second director after Françoise Cachin.

The circumstances I inherited were therefore remarkable—a Louvre that had already acquired all the tools to make it the largest museum in the world. The teams that enabled us to support this effort were all there. Still, there were some pockets, indeed, numerous pockets of resistance and reluctance, which slowed down the movement, and the whole process. This affected a variety of things. When I arrived, the Louvre was composed of many different departments, each acting as though it were a small museum in its own right: all these departments had little contact, if any, between them. Really, and there was so much feudalism. I am referring to department directors, who were still called the department curators, and who had a hard time tolerating this authority. For instance, when I arrived—I am providing this example because it is absolutely striking and incomprehensible to me today—I, as President-Director of the Louvre, was never kept informed of the exhibition loans that all the department heads were sending! This would happen on their own watch, and without any consideration of the overall larger interest of the Louvre. Once you have organized many exhibitions, you know quite well what is at stake for the institution to negotiate a loan with another institution, and that a certain fragile balance is to be established and kept among larger institutions. It is, therefore, totally normal for the President-Director to not only be aware, but to be actively involved in this process. There was so much feudalism going on in all the departments that it prevented all to work together, that is, from one department to another, there was practically no communication! They were each in their own space. In fact, the term used by Michel Laclotte at the Arcachon seminar refers back to this. He said that it was like “Yalta” because we had distributed the spaces in this manner. (Ed.: A reference to the Yalta conference during World War II when Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met secretly to divide up the world). The use of such a formula, however, is also a compromise towards each other’s reluctances and resistances. Such was therefore the internal situation that I entered: an executive administrative team that was hardly accepted by another institution, and that a certain fragile balance is to be established and kept among larger institutions. This antagonism is quite common, but it had been exacerbated in this instance between the so-called scholars/curators and the past administrative teams, and this obviously did not ease the task. This is the first point.

RAIL: It is absolutely fascinating to hear you speak about this. Your two predecessors did not mention it. This brings to mind Glenn Lowry (whom we also interviewed at the Rail) and who went through a similar experience when he arrived at MoMA.

LOYRETTE: But he has been there for much longer.

RAIL: Yes, since 1995. He did have a similar experience with feudalities. There were different departments at MoMA that had been conceived and governed somewhat autocratically... and the Chief Curators were like mini-directors of a small museum, each. I have no proof of this, but I actually always thought that Alfred Barr probably looked at the structure of the Louvre to apply it to MoMA.

LOYRETTE: Yes, absolutely. He had his spaces, his managers—
RAIL: And the commonality was that these managers, who were also called “director of departments,” like Rubin, did not communicate amongst each other.

LOYRETTE: Of course, it is also important for the departments to remain somewhat autonomous. We sought to decentralize and to give them more autonomy at the same time, but there should also be a consideration for the whole and for a certain common interest. The Louvre had a very peculiar and paradoxical situation: it was a very old museum, founded in 1793, as you know, and yet at the same time, a very young institution. This is truly quite rare. The Grand Louvre opened in 1993. I was actually the third President-Director of the Louvre. In a way, you could say that the Grand Louvre was a brand new museum! [Laughter]

RAIL: I see what you mean. Yes, the Grand Louvre can be regarded as an institution of the 21st century.

LOYRETTE: Yes, in some ways. You see, the situation was that beforehand, you never had directors at the Louvre, including those who had a solely administrative function. To a certain extent, we always had this feudal endemic system. And for the first time with Laclotte, with Rosenberg, and then with me, there was someone who managed this establishment from the inside. As we know, piecing old and new is a very evangelical concept, but it is something inherently difficult and complex to carry through.

Now, on the outside perspective, there was very little autonomy given to the Louvre because there was a very particular system of supervision, revenue sharing and collaborations with other administrative structures, called Réunion des Musées Nationaux and we had not been freed up from that administrative weight yet. When I arrived, there was a report from the Cour des Comptes (Court of Audit), which helped me a lot. It stated that the State had wanted an institution that should be perfectly autonomous, if not independent, but definitely autonomous, and that, so to speak, the Louvre did not have the means to achieve this autonomy. This was a real difficulty. It may seem straightforward and simple to ensure that departments worked and that there would be more connections between them, that it would be acceptable to display a few sculptures in the paintings department and a few paintings and objets d’art in the sculptures department, but each time this led to unbelievable battles. You have no idea!

RAIL: Was gaining a new status of autonomy for the Grand Louvre, what you consider among your biggest achievements during your tenure?

LOYRETTE: Yes. You see, in a way, this was the completion, in a certain way, or the implementation of what the government wanted for the Louvre.

RAIL: And so, of course the government followed you?

LOYRETTE: Yes, more or less, because I also often had a few clashes with the Minister of Culture, who had a negative view of the autonomy of large establishments. What needs to be said is that the Ministers of Culture were coming and going; there were lots of them. I have known six of them in twelve years! And my presence at the helm of the Louvre, and the Louvre’s inherent grandness and radiance, might sometimes have overshadowed them. But we worked it out. [Laughter]

RAIL: You did, and triumphantly. Now let’s look at your legacy, at the other end of your tenure. Today, the Louvre that you have helped to redefine is often valued as a great example, especially in the United States, of a large autonomous institution that succeeded in establishing its own autonomy, and functions by itself very successfully, partly by receiving major donations and gifts.

LOYRETTE: Yes; this was indeed one of the significant changes. You are right to stress this point because the autonomy of the Louvre, on a larger scale, also meant its financial autonomy with a budget of a little over $100 million—this is not insignificant. First the budget increased, in a rather colossal way, with the construction that we undertook, and with the staff that we hired in areas that were vastly understaffed. But I need to say
that when I arrived, the budget of the Louvre was covered with 75% from the government and 25% from our own resources and from private patronage. When I left, it was 47% from the government and 53% from our own resources and from patronage. It was an important increase, and in fact it was supported by the government because during those years the state had the best tax systems in the world in terms of patronage. I never speak of the government’s role in terms of “withdrawal” because, in actual fact, it completely supported the financial autonomy of the Louvre, which I was advocating. There was then a steep rise in public attendance, which obviously increased the revenues, in particular the revenue from ticket sales. I must say, the figures are staggering: we went from 3–4 million visitors when I arrived, and the year of my departure, we almost reached 10 millions. I was especially proud of two things with regards to these numbers: the proportion of young visitors, that is, 40% of visitors were under the age of thirty; and I was also impressed by the importance of our national attendance, that is to say that one third of the 10 million visitors were French. The proportion is much higher than what I had previously known at the Orsay, for instance and it is also higher than the statistics of the Louvre today. Much of this is due to the quantity of projects we were producing, especially for younger audiences.

RAIL: Well, the statistics that you’re giving me here are very meaningful. To return to visitor numbers, today we often cite a fact, which is not particular to the Louvre but which is certainly evident at the Louvre today—the considerable number of visitors, mostly from Asia, who come to see the Louvre for two or three works: the Venus de Milo [ca. 100 BC], the Mona Lisa [1503], and perhaps the Winged Victory of Samothrace [ca. 190 BC]. You obviously perceived this phenomenon. How did you address this? You have to bring them in, but in relation to what you told me...

LOYRETTE: I arrived to a museum where the position of the works had been fixed already. There was no question of changing it. I completed the project that Laclotte and Rosenberg initiated—it opened when I was the director. The only change we made was for the Venus de Milo, when we created the new Greek rooms with Jean-Luc Martinez. The Mona Lisa was placed in the Salle des États with the recurring issues that we know.

I need to correct you, as I have to say that the problem of these works is both a handicap and a blessing. It’s a handicap because indeed it focuses the attention of literally millions of visitors in those two places, which aren’t too far from each other, but it also privileges certain other areas of the museum. This is the main problem of the Louvre: due to its configuration, which is that of a royal palace, its distances are huge, and sometimes difficult to bear, which means that certain areas are hard to reach. On the other hand, when you think about it, there really aren’t that many museums that own so many iconic works. Many of the most important museums today, might be embarrassed to admit, even the Met, that they don’t have the equivalent of a Mona Lisa or a Winged Victory of Samothrace. But this also comes from the fact that the original history and function of the Louvre was not to be a museum, but a royal palace with a very, very old history.

RAIL: What often strikes me, and I personally love the rooms of Laclotte, the early Italian Renaissance, where we see the majestic and splendid crowning of the virgin Mary [Coronation of the Virgin ca. 1430-1432] by Fra Angelico, and that incredible group of Trecento paintings and, more often than not, I find that there’s usually not a soul there.

LOYRETTE: And even though it’s on a path that is busy, very, very busy! And close to rooms that are packed. But it’s true, there are patches, and rooms that are empty at the Louvre. And, I’m not even speaking about French 18th century painting, for example, which is at the other side. That’s one of the real problems. On the other hand, it’s also one of the charms of the Louvre, not to be constantly subjected to such a strong pressure from the visitors. This is really one of the fundamental problems of this institution. In an effort to direct visitors to certain areas, we created itineraries, which sometimes worked relatively well. We did everything to bring visitors to spaces other than those that they were used to visiting.

RAIL: Just one more question regarding finances. There is an irony or an interesting paradox, which is that the institution you inherited from Laclotte and Rosenberg was the antithesis of what American museums are. The institution that you passed on to Martinez became the effigy, the perfect example with stores (I know that Rosenberg and Laclotte don’t like the use of the term “store”), but the Louvre now generates a very serious revenue, and has acquired under your watch a quasi-autonomy financially. This is no small accomplishment. So, with only three directors, three president-directors, three decades, you transformed this place—of course all three of you contributed to this, but you completed it, what your predecessors put in place—making it one of the most important cultural and art historical instruments worldwide, but also a considerable economic force. I wanted to ask you, I heard a rumor that, apparently, one of the latest Ministers of Culture came to claim a certain portion. You were so successful that she basically wanted to have a share of the pie...

LOYRETTE: No, no, that’s not true. One of the difficulties we faced was to keep the money of the Louvre Abu Dhabi to ourselves. But through some struggle, and, in the support, much more of the Ministry of Finance than of the Ministry of Culture—in a way you are right to talk about this—we did retain our financial autonomy and we kept our revenue. The sharing that used to take place between the Louvre and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux ceased very quickly. For us, that was unbearable. And I am very pleased with this result.

RAIL: So nowadays, the publication department of the Louvre—

LOYRETTE: Yes, it is finally completely autonomous. What I wanted, and for me this was crucial because I had known very difficult situations in the past, this is a domain that you too, know very well: acquisitions. When I was at the Musée d’Orsay, there was a global budget for the national museums, and there was the added difficulty in my field, where, in particular with Impressionism, works of art are worth enormous sums of money. There was therefore a true loss of cultural heritage. Many things left the country because we couldn’t afford them, we couldn’t hold them back. What I achieved, and I am very happy about that, is that a percentage of the ticket sales is reserved purely for acquisition of works of art. This is excellent on one hand, because I believe that once you make it clear to your visitors where the money they spend on a ticket goes, they might more easily accept the price of the ticket. And then, on another note, the curators themselves suddenly see an incentive and begin to get concerned about issues of public access, and number of visitors, if, of course, they want to expand their collections. So we had a base which was far from negligible, to the extent that now, I think, some want to cut those percentages. It worked out quite well.

Matters that for me remained unfinished, and I did a lot of work on this, are questions of collection. There is a strong lack of certain areas that are sometimes omitted. That is an old story. For example, the Department of Egyptian antiquities never went up the Nile to look to the Sudan, for instance, which was a heritage of the 19th century. It was as though, past Nubia, there was nothing at all. Even though it was in a certain way one of the prerogatives of the Louvre to be interested in these cultures. So, we began archeological digs, and excavations in the Sudan, north of Mouweis. Another example: we also devoted renewed interest towards Russia and produced a beautiful exhibition on the subject. In a similar context, we realized that we were relatively poor in German 19th century decorative arts and acquired important Biedermeier furniture. You see, each time, these actions were very different, but each one aimed to break a little bit the agreed-upon vision, or the preconceptions that we had of a set museum whose collections and borders were, in a way, strictly defined. What was important for me was to encourage curiosity for something that was at the edge, for something that we had never considered until now in the true sense of the term, and, of course, as you can imagine, I often encountered reluctance because, among some of my colleagues, there is a certain dominant idea of the Louvre to be in these cultures. Biedermeier furniture, precisely for example, was an area that I find incredibly interesting and fasci- nating. Having been at Orsay, one cannot understand the Viennese progress at the end of the 19th century, if we do not consider what was there beforehand, but for many people it was, in a way, unworthy of the Louvre. It was below us, if you see what I mean. Quite a fossilized vision of what is art and art history!

RAIL: You also did some significant work to create a new department. The Louvre was the Louvre of seven departments. Today, there are eight departments. I am assuming that it wasn’t an easy task to create a Department of Islamic Art.

LOYRETTE: For me, it was a necessity, and it’s one of the changes I proposed at the very beginning of my tenure at the Louvre. When I went to see President Jacques Chirac before he appointed me, I had told him that what the Louvre really lacks is a department of Islamic art. For two reasons: on the one hand, Michel Laclotte had already done a lot and paved the way towards this goal, but he had created rooms that were somewhat residual and not very convenient. It nonetheless permitted us
to display collections that I had known when they were in storage for about a quarter of a century, and that were suddenly shown at the Louvre for a much longer time. What you should know is that some of these objects of this department were in the possession of the French Crown well before the Revolution. So, there was a real story to these objects and I felt that, for both political and artistic reasons, not to consider the arts of Islam with dignity, not to give them the space they deserved, not to give them an administrative autonomy and not to consider them as forming a whole and important department in itself, was an aberration. I think that it is so obvious today that we don’t even understand the situation of the past, when it was meant to be a mere section attached to the Department of Oriental Antiquities with which it obviously had but a slight connection geographically, but even then, it had absolutely nothing to do with Oriental Antiquities!

RAIL: In relation to Syria?
LOYRETTE: Yes, and with Iran. It basically made no sense at all. And when it happened, it was not only just that these objects gained an administrative autonomy, but this came with whole new rooms. The construction of these new rooms of Islamic art enabled us to display the collections more gloriously. Once a new department is created, teams are gathered, the research policy is increased, there is an acquisition budget, patronage also follows because, of course it immediately interested many people. A new dynamic is formed and it has multiple consequences but, at the source, there was an existing collection that had been largely ignored, and it is one of the most beautiful in the world. My biggest regret, had I stayed on, is that I would have loved to pursue this effort further, but it was unfortunately abandoned by my successor, was the idea of creating a ninth department: a department of the art of Oriental Christians, which sort of corresponded to the Department of Islamic art. At the moment, if you go to the Louvre, everything that touches upon the Copts of Egypt is attached to the department of Egyptian Antiquities, everything that touches upon Armenia, Byzantium, Russia, etc. is all dispersed across different departments, which means that there is no overall view of early Oriental Christianity, even though there is a profound unity which is artistic, geographic, religious, and civilizational there. This is a real subject. I truly regret that this has not been done. Additionally, I think that in this day and age, it would be good to have this element and to place tension on what was and is extremely important.

RAIL: What were the one, two, three, four acquisitions that you are most proud of and that you view as essential?
LOYRETTE: They were varied. I would like to emphasize that I am proud to have brought things that were previously not expected to be at the Louvre. For example, a head by [Franz Xaver] Messerschmidt (Ed.: Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 18th century German-Austrian sculptor, known for his almost caricatural “character heads” sculptures) that we purchased at an auction for an important price, but the tax benefits of the Louvre enabled us to do this. I believe this was very important for the Department of Sculptures and that was part of a policy I personally encouraged, of paying attention towards artists or countries that were until then given little consideration. There were many such things. Some were national treasures that we were able to get after many successive battles. The painting by [Jean] Malouel (Ed.: Jean Malouel, or Jan Maelwael, Netherlandish artist, sometimes considered French, of the late 14th century who was the court painter of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy), for example, a truly admirable work, very sought after. This acquisition went through a whole series of complicated obstacles, but we got it in the end. Also things that may seem insignificant, like the Biedermeier furniture, which I mentioned before, because it was also a somewhat new direction for the Louvre. But you see, we did have a kind of financial comfort which didn’t exist before, but for the larger acquisitions, I must admit that it was always a battle. Once again, the national treasure system in France is unparalleled. In a way, not a single other country has this opportunity. It was also a matter of regularly connecting and building relationships with certain patrons. For instance, I’m thinking of the generosity of AXA and of its president Henri de Castries, who has always supported the acquisition of glorious national treasures. These are quite complex situations that involve curators, patrons, and it’s...
never a one-shot type of situation. These things develop progressively through loyalty, friendship, and recurrence. One of the things I am very proud of is the acquisition of the Venus (standing in a landscape (1529)) by Cranach because it was the first major standing campaign that we launched, and it was the first time it was done in France. It later became quite common, but it worked very well with people who gave from €10 to €500 thousand, sometimes more. We had named this campaign "Tous mécènes!" [All patrons!], and all the donors proudly participated. It was a very moving situation to watch, and to see all of them when they were invited to be the first to see the acquired work, and take pride in this important acquisition, this was something!

RAIL: How many donors are there generally?

LOYRETTE: A large number, very large number... thousands.

RAIL: The responses that surprised me from both Pierre and Michel, when I asked them the same question, and I don’t think they had spoken with each other about it beforehand, but they both wished to steer the conversation towards the regrets they had had, rather than the great acquisitions they made. It was fascinating.

LOYRETTE: Yes, that’s curious, because I am really proud of what we have acquired recently. We have regrets, of course, we always have them. But, you know, in a certain way, I had many more regrets when I was at Orsay. It’s true that we regretted a Velázquez that we almost bought, so we have no Velázquez today! We almost bought one, but for some reasons it went past us and was acquired by the Prado. But in any case, I would say that my most notable regret, yes, it’s maybe the Stoclet Duccio (Ed.: Duccio’s Madonna and Child (ca. 1300), sometimes referred to as the “Stoclet Madonna” after the name of its 19th century Belgian owner) that I regret most, that we couldn’t buy because the price was absolutely enormous and we also ran into another kind of obstacle from the patrons’ perspective who had a problem with a religious painting. When a patron is a corporation, it is always more difficult to propose an acquisition with a religious theme, through a company because it might be supported by some and rejected by others. It is one of the reasons why we did not get the Stoclet Virgin, which was indeed a beautiful piece. The Louvre still lacks a Duccio today as a piece. The Louvre still lacks a Duccio today as a piece. The Louvre still lacks a Duccio today as a piece.

LOYRETTE: [Laughter] No one has this kind of universal specialty unless it’s an incredible pre-tentiousness. One inevitably has a field. What’s important, I believe, is to be an art historian, to know what a museum is, what curating an exhibition means, what orchestrating an acquisition involves, etc. And you forget to mention something essential, which is that the Louvre is still the great museum of the 19th century, and this does go back to my field of research and specialty. The Louvre itself is a product from the 19th century. And so, I was maybe more legitimate, in a certain way, than some who worked on previous periods....

The object, if you will, the object of the Louvre and its history, fascinated me. In fact, we published a large history of the Louvre and really focused on what happened between 1792 and now, and the extraordinary growth of the museum during the 19th century. It’s more about the way that you conceive art history than it is about a specialization proper. In my research, I was always opposed to a view of art history that is too Franco-centric, which brought together a certain number of artists or civilizations and relegated the others to an underserved area. It was therefore a question of considering the situation more generally, of catching mistakes from the past (I was always afraid we might be missing many things) and to literally consider artists and civilizations that we had until then neglected. It’s about how we view things, how we consider a focus on multidisciplinary, with a strong attention to contextualization. The museum sheds a sort of unanimous lighting on all things and therefore considers in the same way all objects that it displays, and which become museum objects without seeing that they actually have specific origins, contexts and narratives that are all absolutely different from one another. That they weren’t made to be viewed in the same conditions and that sometimes they were created not to be seen, but to be worshiped, or venerated, that was something important that the museum had previously ignored or overlooked in any case. I wanted to correct this, and had I stayed, I would have done much more in this direction. It was also one of the goals of Louvre-Lens, to correct this univocal vision that the museum casts on the objects and works it keeps.

This issue really fascinates me and all the difficulties of displaying things because, look, you were speaking of works by early Italian artists earlier: well, these were barely meant to be seen in chapels; they were there to be surmounted, to be venerated, to be worshipped, with lighting conditions that were very different, and defi nitely nothing like what we are experiencing today in a museum context. Which brings me to another essential point: the Louvre shed a light on the works from every angle. I do not want to say that there is a banalization, but there is a museification, if you will, of all these objects which is a problem typical to the Louvre, that I wasn’t faced with at the Orsay, because as you know, being a 19th century specialist yourself, when an artist works in the 19th century, his ultimate goal was the museum. For an artist working beforehand, the ultimate goal couldn’t possibly be the museum for the simple reason that the museum didn’t exist. The artist had a patron, received a commission, etc. Therefore, it’s an extremely different perspective and I think that it is one of the things that fascinated me and which I continue to work on because it is really incredible.

RAIL: I think here, it seems to me that you share more with Laclot than with Rosenberg. I was surprised, I learned this about this two or three hours ago, and as we spoke in his apartment, Laclot was sitting under a Poliakoff, he also has two works by Hans Hartung, and a beautiful Soulages. He tells me, “you know, when I was a student, I had no money, but what I bought was things that I saw at Denise René, etc.” Well, to come to my point, which became quite notorious at the Louvre, namely, the presence of contemporary art. Weren’t you the one who initiated that?

LOYRETTE: Yes, I was the one who initiated it. Well, it’s both true and false that I was the one who initiated it. Having said that, the Louvre was always the house of contemporary artists. What I did at Orsay beforehand, when I was director, is that I organized several photographic exhibitions that brought together works by photographers from the 19th century next to works commissioned from contemporary photographers. But at the Louvre, this is a museum in which you must hear a number of voices, you cannot only hear voices of art historians. I think that creators from our time should in a way play a role too, by shedding different lights on the works in the Louvre’s collections. For me, this was fundamental. We must hear a plurality of voices around works of art, and so, there is in a way a polysemy, which was missing most of the time, and which is important to strengthen. It then also depends on the genius of the place, because you cannot apply what you did at Orsay in the same way at the Louvre.

The presence of contemporary artists at the Louvre is a very interesting and much overseen problem. The Louvre has always been the house of living artists, not many people think about this. In the 18th century, with Hubert Robert, they lived there, in the 19th century they would return very frequently to the Louvre, for Degas, for Manet, it was their home, in a sense, and what Cézanne said so admirably, it’s the big book where we learn to read. It was really that. In a way, for them it was a familiar place readily on hand. This got a little lost through the 20th century, but bringing back artists to the Louvre was something that was essential for me. The goal was not necessarily to exhibit living artists. It was to ensure that they would work with us on the collections of the Louvre, on the palace, on the rooms, on so and so’s work, etc. Each time this led to a specific commission. The goal was never to remove works in a room and hang new works that had nothing to do with the Louvre. It was always a different and much richer and complex reflection, a commentary on the Louvre, if you will. This is something we regularly did with Marie-Laure Bernadac, who was curator for contemporary art and who is a fascinating person. This stemmed from a whole project to regain that, which used to be the Louvre’s tradition, whereby the very Louvre continuously hosted living artists, and participated therefore to contemporaneous artistic creation. THE MUSEUM DIRECTORS
Once again, we are talking about the multifarious facets of the history of the Louvre and that’s why you’ve heard me sometimes say that it’s also a palace, and that in a palace, you find a lot of rooms, designed or redesigned with consecutive decorations, which can for instance be seen with the phenomenal Galerie d’Apollon which started under the young Louis XIV and that in a way Duban (Ed.: Jacques Félix Duban, French architect who was in charge of the restoration project of the Galerie d’Apollon, between 1847 and 1851) and Delacroix completed in the middle of the 19th century with Apollo Vanquishing the Serpent Python at the centre of the Galerie d’Apollon, painted by Delacroix. The last intervention of this kind was by Braque—there hadn’t been many of them in between. At the request of Georges Salles, (Ed.: Curator of Asian arts at the Louvre who subsequently became Director of the Museums of France (and therefore in charge of the Louvre) between 1947 and 1953) Braque painted a ceiling with birds in one of the Henri II rooms. By looking at the palace, I noticed a certain number of spaces that were, in a way, vacant and that asked for new decorations. From then on, we started giving commissions to a certain number of artists. There were three beautiful projects. This was a huge effort because it was solely done under patronage and also because it was complicated, for a variety of reasons since we are dealing here with a historical monument. But we did it, and wound up with an Anselm Kiefer in the stairway of the Department of Oriental Antiquities. François Morellet created stained glass windows. And Cy Twombly painted the large ceiling of the Salle des Bronzes. It’s true that we had taken the three most beautiful spots and that they are now permanent decorations there, as a result of this initiative. These are permanent things that are perpetuating the history of the Louvre, by keeping it alive, and relevant to us today. One cannot be a valid and sharp art historian, I believe, without being interested in what is happening today. To me, it’s quite simple. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure this out.

RAIL: I wholeheartedly agree with you, and it is so true that your introduction of living artists, not in an ephemeral way, but in a deep, thought out, and permanent way, has transformed the way we think, we see, we live in the Louvre today. No question!

I think, to me, alas, this dimension has been somewhat lost since you left, but, it doesn’t matter, we don’t need to discuss that.

LOYRETTE: Well, once again, it isn’t like in other museums, where it later became more of a trend. You can’t do this kind of project anywhere, without giving the deepest consideration. There’s what I called “the genius of the place,” its history, its identity, which dictates a lot of things, what you can and what you cannot do. What is done at Orsay cannot be done at the Louvre, and vice-versa, or at least it cannot be done in the same way. Something that is also very important to me and that I always followed attentively, it’s something that isn’t as visible from abroad, it’s the unity of the national French collections. The Louvre was the only museum in 1793, there were no others. During the 19th century, a certain number of museums were created inside the Louvre. There was an American museum, many things were developed in the 19th century, and then, an Assyrian museum, the opening of the American museum, and all of that. Art of the Far East was at the Louvre until 1945 before joining the Musée Guimet. There was therefore a universality that was much larger and, due to a lack of space for a variety of reasons, the national collections ended up being scattered around. But I was always sensitive, I would say, to the unity of our collections, which today begin at the Louvre, continue at the Orsay and end with the Musée National d’Art Moderne (Ed.: The Pompidou Center). But, to begin with, it’s all part of one collection, bordered geographically, between the Louvre, together with the Musée Guimet for the art of the Far East, and the Musée du Quai Branly for Africa, Oceania and Pre-Columbian Americas. There is no precedent, no example of this type of complementarities in the world, of a single national collection that is incredible, mind-blowing, because as you add them all up together, no other country in the world has anything like this. What I am trying to say is that we should not forget that unity, despite the fact that these collections are today hosted in different venues. And so, working on links between the different establishments has always been important to me.

RAIL: These three interviews have been the sources of considerable revelations about the history, the past, the present, and the future of the Louvre—and more. These three narratives, yours, together with Lacloette’s and Rosenberg’s, take us through the span of the past 30 years of the history of the Louvre, and its entry into the 21st century. Lacloette, for instance, told me something, among many things, that I didn’t know. When I was five or six years old, I went to the Jeu de Paume for the first time with my grandfather, and that’s when I heard that the Impressionist collections were an annex of the paintings department of the Louvre. Lacloette told me a story, when he was crossing the bridge with Rosenberg and they came face to face with the empty Orsay train station, he had an epiphany that eventually led to the creation of the Musée d’Orsay. But before that, he had had a different idea, and created a model, a drawing, going from the Jeu de Paume with an underground tunnel connecting directly into the Orangerie. Did you know this story?

LOYRETTE: No. I don’t know about the underground tunnel story. Maybe it’s more recent? But Lacloette, you know, he existed way before the Grand Louvre, he was at the paintings department and I admired him greatly, because I entered the museum in 1975 and before that, I had done an internship in the paintings department in 1974, in a Louvre at the time that was completely fossilized, where the curators in charge of the departments were not interested at all in these questions of display that were considered futile and unnecessary. He was the first to introduce Paulin, he was the first to introduce things that completely renewed museology. He gave this momentum to the Louvre, which he accompanied, but it’s because he started all that powerful dynamic, that he, in a way, was able to follow it through and to become, I would say, the only one to be able to hear the project of the Grand Louvre, to pull it through. You should have seen what his loneliness was like in these years. Among the curators, he was completely lonely, isolated. It was painful.

RAIL: I am so glad that we are ending this interview, with this full circle gesture. Your salute to Lacloette is beautiful, and so moving. One of the few frustrations—I wasn’t going to say it, but this frustration also is linked to my admiration for him, of course—I mean, he is so, so modest!

LOYRETTE: Yes, indeed! We must say it because the story didn’t begin in 1989 with the opening of the pyramid. It really was his own struggle, I think, a battle that he fought through, valiantly, in circumstances that weren’t easy at all.

RAIL: When I asked him how this epic story of the Grand Louvre happened, it’s interesting, he would use the same words over and again. “Oh, it happened organically.”

LOYRETTE: No, no, no, it didn’t happen organically. Lacloette did a lot, indeed, Lacloette did a tremendous amount, and fought it through, and the Grand Louvre is essentially attributable to him. He led by his remarkable example and through, at times, painfully difficult conditions.

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Portrait of Daisy Desrosiers, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.
Made of linguistic forms and failures: inquiry in times of isolation

BY DAISY DESROSIERS

If translation is like a table, then it is either, or can be alternately, the thing itself and the configuration of persons and relations around it.
— Kate Briggs, This Little Art (2018)

Décalage resists translation and embodies it.
— Chantal Akerman, My Mother Laughs (2013) (trans. by Corina Copp)

Let me start with the obvious and the premise of my proposal as a guest critic for the Rail; I’m not a translator nor a translation expert. This isn’t a professional take on the discipline that is translation even though I admire it from afar. L’anglais n’est pas ma langue maternelle. (trans.: English is not my first language.)

Invitée à écrire en anglais, les idées me viennent en français. (trans.: Invited to write in English, I can only think about the content in French.) I hear in French. I understand sounds in my native (and contracted) French Canadian, with a hint of my father’s melodic French from the Caribbean. Je te parle dans ta langue mais c’est dans la mienne que je te comprends. (I speak to you in your tongue but it is in mine that I understand you).¹ This quote from Caribbean poet, writer, and philosopher Édouard Glissant couldn’t be more fitting in introducing the multifaceted point of departure of this proposal which possibly inhabits (literally, conceptually and symbolically) the works of all the contributors I invited as the Guest critic for the May 2020 issue of the Brooklyn Rail. Perhaps the safest place to start is by admitting that I’m still searching for the “right” word. I don’t know if translation is the good one either but, it stuck with me. Thinking about the role of translation in various aspects of my life, it felt like a compelling point of entry for what I imagine this invitation could encompass.

In my experience, translation is many things including but not limited to, negotiations between languages, a power dynamic within communication, the re-composition of thoughts, the re-contextualization of cultural specificities, the Untranslatable³, the experience of languages (or silences) in many forms, a slippery attempt, a weaving process, a No Man’s Land, a shared and ongoing exercise, a cultural muscle, a communal table, the relics of a process, a way to someone’s tells, a system of exchanges and much more.

The impulse and direction of this proposal is hybrid. As I live and work in the field of visual culture that is the art world, it was natural that I would turn to artists to think about translation as much as it relates to invisible, verbal, or conceptual languages. This inclination is also the result of time spent with the work of Glissant as a personal investment in exploring my Caribbean heritage through his Poetics of Relation and, most recently, reading Kates Briggs’s exquisite book, This Little Art. The encounter of both materials, at different times—Glissant having been a conceptual companion for the past years and Briggs’s work being a new and exciting discovery—reveals and guides a great deal of my thinking about this project. Built from the heart of the post-colonial Caribbean experience, Glissant’s words have been and still are a way towards my Black-Caribbean self. His writings may be the reason why I feel so strongly about the connection between the means of translation and who it serves. In other words, in the back of my mind always lingers Glissant’s opacity,⁴ an alterity that defies the limitations of representation embedded in
hegemonic power. For Glissant, opacity is a constructive and ever-growing site of self-determination. The relationship between translation and learning languages is extensively developed in his writings as it relates to the post-colonial condition. In regards to this project, translation is considered as an opaque analogy that highlights new forms of understanding. It underlines what Glissant has identified “as the always evolving opacity of the author or the reader” and, in this context, the artist and the viewer, but also the artist and its source. While speaking Haitian créole may have been a way to part of my own opacity, not speaking it is probably where this project emerges on an intimate level. My need for translation during many family encounters and social occasions asserts my curiosity for the process. I’ll admit still longing for what couldn’t be conveyed, parts of the stories that were left behind because they live beautifully and maybe solely in créole. I think of translation and, equally, of mistranslation as embodiments that resist absolute renunciation. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, “This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. It is simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self.”

This is also something that the Glasgow-based research collective Mother Tongue touches upon in their essay, “What Sound Does The Blk Atlantic Make?—on translation in the work of artist Alberta Whittle.” Thinking about the role of translation through the works of artists but also in conversation with them has been an uplifting way to understand the centrality and complexity of its potential. For some, like NYC-based artist Jesse Chun, it means understanding translation as it refers to memory; forgotten and, sometimes, retrieved. She points out in our recent correspondence that part of her interest with language as a conceptual format comes from her childhood memories. As a child, moving from South Korea to Hong Kong, she did not fully understand English at school and did not understand Cantonese either. Home was then the only place where she would be able to fully articulate her thoughts and communicate. Today, her Korean vocabulary has deteriorated to the extent that she cannot communicate on deeper levels with her parents. They also do not have the depth of her English to answer back.

As an artist, her practice is so deeply rooted in exposing the untranslatable by poetically re-formatting learning software or exposing the inefficiencies of translation tools. Even more so to the potency of these questions as she wrote to me, in these times more than ever, does it seem that translation and vital communication makes you remember how translation is intrinsically linked to the survival of diasporic bodies. The role of translation is also the channel through which a colonial systemic agenda and strategies of resistance have been notable. The stories of our travels and displacements also act as the sites of contested versions of one’s self. I think of the words of theorist and artist, Trinh T. Minh-ha, “I am the one making a detour with myself, having left upon my departure from over here not only a place but also one of my selves.” In my case, hearing Créole, always brings me to a familiar place and yet, still quite foreign, it becomes lyrical. As a French Canadian and French Caribbean, these two singular histories have carried me to listen with an acute depth of gratitude for my own histories of languaging. When I pause, in search of a word or trying to self-translate, I am also interested in what is to be solved or left unresolved in this process. Grieving everything, I will not be able to convey either because I’ll keep searching for the exact word to better attest of the intimacy of this project or, because I know I am not a translator myself and my voice may be better serving as I borrow cherished and found words from others. In the process, everything that will be lost is something I will keep trying to retrieve, even if only in fragments. Those elements being contained as much in words as they prevail in the silence is something that is beautifully explored in the conversation I had with artists Azza El Siddique and Sahar Te, “The losses we carry across: an afternoon with Azza El Siddique and Sahar Te” as well as in Te’s work, “Khaarej no. 3” (2019). On many accounts through this project, the masterful work of the poet, critic and editor, Divya Victor, reverberates. In an interview around the writing process for her book, Kith, Victor noted, “The way we write ourselves into being and into memory matters a lot. It matters especially now when there is an ongoing hegemonic battle for cultural memory.” As this project developed, I, too felt the vehemence of memory as a shared denominator. It informs translations of any kinds and the ways in which we bear them.
In ongoing conversations with artists, I am interested in how the process of constructing and deconstructing translation exists within artistic research and studio practices.

Is translation a motor to action and/or the action itself? To me, its potential speaks to an intimate relationship intertwined with the capaciousness of languages. Translation as a continuum of re-construction is something that painter Ambera Wellmann reflects upon in her essay titled “Catachresis” which explores the questions and values embedded in the need for translation in this time of pandemic such as what is worth translating and for whom.

She also ponders on the inadequacy of languages—material, experimental and emotional. Translation, a word that moves between languages but more importantly, situates us between sets of “languaging” conditions. As a site of projection and dislocation, “The Space between languages” an essay by the poet, novelist, and essayist, Herta Müller explores from this tangent,

It is from the space between languages that images emerge. Each sentence is a way of looking at things, crafted by its speakers in a very particular way. Each language sees the world differently, inventing its entire vocabulary from its own perspective and weaving it into the web of its grammar in its own way. Each language has different eyes sitting inside its words.11

That liminal space is one where nothing can be presumed, taken for granted and yet, needs to be consistently sought. Traduire est un entre-deux mouvant qui ne s’arrête jamais complètement. (trans.: To translate is to be in an in-between that never really is a singular thing.)

As an independent curator, I am invested in the conceptual approaches inherent to the process of translation as a form and a motif that is consistently explored by artists. Like the metaphorical qualities of language that comes to me in French but takes an edited form in English, I want to experience the space where ideas and forms coexist before they part ways. The concept of “lost-and-found” as articulated by Martha J. Cutter is one that is very dear to me in this sense,

Where is the lost-and-found, we ask, if we have left something somewhere? Where, indeed, but in translation? Translation as trope finally constellates a lost-and-found—a locale that holds items/languages until such time as they can be reclaimed, exchanged, or claimed by another user/speaker? The lost-and-found of translation represents a site of simultaneous linguistic loss and gain, of reduction and reimplication of codes, of both the destruction and the resurrection of languages.12

It is with the concept of “lost-and-found” that I believe the conceptual translation between ideas and form can be understood in the work of Berlin-based artist, Shannon Bool and our conversation titled, “Marble benches, Anatolian weavers and Madonnas.”

It also prevails in a much more transient aspect in my correspondence with curator Frances Loeffler and in the excerpt presented in this issue of Marie-Michelle Deschamps’s “The Twofold Room.” I have come to found—a locale that holds items/languages until such time as they can be reclaimed, exchanged, or claimed by another user/speaker? The lost-and-found of translation represents a site of simultaneous linguistic loss and gain, of reduction and reimplication of codes, of both the destruction and the resurrection of languages.12

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It also prevails in a much more transient aspect in my correspondence with curator Frances Loeffler and in the excerpt presented in this issue of Marie-Michelle Deschamps’s “The Twofold Room.” I have come to
understand how my own process of self-translation may have been a blueprint to some of my artistic relationships and projects. While some artists define themselves as strongly intricate with world literature and translation, I’ve witnessed others who build upon the absence of translation, a reappropriation of words and a form of implicit narration. The work of Montreal-based artist, Sophie Jodoin attests of the latter through repetition, retraction, or erasure. The act of transfer is embedded in found material such as books, found letters, collections of images, and punctuation marks that she extracts from different sources.

A testimony that proves to be ongoing, slippery, and never completely closed. It exists and survives through the presumption that it can be understood but not all can be conveyed. In *Daybook*, the artist Anne Truitt circles around similar thoughts as it partakes to the understanding of her formal approach and the external read of it.

No one questions the fact that verbal language has to be learned, but the commonplaceness of visual experience betrays art; people tend to assume that, because they can see, they can see art. So in the end my ability to convey my experience of the sunrise would depend, first on my having mastered an abstract language and, second, on someone else’s having mastered it too.\(^\text{13}\)

Translation contains similar promises. The language that emanates from these singular methodologies is one’s own to make sense of and to offer. In remembering past conversations, triggering new ones or in sharing anecdotes, this invitation allows me to also think about the elusive parts of translation. In an email exchange with Berlin-based artist, Christine Sun Kim, I was reminded of the idea of mother tongue as an instinctive impulse inherent to communication. Kim remembered this quote for the ether of Instagram, “I speak two tongues; my colonizer’s better than my mother’s. this is the first problem.” She wrote back to me, “I thought it was ironic because it’s actually the opposite in the deaf community. For decades, they have been denying our natural language and making us mimic spoken words...” Something that is fought simply based on the hegemonic premise of an “asserted” tongue over another and, as such, compromising access to education while adding complicated layers by means of unified communication. This thought brings me back to Glissant with even greater depth, “I speak to you in your tongue but it is in mine that I understand you.”\(^\text{14}\) The incredible proposal of Jesse Darling, *Letter to the Translator (2018)*, published as part of the last Sharjah Biennale also comes to mind as a powerful reflection on the politics of translation. Written in English while being simultaneously translated in Arabic through Google translate, this work, first presented online, also ponders on the limitation of translation and its porosity. As she writes it,

Translator, in the spirit of debts and exchanges, I would like to ask you to collude with me. Inevitably, you have already done so; no one writes alone in a foreign tongue, and by now there are two of us here, each with their own ideas of where this is going. Let’s say that somewhere in this text you have placed a few words of your own. Hiding in plain sight, nobody will ever know.\(^\text{15}\)

I could describe what I imagine as translation, in the same way—it is elusive, sentimental and yet, impossible to fully leave at a distance. Kathleen Ritter’s series “Manifesto” challenges interpretation and the toll of the reader. Translated in shorthand, “Manifesto” re-contextualizes the *Feminist Manifesto (1914)* of poet and writer Mina Loy which was written in reaction to Marinetti’s misogyny. The work relies on the now very rare form of shorthand for readers who were (and are), for the most part, women and the performativity of its visual rendering.
Through the transfer, Ritter questions the politics of legibility and the hierarchy of languages. Ritter’s essay for this special invitation, titled “Babble” revisits some of those ideas in the light of motherhood. More to the point, it is a crucial reminder that languages, of any forms, await singular and, most importantly, continual forms of interpretation such as, translations.

In this moment of deep isolation where proximity is sorely missed but where communication is crucial, this invitation, for me, was an attempt to bring people together. I started with my own lingering thoughts and called upon friends and allies that happened to be artists, writers, curators, and dear collaborators. In some cases, I could only quote them, some wrote or shared excerpts of ongoing projects, others openly tapped into personal experiences, practices, memories, and ideologies. I am utterly thankful for their willingness to join me in this process. My utmost gratitude goes to Marie-Michelle Deschamps, Kathleen Ritter, Jesse Chun, Sophie Jodoin, Frances Loeffler, Christine Sun Kim, Shannon Bool, Azza El Siddique, Sahar Te, Mother Tongue (Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden) and Ambera Wellmann. Mes remerciements vont également à Joanie Lavoie et à Megan Bradley. Special thanks to T for our mispronunciations. En d’autres mots (et c’est là que réside le paradoxe), traduire est une affaire trop personnelle pour être livrée à elle-même. (Trans.: In other words, translation is too much of a personal affair to be left alone.)

3. Emily Apter’s Against World Literature explores this untranslatable in depth. For the purpose of this introduction I’m tempted to share this brief and short definition (of many) offered in her book, “I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m’étonnerait pas” (trans.: “I think that my two tongues love each other, that wouldn’t surprise me.”) (trans. Betsy Wing), 1997, University of Michigan Press, p. 190.
4. Opacity is here understood as part of Glissant’s Poetics of Relation, “Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.” Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation (trans. Betsy Wing), 1997, University of Michigan Press, p. 190.
8. Language, as explored by the scholar Rey Chow in Not like a Native Speaker and borrowed from A.L. Becker, “For Becker, the term language refers to a system of rules or structures, whereas the term languaging refers to an open-ended process that combines attainment to context, storing and retrieving memories, and communication.” Ibid, p. 125.
9. (I, the author and translator happen to be the same person taken from Rainier Guldin, “I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m’étonnerait pas”: Self-Translation and the Construction of Sexual Identity,” p. 195.

Kathleen Ritter, Manifesto, 2014, offset prints on newsprint, folded, endless copies, series of seven, each 86 x 58 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Daisy Desrochers is the inaugural Director of Artist Programs at the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College. She is an interdisciplinary art historian and independent curator. Her thesis concerns the cultural, post-colonial, and material implications of the use of sugar in contemporary art. In 2018, she was the inaugural recipient of the Nicholas Fox Weber curator fellowship, affiliated with the Glucksman Museum (Cork, Ireland), as well as a curatorial fellow-in-residence at Art in General (Brooklyn, NY).
Poetic Intention: 
Correspondence in isolation between Daisy Desrosiers and Jesse Chun

My friendship with artist Jesse Chun is etched in experience between places and between languages. Our relationship is one of a curator with an artist whose work consistently challenges and compels you to new understanding as well as friends with a shared curiosity (and fascination) for the respective work of Édouard Glissant and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Our encounter led to ongoing exchanges informed by an ever-growing reading list and exhibition-hoping (in person or through archival discoveries). This excerpt, done while self-quarantining, felt like a felicitous contribution to this invitation and a creative outlet to our isolation.

DAISY DESROSIERS (RAIL): We met in NYC in 2018 when you were opening your show, Name Against the Same Sound, curated by Howie Chen at Baxter Steet (Camera Club of New York). After taking a look at the show together, we talked about our mother tongues and the familiarity experienced through forgotten language, sounds, and translation, and its limitations. Your work takes that on using learning software and pedagogies as well as translating devices. What also strikes me, in your exhibit, is the role of memory. What do you recall from that first encounter?

JESSE CHUN: I found your memories about the Untranslatable so resonant—the words that cannot be captured in English or French or vice versa—and for me, between English and Korean. I remember us discussing further into the untranslatable in regards to language and visual as well as sonic forms, and the abstract measures that we take in our individual practices to play with that space. In the exhibition we met at, I was employing various mechanisms of the English language pedagogy to decenter and re-interpret the power dynamics of the world’s most dominant language, and I felt that you immediately understood the violence and weight of translation that happens in those spaces… and the interior ramifications of that experience.

RAIL: What is the role of translation in your work?

CHUN: I’ve been thinking of translation as a position and intent, rather than a tool or process. In my work, I’ve been employing the role of the artist as translator to re-interpret found language, documents, and bureaucracies. I think that when you’re an artist working with pre-existing objects, systems, and symbols, you are absolutely playing the part of a translator to the world. Whether it is what you decide to leave out, keep, abstract, or redact—it’s the intention of the translator that determines new “language.” That desire for authoring new modes that reflect the diasporic, non-monolithic condition of language is what drives my interest in translatability. Who is being translated, and for whom? For this reason, I’ve been
engaging with mistranslation as an active tool for poetics—translating language visually instead of semiotically, or abstracting language into the voiceless consonants of its sound, and re-imagining institutional mechanisms that render one legible as a subject into visual abstractions. By complicating the relationship to correct translation and legibility, I am interested in extending the space for interiority, complexity, and untranslatability.

RAIL: Speaking of “languaging” and the work of Rey Chow, you and I share many reading lists which is one of the things I love the most about our ongoing correspondence. You introduced me to Chow’s Not Like a Native Speaker (2014). I’m interested in your thoughts on this quote from her book:

I am not adhering strictly to the common definition of the translator as a professional word worker who carries meanings from one language into another. Instead, I would like to explore translation and translator by way of something (ap)proximate—namely, the notion of an arbiter of values, as embedded in disparate cultural literacies or systems […] What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for the present range of local oppositional movements? And how do people define themselves with, over and in spite of others? What are the changing local and world-historical conditions determining these processes?

CHUN: This quote really resonates with what I shared about borrowing the stance of a translator to recontextualize and re-interpret the things that exist—whether it be documents, history, or the world’s “common language,” English. I think that the postcolonial condition, the current efforts to decolonize language, is one of the “changing local and world-historical conditions determining these processes.” At least speaking for myself personally—I learned English as a second language as a Korean kid growing up in colonial Hong Kong under the British rule in the ’90s. So, my relationship to language was always linked to witnessing the relations between colonialism, bureaucracy, translatability, and power. My art practice gives me the space to re-author that. Chow also says something else incredibly poignant in this book which I’ve quoted in a recent work that puts into words what I’ve been exploring in my practice as well. She suggests that we situate the English language as a “point of departure rather than the final destination of a newly configured scene of languaging.”

RAIL: Between me moving in and out of English through French forms and you being informed by a Korean-Chinese-Canadian-American diasporic experience, where do you think our shared space is?

CHUN: I actually think we meet each other the most in moments of mutual, lived in absurdity and humor. I think we meet in our acceptance of NOT prioritizing clarity as a mode of communication. I keep thinking about the Western society’s focus on clarity of communication and writing, that we’re so thoroughly trained to speak, but not really taught on how to listen well, and listen better. What I admire about my communication with you is that you listen with the same rigor as when you speak. That’s something I am working on myself as I reflect on language.

1. The title of this exchange is borrowed for our beloved, Édouard Glissant’s book, titled Poetic Intention (1969) which we both read extensively and talked endlessly about.

2. “Languaging” found in Rey Chow’s book, Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience (2014), which she borrows from A.L. Becker. “For Becker, the term language refers to a system of rules or structures, whereas the term “languaging” refers to an open-ended process that combines attunement to context, storing and retrieving memories, and communication.” Rey Chow, Not Like a Native Speaker, Columbia University Press, NYC, p. 125.

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DAISY DESROSIERS is the inaugural Director of Artist Programs at the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College. She is an interdisciplinary art historian and independent curator. Her thesis concerns the cultural, post-colonial, and material implications of the use of sugar in contemporary art. In 2018, she was the inaugural recipient of the Nicholas Fox Weber curatorial fellowship, affiliated with the Glucksman Museum (Cork, Ireland), as well as a curatorial fellow-in-residence at Art in General (Brooklyn, NY).
What Sound Does The Blk Atlantic Make?
—on translation in the work of artist Alberta Whittle

BY MOTHER TONGUE

Powerful statements, captions, song lyrics, dictionary definitions, and phonetic spellings run across the screen of Barbadian-Scot artist Alberta Whittle’s filmwork, alongside audio clips for pronunciations and a pulsating soundtrack which seems to take the sharp clacking of typewriter keys and crunching factory machinery as its base. Whittle’s 2019 filmwork *What Sound Does the Blk Atlantic Make?* departed from a visit to the archives of the North British Rubber Company, founded in Edinburgh in 1856 by American businessmen Henry Lee Norris and Spencer Thomas Parmelee. During early explorations of the material held in the company’s archives in the Ewart Library, in Dumfries, Scotland, slippages in terminology surrounding the materials under explorations became apparent—between Scotland and Barbados, and over the course of time.

Gutta-percha is a latex distinct from natural rubber and—in some applications, pre-dating it—made with the sap taken from plants within the Sapotaceae family. Gutta-percha was used during the Victorian era for a wide range of purposes, from insulating telecommunications cabling, golf ball production, and in medical instruments. The most well-known of all the products produced by the North British Rubber Company was the wellington boot, of which the factory produced 1,185,036 pairs of boots for the British Army during World War I. For the artist, the phrase was familiar but held a different meaning—that of the slingshot, with its crucial “sling” made of a rubber-like substance.

In etymological terms, “translation” is derived from the Old French *translater* and Latin *translatus*, meaning both to “remove from one place to another” and “to turn from one language to another.” Its use in English replaced the Old English *awendan*, from *wenden*, meaning “to turn, direct.” In a similar vein, the etymology of “transmutation” stems from the Latin *transmutare*, to
“change from one condition to another.” The synergy between these roots appear to suggest firstly that translation also happens in a dimension encountering space and place, and secondly that rather than being a direct switch, that the process requires configuration and re-routing. The disjuncture and familiarity experienced by the artist upon hearing the phrase “gutta-percha” brings to mind the extended foreword to the English edition of Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* by translator Betsy Wing. She notes that alongside Creole and the French of his education and empowerment in Martinique, that he also wrote in a “French different from the so-called standard French of the Métropole: one made supple by Creole, one ready to incorporate all the aspects of its formation, one cognizant of the history of the Antillean people and ready to imagine for them both past and future,” for which she gives “hêler” and “roidissement” as examples. The context of the im/possibilities of translation which she describes also highlights the potential in offering up historical reminders via the particularities and archaisms of Glissant’s vocabulary (to use the phrasing employed by Wing). In a similar fashion, for Whittle to highlight the varied means of gutta-percha in use, and especially the divergence between these in Scotland and Barbados, is, as Wing notes, a “tooling of the past to serve the present.”

Whittle’s work was filmed in part within the North British Rubber Company archives, surrounded by documents and objects relating to their former Edinburgh factory site, singing the mournful lyrics of African-American blues, jazz, and folk singer Odetta Holmes’s song “Deep Blue Sea.” A prominent activist, Odetta was frequently referred to as “the voice of the Civil Rights movement.” For the artist, the historic production at the site of these materials (rubber, latex, gutta-percha, and Wellington boots) is wholly intertwined with capitalism, language, sound, race, and migration—with race historically and in the present-day rendering certain people collateral. The artist responds both to the present day Windrush scandal, and historically to the utilization of Black military regiments in World War I and World War II. 2019, the year of the film’s production, marked the 100th anniversary of Glasgow’s Broomielaw Race Riot of 1919, which saw angry mobs attack African sailors with violent outcomes over unemployment and wage competitions fears. Whittle’s use of her own body within her work is almost omnipresent; its presence, however, is unlike the direct messages which roll out on the screens as we encounter her videoworks. Her body transcends a single reading, through dress, nudity, blue body paint, transcending into the digital realm of an avatar, or as the water spirit Mami Wata. In doing so, the artist asks us to simultaneously read, understand, and digest multiple signals, emanating Glissant’s opacity in image form.

2. Ibid, xvii

*MOTHER TONGUE* is a research-led, independent curatorial practice working locally and internationally, formed in 2009, by Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden based out of Glasgow, UK.
In reflecting on translation and the roles that it can play within artists’ practices, I was reminded of a body of works, *Michelangelo’s place*, seen a few years back at the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa) by Berlin-based artist, Shannon Bool. In subtle ways, Bool’s work felt fitting to reflect on the transient nature of translation as a material and cross-referential process. I reached out to her with a few thoughts: How does our mother tongue inform us? How do languages (of all forms) transform and shape us—newly acquired one(s) and unknown one(s)? How do you negotiate your process and the material histories within the sources themselves? What gets to be absent or revealed through this process? And our conversation carried on… here is an excerpt from it.

**DAISY DESROSIEERS (RAIL):** One of the things that always strikes me about your work is its capacity to capture the counter-narratives inherent to your sources and challenge their reception; historical and fictional, from within and afar, tangible and yet, somewhat intangible.

**SHANNON BOOL:** You have a very fine tuned approach to what I make and I have to say it is rare because I work with so many layers and you are really present with multiple levels of the work. So, first of all I am just totally excited and thankful to get this kind of feedback. I wouldn’t say that people misread the work, but there is just so much potential for the viewer to go on multiple adventures.

**RAIL:** It makes me think of your sculptures, “Michaelangelo’s Place (2013)” which have incredible material qualities, like repositories of a place and memory. Can you speak about this series?

**BOOL:** This body of work references the benches in the Piazzale Michelangelo, in Florence. I went through it almost daily in the year that I was at the Villa Romana. I built a marble bench that references the marble benches there and replicated the graffiti that you can find on them. Giuseppe Poggi designed Piazzale Michelangelo in the late 19th century when Florence was ramping up its tourism and consumption of the Renaissance. The Piazzale has a panoramic view of the city with the great Duomo and everything surrounding it, and around 15 marble benches where you can view everything. The benches are totally full of carved graffiti and I just became obsessed with it. My work often begins by spending time with something or coming across something that niggles at me: I can’t get it out of my mind. Then I thought I would make a work based on this idea of sculptural mastery. The benches are probably Carrara marble, which was Michelangelo’s second
favourite marble. And my perception of the graffiti was that the people were negating this Renaissance view and just taking the marble into their own hands, putting their name on it. It was so simple. I made an archive of the graffiti in the scale and I tried to replicate how it was made—there is this weird mimesis that is in a lot of my work. I continued in this vein with the series of “All Saints Benches” (2017), where my graffiti obsession led me to work with graffiti from churches, mostly Medieval and largely undeciphered. In both works, in replicating the graffiti, I limit my expression. The expression comes through the process of transferring the information, I guess. I try to negotiate these various systems that move and obsess me.

RAIL: I love this process of transfer and re-inscription. An interlinear narrative almost becomes secondary to the material, right?

BOOL: Exactly. There is an impulse or a projection. There is something very psychological about the effect the material acquires in your own hands as opposed to communicating the material’s history of mastery.

RAIL: Do you consider your weaving practice emanating from the same obsession?

BOOL: Yes. It is a bit different when I work with jacquard weaving and with traditional Anatolian weavers. I can begin with the last body of work that I made with Anatolian weavers, the “Madonna Extraction Carpet” series MEC I-V (2013–2015). The impulse for those carpets came from me discovering carpets in Northern Renaissance paintings when I was studying painting.

RAIL: You were a painting student?

BOOL: I studied painting, yes. And I am a painting professor. You can say it is my mother tongue... Before I worked with weavers I made large wall drawings of the carpets exactly how they appear in paintings of the Madonna. I was interested in the carpets because they did not fit into the iconography of the painting. Like jokers, misfits. You cannot trace the iconography of the carpet to the iconography of the setting of the room. Like the millions of threads in the carpets, you can trace subtle interchanges between the East and West back to the paintings. For example, paintings have become a record of carpets which don’t exist anymore. So if you go to Turkey and you speak to carpet scholars you will witness a sort of cultural cross pol- lination when they speak of classifications like “Memling medallions” or “Lotto borders.”

RAIL: Which act as an entry point between making and telling?

BOOL: Exactly. I got really intensely invested in learning about carpets and realized that the more you learn the less you know. The more you learn about the Western perspective of carpets the more you understand the complexity and inaccessibility of the Eastern cultural content of the carpets. For example, we have information on what visual information in carpets can represent on an iconographical level, but not so much in the way weavers construct and communicate this information. The mysteries of this knowledge somehow converge with the mystery of the painting itself.

RAIL: This notion of pending information is interesting. It challenges a capacity to properly read these surfaces in between material and verbal specificities.

BOOL: Absolutely. For me, at some point, I wanted to find a way to produce the carpets from the paintings using their original production system but I didn’t think it would be possible. I was lucky to find a traditional workshop that was open to experimentation. I ended up drawing weaving plans where the carpets are simply extracted from the paintings with their skewed, Western perspective. The extracted carpets are then floating in grey and white checkers, from photoshop. You know, they appear when you erase things?

RAIL: Your version of Anatolian weaving is informed by Photoshop?

BOOL: I like that you see a trace of the digital, the thing of free floating. To me a really important level of these works is that I rip the Madonna out of the carpet. It is no coincidence that the carpets all come from sacred paintings. There is a charge in making an object out of or about absence.

RAIL: Or the manifestation of a very symbolic presence for which Madonna is the sacred signifier. There’s a
subtlety in the way you construct, it feels that it is part of a longing process; however, it takes form.

BOOL: You hit the nail on the head. I’m drawn to these energies and reconfigure them to shift things. I think, for me, to look at the Madonna paintings and the charge of them, the carpet form is the most dissociated format in the iconography. I always want to go deeper into these dissociative forms, probably because they haven’t been thoroughly dissected by the western art canon and definitely because I think there is a potential to reveal different kinds of relationships between layers of meaning.

RAIL: It makes so much sense. It also points out to confluences of connections to be made—maybe you could guide me through another set of negotiations?

BOOL: I think this aspect of my work is a form of translation, a kind of obsessive search for undiscovered meaning. For example, let’s take the Women of Algiers in their Apartment (1834) by Delacroix…another seriously long term preoccupation in my practice is with the idea of harem in the Western canon. I have made many works that attempt to reenter or renegotiate this impenetrable space over the years, or look at the lineage that stems from Delacroix’s first “representation” of a harem, which set the stage for multiple fantasies and projections that continue today. A good recent example is the jacquard tapestry Women in their Apartment (2018). This work stems from a moment when I realized that the infamous photo of Kim Kardashian’s bottom from Paper magazine fits exactly on the central figure of Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger” (1955), it clicked like a puzzle piece. From that, I superimposed a harem setting in the open bathroom of Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye with elements of Picasso’s sketches and Kim Kardashian’s bottom. This seems like maybe a cheeky gesture, but there are so many subtextual links between Picasso, Le Corbusier, and the phenomenon of butt implanted internet culture: the question of the field of projection, the contortion of the subject but also the viewer in a sense.

RAIL: Those moments of discovery, through your intuitive and associative process, entice new legibility. The space of transfer for these liminal space narratives expose something that is even more troublesome. It exposes an appetite for an otherness, an exotic feature that is perpetually present in history and, perniciously, in visual culture?

BOOL: Exactly. For me, it’s a very long process; how do I approach this? How do I make it work? How do I make this apparent? When I am building a bridge, a framework, I have to allow it to take different forms for the meanings and to be their own things. Which goes beyond my cognitive ability and beyond my control. It does something. It clicks, but it does not make me comfortable.

RAIL: It also seems to address duration as part of the layering process for you and the viewer, no?

BOOL: Yes. I think this also links well to the idea of translation, it is not really within the realm of gesture. If you work in a really involved way with materials, you inhabit this realm of translation, in a sense, because the preoccupation with material systems stays within these specific languages. Like this interview, Daisy, you didn’t pick a broad topic that you could put things into. You picked one that has to become a process. It’s timely during an unprecedented time like now. Everyone is currently in a very dissociative state. Translation is a state of suspension while grasping at something, suspending it and then grounding it. Very fitting to our collective state of mind.

RAIL: Thank you. Hopefully, on the other side of things, we’ll be able to grapple with the complexities of languages—however they come to be.

Shannon Bool, Women in Their Apartment, 2019, Jacquard tapestry, 300 × 221 cm, Courtesy of the artist and her galleries; Daniel Faria (Toronto) and Kadel Willborn Gallery (Düsseldorf).
The losses we carry across: an afternoon with Azza El Siddique and Sahar Te

In thinking about translation, many past conversations came back to mind. Some that took place between an artist and me, some were interpretations based on works seen, heard of, or read about. This conversation between Azza El Siddique, Sahar Te and myself is a conjuncture of all the above. I have met and worked with Azza in the past, I had been following and read about Te’ s work. I was curious to connect with both artists as it seems that each, in their own ways, gives form to ethereal, sonic, and mnemonic languages. El Siddique’s practice is informed by African mythologies, religious and architectural theories. In her work, those sources are cited discretely as acts of remembrance and grief through material transformations and motifs. Sahar Te investigates the politics and potential of languages. Coming from a literary background with a profound interest in traditional Persian poetry, she explores languages for their phonetic—intonation, rhythms, and patterns—and performative qualities. Her work aims to shift the meaning of words to their musicality. While being based in three different cities, here is the conversation we sparked.

DAISY DESROSIERS (RAIL): I thought I would start with a very straightforward question and navigate from there. Where does each of you see the space and juncture where translation resides in your practice?

SAHAR TE: I would say it came from two places, where one was the concept of translatability that was itself interesting, in the sense that there are moments that are untranslatable. So those moments of untranslatability rather than translatability are rich, which is important for me to look into it rather than look over it. A lot of times those lost in translations get kind of forgotten and lost—absolutely lost—and I was interested in finding alternative ways of welcoming those moments of untranslatability into my work. The second one is the awkwardness. There was a sense of awkwardness that I experienced within translation whether if it is in texts that I was reading or it was a translation from let’s say French, I wouldn’t even know this is a translation and the awkwardness reveals a translated work. The decrease of power that happens within language and the loss of affect for me was a major element that I really wanted to get into because of the sense of oversimplification that it carries.

AZZA EL SIDDIQUE: I think it is really interesting, Sahar, the way you address an aspect of translation is the inability to translate. I also feel that is also where my interests lie. It is through materials where I can begin to be able to give form to where language fails me.

RAIL: I would like for us to think about mother tongue as an origin story and a conceptual frame too. Where do they meet in your work?

EL SIDDIQUE: I think about the idea of mother tongue and I reflect on its first manifestation that was body language and the emotions that are inherently embedded within you that you don’t necessarily have the words to express. It is these complex feelings where my sensorial installations attempt to capture these guttural bodily feelings that cannot be translated through verbal language. It also brings me back to Arabic which was my first language, but I think the one thing that is really interesting with language, sadly, it’s something that you can lose. I lost my Arabic at a young age. I still understand a bit, but just basic conversation. Something that has always stuck with me was having very strong memories of being a child and not being able to speak English and playing with other children, and how we were able to communicate through body language.

TE: Farsi, it is a very complicated language and when I came here [Canada], I was so proud thinking Farsi beats English so badly! It is such a rich language, there is a lot of metaphoric, emotional, and musical ways of using it that are less present in English. For example, if we want to say something like the word calm, it is actually a calm word with a calming effect. If you want to talk about anger, the word anger is itself “خشم” a dynamic word. A wise poet can find the right words to convey a message.
through a choreography of sounds. I also come from a literary background and I studied how poets, for example, use these sound qualities of language to create an experience. Language itself is more experiential, I would say, in Farsi than in English. So, coming to the University in Canada and having to write about complex concepts, I found English more straightforward and more on point. It is funny now as a Farsi speaker, I cannot write an essay in Farsi. Because I have a lot of concepts, but I cannot speak about them as directly as I can in English, so English, for me, is a more equipped language with more scientific words. It has the capacity to get updated, but then with Farsi I can communicate so many more emotions that do not exist in English with the same quality. That is a departure point where I started looking at language as my material itself and looking at the material aspects of language, like the intonation, rhymes, rhythms, and patterns. Specifically looking at traditional Persian poetry, which takes a lot of its rules from traditional Arabic poetry, and follows certain metric systems. If the rhythm sounds like “ta ta taa ta ... , ta ta taa ta ...” it is a romantic poem, but if you want to write an epic, it usually follows another metric system or pattern, which sounds like, “ta,ta,t | ta,ta,ta,ta,” which is very epic in its rhythm. That translates to music very well, where you find a lot of drumming that is used in epic films or when people are chanting on the streets: rhythm becomes the conveyor and the meaning. More intuition is involved in the rhythm in Farsi as a natural quality than in English. I am saying English because it is another language that I know, not like a universal thing.

RAIL: Of course and no forms of languages are static anyway, it triggers or it is being triggered. Azza’s use of incense comes to mind.

EL SIDDIQUE: Yes, the sandaliya, which is used during a Muslim burial as a way to cleanse and prepare the body through ritual.

RAIL: I think your work has an ethereal syntax that it is very much rooted in very tangible qualities.

EL SIDDIQUE: I think it is a fair assumption to say that the process is present. Also, the process is very transparent in how you are able to see these systems work and how these ephemeral and ethereal moments are happening within the installations. They are an amalgamation of a personal translation linked to cultural specificity and anthropological research that I intertwine with one another. And I think that sort of translation for me is trying to unearth and make meaning and understanding of these systems that I am specifically thinking about.

TE: Do you imagine translation as a site of interpretation?

RAIL: Of course and no forms of languages are static anyway, it triggers or it is being triggered. Azza’s use of incense comes to mind.

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RAIL: Do you imagine translation as a site of interpretation?

TE: It is really interesting because, for me, it bears the question, is this a translation? Then I ask myself, what do I even mean by translation? In KHAAREJ No. 3 (2019), by bringing an English speaker to comprehend a Farsi text, I ask that we focus on another aspect of language rather than the connotations of the words. Mostly on the material quality of the language in terms of sound, spacing, rhythm, and pattern, and all of that. To achieve that, I ask the performer to accept the role of the translator and to focus on these alternative qualities of language that usually get lost in translation. There is a lot of weight given to the possible meanings of words. For example, Rumi is one of the most read poets in the world, especially in America, but when you read the translation, the entire rhythmic and musical experience is lost. He would spin around and then get to this ecstatic mode and would say things like... “Man na manam, na man naman” which means “I am not myself, this is not me” but then “I am not myself, this is not me” is not “Man na manam, na man manan”... right?

RAIL: Now that I know, I can hear the lost.

TE: To me, Rumi is completely gone. The experience of Rumi is completely turned into little bits and pieces of words that are trying really hard. It reminds me of the idea of when Walter Benjamin talks about how the relationship between a language and its culture is similar to a fruit in its skin! When you put the banana skin on an apple it never works.

EL SIDDIQUE: I think also within translations and histories, what isn’t being said is silence, which is also super powerful. That essentially holds so much more weight of what isn’t there than what is.
TE: I have been challenged by a lot of different people on the idea of using translation as a metaphor, which sometimes can become potentially problematic.

RAIL: And maybe, reductive.

TE: Sometimes it fits the context and sometimes it creates confusion and becomes too generic. But then I was thinking of how translation can be looked at as a potential. I was actually looking at the word translation this morning and I thought: by translation do I mean adaptation in my case? Is this a reenactment or an adaptation? Or is this a remediation or a transformation? I have been thinking a lot about it as a gesture and as manipulation and I am playing within the power systems through a process. Maybe an unwanted and unwelcome potential. That is where I get super interested in the poetics of mistranslation or intentionally manipulating something. This is a concept that Gayatri Spivak talks about within the discourse of post-colonialism and the ideas of being a translator and how it works to be a subaltern who is doing the translation or being translated.

EL SIDDIOQUE: What a slippery and fugitive word translation is. There are so many factors that come up and collide in this way. When I begin to reflect on translation, I’m thinking who is doing the translating? And also memory. Memory is something that is always in flux, as well as ideas of truth, which are in their own form extremely slippery and hard to grasp. In its own way it makes me just wonder if translation itself, in some aspect, is not necessarily the right word. The other thing is in English there are just not enough words. I think that is probably why I go to the visual and the material, the tangible. Because what lies between translation feels more of an “honest word” for me.

TE: I really enjoyed your word “slippery.” It is such a good way to convey it.

EL SIDDIOQUE: I think you were also talking about this, Sahar, how you were saying language is always changing. And for some odd reason I think translation hasn’t quite caught up or something. It feels static and that we still don’t have enough words.

TE: That is so true. I think there is a paradox within translation that is as much as a connector as it’s also a divider. As you mentioned, if there is a space in-between these cultures, it creates a moment of failure or a moment of falling in that gap. To understand this in possibility and failure of translation I think it is very important to think about it as less of a tool and more of a discourse these days. I also think that the performative aspect of translation is so essential and important that we sometimes overlook it. There has been a lot of times where I am trying to explain a concept, let’s say go back to the musicality of language, and then I want to communicate that with you without me performing the rhythm you will never understand the concept, even if it is like five pages explained under, in the footnotes. It would not do what the performative aspect could do which is; intersemiotic translation. I find myself a different person each time I develop a new set of vocabulary, especially within the art context. We heavily rely on language and a lot of times we use these Western or mostly Latin-origin language systems to explore a work of art. For example, the idea of “context”; there is literally no context for the word context in Farsi. I struggle a lot of times. Within the Latin-based languages like French, German, and all of these languages, you can explain some concepts, but then Arabic, Farsi, and Indian languages are kind of similar and then the word context. Azza, do you have a word for it in Arabic?

EL SIDDIOQUE: That would be something that has been lost into the ether of losing language. I actually appreciate that. That there is no word for context in Farsi since it is already performed.

TE: Exactly. With words in English, I am so equipped to make valid points or maybe, making things more legible. When I think about that lack of lots of words in Farsi, there is a sense of performativity or ritual that makes up for that gap. That it is more effective in the sense that it is more experiential and less linguistic, let’s say.

RAIL: I like to think about the rituality of words and it goes back to Azza’s point about silence as a powerful and super active form. I wanted to share a word with you both, “yonder.”

EL SIDDIOQUE: Like “way yonder?” Way over there, kind of?

RAIL: Well, it’s close. It’s the title of a book by Siri Hustvedt where she explored the in-betweenness of interpretations exploring this word as a trigger. It’s Yiddish and basically means “between here and there.” Doesn’t that leave us in a good place to wonder?

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1. The title of this interview echoes the Latin origin (lat.) of the word translation; carrying across as found in the Collins Encyclopedia, fifth edition, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 2775.

DAISY DESROSIERS is the inaugural Director of Artist Programs at the Lunder Institute for American Art at Colby College. She is an interdisciplinary art historian and independent curator. Her thesis concerns the cultural, post-colonial, and material implications of the use of sugar in contemporary art. In 2018, she was the inaugural recipient of the Nicholas Fox Weber curatorial fellowship, affiliated with the Glucksman Museum (Cork, Ireland), as well as a curatorial fellow-in-residence at Art in General (Brooklyn, NY).

AZZA EL SIDDIOQUE is an artist currently based between New York and New Haven, CT where she completed her MFA at Yale University.

SAHAR TE (b. Tehran) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto, Canada.
I heard my heartbeat:
Tutum tum, Tutum Tum, Tum Tututum, Tutum Tum
I know this rhythm, warm, growing. The cadence of a poem remembering its own pentameter.
Natarseen nalarzeen, Maa hame baahamasteem
This is a popular chant in Iranian protests, taking its beat from the metric counts of Persian epic poetry.
U _ _ , U _ _ , _ U U _ , U _ _
The prosody leads the way this poem is read. The rhythm echoes thousands of people marching down the streets of Tehran. Bodies in synch, voices in tune – a crowd in climax.
Rhythm mirrors heartbeats, then one beat united, a movement...protest...revolution.
Na ekhtelaas na barjaam, Moghaavemat yek kalaam
Poetic, paternal, and harmonic. One voice shaped by thousands of bodies. A beat without an instrument to play it on. Occasional foot heels striking the ground, hands clapping to introduce a transition in tempo
They say history repeats itself; cyclical, monotonous and repetitive. Like chanting. A call for action and an abstraction, rising in collective objection with increasing fervor. Are they cultural weapons?

The medium is... The medium is... Meaning is not just words, but the material qualities of the language and the execution of action (sharp as knives).
Streets become stages, activists turn into actors. These repeated rhyming couplets shouted in a call-and-response format make use of common prosodic strategies such as internal rhyme and assonance.
Iranee meemeerad, zellat nemeepazeerad.
We mimic each stressed syllable, internalize the prosody, and embody the segmentation of slogans. Our phonological awareness surpasses the ability to detect, segment, and manipulate the sounds in language. We are masters of rhythm, teachers of rhyme, poets of turmoil, and deliverers of the voice!
Maa bachehaye jangeem, bejang ta benajgeem
Translation, as a fundamental metaphor of our time, highlights the challenges posed through cultural, political, and linguistic fragmentation in a global setting.
clap, [rest], clap, [rest], clap, clap, clap
Translation, a means of transcending crossing borders can also be the act of bordering. It can create common understanding while at the same time identifying key differentiators. These chants remain Farsi, while letting the performers be the translators, the actors, and the remediators. Meaning is derived not from the meaning of the words, but from the physical and material elements of the words.
Marg [rest] bar[rest], dik taa tor!
The decades-long social revolution unfolding in slow bass percussion is one melody line. Can you feel the beat? Can you hear the emotional impact of the phrase? Can you hear the urgency to create a repetitive pattern? Can you hear the old man shout in front his shop window? Can you feel the power?

“Because our societies have the illusion that they change quickly, because the past slips away forgotten, because identity is intolerable, we still refuse to accept this most plausible hypothesis: if our societies seem unpredictable, if the future is difficult to discern, it is perhaps quite simply because nothing happens. Except for the artificially created pseudo-events and chance violence that accompany the emplacement of repetitive society.”

KHAAREJ explores the paradoxes within the act of translation as a mechanism that opens up a space between different cultures, while creating a space for misrepresentation and a border that sets dual settings such as source and target, center and periphery, local and foreign. It celebrates the impossibility and failure of translation and considers the alternatives in translation. This work has been performed in 2019 at (Museum) by an opera singer and a drummer in a free-form structure allowing the performer to interpret the musicality of the poem relaying on visual and phonetic as opposed to a literal read. Composed by Te in English and Farsi, without translation, the language acts as activated and fluid form that can't be properly read, thus empowering sounds over well-enunciated words, the performativity of language over clear communication. In Farsi, KHAAREJ, can be translated as: outside, foreign, out of tune/out of key (in music), outer, exterior, abroad, quotient (mathematics), and beyond.


SAHAR TE (b. Tehran) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto, Canada.

Thinking about you, thinking about translation

BY FRANCES LOEFFLER

You invited me to think about translation. It’s something that’s been on my mind for a while, probably since childhood. My father is Czech originally, but he moved to Switzerland as a young man and we did not speak the language at home. I heard it sometimes when he spoke to his family on the phone, a set of familiar sounds with no meaning. It has become a sort of ghost language to me— one I feel in my bones, but cannot articulate. I grew up speaking Swiss German with my father and English with my mother. In our household, we had language allegiances. My brother and I spoke only English to one another, and do to this day. We only speak Swiss German to our father, and English to our mother. My brother’s children speak only French to their mother, and only German to my brother. They speak French to each other. My brother speaks better Swiss German than me, but he still dreams in English sometimes. My Swiss German is deteriorating, but I cling to it. It is now the language I speak with my two-year-old son, hoping to plant in him a piece of my history that will hopefully live on. I love to hear how my son plucks freely from both languages, sometimes beginning a sentence in English and finishing it in German. My brother and I used
to do the same when we were children, crisscrossing linguistic boundaries with giddy abandon. Sometime a word just works better in one language, so the more languages you speak, the better grasp you have on the world.

When I came across the writings of Christine Brooke-Rose (through the artwork of artist Heather Phillipson), they really struck a chord. For a start, she had a Swiss mother and English father, so we were the same but in reverse. Translation ran through her life. She grew up trilingual, translated decrypts of the Enigma code at Bletchley Park, and so much of her writing focused on the subject of translation. I read Xorandor (1986), a novel about Jip and Zab, two children (twins) who discover a talking rock, which is also a computer. Part of the book is written in their cryptophasia, an invented language the children use to converse with the rock, a sort of BASIC-like computer programming language. Their secret discourse reminded me very much of early English/German word plays and cryp- tolects my brother and I enjoyed. It’s not really readable, but that’s the point. In the sequel, Verbivore (1990), Jip and Zab have grown up and are fighting a crisis: computers have started to eat words, causing widespread havoc. In
her novel Between (1968), her maverick use of multiple languages really gets to the marrow of it. The narrator (a translator) crisscrosses between English, German, and French without any attempt at translation. Unless one is trilingual, the experience of reading it will be one of loss and misunderstanding, but also one of tremendous linguistic release and also love. For after all, to reject a language (to forget a language, to be kept from speaking a language) is an act of violence. To hold on to a language otherwise lost is an act of love. As she states,

As if languages loved each other behind their own facades, despite alles was man denkt darüber davon dazu.

As if words fraternized silently beneath the syntax, finding each other funny and delicious in a Misch-Masch of tender fornication.¹

Thinking of you,

Frances

Dearest Frances,

I like to imagine memories in tongues I don’t know. I guess foreign (or hybridized) syntax can also be a point of encounter, no? Thinking about syntax, in a recent trip to Atlanta (GA), someone identify my French speaking heritage by the way I construct sentences while speaking. I keep making assertions by adding “no?” at this end of sentences. I think it works better this way, no? I thought the accent was the tell, apparently the syntax gave it away first.

Maybe a bit like you, when I hear my dad speaking Créole, I realized how familiar it is to me while being so foreign—either because I recognize bits of French but also, because it brings me closer to a version of him and myself that remains somewhat unknown. The origin story is also about intonation but also, the singular encounters of résistance within the language, no? I think the scholar Rey Chow says it best in Not like a Native Speaker (2014) when she introduces the concept of “xenophone,” which I thought I’d share with you,

what I call the “xenophone,” the foreign-sounding speech/tone, and argue for a revision of language practices in postcoloniality that can encompass quotidian and seemingly simple but in fact ideologically loaded phenomenon such as accents and intonations.

The open and unhealed wounds of language, if they may be so called, are often accompanied in contemporary theoretical writings by investments in affects associated with loss, such as mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia over irretrievable origins.²

Memory always strikes me as the double agent in processes of translation. It is a pernicious thing that seem to linger while pretending to be absent. I think it informs us such a powerful extent how we carry a mother tongue, no? I have watched The Farewell recently, an incredible film by Lulu Wang, that speaks to some of these issues in such finely-tuned and poignant ways. It shook me to my core. In Wang’s opus and in reading you, both assert that language and memories are weaved as subtle and resonant reminders of the stories we share.Until we meet again, take good care.

PS: I also think I’m funnier in French? Is this a thing?

D. xx

¹. Rainer Guldin, “I believe that my two tongues love each other cela ne m’étonnerait pas’: Self-Translation and the Construction of Sexual Identity,” Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction, 20, no. 1, (1er semestre 2007), 205.


FRANCES LOEFFLER is Curator at Oakville Galleries and is currently based in Toronto, Canada.
The Twofold Room

BY MARIE-MICHELLE DESCHAMPS

The Twofold Room

The Twofold Room is an artist’s book in which Montreal-based artist, Marie-Michelle Deschamps uses the metaphor of the hotel to describe language. In her practice, language is material and protocol. She investigates not just the politics of language but its diverse manifestations—translation, world literature, and linguistic theories—writing adaptation, mnemonic devices, or human voice. The Twofold Room takes the reader on a journey following a horizontal line—a line that starts with a red carpet, breaks at a reception desk, deploys itself endlessly in the hallway, and folds at the bedroom, where suddenly another appears, as it is, evidently, a double room. In the bedroom, the description goes back and forth from the bodies of language to the bodies of the guests, pleasurably intertwined in bed together. Deschamps’s interest in the losses and gains through the process of translation illustrated a mode of construction based on altered meanings. Just like a foreign language, the hotel is an abstract location that, through a visual and literary discovery process, becomes a familiar one. She explores the variable, contagious and potent nature of language as a fluid and shared form. This book, written in English and then translated into French (this artist’s mother tongue) by Colette Tougas, explores the loss of identity caused by moving from one language to another. Upon the invitation of this month’s guest critic, Daisy Desrosiers, the last chapter of the book is presented as a special contribution.

The Twofold Room

The door leading to the room develops like a seed, it is the fold at the end of the line.

Before, it was a question of the inaccessible ears, of the eyes, and of the entrance, the door-mouth. To enter the bedroom is to enter the intimate space of the hotel’s body, to step into the palace-palate (palais-palais) where the tongue dwells.  

Like the hallway, the room is an area set within another, but also detached and estranged from it with the help of partitions. We feel at this particular moment the illusion that we are alone in the building. Settling here, we are subtracted from it.

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The bedroom is often composed of three doors (one leading to the hallway, one to the closet, and one to the bathroom), a bed, a desk with a single chair, a mirror, and a window covered by a curtain. Upon entering this area, the first way of appropriating it is with our bodies, generally by sitting. We usually do that to begin with, as it is far less involved than lying down.

It seems easy to imagine that it is a space where we generally feel the contentment of solitude or the pleasure of being a pair—probably because the seating is limited here. (I should probably point out that to sit is to fold the body in two, three, four, or more, depending on whether or not you have good posture, and on where you are sitting.)

This appeal to sit usually brings us to the bed.

We generally utilise the page in the larger of its two dimensions. The same goes for the bed. The bed (or, if you prefer, the page) is a rectangular space longer that it is wide, in which, or on which, we normally lie lengthwise.

The bed is the most important part of the room: even the room’s appellation is derived from it. In the bedroom that is mine, here in the hotel, the double bed is made of two single beds held together tightly by the tension of
the *contour* sheet. This *contour* delineates the frontier, the space I can occupy when I sprawl. This bed has two sides—two tongues?—for me to lie down on. However, gravity (or is it some kind of hidden fear of falling off?) usually pulls me towards the middle; in such cases, I always end up in the *zone of inseparability*—the uncomfortable area of the crease.35

***

As the *I* falls into this fold—the *fold itself composed of an infinity of little folds*, folded over on themselves—it hides because it does not know which side to lie on.36

*After all, text means tissue, a ready-made veil, behind which we lie, more or less hidden. Lost in this texture, the subject unmakes itself, like a spider unmaking the constructive secretions of its web.*37

These are not the only folds of the bed. Every day, as the maid makes it (it is only she who knows how to put it together properly), attiring it with pristinely ironed white sheets (a blank space upon which I can recline), she carefully folds it at the top, creating a margin of sorts, an opening where the inside appears—a tricky way of enticing me with the desire to enter it. In truth, the *I* is never shy to break this structure, to write in this margin with its indelible ink. The *I* places its head in the margin of the bed.

Lying between these sheets, mobile, opaque, fleeting, the *I*’s body is more vulnerable, more transparent, far more legible. It is a clear and distinguished zone of expression.

*For some perverts, isn’t the sentence a body?*38

Stretched out, extended, the *I* lies horizontally, becomes a horizon. In changing orientation, the *I* rapidly shifts from portrait to landscape: a scene where the *I* is found on an island, surrounded by beaches of fine white sand. Here more lines are written—*ripples, fringed, capricious curves* where the fine sand meets the noisy rolling of the waves—but these lines are erased as quickly as they are engraved. The more these come and go, the more the *I* loses itself, alone here in this deserted land. That explains why there is the need to go for a swim sometimes, when calm waters are found around the island.

As they are surrounded by water, islands are often unstable habitats, *and as if from a fold of space or a hollow in the world.*39 they are prey to the turbulent wind and sea: hurricanes, tidal waves, tsunamis—a paradox, as the island itself is a place where the *I* runs aground and seeks refuge. Intuitively, when praying to such invasions, the *I* looks for a point that cannot be reached by the attack. This is when the *I* curls up in bed (usually folding in three), completely covered by the sheet, a protection in case the sky were to fall on its head.

(∗∗∗)

The bed is the remote, deserted island where we live alone or as a duo; the hotel is the archipelago, a conglomeration of horizontal *Is* in bed. There is comfort in the grouping of islands, in nestling close to neighbouring rooms. Sometimes to be at peace, alone on the island, one needs the thought of someone or something somewhere else.

*Continents reject mixings... whereas archipelagos make it possible to say that neither each person’s identity nor the collective identity are fixed and established once and for all. I can change through the exchange with the other, without losing or diluting my sense of self.*41

***

The bed is not the only place to write in the room, as the desk is supplied daily with a sizable amount of hotel letterhead on which to write or draw. These sheets lie flat on the table, the same way the bed lies on the floor, and themselves hold a bed at the top of the page: the hotel’s logo. Like the bed, its design also implies another, a double. It is composed of two *Is* in bed together, two *Is* linked together to form an *H*.

It is said that being two in this double bed causes its aforementioned edges, its contour, to be less and less definable; that gradually, the two *Is* mutually forget where they are, lost somewhere in this white surface, amongst the folds of the sheet. (Two bodies in a bed definitely disturb the evenness of the sheet, creating many more folds.) They do so to the point that the *Is* cannot distinguish whether they are outside or inside of the bed, in or out of these sheets, as it is true to say that folds are at once a concave and convex surface. Of course, the fold (or the crease) in the middle of the bed never ceases to separate the two beings, the two bodies. Naturally, everything still plays around the fold, simultaneously separating and combining and also opposing and tying the two of them together. It creates the double of the introverted and the other introverted, the attraction of the two—two parts that simultaneously merge and unbind. Right then and there, the two *Is* might
even come to form a We, causing them to abandon their individuality—two subjects together with the same desire for a relation. Being is abolished for the relation, making this moment a very dangerous one.

Nevertheless, I must admit that on occasion I wonder: is it possible to lie there side by side, to coexist without merging? And if we go back to my bed, does the fold, the line in the middle, become the edge of the I’s inexistence? Slowly, the pli doesn’t create a separation but rather a space in which continuous and reversible dialogue can occur.

***

I speak to you in your tongue but it is in mine that I understand you. Je te parle dans ta langue mais c’est dans lamienne que je te comprends.42

Does that mean that it would be much better to intertwine them?

THE BASEMENT

(...)

33. ‘The Hotel Language isn’t the first hotel constructed on the model of the body. In fact, in Elia and Zos Zenghelis’s design for the Hotel Sphinx in Times Square, New York (at the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue), “each physical part of the hotel as sphinx accommodates different programmatic functions: the legs contain escalators ascending to theatres, auditoriums, and ballrooms; the two towers of the tall contain studio apartments; the neck contains social clubs; the head is dedicated to relaxation and sports; and the spine houses hotel rooms, apartments, and villas with terraced gardens. Manhattan was intended to function as an extended lobby providing all possible amenities, and, likewise, the ground floor and mezzanine were designed to draw in the city and to take on the character of the Times Square area, a notoriously seedy neighbourhood in the 1970s.” Terence Riley, ed., The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 142.


36. Deleuze, op. cit., p. 16 (French edition), or p. 18 (English edition).


MARIE-MICHELLE DESCHAMPS is an artist who lives and works in Montreal, Canada.

Catachresis

BY AMBERA WELLMANN

Like other artists I’ve spoken to, the weeks that have passed in isolation—witnessing from a distance the deaths of thousands and the utter bureaucratic failure of the government to protect the most vulnerable people—have understandably led to an unrecognizable feeling of listlessness in the studio. Our global pause extends into all areas of our life, and in this period of de-growth, “progress” and “productivity” in the studio seem facile, even selfish. Without any exhibitions in the foreseeable future, I’ve been thinking about what it means to continue making physical art without the physical art world. It’s a bit like a collapsed building with a once-elegant facade, and without any walls, you’re left looking at the remains of its foundation, wondering what it contains that’s substantial enough to build upon. This pause allows us to examine our practices as they relate to a system in a rare moment of suspension: without mobility, we have an opportunity to observe how things look when they are standing still.


I’ve been thinking about all of us living inside. More than ever, it affirms for me the importance of painting as a physical experience. I was always a little brokenhearted that a majority of viewers would only ever see paintings through an online format of documentation. Despite its inherent 2D nature, the smallest nuances of a painting seen in person
are crucial to really knowing it, intimately: I always insist that paintings are watched, not looked at, and that their physicality necessitates a time-based experience. Paintings are also a place, a site; people congregate there.

I found that your questions about translation are so compelling to me, Daisy, in this moment as a chance to (try to) articulate what might be at the core of our practices and processes when the facade of the art world is stripped away. In this context of a global pandemic, I think we are questioning not only what aspects of experience we want to translate or are worth translating to create meaning, but also how translation makes our experiences meaningful. The process, in this sense, is infinitely more valuable than the product.

For several years I was making paintings based on very personal experiences of erotic and emotional encounters. Very simply, the paintings were catalyzed by being in love. But questions arose of how to translate this emotion, translate it sensitively, and how to translate the specifics of a physical encounter into a physical encounter for the viewer. Why was the specific medium of painting an appropriate container? How could it give form to a feeling, and feeling to a form? How can emotion live inside of—and translate all of its complexities—in a non-living substance? Emotional experience necessitates a body, and everybody is culturally unique. A quick conversation with Frieda affirmed that language will in some way always be inadequate—even a barrier to understanding the unique experience of love—and for that reason translation is an impossibility. What tastes salty to me may not be salty for you, just as asking, “How are you feeling today,” is completely different and cannot encompass the complexity of, “How does your heart beat today,” or, “How is your wind,” in another language. Painting is an apt medium for translation because of its inadequacy: there is an inherent sense of lack in trying to transpose a three-dimensional world in two dimensions—feeling into form—but the gap between image and language is so fruitful. Paint is, quite literally, fluid: I move it from place to place and erase it, a lot. It exhibits the signs of its own failure, it evidences what was impossible to translate and in doing so, opens a new kind of space.

So like you, Daisy, I am interested in the labor and process of translation itself, and the opportunities that arise from its impossibility: not what is lost in translation but gained. Translation may be impossible, but maybe it’s possible to translate its impossibility.

I came across a word recently—catachresis—which is to deliberately use a word in a way that is not correct. It seemed to be the perfect word to describe my own deliberate misuse of objects, animals, human bodies, and space in my work; to try and redefine a pictorial language or, at the very least, resist the rules that govern the pictorial language of historical painting from which I often glean. I don’t simply endeavor to translate personal experience, but to locate and understand it in the context of patriarchy and within a syntax of existing pictorial language as a feminist artist. Whew! The result of my painterly catachresis has been an illogical or irrational pictorial space, an indeterminate number of bodies, genders, species... without hierarchy. An impossible body allows us to consider what is possible, to consider potentiality. I am always looking for the moment in which things become impossible, either figuratively or spatially, but which still register in a way that makes formal sense. This uncertainty is a form of intimacy (something unrecognizable is, oddly, the place in which we can recognize ourselves the most). Likewise, an apple sliced in half with its seeds pointing downward like tears can portray the same emotional weight as sexual rejection. This recognition is a kind of intimacy. Or when a mark strikes a delicate balance between being an arm and a foot at the same time, but is also just a mark; misunderstanding and conflict are ways toward intimacy. What they share is an openness, or the space they try and provide for the other half of translation: interpretation. I am not trying to translate or universalize my experience, rather, I want to create a space in which a viewer can interpolate an experience of their own, to see what else is possible.

AMBERA WELLMANN is an artist based between Berlin (Germany) and Mexico city (Mexico).
I understand my daughter very well. She is 18 months old and has only a handful of words: banana (na-na), hello (hel-lo, bon-jou, cou-cou), water (lo), take this (ti-uh), shoe (shaw), apple (up-pa), goodbye (buh-buh) and listen to me, I need something (ma-ma). The few words she has are a combination of French and English. She hears one at home and the other everywhere else.

But this is not the limit of her language. She is fluent in babble. The majority of her language is nonsensical: a remarkable lexicon of sounds and intonations that suggest a complexity of thought and emotion. She captures the musicality of language without the words. Her babble is any and every language. It is a becoming-language. I am fascinated by her babble and I find myself repeating it back to her. We spend days speaking to each other in bloubiboulga and gobbledygook, and yet we understand each other well.

Her babble is paired with an impressive repertoire of gestures. She points, snaps her fingers, raises her arms, waves and blows kisses, dances and stomps her feet, tickles herself, and giggles. She is full of expression. Everything is big and exaggerated, and it all comes out of a tiny body.

This is a beautiful moment in development. Her capacity to express herself is all possibility and potential—her babble could become any language. From here on her acquisition of language is an edit. Her babble will become more coherent each day as she pares down her phonemes and organizes them into words. The variety of tones and sounds she makes will reduce and eventually conform to what is understood in one language or another. Her expressions will become subtler as they are replaced by words.

The acquisition of language is simultaneous with increased independence. She is walking. She occupies herself with activities and impromptu games. She is creating a world of her own. I feel her acquisition of language coincides with a separation, and I feel a sense of loss.

While I am teaching her language, she has been teaching me babble. She has reminded me that meaningful communication is not dependent on language. I am no longer sure how much language facilitates understanding between fluent adults. Sometimes language is distraction, it is noise, it is everything but what we mean. Children, on the other hand, say exactly what they mean. This is why their speech is so confronting. We are not used to exchanges in which speech and its meaning are so direct.

As I type this, I hear her rustling herself awake from a nap. Her hand pokes out from between the slats as I hear a mischievous giggle. An invitation to play awaits.

KATHLEEN RITTER is an artist, writer and faculty at Parsons Paris, France.
MATT MULLICAN

BY WILLIAM WHITNEY

Matt Mullican
Universal Perspective
Peter Freeman Gallery

It turns out that binge watching the television show Counterculture was the perfect appetizer to Matt Mullican’s latest exhibition Universal Perspective, his sixth at Peter Freeman. The series is set upon the premise that in 1987 East German scientists succeeded in creating a parallel world. In order to test the bounds of science, in order to examine the potential differences between the two worlds, one of the scientists conducts a cause-and-effect experiment, gifting his daughter a vinyl record from her favorite artist, while his counterpart does not. This small divergence fundamentally alters both worlds, highlighting the potential significance of seemingly mundane daily actions to impact the global landscape. The same idea and effect are evident in Five World Signs (2020), which is hung on a singular wall in the gallery’s entryway; it is the first work viewers are presented with, and can be seen from outside the gallery’s front doors. Two 78 1/4 by 78 1/4-inch canvases hang side by side, displaying a small circle within a square within two larger circles. One canvas features the black outline of the shapes amidst the white backdrop of the canvas. The other is ablaze with colors: an emerald green, a dark shade of royal blue, a vibrant orange, and white and green plexiglass disks is unique either in color or in shape, as Mullican has carved out different shapes within the circular frame of each disk, some people catch glimpses of it in transit. The artist has long played with the expectations of where art belongs and who its audience should be, bringing art into the daily lives of people who may never enter a gallery. Her practice of making public art, “upcycling” taxicab windows, public space: gentrification, homelessness, street harassment (“IF YOU DON’T ASK THE ANSWER IS ALWAYS NO”), and the danger women face just by walking alone. Erenthal was raised in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, growing up in both New York and Israel. When she was 17, she ran away from home to avoid an arranged marriage. Her work places women—rendered in a cartoonish style—unafraid and inventive in the streets, reminding us that we are not always welcome or safe; her figures’ eyes fixed open with a gaze directed straight at us, expressing sexual desires as well as anxieties such as, “I WANT US TO SLEEP TOGETHER SO LET’S NOT BE FRIENDS,” and “I SHOUL’D’VE KEPT YOU AS A FANTASY,” both on mattresses; “LIKE MY LOVE LIFE” on the base of a broken guitar; and “PLEASE STOP MAKING COMMENTS ABOUT MY WEIGHT” on the back of a dress pattern box. She plays with national politics, like her 2019 mural in Crown Heights showing two women with uplifted fists flanking the words “MY UTERUS MY DECISION,” or a painting on a board inside a front yard, leaned up against the railing reading, “CHILDREN DON’T BELONG IN CAGES.” The current state of social isolation gives her work a new relevance, as we are all now forced to experience art in unexpected, non-traditional art spaces, like the street and the screen, viewing art from the safety of our homes or on a socially distanced walk. “THE STREET IS OUR ONLY MUSEUM NOW,” Erenthal paints below her wide-eyed heroine, recorded in her March 22, 2020 Instagram post, which also captures two passersby reading the words, “MY UTERUS MY DECISION,” or a painting on a board inside a front yard, leaned up against the railing reading, “CHILDREN DON’T BELONG IN CAGES.” The current state of social isolation gives her work a new relevance, as we are all now forced to experience art in unexpected, non-traditional art spaces, like the street and the screen, viewing art from the safety of our homes or on a socially distanced walk. “THE STREET IS OUR ONLY MUSEUM NOW,” Erenthal paints below her wide-eyed heroine, recorded in her March 22, 2020 Instagram post, which also captures two passersby reading the words, “MY UTERUS MY DECISION,” or a painting on a board inside a front yard, leaned up against the railing reading, “CHILDREN DON’T BELONG IN CAGES.”
“ONE DAY AT A TIME.” On Instagram, she poses next to the work wearing a mask. Recently, Erenthal has begun posting videos of a performance she’s been doing in still-busy Prospect Park, where she installs a piece reading, “LIVE ALONE. PLEASE TALK TO ME FROM 6 FEET AWAY” against a tree and, wearing a mask, sits by the artwork as passersby interact with her or stop to read the piece. The performance, documented in stills and videos on her Instagram and recently featured on Pix11 local news, shows how even in these times, art can be a means to reach out to people, an opening for conversation, or an unspoken bond. In her practice has always embraced the chaotic and detritus of the street, Erenthal’s new work leans into our difficult circumstances, offering a way to move through them together.

MEGAN N. LIBERTY is the Art Books Editor at the Brooklyn Rail. Her interests include text and image, artists’ books and ephemera, and archive curatorial practices.

PETER SAUL

BY DAVID CARRIER

Peter Saul (b. 1934) is a classic Pop artist who, with his current exhibition at the New Museum, is achieving the recognition he has long deserved. On the third and fourth floors of the museum are installed about 60 of his paintings, most of them large. The show is also accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue. In 2008, Hal Foster wrote: “Pop history painting” seems almost an oxymoron.” He only cited Gerhard Richter and Richard Hamilton as artists that belie this feeling, but Saul should now be added to that list.

Look at how Ice Box Number 1 (1960) dumps a quantity of consumer goods, as if they had tumbled out of the icebox, onto the picture plane. Here there is none of the orderly presentation of Andy Warhol’s shiny Pop paintings. Then compare Saul’s Man in Electric Chair (1964) with Warhol’s own electric chairs. And consider how aggressively Saul depicts the cartoon character in Mickey Mouse vs. the Japs (1962), with none of the lucidity of Roy Lichtenstein’s images of comics. Other Pop artists depicted Superman, but who else did any picture like Superman and Superdog in jail (1963), which shows the titular dog drinking from an open toilet?

Saul creates potent political art. His only cited Gerhard Richter (1992–95) continues to make strong images. Even as his targets change, Saul presents no alternative to nihilism. You feel, sometimes, that he would do anything (in his pictures) to get your attention.

The many paintings on display at the New Museum reveal all these aspects of Saul’s art, but their installation sometimes gets in the way. In the third floor gallery, paintings are installed in two rows, with the uppermost paintings almost at the ceiling. This double hanging discouraged close looking, turning Saul’s very diverse paintings into visual wall-paper. This problem is, perhaps, inherent in the architecture of the New Museum, which is almost always hostile to painting. In any case, the museum is closed, and now the paintings cannot be seen at all. Not to worry! In the meantime, listen to The Cramps’ classic, “Oh baby I see you in my Frigidaire” (1980). They are the Peter Sauls of punk. (The live 2006 Oslo performance on YouTube is best.)

PETRA CORTRIGHT

BY BARBARA MAC ADAM


Portrait of Donald Trump (2018), a ferocious portrait, transforms its subject into an image in the process of being assembled by an Action painter. No one, however, is immune to error: Crucifixion of Angela Davis (1973) shows that famous activist in an aggressive picture that, as Saul has acknowledged recently, now looks mistreated and obviously offensive.

When I was growing up, Mad Magazine fueled my adolescent imagination. That publication, the catalogue explains, was one of Saul’s early sources. When I became an art critic, I asked Thomas Nozkowski, who worked at Mad, to recollect Saul’s early art.

Like everyone else, Peter was trying to find a way to move out of and forward from New York School painting. In Paris, at some distance from the main event, he devises this ecstatic mix of images: drawing from every corner of the visual continuum. Observation, art history, comics, fantasy—name it, he throws it in. It is as if he takes the formal permission (to make any kind of stroke or blot) of Ab-Ex and expands that to include the permission to make any kind of image and bounce it up against any other kind of image.

In good art historical fashion, the catalogue cites numerous precedents besides Saul for Mad’s painting. But as Nozkowski says, Saul really is a law onto himself: Strange, I think, that no [one] writes about this work formally because there is where its strength is. His best work is like no one else’s—hell, his worst work is like no one else’s, filled with extraordinary passages of pure painting, extraordinary colors, and maybe the richest and most varied vocabulary of shapes of any living painter.

There is no space in Saul’s painting, just heaps of stuff, like in a bombed-out city. His body lacks all dignity. How do these people have sex? how do they commit their acts of violence? indeed, how do they move at all? Like an octopus, they have no bones. The old masters show Christ crucified. But however badly beaten, he appears as an intact human figure. Saul’s vision of the body is much more radical. His approach to political commentary is equally confrontational. While leftist protest in the 1960s was often backed up by utopian visions of what was possible, there is no redemptive dimension to Saul’s art. Displaying the evils of the present order, he gives no reason to believe that improvement is possible. Like Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose early novels were echoed by leftists, or the writings by his American admirer Charles Bukowski, Saul presents no alternative to nihilism. You feel, sometimes, that he would do anything (in his pictures) to get your attention.

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The abstraction in my work comes from using really bad quality images. I don’t feel bad about ripping shitty things apart. If it is really high definition with beautiful details it feels more precious. Why abstract that? I want to cut up things that aren’t working on their own.

Although she is a digital painter Cortright also embraces tradition, and while her medium is new, she does not shy away from redefining something old. A painter who doesn’t use paint, she teaches us to look using her tools as we follow her lead through represented landscapes and between hanging sheets of abstract images. Her landscapes of repose, complete with peaks, valleys, and vegetation rendered richly enough that we can almost smell the rot and roses.

While we may be unsure of how to evaluate an exhibition that we are not viewing in person—we’re looking at a gallery website and judging a two-dimensional presentation as if it were three-dimensional—we must mentally fill in the dimensions and build a possible alternative space for imaginings and responses.

Cortright’s post-internet practice is never far from physical experience. That’s where we step in.

Barbara A. MacAdam is a freelance writer and former long-time editor at ARTNews.

Masculinities: Liberation Through Photography

By Daniel Pateman

Barbican Art Gallery

About a month before the UK government realized the urgency of implementing social distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Barbican Art Gallery’s Masculinities: Liberation Through Photography had just opened its doors to largely positive reviews. Impelled by the scrutiny of masculinity in the media and spurred on by movements like #MeToo, the current pandemic may have sequestered artists from positions of power. Karen Knorr’s “High School Football” (2007–2009) eschews the testosterone-fueled representation of athletes for individualistic portraits of adolescents: shy, uncertain, or brazenly confident. Particularly astute is Devin (2008), which posits conventional masculinity as a socially imposed mold. In juxtaposition with the subject’s gangly frame, his shoulder pads appear oversized, his kit constructive.

The notion that particular characteristics are exclusive to either sex is regularly contested, a point effectively made in the representation of hypermasculinity, Robert Mapplethorpe’s camera worshiping Arnold Schwarzenegger’s bulging musculature (1976), and Akram Zaatari’s archival images (2011) show Middle Eastern bodybuilders enacting great feats of strength. But these ostensibly male displays are desta-bilized by the adjacent works. Lyra Lyon (1980), Women’s World Pro Bodybuilding Champion, hyphenates two images of Schwarzenegger posturing, while Time Lapse (2011), a series by transmasculine artist Cassils, attests to the fleshy malleability of the body.

The first room of “Male Order: Power, Patriarchy and Space,” in its uniformly imposing presentation, conveys how hegemonic masculinity is maintained by the exclusion of women and non-White “others” from positions of power. Karen Knorr’s Gentlemen (1981–83) documents the opulent all-male members clubs of St James’s Park in London, while Richard Avedon’s homophobically styled portraits of America’s key political, economic, and cultural figures (1976) illustrate a corresponding patriarchal elite across the Atlantic. In the following room, Michael Subotzky’s “I was looking back” (2004–2012) evokes the oppression and violence that White masculine power can inflict, in particular on the Black body, by carefully breaking the glass on images from old series of photographs.

Segueing from political to personal but not interrogating paternalistic control is “Family and Fatherhood.” In Larry Sultan and Masahisa Fukase’s visual narratives, old age becomes synonymous with emasculation: aptly portrayed by Sultan’s Fixing the Vacuum (1991), in which the artist’s elderly father—a retired businessman—labors over the household chores. Meanwhile, the nuclear family is represented as dysfunctional in Richard Billingham’s “Ray’s Laugh” (1996) and Anna Fox’s “My Mother’s Cupboards and My Father’s Words” (1999). Domestic abuse is implied in the former—a likely consequence of social deprivation—but it’s chillingly foregrounded in the latter: the misogynistic words of Fox’s father accompanying her claustrophobic images.

Upstairs, artists respond to a history of marginalization that has seen Black individuals exoticized and objectified but rarely the empowered authors of their own identities. In Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008 (2005–2008), Hank Willis Thomas deconstructs the imagery of adverts produced by white men for African American audiences. With the text removed, the racial signifi-cations of the photographs become clear: reinforcing stereotypes of Black men as aggressors or gangsters. Samuel Fosso and Elle Pérez champion the fluidity of identity, while Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Paul Mpagi Sepuya provide visually rich examples of queer Black sexuality. In Darkroom Mirror (2017), Sepuya both denies and returns the viewer’s gaze in an erotic exchange of looks: the photographer and his friend intimately watching us through their camera’s viewerfinder.

The final two sections offer individually appealing appraisals of masculinity, but their concerns become noticeably narrower. “Queering Masculinity” presents an almost exclusively White, Western narrative of gay liberation—lacking the complex intersectionality of “Disrupting the Archetype”—and whose focus revolves almost exclusively around New York City and San Francisco. The black-and-white documentary images are handsome, though, while George Dureau’s collaboration with double-amputee B.J. Robinson stands out, his images (1978–1979) reinventing the disabled body with vibrancy.

We conclude with “Women on Men,” comprising work that emerged from, or was part of, second-wave feminism, and questioning a visual dichotomy between the active male and the passive female. Tracey Moffatt’s Heaven (1997) provides an amusing reversal of the male gaze by filming surfers in various states of undress, thereby highlighting a power imbalance that makes it socially acceptable for men to objectify women but not vice-versa. But wall quotes from Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), such as that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification,” feel belated at this point in the exhibition. From the outset, in the fetishized soldiers of Fouad Elkoury’s Militiamen: Portrait of a Fighter, Beirut (1980), for instance, there are numerous examples of men being displayed for the viewer’s pleasure.

But these are minor quibbles in what is an impressively executed show; a vibrant agglomeration of artists and media that overflows with ideas. It may have benefited from more contemporary work, given the increasingly amorphous concept of gender today, but mostly it feels comprehensive, judiciously deconstructing the cultural ideal of masculinity and representing, if not exhausting, a broad range of its embodiments.

Leap of Color

By Tom McGlynn

Leap of Color

Yaros Art

The effect of color is one element in art that continually eludes codification. Braque, not known in his mature phase as a particularly flashy colorist, once mused, “Color could give rise to sensations which would interfere with our conceptions of space.” Historical attempts to formalize color’s affective sensations, its “interference,” through multiple (often conflicting) color theories and paenae to the chromatic spirit in art, can be useful in understanding its technical deployment. Yet there remains an unknowable factor to the overall effects of chromatics once freed from the lab or the studio. The ecstatic symphony of hues orchestrated by Henri Matisse and André Derain in their Fauvist phases was intended to strategically overwhelm the academic view that color should be sutured to representational form in a way that would support the representation, but not overtly express the phenomenal sensation of that form in color. Color is basically sensational, its own register of expression, and that’s exactly why it became such a powerful, elemental factor in post-war abstraction: that factor which ultimately escapes explicit codification. Braque, not known in his mature phase as a particularly flashy colorist, once mused, “Color could give rise to sensations which would interfere with our conceptions of space.” Historical attempts to formalize color’s affective sensations, its “interference,” through multiple (often conflicting) color theories and paenae to the chromatic spirit in art, can be useful in understanding its technical deployment. Yet there remains an unknowable factor to the overall effects of chromatics once freed from the lab or the studio. The ecstatic symphony of hues orchestrated by Henri Matisse and André Derain in their Fauvist phases was intended to strategically overwhelm the academic view that color should be sutured to representational form in a way that would support the representation, but not overtly express the phenomenal sensation of that form in color. Color is basically sensational, its own register of expression, and that’s exactly why it became such a powerful, elemental factor in post-war abstraction: that factor which ultimately escapes explicit ideation via its overt expression. Leap of Color takes on this task.

The show is dominated by artists associated with what became known as the Washington Color School, including Kenneth Noland, Howard Mehring, Thomas Downing, and Gene Davis, whose careers benefited from Clement Greenberg’s notion of “post-painterly abstraction.” After supporting Pollock and a few other of the
Sculptures, Plastic, and Abstraction in 1960s California: A Conversation Between Thomas Downing and John McLaughlin

BY RUBA AL-SWEEL

Abstract Expressionist artists through their lean times, Greenberg took it upon himself to demarcate the new generation of abstract painters through the same lens of aesthetic and historic inevitability he applied in the 1940s and ‘50s, thereby betting up the stakes of post-WWII American cultural hegemony. In a 1990 Rail interview with Sam Gilliam (notably absent from this show) I gleaned some first-hand information: this so-called Washington Color School was much more fractious and loosely organized, more of a collection of individuals already involved with their own explorations of color and structure in painting. Greenberg's post-painterly abstractionist strokes that make up its ostensibly bland and color-coded culture. In the meantime, color perception or blends into the background.

From his downtown Dubai apartment as the first light and murrmings of the day unfurl, he sits by his window overlooking a construction site teeming with workers, observing as they perform their tasks of opening the city. “It’s interesting how central they are to the heart of the city, yet they exist on the margins,” he says. In any given building in Dubai, the windows will more often than not overlook a kaleidoscopic tessellation of high-rises under construction. To Kazem, these windows are mere frames for vibrant tableaux vivants; his subjects, the fugum of the canvas. “The way structures swallow and refract light, casting interesting shadows, made me think of how laborers don’t even own the shadows of their own creations,” laments Kazem. He is wary of joining the ranks of artist-cum-activists, but in today’s mounting global healthcare frenzy, the topic takes on new significance. “I don’t have solutions. I just observe life and interact,” he says.

Perhaps this is most apparent in Sound of Angler (2020), an installation comprising 38 new scratch works and a found bathroom door he stumbled upon at an Italian restaurant in Cincinnati, Ohio. The door, worn out from 30 years of use, bears the marks of time with countless blotches of paint repairs on its scratched surface. Each layer, a different color. “I’m fixated on the idea of infinity, that’s why I wanted the door to be a sort of ongoing record that would continue bearing the marks of countless palms pressing against it,” says Kazem. Here he invites viewers to push the door, which swings open onto a showroom where his new scratched works hang in a cacophony of colors taken from the many layers of paint on the bathroom door. The scratches trace the endless permutations of angles created by light bleeding into the room each time the door was pushed.

Kazem’s scratches, which developed into a signature technique, date back to 1999, when he started creating visual representations of sounds by scratching paper with scissors. In Collecting Light (2020), made of large foldable scrolls of paper, he painted light using scratches in an ongoing series focused on the MENA region. In 2019, he created a single work for the Museum of the Smithsonian. He is the director of Beautiful Fields, an organization dedicated to socially-engaged curatorial projects, and is also currently a visiting lecturer at Parsons/The New School.

Mohammed Kazem, Learn to Float (2017). The serial nature of her works often than not overlook a kaleidoscopic tessellation of high-rises under construction. To Kazem, these windows are mere frames for vibrant tableaux vivants; his subjects, the fugum of the canvas. “The way structures swallow and refract light, casting interesting shadows, made me think of how laborers don’t even own the shadows of their own creations,” laments Kazem. He is wary of joining the ranks of artist-cum-activists, but in today’s mounting global healthcare frenzy, the topic takes on new significance. “I don’t have solutions. I just observe life and interact,” he says.

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continues a hellbent attempt at charting light by gouging the point at which it lands like coordinates on a map. But creating a compendium of sound and light is no cushy job: it took the conceptual artist around 70 hours to complete each piece. "I don’t hold on to my initial vision of the work, nor do I overload it with symbolism," he tells me. Indeed, he glides through the process like natural light. Flowing through his studio from dawn to dusk.

To Kazem, darkness is not the absence of light: darkness is a separate entity which tangoes softly with light. "As the earth rotates around the sun, shadows move and that creates a symphony of sound. You won't see or hear these elements because we too often forget that there’s a metaphysical aspect to visual art," he tells me. For Sound of Light (2019–20), composed of massive canvases perched on freestanding wooden structures in the middle of the gallery, Kazem depicts scenes from his ventures into abandoned construction sites, with light thrashing in from the apertures, hungrily coating cement surfaces.

Kazem is neither an experimental light artist of the Instagram-era or a disc jockey of the New Wave renaissance. Rather, his layering of light and sound create infinite reverberations, rendering the conditions for the party and the after-party, ad infinitum. RUBA AL-SWEEL is a writer, critic and reviewer of art from, about, and around the Middle East.

NICK RAFFEL

BY ALEX JEN

Nick Raffel
plenum
Regards Gallery, Chicago

The window is open and it is cold. In front of me is a sleekly-hewn MDF box, proclaiming itself a modern-day stele. Its grille cuts up my sightline, a simple Maybridgetean delight. Such is an encounter with plenum, a sparse, immediate exhibition of sculpture. The sculptures want to add up to something. Raffel has intruded the gallery space by using the back plate has a smaller opening like a speakeasy door, framing a piece of the street outside. Each vent ends in a diagonal notch and is nicked with two sawtooth incisions, curiously reminiscent of the stray bristle marks on even the cleanest Barnett Newman zips. Further evidence of handiwork can be found in the bowed pencil streaks and darker beige saw burns at top. Though the sculptures appear unremarkable and mass-produced, details like the measurements scribbled inside the first and the neat trapezoidal partitions in the second hint at a very particular engineering.

The framework for plenum is a computational fluid dynamics (CFD) simulation, typically used for planning HVAC systems, that models how air circulates through Regards. There is one caveat: such simulations are never completely accurate because they are premised on the spaces being impermeable, perfect vacuums of pure air. And so, Raffel placed the sculptures in spots of recirculation; that is, every time a visitor swings open the front door, there’s a cross breeze with the raw air and a spur of air in drawn through each work.

Indeed, additional narrow slits on each perpendicular face of the second MDF sculpture, beached next to the first, visualize a brisk passing-through. And as the sun glanced across the laminated floor that Wednesday around 3:45 pm, each opening flickered with shadows not unlike those behind a lit door. With the world feeling like it’s in some standstill, that rhythmic and harnessed change of weather pumping through Raffel’s sculptures felt strangely alive and reassuring.

If the MDF sculptures feel a little delicate and risk being overlooked, the stainless steel sculpture is an enchanting sight to behold. Made up of five main sections, each further divided into multiple twist-off segments, the work recalls endless French horn tubing or Art Deco ruins. Large cylinders taper and funnel into thinner ones, then loop and branch off. But some of the sections are solid, and as far as I could tell, there are only two openings in the whole system. Tracing my eyes over it, I slowly started to wonder what the point was—none of the five sections even connect. Air either cycles endlessly in one, or gets spit out again in another. It’s either a damaged product or a really good sculpture, I think.

Which led to the question of where the metaphor of plenum can take us. Imagining an inherently imperfect HVAC system—airflow is not something we can really see—is a welcome, if at times opaque, thought experiment. Retracing my steps through the gallery, however, I felt keyedin to some distilled, conscious relationship between myself, those hummings boxes and pipes and their spaces between. Because perhaps the utility of plenum is outside the objects, and by teasing their purpose as HVAC parts, the sculptures lure viewers into a state of momentarily pure inquisitive focus. Realizing that, despite our best intentions and efficiencies, trying to build the perfect environment is a losing game—whether literally in architecture or more openly speaking in one’s personal life. There will always be, for better or for worse, some human discrepancy or intervention that’s not part of the plan. Counterintuitively, Raffel’s overly beautiful, overly minimal sculptures made me think about waste and filt, and how we ignore it or try to cover it up.

Though plenum does not resolve, it holds. The sculptures want to add up to something. Raffel has intruded the gallery space by taping into; I meet his sculpture like I would Robert Irwin’s: plugged in and willing to wait. Perhaps plenum needs people, not private appointments, to be felt. A different kind of circulation: visitors in their own scrambled thoughts, eying each other between the works. In any case, leaving I was back to how I felt first entering: a little cold. ALEX JEN is a writer based in Chicago.

AGNES PELTON

BY ANN MCCOY

Agnes Pelton Desert Transcendentalist Whitney Museum of American Art

That a contemplative artist like Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) is having an exhibition in a shuttered museum, as her viewers are experiencing enforced reclusion during a pandemic lockdown, has a profound synchronicity. As we witness the implosion of a world ruled by consumerism, positivism, and scientific materialism, the Lenten practices of reflection and introspection have descended upon the city like a penance enforced by circumstance. Pelton experienced her share of darkness: a father’s early death by morphine overdose, poor health, nervous disorders, periods of poverty, and the dark cloud of a Gilded Age sex scandal that hung over her family. Like her rough contemporary, the Dadaist of Klimt (1862–1914), Pelton was a visionary interested in occult pursuits who communicated with inner spiritual guides. Both were also readers of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), the Russian mystic, encyclopedic source of ancient wisdom traditions, and founder of the Theosophy Society. Yet, in spite of their similarities as spiritual seekers, Pelton was a very different painter. Her paintings reference a pictorial space dissimilar to af Klint’s—one that was first described by the more mystical members of the Russian Cosmism movement who were to influence Wassily Kandinsky and Nicholas Roerich. Pelton comes to us like an angelic messenger in our dark hour. Her Pilgrim’s Progress through esoteric spiritual traditions, reliance on inner voices, purity of purpose, and monastic devotion to her art, represent a less-worn path that artists might benefit from treading today. Pelton’s inner light feels like a guiding lamp during our coronavirus plague and inundation in all-consuming materialism.

Pelton read and was influenced by Kandinsky’s On The Spiritual In Art (1910), and his words resonate in our age of ever-expanding art commerce:

This all-important spark of inner life today is at present only a spark. Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness. This feeble light is but a pre-sentiment, and the soul, when it sees it, trembles in doubt whether the light is not a dream, and the gulf of darkness reality. This doubt, and the still harsh tyranny of the materialistic philosophy. Russian Cosmism was all about future existence, a combination of science,
MAY 2020

Intimation by the composer and humanist astrologer, work. Pelton was a student of the Agni Yoga New Mexico, experiences reflected in their (Sanskrit for “sprouts of immortality”) and sacred texts. Cosmism had a direct Urusvati Himalayan Research Institute establishing the Master Institute of States, and throughout the Himalayas, Germany. Helena and Nicholas Roerich philosopher, and art historian, was shot 1930. Florensky, the theologian, scientist, and formerly suppressed writing. Those ideas of the religious visionaries like influenced by Nikolai Fedorov, cosmism’ s Groys, and the religious visionaries to new translations by critics like Boris biopolitical utopianists space—projecting man into the cosmos.

Mother of Silence

Agnes Pelton, Mother of Silence, 1933. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 inches. Private collection.

natural philosophy, ethics, Eastern and Western thought, and astronomy and space—projecting man into the cosmos. Cosmism fell into two camps, the radical biopolitical utopianists whose reputations are now experiencing a resurgence due to new translations by critics like Boris Groys, and the religious visionaries influenced by Nikolai Fedorov, cosmism’s central philosopher. The theoretical ideas of the religious visionaries like Father Pavel Florensky have received less attention due to their tragic fates and formerly suppressed writing. Those rejecting atheism and the official doctrine of dialectical materialism either fled after the revolution or faced imprisonment and death. Alexander Yaroslavsky was shot in 1930. Florensky, the theologian, scientist, philosopher, and art historian, was shot in 1937. Wassily Kandinsky escaped to Germany. Helena and Nicholas Roerich traveled to Finland, England, the United States, and throughout the Himalayas, establishing the Master Institute of United Arts in New York in 1921 and the Uruvati Himalayan Research Institute in northern India in 1928 for the study of botany, ethnological-linguistic studies, and sacred texts. Cosmism had a direct impact on the artists immersed in Eastern spirituality like the group Amanavalla (Sanskrit for “sprouts of immortality”) close to the Roerich’s circle.

Pelton and the Roeriches shared the New York esoteric world and travel in New Mexico, experiences reflected in their work. Pelton was a student of the Agni Yoga Society founded in 1926 in New York by the Roerichs—a study she was introduced to by the composer and humanist astrolger, Dane Rudhyar in 1930. Pelton’s painting betimation (1913) portrays both a guru and animus figure representing Agni Yoga. The Roeriches spent a summer in Santa Fe in 1921, and Pelton first visited Taos and the art patron Mahel Dodge Lahan in 1919. Nicholas Roerich was a set designer, and his work uses linear perspective and relies on Russian folk art and landscape genre painting. Pelton’s use of transparency and achievement of a mystical pictorial space described by Florensky is masterful; she surpassed Roerich as a painter, whose paintings feel like flat pictorial representations. Through an act of divine intuition, she accomplishes what Roerich could not, in spite of his many accomplishments. Her inner voyages are as great as his Himalayan treks.

Florensky described the icon as a kind of window, an opening through which God can illuminate the viewer. His aesthetic arguments were in support of icons and the superiority of a mystical Slavic aesthetics over the materialistic Western conception of schematic linear perspective. Unlike the Albertian window, where the eye of the viewer opens onto a vista receding into space through single-point perspective, we see the opposite with Florensky’s reverse perspective. Through the power of the believer’s faith, the icon becomes the opening through which God’s magnificence radiates outward, becoming larger, as it approaches the viewer. We see this in Pelton’s works like The Fountains (1926), Being (1926) Radiance (1929), Wells of Jave (1931), and Winter (1933), which feature a window. The light source travels from behind and flows toward the viewer. Pelton discusses both the window and the icon in her notebooks. In 1929 she wrote, “Those pictures are like little windows, opening to the view of a region, much visited con- sciously or by intention—an inner realm, rather than an outer landscape.”

And concerning icons, she observed, “Some of the old Russian icons [sic] emit radiance quite perceptible to the sensitive. That it was not brilliant did not make a difference... The divine light of a halo reverently executed by a painter consecrated to his work emitted a radiance, no matter how dim.”

Florensky theorized that the use of reverse perspective in icons was a superior method of representation, along with what he called poly-centredness, or multiple viewpoints. The same idea may be found later in Cioran’s Grupurung and Gegenwart (1946), by the Bernese philosopher Jean Gebser (an English translation titled The Ever-Present Origin appeared in 1986). Gebser uses the term a-perspectival, arguing that by being able to move through and around an object (such as in a hologram), a spiritual perception occurs. In Pelton’s paintings like The Fountains (1926), Meadowlark’s Song (1926), Winter (1926), and The Blast (1941), the transparency of the shapes causes the viewer to enter the painting as though floating in a four-dimensional world, moving in and around the forms. Pelton is able to not only project light outward using a reverse perspective, but also through transparency moves the viewer into Gebser’s a-perspectival realm of visual poly-centeredness.

Many of Pelton’s works include a light-filled orb or egg. A cosmogenic symbol par excellence, it is found in many creation myths and represents fertility, often beginning open to form a new world. Pelton’s eggs are transparent with light emanating from their centers. Two such works must have had great significance for the artist, because she repeats the first version, Light Center (1947–1948), again at the end of her life in Light Center (1960–1961). Both paintings feature a pale, almost white, transparent egg that glows from within, surrounded by darker blue forms. They present a portrait of the divine center of the artist’s personality. Similar forms can be found in many of Pelton’s works such as Wells of Jave (1931), Interval (1950), Focus (1951), and Departure (1952). It is as though she has captured divinity in this orb or egg, and it creates an energetic center, projecting these energies outward toward the viewer. Sometimes this egg is enclosed in a semi-figurative abstraction as in Mother of Silence (1933), a painting the critic Ben Davis has insightfully compared to the Mother of the World of silence, disguised as the feminine. Standing in front of Pelton’s work, I felt as though her source of light flowed out and enveloped me. In this dark time, such a veneration of her work seemed appropriate along with a celebration of her ability to create works that acted as portals for the divine. Her art as a devotional practice speaks to us, even if it represents what the academy cannot embrace.


ANN MCCOY is an artist, writer, and Editor at Large for the Brooklyn Rail. She was given a Guggenheim Foundation award in 2019, for painting and sculpture.

JEAN-JACQUES LEQUEU

BY BRANDT JUNCEAU

Jean-Jacques Lequeu: Visionary Architect

The Morgan Library & Museum

The current Morgan Library exhibition title, Jean-Jacques Lequeu: Visionary Architect begs the question, just who was Jean-Jacques Lequeu? A careful visitor may notice that he was in fact really not an architect, and far from visionary. Architect was the pretext, occasion for most of these 59 drawings, all lent by the Bibliothèque national in Paris. His highly finished elevations of imaginary structures
parody rather than contribute to the profession. Rather than get a job done, they elaborate a number of maladroit role-plays. Lequeu, the self-avowed architect, was only the first. He also posed himself a cosmopolitan reader in history, philosophy, esoterica and pseudoscience, a playwright (the texts have yet to surface), a maybe/would-be sort-of libertine, and occasional gender shapeshifter in drawings if not in fact. Lequeu’s essays in self and place give him considerable cachet at present. A great many received ideas can be hung on his; he was all but purpose-built for that, but Lequeu the poet had something else on his mind.

Born in 1757 in Rouen to a family of skilled mechanics and quite a few architects, Lequeu was a more-than-competent draftsman when he went to Paris and worked as such under the protection of Jacques-Germain Soufflot (architect of the church of Saint-Genèveve, now the Panthéon) but when Soufflot died two years later, the young Lequeu lost his best connection to the profession. He was employed here and there, without assignments, without advancing, and even before the Restoration, had foregone architecture to take a post in a cartography department. Mapmaking rounded off the whole second half of his career. Had he built nothing, published nothing, exerted no influence, and died essentially unknown.

Just a few months before his death, however, Lequeu made history. Having failed to sell his accumulated papers, he managed to donate his unfinished Architecture Civile, incomplete treatises on architectural and figurative drawing, plus hundreds of miscellaneous drawings, 200-some books, and a mass of newspaper clippings to the Bibliothèque nationale. The donation slept until 1933, when the Viennese art historian Emil Kaufmann stumbled upon it, and kick-started Lequeu’s reputation by inflating it. He was the first, but not the most interesting. Later, Philippe Duboy proposed that Duchamp had maladjusted Lequeu’s legacy in his own image, while proposed that Duchamp had maladjusted Lequeu’s legacy in his own image, while proposing that Duchamp had maladjusted Lequeu’s legacy in his own image, while proposing that Duchamp had maladjusted Lequeu’s legacy in his own image.

No doubt about it, Lequeu loved drawing, which for him was mostly working with instruments: straightedges, compasses, dividers, French curves, pens, brushes, and inks. It had all but nothing to do with design. No sketches, no works in progress survive, if ever he made them, he didn’t keep them. Problems of design are not evident in his work. Neither is good design. Concepts of space, traffic, procession, and all the human social behavior—individual purposes, needs, and desires which guide a gifted architect like so many unseen hands—did not touch our Jean-Jacques. His work is almost pathologically free of purpose. Neither is good design.

In Buenos Aires, Centurión became involved with the Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, where young artists including Marcelo Pombo, Liliana Maresca, and Omar Schiliro, created expressive, irreverent work that often incorporated kitsch and queer aesthetics. Immersed in this milieu, Centurión revisited his childhood affinity for materials and craft practices related to female domesticity; thus, Centurión withheld his enthusiasm. While the artist’s home life was relatively tranquil, Paraguay at large teemed with political brutality and social injustice. Having barely recovered from three devastating wars—the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870), the Chaco War (1932–1935), and the Paraguayan Civil War (1947)—the nation succumbed to Alfredo Stroessner’s 35 year authoritarian regime, which began in 1954. Stroessner consolidated and legitimized his power by modifying Paraguay’s Constitution and conspiring with the armed forces. His government partnered with local civic-military dictatorship—enjoyed the renewed personal and political freedoms of restored democracy. Counterculture blossomed, and Centurión could finally be open with his sexuality. It is with this idea of personal sanctity that the exhibition title, Abrigo, engages. In Spanish the word has multiple meanings: it can be used to mean “overcoat” —as in a garment used to shield one’s body from the cold; al abrigo de translates to “in the care of” (a particular person); and the verb abrigar can be used to mean “cherish” or “keep” (hope).

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In Buenos Aires, Centurión resided and worked in San Telmo, a neighborhood home to vibrant immigrant and artist communities. He drew strength from this multi-cultural environment and from his tightly-knit, inclusive groups of friends and colleagues. A work that Centurión created in the final year of his life, as he suffered from his failing health. Neatly embroidered phrases read, alternately, “I am alive!” and “I am a soul in pain.” Despite this palpable frailty, Moros 2016 documentary Abruzo intimo al natural (Intimate Embrace Au Naturel)—shown in a darkened corner of the room—infoms the viewer that the artist’s reservation was luminous and brave. In camera footage, Centurión radiates a remarkable, childlike glee. Frame after frame train on his warm gaze, dazzling smile, and glossy black curls. In photographs he figures in groups, large and small, always embracing or embraced by others. It is impossible to detect anguish in his visage or posture.

One work in the final gallery contains the image of a small pink cross, above which Centurión embroidered the phrase, “renazco a cada instante,” “I reemerge at every moment” (1995). To feel renewed in deep crisis by faith, creation, and love. To be carried forward by small joys, to allow these joys the fullness and purity of our appreciation. This is art, personified.

ADRIAN MORRIS
BY BRIAN T. LEAHY

One of the last paintings I saw in person, before New York’s stay-at-home order took effect on March 22nd was Adrian Morris’s Bunkhouse (c. 1985). It portrays a spare gray room, illuminated only by four small windows inlaid with white stone. Two racks restate the chamber’s strict geometry. Ahead, a metal frame bolted to the wall offers sleeping platforms with meager, skinny mattresses; on the left, more bunks are neatly tucked into the small room. It is a sheet of studies for a painting of a bunkhouse if I tell you that the small room Bunkhouse portrays—with its slack, interior air—has been much on my mind the last few weeks. This painting, as well as the show’s two other outliers—Compound (c. 1998) and Ambulance Truck (c. 1995)—have become repetitive features of my mental slide show, arising as I scroll through images of hospitals and emergency quarantine centers or when I see the cramped spaces of friends’ apartments squished into the small virtual boxes of a video conference. In Morris’s paintings, “hope and dread go hand in hand,” the painter Merlin James tells us in the April-May issue of Mousse Magazine. But it is the dread that has felt most vivid recently: the way a painting like Ambulance Truck, with its two forestored cots pointing towards a limitless horizon, implies the pain of loss that has occurred already and will occur again. This utopia define our world now. Yet Morris could not have foreseen the particular connotations these images bear in the current crisis. Educated at the Putney School, a progressive boarding school in Vermont, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, and the Royal Academy in his native London, Morris was no outsider. But after his professional apogee, a substantial presentation of his work at the 1978 Hayward Annual, a mixture of his own reticence and the shifting moods of the art world ensured his paintings were never again exhibited during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Morris painted constantly, reworking images over many years. Since his passing in 2004, Morris’s paintings have found new audiences, largely thanks to James, the painter Carol Rhodes, and a handful of adventurous European curators and dealers. Maxwell Graham, the founder of Essex Street, adds his name to that list with this presentation, providing a tantalizing introduction to the artist for North American viewers. Even still, Morris’s work fits uneasily within the current painterly ecosystem; his images feel as untimely today as they must have in the 1970s. Artists who do not quite fit the critical narratives of their era are not unusual—indeed, they are what make art historical work meaningful. But Morris’s paintings seem particularly hard to pin down, harmonizing and clashing in equal measure with the early 20th-century surrealisms of Tanguy and Giorgio de Chirico and the complex realisms of his contemporaries such as Sylvia Plimack Mangold and Vija Celmins. Even in 1970, critic Sarah Kent wrote that “Adrian Morris’s work cannot easily be located in contemporary art,” a statement that still rings true.

Morris’s paintings are timely precisely because of this untimeliness. Our current moment is one of temporal disjointedness; the slowing of everyday life and the economic machinery that powers American society has produced a bizarre situation. Clock time no longer corresponds to the lived experience of crisis; emergencies abut interminable periods of waiting. This is the situation Morris’s work enacts: a process of living in constrained space through dis-tended time.

One final work, a small drawing from 1969, hung next to the gallery entrance. It is a sheet of studies for a painting of a window with a crank handle. In one version, the window is shut tightly, a lone building visible in the distance. In the other, the window is cracked open. Morris’s lacock images provide a means to encounter the complexities of time, space, and mourning in our current crisis. For a different viewer, in a different time, they might also signal the promise crossing thresholds can hold.

BRIAN T. LEAHY is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History at Northwestern University.
WHAT IS THIS FACE, AND WHAT IS MY FACE, EVEN IF IT'S NOT MINED?

While galleries, museums and institutions are now trying to imagine how art will continue through and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the only certainty is that things will be radically different both privately and publicly. In our newly exposed and uneven fragility, what will we say about what was happening from recall. The resulting burn is a mouse from recall. The resulting burn is a mouse. Through the visualization of her frozen in the palm of a human hand. With an open eye and an erect tail, the creature is attentive, aware of the viewer’s presence as if it carries the knowledge of experience, understanding the chase that continues. Like d’Heurle’s body, the hairless vermin is upside down. Its scale and centrality elevate the rodent’s credibility to that of the nude. As the creature stands on the rug each component of the work in dialogue with each other creating a dynamic mosaic that challenges canonized and normative hierarchy.

Two of Fallahpisheh’s ceramic cats are positioned between an arched doorway cut away from a plane of cardboard that sits beneath the photograph. If anatomically correct, the felines would be face-to-face. Instead, their faces are shaped like plates positioned on a table. Underneath the tail is another arched doorway. This one leading into the doomed body of the animal. The perfect vestibule and repository for the perfect home for a vermin. The games of animals a chance to fly. Before they enter the object. With such knowledge, the entry point is misunderstood and inserted to the mouse’s home through the rear canals.

Giving credit to the viewer’s suggestion that soap be used as a bollard lubricant when applied around the rectum, at seven, Fallahpisheh misunderstood and inserted the object. With such knowledge, the entry point is misunderstood and inserted to the mouse’s home through the rear canals. Reminiscent of the arch—seen in the doorways and two cardboard windows—reinforces a domestic space and the multitude of prescribed assumptions and events it carries.

For all the creatures in this exhibition share a discourse. In addition to Fallahpisheh’s mouse and cats, d’Heurle includes two chick—amorphous baby birds perched heavily atop rough mounds. In a poetic, frozen in the palm of a human hand. With an open eye and an erect tail, the creature is attentive, aware of the viewer’s presence as if it carries the knowledge of experience, understanding the chase that continues. Like d’Heurle’s body, the hairless vermin is upside down. Its scale and centrality elevate the rodent’s credibility to that of the nude. As the creature stands on the rug each component of the work in dialogue with each other creating a dynamic mosaic that challenges canonized and normative hierarchy.

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The exhibition Things on Walls at Affective Care—an operating medical office specializing in psycho-interventionist treatment—explores sculpture in a variety of mediums, including ceramics, wood, cast paper, resin, metal, and video. Organized by New Discretions, a curatorial project by Benjamin Tischer of Invisible-Exports, the show includes 17 works that play in the overlaps of “inner” life understood as both designed physical space and psycho-sensory interiority. In the unfolding temporaliest of this novel coronavirus, our attention requires ongoing adjustment as we plan online meetings for tea, for work, for fun, and ultimately for the survival of human connection. In Lucky Dellevelle’s “Zurich” (2016, block printing ink on linen, 20 x 20 x 1 in), part of a series of prints with different city names in their titles, the artist poses fun at the inherent fiction of moving across time zones between destinations. A circle ink block with what looks like giant pieces of turquoise confetti is overlaid with blank rectangular clock-hand positions at 19:05. Whether waiting in a doctor’s reception or anxiously deciding on when to venture out for groceries, as our routines are paused or even severely disrupted, we enter a dissociative state as if time is speeding up or seeming to stop altogether.

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While galleries, museums and institutions are now trying to imagine how art will continue through and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the only certainty is that things will be radically different both privately and collectively. The connectedness between bodies and precariousness of our specific bodily vulnerabilities has hit us in the face as we watch and partake in the spread of the virus, desperately search for masks, and grapple with the scarcity of ventilators needed to care for patients. While some consider the health and economic crisis a rational outcome of capitalist production, others speculate on karma and conspiracy. Anxiety prevails and questions bombard our psyches: What will become of us? What shapes will life take now? How will healing, politics, art, and, dare I think it—prices—change?

In what now seems like prescient thinking borne out of a creative collaboration, the exhibition Things on Walls at Affective Care—an operating medical office specializing in psycho-interventionist treatment—explores sculpture in a variety of mediums, including ceramics, wood, cast paper, resin, metal, and video. Organized by New Discretions, a curatorial project by Benjamin Tischer of Invisible-Exports, the show includes 17 works that play in the overlaps of “inner” life understood as both designed physical space and psycho-sensory interiority. In the unfolding temporaliest of this novel coronavirus, our attention requires ongoing adjustment as we plan online meetings for tea, for work, for fun, and ultimately for the survival of human connection. In Lucky Dellevelle’s “Zurich” (2016, block printing ink on linen, 20 x 20 x 1 in), part of a series of prints with different city names in their titles, the artist poses fun at the inherent fiction of moving across time zones between destinations.
becomes exciting as we publicly imagine our private abodes together, Justin Adrian’s two works Bullfightier (2019) and Last Drop (2019) affect the smoothness of high-end organic soaps that have melted and been stuck together in the shower. But these are soaps that merely show possibilities rather than cleanse—like silky 3-D printed Korschach tests come to life—through the hand of the artist’s biomorphic imaginary. The self-described painter experiments in exciting painting, yet also revels in the myth of the death of his medium.

Things on Walls reflects a collaboration of interiors—sometimes a gallery within a functioning medical practice, sometimes an exhibition in the midst of a patient’s treatment. As an experimental context for an exhibition that resists relinquishing art to mere decoration, the works interact with the design of the office. For example, a lonely quasi-anatomical statue—a shiny bulbous bronze gracefully balanced on its limb—is positioned just beneath the doctor’s wall of diplomas to offer a satisfying pause in Christina Kruse’s Settled (2019, bronze, wood, ink, 59 x 15 x 21 in). Opposite of which is Walt Cassidy’s shiny jagged brass framed in wood (on The Ascending (2012)). Nineties club kid turned high-end jeweler, Cassidy uses his wood frame to ground and situate the violence inherent in mining and molding beautiful objects. And in Douglas Rieger’s Querelle (2017, wood, string, silicone, 20 x 13 x 8 in) and Gabriela Vainsencher’s Untitled (2019, porcelain and underglaze), the artists trade on the absurdity of believing either in an all-knowing science or the power of faith. Wonder remains active from each of their pseudo-devices worked into either the shape of a kneading or kaleidoscopic form to signal prayer pews or new kinds of bodies twisting out from beneath the microscope.

How much do we want to get away from life as we’re living it now? And what will it mean to escape all this and return to each other? Rear View (Black Ice) (2019) is fabricated from a found rearview mirror, plastic cushion, and an air freshener by Double Vision (a collaboration between Agathe Snow and Marianne Vitale). This piece is brilliant for its subtle offering of a literal and metaphorical space for dipping back into our own interiors. Forced to face the rearview mirror the “wrong” way, from angles that eschew flattening, the physicality of this disorientation is welcoming. There was no normal. We always needed stories, myths, signs, and curatives, and Things on Walls asks what stories we told ourselves about ourselves and others—the poor in pocket, the #rich, the pervert, the artist.

DARLA MIGAN is a contributor to the Rail.

KATE SHEPHERD

BY SUSAN HARRIS

Kate Shepherd
Surveillance
Galerie Lelong & Co., NYC

Kate Shepherd’s Surveillance is the artist’s first one-person exhibition at Galerie Lelong in six years. No sooner did the show open on March 12 than the city (and the gallery) close the next day due to health concerns related to COVID-19. It is a huge disappointment for Shepherd’s wide community of supporters and the art community as a whole, but Shepherd has taken the situation in stride in her inimitably practical way. She is grateful to the gallery for keeping the show up when it reopens in hopes that people will be able to see it yet is content and at peace with the fact that the paintings get to hang together alone.

I first visited Shepherd’s studio in the mid-late ‘90s when she was making quirky drawings on prefabricated paint chips. I wrote about her work for a catalogue accompanying a 2007 gallery show in which I was infatuated by the element of drawing in her paintings, as though that was her “signature” psychologically and programatically fundamental to her art making. Her unique union of drawing and painting, her adherence to the laws of linear perspective, and the subdued shifts in tone and luminosity that create an almost tactile, architectural space into which viewers are pulled have been signature ingredients in an oeuvre that never feels prosaic or formulaic. Surveillance marks a vast leap in a new direction. Working on, experimenting with, and percolating this new body of work for years, Shepherd dug deep into herself and her process to figure out how to make paintings that would essentially make themselves instead of her superimposing images on them. Having always considered the crisp lines describing geometric structures and spatial experiences to be what her painting was about, she was compelled to finally address the qualities of her painted surfaces without sacrificing the personal criteria she has from making a successful painting, in particular the articulation of space and the concomitant viewer experience. A short video walkthrough posted on the gallery website and two recorded conversations conducted, respectively, with William S. Smith, editor of Art in America magazine, and Tyler Green, host of the podcast, The Modern Art Notes, are generous, intimate, and informative contributions to our understanding of the genesis and essential qualities of the paintings in the show. 1 As a caveat, however, it must be noted that hearing about the new paintings is not the same as experiencing them, and experiencing them all together in real space and time is what I look forward to.

The show’s title, Surveillance, was apt even before the pandemic in light of our self-obsessed, digital world in which boundaries between private and public have been increasingly eroded. It becomes even more eerie and present, however, in the current lockdown world where solitary individuals work and socialize through online Zoom meetings and art is viewed as digital thumbnails. The exhibition is comprised of two distinct bodies of work. The oldest works in the show were made three years ago and are installed in the small, side gallery. Works such as Blue Violet Lights Off and Crimson Lights Off (both 2019) each began as glossy, monochromatic paintings that captured in their surfaces the ambient light and fluorescent ceiling fixtures that Shepherd photographed and then had screen printed onto another surface. Seizing and fixing a specific image at a specific moment in time and place, these printed works are representational paintings that have effectively made themselves.

The paintings in the main gallery, which Shepherd finally resolved just a few months before the show, relinquish her signature lines and establish as their primary subject matter the heretofore unspoken attributes of the painted surface. Having always built up her paintings with many layers and sanding in between, she never found a reason until now to display the luscious velvety quality of the buried, sanded surface. In Eavesdropper (2019), two highly shiny, purple parallelograms holding fugitive images of passersby and nearby objects within their contours cut back sharply into an atmospheric field of tender, non-reflective purple that is modulated by whispers of brushstrokes. A breathtaking, space-defining tour de force, the glossy trapezoids read as “surrogate paintings” against an indeterminate wall rather than the painting itself. In the eponymous painting Surveillance (2020), the left half of the painting is glossy like Shepherd’s earlier paintings; on this side you see a reflection of the artist taking the picture. The right half, meanwhile, reveals a sensuously matte surface that is imperious to people and things in real space. Despite its impermeability, Surveillance, the last painting made for the show, is offered by the artist to viewers as a recipe or instruction manual to gain access into the paintings and her process.

In her conversation with William Smith, Shepherd enumerated the qualities with which she seeks to imbue her paintings: spookiness, loneliness, love, and sweetness. Seemingly contradictory, perhaps, these traits indeed manifest themselves in the new works. One cannot help but also ascribe these characteristics as projections of the artist herself as well as of the particular moment we are living in.

1. Art in America “William S. Smith in Conversation with Kate Shepherd...” Instagram Video, 10 April 10 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B7s0AB-nLu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Tyler Green, “Pandemic Bonus Episode: Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Kate Shepherd...” Modern Art Notes Podcast, 14 April 14 2020, https://mangopodcast.com/portfolio/pandemic-bonus-episode-paul-mpagi-sepuya-kate-shepherd/. Shpungin, who (as of this writing) also has a solo show up at MoCA Tucson through May 3, conjures and controls Medusa’s magic as she “carves” layers out of pulp, seemingly turning paper to stone in the aptly titled Good Bad (2018, pigmented casting cotton paper pulp, luminous silver pigment, 54 x 38 x 1 in). The effect of an old stone cast in cotton, a lightweight material potentially more protective than ever, is series given the weight of cloth in our newly limited zones of contact. Places that are still open or never closed are places deemed essential—they are places where we buy food, get care, places where we shit, shower, and cry. Out there, and in here, then and now, there are still things up on walls.

SUSAN HARRIS is co-president of the Board of the International Association of Art Critics, United States section (AICA-USA). She is an independent scholar and curator. Her most recent project is Managing Editor, Unfinished Memories: 30 Years of Exit Art, Stadl, 2016.

CURTIS TALWST SANTIAGO

BY MAGDALYN ASIMAKIS

Curtis Talwst Santiago
The Drawing Center

This month, the scaffolding in Curtis Santiago’s installation at The Drawing Center hits differently than it did when the show opened in February. Can’t I Alter remains a meticulously arranged selection of interrelated sketches, sculptures, and murals installed into the hunter green scaffolding standard in New York City, where the artist is based. This exhibition looks to the simultaneity of interrelated narratives, including the history of the Black knights of the Order of Santiago of the Red Cross in Portugal, the J’ouvert celebrations in Trinidad, skewed European histories, and more broadly to ancient lineages that are felt but not traceable due to colonization and empire. The scaffolding physically weaves Santiago’s works together and creates a space meant to represent the home of the fictional J’ouvert Knight, who recurs throughout the exhibition in temporally ambiguous vistas. In the weeks since the city shut down this installation has adjusted, perhaps contradictory, relationships which are further emphasized by the layers of paper from numerous panels that Santiago drew, cut apart, and pieced back together. Around the corner, the component-parts of these large wall works are parsed out as you are immersed in a series of ancestor portraits, dozens of visual and linguistic studies, and two sculptures: a portrait drawn on a large rock, and a glass nose placed on a column. Which vandalized ancient sculpture is being reclaimed? Around the same time of the opening of this exhibition, a translation of Édouard Glissant’s first published essay “Sun of Consciousness” was released. It was poetic timing to read Glissant’s exploratory texts reconciling his lived experience as a Martiniquais man in Paris while thinking about Santiago’s work. There is a shared interest in opacity and an acknowledgement of the density of transnational history that cannot be told solely through literary and artistic structures which lean towards summary or historicism. Santiago has previously said that he is interested in the potential of “genetic imagination”—an embodied knowledge that exists outside of written history—as a way of moving into unknown spaces and stumbling outside of our conditioning. The exhibition’s titular proposition, “can’t I alter,” reflects on this, suggesting a dialog between dominant global narratives and the artist’s interest in exploring their liminal, precarious, evolving spaces. Santiago makes work that is intentionally decentering—floating real and hypothetical historical and contemporary narratives together, without searching for distinct beginnings, ends, or resolution. Ultimately, it is within this entanglement that “truth” lies.


HELL IS A PLACE ON EARTH.
HEAVEN IS A PLACE IN YOUR HEAD.

BY KATHLEEN LANGJAHR

Hell is a Place on Earth. Heaven is a Place in Your Head.

As COVID-19 continues to proliferate throughout New York City, forcing all art institutions to remain closed to the public, museums and galleries have been scrambling to convert their programming to an online-only format. A standout example of this adaptation is P.P.O.W.’s current presentation, Hell Is a Place on Earth, Heaven is a Place in Your Head. Taking the form of a dedicated website, the exhibition coheres into a timely, thematically unified presentation that candidly addresses the circumstances of its occasion.

On the site, eight films by six artists—Carlos Motta, Guadalupe Maravilla, Carolee Schneemann, Hunter Reynolds, Suzanne Treister, and David Wojnarowicz—are available for viewing via embedded Vimeo players. The exhibition’s title quotes a line from Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (Vintage Books, 1991), a collection of essays recounting, among other experiences, his outrage and despair at the American response to the AIDS epidemic. This reference is apt, as four of the eight works in the exhibition deal directly with the theme of AIDS, the last major plague to disproportionately affect a socially and politically vulnerable demographic in the United States.

The most politically explicit work in the exhibition, Carlos Motta’s Legacy (2019), documents the artist struggling to orate a timeline of the HIV/AIDS epidemic while wearing a dental gag. Drooling from his gaping mouth, Motta struggles through the 30-minute performance, which transforms the factual, journalistic script into a feat of physical endurance, establishing a visceral metaphor for the oppression of those impacted by the AIDS crisis. Fury Them and Keep Quiet (2004) is more ruminate...
and symbolic; we see an array of 100 gloves culled from the streets of New York City set on fire, a static shot which is overlaid with footage of Motta sweeping up and burying the ashes. Apart from the imagery of the gloves constituting an eerily precocious parallel to our current reality, where the necessity for medical PPE dominates our news cycle, the work addresses the lasting impact of an epidemic ignored by social and governmental bodies for far too long with a somber, funerary directness.

Fittingly, themes of domestic isolation and the natural yearning for human contact are similarly prevalent throughout the exhibition. One of Carolee Schneemann’s most well-known works, Puer (1964–67), comprises a vertiginous collage of bodies and materials that expresses the coalescence of individual selves into an erotic, sensual whole. Augmenting the film’s innovative imagery, Schneemann’s novel processing techniques, wherein she burned and painted the 16mm film strip, resulting in a densely layered montage of media and subject. The film’s focus on interiority—both domestic and psychological—and its emphasis on bodily contact establishes a stark contrast to the palpable sense of isolation expressed by Hunter Reynolds’ Conversations with Kathleen White, Medication Reminder (2012). Here, several portrait-like shots of the artist sitting before the camera, alone in his home, are arranged in a multi-panel frame. The audio is a remix of both automated and human messages reminding him to take the pills prescribed to him following complications related to HIV. Throughout the video, Reynolds responds to the audio as if it were a present, sentient entity, opening the work onto another uncannily timely associational field characterized by confinement, physical compromise, and technological communication.

Suzanne Treister’s two videos, SURVIVOR (F)/Screener 02 (2016–ongoing) and SURVIVOR (F)/The New Planet (2016–2018), imagine a future unbound by the limits of human consciousness and terrestrial existence. Deceptively simple in format, her films paradoxically evoke a sense of entropic doom in the face of human understanding of the universe while instilling a dystopia and transcendence, imagining a future defined by an expanded understanding of the universe while instilling a sense of entropic doom in the face of human expansion into the far reaches of space. Similarly otherworldly is a recent film by Guadalupe Maravilla, Legacy (2019), which expands the implications of the exhibition to encompass the struggles of immigrant populations in the United States, particularly under the current, openly hostile administration. Dressed in elaborate costumes designed by Maravilla, performers undertake a series of invented rituals and choreographies while the artist discusses, in voiceover, how the conditions for immigrants have changed since he first came to the US from El Salvador in 1984.

While the compromised body is an explicit theme in the work—one which ties neatly into the rest of the exhibition—Maravilla’s film, as the title suggests, is more of a liturgy for the struggle of undocumented peoples. The exhibition is appropriately concluded by Wojnarowicz and Marion Scheman’s When I Put My Hands on Your Body (1989/2014), which centers on imagery of Wojnarowicz kissing and caressing another male actor. Wojnarowicz’s resonant voiceover poetically considers the transience of human bodies, memory, and the fundamental desire for human connection. The language oscillates between a consideration of death and eternal oblivion and the earnest, ecstatic desire to care for another person, reminding us, once again, that the crisis we now face is a collective struggle—one that may set us physically apart but, in so doing, reveals the yearning for connection that unites us.

KATHLEEN LANGAHR is a writer and researcher based in Brooklyn.

ROCHELLE GOLDBERG

BY PETER BROCK

Rochelle Goldberg
Psychomachia
Miguel Abreu Gallery

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Psychomachia, Rochelle Goldberg’s second solo exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, brings new material explorations into her intricately structured universe of personal and art-historical iconography. The show features fragmented figures cast in bronze, unruly sourdough sculptures, and glass bowls alongside some of her usual materials. Goldberg continues to frame her work with the story of Mary of Egypt, who gave up her worldly existence to live in the desert. She is said to have carried with her only three loaves of bread, and the inverted relationship between Mary’s bodily needs and her spiritual flourishing permeates the exhibition. Goldberg homes in on a series of connected symbols and combines them with such a peculiar form of precision that the boundaries of their conventional meaning begins to erode. The force of her associative poetics builds through repetition, and this iterative approach proves necessary: Goldberg insists that even commonplace materials take on strange new significance through her understated transformations.

In the center of the long corridor that forms the beginning of the exhibition space sits a deceivingly straightforward work titled Great Gardener Makes Bread (2020). As the first object to confront a visitor, this sculpture serves as an orientation to, or perhaps a warning about, the strange allegorical mutations that are underway. What looks like a hearty loaf of bread sits at the far end of a low, bed-shaped platform. Crispy chunks and a dusting of crumbs lay scattered across the white cloth surface of the pedestal. As I moved closer, I noticed that something was wrong with the bread. The form was actually a glass bowl from which the dough had overflowed and become fused to the outside edges as it baked. A slow, hot, yeasty eruption played out in my head. Witnessing the crusty dough cling to the outside of the bowl made me salivate but also caused my stomach to feel like it was turning inside out. In the sunken middle of the bowl I caught a glimpse of another unexpected twist: a quarter, two nickels, and a penny sticking out of the crust. There are coins in the dough. This revelation ended my ability to relate to this substance as the combination of yeast, flour, and water. Instead I began to contemplate a viscous sludge of sustenance, at once symbolic and literal. The inseparable histories of bread and money share in their tendency to congeal value into a discrete form. The loaf and the coin are merely temporary stopping points in a process of endless exchange. At the end of this entry corridor, perched at waist height atop a slender metal support, stands another mesmerizing transfiguration of the same symbol. Bread (2020), is a stunningly detailed bronze cast of a handsome sourdough loaf with a dozen or so spent matchsticks protruding from its edges. The surfaces are finished with a subtle, earthy patina that has shades of warm ochre and hazy light patches that eerily resemble a dusting of flour. Some excess dough appears to have oozed from the ends of the oblong form. This lumpy shape and mottled brown palette result in a parallel resemblance to a pile of animal dung. The bronze matches sticking out from this work have a distinctive shape, thinned and slightly curved from combustion. They are cast from matches that have already burned, and this detail helps collapse the distinction between food and feces. The work is an uncanny hybrid that somehow contains all the stages of this cyclical process of ingestion. That the act of consumption and the question of nourishment figure so prominently in these sculptures implicates
the living body of the viewer. This effect is accentuated by the fact that the figurative works appear to be immersed in a self-contained state of reverie, uninterested in the foods that surround them. Psychomachia further develops a conviction that manifests throughout Goldberg’s work and writing: that consumption, whether physical or visual, is necessarily a mutual process. In a text that accompanies the show, she poses a question that haunted me during my visit and afterwards. She asks, “Is it the symbiotic relationship of the symbol to its witness that enables it to live forever?” This type of dependence presents itself in an unavoidable manner in Halo is leaking (2020). Hung at eye level on the wall, the work consists of a round mirror nearly two feet across with a rectangular napkin-like object covering most of the center of the circular face. On top of this chalky white surface with delicate wrinkles, a shimmering gold liquid seeps out from underneath a small matchbox. A handful of used matches lie glistening, covered with this metallic fluid. Several small, star-shaped stickers appear amidst this mesmerizing flow, and a pinkish glow emanates from the top of the rectangle. Despite the presence of the matches, this scene feels immense, like gazing onto the surface of a new planet. While savoring these details, I kept catching glimpses of myself in the act of looking. Depending on the angle, the surface of the mirror would also reflect other sculptures in the room. The energy of my gaze was both absorbed by the sculpture and sent back at me. I felt compelled to immerse myself in this reciprocal exchange and to temporarily allow the confrontation to consume all of me. This interval was in fact a nourishing release from the climate of fear and anxiety that pervaded the city on the day of my visit. As I stood in front of Empty Stomach (2020), I remembered the artist’s warning to me that the piece, which contains 26 glass bowls filled partially with water, might not have been properly maintained. Due to COVID-19, the gallery closed to the public immediately after the opening. I arranged a private visit and donned a mask and gloves for the bike ride across the bridge into Manhattan to spend some time with the work. Empty Stomach embodies a gentle optimism in that it proposes that desert sand and water might someday combine and rise to become bread. For the moment, a thin plastic sheet separates the dry earth below from a pool of water in each bowl pressing down onto the sand. That boundary could be a hygienic necessity to avoid contamination, preventing the clear water from soothing the thirst of the parched earth and becoming mud. The work invites us to imagine the literal and symbolic transformations that might occur when these two materials overcome their temporary separation and begin to nourish each other.

PETER BROCK is an artist based in Brooklyn, NY.

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HERNAN BAS

BY CHARLOTTE KENT

Developing TIME LIFE

Lehmann Maupin

Amidst the rise of online viewing rooms for shows we might not otherwise see, Lehmann Maupin made the decision to provide us backgrounds to shows we have. In Developing TIME LIFE, the gallery presents studies (available for sale) as well as information from Hernan Bas about the process for his most recent fall 2019 show. Time Life riffed on the cultish fascination with “Mysteries of the Unknown,” as the Time Life series dubbed it, but other paintings reflected on the times and lives of our own strange world. In this drawing back of the curtain on an artist’s process, Lehmann Maupin reveals some of the pleasures that industry professionals have in their work: conversations with artists about how and what and why are not only intellectually stimulating but fun. Bas adopts history along with tangential areas of American culture, serious stuff beside chance encounters as the material for his paintings and Developing TIME LIFE makes evident the joy as well as the intensity in his practice. Developing TIME LIFE starts with the research that Bas did for his major work of the fall show, The Sip In (2019). It addresses the moment on April 21, 1966 when Dick Leitsch, Craig Rodwell, and Randy Wicker entered Julius, in the West Village, and announced they were gay. Since homosexuality was considered disorderly conduct at that time, the rules of the New York State Liquor Authority required that bartenders refuse them service. Inspired by the Civil Rights sit-ins, they wanted to push against these discriminatory regulations. John D’Emilio, a historian of gay rights, suggests their legal battle helped the gay rights movement gain the confidence to fight back during the Stonewall Riots a few years later. The studies reveal Bas’s compositional development, and the accompanying text describes his research process with a light, conversational tone. In a newspaper photograph of the sit-in, the bar divides the image with the customers on the left. That angle didn’t work for the effect Bas wanted. To recreate history, Bas turned to Google Street View to discover a layout and decor of the bar that he could use for a painterly perspective. The long wooden bar stretches across the lower half of the painting, dividing the viewer from the customers. The three men sit there, awkwardly looking in different directions, uncomfortable heroes. A man with a martini gazes at the viewer, ignoring what’s happening to his right. We stand in the ethical and legal shoes of the bartender. A white glove suspended over a pint glass is all that remains of him. Bas used his own, “modeling the very hand that refused three gay men a drink.” That disembodied hand is the fantasy Bas contributes to bring our attention to the missing facts in so many histories. In the background for A Moment Eclipsed (2019), Bas describes his use of Tumblr accounts and collection of vintage taxi-dermy, as well as how he creates reference photographs using props and his own body to ensure a sensibility in the final work. He spent hours immersed in Pinterest and
Redditor pages, discovering the specialized world of fish lovers, for The GloFish Enthusiast (2019). The young man in a basement surrounded by aquariums of fish genetically modified to glow under black light is worrying. The artist incorporated black light paint into the work so that it glows with a kind of raver, underground aesthetic, which only adds to the sense of concern about what this young man is about—innocuous or dangerously obsessive? The protagonists in Bas’s works make for unlikely heroes, but his paintings hint that these parallel lives may indeed merit equal recognition. Power, money, and celebrity aren’t conveyors of truth, value, or relevance. Using a journalistic approach to the genre of history painting allows Bas to suggest it might be worthwhile to learn about the lives of people we find weird.

Since his inclusion in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Bas has been widely acclaimed for his paintings of sissies and dandies in lush rooms and magical landscapes, his assortment of cultural references contributing quirky allusions. Here, however, the figures are a little older. They have commitments, a stake in their world. The sense of loneliness are a little more pointed, as if our attention might need to shift to another layer of appreciation for any of the artists that they feature next.

CHARLOTTE KEN

BY HEARNE PARDEE

Louise Fishman
An Hour is a Sea
Vielmetter, Los Angeles

In a 2012 Rail interview, Louise Fishman spoke of the importance of her initial decisions about the size and shape of her canvases: “I go from the scale of two inches by four inches to 90 by 110.” Some of those two by four-inch canvases (along with others only two by two) no doubt appear in An Hour is a Sea, an online exhibition hosted by Vielmetter Los Angeles. Fishman spent a transformative residency in Venice, Italy in 2011 and purchased the small canvases (along with others only two by two) no doubt appear in An Hour is a Sea, an online exhibition hosted by Vielmetter Los Angeles. Fishman spent a transformative residency in Venice, Italy in 2011 and purchased the small canvases in Europe, perhaps because they would be easy to transport. The 27 works in this show, dating from 2011 and 2016, bear images of watery vastness and flux. No less ambitious than her larger works, they display virtuosic paint handling on their limited scale. The title, borrowed from an Emily Dickinson poem, conflates time and space and links the paintings to New England, to the rougher, darker seas of Marsden Hartley and Albert Pinkham Ryder. The show expands on the

interplay of time and space by including two larger works: Untitled (1971), a grid overlaid with gray washes, which anchors us in Fishman’s early explorations of Minimalism, and Jasper (2016), dedicated to a victim of AIDS, which grounds us politically by recalling a past epidemic. Always aware of the weight of history, Fishman encourages reflection on our current state of spatio-temporal flux.

Originally intended for Frieze New York, the works went online due to current events, but one can’t escape the sense that the digital format, while denying us the materiality so vital in Fishman’s work, enhances our experience in other ways, enlarging the paintings’ scope as if to compensate for their physical absence. The small paintings can be easily enlarged on a screen (the gallery points out that they are actually about the size of a cell phone), and, while they may include fewer incidents than the larger works, their effects are comparable. Seen “close up,” the enlarged weave of the canvas lends them a tactile character that hints at their actual size, so do the grains of sand glued to some surfaces. By bringing the textured grid of their material supports into such close focus, digitization places us in intimate contact, albeit virtually, with Fishman’s materials themselves.

Deep blues, grays, and greens predominate, sometimes mixed into swirls of
white impasto. On the quantum scale of the small works, paint is as tactile as it is visual. Trained in calligraphy, Fishman is sensitive to the pressure of her tools and the amount of paint applied, especially along the edges of the stretchers, which it sometimes overflows. Some works are painted on boards with a faux weave, which offers more resistance. Thinly brushed areas bring out the weave of the canvas, evoking tides washing over a beach and slowly soaking in. Elsewhere, roughly scumbled pigments suggest weathered metal. Fishman’s darker washes could be mud, set in contrast to jewel-like grains of sand and warm, white impastos, applied in sculptural waves like cake frosting. Untitled (2014), #FIS150—the works are identified by inventory numbers—moves from left to right in layers, from thin white gesso into progressively denser washes of green, culminating in a rose-like efflorescence of white impasto puddled in green drips. The interplay of rough and smooth surfaces recall Adrian Stokes’s celebration of water and polished marble in Stones of Rimini (1934); the terms he coined for carved reliefs—“stone blossom,” “incrustation,” or “sea-crusted effect”—could equally apply to paintings like the tiny Untitled.

The inclusion of Untitled (1971)—whose washes also evoke the sea—broadens the context for Fishman’s abstraction, which is usually identified as Abstract Expressionist. Its paired fields of matte gray, one darker than the other, are loosely stitched together by an exposed grid. The poured paint resembles the Xerox toner sometimes used by Jack Whitten, whose rasterized “slabs” resemble Fishman’s textured grounds. Elsewhere, colored stains suggest color-field painting, to which they lend a harsher materiality. Jasper relates more in palette and facture to the small paintings but feels larger, even in the digital context. More about open space, its broken grid of sooty black verticals slashed by thinly scumbled greens and whites. Jasper bathes the rhetoric of Kline and de Kooning in cool luminosity, balancing violence with stillness.

The acute intimacy of the small paintings establishes an ironic distance from Abstract Expressionist heroics. Digitization focuses our gaze on their exposed ground and subjects Fishman’s methods to visual deconstruction. It is as though the viewer can revisit the self-scrutiny involved in her transition from stained grid paintings, like the 1971 Untitled, into gestural works that “came out of my own experience.” She harkens back to Cézanne and Soutine. Here, while the online format amplifies their context, it ultimately leaves out the works’ mute, material presence, so reliant on touch—an absence that adds poignancy to today’s enforced remoteness.

HEARNE PARDEE is a painter based in New York and Northern California.
David Wojnarowicz’s *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*

A facsimile of the original 1989 zine, it reveals his uniquely vulnerable and deeply symbolic writing style alongside his visual work.

**BY MEGAN N. LIBERTY**

In the Shadow of Forward Motion

David Wojnarowicz with notes by Felix Guattari

Primary Information (2020)

(P.P.O.W. Gallery, 1989)

David Wojnarowicz’s work is a web of symbols and references—locomotives, ants, currency, monkeys, and clocks, to name just a few of his recurring motifs—that make viewing even his text-less works a kind of decoding experience. The artist produced sculpture, painting, collage, music, and film, and was also a prolific writer who kept journals and wrote extensively about his work, his friends and fellow artists, and the toll of his illness, AIDS, which would take his life in 1992 at the young age of 37. In 1989, to accompany an exhibition at P.P.O.W. gallery in New York, Wojnarowicz published a photocopied zine (in an edition of 50) that included sketches and mockups for his paintings alongside typed notes describing the symbolism and circumstances surrounding the works, along with an introduction by Felix Guattari. Recently republished in facsimile by Primary Information, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* reveals his uniquely vulnerable and cryptic writing style alongside his visual work.

The zine is slim, a floppy softcover let-size book of 34 pages, fully black-and-white with typewriter text opposite sketchy drawings for 31 artworks. In the opening, Wojnarowicz explains:

**THE NOTES CONTAINED IN THIS BOOK ARE NOT MEANT AS LITERAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE PAINTINGS PHOTOGRAPHS AND SCULPTURES IN THE SHOW; THEY ARE ROUGH NOTES, LATE NIGHT TAPE RECORDINGS, THINGS SPOKEN IN SLEEP AND FRAGMENTED IDEAS WHICH AT TIMES CONTRADICT EACH OTHER.**

This caveat recalls Whitman’s famous line from “The Song of Myself,” “I do contradict myself / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.).” Reading Wojnarowicz’s words alongside his visual notes emphasizes the work of an artist whose “multitudes” are vast, and whose willingness to bare them publicly is one of the strengths of his art. He offers up a rawness that matches the roughness of the zine, which shifts from urgent whispers (“Something about mortality and a desire to go to a foreign place”) to angry pleas (“I am in the throes of facing my own mortality and I am attempting to communicate what I’m experiencing or learning in order to try to help others I am effectively silenced. I am angry.”).

The zine illustrates the range of his quotations and interests. Sometimes he deconstructs his symbols, as in his notes for, “WHERE I’LL GO IF AFTER I’M GONE” in which he writes, “the gears are the residue of the manufactured world I was born into. The train is the acceleration of time; the tornado the force of displacement in death; the shadow the lifeline (I cheap WWII doll that for me translates culture into something can be owned.” But most are more abstract, a weaving together of symbols and stories from his life. In his notes for “THE WEARY DéJÀ VU OF THE EARTH PART I” he lists, “The weight of gravity” and “the human irration at the sight of uncontrolled nature” with a detailed mockup demarcating the size of various squares, what would be in them “drawing dog with cast injury repair” and “water color earth in space,” as well as various ideas circled across the page: “ANIMALS” “SMILING DOG ROAD IN HANDS.”

In the description of the first work, “FEAR OF EVOLUTION,” Wojnarowicz writes at length about his childhood interest in natural disasters and weather:

Somewhere since childhood I have found comfort and hope in various forces of nature that were either unexplainable or uncontrollable; spontaneous self-combustion or tornadoes, floods or earthquakes or volcanoes—when the future and destruction and all its learnings could suddenly be altered or whisked from human hands by natural occurrences or ‘unnatural’ phenomenon such as flying saucers or the reviving from glacial sleep of an old bewildered dinosaur as in black and white Japanese movies; all this gave me faith in the nature and possibilities of change.

Other times, he holds in on a particular animal or insect, such as ants, referenced throughout this zine and represented in a number of his works. “Ants are the only insects to keep pets, use tools, make war and capture slaves,” he writes in the description of “UNTITLED - SIX PHOTOGRAPHS (Ant Series).” The series itself is a group of six black-and-white gelatin prints depicting closely cropped items—coins, a crucifix, a gun, and one nude male body—with ants crawling on them. The image accompanying the text in the zine is a sheet of stamps commemorating the 1986 “Mexico Campeonato Mundial de Futbol” superimposed over a map of Mexico City, where the photographs were taken in 1988. Sometimes the text and images are loosely related, but they share a thread of connection, giving insight into Wojnarowicz’s own way of making connections in his work.

In addition to his unpacking of symbols and references, his writings in the zine are deeply personal and political. “Recently I was diagnosed with the secondary states of AIDS and now looking through journals from the past couple of years I see the threads of the unconscious revealing to me that this virus was making its way through my body before I became symptomatic,” he writes accompanying “SOMETHING FROM SLEEP (Dream) For Tom Rauffenbart.” He reflects on the death of his friend and former lover, Peter Hujar, and his struggle to take over his apartment. Same-sex couples are “unable by law to marry if they so desire,” and as a consequence, “have the same rights, ‘such as the simple right to continue living in the home when one of the other partner dies.” In order to remain living there, Wojnarowicz explains, “They also had me sign a slip of paper guaranteeing that I would not turn the apartment over to another person with AIDS before I die.”

The artist’s battle with AIDS haunts this collection, though it shouldn’t be read solely through the lens of death and disease. As David Breslin writes in his essay about Wojnarowicz for the artist’s 2018 survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum, there is a fine line that must tread between illness and life, particularly with AIDS which was so often illustrated with the bedridden, the sickly, the dead. As he writes, “Not only does this forget those AIDS activists who created language that rhetorically unhinged the possibility of getting into a government/drug company sponsored drug trial.” He follows this with a long list of those who are excluded from these trials including: women, particularly lesbians, people of color, the poor and people on welfare, the homeless, and of course, homosexuals (“They also say that the homosexual community is so well informed that there need be no social campaigns aimed at homosexuality and safe sex—once again this is nonsense.”)

The urgency in Wojnarowicz’s writing is palpable, and his request—to be recognized for his humanity, not his sexuality or diagnosis—rings painfully true today.

Many of the inequalities he cites in the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s are strikingly familiar cries being made today as COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, evidenced by the New York Times’s recent article, “For H.I.V. Survivors, a Feeling of ‘Weary Déjà Vu.’” This is not to draw a false equivalency between the two diseases. But, as the Times notes, both disproportionately impact lower-income and minority communities with lesser resources. New information shows that in America, more African Americans are dying from the virus. The current pandemic gives new weight to Wojnarowicz’s words as we are reminded of how unequal the world remains, particularly when it comes to access to healthcare. “To dream of oneself as a dinosaur or a fossil, something ancient and alien—I figured it had something to do with examining my position in the world: I’d always felt an alienation from the ‘art’ world as well as the alienation from the forward thrust of change.”
of civilization,” he muses next to a drawing of a dinosaur on sheet music. As we remain inside and do what we can to stop the spread of the virus, for which there is still no vaccine, I imagine we are all feeling “the alienation from the forward thrust of civilization,” as we are forced to face its screeching halt.


MEGAN N. LIBERTY is the Art Books Editor at the Brooklyn Rail. Her interests include text and image, artists’ books and ephemera, and archive curatorial practices.

Joseph Jarman’s Black Case Volume I & II: Return From Exile

A republication of the jazz artist’s 1974 self-published book, it is deeply personal, filled with typewritten text, family photographs, and pages of sheet music notated by hand.

BY GEORGE GRELLA

Black Case Volume I & II: Return From Exile
Joseph Jarman
Blank Forms (2019)

“Call it jazz, blues, rock, reggae, it’s all Great Black Music.” I’m paraphrasing here, because the concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine at the end of which Joseph Jarman made that atheletic announcement happened sometime in the late ’80s. 30 years later, the mind can’t transcribe the exact words, but the force and meaning of what Jarman said grows clearer every day.

Jarman was on stage with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. He played saxophones and other woodwinds in the group, along with the “little instruments”—hand held percussion and noisemakers—that littered the platform at each AECO performance. He was an early member of what grew out of the avant-garde cul-de-sac that Jarman went on in later life to work on, as Davis notes, a conventional memoir (never realized), Black Case seems to be a deeper and more meaningful self exploration than a narration of events and facts in a life. In affect and effect, it reminds the reader any idea of how Jarman’s playing creates beautiful things.

And so did the AECO play blues jazz, rock, reggae, Waltzes, free improvisations, accompanied solo instrument Fontella Bass, and build a sonic frame around poetry readings with Jarman and others. Their concertizing, or an album, moved fluidly from sparse, quiet, floating textures, to burning passions, to a blues dirge, to some lovingly tongue-in-cheek corn-pone. What kept the group out of the avant-garde cul-de-sac that eventually did in a lot of free playing was the naturalness of their conception. They were up there to make music, not to make a point, they were revealing their souls and humanity in a way that obviated political ideology or social preconceptions.

That is the spirit in Black Case, and that same feeling of flow, interconnectedness, and gestalt makes some of the unexpected turns in Jarman’s life comprehensible. The curiosity about himself and the world that comes through in his writing led him to the serious study of Buddhism—it was Buddhism that seems to have unwound what was clearly a profound case of PTSD that he bore from his service in Vietnam, and he took it with such seriousness and dedication that he was ordained as a Jodo Shinshu priest and founded the Brooklyn Buddhist Association. He studied, mastered, and taught aikido and at his death in January 2019 was remembered with reverence by aikido students who had never heard a note of his horn playing. Black Case is an eloquent expression of the man Jarman was, and in some ways explains the insoluble mystery of how we can come to create beautiful things.

GEORGE GRELLA is the Rail’s music editor.

André Breton’s Nadja: fac-similé du manuscrit de 1927

A publication of the manuscript of the 1927 masterpiece long thought lost reveals truly majestic overwritings.

BY MARY ANN CAWS

Nadja: fac-similé du manuscrit de 1927
André Breton, edited by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Olivier Wagner Gallimard/BNF Editions (2019)

An immense dark sky-blue box contains a more-than-handsome heavy cardboard book of the facsimile of André Breton’s NADJA (Trézar national). With 25 pages of autographed writing full of suppressions, alterations, and additions, with side panels and nine iconographic sheets of documents, drawings, and letters, this marks a monumental publishing event. The cover bears the name “NADJA” lettered in glossy bright blue with a flower-shape; this feels like a rewriting of the myth, laden with a sense of magic. This is the manuscript thought lost for a very long time, purchased by the fashion designer Pierre Bergé, and then ceded to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 90 years after its writing. Bergé having felt he had “bought a fragment of the True Cross.”

How not to be mesmerized by the self-portrait of Nadja from 1927? She is inscribed within the left curve of the moon, echoed by the two curls beside her face, bright eyes confronting us, with the inscription on the inside front cover: “A garder sur vous Nadja!” (To keep with you, Nadja). To keep with you, and us, indeed. It is, as the editors point out, one of the most trembling and vibrating of texts.

In 1927, Breton set himself the task, alone, of writing the first two parts of this bizarre and captivating story of his meeting with Léona Delcourt, named “Nadja” after...
the beginning of the Russian word for hope. This optimistic start ends miserably for the named “passerby,” since Nadja will be taken to an insane asylum in Vaucluse, as Breton turns to another, the same and un-named “tol,” the desired and complicated Suzanne Muzard. Looking at the text, the supersaturated texture with its collages and suppressions and reworking has us meditating on the importance of control, censorship, adjustment, as the moment changes. It is about adventure, flavored with the strong and bittersweet taste of wandering, of a quest then redoubled by its uncertainty and plunge into disaster. Nadja seems to know of the end already at the start, asking, “André? ... you will write about me. Something has to remain from us...” And so this does. The red-hot link of the two lives from October 4–13 of 1926 fades, as she predicted, and their liaison more generally, the idea of works from the 1961 exhibition The Art of Assemblage with photographs of documents related to the show’s planning and execution. Owens and Carroll, on the other hand, present their own work as filtered through the visual templates of archival documents, resulting in a blurring of past and present. Rhea Karam includes a transcript of her affecting conversation with Robert Jane, whose Line on a Walk (1976) chalk drawings she encountered in the museum archives, interspersed with photographs and a removable silkscreen print. Jonas’s vibrant “MoMA and DADA” is a colorful timeline that mingles the events of Ramirez Jonas’s father’s life and political developments in Honduras with landmark dates in MoMA’s engagement with the Dada movement, resulting in an affecting, politically-charged mix of the personal and the institutional. While the documents included in Modern Artifacts were carefully selected by Elligott and framed by her descriptions, the aesthetics of the book also reproduce the more serendipitous, detective-like pleasures of the archival research process. Photographs of documents, ephemera, and scrapbook pages include the edges of other items contained within archival folders, hinting at a vast storehouse of material scraps and traces. Inserts and fold-outs, such as reproductions of a Byars letter, a folder with documents from Henri Matisse’s first US retrospective, and a Robert Indiana Christmas card produced by the Museum’s Junior Council, allow readers to understand the scale and breadth of archival documents, and to potentially circulate these items further. Through its creative, subjective approach to the archive, Modern Artifacts offers a window view of MoMA, and the development of 20th century art at large, with space for capturing storytelling, revealing dead-ends, and visual invention.

JENNIE WALDOW is a PhD candidate in Art History at Stanford University, where she studies postwar American art with a focus on 1960s and 1970s Conceptualism. She is currently at work on a dissertation about the American artist Allen Ruppersberg.
It seems more than slightly ironic to be reviewing a novel that includes heavy cri que of our reliance on social media in the midst of a pandemic that leaves many of us only able to communicate with others through technology. For some of those who love us, our presence has become only words or images on a screen (I stayed off Facebook for a day and a long-time friend called to make sure I’m still alive). For the young couple in Tracy O’Neill’s new novel *Quotients*, technology is both friend and foe, both connecting and separating; the layers we all build over our own core selves (online identities, aliases, avatars) become central to the struggle to maintain their relationship. Jeremy Jordan and Alexandra Chen are successful, attractive, and in love. They marry at Alexandra’s suggestion and move from London to New York so she can take a job at a Facebook-like social media platform called Cathexis. Jeremy leaves a lucrative finance job to follow Alexandra to New York and becomes a social worker. But really, those are just cover stories. Jeremy is an ex-spy (English intelligence stationed in Belfast with all the brutality that involves) and Alexandra is really just trying to find her missing half-brother Shel who ran away when he was 13. The novel is a long, circuitous and often incredibly wordy meditation on love, life, parenthood, the secrets Jeremy and Han keep from each other damage of us live and love. The secrets Jeremy and Han keep from each other damage. The secrets Jeremy and Han keep from each other damage. The secrets Jeremy and Han keep from each other damage.

**Quotes** has a cast of supporting char acters that includes a former (he is really retired?) spy, Alexandra’s hyper-paranoid brother (is he really a spy or just ill?), a young Black man struggling to survive, a failed online investigative journalist, a successful academic, a friend or two, and the charmingly distracting Han—Alexandra, and Jeremy’s adopted son. The interactions between Jeremy and Han are some of the high points of the novel, allowing Jeremy to exhibit a tender humanity that isn’t always present in his other interactions. The power of the domestic scenes made me impatient with the larger systemic critique in which the novel engages. This is a system critique on the level of Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, or William Gibson, featuring bad-guy spys (whether the spies are in as a “bad guy” is up for debate), global financiers, and deep-web hackers. There are men who name drop the NSA, the IRA, and actual or only perceived links between data, privacy, and terror. While I was reading and desperately trying to keep track of the various plot lines, characters, hints of connections, I remained focused on just what all of it meant for the domestic life of Jeremy, Alexandra, and baby Han. Because ultimately, that’s what’s important—the love between partners, between parents and children. There is high evil being done on a daily basis, government agencies and operatives lie, cheat, and enact terror from every side but really, I wanted to read about the choo-choo train Han was making out of paper; I wanted to know how Han was learning English (he speaks none when he’s first adopted); the feeling of drowning in darkness and deceit but parents still read bedtime stories to their children. In a recent interview, O’Neill focuses on the paradigm of what she calls “watched-ness”—the state of watching and being watched; a state many of us find ourselves in right now. The novel’s critique of internet privacy is of course vital and current, but so is the notion that all of us, everywhere are watching and being watched—all the time. Living in a city on lockdown we are encouraged to report our neighbors who may not be practicing “safe social distancing” and where we are encouraged to self-isolate, to only connect through technology, makes O’Neill’s critique of surveillance almost soft. And perhaps that’s why I’m so drawn to the interaction between Jeremy and his baby son, Han. The transparent awe Jeremy expresses when Han first moves to hug him one night, the intense protection Jeremy expresses, the joy that comes from this particular type of love. The book is split into ten sections each containing small chapters, what O’Neill calls “data bytes” which, while providing necessary information and contributing to the overall atmosphere of the novel, can also be frustrating to the reader trying to carefully follow complex narratives—this is not an easy book to read. Of course, the constant shifts in language and narrative add to the atmosphere of unease. The novel opens with the July 7, 2005 terror attacks in London; Jeremy is thinking about Alexandra and then, suddenly, is unable to reach her. Shifts in technology over the course of the novel (2005–2014) are clear, though not always defined. In 2005, the iPhone has just been invented and characters struggle to connect, turning to the television news for information on the bombings. The novel ends in 2014 in a world utterly changed by technology. O’Neill cites global internet usage at around 50 percent but it’s clear she sees technology as both a connective and destructive influence on the ways many of us live and love. The secrets Jeremy and Alexandra keep from each other damage. The secrets Jeremy and Alexandra keep from each other damage. The secrets Jeremy and Alexandra keep from each other damage. But really, there is also a broader call for privacy, for a life more open to the possibilities of love, and also a razor-sharp critique of the way many of us confine the way we actually being a damn. As so many of us are learning here in New York (and London, and Chicago, and Seattle, etc.) privacy and isolation need not be synonymous. Privacy is essential in building the ability to care, to risk, and ultimately to love. It is important to remember that in this world of instant connectivity, perhaps we are the engineers of our own loneliness and isolation; perhaps we can listen to O’Neill and turn instead toward love. **Mark Nowak’s Social Poetics**

**BY JOHN DOMINI**

“The materialist history of any book you hold in your hand,” asserts Mark Nowak in *Social Poetics*, “contains a history of the contemporary working class: booksellers, Amazon warehouse workers … Powell’s staff, paper mill workers … editors and copyeditors … janitors and ‘nightshift moth ers’ who clean all these office spaces.” The list goes on, soon enough reaching the book in our own hands. Every line seems soaked with the sweat of labor. If a creative writing text ever raised a call to the barricades, it’s this one.

Nowak, himself a product of blue-col lar Buffalo, seeks to explain and promote the teaching he’s developed for workers’ enclaves around the world. He defines his project, the *poetry workshop … largely untapped radical potential for social transformation.*

In other words, he seeks a fresh means of fulfillment and empowerment for the proletariat. Indeed, the text often cites Marx and Gramsci, and its title stands as shorthand for his style of workshop, inclusive and engaging. The writing they produce is intended usually for live performance, and their participants, by and large, little resemble the dewy-eyed folks going for an MFA at Iowa or Columbia. A compa rable program at Manhattanville employs Nowak now, but *Social Poetics* concerns itself exclusively with his Worker Writers School. In the WWS, students range from men on the Ford assembly line in St. Paul (that is, now laid off), to unionized taxi drivers in Manhattan (another endangered workforce), to marginal labor groups in South Africa.

Such unconventional teaching deserves better than dry academic treatment, and happily, this author is also a poet. He locates the vitality in his sojourns: now a transportation mishap, now a close look at a worker’s hands. Concerning a project on Governors Island, in which low-wage earners were propped into abandoned build ings “to write, paint, draw, and create,” Nowak works up a celebration: “the walls, it seemed, were in rapturous conversation with themselves.” So the walls of the text, too, are decorated by the products of his workshops. Nowak applies the text to the length of some samples nor for the occasional unvarnished language:

In Morocco, I was working in garment factory Just 8 hours a day but salary not enough To help my family

In UK, I become a domestic worker Life is hard, long hours… But the wage is a bit better… Not all the book’s poetry, I rush to add, is quite so prosaic. Sublter, more thoughtful examples include pieces from Frank Cunningham, a Chicago electrical worker, and the New York domestic worker and activist Christine Yvette Lewis. Still, this text has little room for the delicacy of, say, Wallace Stevens. On the contrary, it relies on a structure of square-built simplicity. After defining his project, he moves on to investigating its predecessors, and then once the history is in place he sketches his own learning curve. As he stumbles through trial and error, Nowak again keeps things lively, for instance with a devastating list of all the folk who never got back to him. And over time, his WWS achieves its own sort of success, allowing the book to culminate with a run-through of the pedagogy that has worked best. With teaching in mind, too, *Social Poetics* observes all the academic protocol. The passage that defines the pantoum could serve as a lecture in Intro to Poetry. Things get more rowdy in the demonstration that follows, showing how the form is put to use by the poets in WWS, but it’s likewise carefully paced and reasoned. Also, the text is studded throughout with quotations. I found a few unnecessary (what, again with the Raymond Williams?), but I never came across some testimony that lacked corroboration. It’s the same went for every statistic or media reference. One chapter has no fewer than 114 notes, and there’s a full bibliography.

Such scholarly apparatus, happily, almost never interferes with Nowak’s gift for teasing out the human element. He may not have been present for the history he discusses in the early chapters, but he brings to life the turmoil of the late ‘60s workshops in Watts and elsewhere. Among the volunteers who stepped up to programs for impoverished New York children, Nowak’s research turns up a startling name: Adrienne Rich. Rich claimed that her work at the short-lived Elizabeth Cleaners Street School proved “an education in uncertainty—a development in education that has had an influence on her later, more radical, poetry. The text’s background material proves even more fascinating, not to say hair-raising, when the scene shifts to Kenya and the collaborative theater of Ngugi Thiong’o. Ngugi wound up in prison for his stage work, its “struggle for total liberation.” And over all of *Social Poetics* hovers the spirit of Amiri Baraka,
the former LeRoi Jones, who, as Nowak’s mentor, takes on a dimension and depth I for one had never before perceived. The work deserves a place on the shelf of any thinking teacher in the field. Anyone can use a breath of fresh air, a bracing reminder of art’s power to change the world. Yet even as I stand and cheer, I recall the occasional disturbing note sounded in Social Poetics. Every now and then, as it raises another complaint about “the MFA industrial complex” and its brand of poetry, the text comes close to insisting on a purity of “proletarian civilization or culture.” The phrase is Gramscian, but Nowak assigns it special weight. He does the same with Paul Freire’s call for a “new man” who achieves “dialectical unity between practice and theory, action and reflection.” But in that gap between action and thought, there resides a lot of great poetry—not to mention much of what we call human. Come to think, weren’t visions of some spotless New Man—always in the right—part of what led to Auschwitz and the Killing Fields? Such horrors lie a long way from the good Nowak’s doing, of course. Still, he could at least have noted the chilling implication, and acknowledged the value of more ordinary workshops.

JOHN DOMINI’s latest book is a novel, The Color Inside a Melon; his next will be the memoir The Archeology of a Good Ragù.

Chelse Bieker’s Godshot

BY DEEWA EGLENDAI

Chelse Bieker Godshot Catapult (2020)

In Chelsea Bieker’s debut novel Godshot, 14-year-old narrator Lacey May is, unbeknownst to herself, a devout member of a cult in Peaches, California. Peaches, a town once rich in agricultural production, is now an environmental wasteland, suffering from drought, with people suffering on soda rather than running water. Godshot is a story about religious fanaticism, mother loss, a stolen childhood, and the search for salvation. Bieker deftly builds the world of Lacey May, who is desperate for some sense of purpose in her small town.

Lacey May lives with her mother, who is an alcoholic. Since joining the church of Pastor Vern, though, the beer bottles have disappeared, and the questionable missioning in and out of their lives are no more. But eventually, while on a mysterious “assignment” for Pastor Vern, who promises rain if the townspeople heed his words, Lacey May’s mother starts drinking again and runs off with a man that Lacey May dubs the “Turquoise Cowboy,” leaving her with her grandmother, Cherry, in an all-in town led by a suspicious pastor. Eventually, Lacey May is given her own “assignment,” one that’s horrific, traumatic, and forced upon her, and Bieker shows us the ways in which women’s bodies have been subjugated and exploited in the name of a greater good.

To Bieker’s credit, Lacey May is a powerful narrator, exemplifying a sense of innocence and naivety as she navigates the difficult situation she finds herself in. Despite her naivety, Lacey May is likable, a product of humor and a sense of drive. Desperate to find her mother, Lacey May shows us the sense of grief and abandonment that follows this loss, and we see her transformation from childhood to adulthood, fast-forwarded given the circumstances. Because of the powerful narration, I was able to feel that deep sense of loss, anger, and sadness throughout the novel.

Bieker also gives us a glimpse into the world of cults and fanaticism. Now more than ever, the world is fascinated with cults, as evidenced from popular movies like Midsommar (2019), or documentary series like Tiger King (2020). The current political climate, too, has shed light on the cult-like nature of various Evangelical groups that have come in full force to support conservative leaders. In many ways, we are obsessed with cults—from a distance, at least. Bieker’s book, although fiction, sparks that same sense of wonder and fascination, giving us a realistic look at the dangerous and insidious nature of fervently following a Christ-like leader who promises salvation.

Right from the first sentence of Godshot, Bieker shows us that Pastor Vern is not to be trusted. Lacey May tells us, “To have an assignment, Pastor Vern said, you had to be a woman of blood.” We quickly learn more about the church in Peaches and discover that it is less about God’s will and more about Pastor Vern’s. Though Lacey May starts off the novel revering the pastor, it is clear to readers that this is no ordinary church, and its members aren’t being sent to complete ordinary assignments.” Bieker’s writing, in keeping me engaged, and my fascination with cults was satiated throughout. I found myself wishing I could shout warnings at Lacey May, flipping page after page and hoping for the best.

This novel covers a lot of ground—gender politics, poverty, religion, and more—but all of these topics are handled with precision and care, and nothing feels contrived or forced upon the reader. All of this eventually leads to an exhilarating ending. Godshot is a fascinating and entertaining read, and while Lacey May’s circumstances are so different from my own—and probably most readers”—Bieker makes us feel for her nonetheless. Above all, this is a character-driven story, with Lacey May at the helm, and as a reader, I wanted nothing but the best for her, which is a testament to Bieker’s writing.

DEEWA EGLENDAI is a writer living in Brooklyn. Her work has also appeared in Electric Literature, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Heavy Feather Review, and other publications.

IN CONVERSATION

Down Away From the Sun You’ll Burrow: LAWRENCE ELLSWORTH with Andrew Ervin

Search ye far or search ye near You’ll find no trace of the three Unless you follow instructions clear For the weapons abide with me.

That quatrain will ring familiar, I think, to all of us who grew up obsessed with tabletop role-playing games in the late 1970s. It so happens that Lawrence Ellsworth is the pen name of Lawrence Schick, who was an early employee of TSR, the company that created Dungeons & Dragons. There, he wrote White Plume Mountain (1979), which I personally regard as the greatest D&D adventure module of all time. He’s also the co-creator of the earliest version of the D&D setting Mystara, in which my long-running campaign is set even now. Since then, among other pursuits, Ellsworth served as Loremaster for the Elder Scrolls Online games and now lives in Dublin, where he is hard at work writing a new mobile game.

Ellsworth was generous enough to correspond with me via email in January and February, during which time we discussed world-building, how to write an epic role-playing game (RPG) adventure, and the challenges of adapting Dumas for current audiences. There’s a unique and profound joy in getting to pick the brain of a multi-talented writer whose work I’ve known since I was a kid and who’s had such a huge impact on my own creative life.

ANDREW ERVIN (RAIL): When did you first read Dumas and why did you decide to start translating him?

LAWRENCE ELLSWORTH: Though I grew up on the paperback adventures of sword-wielding heroes of fantasy from writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs, Fritz Leiber, and Robert E. Howard, and historical fiction authors like my father’s favorite Harold Lamb, I initially passed up Alexandre Dumas because I thought his work would be creaky and old-fashioned, like that of Sir Walter Scott or James Fenimore Cooper. But Richard Lester’s 1973 film version of The Three Musketeers inspired me to pick up the novel, and I was hooked. The sequels were long out of print at that point, but I tracked them all down in used bookstores in dusty Victorian editions.

Flash forward almost 20 years to the early 1990s, by which time I was a professional video game designer and producer. As a side project, I led a troupe of six called Cruel Hoax that wrote and produced live-action
role-playing games, weekend-long events for 60 to 100 players that emphasized politics and romance. We were looking for a subject for our next game when I remembered Dumas and his musketeers. It turned out to be a great choice, and in the process of doing the research for The King’s Musketeers I got hooked on the characters and the period all over again, so much so that I started doing independent study into Early Modern Europe and France in the 17th century. I decided that I wanted to write historical fiction in that setting and began collecting materials.

I was teaching myself French and rereading Dumas, and began to realize that his writing wasn’t creaky and old-fashioned, but his Victorian English translations were. Reading Dumas in the original French was a revelation: dynamic prose, cracking dialogue, vivid scenes, plus he was funny as hell. Most of the English translations of his work paled in comparison.

By this time I was reading beyond Dumas’s famous novels and into his more obscure works, including references to a musketeers-period swashbuckler from late in his career called The Comte de Morny, but there was no extant English translation and it was impossible to find. Finally, I found a reprint copies of its two volumes in the bouquiniste stalls in Paris, and though the novel was unfinished, it was grand stuff, genuine Dumas bursting with all his color, humor, and joie de vivre. I’d done my own translation of The Three Musketeers as part of my learning-French project, and as I was flying back from Paris, it suddenly occurred to me that I could translate Morny and from that idea was born the literary reconstruction that became The Red Sphinx.

RAIL: Can you tell me about your experience in designing video games? Do you see a connection between your work there and the kind of world-building we see in Dumas?

ELLSWORTH: In games, narrative arises from player decisions in game activities, so what game design teaches you about world-building is that the world exists to provide context for gameplay, so pay attention to those aspects of the world that bear on player choices. The player wants to feel that they’re participating in a rich and coherent world, and to provide that you can and should go into great detail about parts of the background that provide meaning and motive to the game activities. The rest of the world can be more-or-less sketched in, because the player won’t directly interact with it, and to give it too much attention can make players into thinking something is more important or relevant than it really is.

Ultimately, world-building for historical fiction gets you to the same place, but the process is different: a historical setting provides the world-builder with an overwhelming quantity of detail, and the writer has to decide which details matter to their story and largely select only those to include. To oversimplify, game world-building is additive while historical fiction world-building is subtractive. In both cases you end up with richly detailed contexts where it matters for the narrative, while less relevant background is merely sketched in.

Dumas was a master at this. He was a playwright before he became a novelist, an expert at honing down his narrative to include only what would fit on the stage and be direct and forceful enough to play to the cheap seats at the top of the balcony. Most of the prose he wrote was historical fiction because he loved history, and in his best work all the detail on the page is there to serve the purpose of moving the story forward. Dumas famously used assistants like Auguste Maquet to help outline his novels, and one of their main functions was to do historical research that would support the narrative. If it wasn’t directly relevant to the story, Dumas threw it out—subtracted it, just to nail home the point.

RAIL: Like Dumas, you’ve worked in several different media and genres. For example, you wrote the first poem I ever memorized. What were your responsibilities as a game designer and novelist when those two fields were side by side? How did you prepare for your work on Dumas?

ELLSWORTH: In writing fantasy, I’ve occasionally put things into verse form to convey a certain tone, and I’ve had to translate some poetry in the Musketeers books, but poetry is hard work, and my skills don’t naturally go in that direction. Though doggerel, such as drinking songs, can be fun.

My first writing job was working for Gary Gygax on material for Dungeons & Dragons: I revised his work and that of his friends, who got all the plum assignments in the early days, and wrote some stuff of my own. The most important thing you learn working on story games is to approach everything as a collaboration, with the players as your collaborators. I can’t emphasize this enough. You’re not writing a story, you’re creating the background and narrative tools and materials that others will use to tell a story among themselves, a story that doesn’t really exist until they tell it. It’s like writing horn charts for jazz, music that really only exists when the musicians play it, hearing each other live during the riffing in collaboration. When you write a scenario for a role-playing game, you’re creating a structure that others will extemporize upon to create their personal version of the narrative. So you have to leave room for their contributions, including enough pointers to help them shape the story because they’re not professional storytellers.

Working that way eased my transition into designing video and computer games, because they have to be built by creative teams in which narrative design is just one of several disciplines. You work include just what fit on the theater, other skill sets even more arcane—you have to be able to collaborate. But the narrative designer has the greatest responsibility for looking out for your final collaborators, the players.

Which brings us back around to translating—yes, because translating is not just a technical exercise, it’s really another kind of collaboration. You can translate the words on the page, but you must also somehow conjure up that intangible essence we call the writer’s voice, and do it in a language not their own. When I was starting to translate Dumas’s tales into contemporary American English, I’m not just translating his words, I’m collaborating with the writer himself to color the work with his sensibility, feelings, and personality—in short, his voice. You might think that would be made easier by the fact that he’s been dead for 150 years and therefore can’t complain about my decisions, but you don’t have him talking in your head like he does in mine. He gets salty.

RAIL: You’ve committed yourself to translating approximately 1.5 million words. How does it feel to take on a project of this magnitude?

ELLSWORTH: Any size project is manageable if you take it a chapter at a time and set your own pace. I have friends who’ve hiked the entire Appalachian Trail, and they all did it one leg at a time over several seasons. The Musketeers cycle is well over 500 chapters, but at one or two chapters a month it’s not crazy big. Dumas was a master at getting it through in far less time than I’ll take, and won’t it look nice when all eight volumes are lined up on the bookshelf?

Given the state of the world, it seems to me it’s up to creators to keep the lamps lit and create as much as they can. I’d be married, maybe I’d be happy sitting down with my partner in the evenings and binge-watching quality TV series, but I don’t care for doing that alone. I play role-playing games and try to keep up with literary historical fiction and fantasy, really, I’d rather be writing. I like playing an evening I set myself a manageable goal, plug away at it until I hit my numbers, and then it’s pencils down and read a book or do some research.

RAIL: What were your responsibilities for The Elder Scrolls Online?

ELLSWORTH: Ah, that was a dream job, really. As your readers may know, ESO is a sprawling multiplayer online role-playing game set in a persistent version of Tamriel, the fictional fantasy world as Skyrim was lead writer on the project, but then a new creative director came in who wanted his own guy for that, so he invented the position of “Loremaster” and shifted me sideways into that role. That was really just a recognition of the job I was already doing, overseeing the world background and maintaining consistent history, mythology, and cultures for that world’s array of strange and ancient civilizations. I worked with the studio’s stable of writers to keep the stories in the tone of the Elder Scrolls series, which is dark and humorous but never hokey, I got to consult with the great designers at Bethesda Games who’d gone before me, many of whom I’d known from our previous lives in the biz, and it was like collaborating on a great work that spanned generations—not that long in the real world, perhaps, but it was cosmic in video game terms.

I was privileged to contribute to enlarging and enriching the history of Tamriel for a set of games, and it was no longer a safer and welcoming haven for intellectual weirdos who won’t stay within certain narrow bounds of behavior. And it’s not just that: my son lived through a horrific multiple-murder shooting at his high school, and as a student of history, I’m pretty sure things are going to get a lot worse in my native country before they get better again. I’m American-born, but my two youngest are immigrants, one of them a young woman, and I looked at the situation and didn’t like the odds. I decided it was time to consider other options, and put out a few tentative feelers.

If a life in the games business prepares you for anything, it’s how to react to sudden change: an old friend proposed an opportunity in Ireland that met all the necessary criteria, it stood up to a careful vetting, plus it just felt right. So, one morning early last year I woke up to find myself living in Dublin. I wanted a challenge, and boy howdy, did I get one. I’m working in a small team building a category-breaking mobile game, and it’s been enriching the history of Tamriel for a set of games, and it was no longer a safer and welcoming haven for intellectual weirdos who won’t stay within certain narrow bounds of behavior. And it’s not just that: my son lived through a horrific multiple-murder shooting at his high school, and as a student of history, I’m pretty sure things are going to get a lot worse in my native country before they get better again. I’m American-born, but my two youngest are immigrants, one of them a young woman, and I looked at the situation and didn’t like the odds. I decided it was time to consider other options, and put out a few tentative feelers.

RAIL: Why is it that Dumas’s stories still feel so vital, especially right now?

ELLSWORTH: Dumas’s work remains vital and relevant over 150 years later because his best novels speak to the problem of courage, of how an individual can find the strength and means to do what’s right despite the constraints of society, family, and convention. This is a problem that never goes away, a matter that every generation has to face for itself. Unlike many of the heroes of historical fiction, Dumas’s characters are complex, three-dimensional human beings of depth and contradiction, people for whom wrestling with these problems is no easy matter. Look at Cardinal Richelieu, an antagonist and seeming villain in The Three Musketeers, yet a protagonist in The Red Roses. Because his novels are exciting and plot-heavy, and because his early translators cut out the sex, softened the language, and dialled back the violence, in the early 20th century Dumas’s work was marginalized as “Boys’ Adventures,” a label that has stuck for far too long. His best work is long overdue for a re-assessment, at least in the Anglophone world.

ANDREW ERVIN is the author of the novel Burning Down George Orwell’s House and the novella collection Extraordinary Renditions. His most recent book is Bed by Bed: How Video Games Have Changed My Life and Made Me a Better Person.
Blowin’ in the Wind: On Fernanda Melchor’s Hurricane Season

BY BAILEY TRELA

As far as Fernanda Melchor’s Hurricane Season is concerned, blurry comparisons to the works of Roberto Bolaño turn out to be surprisingly apt. Like Bolaño’s 2666 (2004), a lurid door stop centered around a brutal series of murders in the fictional Mexican city of Santa Teresa, Melchor’s first major work of fiction to be translated into English takes as its focus the fomidable of an outcast figure, known as the Witch, in a fictional village in rural Mexico. The book’s themes should be familiar to any reader of Bolaño—misogyny, drug abuse, sexual violence, poverty, and homophobia stud the pages of Hurricane Season, contributing to the book’s miasmatic and, at times, apocalyptic atmosphere. As in 2666, a catalyticcsmic judgment seems to be gathering on the horizon, promising, if nothing else, a leveling of the world as it is.

And yet, Melchor’s treatment of her subject doesn’t ring perfectly of Bolaño, if only because, at their heart, Bolaño’s most resonant works thrum with a Kerouacian energy to the writing that seems always to rush forward, it runs over Melchor’s prose. After a failed abortion induced by the Witch, Norma is taken to the hospital, where, in a moment of lucidity, she examines her body:

a red, scalped pubis which didn’t remotely resemble her own, and she couldn’t believe that all that flesh down there belonged to her, all that yellowish, pimply flesh that remotely resembled the skin of the dead, gutted chickens in the market …

It wasn’t a lack of will that stopped her from flying out of the room at the first opportunity, even if she was butt naked, and even if the breeze waiting in through the door made her shiver and set her teeth chattering, a breeze that was warm, sticky even, but to Norma—who was running a fever—it seemed as glacial as the wind that came down at night from the mountains surrounding Ciudad del Valle, the bluish rock mass covered in pines and chestnut trees, which, on February 14, a few years earlier, Pepe had taken them to see.

What’s interesting about Hurricane Season is that its prose comes with a built-in metaphor—the torturous swirl of narration is, of course, reminiscent of a hurricane. But this to-hand description slightly obscures the careful mechanisms at play in the writing. Instead of pebbles of thought flooding in, the reader is flung into the surrounding landscape, into the memory of snow.

Just as Norma is channeled to her corrupted body, the book’s other characters seem trapped in loathsome illumination—self-obsession, into the eyes of a person who will not stop telling them about the child’s death, about the noir atmospherics of the setting, about the anhedonia attendant to finding oneself lost in a ramifying fractal of violence. There’s a certain cold rationalism pervading 2666, which isn’t really surprising given the unbearable task Bolaño set himself. To flesh out the anhedonia attendant to finding oneself lost in a ramifying fractal of violence, Melchor’s prose flouts, in its shear unforgiving insistence and lack of adornment, the possibility of an allegorical meaning. In its maximalism, we can sense Bolaño attempting to prove the senselessness of a hermetic approach to violence, whereas the excess of symbolism and dogma thrown off by the novel’s detective work align into nothing, produce no meaning, and instead only serve as a descriptively intense expression of the violence in question.

Melchor’s text takes a different tack, approaching mythology through the lens of deconstruction. Obsessive and gothic in the vein of another contemporary writer, Samanta Schweblin, Hurricane Season is, just like Schweblin’s work, grounded not in a sense of archaic or timeless violence, but in the precariousness of life in the 21st century. (Schweblin’s Fever Dream, for instance, presented a cautionary ecological parable in the form of a febrile Jamiesian psychodrama.) Melchor’s Mexico is one where the powers that be are not just by design, but by free trade agreements that send whole populations swarming to organize themselves around the factories that spring up seemingly at random; where porn producers visit schoolchildren and not just take photos of their body parts, but mold them into young men’s growing homophobia; where the primary forces of destruction are, more often than not, economic.

At the center of it all, of course, is the murder. The Witch occupies an uncertain position in the community of La Mota, halfway between caretaker and bugbear—she performs herbal abortions for the local women, while at the same time she’s treated as a cautionary tale, safely abstracted away in her haunted house, for the community’s children. In fact, the progression of the novel often seems to read as a gradual process of demystologization, with Melchor’s visceral realism flensing away the dead layers of superstition that surround the Witch. As the book moves forward, we learn that the Witch isn’t so mysterious and withdrawn as rumor might have it, that she is in fact deeply integrated into the community around her—a trans woman, she holds parties in her basement, where she crafts disco light as the gay community gets drunk.

Ultimately, it’s the teasing out of the complex interconnections in this subculture that occupies the book’s focus. Structured as an interrogation of community, Hurricane Season leaps off from the Witch’s death as the villagers involved all have their say, contributing piece by piece to a churning chorus of unclear narration, composed of equal parts rumor, speculation, fearmongering, and finger-pointing. As the pummeling torrent of prose rushes forward, it runs over Melchor’s characters like an avalanche, incorporating the depths of their personalities—their speech patterns, their hopes, their loves, and (more frequently) their hates. Vitriolic, ribald, and brimful of expletives and slurs, it’s here as well that the prose buttresses the book’s descriptive data are strained through—there’s a religious-mythical background that haunts everything, because the stakes, so that the murder of a human being seems a matter of damnation, of mortal sin.

A chapter told from the perspective of Norma, a 13-year-old girl sexually abused and impregnated by her stepfather, Pepe, demonstrates some of the strengths of Melchor’s lexicon. After a failed abortion induced by the Witch, Norma is taken to the hospital, where, in a moment of lucidity, she examines her body:

a red, scalped pubis which didn’t remotely resemble her own, and she couldn’t believe that all that flesh down there belonged to her, all that yellowish, pimply flesh that remotely resembled the skin of the dead, gutted chickens in the market …

It wasn’t a lack of will that stopped her from flying out of the room at the first opportunity, even if she was butt naked, and even if the breeze waiting in through the door made her shiver and set her teeth chattering, a breeze that was warm, sticky even, but to Norma—who was running a fever—it seemed as glacial as the wind that came down at night from the mountains surrounding Ciudad del Valle, the bluish rock mass covered in pines and chestnut trees, which, on February 14, a few years earlier, Pepe had taken them to see.

What’s interesting about Hurricane Season is that its prose comes with a built-in metaphor—the torturous swirl of narration is, of course, reminiscent of a hurricane. But this to-hand description slightly obscures the careful mechanisms at play in the writing. Instead of pebbles of thought flooding in, the reader is flung into the surrounding landscape, into the memory of snow.
Enlightened Aesthetics: LOUISE LANDES LEVI with Raymond Foye

IN CONVERSATION

Poet, musician, and translator, Louise Landes Levi was an original member of Daniel Moore’s fusion orchestra and experimental theater troupe the Floating Lotus Magic Opera Company in Berkeley, in the late 1960s, where she played alongside Angus MacLise and Terry Riley in outdoor productions that included Balinese gamelan, Tibetan ceremonial instruments, actors, puppets, and chant. Four decades later, Levi continues to practice this tradition in her own way. New recordings and reissues of her music have recently appeared on labels such as Oaken Palace, Slow Tapes, and Soundohm. Levi was visiting New York at the invitation of Lawrence Kempf and Blank Forms to perform her music at Josiah McElheny’s solo show, Observations at Night, at the James Cohan Gallery.

LOUISE LANDES LEVI: Before I begin, one thing I want to say: it’s amazing to think that I met you here in the Chelsea Hotel, over 30 years ago—when was it, 1988? I had my sārangī with me—

RAYMOND FOYE (RAIL): Yes you did—

LEVI: It was wrapped up with yellow cloth and flowers and you thought it was a tent—so beautiful, to think that.

RAIL: Well, it is a form of shelter, isn’t it?

LEVI: It is, definitely.

RAIL: For many years you played on the street, what was it like being a street musician?

LEVI: What was it like? Very magical. Things that took place on the street, and while hitchhiking also, clearly had a dimension that belonged not just to the outsider but to the exiled divinity. All kinds of very synchronous and strange things would happen. For example I would always make exactly the amount I needed. I’d go there and I’d think, “I need $25 tonight,” and that’s exactly what I’d get. Or I’d make much more, and suddenly someone would pass and they needed some money, or I had a debt to repay. I came to understand that outside of the rational systems in which people believe themselves to exist, there are many other systems. And playing on the street was a kind of vehicle to the understanding of these other systems—systems that would work on my behalf if I appealed to them. If I didn’t have conventional protection, they would protect me. I mean “they”—these energies.

RAIL: How did you make the decision to play on the street?

LEVI: Well, it didn’t happen all at once. When I tired of my bookstore job my best friend said, “why don’t you just play in the street?” because I was a flutist. She said, “just give up the bookstores and try to play in the street.” So I started to do that, it was very ceremonial, I liked it very much. I had a hike, and I put some flowers and my flute in the back of my bicycle. I was playing Bach, I was playing really good music. One day I was at a weekly antiques market in Amsterdam, the Nieuwmarkt, opposite the Café Bern where I went anyway, my kind of space. There was a small sārangī in the shop, a folk instrument. I picked it up and started to play, and I knew absolutely I had to play sārangī on the street, I must never play flute anymore, only sārangī.

RAIL: Had you studied sārangī before?

LEVI: Oh, yes, by then I’d studied in India with Ustad Abdul Majid Khan, a disciple of Ustad Alladiya Khan, and the great sārangī master Bundt Khasahib. From 1969 to 1972 I was living in and around Bombay, studying with great figures like Annapurna Devi, and meeting the junior Dagar Brothers, who I later lived with as their servant and student, in London.

RAIL: The reason I’m fascinated by the street-musicianship is I’ve always had this picture of you wandering through the world, just floating, the wandering jew, the exile; you’re always in these liminal states.

LEVI: Absolutely. But another thing about the street, that is where the great meeting took place with the person who really transformed my musical understanding. One day I was playing on the street in Amsterdam, and I saw this noble figure on the other side of the bridge, and I had to absolutely attract that person. So I played my favorite melody, which was a melody I learned from Annapurna Devi. He just started walking toward me, I was terrified. I had this feeling that we were—pardon me for saying—part of some ancient circle, around the Bharata Nāṭyā Sāstra. I recognized that he had a connection to a very ancient aesthetic formula. But we just spoke like hippies, you know, “Where are you hanging out in Amsterdam? Oh, this is a good cafe? Are you making enough money?” This was Klaus Wiese, who at the time was playing with Popol Vuh, and doing his own music. He was a very particular person, what we would call now a drone artist: a very deep meditative sound artist. Then I saw him by chance again, and again, and I ended up studying with him in Munich. It wasn’t conventional study, but I somehow arrived there after about a year. Klaus Wiese was the person who gave me the understanding that you could take a whole aesthetic system and transform it, like Ezra Pound’s Make It New. You could transform a tradition without losing it.

RAIL: In other words you are adapting a system from one discipline to another?

LEVI: Not really adapting, no, you’re not adapting anything. You’re using your own experience of the beauty of the music and the power it has conveyed to you, and perhaps even your understanding that this particular music was in its origin a transmission, it was a vehicle for grace, for liberation—a kind of Bhakti yoga. Of course all music is the vehicle for grace. But somehow because the mantras still exist in our time frame, we can track it more easily, I think. But it was not adapting anything because that would be conscious, it’s allowing the experience of the music to transform itself within you. You’re not controlling, you’re not looking for a new formula, rather you are giving the experiences of the bhavas or rasas a new dimension with which to modify both your consciousness and—if you’re a good artist—the consciousness of others. In the Indian classic system there are two veins to speak so to speak, one for the virtuoso musicians, and one for the “poets.” The poetic compositions provided the basis for the improvisation. I somehow tapped into a way in which poetic consciousness could enter into and directly modify and be modified by the evolution of notes.

RAIL: You mention the Bharata Nāṭyā Sāstra, and the rasas, maybe it’s a good moment to explain these things.

LEVI: The Bharata Nāṭyā Sāstra is considered to be the fifth Veda in the Indian epistemology, written down by a musicologist and theologian named Bharata Muni. It was transmitted to him by the celestial musician Narada, and Bharata transmitted it to his disciples, the actors and musicians in his theater. The classic four Vedas were closed to those who were not male Brahmins, therefore most of society had no access to the sacred sound. This was considered by the celetials to be a terrible deficit, as the Vedas contained the instructions on liberation. They gave the Bharata Nāṭyā Sāstra to society so they would have an enlightened system of aestetics, applicable to music, theater, dance, et. al., we could call it multi-disciplinary or “total” theater. René Daumal was the first to realize that this text had a living message, a living energy for contemporary artists. The rasas are the aspects or varieties of aesthetic experience in the arts: the word is sometimes translated as “flavors” or “taste.”

RAIL: What is the function of the drone in music for you, and its relationship to silence?

LEVI: For me, silence per se is not really the ground—luminosity is the ground. I suppose silence and luminosity are the same for certain people, but for me the ground is luminosity. But even the Tibetans assert that sound produces light, or is its vehicle. They understand sound as the absolute ground and describe its modifications: sound, light, wave, color, form. In the Indian system the tambura provides the drone, those are the fundamental from which the others can or will emerge. The higher manifestation of the drone in our modern world would be the alap in Indian classical music. It develops directly from the drone, a very slow elaboration of a melodic principle.

RAIL: Why is the drone so popular in western music today?

LEVI: That’s easy to explain: because we have lost the fundamental tone. If you study harmonics, it’s like studying the Fibonacci numeral system—it’s a system
MAY 2020

RAIL: Did the Anthology mean a lot to you as a musician?

LEV: Right from the very beginning. It was the first awakening. For years afterwards that was the ground-music for me. Even today I still study folk music. I sing with it, I listen to it, I never start one single practice session without singing.

RAIL: Has music for you always been transmission?

LEV: It’s been transmission, but it’s also been community. That’s also why I enjoy ensemble music so much: it allows you to experience the psyche of other people without the slightest invasion, and only with the intent to make something harmonious for those who are listening. It’s a very high form of communication, and more beautiful when it’s improvised. May I take a step back?

RAIL: Of course.

LEV: I think when I’m using “drone” you’re not referring to the Indian musical system, but rather this contemporary desire for a certain kind of underlying tone or even principle. But it’s not, as is generally considered, pacifying—it’s really about awakening. The drone is not repressing, it’s an active power. If it was just pacifying you could take a pill. That is what was so interesting about Klaus Wiese’s work: it wasn’t New Age music, but something different that worked with memory, and luminosity.

RAIL: How is it that there is a whole group of people that includes Tony Conrad and La Monte, and Terry Riley who are all tied into this one type of music? Is there a root teacher, is it the air?

LEV: Yes, the root teacher is Pandit Pran Nath, via La Monte Young. La Monte recognized that behind all of our experiments lay a vast knowledge codified and contained in the esoterica of the raga. Fundamentally we were all searching for a spiritual order that would serve as direct introduction to the transcendent or the unspoken, bypassing religious doctrine. The fact that the Indian music masters were so kind and generous with us indicates that they understood the fluidity of the doctrine they were maintaining.

RAIL: What can you tell me about your Mirahai translations, what did that work mean to you, what the role did it play in your creative life?

LEV: In my life things happen through signs and symbols, rather than through a more rational blueprint. So there were signs related to Mirahai—I visited all her points of her hagiography in India without knowing that’s what they were. I’ve always loved her poetry, and Kahir also. As soon as I got to India, despite a totally weird situation, the first thing I did was translate Mirahai. In the crumbling home of some Parsi elders I worked with an old pandit who knew all the esoterica, things you don’t get from textbooks. Someone who has walked the walk, lived the essence of those kinds of traditions. I felt I had to translate Mirahai to have a point of personal application for Rene Daumal’s theories, because I was translating his book Rasa [Knowledge of the Self] Essays on Indian Aesthetics and Selected Sanskrit Studies] (1982) for New Directions and it was difficult for me. I needed a criteria to concentrate for my own devotional maturation.

RAIL: You wanted to test the rasas in actuality?

LEV: Yes, definitely. I didn’t want to write like Mirahai but I wanted to test how a system of poetics functioned that approached mantra, that conveyed the sacred word. I wanted to understand how someone did that, how they created a system of enlightened aesthetics, as it were.

RAIL: In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s there was a fascinating group of American expatriates in the East: yourself, Ira Cohen and Petra Vogt, Angus and Hettie MacLise, Peter Lamborn Wilson. Historically it was a unique moment.

LEV: I have to say we were fearless. We traveled through Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India. Even my somewhat conservative aunt in Paris (my Romanian relatives, very well established and respected) thought it was a wonderful idea for me to travel alone to India, and even bought me a ticket on the Orient Express, to Istanbul. In that brief period, peace reigned.

RAIL: I was traveling in Greece when you performed in New York last month, but I heard about it. So many of my friends were very taken with that performance.

LEV: What a gift! Thanks to Blank Forms and Lawrence Kamp. The experience was fantastic, the gallery was completely full, the audience was so sophisticated—they really, really listened. It was also my first time performing solo in my home city, to people who spoke my mother tongue—I also read poetry. I’m an obscure figure, I was amazed when Blank Forms invited me, but Lawrence was the former director of ISSUE Project Brooklyn where I was artist in residence and accompanied Catherine Christer Hennix for a concert there, so he knew my “secret” work.

RAIL: I feel that a lot of these things that you are enjoying now have come to you unexpectedly, they’re not anything that you consciously strove for.

LEV: I know, it’s so bizarre. Looking back, it seems my earliest work with the Floating Lotus Magic Opera Company was the blueprint for everything that followed. These past few months in Japan, improvising with Kawahata Makoto, have been so remarkable, he’s a virtuoso on guitar, with his band Acid Mothers Temple, but also a serious soloist and composer. We are all working to discover a new potential. The duet we played was telepathic and very powerful, sustained by the rock “powers”—his truly beautiful bowing of the electric guitar. I went directly to another dimension, I think he did too, sustained by the drone, by the perfectly harmonic capacity of the sārangī. Talking about it now, it’s very hard to relate. I would rather not even try...

RAYMOND FOYE is a curator, writer, and publisher based in New York. He is currently editing the Collected Poems of Rene Ricard for publication this year.

Lontano (“As from a distance”) by George Grella

Sound is a wave, one that flows within a frequency band low enough so that it reaches into the structures of our inner ear and vibrates there. That information gets sent to the brain, where we try to figure it out. That’s how we hear, and how we listen. We see light waves, we smell chemicals, but we feel sound, literally. Sound touches us, and since music is a type of sound, music touches us at a distance. Consider how intense that is—a singer produces vibrations in their body, and when those reach us we are enwined in a real way. The only other experience like that is sex.

Music making is a social activity, and that fundamental feature of touch at a distance is not just a physical realization of socializing, but likely something that motivated early humans to make this thing we now call music, a social desire for connection that brought about an enormous evolutionary step.

That touch also means that hearing music is always a live activity, things are moving around and working their way into and through us. There’s a long-standing knock on musical organizations acting like museums, preserving some precious and stale piece of classical music or old-time jazz as if under glass, reluctant to alter a phrase or drive up passion in fear of dislodging some delicate part. Even in those situations, though, the sounds made in the moment are alive, and we touch them in a way that no actual museum would allow. Music cannot be hands-off.

But now everything is hands-on. People are making music, people want to listen, both sides struggle to connect, much less see their way through to what is going to be different for music performances in the future, and there’s going to be plenty that’s different beyond what is sure to be a large number of institutions and venues closing up for good.

The live streaming experience has quickly become the status quo—we’re fast to adapt. The tension of the last few performances in mid-March, concerts going on even as the audience was shut out, has gone. There is so much live streaming going on that one is again faced with the pleasant dilemma
of having to pick something to see out of several simultaneous events. The stakes are different, the quality of the event is almost inconsequential right now, what matters is the ambiency, the feeling that, even though we can’t be together, we are doing something in synchronicity, organized around a performer.

This is something like the experience of radio, but muddled and, I’m coming to find, not as satisfying. Radio is pure, just the sound connecting you to the DJ, and wherever they happen to be, they are right there in the room with you, touching with sound. Watching the live performance while hearing it is pleasant but also jarring, without the same kind of grip. The visual component creates sub rosa confusion—why am I here and not you?—and the eyes and ears split the focus. That happens at a concert too, but there’s something about the digitization of the sound, from an instrument far away through a transducer, then across wires into a server, then back down to our computers and retranslated through speakers, that removes the touch. It’s uncanny in an old-fashioned and Futurist way, because the sound wave has been turned into digital information, then reconstituted into a wave—we’re not touched by the artist so much as we are by the microprocessor right in front of us.

Through all these experiences, something has been running through my head, memories of seeing the violin duo String Noise (Conrad Harris and Pauline Kim Harris), play a piece Alvin Lucier wrote for them, Love Song. I have witnessed them playing this twice, at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 2016 and at the Gallery of Fine Arts in Ostrava, Czech Republic, the following year. In the work, as Lucier explains, “two violinists are connected by a long wire stretched between the bridges of their instruments, causing the sounds played on one violin to also be heard through the other. As the two violinists play long tones using only the open E string, they move in a circular motion around the performance space, thus changing the tension of the wire, which creates a remarkable array of variations in pitch and timbre ranging from ghostly and subtle to the percussive.” String Noise has released this piece and others on a new double-CD, String Noise (2020), on the Black Truffle label, so you can listen to this through your speakers. What you won’t get though is seeing how the music is produced in front of your ears. This is not a bad thing, but it means that you will be at some distance from the experience, even as Lucier’s ideas, preserved on recording, reach out and touch you. Because Love Song is less about the music than about how we make music together, and how we can both bridge the distance through sound waves, and how it might be possible to make sound out of that distance. Distance is most of what we’ve got for still some time to come, and if it’s kept empty, then there will be nothing to touch us.

GEORGE GRELLA is the Rail’s music editor.

IN CONVERSATION

MATT EVANS with Vanessa Ague

Matt Evans is a Brooklyn-based percussionist and composer who recently struck out on his own with his debut solo album, New Topographics (Whatever’s Clever, 2020). Recorded during a month-long residency at Red Hook’s experimental art hub, Pioneer Works, New Topographics comes on the heels of his collaborative work with vibrant percussion trio Tigue and new music chamber trio Beethoven. His solo practice explores the meeting place of our digital and physical worlds by juxtaposing acoustic and electronic sound, and takes a wide swathe of inspiration from visual art, poetry, and philosophy. Perhaps fittingly, we discussed his creative processes and inspirations by video.

VALENSS AGUE (RAIL): With New Topographics, you’re exploring the interconnectedness of physical and digital worlds. What draws you to this as an inspiration?

MATT EVANS: I think it’s just part of our contemporary condition in so many ways. There’s something about how we live our lives right now—half-physical, half-digital—that begs to be addressed. I’m trying to create work that feels like it’s both.

Liminal is a really interesting word that I keep coming back to. It really nails this space we’re in, liminal being something that occupies a kind of uncanny valley space, at or on both sides of, a boundary. To me, the crossfade of digital and physical is what is interesting. I’ve been trying to find sounds that exist mid-crossfade.

Timothy Morton’s idea of hyperobjects has also been huge for me. Hyperobjects is a name he gives to experiences that are too large and lack physical form. There’s a transcendent absurdity to attempting to understand things on that massive scale. For me, this project was about trying to capture that transcendent, absurd feeling with regards to how we experience the world in physical and digital tandem.

RAIL: How are you blending acoustic and electronic musical elements?

EVANS: One example is the chord that’s playing in “New Moon.” It’s this chord that I could hear outside the studio. I could hum the pitches and decided to manipulate two keyboards to get exactly those frequencies. I recorded that sound into Pro Tools, and then I had a synthesized version of this physical landscape. Then I would send that chord through speakers and back into the room. I would have a microphone or a cassette player and I would walk around the room, recording the sound of that chord in different positions in the space, catching reflections, based on the experience one might have in La Monte Young’s Dream House. Just by moving a microphone in a static sound space, you get a sound that has life. I would put both the static and moving recordings on top of each other and the sound would gently wiggle against itself. The appropriate character for the sound we produced by constantly translating it back and forth between digital and physical.

RAIL: You’ve picked text that has served as an inspiration and is also incorporated into the music. What led you to pick the text and how did you use it in the music?

EVANS: It’s a Richard Brautigan poem, “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace.” It’s a really powerful poem, but it’s also worth noting that I find Brautigan to be a very controversial figure. I don’t find him to be an inspirational person. I don’t really want to defile him, but his work is very unique.

I was in Ohio, and I wanted a Brautigan thing because I had read one of his before. The only book the bookstore had was The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster (1968), The first poem in the book is “All Watched Over,” and it rocks. It’s so simple and direct. It’s this psychedelic, 60s-era poem that discusses a trust in cybernetics and a human “return to nature.” It’s over 50 years old, but it still reflects our contemporary experience of questioning the future within this idea of a techn-o-utopia. It’s overly positive to a point where it makes you question the position, or at least that my experience. Translating mediums to abstract them and also to see if an idea’s core stays intact through various adaptations became a big part of this whole process. It unveiled something about how I understood “truth.” I realized that “truth” is this thing that can exist throughout translations.

I got really interested in whether my perception of this poem would [remain] intact through translation in a sound-based way. The first thing I did was record myself writing the poem out with a Sharpie on a piece of paper. Writing in a very percussive act, and we don’t think about it. We create a lot of sound by byproducts by accident, and I wanted to see if they could become a leading musical language. So I got interested in other ways I could translate it. I translated the poem into braille, Morse code, and radio teletype. It became a goal to collect and express through byproducts of our communication systems.

RAIL: How did you pick the title for this album?

EVANS: I went to the National Gallery in 2015, and saw these amazing Lewis Baltz photographs that led me to read about the original show where they were exhibited, called New Topographics. The photographers in that show were making work in the ‘70s by finding minimal, abstracted representation in really flat, two-dimensional images of urban sprawl. I was really into this imagery for a long time, and it made sense in terms of connecting
with the greater concepts of this record. I’m taking these multidimensional per- spectives on digital and physical sound, and “flattening” them into a space that’s just two speakers in front of you or just putting on headphones.

RAIL: There’s a visual component to the album with the accompanying music videos and with the cover art. How did you choose those visuals?

EVANS: It’s all been ways to continue to play around with these ideas of translation, abstraction, and byproducts. “Cold Moons” was shot at the Cosy Island Aquarium by my friends, Izrid. They made this really detailed, hypnotic video where each sound has some distinct visual representation. In the “Full Squid” video, I put water on a drum head and let it with cliplamps, laying it horizontally on a speaker. Then played the synth part loudly through the amp and the water simply responded to the physical vibrations of the sound waves, creating this beautiful little dance.

The third video, for “Spinning Blossoms,” was collaboratively directed by this amazing crew, Vanessa Castro, Mel Stancato, Darc, among others. We called our- selves “Soop Group.” We shot it on two separate days, one in a small white box space where I’m playing some instruments, and another where Mel is dancing in an empty office space. Each of these video projects felt like ways to consider the movement and physicality that naturally echoes from the sound-making process. I wanted the album art to be an image of Devra Freelaender’s since she was a sound- ing board throughout the development of this project and a hugely supportive person in my life. Devra and I dated for two years, and it was an incredibly positive relationship. To this day, I think about her unbelievable brilliance. She had a light and comical approach to how she lived her life, and was able to write and make work in a poignant, poetic way. I was so in love with her, this intellectual side of her, and the joyous, loving side of her. Losing Devra is the most difficult thing I’ve ever experienced.

The work I ended up choosing is a piece from 2014, “Fluorescent Anomaly.” I chose it because it’s this perfect analog to the sound that I was trying to make. It’s a photograph of a physical object that was made to look like a rendering of an abstract conceptual object. It could have just been a rendering, but instead, it’s a photograph of a physical object that is mimicking, poetic in that translation concept, and how you feel Devra’s bright neon personality in the color that she chose, makes the whole thing work. Her personality is present in every step—in the rendering, in the physical version, and in the photograph—it really transcends translation. And I think, in a very short phrase, what a lot of this is about is trying to see transcends translation.

VANESSA AGUE is a violinist, music blogger at theradioandsound.com, and the Development and Research Associate at National Sawdust. Her projects include her own work, National Sawdust Log, and Tone Glow. She was a 2019 Bang on a Can Media Fellow, and holds a Bachelor’s Degree from Yale University.

No Joke: ehh hahah’s Non-Generic “Kreativitet”

BY S. DAVID

The notion of genre is an awkward tau- tooey. Conceived in an easy formalism engendered partly by the exigencies of the market, it honors best that which is easiest to classify. The Krakow artist ehh hahah agrees that the genre question is one reflecting on, if only for a moment, and with some apprehension. “The case of [genre] often returns to my mind, but I am still not sure what to think about it,” he comments, casually, as we settle into our first conversa- tion over the phone and SoundCloud DMs. “But what I think is most important is the search for non-obvious connections.”

That answer looks large in part because, though existing somewhere along the impre- cise limits of “experimental” and “elec- tronic,” ehh hahah’s music is perhaps best characterized by its seemingly convincing avoidance of broad generic statements. Discursive, but not disjointed, it circuits freely among the tokens and trappings of the past, “pop,” “bass music,” and electroacoustic music, while offering the necessary shibboleths of none. It retains a spirit of re-contextualization, and what all remains constant is an original experimentalism that endows the music with a distinctive personal valence, despite the lack of vernacular orality. To put it sim- ply, his music fits no easy taxonomy.

Even in conversation, ehh hahah—who whose real name is Wojtek—is resistant to clas- sification, preferring to define himself simply by what it is not. “I don’t like that ‘constructed club’ thing,” he miffs, without reason. “It’s just a very broad label for music at the intersection of post-indus- trial, IDM, and progressive electronic…it’s all just a reinvention of the wheel.”

But it is in tacit opposition to the per- ceived rock-like rigidity of mono-generic scenes and outfits that ehh hahah also seems his most effusive, his most comfortable. “I just want to mess with binaural; I could-Drone, and electroacoustic music,” he says, “I try to shed the social limits and expectations that come with them.” And so on and so forth, on. He feels free to use the various tools at his disposal to bring out the distinctive gaps between personal narratives and regional colloquialisms. The music is similarly expressed in high-relief against the full weight of global aspiration. In fact, he seems eager to extend his purview beyond the comfort of home. “In Poland, we are all divided, multiplied, and so on.”

So, as with this record, he feels free to comment on pop with his remixes. But it is in an essentially different way, one that rejects the tokens of formal critique. He maintains that his music doesn’t bear a dialectical relationship with pop, nor does he claim to work in a process of any “consecrating dénouement.” “I honestly don’t wonder about pop and all that… discourse about music being mainstream and all these things,” he says, dismissively. “When I comment on pop, it’s purely because I’m expressing a kindred desire to create simple and easy going music.”

It’s not a comment made flippantly. But even at his most accessible—as with the remixes, or on this record—ehh hahah is not simple, not even deceptively so. The music is progressive and remains challenging. As someone who claims to be inspired by sound synthesis practices, Eugeniusz Rudnik, and generative music, he comes across obscuran- tist in motivation, maybe a little academic in pretense, literally. “The University and my studies in computer science have a very big impact on my work,” he reflects. “And I cannot run away from the more algorithmic and ‘logical’ thinking in my creative process.”

But when asked what he’s looking forward to, he gives his most emotive answer, indicat- ing a connection with the music that’s staying beyond the physical or formal. “Something that I dream of is a group of people that would like to hear my music, regardless of the style that I choose.” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “In order to make the music that I’m making now, I can’t complain about being heard.” Though nominally cheeky and a little elusive, ehh hahah’s name fore- grounds something beyond a commitment to keyboard-conscious self-amusement. He is certainly no joke.

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MAY 2020

MUSIC 99
Lydia Lunch’s Retrovirus And Other Sonic Infections

BY MARTIN LONGLEY

Sixty Sixth Congress, AMA Holdings Inc & Downtown Music Gallery
March 13−15, 2020

Friday the 13th, four days before the complete NYC lockdown. Close to the water in Greenpoint, a den of No wave acolytes are attending one of the city’s few remaining gigs, clenched under leather for a dagg-er-pocked return to rock’s most violent days, as singer/rorator and daughter of Rochester Lydia Lunch leads her Retrovirus, a band dedicated to a classic songbook that includes works by 8 Eyed Spy and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, just a part of her four-decades-old legacy.

Sixty Sixth Congress is a fairly obscure bar on Greenpoint Avenue, and the gig happens in its rear room. Lunch held court just as much as performed, her lines as much poetry readings as rock’n’roll verses, her bellowing demon tongue repeatedly sent out to taste the bad-droplet atmosphere. She was relaxed as she smoldered, spitting and lolling demon tongue repeatedly sent out just as much as performed, her lines as much as percussive and electronic tweakings. This is not to say that bassist Tim Dahl and drummer Bob Bert weren’t impressive, but they were more dedicated to the incessant stoking of general dynamism. Bert was the original Sonic Youth sticks-man, and a member of Pussy Galore—amongst many more subsequent drumming roles.

Despite the robust nature of the Lunch oeuvre, one of the set’s extended highlights arrived with the climactic inclusion of Pere Ubu’s “Final Solution,” which seemed entirely appropriate on this weekend. Such tense dance music produced a range of nervy twitchiness around the crowd, which wasn’t as abundant as was normal for this event, now distilled into the fixated true believers in this punk funk nihilism ritual exorcism. MECHA Sonic was booked for the next day, but suddenly converted from public gig to underground Saturday night function. Taking place in the AMA Holdings Inc metal subway station, a collective of musicians and instrument makers had prepared a multi-form spectacle. Co-producer Dan Glass and trombonist Chris Cortier had built a set of modified instruments, with internal tubings designed to propel flames into underground Saturday night function. The evening climaxed, again, with a performance, or demonstration, of a massive Tesla coil, which had the workshop humming and crackling with its immense, barely-contained power. Fortunately, we were guided by experts.

The Downtown Music Gallery presents weekly free admission gigs in its Chinatown workshop, just under the Smith-9th Street subway entrance, a collective of musicians and instrument makers who had prepared a multi-form spectacle. Taking place in the AMA Holdings Inc metal workshop, just under the Smith-9th Street subway entrance, a collective of musicians and instrument makers had prepared a multi-form spectacle. Co-producer Dan Glass and trombonist Chris Cortier had built a set of modified instruments, with internal tubings designed to propel flames around their interior, and eventually out into the open, each player equipped with a gas bottle hanging from their hips. Members of Gato Loco and The Gotham Easy made this a walking brass outfit, with twinned percussion and electronic tweakings. Baritone saxophonist Stefan Zeniuk was the other half of the production team. The fireball eruptions became a perfectly timed element of the music, as the entire six-piece spread triggered licks, bursts and blooms of flaming destruction. A particularly moving stretch arrived when they piped up with the self-titled Black Sabbath number, a doom-tolling selection of the Birmingham rockers’ songbook not often chosen for open coverage. The evening climaxed, again, with a performance, or demonstration, of a massive Tesla coil, which had the workshop humming and crackling with its immense, barely-contained power. Fortunately, we were guided by experts.

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The Uni duo now had a difficult act to follow. Kenji Herbert (guitar) and Vinicius Cajujo (upright bass) operated on a much subtler, minimalist level, and perhaps should have played first. Herbert coaxed out a faint buzz, which upped to a drone-hum, as he attached small clips to his strings, at first playing in the lap steel manner, then hoisting the guitar into conventional position. A frothy distortion ensued, using a rambling, easy-going motion, Cajujo bowing bass strings, the pair introducing a Keith Fullerton Whitman aura, meandering and entering the dusk spume exotica zone, the results being strangely restful. It looked like DMG’s likely under-10 attendance and obscure location might have allowed a con-tinuation of Sunday performances inside the lockdown, but a lot can happen in a week, and by time of the next booked session, the calendar was empty.

MARTIN LONGLEY is frequently immersed in a stinking mire of dense guitar treacle, trembling across the bedsit floorboards, rifling through a curvature stack of glowing laptoppery, picking up a mold-speckled avant jazz platter on the way, all the while attempting to translate these worrying eardrum vibrations into semi-coherent sentences. Right now he pens for The Guardian, Jazzwise, and Songlines.

Weeks tried to resuscitate his alto bell, while Cajujo created artificial cicadas, then graduated to full-blown Harley-Davidson throttling, to climax Toned’s 30 minutes or so of condensed intensity.

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Editor’s Note

BY GILLIAN JAKAB

With the world’s stages dark, this month’s Rail dance section looks at dance from a distance. Our writers explore dance as a salve for isolation, how dance bears up as streamed performance video, podcasts on the art of dance making, choreographies of dancing together, apart. Dance, for the individual and for the collective, has been a source of healing and human connection since time immemorial. I hope these pieces remind and inspire us to find new ways to support the dance community in this time of need.

GILLIAN JAKAB is the dance editor of the Brooklyn Rail.

Touch Without Touching

BY GEORGE KAN

Their red clothes stand bright against the blue-gray of the sky and the murky tones of the city. Their rotating of limbs and raising of arms occurs as if indifferent to the passing cars below. AtoP the buildings, they wave like flags. Watching the figures move and twist, their heads remain, by contrast, still and fixed. Faces focused towards their counterparts ahead on the horizon, they are silently attuned, following the gestures in steady rhythm.

In 1971 Trisha Brown created Roof Piece. A troupe of 15 dancers is dispersed along individual rooftops in StoHo. Each wearing red, they watch and mimic the movements of the dancer on the rooftop ahead of them. Together they form a chain of transmission that traverses the city’s skyline. Attuned to each other’s movements, the band of bodies synapses signals across the city. The work’s resonance with our current mass quarantine is visually apparent. Confined to our own homes, we reach out across to each other. There are ways of enacting togetherness, for isolation, how dance bears up as streamed performance video, podcasts on the art of dance making, choreographies of dancing together, apart. Dance, for the individual and for the collective, has been a source of healing and human connection since time immemorial. I hope these pieces remind and inspire us to find new ways to support the dance community in this time of need.

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point of camp—becomes a poignant vehicle for moving in sync.

Buffin’s restaging, 30 years later, involved asking different communities from across the city (including firefighters, schoolchildren, bus drivers, and nurses) to learn and perform part of the routine—whether that be in the local fire station, the schoolyard, or the hospital floor. The many participants did not have a side-by-side but in their own buildings, streets, and workplaces. These segments together compose a portrait of the city. The earliest choreography is echoed in the various bodies of delivery men and army cadets. Pirouettes unfurl clumsily, fingers fumbling to meet each other, and faces are held with solemnity as the romantic Boléro is transposed onto the Nottingham everyday.

As with Trisha Brown’s work, the Nottingham Mass Boléro embraces contaminated communication. The inaccuracy that renders the reproduction comically dissimilar is what gives space for humor, comadrey, and pathos. That same overlevered and bathetic appeal of the 1984 original is rekinkled here in the dancing and weaving together of a kindred sentiment.

For theater critic Lyn Gardner, the “joy in the work is the occurrence of “something beautiful and bigger” beyond the individual contributions.”2 Two librarians, leaning to the left, leap and turn to the right. Without the ice of the original, the poses are held static—a kind of clownsli stillness where Torvill and Dean were originally gliding swiftly across the rink. The librarian’s arms are outstretched wide, parallel to the ground, her gaze is focused out over her left hand. Another librarian, the Dean to her Torvill, awkwardly grips her waist. They leap together into the next pose. Motionless in concentration, just her lanyard swings gently beneath her.

In the stillness and stilleted of their movements, we see the grace and agility of 1984 Olympic gold. In the empty stadium that surrounds the two rugby players—preparing, with their tacit eye contact, to attempt the first lifts—we see the attending crowds of British popular history. Not organized in any linear clarity nor assembled with coherence, the people and stories gathered here, to use Love lace’s word, soak the movements.

Dance is often assumed to take place in a synchronous with specific bodies and specific movements. But these assumptions limit our understanding. Works such as these reveal that we can also dance with those not physically there. Without even moving.

Our technologically hyperconnected lives. Yet, it quickly appears, isolation, our present situation demands assumptions limit our understanding. Bodies and specific movements. But these contributions.

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Looking for ways to stay connected and entertain ourselves in our respective quarantines, my friend and I decided to learn these dances—be Janet, and I Paula.

Abdul said she chose the choreography for the 1990 American Music Awards because of the celebrity’s Nichelle. The thought of Abdul choreographing dances in her cramped bathroom or waking up to film herself in the middle of the night only made these absurdisties seem more appropriate.

The pandemic has forced many of us to remain in our homes while the spaces where we used to dance—the clubs, stages, dance studios—have closed. As such, our living spaces are becoming our dance studios. Thousands of people are sharing videos of themselves dancing online: families learning TikTok dances together, dance classes taught over Zoom, “quarantine clubs” where groups of people collectively dance to streamed DJ sets. Dancers from the Trisha Brown Dance Company recently performed an indoor version of Brown’s RooF Piece (1971), the original isolation of being positioned on different rooftops finding a new interior relevance.

Even the dean of NYU’s Tisch School of Dance program responded to her students, who were requesting tuition reimbursement after their dance classes were all shifted online, by posting a video of herself dancing in her office to R.E.M.’s “ Losing My Religion,” the dance equivalent of flipping her students off.

Deciding to learn Abdul’s choreography, more than just a means to pass the indistinguishable days, was also an escape into nostalgia. When I was young, I learned to dance by watching music videos in my family’s living room. My sister and I recorded music videos on VHS tapes and then paused and rewound the tapes over and over, committing the detailed choreography, usually of Janet Jackson, to memory, until we could master every detail: the shoulder switch, the arm combo, the knee slide.

First thing I recognized learning Abdul’s dance, she takes up a lot of space (I gave up on the apartment and moved to my building’s roof to perform, abandoning the furniture gymnastics in favor of refining the moves). She travels and slides and struts across the stage, her blocking a kin to a large Broadway number. Abdul has her trademarks: swift changes in direction; dancing on the two and four beats, syncopated; jumping into a wide stance and buckling one knee inward; ending a complicated phrase with a sharp turn of the head to face the audience. Her physicality references the sharp isolations and extensions of Fosse, the gliding and stomping
Trading Velvet Seats for Couch Viewing: A Night at the Ballet at Home

BY HANNAH FOSTER

It’s said that good art makes us uncomfortable; it can shake us out of our happily preconceived notions or trigger visceral emotion. After a full weekend binge watching ballet performances from my living room—thanks to streaming initiatives undertaken by ballet companies everywhere in response to the pandemic—I’ve realized that in the environments where we fully engage with art, we usually start off a little bit uncomfortable. Physically, that is. Our dresses and dinner jackets are a tad too tight when we sit down at the theater. We’re too hot or too cold or the chair is too hard. The person in front of us is coughing too loudly. Today, we would burn public coughers at the stake for not staying home. But with the entire performing arts world suspended, we’re all at home—for many of us, in our comfort zones—for the foreseeable future.

Moviegoers have been opting for home viewing before it was forced upon them. Some called the release of Martin Scorsese’s The Irishman on Netflix the canary in the coalmine for the end of movie theaters. COVID-19 was the sooner-than-expected cave-in. Can streaming be a sustainable business model for ballet?

Of course, stage works aren’t crafted with the camera frame in mind. There are dances made for film that choreograph the camera’s movement as part of the piece rather than limiting it to proscenium framing. (I recommend Scottish Ballet’s Tremble from its 2019 Digital Season, then watching three hours from your day disappear perusing the company’s YouTube channel.)

But that’s not what I’m writing about. I want to know about live performances—best viewed at the theater—but also enjoyable, hopefully, at home. Thus, I have my sweatpants on, a mug of tea in hand, and I’ve signed up to see if I can get on board with regular ballet viewing from my couch.

To begin, I make a fatal mistake. I tune into Bolshoi Ballet’s Marco Spada at 1pm in the afternoon on Saturday. I wanted the communal experience, the feeling of watching with thousands of others for the “premiere” at 7pm Moscow time. What I got was a bright midday glare on my screen.

The Bolshoi’s production value is very good, with sharp, clear shots and multiple camera angles. I can tell that Olga Smirnova’s eyelashes are fake and can see the sweat glisten like diamonds on her regal forehead. But I’m instantly and constantly annoyed by framing choices that cut off her feet or the corps de ballet’s formations. It’s a tradeoff I haven’t reconciled. I’d never be able to see the dancers’ faces this clearly from the seats I can usually afford, but I also fully believe that the corps tableau behind the principals—men and women sautéing and swirling in and out of perfectly spaced arrangements in complete unison—is integral to the art form.

Originating in 1850s France, Marco Spada is made devilishly difficult in Pierre Lacotte’s 1982 restaging, and the plot is quite silly. The real treat is seeing Evgenia Obraztsova’s effortless technique with film clarity as pure as her pointework. Can she really be that perfect? Quick camera work recording isn’t sharp enough to snap me back to attention.

For English National Ballet’s Akram Khan version of Giselle, presented on the Marquees TV platform, I’ve learned my lesson: to recreate a night at the ballet as closely I can. I save it for the evening, snack and drink beforehand, put my phone on airplane mode, and make my husband do the same. Though he’s no balletomane (he would have chewed through chains to get out of watching Marco Spada), his engagement is enough light at the end of this pandemic tunnel for me, and perhaps a bright one for the ballet world at large even after we’re back to our normal in-person seasons.

Khan’s Giselle is riveting. The ballet opens on the sinister tone it will retain throughout, and Khan’s version fills in gaps in the original Romantic ballet. We actually witness the fearsome Myrtha, exceptionally performed by Stina Quagebeur, pulse life back into Giselle, and the world in which she awakens isn’t some storybook forest with identical, upright sphyls. It’s a proper undead nightmare. The Wilis (spirits of maidens who died after betrayals in love) are ragged, armed with poles, and when they rise to pointe it’s a position of demonic power. Special mention should be made for Jeffrey Cirio’s athletic Hilarion and Tamara Rojo’s superior acting throughout. I’m still incredibly annoyed by camera cuts that prevent me from seeing certain steps or formations. I want to be able to decide what to look at on the stage. Overall, however, the production’s stark drama holds up on screen.

The bad news is that it could never compare to the live viewing. The chilling horn that erupts at the entrance of the royals and mid-Wilis nightmare would blare right into your soul in a surround sound theater. An immersive virtual reality ballet, like
Dutch National Ballet’s 2016 Night Fall, might come close, but we’re likely a few years from the average household owning a high-tech VR set. (The cardboard versions distort and blur the picture enough that they aren’t worth the time.) What’s more, the theater experience primes us to be at our most receptive from the outset. We dress up and shell out the ticket price for the privilege of a live dancer’s performance. The lights dim and our expectations swell as the hush falls over a room full of thousands. We’re sensitive to even the slightest whisper or rustle. In that moment just before the darkness and quiet gives way to light and music, we wouldn’t dare to even scratch an itch. We’re hardly in our comfort zones to begin with, and it’s through those alert senses that the art takes hold.

The good news? I would absolutely see Khan’s Giselle again live. Being a $8.99/month Marquee TV subscriber would not preclude me from purchasing a $300 orchestra ticket in the future. In fact, I want to see it live even more now, and I might even convince my husband to a double feature: to see the original Romantic Giselle with me, as well. Two ballets have a ticket buyer they would not have had before.

That’s for when we can return to theaters. For now, it’s our responsibility to be actively receptive when consuming art at home. Don’t kick your feet up or leave your phone on because you can. Sit erect, sit alert, make an evening of it—give the artists the attention they’ve trained to earn—no matter what room you are in.

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1. Marco Spada April 4th, YouTube Bolshoi Theatre Channel
3. Giselle, Released April 4th, Marquee TV

HANNAH FOSTER is a New York City based writer, dancer, and contemporary art advisor. She currently serves as Head of Art Advisory at Sugarlift.
UnSequenced: A Podcast About the Choreographic Process

BY SIMA BELMAR

Dance may seem like an unlikely fit for podcasting. But choreographers are no less capable than film directors or novelists of talking about the making of a work, offering insight even to those of us who will never see it staged. UnSequenced: A podcast about the choreographic process is a podcast from {DIYdancer} Magazine that claims to “get inside a choreographer’s head” to understand what drives them as artists and “discover the stories and emotions behind [the movement].” The podcast gives listeners an auditory experience of the rehearsal studio that goes beyond the usual Q&A format by letting the choreographers speak from within their choreographic processes.

Episode one of UnSequenced dropped on June 1, 2019, when the world as we knew it was the world as we no longer know it. The podcast releases a new episode every month and I look forward to hearing from movement artists about how their choreographic practices have changed since the advent of the global coronavirus pandemic. When I spoke with host Stephanie Wolf on April 15, she said that she will be connecting via Zoom with Pigeon Dance’s Gabrielle Lamb who is creating quarantine solo dances designed for a 5- by 8-foot rug she has in her house. Wolf said, “I had some tape stocked and thought about putting everything on pause. But I kept the Tiffany Rea-Fisher [artistic director of Elisa Monte Dance] episode because it is like a talking love letter to NYC, which felt heartbreaking right now.” Wolf released the Rea-Fisher episode on March 17 and said that listeners should expect more episodes that focus on “how people are thinking about choreographing in this moment in history.”

In season one, we hear from California-based choreographers Micaela Taylor and Lara Wilson (who is also {DIYdancer}’s creative director); Atlanta-based choreographers Tara Lee (Terminus Modern Ballet Theatre) and Raianna Brown; former Batshева dancer Bobbi Jene Smith; New York City Ballet principal dancer Lauren Lovette; and Safety Third Productions’ Katherine Helen Fisher and Shimmy Boyle. So far, in addition to Rea-Fisher, season two, which dropped in February 2020, has featured Dublin-based Liz Roche; Brooklyn choreographer Heather Bryce; and Amy Leona Havin of Portland-based The Holding Project. Though clearly focused on contemporary dance, the podcast is careful to represent a range of identities and geographical locations.

Each episode strikes a solid balance between thematic concerns and the actual practice of making dances. When Raianna Brown of Komansé Dance Theater talks about her work Skid—made with 30 dancers around the issue of homelessness and gentrification—we learn about her research methods, her desire to redress misperceptions of Blackness, and her movement influences (Horton, hip hop, and House, to name three). We also hear how she talks to her dancers: “I want to see your whole story in these movements.” Brown says at one point that it’s hard for her to explain the dancing in her work, but she does so with precision, evoking both movement qualities and choreographic structures.

The April 1 episode featuring Amy Leona Havin first bathes us in a male-voiced Jewish prayer before introducing Havin herself and the new work, mekudešet, which premiered in 2019. Again, we learn about the inspiration for the work (Havin’s evolving personal relationship to Judaism in relation to her experiences growing up between Israel and San Diego) as well as hear Havin in rehearsal, counting to her dancers. We hear stomping. We learn the piece took a year to make.

My favorite episode showcases Micaela Taylor as she sets a new work on the Denver-based Cleo Parker Robinson Dance. It was thrilling to hear from the legendary Robinson herself, who says of Taylor, “She goes beyond the entertainment. She goes into the psychic.” Taylor seems to effortlessly find the words to describe the dancing: “Physically it means to have more restraint, a little bit more thickness, more substance to movement, as if you’re moving through a thick liquid; mud, water.” Unsequenced is a highly produced endeavor, which is no surprise given that Wolf works for Louisville Public Media, an NPR member station (the podcast is an independent project of {DIYdancer}). The hosts interject just enough narrative context, biographical content, and description to highlight the practice and words of the choreographers. But what I like most about UnSequenced is that each episode runs around 15 minutes. There are too many long-winded podcasts out there and—just like a live dance performance that runs longer than an hour without intermission—they can be hard to get through. As we suffer the hibernation of live performance, I’m grateful to have the sounds of choreographic thinking pass through my earphones, to remember what it means to make a dance.

Listen at {DIYdancer} or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Physical Outcomes: True/False 2020

BY GINA TELAROLI

In the early 19th century, in western Ohio, the younger brother of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh changed his name from Lalawethika to Tenskwatawa and began having visions. He started talking about them and gained a following, eventually forming a settlement called Prophetstown near present-day Lafayette, Indiana. Tecumseh joined him there and started working on building a pan-Native American alliance with the goal of defeating the ever-growing and encroaching white settlers and armies. At a critical juncture, with William Henry Harrison's army threatening attack, Tecumseh had to leave in order to recruit more tribes to the alliance. He told Tenskwatawa that should Harrison attack, they must abandon the settlement. A major loss would dismantle his diplomatic work and the alliance would fail. Tecumseh left but Tenskwatawa did not heed his brother's commands, instead dramatically telling of a dream he had wherein no Native Americans died in battle. This led to Tenskwatawa not only defying his brother's orders but to actually attacking Harrison first. The great and violent loss that resulted caused many Native American tribes to lose faith in the alliance that Tecumseh had desperately been trying to build, an alliance that could have changed the course of history.

On the second day of the 2020 edition of the True/False Film Festival, the festival trailer (there was a new one presented each day) that played before the films opened with a quote from William Henry Harrison questioning Tenskwatawa's validity as a prophet. It went on to show animated sug-
IN CONVERSATION

KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO AND JULIANO DORNELLES with Anthony Hawley

Just before worldwide shutdowns and travel bans went into place with COVID-19 spreading across the globe, I sat down with Brazilian directors Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles on an unseasonably warm afternoon in New York City to talk about their 2019 Cannes Jury Prize-winning film Bacurau. It was about to be released in select US theaters along with a Film at Lincoln Center series curated by the film’s directors, “Mapping Bacurau”—a robust constellation of American, Brazilian, Italian, and Australian genre films mixed with political cinema that informed this unpredictable, wounding work.

It’s hard to say exactly what Bacurau is—an anti-imperialist sci-fi western? An adrenaline-fueled portrait of resistance? An entertaining critique of power, money, and the rise of right-wing populism, blending social realism with the unapologetic camp of early John Carpenter (think Dark Star) social realism with the unapologetic camp of early John Carpenter (think Dark Star) political cinema that informed this completely realistic—it's almost like a social realist horror—this was all gringo vanishing the public.

So when I started to have the means to watch those films, when I could go to a video shop, I started to feed on all the memories from when I was a kid.

FILHO: But why do we always get this interpretation that genre is immediately political?

RAIL: I don't think it is at all; not by necessity.

DORNELLES: It isn’t at all, but when it involves something that is actually happening in the world, the film becomes powerful and sometimes goes outside of our own genre borders and reaches different people.

FILHO: This whole series of short films culminated with a 2009 film we worked on together called Cold Tropics, which is a kind of fake sci-fi documentary. A genre film that became a political film. In the film a bizarre climate change occurs in a tropical city. The population does not know the concept of cold. It only goes as low as 27 Celsius in winter and 30 Celsius in the summer, not higher, never lower. In the film everything becomes cold forever, in the summer, not higher, never lower. In the film everything becomes cold forever, about 5 Celsius without explanation. The film doesn’t have a technical or scientific explanation for that, but there is a whole social, political, and cultural change in behavior among these tropical people whom we now have to deal with the cold. There’s a scene with a bourgeois family living in a bourgeoisie house, and they have a housemaid. The housemaid lives in her bedroom, which is, as we all know in Brazil, the worst bedroom in the house. It’s hot, with no window. What happens in the film is the boy from the family, he takes over the housemaid’s bedroom, which is basically a slave’s quarters, and sends her to his suite.

FILHO: We never thought about zombies when writing, but that’s interesting.

DORNELLES: Actually we always tried to avoid the zombie film conventions that we could sometimes slide into, but only in the forms.

RAIL: And Bacurau is in no way like that, but in terms of populist politics, and galvanizing the public.

FILHO: Yes. When we developed the characters of the outsiders—the attackers, the foreigners, the Americans—did we do so on two levels. Firstly, in terms of the psychology of war atrocities, which comes from all wars. Levels of racism apply to this. When somebody takes part in an atrocity, he will say, well, I did, but there were no women. Well, I did, but they were all prostitutes. There is always a “but” to try to explain to oneself why it was okay.

DORNELLES: I did but they were communists.

FILHO: It’s also about power relations in terms of the “but,” and that’s exactly the point with the community in Bacurau. They do not see or respect those power relations. And that is what resonates with many audiences. The townspeople do not just lower their heads and die.

Bárbara Colen in a scene from Bacurau; photo by Víctor Jucá. Courtesy of Kino Lorber.

RAIL: Years ago, would something like Night of the Living Dead (1968) have been read by those older Brazilian critics as political or as a mere entertainment?

FILHO: That’s a very political film.

DORNELLES: The whole genre of zombie films was born as a political one.

FILHO: One of the best ideas in the history of cinema—not knowing whether he died because he was Black or because he was a zombie. This is very disturbing.

RAIL: And the fear of the outside, the fear of contagion, the fear of something inside that could eat you.

FILHO: And there’s a couple images at the end of that film that would reverberate with Bacurau—a group of big, white, very American men in the countryside who can finally use their guns.

RAIL: I thought about zombie films so much when watching Bacurau because of that idea that everybody wants to be a part of something, or can finally be a part of something.

FILHO: Actually we always tried to avoid the zombie film conventions that we could sometimes slide into, but only in the forms.

DORNELLES: We thought about zombie films in a way that wasn’t the conventional zombie film, but the traditional zombie film conventions that we could sometimes slide into, but only in the forms.

RAIL: And Bacurau is in no way like that, but in terms of populist politics, and galvanizing the public.

FILHO: Yes. When we developed the characters of the outsiders—the attackers, the foreigners, the Americans—we did so on two levels. Firstly, in terms of the psychology of war atrocities, which comes from all wars. Levels of racism apply to this. When somebody takes part in an atrocity, he will say, well, I did, but there were no kids. There were no children. Well, I did, but there were no women. Well, I did, but they were all prostitutes. There is always a “but” to try to explain to oneself why it was okay.

DORNELLES: I did but they were communists.

FILHO: It’s also about power relations in terms of the “but,” and that’s exactly the point with the community in Bacurau. They do not see or respect those power relations. And that is what resonates with many audiences. The townspeople do not just lower their heads and die.

IN CONVERSATION
DORNELLES: And it’s also interesting because so many of us have our own stories. Stories about the same things between women, between the government and the poor people. We have Canudos, a very violent moment in our history. The government just sent the military to obliterate a community, which was a big city, about 30,000 people, and they went there and just killed everybody.

RAIL: The American characters are so perfect because, to me, they felt like people who are on a reality TV show.

DORNELLES: That’s the atrocity guy.

RAIL: It’s so terrifying, but they’re pitch perfect.

RAIL: I find it interesting when American citizens react negatively to the American characters. I have had the opportunity to discuss this with some of them in the Q&As and I’m always respectful and interested in listening to them, but I really believe that there’s something frightening about the 24 years of film history where the US has been incredibly forceful, competent, and proficient in presenting its points of view on the world because it’s the American film industry in Hollywood. And then suddenly this little film turns the tables on the Indians. Defining now are the Americans and the Americans are the Indians. Pacote (Thomas Aquino) is not shot like a cowboy, but he is one. And Lunga (Silvério Pereira) is out of some Walter Hill film, but at the same time, he’s very much Brazilian and querer. I love when people ask, but why was Michael (Udo Kier) shooting his own men? And I say, why is it so tough to accept that he will shoot his own men when you have a guy spending two weeks coming in and out of a hotel in Las Vegas and then he goes and shoots 180 people? You still want an explanation? Is it the film industry that made you like this? Why can’t you accept it?

RAIL: It’s like fighting against 124 years of representation, of American cultural mythology.

DORNELLES: But you can talk to any Brazilian in a multiplex and he or she will react the same way because we all feed on American iconography. For good and for bad. For instance, we love Die Hard (1988). It’s a wonderful commercial film, right? [Leagues]

RAIL: There’s a lot of information transmission in Bacurau, for example in that little screen in the truck that shows Lunga being hunted.

DORNELLES: The classic “WANTED” poster.

RAIL: Yes. And you see Tony Junior’s (Thardelly Lima) truck, the town’s media truck, and of course, the UFO drone. But on the other hand you have the guitarist, and the mirrors to signal each other.

DORNELLES: There’s also the hole in the ground and probably a lot more information there, but we never go in. We love the idea that it opens up a completely new level. It’s almost like a new level in a video game or an unread chapter in a book, but for whatever reason, the book that you’re reading has the pages missing.

DORNELLES: Let’s not forget the technology of the earbuds, the phone transmissions in the Americans’ ears. You never hear what’s being said. You don’t need to.

RAIL: The information comes naturally with the requirements of the story. But there are many bits of information, and many of them pointed to different layers of information in the film.

RAIL: Then there’s the psychotropic drug. Teresa (Bárbara Colen) takes it when she comes back to the town at the beginning.

DORNELLES: And Kate (Alli Willow) when she is dying.

RAIL: And the townspeople keep taking it to face the enemy; the Americans.

DORNELLES: I have to say, I just love the fact that the old man gives Kate, a woman he has never seen before and who was trying to kill him, a little bit of their peace of mind. Because some directors would have had him with an axe finishing her off. We just had a shocking enough moment one moment before. And then, not thinking to include the drug was that he could ask, why are you doing this? You know that fucking television series Lost—why does no one ever ask in the fifth episode, why are we doing this? Because they meet people from the other side of the island and it’s just business as usual; they just shoot at them.

RAIL: That’s why I brought up reality TV earlier, there’s never a “why.”

DORNELLES: Never!

RAIL: It’s about participation, about the attraction of being seen, belonging to something, mindlessly.

DORNELLES: About mindless action and never questioning anything. So that’s the first question they ask in the film: why are you doing this?

RAIL: And this comes back.

DORNELLES: Three times. That’s the thing about violence. Violence is the very last resort. We didn’t want to fall into the trap of all the violent films. Violence is ugly; it’s a big deal to have violence. You have to accept the consequences of violence. The townspeople use violence to defend.

RAIL: And there are different levels of violence. The dumping of the books. For the first time this afternoon I’ve been thinking about how much impact Cronenberg’s A History of Violence (2005) had on the film—but not the whole film, just a 15-minute segment at the beginning, and probably later. The situation gets nastier and nastier and [Viggo] Mortensen has to do something and he does, dramatically. The pressure kept building and then it’s very cathartic.

RAIL: When the old man shoots Kate, it’s cathartic, but then he gives her the drug, which is a twist.

DORNELLES: What’s important in that scene is the aftermath, the care, the encounter. A journalist in Brazil in a press conference talked about it as a revenge film, but I corrected him immediately: it’s not a revenge film, it’s a reaction film. The audience might feel the revenge, but ultimately it’s about a town reacting.

ANTHONY HAWLEY is a multidisciplinary artist and writer. Recent solo projects were presented by the Ballina Art Center; County Current in partnership with the Meril Collection & Aurora Art Space; and 2018’s Spaju Kunstler in Brazil. He is the author of two full-length collections of poetry, and a forthcoming artist book A Book of Spulls. Along with visual artist Rebecca Fischer, he formed one half of The Aford, a performance collaboration with video, electronics, and music. He teaches in the Hunter College MFA Studio Art Program.

Imprisonment of the Pregnant Body: Jo Arding’s Personhood

BY ILANA SIMONE HERZIG

There are more and more laws on the books in states and at the federal level, in which the fact that a woman is pregnant provides the basis for prosecution, an arrest, a detention, or a forced and medically dangerous abortion. “And that effort has gone under the radar.” — Lynn Paltrow, founder of National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW)

The strobe of a police flashlight illuminates grainy footage of a woman, gasping for air, held in a rough chokehold by a male officer. Another officer slams her into the side of a cop car, brutally securing handcuffs. Such archival material pervades Jo Arding’s 2019 documentary, Personhood.1 Arding and Miller’s film embodies a perennial battle with ever-changing furnishings. The Personhood Movement aims to police and criminalize pregnant people across the United States. So-called Personhood Laws² endeavor to extend the 14th Amendment’s “personhood” standing to embryos, fetuses, or fertilized eggs; by equating a pregnant person’s use of controlled substances with child abuse, they enable prosecution for miscarriages, stillbirths, drug or alcohol use (even prior to knowledge of pregnancy). The film documents the consequence: a state of women deemed “host” prosecuted, often without due process, and jailed, often with prenatal care, to “protect the unborn child.” Arding formulated her feature directorial debut in 2014 in response to a failed ballot initiative in Mississippi, intended to dismantle the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision. The documentary serves as a stark reminder that after almost 50 years, the war on people’s bodies and reproductive community endures, embroiled and pressing as ever.

The film chronicles the progress of the Personhood Movement from Minnesota, the first state to pass a “fetal homicide law” in 1986, to Alabama’s 2016 chemical endangerment law. Beginning with Maryland congressman Lawrence J. Hogan’s Human Life Amendment, introduced one week after Justice Blackmun’s 1973 majority opinion, stipulating that establishing “fetal personhood” would nullify Roe’s case, over 330 iterations have been put forward.³ More specifically, Personhood winds through subject Tammy Loertcher’s experience in 2014 with Wisconsin’s 1997 Unborn Child Protection Act, the “Cocaine Mom” law.⁴ The filmmakers masterfully intersperse her story with a concurrent 2014 attempt to implement a personhood amendment in Utah, and organizations that struck down Tennessee’s novel 2014 Fetal Assault Law. Personhood scrutinizes the disproportionate impact on lower-income women and people of color through a historical lens and as an extension of mass incarceration and mass forced complex,⁵ and the war on drugs.⁶ Arding’s storytelling splices these intertwaving narratives with a cascade of news clippings, legal documentation, footage of politicians, and interviews with advocates, lawyers, professors, experts, and organizers.

Throughout the film, Arding highlights some of the more poignant statistics on-screen to drive home just what is at stake: 38 states treat fertilized eggs, embryos, and fetuses as the victims of a crime.⁷ The text boxes over a map of the US, red increasingly imbuing states to indicate where such measures have been put into place until 2019. “It isn’t just about abortion, it is also about equal rights,” contends Lynn Paltrow, a frequent interviewee, and Personhood’s founding figure.⁸

Personhood bills, the film underscores, is not without consequence. “We spend a ridiculous amount of money fighting these measures,” says President & CEO of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains (PPRM), Vicki Cowart to the camera. “Imagine if we were spending $3.5 million on birth control for everybody, that would be a really different scenario for this state.” Their very proposal belies underlying problems. Miller, “it’s also about restructuring a system that is not working for us,” changing the cultural path of how we view and devalue women.

One need not look further than the US’s maternal mortality rate—the highest among similarly wealthy countries (2.5 times higher than the lowest),⁹ and the only “developed” country to steadily rise over the last 30 years—⁰ and female incarceration rates, to substantiate her point. The US has the highest rate of female incarceration in the world.¹¹ A montage of a succession of men in power throughout American history seek to strip women’s reproductive rights bleak one into the next: Ronald Reagan in 1981 promising a “human life” amendment, George W. Bush in 2001 extending the protection of federal law to “unborn children,” then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016 affirming disciplinary action for abortion: “There has to be some sort of punishment.” (“For the woman.”) Yeah, there has to be.

The documentary endeavors to broaden the conversation beyond abortion and represent the breadth of people affected by these measures. The ramifications of which compound multifold for women of color. Female incarceration increased more than 500% (between 1980 and 2012), disproportionately targeting women of color.¹²
Enforcement of Personhood laws mirrors this trend. 72% of targets for arrest, detention and forced intervention are low income women. 59% are women of color.4

“What's particularly troubling about this is that we're talking about using a prisoner jail as a detention center to try to ensure a healthy pregnancy, not because we're trying to punish a pregnant woman for breaking a law. It's because we're believing that this will make a pregnancy go more safely, and that's what is so wrong,” says Sara Ainsworth, NAACP’s Director of Legal Advocacy, during the film.

“We really see ‘personhood’ and feticide laws as a tax on women of color,” Cristina Aguilar of Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR), explains to viewers. Together with PPRM, COLOR orchestrated voting down Personhood USA's proposed 2014 Colorado Amendment. “We already know low-income women and women of color are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system.”

Essential to Ardingher’s mission was including a multitude of diverse perspectives. “We're white filmmakers,” Ardingher says in a phone interview. “We’re making a documentary that affects low-income women for sure,” but of them, Personhood laws disproportionately impact women of color. Those voices lend firsthand experience and knowledge to “show the different ways that advocates are fighting this on the ground,” Ardingher points. “We need to move towards that reproductive justice model and look to the advocates like Cherise and groups like COLOR who have already been doing this for decades. We have to look to them, and learn.”

The feature’s archival imagery—like the debunked “crack baby” tropes of the War on Drugs—demonstrate how dangerous media narratives fuel these laws and obfuscate systemic issues. “Folks are mediating poverty, folks are medicating not having a job, folks are medicating domestic violence,” says Cherise Scott, founder of SisterReach, a reproductive justice4 non-profit centering people of color, on-screen. “And if we’re not connecting these things, then all we’re going to see is a woman who’s using drugs and doing it on purpose to harm herself and her child.” Only 19 of Tennessee’s 177 drug treatment facilities provide care to pregnant patients. Two provide prenatal care.4 Thus, Tennessee’s 2014 Fetal Assault Law, Scott explains, “puts this kind of wedge between doctors and mothers that turns their doctor into their warden, into their probation officer, into the police, so they didn't want to go to the doctor anymore.”

A reproductive rights coalition including SisterReach overturned Tennessee’s punitive law in 2016. Through many viewpoints, Personhood warns of the peril of a federal Personhood amendment. Towards the documentary’s end, bioethicist Arthur Caplan cautions of a slippery slope to eugenics (which, Scott elucidates, already occurs4). Paltrow asserts, “There is no way to add fertilized eggs, embryos and fetuses to constitution without subtracting pregnant women. And never before in the history of the United States has there been a movement to remove a group of people from the community of constitutional persons. And that's what we're talking about.”

The film closes with Ardingher off-camera asking Tammy a final question: “Do you feel like you were treated like a person?”

Her reply: “I wasn’t treated like a person at all.”

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Coronavirus

In the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic, anti-choice lawmakers attempted, succeeded, to prevent clinics that provide abortion services from funding to combat the virus by including language of the Hyde Amendment in relief packages. The filmmakers point out that conservative lawmakers also tried to approve dehumanizations in Oklahoma, Iowa, Texas, Ohio, Alabama,44 and Mississippi49 “non-essential surgeries” with punishments from fines to imprisonment, amidst people being ordered not to leave their homes, let alone their states. “The number one driving factor for abortion is economic,” Ardingher says of states seeking to employ such emergency decrees at a time “when families are already financially strained,” potentially facing loss of healthcare, unemployment, and a recession. On top of “all the things that could go wrong during childbirth,” Miller adds, being pregnant when hospitals are ground zero—with some New York hospitals refusing to permit patients (although the state has since ordered hospitals to allow one support person)—adds another complication for pregnant people in 2020. While the filmmakers work towards distribution during the pandemic, Personhood will screen at Cleveland International Film Festival (geo-located in Ohio) and Mountainfilm in Telluride (geo-located in Colorado).

Further Reading


ILANA HERZIG is an arts & culture writer based in Brooklyn. Her work has appeared in The Los Angeles Times, Hyperallergic, and Artsy, among other publications. Iena is the Editorial Director of Body Politic’s Body Type.
In this recurring series, I interview performers, writers, directors, designers, and composers who have dedicated their lives to forging New York's contemporary theater. These artists knew the rules and rejected them, gambling on new modes of expression, trusting impulses true to their experience. Each interview explores how they started, what keeps them going, the evolutions they've seen, what it takes and what it took to make a life as an artist in New York City.

My interview for this issue is with director/playwright Richard Foreman. Over the course of his extraordinary six-decade career, Foreman expls the rules. A Foreman piece is not an evening of the theater, it is, as he's said, an ordeal. You might love him or hate him, hate him then love him, hate him then realize he's a genius. (The latter was me.) There is a line from his 2009 piece Idle Savant that helped me understand Foreman: “Message to the performers: Do not try to carry this play forward. Let it creep slowly over the stage with no help, with no end in view.” We had planned this interview in person, but when New York locked down due to COVID-19, we connected over the phone.

SARA FARRINGTON (RAIL): I conceived this interview series after a particularly challenging rehearsal period. It got me hungry to understand how the New York originals dealt with things like actors saying no, lack of space, day jobs, keeping sane, and especially how you did it.

RICHARD FOREMAN: Well, I avoided the actor problem in the beginning because I didn't use actors. I used my friends who were filmmakers, people who didn't have their ego invested in being an actor. The only time I had that problem was the first show I did in Paris. I was looking for non-actors, but a friend said, “Oh, I have this girl who wants to be an actress, but she can do anything.” I interviewed her, and she said, “Whatever you say!” Well, it was a disaster. She was standing there on stage, and you could just tell how much she hated doing it. She didn't want people in the audience to think that she identified with the show. She just had this bored look on her face. But I didn't mind.

RAIL: When did you move away from working with non-actors?

FOREMAN: The non-actors included my wife, Kate Manheim, who then developed a technique of her own that became so strong I felt it didn't make sense not to have equally strong performers working against her. So that's when I switched.

RAIL: And Kate and I met in the '60s, when a friend suggested you meet her?

FOREMAN: Yeah, I said, “I'm missing an actress, and I need somebody.” And he simply said, “Well, there's a girl upstairs who might be interested.” There's a famous story about that where I asked her, “Are you related to Ralph Manheim?” She said, “Oh yeah, he's my father!” Well, I meant to say Karl Manheim, the sociologist, but Ralph slipped out. But because of that when I asked her to perform, she said, “Yes! I'll do it, yes, yes!”

RAIL: You had a similar chance meeting with [composer] Stanley Silverman.

FOREMAN: Well, my ex-wife, Amy Taubin, and Stanley's ex-wife, Mary, had gone to Sarah Lawrence together. I was walking down the street with Amy, and there's Mary: “Hi! This is my husband, Stanley, Stanley's a composer!” And Amy said, “Oh, wow, Richard's a playwright!” And I just said, “Let's do something together.” I said I'd do a libretto. And he said, fine, I'll do the music. And then we were trying to find a director. I had never directed much of anything, but I said, “I think I could direct it.” So that was my first big directing job, really. I was writing plays already. Early on, I had written a more commercial play that was actually optioned for Broadway, but it never happened. So, I felt I needed the theater to do anything, it was no problem.

RAIL: When you were a kid, your one line in the elementary school play was taken away from you. This made you determined to prove to them, I can do this. Do you think that was the beginning of your rebelliousness, turning “no” into “yes”?

FOREMAN: I'm not sure, it was so long ago. The thing that really did it: I was an actor in a high school and college, and friends of mine were writing plays, and I thought, “I can do as good as that.” So, I started writing plays. Then I went to the Yale School of Drama. John Gassner, who had been the literary manager for the Theatre Guild, taught at Yale. He was a great teacher. He said, “Richard, you know, you have talent, and I don't say that to everybody. But you make one big mistake. You find an effect that you like, and you repeat it and repeat it and repeat it.” So, I went home and thought, “Oh boy, I better do something about that!” But then I thought, well, wait a minute. If that's what I like to do, couldn't I radicalize that? Make it my style? Which is what I did. And that was more important than being told as a child that I wasn't speaking loudly enough and having my line taken away.

RAIL: I'm curious about your courage to hang instincts in the face of being told not to do something. Did this courage follow you to New York? Did it ever get shaken?

FOREMAN: Oh, no, because that's what I wanted to do. When I came to New York I got courage because I hated everything I saw in the theater including the experimental theater of those days, which was La MaMa. But I fell in with the underground filmmakers, under Jonas Mekas. They were my friends and my inspiration and gave me the courage to do what I wanted to do. I saw that they did what they wanted to do.

RAIL: When did you officially settle in New York?

FOREMAN: My first year at Yale School of Drama I moved to New York. So, I graduated from Yale, let's see... I graduated from Brown in 1959, then it was 1962.

RAIL: Did you have a day job?

FOREMAN: My father was a lawyer who dealt with builders, and he got me part-time work with one of his building clients, managing apartments. Instead of a salary I got an apartment on Riverside Drive and 79th.

RAIL: You've said that the secret history of New York art-making is rich kids.

FOREMAN: Oh, yes. Most of the people that I knew who were making experimental art in those days came from families who had money.

RAIL: Do you think there's a reluctance to talk about this now?

FOREMAN: There was a reluctance to talk about this then. I always thought someone should write that secret history of family money in the experimental arts in New York City. The only person that I knew who was making experimental art without money was Lee Ierurer of Maho Mines, who Kate [Manheim] actually studied with when they were in Paris. But everyone else I can think of in one way or another had financial support.

RAIL: You know, I see great efforts made in gender and racial diversity in the arts, but not so much class diversity. There is a great privilege in art making.

FOREMAN: It is a class thing, there's no question about that. I had enough financial backing that I knew I wasn't going to starve. But somebody like Jonas Mekas didn't really have that. He just managed.

RAIL: New York wasn't as expensive then, so was it easier to manage?

FOREMAN: I can't say. Expenses are relative because yeah it wasn't as expensive, but people didn't have as much money. It didn't take as much money to be comfortable.

RAIL: Did artists in the '60s, '70s, and '80s just want to be in the room making something, or was there a question of pay?

FOREMAN: Because I didn't use people who thought of themselves as actors, it was something we did at night. For them it was sort of a hobby, and they were excited to do it. When I started using people who thought of themselves as actors, still, it would start out being at night. Then at a certain point, one or two of them said, “You know Richard, I don't know if I can do this anymore without any money.” Well, I didn't have any money. Except, very early on, these two people, Mimi Johnson and Jane Yockel, approached me after a show. They said, “Do you have anybody trying to raise money for you?” I said, “Me? Forget it!” And they said, “Well, we would like to do that.” I said, “Sure!” So, they went out and got money from the NEA for me. Jane has died, but Mimi is still my manager.

RAIL: Do you remember what show it was that inspired them to come up to you?

FOREMAN: It might have been Hotel China (1971). And then Mimi, of course, married [composer] Bob Ashley, and they started Artservices [Performing Artservices, Inc.]. In those days, Artservices managed sort of everybody, from Phil Glass to you name it. But managing an artist didn't mean very much. They just did tasks for you occasionally.

RAIL: Many avant-garde artists who emerged then could do everything. Like you, they were actors, designers, writers, and composers. They didn't always align themselves with one thing. Now there's this careerist mindset.

FOREMAN: Yeah, in those days we were making art. The theater is a profession...
now. People want to think of themselves as professional, and they have to worry about making a living, yes. We shouldn't view art as a career, it should be a side thing. But in those days, everybody was making art, and to make art you could do anything.

RAIL: And I love that you’re in most of your work.

FOREMAN: Well, I don’t make theater anymore, but I operated the sound.

RAIL: I mean your voice.

FOREMAN: Oh, yes, yes.

RAIL: I think the imagination of New York would benefit from people being more like that rather than saying, “I’m just a playwright, I can just deliver this.”

FOREMAN: Well, of course it would, of course it would. But we live in decadent times.

RAIL: You’re said you felt a success, early on, if anyone was still in the audience by the end of the show.

FOREMAN: Oh, we expected people to walk out. I wasn’t particularly happy about it. But I was proud about it in a way because in those days, a lot of the art that I liked, people were walking out of.

RAIL: And I still remember that when I did plays at the Public Theater. A lot of the audience at the Public Theater couldn’t stand what I was doing. They expected to see the shows that [Artistic Director/Founder] Joe [Papp] usually gave them. And I must give him credit. He was very supportive of what I was doing. The theater has always been the most backward of all the arts. Because on the surface the theater seems most life-like, I suppose. So then people expect…

RAIL: Which is weird because you can describe a dream to someone, and they can accept it. Or the Bible, people can accept that.

FOREMAN: The Bible is a special case. Do you mean people who literally believe it? Because not many people who literally believe it probably come to your shows. Or my shows. People used to say about my work, “Oh, it’s a dream.” But I never really thought that. And I didn’t want people to think about it like that.

RAIL: It’s a recalibration of time for me, watching your work.

FOREMAN: I wanted to change the mental rhythm.

RAIL: There was a first great review you got after Total Recall, around 1970.

FOREMAN: Oh, yes. It was in The Voice.

RAIL: Did you need that validation?

FOREMAN: Yes, yes, I did. It was extremely good for my spirit because the reviewer said, “I don’t usually give recommendations to go see shows, but I just saw something that you should all go and see.” Especially at that point, because people were walking out of my shows after 20 minutes. So, it was a big thing for me. That was in Jonas Mekas’s old theater, the [Filmmakers’] Cinémathèque set up by Jonas Mekas. He was the head of Fluxus in New York and did all kinds of incredible things to make it all possible. He was another Lithuanian, like Jonas. He started SoHo, set up the first 15 artists’ co-ops in SoHo. He would get artists together, they would pool their money and then book the theater in SoHo, which was really little and little in those days. He would always take the ground floor space. That was 491 Broadway, I think it was. I used that as my theater. All as a friend of George’s and Jonas’s.

RAIL: What kind of shows did you do at 491 Broadway?

FOREMAN: I did shows where I could use that deep space to dramatic advantage. There was a little alcove to a façade where for about 20 feet I could slide in walls from the side on tracks. So, you would be sitting there watching a shallow space, and then all of a sudden, the wall would slide out and you’d be looking into a deep space.

RAIL: Oh, wow, that sounds incredible. What prompted you to leave that space?

FOREMAN: I thought it was getting too safe. I thought, “Oh Richard, this is getting too safe. I should get rid of that space and force myself to move on to other things.” It was just too safe to go back to space every year. I felt one had to be challenged in other ways. Also, Papp had invited me to do a show at the Public, and I had done a show in Paris.

RAIL: You spent much of your artistic life in Paris. Do you think if you’d stayed in New York you would have evolved the same way?

FOREMAN: I think the same. I did a number of shows in Paris. I would be there for six or seven months a year, and I loved it. But I couldn’t stay, in the final analysis. I had to come back to New York, which I think was healthy and good for me because I never would have really been a Frenchman. But I loved Paris. It was the place I wanted to be. I loved the feeling of the intellectual atmosphere. I didn’t speak French very well, but still there was that vibration which Paris was full of artists and intellectuals. It was a total revelation to me when I first went there.

RAIL: How did you finally get the space at St. Mark’s Church in 1992?

FOREMAN: That happened because I got a call one day from a guy who was the head of The Poetry Project at St. Mark’s. And he said, “Richard, you know, we have this theater space, and we’re looking for someone to take it over because the person who was there left, would you be interested?” I said, “Sure.” His name was Ed Friedman. Now, I’ve adopted. And in later years, I was friendly with a woman who helped me find out who my parents were. She said, “You are registered on Staten Island.” We went to a library there, and she took the book out for my year, with the adoption agency listed and the number, you’d have a number. I looked down the list, found my number, looked over and saw that when I was adopted my real mother had given me the name Ed Friedman. And that was the name of the guy from The Poetry Project.

RAIL: That’s crazy. That’s a sign.

FOREMAN: [laughs] Well, I didn’t know it at the time.

RAIL: Did being adopted affect you as an artist in any way?

FOREMAN: Not very much. I forgot all about it when I was starting out. Forgot all about it. Or maybe suppressed it, is a better word.

RAIL: It does seem to me like you had amazing adoptive parents.

FOREMAN: Oh, yes. My parents claimed they didn’t understand my work, but they always went. When I did shows in Paris, they flew to Paris. And when I did an opera at the Paris Opera, they brought two other couples with them. At first my father was angry that I was doing such experimental work. But fairly early on I got my picture in The New York Times. And that changed everything.

RAIL: You once got an offer to direct Lily Tomlin’s first solo show for TV, which you turned down. I know it would be hard for an artist now to turn down something like that. Was there ever an urge to go in that direction, be that mainstream guy?

FOREMAN: Not really, no. I was working on another thing. I was ready to go to Paris when they called. I mean, if that hadn’t been the case, I probably would have done it. But I don’t know. I probably would have been fired after two weeks. Actually, no, I probably wouldn’t have been fired, because I had the ability to do it. I did this thing called Doctor Sedary’s Magic Theater, which I staged, and it was a big, successful Off-Broadway musical. Because I always had the feeling that I could direct anything. In the early days I was very proud of the fact I would look in my notebooks and say, “Well, here: Page 35–35. I’ll stage that. Nobody could stage that. So, if I can do it, it proves I’m a good director.” I really thought that. I would take all these things that didn’t make any sense, and I would stage them.

RAIL: You challenged yourself with impossible tasks.

FOREMAN: Oh, absolutely.

RAIL: I wanted to ask about your piece Doctor Sedary’s Magic Theater, and you challenge yourself in so many different ways these days? It’s a big task. It’s not scarier than before, it’s just harder. To be able to get funding, what little funding you need, to do it? No. I think there are a few places left where you can do whatever you want, but unfortunately most people don’t have the background to do anything very adventurous. They come from the theater, they think about the theater and only the theater. And that is not a good place to start making interesting work.

RAIL: And some view theater now as training wheels for something else—TV, whatever—which takes away from any ability for New York to ever again have a counterculture.

FOREMAN: But that’s because of the particular situation we are living in. It’s much harder to imagine doing that in this world, in this economy, in this political situation, aside from what New York is going through now. I’m reminded of Wallace Shawn, who in the early days used to do plays in people’s apartments. You would invite him and 20 other people over. You’d make a semi-circle, and he would do his monologues to the 20 people sitting around him.

RAIL: I think we may have to start doing that again. Why do you think Americans are still fiercely clinging to realistic plays, especially when the world is so crazy?

FOREMAN: Because people can’t stand it. They wish the world were realistic. But it’s hard to be as crazy as the world.
Theater: The Theater Community Uplifts Its Own

BY BILLY MCENTEE

Theaters have been shuttered for a record number of days: with Broadway venues currently closed through at least June 7—and many Off-Broadway theaters following suit—we are quickly approaching our 100th day without communicating together. It has had a devastating effect on the industry, and none have felt this seismic shift more acutely than its artists. Some Off-Broadway theaters have come forward and generously announced they will pay their artists through the end of their seasons. This is a vital effort, but what about the theater-makers who are not affiliated with a sturdy institution—the fledgling ones or those on the rise who are not only unemployed by leading theaters but have also lost their gigs as teaching artists, bartenders, or waiters?

“We were really alarmed when we started hearing from many of our friends that all their work for months had been canceled,” said Kristin Marting, theatur-maker and founding artistic director of HERE, the downtown performing arts stronghold. “We felt like we needed to do something immediately to address this need.”

Thus was born The Trickle Up (A NYC Artists Network), a program that “helps freelance artists without resources or a safety net,” said Marting, who is a co-founder along with theater-maker Taylor Mac, Playwrights Horizons Dramaturg Morgan Jeness, New Dramatists Artistic Director Emily Morse, and The Flea Theater Artistic Director Nigel Smith.

Over 50 theater artists have joined them to collaborate on this “new grass-roots subscription video platform” that enlists “artists who are suffering from lost income [to share] work on the platform,” per Trickle Up’s website. The illustrious roster of Tony, MacArthur, Pulitzer, and Obie award-winning playwrights, actors, directors, and comedians who have signed on to donate their time and creativity to the effort includes Annie Baker, Andre De Shields, Diana Oh, Clint Ramos, and Paula Vogel, among others. The artists will contribute three videos to the subscription series and also select the recipients of the content it serves, preference is given to previews that don’t run dry.”

The initiative’s subversive name, which seems to play on the toxicity of trickle-down economics, came from Mac—a playwright, performer, and Pulitzer Prize finalist who is well-acquainted with the downtown-theater scene and COVID-9’s effect on that community.

“It’s something I’ve been saying in my shows for years as I’ve noticed the culture up from the peer basement or the activist meeting house or the tiny Off-Broadway theater into the larger culture over and over and over again,” Mac said. “It really trickles down (economically but also creatively). So, I think, if we really want to sustain strong culture, we have to support the people who are at the ground level, or below. Or as my drag mother would say, ‘Ya gotta get in the soil to grow the flower, darling.’”

On Trickle Up’s video subscription series, a commissioned, unknown artist has the opportunity to share a platform with a world-renowned one. The egalitarian endeavor has quickly bubbled, in many ways thanks to the immense outreach its creators have spearheaded. “I have sent out probably a thousand emails,” Mac said. “So many emails. I’ve really discovered a great love and appreciation for arts administrators. I’ve always seen arts administration as a big hurdle, but this is a whole ‘mother level of understanding.”

Information is its own form of currency during these confusing times. Over at Playwrights Horizons, Literary Manager Lizzie Stern curated an artist resource page on her account’s bio that features a robust list of remote work opportunities, emergency grants, and—for those who can—organizations to donate to that will fund artists.

“I want to equip our community with necessary information in an accessible and digestible way,” Stern said. “During this crisis, there is a clear need to support artists whose productions and workshops were postponed or canceled, but many people don’t have a tether to an institution committed to protecting them. I hope to reach as many people as possible.”

Stern’s efforts are indeed reaching a vast number of creatives. The artist resources webpage quickly caught fire and was passed around social media. Theater-maker Young Jean Lee commended the endeavor on Twitter, and hundreds of users went on to share her and others’ posts about the available resources.

The page continues to be an ever-evolving list of economic opportunities for artists, but Stern’s work stretches beyond just the website. “Shortly after the government announced the stimulus, we hosted a live Q&A webinar with financial planner Ari M. Teplitz (CFA®, CPA, Partner at The Teplitz Financial Group) who generously offered his time and expertise,” she said. “We recorded the session and compiled Ari’s answers to everyone’s questions about qualifying for unemployment, collecting unemployment, managing debt, and more, and made all the information available on the Playwrights Horizons website. Over the past two years, Ari and I have been building a cost-free financial literacy program for theater artists at Playwrights Horizons. These resources are vital, but normally prohibitively expensive for most artists.”

Summing up her efforts’ motives, Stern said, “Information and compassion are two wells that don’t run dry.”

K indred to Trickle Up, yet also serving the spirit of Playwrights Horizons’s artists resource page, a new Instagram account, @theatrewithouttheater, tries to fill the void we’ve all been experiencing: At curtain times each night, the account shares performances from a range of theater programming, raising money for artists along the way.

“My partner Fedor Sokolov runs the online education company ELK Academy, and so we’ve constantly hanging around a lot of the tech crowd, which had prompted me to thinking about how theater can work online,” said actress Ali Stoner, a co-creator of the account. “I’d honestly been holding it in the back of my mind for a while and had subconsciously marked the question as ‘important but not urgent.’ As soon as I heard about the Broadway closures, it hit a sudden felt very urgent.”

The Instagram page has garnered an audience, gaining 7,000 followers in under a month’s time. A public account, it offers free snippets of theater to its followers, often of actors sharing monologues, scenes, and songs from shows. Featured works have included mainstream smashes like Harry Potter and the Cursed Child to previews from smaller festivals showcasing work or clips their works-in-progress. While the account casts a wide net in terms of the content it serves, preference is given to shows whose runs have been stalled or stopped altogether.

“Between Ali [Stoner], Lily [Houghton, a playwright], and I, we have a lovely and lucky, broad range of colleagues in the theater community who we knew had been directly affected by the initial wave of closures, so we reached out to them to see if our idea would be a balm for them, rather than a ‘hey do this thing for us’ situation,” said writer, actor, and director Matthew Minnicino, another of @theatrewithouttheater’s founders.

“We were wary that the moment was a tender one, but almost universally we received interest and buoyant support, which emboldened us to start reaching out to individuals and institutions we didn’t know directly. Once we expanded our team to include the wonderful Dina Vovsi [a director/theater-maker], Emily Juliette Murphy [an actor], and Shannon Buhler [general management associate at The Flea], our scope grew even wider, and by then we were cross-checking lists of closures, reaching out internationally, and dealing with submissions from total strangers to us.”

While the content is free, viewers are invited to donate to the Artist Relief Tree, the link for that organization living in the account’s bio. Houghton heard about the Artist Relief Tree from Rachel Russmann, a Tony-nominated producer who champions and mentors women entering the producing field. Houghton called the organization “a fund where artists in need can apply for $250 grants from a network of trust-based, so artists that apply are given funds not by their resume but by their need. So far, the organization has raised over $275,000 and has been giving funds straight into artists’ pockets.”

Running an Instagram account is no frivolous job, however. “It is more work than I imagined it would be,” Stoner said, but noted that “the response has been tremendous” and a source of encouragement as the team behind the account looks to keep audiences satiated and artists funded with potential Zoom readings, digital vignettes, and more.

Meagerness can elicit creativity; even while confined to their homes, theater-makers are finding innovative methods to generate new work while supporting others—and in many ways, it’s working.

“We have enough Trickle Up subscribers that, if they stay subscribed for the next year, we’ll be able to give out a $10,000 commission every month,” Mac said. “But that is not enough for us. We want to help hundreds of artists. The more subscribers we get the more people we can commission to make content. So please, sign up.”

BILLY MCENTEE is a freelance arts journalist whose articles have appeared in Vanity Fair, American Theatre, and Indiewire, among others. He is the art editor for Greenpointers and works at Playwrights Horizons.
IN DIALOGUE

MORGAN GOULD AND REN DARA SANTIAGO with Kate Cortesi

From their respective quarantines over—what else?—Zoom, three playwrights complained about streaming, expressed gratitude for streaming, and wondered why actors love playing high so much.

Kate Cortesi’s Love had six performances at Marin Theatre Company before theaters closed down; Morgan Gould’s Nicole Clark is Having a Baby had five shows at Actors Theatre of Louisville; and Ren Dara Santiago’s The Siblings Play made it through a whopping nine previews at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. Two of these were streamed for the ticket-buying public. One playwright declined to have her video broadcast.

KATE CORTESI (RAIL): Hi, friends, how are we all feeling? I know I’ve started to crack.

MORGAN GOULD: I’m not doing great. Hi Ren, I’ve never met you. I’m Morgan. I’m so sorry about your show.

REN DARA SANTIAGO: Yeah, thank you. Did you have a cancelled show as well?

GOULD: Yeah, I did. What a gift.

[Laughter]

My play being cancelled feels like two decades ago, so that’s over. I’m sure the grief will come back, but right now that feels like a distant memory.

RAIL: I just found the notes from my cast opening night. A message in a bottle from a past life that was one month ago.

GOULD: I just realized right now that my closing night is tonight.

RAIL: Mine was five days ago if we got extended. Which we definitely would have.

[Laughter]

SANTIAGO: I felt grief the week of closing. The final week of streaming.

GOULD: It sucks, it totally sucks. But also, there’s nothing like a global pandemic to give you perspective about your career.

[Laughs]

What’s gonna happen to our field?

RAIL: When I found out my show got pulled, I felt so sorry for myself. I made the global pandemic all about my play. I had worked so hard for that opportunity—

SANTIAGO: Yes.

RAIL: After so many “almosts,” someone said, “Yes, we’re doing your play,” and our show was good, the audience was in it, and then—never mind, it’s done. It was like, of course you would take this, Theater Gods. You’re testing my faith.

GOULD: I definitely felt like the global pandemic was all about my play.

RAIL: Right! But within 12 hours, I realized everyone’s show was canceled. I felt awful for everyone. And remember, Morgan? You were one of the few phone calls I took. And we were just like, “ahhhhhwtfhuh.”

But there was something about knowing you were going through it, too, your grief for your show. Your actor felt like her big break was taken, too. This snatched away a real break from so many of us. But it was a real community moment for me, which eradicated my self-pity.

GOULD: Yup.

RAIL: Not me, is there, you know? Sorry, I think that’s Bernie.

GOULD: It sure is.

SANTIAGO: I guess it’s fun to be there with them. But the buffering thing…

RAIL: It’s theater and we’re talking about buffering. Buffering, What a word.

SANTIAGO: I’m lucky that my play has some kind of function in watching it by yourself, in privacy. Because the play is about being trapped. But on the other hand, if you’re not experiencing it in the theater, you’re not learning how to be brave. You’re not learning how to reach out. You’re not learning how to take up space. Theater’s the only place that teaches you how to do those things.

RAIL: I love that.

SANTIAGO: It’s a conversation with you in the space. It’s never just the one-way dialogue. Which is different from how film is, because with film you know that, no matter what, the next thing is going to happen. It’s recorded. The next thing is inevitable.

GOULD: Yeah. They captured mine, but I saw it and said, please don’t release this. In part because the terms were not favorable to the actors. Really not fair. And in part because the capture was just not what we made. It was a comedy with no audience! And we staged it in the round. So, I mean, filming it was like… They did everything they could, but it’s like that part of Aladdin where the genie’s like, I have rules. I can’t bring anyone back from the dead. Because when they come back, they’re like the zombie corpse of the person, and you think you want that, but trust me, you don’t.

SANTIAGO: My roommates are both actors. One stopped getting paid for a show on Broadway two weeks into quarantine.

GOULD: Just do the right thing! The actors are the fucking essential workers of the American theater. So, I said no. I have to believe that the drag—the 15 years it took to get me here—I have to believe this is not the end.

RAIL: It’s not the end.

GOULD: But if it is, I don’t want that stream to be the last thing people see. Because, Kate, I watched yours, and I was like, actually this stream is really good.

RAIL: Thanks. It is, but I’m still so aware of what it didn’t capture. Mike [Donahue, director] and Stephi [Cohen, set designer] made this beautiful formal creation with the set and the staging. A stunning, deceptively simple composition. The video didn’t convey any of that. The pools of light Scott Zielinski created were sublime.

GOULD: I only saw the stream, but my first thought was, “God, Mike is so lucky,” because the single gesture of the thing actually did translate. Whereas mine—in real life, the set was gorgeous—but on screen, it looked like a school play.

RAIL: And there’s no audience! The laughs. The poignancy. The lead in Love makes some very questionable decisions, and the audience gets so stressed. And that’s really powerful. To have 250 people that stressed out together.

[Laughter] I loved hearing the audience in Ren’s capture.
GOULD: Oh, you have an audience in yours?
SANTIAGO: Yeah.
GOULD: That makes such a big difference.
SANTIAGO: Well, the thing about New York is, we don’t believe anything we hear. The day before closing, we were packed.
GOULD: I think mine would have been really different if I’d had an audience.
SANTIAGO: Yeah.
RAIL: I want to switch topics to—not COVID.
[Laughter]
I want to talk about what you come to the page to do. Craft-wise, theme-wise, what are you about?
GOULD: Nicole Clark is both different and the same as my other work. It’s formally less challenging. And that’s not bad, I just mean it’s straightforward. It takes place in a room. It has four characters. It’s naturalism.
But it’s the same in that I like to have a conversation about women. I like to have a conversation about people who are poor but not sad. They’re not like, “We’re sad and poor and it’s hard.” I grew up poor, and people don’t talk like that.
SANTIAGO: No. They don’t.
GOULD: And I’m obviously always interested in talking about being fat. Being a fat woman specifically. Because I think that that’s essential to intersectional feminism, and it’s something we never see on stage.
RAIL: For sure. How about you, Ren? There’s a lot of overlap, between what Morgan said and what I saw in Siblings Play.
SANTIAGO: I love how you speak about representation. And people having the wrong idea because no one else is showing these characters. Like what it’s actually like if you live in it. I can’t wait to read it.
GOULD: Same! I just read Siblings Play!
SANTIAGO: All the people I started doing playwriting with are my closest friends now, 10 years later. And we’re all the one who was different on our block. The misfit in some way. Even if we blended really well, we knew we were looking at things differently. And then we found each other in a youth company and were able to talk about the shit we couldn’t talk about anywhere else.
I write about people of color. I try to always have mixed race characters because I am multi-racial. And complicated families. Typically working class.
RAIL: Sure. And young. You write youth so well.
SANTIAGO: Thanks. With Siblings Play, it’s what I grew up with, where you don’t know which bill you’re going to pay this week. And that’s the conversation: are we going to pay Con Ed or Time Warner? Making sure shit doesn’t turn off.
So, my play’s about how that situation lends itself to poor boundaries and codependency. How you can also inherit the trauma of your relatives.
GOULD: Literally, our plays are about the same thing. [Laughter] I’m sure they’re really different, but I’m like, that’s exactly what my play’s about.
SANTIAGO: A lot of us write to feel like we’re not alone.
RAIL: Ren, I found your play so refreshingly unsentimental. There’s harshness, but it’s not, like, loudly proud of itself for illustrating how hard hardship is. Which we see a fair bit of, right? Theater where the audience gets to go home feeling correct and sanctimonious because—I don’t know why. Because we see that oppressed people are people, I guess? But like, what kind of theater is that? Who is it for? To me that’s liberal catnip, and I guess I find it lazy and usually boring.
SANTIAGO: It is. It’s really boring.
GOULD: It’s what happens when you erase class.
SANTIAGO: Yeah.
GOULD: I can always tell. As a poor person, I can tell when someone is being fake. I just know. You didn’t grow up poor if that’s how you’re writing that scene. Like, you’re kinda full of shit. You know what I’m talking about, Ren? Like when people have a really sad poor person?
SANTIAGO: Yeah. It’s offensive ‘cause it’s using people as a message.
GOULD: Right.
SANTIAGO: A lot of plays about race are speaking to rich White liberals in a way that’s just for that end. To teach them what’s right and what’s wrong.
RAIL: At one point your sister character, I forget her name, she’s like, “God, when will it feel like we’re not on the edge of a cliff?” I thought your play really earned that line. Just one, late-night moment of her looking at her life with some distance and wishing for a damn break.
SANTIAGO: But the next beat is the brother being like, “When I start making more, I want you to go back to school.” So, she has a moment where she’s looking at it, seeing it, but he doesn’t let her sit in it. Her awareness isn’t—he never answers the question. He moves on.
RAIL: It’s too hard a question. It’s too painful.
SANTIAGO: Right: when you’re in that situation, you can’t look at it for too long.
RAIL: And Jenna [Worsham, director] kept the play funny. Loud and front-footed. That’s a great antidote to sentimentality and preciousness.
SANTIAGO: That’s so funny because the two brothers, they’re young. The actors are young, so they go for every fuckin’ laugh. They want to play high so much. They just do it up, so Jenna had to actually kill the jokes and bring it back down.
RAIL: God, why do actors love playing high? They love it.
SANTIAGO: Yeah, what is that? That shit was funny. That was a funny realization, how hard—uh, what do you call it? Playing an external. How hard playing an external can make a scene.
RAIL: ‘Cause when you’re drunk, you’re trying to seem not drunk. The actors who do it right, their drunk character is actually trying to seem sober.
GOULD: Kate, my boyfriend and I watched your drunk scene, and we were like, Clea [Alspin] is amazing at acting drunk. Literally one of the best drunk acting scenes I’ve ever seen. Writing, directing, acting fully came together.
RAIL: Thanks for noticing. It’s a fun scene. The texts she’s sending, in the production they’re like five feet tall on a huge screen overhead. Like MoMA installation art. [Laughter] Video didn’t capture that either.
GOULD: Tell us about Love.
RAIL: It started in 2018, after seven months of living with a very dominant MeToo narrative. I’m grateful for that narrative, it’s yielded some justice and some truth-telling. And a genuine shift in the culture, I think. But I also felt, if we go through this movement only by purging a few monsters, we’ve missed it. We have to go through this with good men, too. The ones who we actually want in our families or at work. It’s not all about banishment to the Harvey Weinstein Island. I wanted to take this reckoning into relationships that are based on love.
GOULD: Which is so hard for people to grapple with.
RAIL: And I knew it would be hard, but it’s even harder than I thought. I mean, the number of reviewers who said something like, “Penelope believes she loves Otis”…
GOULD: No. She loves Otis.
RAIL: Exactly. But they can’t take the play at its word. It’s that unsettling to think an intelligent woman could love a man who committed MeToo sins. Those men are supposed to be canceled, period. Bye-bye, no one misses you.
GOULD: Your play is really unsafe if you’d like to have a simple narrative that evil men are evil and nice men are nice and we can easily identify who they are. The truth is we all have to grapple with the people who are in between. That’s most people.
SANTIAGO: We’re talking about teaching how to actually love well and have conversations that aren’t easy.
RAIL: It’s complicated, but there is so much love in the play. The air in the room felt extraordinary, actually. Very loving and very dangerous. So, what are you dreaming about now? Where is your imagination roving?
GOULD: I… don’t have one. [Laughter]
I can’t tell, it’s a bunch of things. I went really hard in grad school for two years.
I wrote six plays in two years. So, I can’t
tell if it’s the pandemic or just exhaustion.
Probably both. There’s also the end of
the campaigns for Elizabeth Warren and
Bernie Sanders, which I still feel great grief
about. I just feel sad. And writing is not
the answer to how I feel.

SANTIAGO: I’m trying to picture how the
audiences’ minds will be different after
this. I think people will be tired of social
media, right? We’ve lost the individual
in such a profound way. So, I’m looking
forward to having an audience that knows
how they feel and knows who they are.
And has agency in the conversation, just
by being more alive. Being honest and true
to who they are because quarantine made
them face down their bullshit.

RAIL: That optimism is shocking, Ren.
And, like, super beautiful. People are
bumping into their mortality; they’re
in a more primal state of being. Everyone
wants a fucking hug. I mean, what would
you give to sit next to your friend at a bar
and feel their body shaking with laughter
a couple inches from you?

GOULD: I want a fucking iced coffee from
a goddamn barista so bad.

RAIL: Listen to us. We’re trapped in the
third act of Our Town.

GOULD: I don’t want to make my own
coffee anymore!

RAIL: I’m looking forward to an audience
that feels grateful to be in the theater.
They’re glad that they get to sit near some-
one explaining the play too loud. [Laugh]
“What is that funny?”

GOULD: “What did he say?”

RAIL: “He said, ‘Mother, you’re a fucking
cunt.’”

[Laugh]

GOULD: Totally.

RAIL: Whenever that is. We’ll see.

GOULD: Who knows.

SANTIAGO: Who knows, right?

Love by Kate Cortesi, directed by Mike Do-
nahue was supposed to run March 5 to 29 at
the Marin Theatre Company. Its final per-
formance was streamed online March 12.
Nicole Clark is Having a Baby, written and
directed by Morgan Gould, was supposed
to run March 6 through April 12 at the 44th
Humana Festival, Actors Theatre of Louis-
ville. Its final performance was March 11.
The Siblings Play by Ren Dara Santiago, di-
crected by Jenna Worsham was supposed to
run March 4 to April 5 at Rattlestick Play-
wrights Theater. Its final live performance
was March 14.

IN DIALOGUE was created by Emily DeVoti in
October 2001 as a monthly column for play-
wrights to engage with other playwrights. Since
then, nearly 200 playwrights have been profiled.
This will be her last In Dialogue column and last
issue as Theater Editor of the Rail.

KATE CORTESE is a Brooklyn and Boston-based
playwright and teacher. Her plays include Great
Kills, A Patron of the Arts, One More Less, Love,
Let’s Pretend We’re Married, and Is Edward
Snowden Single?. She is a resident of New
Dramatists, a Huntington Playwriting Fellow,
and winner of the Princess Grace Award and the
Sky Cooper New American Play Prize.
TWO FROM UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

by Brendan Joyce

When I shave my head I will claim each hair as a dependent on my taxes. When I am denied by unemployment I will send the bag of rotting potatoes in my pantry to the state house. When they ask for work search activities I will instead say fuck the police, because Sean Bonney told me to. When my boss blocks my unemployment claim I will simply block their driveway until I decompose, elegantly, in their driveway apron. I will send a bouquet of past due bills to whoever gave them 5 stars on Yelp. I will enter in every week until I expire the birth dates of the dead -- the coordinates to where we are throttling-- in the weekly claims field. The conspiracy of a dying empire is only to kill faster. I am entirely overwhelmed by the collapse of the political economy in my body so I am sorry for the late reply.

CRAIGSLIST ODE

by Jameson Fitzpatrick

To the young doctor, balding in Stuy Town, and the straight boy from my school I could never find on Facebook. To the boy from the other college downtown, with the good abs and the bad skin, to the married guy in real estate who insisted the sheets be fresh and liked to look into my eyes the whole time he touched me. To that. To the first one to reach for his wallet after, somebody’s father, and the first to tell me a childhood secret. To the famous journalist with the big dick I fell in love with, and the baseball cap through the peephole who said “this isn’t going to work” when I opened the door. To the guy who held me down but wouldn’t touch my dick, to the redhead bro in Murray Hill whose dick smelled so awful. To my crush from Hebrew class, to his name appearing like a blessing in my inbox. To the guys who used their real emails, bless them, the guys whose girlfriends were out of town or didn’t give head or wouldn’t wait up. To the guys who’d never done this before. To the liars. To the one who was older than he said he was, to the one whose pictures were old, to the one who tasted the way old people smell but I did it anyway. To the men who came from Queens and Long Island and Jersey just to see me. To the hairy guy with the yoga body, the one with the muscles, the college wrestler with the cute little dick. To the married guy in real estate who insisted the sheets be fresh and liked to look into my eyes the whole time he touched me. To that.

BRENDAN JOYCE is a busboy from Cleveland, Ohio. His poems have appeared in Protean Magazine and the Johannesburg Review of Books. He is the author of Character Limit (2019) and Unemployment Insurance (2020) in which these poems appear. Both books are available as digital editions here gumroad.com/niotreificer.

JAMESON FITZPATRICK is the author of the poetry collection Pricks in the Tapestry (Birds, LLC, 2020) and the chapbooks Mr. & (indolent Books, 2018) and Mournire: Erasures (B9plus/LUMA Publications, 2014)
SURVIVAL
by Tishani Doshi

Dear ones who are still alive, I fear we may have overthought things. It is not always a war between celebration and lament. Now we know death is circuitous, not just a matter of hiding in the dark, or under a bed, not even a papoose for our loved ones to carry, it changes nothing. Ask me to build a wall and I will build it straight. When the end came, were you watching TV or picnicking in a field with friends? Was the tablecloth white, did you stay silent or fight? I hope by now you've given up the fur coat, the frequent flyer miles. In the hours of waiting, I heard a legend about a woman who was carried off by winds, a love ballet between her and the gods, which involved only minor mutilations. How I long to be a legend. To stand at the dock and stare at this or that creature who survived. Examine its nest, marvel at a tusk that can rake the sea floor for food. Hope is a noose around my neck. I have traded in my rollerblades for a quill. Here is the boat, the journey, the camp. If we want to arrive we must push someone off the side. It is impossible to feel benign. How many refugees does it take to build a mansion? I ask again, shall we wait or run?

Here is winter, the dense pack ice. Touch it. It is a reminder of our devastation. A kind of worship, an incantation.

MANDALA

Anyone who believes a leaf is just a leaf is missing the point. In the attic, there's a picture of ginko growing steadily yellow, while the body of ginko remains evergreen as he works his way through opium dens and bordellos. I'd like to tell you not to worry, reality has a way of sorting itself out, but panic is infectious. The scare arrives when you're doing jumping jacks or organizing the cutlery, some moment of low cosmological drama, interrupted by the discovery of a lump or the Nine O'Clock News, and suddenly, every door handle is a death sentence. How lonely it must have been for the first astronomers, freezing on terraces, trying to catch the light of faraway moons through their spyglasses. Sometimes it's hard to know whether you're slowing down or speeding up. Time, that wobbly trampoline, confuses us. We stitch our days and nights, one to the other, and it's like embroidering a galaxy, but even galaxies recede from one another. Once, a woman played my body as though it were a harp. I slept on a wooden plank and she strummed the strings below until I became a whale shark, pounding through the oceans aeons ago. I emerged as if out of a wormhole, which is to say, more or less intact. For days I felt fins where my cheeks should have been. We talk of bodies as though we could not understand the universe within them even though we've all gaped at the stump of a tree and understood that time moves outwards in a circle, and while everything seems endless, there's always a ring of something permeable holding us in. Sometimes we leave the house without our masks and it's a relief to take a break from who we are. Dwarf star, prayer bell, lone stag feeding in the gorse—something will hold a mirror to our faces, when really, all we need is to be led upstairs.

MACROECONOMICS

One man sits on another if he can.
One man's heart beats stronger. One man goes into the mines for another man to sparkle.
One man dies so the family living at the top of the hill can eat sandwiches on the lawn. One man's piggy bank gets a bailout. One man tips over a stranger's vegetable cart.
One man stays home and plays tombola till all this blows over.
One man hits the road like a pilgrim to Shambala, child on shoulders. One man asks who's going to go out and buy the milk and eggs? One man's home is across the horizon.
One man decides to walk there even though it will take days and nights on tarmac with little food and water.
One man is stopped for loitering and made to do squats for penance. One man reports fish are leaping out of the sea and sucking greedily from the air. One man eats his ration card. One man notices how starlings have taken to the skies like a toothache, a low continuous hunger, searing across the fields.
One man loads his gun. One man's in charge of the seesaw. One man wants to redistribute the plums. One man knows there's no such thing as a free lunch. One man finally sees the crevasse. One man gives his blanket to the man sitting in the crevasse. One man says there should be a tax for doing such a thing and takes it back. The ditch widens.

TISHANI Doshi publishes poetry, fiction and essays. Her most recent books are a collection of poems, Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods (Copper Canyon Press) and a novel, Small Days and Nights (Norton).
biking into the west wind
not every poem can end with a vision
but this one will
New York meditation
let no one see today be background
a sad-looking moon-faced student feeding the library scanner
reminds me of the one who said the text we were reading
was open to interpretation
before I squeezed the tabletop so hard it cracked
suddenly it’s cold, on the bike
and though I turn to look up the avenues
can’t seem to find the sun anywhere
I pass a valkyrie on a single speed whose hoodie’s drawstrings
dance behind her like vipers in a river
be more universal, I keep vowing
while at the same time I know it’s best
just to speak for myself
as I ride home from an intake with a therapist
whose idea of getting to know each other
was to read from an interminable list of leading questions
are you ever inordinately sad for no reason?
do you ever see things that aren’t there?
I saw Tim Levitch slip
into a Starbucks restroom
and Naomi Watts on Hudson, walking very deliberately
in a long black skirt with white polka dots
a denim jacket and sunglasses
I thought even if we met she’d never fall for me
what interest could she have in a man
after Liev Schreiber
who must have embodied fully during their marriage
all a man could possibly offer
both the strength and the stink
don’t actually know, but I’d guess she probably chose a woman next
or an incredibly rich tech mogul
or maybe no one, freedom, though let’s be honest
even that begins to pale
toddler strains at the buckles of her stroller
and the dad
you can’t come out until you’re happy
and the mom
so are you happy?
and the girl
no
it would be a lie to call the sky purple
and yet it is, somehow
my neighbor no longer strips to the waist
to sit on his stoop smoking
after I move the car
Rachel’s taken down the tarot cards
dusty from the top shelf
where they sat untouched for good reason
our readings are brutal
she puts them back
goes to make a call
I get up and rearrange the box
so you can see the print on the side
I mean, that’s how it was
don’t sleep that night
but skip through the hours like a stone
trip over one of the de facto sculptures made
by the boxes we never unpacked
with the chillier nights it’s quieter on the streets
but in here are thoughts that can’t be banished
as ancient as the revulsions
stacked like those magazines in my parents’ bathroom
and sounds whose source will be forever unknown
what we refer to as walls
are really layers of systems
connected by intricate hollows to the depths
the coal miners used to call the demon hotel
my worst memories are of being noble
face against the mattress
that won’t give way
so I ride its surface
when what I really want is to fall through
and reach the place in the mind no one believes in anymore
dreamt a hatch in the little spaceship-shaped
sound machine opened
and a ladder came down
tiny aliens descended
and ventured across the surface of the dresser
craning their necks at perfume-bottle towers
shitting themselves before the great changing digits
of the clock
so paranoid about the scratches on my neck
that appeared in the morning
approximating little punctures
that we called the bedbug dog
when he emerged from the carrier
I looked at him
said hi to the handler
aren’t you going to say hi to the dog
oh I thought I wasn’t supposed to interact
nah man, go ahead
all good, they left, the scratches had been my own doing
I flipped through a magazine
Debbie Harry in a camisole
“Dreaming” plays in the titles of The Deuce
a song about a subject who knows
she’s a subject
used in a tv series
about the relationship of pleasures
to the systems that provide and regulate them
in a time when those systems
however violent and enormous
were at least still visible
I’ll have a cup of tea
how many ironic epigrams
have I written
in imitation of writers who once impressed me so much
what really did those gentle sensibilities have to do with me?
there’s blood and dirt
on the pages of my summer notebook
because I’m anxious
and like to stretch out on the ground
although the ground makes me really anxious
here it’s just a broken old road
cobblestones the grass and weeds slowly swallow
I doubt another civilization
will come along to sweep these layers away

Matt Longabucco is the author of several chapbooks, including Heroic Dose (Inpatient Press, 2019). His book, M/W: An essay on Jean Eustache’s La maman et la putain, is forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse. Poems and essays have appeared recently in Mirage, Lana Turner, and The Poetry Project Newsletter. He teaches writing, innovative pedagogy, and critical theory at New York University and Bard College’s Institute for Writing & Thinking.
THE WONDERS OF FACE TIME

By Andrei Codrescu

liking some people and liking what they say are different things
i find i like in a noncorporeal way the faces talking on flat screens
among them my face which detached from my body repulses me
though i remember what i said i sounded smart it seems

i remember the bidimensional faces of my conlocutors
but i only vaguely remember the memorable things they said
already concentrated in a forgotten tweet and gone
it's all postmortem we are agreeable articulate and dead

what is a face without a body scared eyes open mouths
saying words that must have somehow issued from a body
that may or may not have existed one time at high tide
flat faces and flat bodies squished on lab slides

and if there is a body on the screen words do not matter
only the question of these tides and what makes them rise and fall
if violent weather sweeps the internet and suddenly it's dark
don't look for your body it left for the future on the departing ark

first they came for your memory and they assured you
that you can retrieve it any time even better without the wet
emotions that enveloped things in their time their always bad
timing and that dehydrated now they tasted bland but wise

then they came for your libido after saturating it with flat porn
that left behind diabetics craving sugar unable to use their inborn grace
next they came for your hands and feet twisting in anxious gyms
they assured you there are tapes you can always watch or else

when they came for your ears and tongue there wasn't much left to take
they left you a finger an eye and a mouth to say these things and wag
this must be heaven cry the eggs being scrambled by the big machine
we can retrieve our bodies when we are not dead it's only quarantine

SIRENS IN QUEENS

In exile in Tomis Ovid wrote letters to Augustus
about the painted natives and the brutal winters
there were physicians and a Lyceum in Tomis
a Greek seaport of vivid spectacles and goods.

Augustus received Ovid's Tristae and ignored
the poet's exaggerated plaints and sorrows
and enjoyed his gloomy verse of the province
Rome was much safer without the amorous lech.

Exiled to the Ozarks I aroused pity in New York
The City as its inhabitants called it for its splendors.
In the Ozarks survivalists juggled snakes in caves.
I had two caves saw snakes there was no doctor near.

In Siberia Pasternak the doctor was kidnapped
by armies to tend to their wounded and their goals
that were as hard and cold as their winters
and out he trudged in the movie through the snow.

Some plagues were real some were not
in retrospect many people died in history's show
for the historians heirs poets and film makers
there is no better subject than great distance
social or forced or voluntary or just geographical
people willing and unwilling to grow the space between
others even lovers kin or parts of their own selves
distance is the only subject to sing and emote for.

Under house arrest in Bucharest
there was a policeman watching at your door
if you got sick and needed to get to the hospital fast
you just called your guard and got there in a jiff.

Under house arrest in Queens
everyone is in their own dens listening to sirens
if you get sick nobody will come for you
by the time you hear your siren you'll be stiff.

ANDREI CODRESCU is exercising CoVid in Queens near Corona Park. He is the winner of the Ovid Prize and wrote "No Time Like Now: New Poems."
Dreamstamps
by Wah-Ming Chang

Sometimes on these long walks with my camera, the whole city seems to pour into the streets, yet when I scroll through the photos later, there is an emptiness to the scenes, as though they’ve been vacated on command. Other times I am out earlier than usual, before the sun rises. This is because of jet lag, but usually there are also sweeping worries, or the astonishment at an unexpected revelation, or the preparation for a new journey (in this past week, all of the above). If I thought I was alone with the moon, the streetlamps, the unfolding clouds, a few days later I would find evidence of other life: a shadowed figure just inside the frame, a hand, a blurred face.

I took two photos of a butterfly I passed in the street yesterday. In the first, the butterfly is drinking nectar from a broad white flower, its yellow wings beating the petals methodically, a little lazily. The second photo is captured five hours later on my way back home. The butterfly does not move. There is a wind around it, which makes its wings flutter slightly, as in the first photo, but life is now absent. The flower, I confirm at home, is a trap.

A week ago I wrote down the following: “There is no linearity when it comes to dreams, only simultaneity.” The word only is such an absolute, isn’t it? In this case, of course I’m right, for inside the vacuum of sleep, anything is possible and everything happens at once. But this morning I see I’m a little wrong too: sequencing also must be acknowledged. For me, it is a backwards sequencing—retracing my steps to the origin of a niggling thought. Because a dream’s logic is based on the logic of an endless maze, I can’t be sure that locating an origin point is possible. Can one even pinpoint the moment one enters the maze? Sometimes the dream might shift point of view—as when the I becomes a she or a he, and then later the she or he reverts to the I—and this jolt can be considered an origin point. During a lucid dream, in which you are aware of the fact that you are dreaming, and can even direct the scene, it is possible to note exactly when and how the maze starts to turn on itself or to turn on you. But the real triumph for me is to identify the path of a dream from point Z to point A. This morning, with the lingering jet lag, I reach this triumph five times, and each time there is the feeling of stepping into a deep bank of snow. The thought about simultaneity came together the previous week possibly because of this jet lag: when I first returned from Taiwan, I woke up at four in the morning, and instead of trying to return to sleep I encouraged the dreams to play themselves...
out for thirty minutes more, sometimes for another hour. By then I would start to wonder about their logic, their uncanny threading of anxieties, all the transitions—sequences—that connected them. And then I would get dressed and leave the house with my camera.

Since moving into my parents’ apartment on Sanford Avenue, I have been trying to fall asleep with the covers over my head, like a little bird.

One night I watch a Senegalese film on my laptop. I am so tired that I am asleep for most of it. While drifting, I suddenly “understand” Wolof and think I know what is going on. But when I open my eyes, the scene does not correspond to what I have been dreaming. A jarring, a disappointment, a return to reading subtitles on a small screen, and then, very soon after, back to sleep. It is the most pleasant bit of somnolence I have ever experienced. I drowse all the time in moving vehicles (as soon as they start gliding along the highway or on the rail tracks or have settled in the air at the desired altitude, a mechanism springs open inside me and releases a steady flood of dead weight), but drifting in and out of sleep along with this film feels natural and light: my eyes open and shut to the rhythm of my breathing, and I am whirling inside a cocoon of new language, absorbing the story that plays itself out in my head.

Once again I make the mistake of thinking I can move on immediately to a second film as soon as I finish watching the first. But the story about the woman in green wants to hang around my neck for a while. I’m happy to be haunted, but a little anxious about it too, if I am honest. I wish the story didn’t have to end. The filmmaker is alive, which means that indeed this story does not end yet, but I mean I wish she would keep on filming this woman and make it one lifelong lesson in women in green. I watched this film the way I tend to dream: I come across so many striking details and am convinced that they are true, but upon resurfacing to the real world, I see them from very far away and start to realize how much of it is in fact a distortion in perception. For example, recently I remembered how a man I was in love with for years finally acknowledged me one day. I was so ecstatic that I let him have his rough way with me. When he finished, I was in complete shock. With my head hanging off the edge of the bed, I watched his cat look at me with pity from its corner of the room.

Everything about this apartment is new, including the balcony, which is supported by a white Greek column that replicates the columns lining the building’s facade. Against this column is a stack of cardboard boxes. One box contains a camera that I used when I first moved to New York. Once, I left this camera hanging on a bathroom hook in a restaurant on Mott Street. When it was returned to me the next day, I saw it as alien. First, I was surprised that it was returned at all. Then I wondered if I had left the camera in that bathroom on purpose. I came to suspect too that the photographs inside it were not mine. If they were not, then the camera no longer belonged to me. For this reason, I have never been able to find the camera, even though it lives in one of these boxes.

In another box is a collection of small notebooks I had kept during a year of financial uncertainty in Los Angeles. The scribbles inside them have become illegible to me. I open them only when I am working out a problem, such as a book on travel that I have been writing for several years. I can’t be sure how to resolve this illegibility, whether I should wait for my handwriting to clarify itself by perhaps sleeping for a little while, despite the hour, or by opening the other boxes on the balcony. For now, what I am searching for must be re-created. I am thinking about a line I had written about photography, taken from a book I was reading about photography, how a photograph does not capture memory but instead the certainty of someone’s existence. I remember also writing a line where I wondered what sort of certainty the photograph captured about the photographer’s existence. For example, sometimes I don’t remember taking a photograph, yet there is the image inside my camera and there is its timestamp when I print it.

I am looking for an explanation about photographs so I can understand something about time. I am also looking for an explanation about time so that I can understand something about photographs. Ever since a period when I watched movies exclusively about time travel, the two are connected. I want to know how exactly. But the young physicist I’ve contacted does not like my questions. I ask her what is the minute hand. She gives me a long explanation. I ask her what is the hour hand. Another long explanation. I ask about the second hand and about the nanosecond. Again, she is long-winded. Every answer presupposes another hypothesis, branching off into a new iteration of theoretical and contradictory multisyllabic jargon. In the end, I berate the physicist for being a fraud. She defends herself: “I have never pretended to like science. But I know how to tell time.”
We had an eclipse recently. I shut my eyes against it, and that same night a man in a movie told me all the words for bird in all the languages he knew (twenty). Now, for the past ten minutes, I have been staring at a large sparrow perched on my sill, its wings paused in their breathing ritual. I hope that soon I can remove myself from the eclipse, that I’ll find my way back to color. But I’ve heard that, in fact, infinite color lives inside an eclipse and that an eclipse is unforgiving only if you lose your way in it. I suppose I have no choice but to surrender to it. I must not struggle. Eclipses are not supposed to last long, yet this one has managed to stretch itself out. I wonder how such a thing is accomplished.

I think about an essay that describes the photograph of Robert Walser dead in the snow, and take down his book *Looking at Pictures* to search for it. I remember that the piece begins with the description of the photograph, with a reproduction of the photograph itself on the next page, and then looks at the body from another perspective, with mention of bystanders and intrusive footprints and a wayward hat. Only when I am studying the book’s table of contents do I wonder how Walser could have written about a photograph capturing the aftermath of his own death. Even an hour later, after acknowledging that my impulse to reach for *Looking at Pictures* was wrong and that

I should have been looking to another source, part of me is still convinced that the essay appears in this book.

I once kept a notebook of the same photograph printed multiple times so I could flip the pages as in a flip book—but except for what looked like a breeze through the grass, there was no movement. Whenever I think about this notebook, I can recall what it was like to look at photographs as a child, and I also think about what it is like to look at them today. A photograph signals motion, which partly explains why I did not take any

last year, because of what the city was going through. Even though that time was precarious for everybody, I was actually very much at peace.

*A punctum* is what triggers the memory of a dream. Dreams need triggers in order to be remembered.

I am looking at a map of stars. I turn the page and there is another map. According to the book, stars have existed since something called 313 B.C. I say “something called” because the year 313 is an unbelievable scope.

I continue to misspell “Cixous” throughout my book, almost willfully. I think of her now to dispel this morning’s dream: Somebody was in the apartment. There were dark-blue hues in the bedroom. As I lay on the left side of the bed with my arms draped over my head, the book I’d been reading was slipped from my hand, out of sight. I stayed still, even when I could feel the figure coming around to my side of the bed. But when the dream ended, I saw that the book was beside me and the figure had evaporated. The dark blue was starting to whiten. It seemed to me a long coma had just passed.

One night, I turn on all the lights in the house. The sense of danger is minimal, however, given that I am armed with a firecracker.

For the next few days, I do not write because of a sudden onset of body aches. Sometimes there are chills. At exactly 2:30 p.m., I have to lie down on the bed with the covers to my chin. The view is of the kitchen, where shafts of sunlight sift through the curtains. This sunlight acts like a general anesthetic: as soon as I concentrate on this yellow sky, everything inside me shuts down and I am unconscious for what seems like a whole day. In fact, the sleep lasts only an hour. Sometimes I wake up with the memory of words being put together. Just now: “whether or not” and “may or may not be.”

At the doctor’s office, I photograph a jumbled collage: centered in the foreground is a giant plant, while behind it is a figure that can almost be seen. It is a figure in shock, the opposite of motion. Later, while preparing the image for print, I see there is another face that’s been captured.

I had a job in Munich: the river where surf happens had collapsed, and the town below was submerged.
I had a job in Beijing: the floods opened up a rift in the earth.

I was photographing actors on the side before the rift occurred. I fell in love with one, of course. He wasn’t very talented, I saw that right away, but he tried to teach me what he knew, because an ignorant man who has an audience can pretend to be more skilled than he is. I found his lessons amusing, if a little confounding. He wanted to teach me how to laugh, and how to cry, and also how to cry and speak at the same time. I already knew how to laugh, and I was pretty sure I knew how to cry. It was difficult for me to cry and speak at the same time, however. Sometimes, of course, there is the need to explain something of the self, not to make excuses but to make sense, and this need comes out as a wail and a supplication at once. I told him that I was photographing actors because I liked all the voices that came out of them, including the garbled ones.

I buy a tape recorder and press RECORD at night. Each tape lasts two hours, and the click of the tape wakes me up and then I have to change it. One day I will use a digital device that can run for hours, but for now I rely on the online junk shops that sell old electronics, and look for tape recorders, cameras, any recording devices. I want to record everything. I want to know what is happening inside the city. On the nights when the cold is unbearable, my actor sends me his voice in an email, and I record it from there. He recites lines he remembers from school plays. Today he looks at the latest discards with me online. In a video call, one salesman takes out a camera and assures me that it works. He demonstrates politely, but his eyes narrow as soon as he stops talking and belie his certainty. Then his smugness returns. He points out the stamp at the base of the camera. “Look at what else it can tell you,” he says. And once again, my concern about time unfurls like a flower. It is a moment of vertigo, like standing at the edge of the platform while a subway car rushes into the station. Only after I’ve bought the camera does it occur to me to ask the salesman whether time works at all. But the answer is in the stamp he has shown me: TIME, TAKE YOUR

What does it mean to rest in a dream?

Yesterday I thought it was Wednesday, and in my dream it is Tuesday. When I wake up it is Monday.

Time does not belong to me but to a woman with rocks in her pockets. She lives in a photograph in a museum in Taipei. She has made me understand something about time finally. I regret that this “finally” did not arrive sooner for me to rescue her, although its iterations—“already” and “for now,” for example—needed to exist first before she walked into the river. With her, I think there will always be a “finally.” It is what the great Odysseus searched for, the present, home, which is an end point, it is what all odysseys consist of. Relief is the meat of her legacy.

On my way home from the doctor’s office, I sit down in front of somebody wearing a coat of dark feathers. She is a cosmos of gray and black. She has no intention of leaving the subway car. Instead, she grabs hold of the railing above her head with both hands and lets herself hang there. A few stops later, she is still swaying, but now she is quite stiff, without independent gesture, as though there is not a body but only air filling the coat. But I see her hair. I see how her head has lolled forward, her gloved hands wrapped around the rail.
A Protective Archipelago: A Covid-19 Correspondence
by Wah-Ming Chang and Celina Su

WAH-MING CHANG lives and works in New York City. "A Protective Archipelago" is one of many collaborations with Celina Su. Dreamstamps is a book in progress.

CELINA SU’s first book of poetry, Landia, was published by Belladonna* in 2018. She is the Marilyn J. Gittell Chair in Urban Studies at the City University of New York. “A Protective Archipelago” may be a series of epistolary essays in progress.

A Protective Archipelago: A Covid-19 Correspondence

For four days, from the 10th to the 13th of April, we (Celina and Wah-Ming) took turns writing each other letters in the midst of our experiences while sheltering in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. We had no agenda but to connect via words rather than audio-visually.

4/10/2020
Dearest Wah-Ming,

Justin has been living in his 6-foot by 10-foot home office for 23 days now. For the first 21 days, Justin took his temperature, and it was 102 degrees. Was his thermometer broken? We sanitized it, tried it on me and Wen—Our temperatures were around 98 degrees, normal. Finally, his fever broke two days ago. It was such a relief. To be honest, it was his shortness of breath—anticipating, from what I read, that feeling of drowning—that scared me. We kept fearing that his shortness of breath would worsen, that we would have to compete for medical attention and a ventilator. Now we’re just waiting for him to feel okay for 72 hours before he can come out and hang out with me and Wen.

He leaves the office just a few times a day, running to the bathroom. (Amazingly, we have a room for him to stay in, and we happened to have a twin-sized air mattress, and it fit. As you know, we just moved here a few months ago, from a 1-bedroom—thank goodness.) The first day of his isolation of the self, Wen ran to him and pleaded, “Up?” each time he left his Covid19 home. He scurried away backwards, wincing and apologizing as he did so.

Now, even when Wen has a present for him, like showing him the nice belt (a scarf that she appropriated from a stuffed bunny I had sewn for her) she has just put on, she knows to knock on his door and then step back six feet before he opens it. Sometimes her instincts aren’t quick enough, and she doesn’t shout “I whoa you” in the direction of his door in time, until after he has closed it again.

The church bells won’t stop ringing. I look up to the top right corner of my laptop screen. It’s 3 o’clock in the afternoon. There’s usually one chime per hour. Why won’t they stop ringing??? Please, please tell me that the church is not mourning the recent dead. It could be a call to mass, but for this long? It’s 3:07, and the church is still ringing its bells. (My apologies. Clearly, I don’t know anything about Catholicism.)

Justin and I figured out a system to ease our routines—We have just enough bleach wipes that, ripped in thirds, he can use...
imagined you and others I know on your various pillows, tossing and turning or staring at the ceiling, composing missives to one another, bathed in the light of a pink supermoon.

In our quarantine, Wen has become extra clingy, so that I can’t read or write anything except in furtive, 30-second snippets before she snatches away my phone. On occasional, wondrous days like today, she naps for a full hour. She’s napping right now. She fell asleep after an hour of crying, right as I was about to go pick her up.

She wasn’t allowed any screen time at all before this pandemic, and now I rely on it in order to cook. (Justin is the cook of the family, and a really amazing one. I just hope that my meals are serviceable.) I don’t dilly-dally, so that I can limit her screen time. I wonder if we’re damaging her cognitive or intellectual development with endless loops of Daniel Tiger. And yet, even the lure of the screen isn’t enough to keep her from tugging at me while I cook. I have learned to hold her on one hip and tend to the stove with my other arm, making sure nothing splatters on her.

Every once in a while, I approach the front window. Yesterday, I saw a neighbor being carried out of his home on a stretcher, wearing a mask. I couldn’t see his face well enough to guess his age, whether he has a history of smoking or preexisting conditions, whether he has any signifiers to let me know that

and I pointed out the magnolias, dogwoods, and cherry blossoms. I almost cried.

Our days feel so very long. She used to sleep 12 straight hours, until 8 a.m. She wakes up at 6 or 7 now, which would be fine if she weren’t also screaming and crying through the night. Sometimes I wish she could read or color or sit still for 5 minutes. She’s not getting enough exercise, and her routines have gone kaput. I’m trying to give her structure, to occupy her for 14 hours, then clean, then try to answer work emails and read Ph.D. dissertations and master’s theses before I go to bed. I try to do so on time, because I’m scared of getting sick like Justin. And Justin and I text from adjoining rooms to schedule our bathroom visits, since we can’t use it at the same time. So now, I actually heed my alarm to eat my elderberry gummies. I started taking sleeping pills; like Wen, I’m experiencing new, intense bouts of insomnia. This misery of mine finds little solace in company, but last night, I

wondered if we’re damaging her cognitive or intellectual development with endless loops of Daniel Tiger. And yet, even the lure of the screen isn’t enough to keep her from tugging at me while I cook. I have learned to hold her on one hip and tend to the stove with my other arm, making sure nothing splatters on her.

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think about how I can best help, especially while barely holding down the fort, especially once this acute crisis recedes into being “merely,” once again, our chronic condition.

I’m sorry that I’m jumping all over the place. Besides, it feels like every time I spend more than 30 seconds furtively texting or reading the news, feeling fury at this fucking shit show of death out there, Wen grabs my phone or tugs at my legs, whining for attention. I re-remember that this cocoon is not separate from but clearly a reflection of the larger world, its riches and inequities. A vanity mirror, maybe, a magnifier of our blackheads and our varicose veins. If only our social ills were so cosmetic.

I hear dogs barking outside. I hear songbirds chirping. On the radio, a botanist confirms that it is not my imagination—The birds are singing more loudly this year, emboldened by our retreat from their habitats. The clouds look like happy little clouds.

Wen is waking up from her nap. She is crying. As she should be, I suppose.

Please send news. I send you love.

Celina

4/11/2020

Dearest Celina,

How I wish I could come by and hold Wen while you and Justin get some rest! I am looking forward to and grateful for when Justin will return to full health and for his exceptional curiosity to be put to good work. I am grateful for Wen, who must be a source of both comfort and anxiety for you right now. Whenever I call for a FaceTime session, she asks, “Papa? Papa?” Where is Justin? He is there, dear Wen! I’m sure it’s become almost a game of hide-and-seek in her mind, to think about him living in his study for this past month. A game, certainly. And it is through games in childhood where imagination shapes itself most powerfully, most lastingly.

Markus and I have kept close contact with our neighbors downstairs: grocery shopping for each other, exchanging cooking supplies, helping to clear their yard of our dog’s poop. Now and then they leave their daughter, N, with me for half an hour. N was afoot before her second birthday. She preferred to stay by her parents’ side, frowning at the faces I made to try to lure her out. But when she turned two in mid-March, a little after our self-imposed isolation began, her cognitive skills jumped and she began naming everything around her quite precisely, including me: Auntie Wah-Ming. This opening up of language
opened up her trust in me too: she now greets me with a smile instead of with suspicion, and she shows me things that interest her, like her rocket ship and her blue horse, and she takes my hand confidently to lead me from one room to another, and she mimics my speech, especially if it’s a monosyllabic warning to the dog, and she jumps into my arms when she wants to be picked up, and she makes her eyes go coy and flirtatious when reaching out for a goodbye high-five. This turnaround happened in the span of a day or two, during our isolation. With daycare unavailable for the moment, and with the bonding between her and her parents more intense than usual, she explores her house with the people who inhabit it. Her attention is a hard-won triumph, though I had done nothing but continue showing up, and this by virtue of being her neighbor. Still, I feel like this triumph belongs exclusively to me, because I’ve been so persistent about winning her over. I remember experiencing a similar ecstasy with my niece three years ago, when she was around a year old. Her father, my little brother, encouraged me to stay in her room one night, where she slept among a fort of pillows on the floor. Her process of falling asleep looked restless to me, yet also inevitable: her body, still so new to the world, kept fidgeting, seeking to prolong the day’s stimulation, even while sleep was so clearly descending. As she tried to find a comfortable position with her cheek on the floor and her butt high in the air behind her (babies often sleep on their stomachs, a habit that makes me nervous but which their parents always shrug off), I lay beside her and, with sudden tears, marveled at her trust in me. I spoke to her and rhythmically patted her back. This was a gesture I remembered from my grandmother when I was a child, although my grandmother’s harsher touch felt like she was trying to knead sleep into me. In this gesture I inherited, in trying to calm a baby’s senses so that she felt 1,000 percent safe with me—and which I’ve repeated on my nights with Wen—I thought I had an understanding of what it was like to mother a child. Understanding is too presumptuous a word, of course. This understanding—a kernel of an understanding, really, this intimate glimpse into parenting—came from a mere nanosecond of a moment, after all. As the auntie to my siblings’ and friends’ children, I am witness to mostly their laughing fits and adventures in curiosity, their undisguised charm. Even during the tantrums (desperate tantrums as when I babysat Wen for that second time), I am aware of my patience, of my full energy level, and of my imminent departure from this environment of ever proliferating toys and picture books and the bewildering maze of lessons of survival. I am also aware of time—how it is on my side, while the parents, who have gotten away for a little while, must be equally dreading and eager for the return home.

My niece, who is now four and a half, voices a multitude of desires, some of them contradictory, and does not turn herself off until it is time for bed. Even then, at half the force, this multitude is relentless. I wonder about my mother having borne three children, two of them in a country where she did not speak the language; about my grandmother’s four in Taiwan; about families in the double digits; about single parents. All these parents—you among them, dear Celina!—face and manage this relentlessness daily, these bundles of unbridled energy and id. I guess this letter has turned into one of appreciation and awe for you as we are forced to keep separate from each other, as I worry about how you are managing the care of a bright, rapidly developing child. This letter is also one of compassion for parents, in particular for my own.

I have been calling them nearly daily for the past few weeks. Before this isolation was imposed on us, I would call them once a month, if that. Sometimes my silence would stretch out for so long, only to be broken by my mother when it took on the whiff of neglect. But now that the option of riding the 7 train to Flushing to see them in person has been removed, I call them almost every day. In this call is a desperation. In this call is a confirmation that the virus has not entered their older lungs. In this call is a way to force them to update me about their health, because otherwise they remain silent, preferring not to disclose anything about what they consider nobody else’s business.

I think about your father’s health.

When I found out that my father had a cold and a slight fever, the news about Italy was starting to flood the news. Against my mother’s orders, he stepped outside one morning to buy more milk. My mother was furious. She was so furious that she even told me about it—she shared their business. This was before the reports that young people were just as susceptible to falling seriously ill from Covid as the elderly. My father is in his mid-eighties. I don’t like thinking about his age. I don’t think about your father’s health.

When I found out that my father had a cold and a slight fever, the news about Italy was starting to flood the news. Against my mother’s orders, he stepped outside one morning to buy more milk. My mother was furious. She was so furious that she even told me about it—she shared their business. This was before the reports that young people were just as susceptible to falling seriously ill from Covid as the elderly. My father is in his mid-eighties. I don’t like thinking about his age. I don’t know the exact number. He’d lied about it when he left China at thirteen pretending to be sixteen. In May this year, he will be either eighty-six or eighty-nine.

On March 29, a week after he stepped outside on his own, my parents stood in line for groceries for three hours, and then for another hour to pay for their items. The residents of Flushing had been told that their grocers’ delivery trucks wouldn’t arrive that Monday, and so everybody, my parents included, went to buy supplies on Sunday. The store opened at 9:30, and my mother left the house at 9:15. The line was already two blocks long. The store had limited the number of customers to ten or fifteen at any given time. It was impossible for me to imagine the neighborhood cooperating with this rule, and I wanted my
parents to avoid another such morning. My brother suggested Invisible Hands for their ethical mission statement. His wife tried to push meal kits. My sister berated us for putting delivery people at risk, given that our parents were neither in need nor vulnerable because two of their children were nearby and could drop off groceries. My sister’s husband sent us a link to where you could donate 7 percent of your net salary. My brother, who lives in California, defended his suggestion: “I figured you would all be staying at home, so the delivery service makes sense.” This entire conversation took place over text. I could hear the exasperation and frustration in their typing. I texted them all: “It’s OK. We’ll find something.” I told my parents that they should have their groceries delivered from now on. This advice was given before I had done any research about the scarcity of delivery windows. That night my mother texted that she had tried to order from Amazon Fresh but they wouldn’t let her complete the order. She sent me a screenshot. There were no delivery windows. I explained this to her and promised that I would secure one for her. After trying various options, I found all the items on my mother’s grocery list at Instacart—including bananas, Lactaid 2%, and Doritos—and clicked “Pay.” No delivery windows. It was ten thirty p.m. I stayed up until one thirty, hitting refresh on the page every fifteen minutes. Finally I set my alarm for four a.m., lay down on the sofa, and shut my eyes. It is easy for me to sleep for short periods without interruption. When the alarm went off, I hit refresh on my computer and a few delivery windows popped up. I chose the “flexible” one, which would deliver between Tuesday and Saturday. There are five stages in Instacart’s ordering process: Received, In Progress, Shopping Complete, In Transit, and Complete. Three days after I succeeded in placing the order for a delivery to Flushing, the status has yet to move from Received to In Progress.

What you say about the death knell makes me wonder about our various modes of communication, any one of them having been created when another needed updating or was unavailable. In the case of the death knell, it was to inform the community of a death. I wonder about this need to communicate this news, and also to commemorate it, how the need evolved as something experienced privately to a collective experience of mourning. In all that we’re going through today, we are coming upon a hinge in the way we communicate. Nostalgia exists as an exercise to remember a “simpler” time, but we see that it is also a useful mobilizing factor to reinstate that “simpler” time. Bells. Telephone calls. Staying home with your family, if you can. But other habits have to be adjusted, like shopping for groceries. Still, there is somebody doing the shopping, and somebody doing the delivering. Perhaps drone delivery will be the next phase to be normalized in this new life.

If my parents had raised their three young children during a pandemic, I can’t imagine them shutting down their store in Chinatown. My father would continue driving his delivery trucks or go to the office to fulfill orders for restaurant supplies. My mother would stay at home, I think, with a phone and calculator set up on the dining table. My sister, the eldest and who would be the most sensitive to the change, would be asked to help our mother with the orders. I would probably be watching television. And our younger brother would be playing with his toy cars.

I like to picture our mother in this scenario learning a new language with us, or teaching a new language to us.

Tell me news of Justin’s breathing, of Wen’s latest words, of your moments with Bartleby.

with deepest love,

Wah-Ming
“milk” sounds vaguely, but not quite, like the Mandarin word for “cow’s milk,” since I speak so little Mandarin around her. But I sometimes wonder whether she has a sign language “accent,” whether she pronounces “water” “awe” because that is the sound her mouth makes when she makes the ASL sign for water. I wonder, especially as we shelter in place—how are she and I shaping each other’s language?

I just put her to bed for the night, and she is screaming. Again, this didn’t happen before the quarantine. I hope that she soon feels secure enough again to easily fall asleep each night.

What strikes me most about your letter is how I’m hungering for the specificity of individual experience, maybe even more than usual, in order to glimpse at the systemic, to accompany the awful statistics in the news. Of course I loved your anecdote about your family’s attempts at grocery shopping. But why should you have to worry about the safety of delivery workers? About 7 percent of our salaries or wages? I keep going over my budget by giving small amounts to different families’ funeral expenses on GoFundMe, to bail funds for ICE detainees, and it all feels reactive. I give more than 7 percent of my income, but that, too, feels pitifully insufficient. Maybe I need to solely volunteer for mutual aid networks as best I can right now, and think about saving funds to give more strategically in the fall. I’m so upset about these impossible choices. Justin lost his job, and I told Wen’s daycare. They generously offered a 50 percent reduction in tuition while we follow social distancing instructions to keep Wen home. Justin and I accepted their offer. But we feel terrible about it, since they’re a small business, and they need to pay their two workers and stay afloat. We want to keep a spot for Wen to go back to. So... we’re paying almost $1,000 a month instead of the usual almost $2,000 a month, for three days of childcare a week that we are not using, and no one is happy, exactly. (We will manage; if needed, we’ll dip into our retirement savings, especially since I hear that they’re suspending early withdrawal penalties.) Our individual decisions do nothing to address such systemic issues. What would it mean for me to keep my eyes on the prize? Beyond November, I mean. It’s so fucking basic; I just don’t want any of us to worry about this shit.

In some ways, it feels like we have more of a shared reality than usual, that you and I, Marina in Milan, friends and strangers all over the world are staying inside. But of course some of us are hit harder than others. It feels so strange that you and I are 3.2 miles apart (I just looked it up on Google maps), but I feel so isolated from the city, unable to recall my usual sense of rootedness, even as I shelter in place. That we are able to be so. After all, it doesn’t feel like a coincidence that both your parents and my dad live close to, but not quite in, the epicenter, that they are partly making do because we can advocate for them vis-à-vis utility companies and get them groceries somehow.

The only disruption to this eerie, unmoored feeling, to the constant sound loops of birdsong and ambulances, is at 7 o’clock each night, when the street explodes with the clatter of pots and pans, and I see kids wearing costumes and performing cartwheels on the sidewalk. An urban gamelan, as Justin calls it.

I do savour our conversations. Inside our homes, for those of us who are lucky enough to stay inside and access fast internet, how life during this pandemic feels distinct from the typical alone together feeling of the internet, how we are, perhaps, together apart instead. FaceTiming with you doesn’t feel like a replacement of our usual correspondence, a virtual simulacrum—It is its own thing. For Wen is always with me, and not in daycare, for she is allowed screen time now, as it is her main portal to the larger world, for she has discovered the animal (“ah-mal”) effects on FaceTime, and so her main way of talking to people is as a cartoon owl or tiger.

And your beautiful Zoom reading parties—how they allow Wen and I to sit on the couch and listen, or Wen to play the piano (muting us, thankfully), or to go fetch yet another snack and come back. It enacts a wholly different relationship between performer and audience, as if we were soaking in the shadow puppet plays in Java, coming and going. It’s such a different experience from passively sitting in hard-back theatre seats or a designated audience zone, staring ahead. I admittedly only catch the readings in snippets, but even individual lines—the musicality of intonations, voices—move me so. That someone would wake up at 4:30 a.m. in Sydney in order to bestow upon us the treat of a passage of *To The Lighthouse* in our late afternoon. What a gift these parties are, how you create and hold space for us to quietly be together, to share different lenses of experience.
and interpretation, abrupt shifts in tone, all with the connective tissues of curiosity and compassion.

Once again, I keep thinking about how our actions right now are both a suspension and a distillation of our everyday norms and perhaps our selves and innards and guts. I can’t think right now; all I can do is feel right now, maybe begin to observe. But I am eager to witness what remains on the other side of this—hopefully in less than 18 months, before a vaccine is widely available—I can’t quite absorb how Trump’s approval ratings are so high right now. I’m choosing to instead focus on how I feel such an intense kinship with folks in geographically disparate locations. I wonder what will remain of this pandemic discourse, besides “social distancing.” If we will tend to the threads of interdependence this pandemic has surfaced and made so bare—as in, both more visible than they usually are and, sometimes, conspicuously threadbare. Will we continue to give recognition to those who place themselves at risk to work, when they are not so conspicuously the only ones out on the streets. Whether a few more Americans will replace “low-income” with “essential” when they talk about food delivery workers, Amazon warehouse workers. If more Americans might still think in November that these essential workers, too, should be unionized, earn decent wages, have access to health care, and have basic protective gear. What do you think life will be like this summer, this fall? Whether we’ll be able to keep these refracted, prismatic, Rashomon, Timecode, Zoom perspectives after the pandemic.

After this is over, I wonder whether I’ll be able to keep you and everyone else in my mind’s eye, going about our days. I’m thankful for the strict schedule and structure caring for Wen imposes upon me, that it forces me to write you quickly, honestly, without a burnishing of the self. But I cannot wait to one day have childcare again, to engage with and hopefully contribute to collaborative projects and spend some time alone each day, and for Wen to be around her peers and caring adults besides myself and Justin, to see someone just a little bit older than her do something she would like to try next, to experience live music again, to feel the exhilaration of being an integral part of a larger collective.

Unless he feels shortness of breath again tonight, Justin gets to leave his tiny home office tomorrow, and Wen, Justin, and I will get to hang out together again. He’s probably still shedding virus, albeit with lower viral loads each day, so he’s supposed to wear a mask and gloves around us for another week. One day, we’ll embrace Wen together. (I have to admit that I didn’t want to start this 4-day letter-writing experiment with you until I knew that our family’s experience would probably have a happy ending, for now at least.)

Wen has stopped crying, thankfully. I know that by now, we all know people who have passed. Please, I hope that we’ve hit the peak. I should go and clean and go to bed. Tomorrow, eye contact, a different future. When will it really hit me. How will we grieve. Tell me, what of this moment might you keep.

With so much love,
Celina

April 13, 2020
Dearest Celina,

My parents’ groceries arrived on Saturday, the last day in the “flexible” window that had been provided in my order. This was my first time ordering from Instacart. The relief to be tracking the shopper’s progress—progress that would keep my parents safe at home—is surprisingly immediate and quantifiable. If an item has been found, it is checked off the list. If an item is unavailable, then you are asked if a certain replacement is suitable. If there are no replacements, then the item is removed from the list and you are not charged.

I kept wanting to text the shopper. Thank you so much. I hope your family is safe and healthy. How is it out there? Do you think we should add more items? Or is that more work for you? How often do you shop for others? Do people ask for just, like, three things and call it a day? Is that a waste of your time? How often are you shopping for the elderly? What do you see on these trips?

The app said that the shopper would drop off the groceries by eleven. I called my mother to tell her, but she was out in the street looking for bread. All the cafés were closed, however. I yelled at her for being outside. She showed me her mask and hoodie and clear plastic gloves.
When their groceries were delivered, we decided to make a pancake brunch together the next day via FaceTime. My mother knows how to cook about five dishes, while my father is an expert only in mapo tofu. We settled on plain pancakes. My brother’s family in California also joined the call. We held our phones up to our respective counters and stoves to track one another’s work. The last time my parents came to my apartment, Markus taught my mother how to make fluffy pancakes. But when she tried making them on her own the following weekend, they came out too salty. It was because of the salted butter. We kept meaning to follow up with a FaceTime cooking lesson, but it never happened. Now the planning of such a gathering seems very easy to me, and makes so much sense. And this time, with unsalted butter, my mother’s pancakes were delicious. They were completely misshapen, though. But she was too happy about eating such fluffy pancakes to care.

I had to yell at her only once during the call: to flip her phone upside down so that I could see the batter sizzling in the pan.

This week I will try to replicate the success of the first round of online shopping: again setting the alarm for four a.m., and then lying down on the sofa so that I don’t fall into too deep a sleep.

This time is incredibly distinct, yes. We are being reprogrammed so quickly inside this suspended state. Or perhaps it’s not that we’re suspended right now—but acting, active, acquiring new shape.

A year ago, during a stretch of anxiety, my body woke itself up without fail between two thirty and four in the morning, and stayed awake until six. By the second week of insomnia, I came to dread the routine for bed. To combat the disturbance of sleep, or to control it, I visited an acupuncturist. I dabbed lavender oil onto my temples and neck. I removed whole milk from my diet and searched for a healthy replacement. I started exercising again. I tried to keep a log of the times I’d wake up, using apps and notebooks with grids. I searched for therapists who took my insurance. I tried setting up a new budget to fit in all these new things, while at the same time keeping out the incredulous voice in my head that belonged to my mother. This maddening habit continued for nearly seven months. Eventually—perhaps because of a change in weather or because time continued to happen, continues to happen—I was able to sleep through the night. But I realized only during the start of the coronavirus spread last month, when the sudden wakefulness at four a.m. had come back, that the way insomnia happens for me is by my anticipation of it. Because I was anticipating rising anxiety, I was also anticipating a return to insomnia.

With this revelation, for the past few days I have been able to shift the hour I jolt awake from three a.m. to at least five thirty. Before my father retired, he awakened at four thirty every morning, except Sundays, and left the house by five. He drove trucks to deliver goods from a warehouse to restaurants. When my parents owned their own business, he continued this morning routine, and my mother would join him at the office by eleven.

My mother does not sleep well because of lifelong worries and regrets. I think about sending her a text when I’m suddenly awake at four a.m., to demonstrate solidarity. But before I can give in to the impulse, I picture her return text: “Why aren’t you sleeping? Stop taking such bad care of yourself.”

This insomnia is how the reading parties began.

On the first morning we had to work from home—March 16—I woke up abruptly at four a.m. An hour passed before I gave up trying to fall back asleep, and I went searching through my books. I had bought a book the month before called The Fool.
by Anne Serre. It is a collection of three novellas. My favorite story is the first one, “The Fool.” It is not really a story. It’s about the Tarot card called the Fool, and how the character of the fool is significant to the world and to the narrator. She marvels over the various fools she’s met, one of them her current partner.

Recurring motifs showing up in a narrative without a plot means the writer is sorting through a haunting.

That sleepless morning, I had the urge to read aloud. This urge occurs often, and I give in often. I started on page one of “The Fool” and ended on page two. I recorded myself reading the few paragraphs. I hadn’t brushed my teeth yet or wiped the sleep from the corners of my eyes. The recording is of my glasses and the top of my shiny forehead and also of the dark window behind me. I sat on the step underneath the kitchen window, which is the farthest point from my bed. I posted this recording on social media for some friends. I did it again the next morning: I anticipated insomnia, insomnia happened, I sat by the kitchen window, I read a few paragraphs of “The Fool” aloud, I recorded myself reading, I posted to Instagram, I felt better.

Then a young colleague and I began reading The Rings of Saturn aloud to each other every morning. It was the first week our office asked us to work from home. Alicia picked The Rings of Saturn because she had always wanted to read it, and I had always wanted to reread it. The average length of a paragraph is four pages. We alternated our readings from long paragraph to long paragraph. There are ten chapters. The average length of a chapter is one hour. Chapter 9 is the longest in the book, and we broke up that reading to two mornings. For the last chapter, I recorded my voice during the reading. We learn about the landscapes that were erased so that mulberry trees for silk worm cultivation could be planted. The book is about reckoning with erasure. It is not difficult to read aloud, because the syntax is so precise. But often I found myself reading quickly in order to reach the end of the sentence sooner. Sometimes I tried to slow down my pace to better honor Sebald’s rhythms. Other times I stumbled through a sentence if it contained an unfamiliar word, especially if the word was one I’d never said aloud before or if it was in another language. I felt most at home in the reading when Sebald described an uncanny experience. Sometimes he would describe, at length, an uncanny dream. I underlined all the passages about the uncanny, the unnerving, the dream state. His acknowledgment of the uncanny is an acknowledgment of a deep mourning.

We finished Rings in a week and a half.

During that time, I found I also wanted to read to a larger group of people. And I wanted other people to read to me. It was a deep hunger, to be read to. The hunger encompassed connection as well, contact, to see people’s faces, to see their expressions,
with. And what was most gratifying was seeing you and Wen pop up in the corner (muted because she’d be playing with the keyboard), and—for the latest reading—to see Justin come out of your closet!

Here are some of the writers that you and these friends have shared:

John Berger
Emily Dickinson
Gerard Manley Hopkins
Matthew Salesses
Anne Carson
Seamus Heaney
Anne Boyer
Leonora Carrington
Thomas Bernhard
Li-Young Lee
Maira Kalman
Mahmoud Darwish
Javier Marías
Sophie Calle
Adrienne Rich
Jacques Prévert (in Québécois French)
Alice Oswald

For most of March, I could not recall the phrase “shelter in place.”

When I look at Wen and my downstairs neighbors’ daughter, when I see my niece and my friends’ daughter, both living in California—as I interact with them all through the prism of this screen—I keep formulating statements that start with, “This will be the generation that . . .”

How was our generation observed as our parents raised us? For me, the social fabric back then consisted first of Chinatowns with their rough cadences and then of suburban tree-lined streets that posed their own sort of uncertainties (I’m walking down Dieterle Crescent toward P.S. 174 as a seven-year-old, and wondering, with a little bit of terror in my heart, why all the trees have gnarled wounds in their thick trunks).

People say things like “After this is all over . . .” or “When we vote in November . . .” However, I keep saying things like “But will there be a November?” Yet, since I do echo your sentiment about wanting to remember how this time is incredibly distinct, let me try too: After this is over, these are the habits I’m looking forward to maintaining this summer, this fall, the rest of this eye-opening year:

• Waking up early.
• Exercising regularly.
• Reading books aloud with Alicia.
• Low-key reading parties.
• Sunday brunch sessions with my family, wherein my mother and I learn how to cook a new breakfast dish each week.
• Getting weekly lessons about Star Wars from my friends’ five-year-old daughter, who has become obsessed with its lore.
• Being in better touch with those I don’t see as often as I like: my brother and his family in California; the parents of the Star Wars–obsessed daughter, also in California; you and your family, only 3.2 miles away.
• Creating an herb garden on the fire escape.
• Expressing support and respect for all those whose work is so different from mine behind the computer, whose labor is so visible, if only now because this pandemic has caused its threads, its veins, its strengths and foundations to be seen. Let me not get clumsy in describing this; we reach for similar root words sometimes (like thread), but I like how you put this far better: I wonder what will remain of this pandemic discourse, besides “social distancing.” If we will tend to the threads of interdependence this pandemic has surfaced and made so bare—as in, both more visible than they usually are and, sometimes, conspicuously threadbare.

•

I keep thinking about a dream I once had about zombies. They were the slow-moving kind and wouldn’t reach our part of the world for a few more years. But the pancakes I was feeding the llamas one morning triggered them to speed up, and suddenly they were on the horizon. My parents huddled together on their twin bed and told me to leave them behind. “It’s all right,” they said. “We’ve seen enough. Go.”

seeing with you,
Wah-Ming
Other Woman

The first hair I found was between the pages of a magazine ruelled between the mattress and the wall. It had to be hers; my own hair stops at the shoulders.

The next hair was flossed in a hedge of dust and dirt that I loosened from a broom.

Like most men, he prefers women with long hair. The most erotic passage in all of literature, he claims, appears in Kawabata’s Snow Country. In that novel, a wealthy dilettante from Tokyo makes seasonal visits to a hot springs inn in the mountains of Niigata, where he dallies with the heart of a provincial geisha.

In winter the scalawag sinks his fingers through the geisha’s long black hair and marvels, “Cold! I don’t think I’ve ever touched such cold hair.”

Two weeks ago I plucked from the bathroom floor a pubic hair about three-quarters of an inch long. I set the hair on a dish to examine it more closely. The hair was slightly curled, whitened at one tip from the point of extraction. Unlike most men, he does not like his women to shave, a corollary to his distaste for cosmetics and nail polish. I stretched the hair straight between my fingers and watched it spring back on itself as though anxious to recover its shape.

Facts about the woman who came before me loiter in the skiffs and pivots of idle conversation. Once, as a girl working the register at her family’s mini-mart, she was robbed by a junkie waving a 12-liter bottle of cola over his head. She abhorred the word “panties.” Hypnosis and acupuncture had failed to curb her smoking habit, which gave her chronic cough. She tended to the cough with a steady intake of lozenges. She spent extravagantly on designer bras but resented the markup on beverages at restaurants.

Once, this woman got very angry and threw a plate of spaghetti at him from across the room. He shook his head, laughing, as he told this story. There was something practiced about his choice of words and delivery that made me certain he had told this story many times before. The rue and affection in his tone tore at me.

Really, I didn’t need to know any of this, but of course I could not know enough. I wanted to know what it was about her. I imagined tipping that plate back slightly in my hand for ballast, and the weight of it leaving my hand.

Someone once told me the best way to write an online dating profile is to write your own elegy: Think about how the qualities you’d want to be remembered for. Which is entirely wrong. Your profile should be written to attract people you want to have sex
with. And if they are honest with themselves, most people want to fuck plate throwers. They most certainly don’t want to do it with someone who delivers her rage like a stone at the bottom of a sack, which, I’m afraid, is my preferred form of vindication when I’ve been wronged.

I don’t want you to think that he spoke of her often—quite the contrary. Most of the time he’s mindful not to mention her at all. But we live through the things we live through and know the people we know, all of it a continent of information and impressions that can’t be broken off from easily. And yet he has carefully stripped away all photographs evidence of this woman from his apartment, and even scrubbed his social media. I searched for her even as I wanted to obliterate her. My online investigation proved disappointing, yielding a single digital image the size of a postage stamp on a professional networking site, her dark hair melting into a dark shirt.

What part of me, or you, will linger after we’re gone? I admit this question was of more interest to me than who I would be if I stayed. Some months ago, I began growing my hair long. I want to grow it longer than hers. Then I will grow it even longer, past the small of my back, so when the time comes that my successor takes my place, there will be no mistaking what is mine.

personality we’d all watched years ago. At least that’s what we imagined whenever we caught the outline of her eyeballs racing beneath her eyelids. The doctor warned us not to read too much into these movements: they were not necessarily signs of brain function. The body has a mind of its own.

Once when we were in her hospital room, she startled us with a fart, as though punctuating an unspoken sentence.

Her high school boyfriend, who was, by all accounts, sweet if a bit dim, went on to attend a small liberal arts college, where he met the woman he would marry at a freshman mixer. We thought dolefully: Cecilia will never go to any mixers. Her mother, Chang tai-tai, was a friend of the family. I

birthday, she took special care to rouge her cheeks and paint her lips. But Chang tai-tai’s greatest pride was cutting and styling Cecilia’s hair, a curtain wall of uncommon strength descended from her side of the family. In ancestral times, she claimed, locks of this hair were twirled into calligraphy brushes, the stroke of which was capable of raising the caliber of a person’s writing. Poetry on love, courage, and sacrifice rose from the paper, monumental as ships. We smiled and nodded. It sounded like bullshit. But we understood this talk was her way of keeping her daughter’s foot in this world.

But we did not keep our foot in hers. Over time, in the rare event that Cecilia came up in conversation, the talk usually dissolved into half-hearted pledges. We really must visit soon, we told each other, empty promises that were, thankfully, accountable to no one. A decade passed. When one of us heard that the Changs had finally consented to remove Cecilia’s tubes, we were surprised to learn that Cecilia had been alive this whole time, a phrase we turned over in our mouths, marveling at the measure of our own lives, the arc of which was not yet visible.

Chang tai-tai visited Cecilia every day without fail. She rotated her daughter’s limbs, cut and filed her fingernails and toenails, sponged her armpits and between her legs. On Cecilia’s
effect was unflattering, the hair of a young woman framing an old, wrinkled face. Even worse, this shriveled face looked out at us reproachfully, like a peevish monkey, no matter what we said or did. It was as though the hair were leeching away the old woman’s vitality—just as Cecilia had done when she was alive—a connection we couldn’t resist making even though we knew it was repugnant. Probably we deserved the monkey face. Every time she turned it on us, we felt both lashing and relief, like penitents.

Some time later, I received a package in the mail from Chang tai-tai. I was not the only one. Inside a small lacquer box brushed with gold filigree was a three-coin lucky knot interlaced with what looked to be Cecilia’s hair. When I took the knot out of the box and held it to the light, my daughters giggled and shrieked the way that children do to escalate the thrill of their own terror.

I scolded them. You know, people in olden times used to keep the hair of loved ones as keepsakes, I said. It was called mourning hair.

I explained how the hair was plaited into wreathes, or woven for use as watch fobs and brooches to be worn over the heart. This was before people had photographs. Before photography was even invented!

The girls listened with faraway eyes. They had no idea what a fob was and cared even less to ask. I had entered into the dead zone of history where the signals were chronically enfeebled. When and how did mourning hair fall out of favor or turn ghastly? Someday, I thought, our dead selves will be turned into microchips, set to an infinite loop of Pachelbel’s Canon in D Major, and shot into outer space.

The littler one, the kinder one, asked, Mama, are you sad?
Of course I am, I said cruelly, and looked away. I’m often sad. I placed the knot back in its rice paper wrapping and slid the box away in a drawer.

**Treatment for a Taiwanese Horror Movie**

Every morning, a middle-aged woman who lives alone in a high-rise apartment, wakes up, and stares at her reflection in the mirror. She turns her face slowly from side to side. Touches the skin along her jawline with her fingertips, and presses down lightly on her cheeks, as one might tender a new bruise. Every day she goes to her office job, takes the train to look in on her elderly parents, and suffers the usual humiliations. With each new day, she more and more resembles Michael Jackson, post-Invincible, fragile, forsaken. When the transformation is complete, a skein of long black hair shoots out of her mouth, ears, eyes, etc.
In the Beginning, Sometimes I Left Messages in the Street
by Lisa Chen

LISA CHEN was born in Taipei, wrote Mouth (Kaya Press), received a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer’s Award, and lives in Brooklyn.

Some years ago I ran into Daisy at an opening for a group show on Orchard Street. The theme of the show was “Bad Optics” and I don’t remember much about the artwork except for a wall of small square canvases, each a painting of different yet eerily identical scenes of the backsides of cops as they swarmed someone unseen on the ground.

I remember thinking when I saw Daisy that she appeared to have lost a great deal of weight but I didn’t know her well enough to say anything about it, so I said nothing and asked instead what she was working on.

We were not close friends yet we’d known each other for years. We were both part of a loose confederacy of artists and writers who had churned through more than a decade’s worth of word-of-mouth apartment shares, artist residencies, restaurant work, proofreading gigs, art handling, the odd archival job. Over time, many of us moved away. A few died or went corporate, but the rest of us remained involved, at some level of success or struggle, with the making of projects. These projects were what we talked to each other about mostly, the way some people might talk about their children or the work they did for money, which was not unimportant but was not the same thing as projects.

We were the ones you could reliably count on to fill the seats at your poetry reading that had three too many featured poets, or at your experimental staging of Nausea with puppets.

As we circled the gallery, Daisy explained that she’d been working most recently with paper, a medium she’d never given much thought to until she sliced her finger with the edge of a sheet of typing paper. The cut was so deep it actually drew blood.

That’s when I was reminded that paper has teeth, she said, a little rehearsed I thought, like something she might say if she were being interviewed by an art journal. She’d spent the past year building several miniature tent cities from paper. More recently, she’d been studying photographs of the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, magnifying the images so she could to examine how the temporary shelters were constructed. She was, of course, imagining making a paper facsimile of the camp—at scale, even though she knew the latter was probably impossible. But the politics of the project were troubling her. Did she have a right? She had no direct or personal tie to the crisis. She wasn’t Muslim. In fact she had no religious belief to speak of.

What about you, Kimi? she said. What are you working on?

I told her that, since the beginning of the year, I hadn’t been working on much of anything. My time, or rather, my mind, had been taken over by my father, whose intractability, I’d come to

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They did a good job. You'll like it. And there's something playing there now that I think you should see. It's called, it's called...oh, Jesus, hold on. She reached for her phone, went at it with her thumbs, then raised her head, triumphant.

_Marjorie Prime_. It's movie adapted from a play, she said, stuffing her phone in the back pocket of her jeans. I won't say more. And call me when you've seen it.

The next time I found myself in Union Square, I took Daisy's advice. I headed to the Quad, paid for a single ticket for a matinee screening and took my seat in a mostly empty theater.

Here's what you need to know: _Marjorie Prime_ takes place in the future, but a not-too-distant future. Furniture still looks like furniture. Clothes still look like clothes.

In this future, people use hologram technology to help them cope with death and grief. They program “primes”, or digital apparitions, to stand in for the people they’ve lost.

When we first encounter Marjorie, she's chatting with Don Draper. Actually, it isn't Don Draper but the actor who played Don Draper now playing the prime of Marjorie's dead husband.

The setting, a seaside home, does not feel very homey. The featureless beige décor suggests the future, or a porn set, or a house staged for buyers—places where people can easily project themselves without having to imagine other people who might have existed there before them.

In a later scene, Marjorie's daughter tells her husband that she finds it grotesque that her mother would choose a prime of her father as he appeared in his prime. He is all square-jawed and sublime while Marjorie is old and lumpy.

When the prime opens his mouth and sounds just like Don Draper, I was surprised by how much I'd missed the sound of his voice. He's on the wrong show and his hair, missing the pomade treatment, looks strangely soft. He's slipped into a foreign, more low-key register, like someone recently released from rehab or who has convinced their employer to let them work remotely from upstate.

Like Marjorie, we will settle for his shadow.

In the future we will order primes of our loved ones from Amazon Prime only to realize we lack the energy or nerve to program them to our satisfaction.

Like other fad appliances and technology, the prime will probably end up boxed up in its original packaging and vanquished to the basement or attic. We will feel bad about the money we’ve wasted, and associate the prime with this shame, and this shame will insure its sad fate.

One day the children of a future generation will rummage through our effects, stumble across a prime of an elder they understand (it was just the two of us; I was an only child and my mother had long ago moved back to Japan) was dementia.

During the day when I wasn’t at work, and sometimes when I was at work, I spent hours researching the world of home health aides and skilled nursing facilities and how to pay for them. Evenings, after I'd eaten my takeout in front of the television, I'd gravitate to my laptop, and then, later in bed, to the smaller screen of my phone. I nested myself in the internet for hours, sometimes revisiting the same information on the same dementia websites, sometimes scouring user forums. I even read blogs written by family members of loved ones with dementia, the entries narrating backwards so the one that appeared most recently on the home page was always the end of the story, the point at which the loved one died or was so absent in his body that the blogger seemed to have lost heart in writing any further. I sometimes read all the entries in reverse, a mordant yet beguiling exercise—declining function; losing friends; incontinence milestone; grim reckoning; early, unsettling diagnosis; the vow to stay positive.

I'm not sure what I hoped to achieve by all this. I suppose I knew enough to know that knowing more would not make my father better. But this fever-searching felt familiar to me—like smoking—a habit that wasn't good for you yet nonetheless afforded a sense of relief without offering any actual solutions.

We'd ended up by the wine and cheese table. There was nothing left on the fake silver plastic serving tray except broken water crackers and a few loose grapes. She said she knew what I going through, or at least a variation of what I was going through. Her mother-in-law—Suze's mom, a retired schoolteacher—had developed some early form of dementia, too. Short-term memory loss, at least for now. She'd stopped reading even though she had, all her life, been an omnivorous reader. Sci-fi, classics like _Middlemarch_ and _Walden_, stuff I could never get through, Daisy said. She's read experimental Latin American authors; she's even dabbled in Goth erotica! We had a little laugh over the sexual thoughts of old people.

A pensive look crossed Daisy’s face. What unsettled her the most was that her mother-in-law seemed to have taken this setback in stride, which frankly made Daisy wonder if she were masking deeper reservoirs of mental debilitation.

Listening to Daisy, I wondered whether her weight loss was related to her worry over her in-law. I felt a flicker of resentment, abhorrent as it was, because I'd taken the opposite approach, eating and eating like a machine that had been broken and stuck on a high setting.

Listen, she told me. Have you been to the Quad lately? Since the renovation?

I said I hadn't been going to movies much lately.

In the future we will order primes of our loved ones from Amazon Prime only to realize we lack the energy or nerve to program them to our satisfaction.
I thought about my father who was becoming more not himself. He was, by temperament, a gentle man, a patient man. When he was well, his favorite pastime was tending his garden. My mother and I used to joke that his life would be happier if he were a plant. But now when I saw him, he was often angry and bitter. It wasn’t only the complaining and cursing that pained me but that he seemed to have largely lost the ability to think or care about other people. I’d read on the internet that empathy lives in the frontal lobes of the brain; the doctors told me that, most likely, based on his behavior, this was the part of my father’s brain that was eroding.

A few days later I called Daisy. I could tell she was excited to hear from me and eager to talk about the movie. This was one of the things I remember seemed to matter so much about the city when I moved here years ago—the fact that you could run into a friend and talk about the latest show at the Whitney, A Fistful of Dollars soundtrack to Wittgenstein’s Mistress; whatever suited her mood. Daisy mused that much of the making projects is about the search for form, where to put the ghosts and in what way or another, about my father. I had thought the project would be about my father in his prime. Instead, all I seemed capable of doing was manifesting his sub-prime, the last dregs of his life.

This was not necessarily the period of his life I want to remember, I said, but the project seems to have a mind of its own.

Speaking of projects.

Daisy told me that she’d read Wittgenstein’s Mistress for the first time, a novel that’s basically made up entirely of the rambling meditations of a woman who just may be the last person left on earth. What she wanted to do, Daisy said, was reimagine Markson’s novel as a pirate radio program operated by a solitary woman who is the station manager, producer and on-air personality rolled into one, broadcasting day in and day out an infinite, unbroken stream of weather reports, advice for the lovelorn and financially anxious, poetry hour, drunken rants, what have you. And of course, music, lots of music—Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s The Inflated Tear, Japanese noise bands, the soundtrack to A Fistful of Dollars; whatever suited her mood.

Is she mad, or truly alone? Does she have an audience? Does it matter?

I know most people don’t listen to radio anymore especially at night, Daisy said. I haven’t much since college. But sometimes I think I was never happier than listening to KPOO at two in the morning when I was painting in my campus art studio. The speed helped too.

That got us on the topic of form, and how Marjorie Prime might have been conceived originally as a play but seemed to have found its truest form in film, that stuttering mirage of light and shadow. Daisy mused that much of the making projects is about the search for form, where to put the ghosts and in what kind of machine.

Then there was a lull in the conversation. I felt shy suddenly, being on the phone. I spoke so infrequently by phone these days that I found it difficult to end conversations. The wind-up and release was no longer intuitive to me; I sometimes mistakenly cut the other person off in the middle of their cheerful goodbye.

We let the silence sit between us until finally I said: Hello, hello, are you still there?

I’m still here, said Daisy. Did you say something?

I didn’t see or talk to Daisy again for nearly a year. As I said, we were not the kind of friends who made any real effort to see each other.

Some people moved out of the city, unable or unwilling to pay the cost of rent anymore. A couple reconsidered their decision not to have children and reproduced using the latest technology. Some became arts administrators, acupuncturists; certified therapists; others adjuncted or worked with at-risk youth. A friend who could be counted on to bring all of us altogether at
least once a year in her rambling backyard in Ditmas Park died of breast cancer. By then my father’s mind was in tatters and I’d placed him in a nursing home. The last time I took the train to visit him, he was bent forward in his wheelchair, muttering, muttering. As I got closer I was able to make out what he was saying: his own name—first, middle, last—over and over again. I mourned the living him.

When I finally ran into Daisy again, it was at Prospect Park. This had never happened before. But this was no ordinary day, and this, as we were all coming to realize, was no ordinary time.

Up north, a containment zone had been set up around the first outbreak after a lawyer got sick and spread it to others at his synagogue. New cases were starting to pop up across in the city, along with reports of cleaned-out grocery shelves. Every few hours there seemed to be new rules governing an increasingly shrinking number of permissible gatherings. Even so, along Vanderbilt that Sunday in early spring—one of the warmest days we’d had in weeks—there were groups of people lounging in the outdoor seating areas of restaurants; I sped by them on my bike on my way to the park. Through open doorways, I caught glimpses of men hunched over barstools. I passed a young couple in their twenties standing in the street, beaming at each other as they exchanged ice cream cones.

It’s okay, I said. And my dad’s okay too. I didn’t actually know that for sure, but it’s what the nurses told me when I managed to catch one of them on the phone. I actually hadn’t seen my father in what felt like a long time; the nursing home had stopped allowing outside visitors a week ago, and the truth was I hadn’t been to see him for at least two weeks before the lockdown. My father and I were becoming strangers. Or we were moving toward something elemental, Neanderthal in our relation to one another? Now I carried a new weight in my chest—some relief and mostly shame—that there were outside forces, global forces, relieving me from future visits for the time being, even as I was desperate to see him.

A trio of men whipped past us on expensive racing bicycles, a shiny blur of Lycra. In the distance we could hear the incantatory beat of the drummers’ circle.

We turned then, to the subject of our projects. But the news there was not good either. With a sigh, Daisy told me she’d had to shelve her pirate radio idea. She just wasn’t any good with technical things, and none of the grants she’d applied for to hire a tech person came through. It used to be that you could trade this labor for that labor but most people don’t know how to do anything anymore, she lamented, or the people who do know how to do specialized things are using those skills to make actual money and have no need for your skill set.

At the mouth of the park I parked my bike and started walking along the outer loop. It was obvious by the size of crowd that many other people had had the same idea; absent our usual entertainments and diversions and the threat of confinement, nature and fresh air emerged as a revelation. All around me, the clamor of schoolyard recess. After some minutes, I spotted Daisy walking briskly ahead on the path. She was alone, pumping her arms up and down. I was slightly out of breath by the time I managed to catch up to her and coughed a few times. A few heads turn in our direction. We made the obligatory chiding remarks about keeping six feet apart and then fell into step, probably at a distance of about three feet. We talked about how the community college where she taught had closed, how the family services office where I worked had closed, how the impossibility of focusing much on anything.

Daisy told me her mother-in-law had taken a turn for the worse since we last spoke. On bad nights she was convinced her husband was a burglar who had broken into their home. Luckily she called Suze or her brother instead of the police, whispering her fear into the phone. Stashes of cash, candy and moldering fruit had been discovered in odd corners around the house. But so far, they were managing. Certainly no one wanted to put the mother in a facility, especially now.

Daisy shot me a horrified look. I didn’t mean—

I described, as best I could, the project I’d been wrestling with, a piece choreographed for five dancers that starts with a coil-and-release motif, then stops abruptly before starting again, then another sudden stop, a restart before doubling back on itself; soaring, crashing, and tentatively breaking open again before being pulled under. It was overwrought, embarrassingly so; the truth was the piece had been mucked up for some time.

The actual, persistent vision I had in my mind was of the dancers marching dirge-like from the stage, filing out into the street, and falling one by one into an open manhole.

Without meaning to, our pace had slowed considerably as we talked. Two boys sped by us on kick scooters, their heads swaddled in enormous helmets.

You know Marjorie Prime didn’t start out as Marjorie Prime, Daisy said. The playwright’s original concept was to write play with an artificial intelligence program.

A ponytailed woman, the mother of the boys I assumed, jogged by us with her phone strapped to her upper arm. Jasper! She called out, maternal, exasperated. Jasper, slow down!

The playwright had in mind to stage the play as a dialogue between two people—two human beings—and leave it to the audience to decide which lines were written by him and which by machine. Unfortunately, as a writer, the chatbot was completely hopeless. He killed the project and out of it came Marjorie Prime.
So what I’m saying is, Daisy said, leaning in so we were no more than a foot apart, you never know.

I nodded. We reciprocated genuine, if bland, encouragement. It was ritual and not without meaning. Then we shared information about the people we knew in common, many of whom, we realized, we seldom saw anymore, and all of them more vivid to us than we were to each other.

She repeated how sorry she was to hear about my father. I felt my attention drift and looked out onto the interior of the park. Geese had gathered at the edge of the lake, their necks elegant as long satin gloves. New parents bounced their infants in wraps and slings; workout fanatics stretched out their limbs. It was late in the afternoon. There were no pedal boats or kayaks out on the water. A wind kicked in at that instant and loosened the blossoms on a nearby cherry tree. The petals took to the air like snow, a light snow, the only kind of snow that seemed to fall on the city anymore. Hadn’t it been snowing in the last scene of *Marjorie Prime*? The filmmakers signaled the passing of time through such perceptible changes in weather. An image flashed in my mind of snowflakes falling outside the big picture windows at Marjorie’s beach house. Or had I misremembered it?

In the last scene, the digital hologram of Marjorie, the digital hologram of Marjorie’s daughter and Don Draper are gathered in the house by the sea.

There are no humans around anymore.

*Once, I had a dream of fame.*

The primes talk, exchanging the information they’ve been taught to know.

*Generally, even then, I was lonely.*

How their back-and-forth conversation calls to mind the screen of an arcade game, waiting for tokens. The images shows you how the game works but without a mind.
Degrees of Retreat
by Carina Kohn

CARINA KOHN is an MFA candidate at Stony Brook Southampton. She has been published in Chronogram and the Stonethrow Review.

Every little thing in Rosa’s house has energy, down to the dish towel. She never stands close to the microwave. All her pots are cast iron. Her clothes are cotton, and her food, organic. Every piece of furniture she and her husband bought has been replaced with its natural, unpolished wood equivalent. It has also been positioned in accordance with the electromagnetic field lines that Victor, the cancer expert, has mapped out on the back of Anna’s science test. He maps a special kind of EMF, which he calls “Energy Lines.” Rosa can’t see the lines, but Victor senses them through his palms.

After an hour of walking in between bedroom appliances—last week they finished the kitchen—Victor takes out a pencil from his trousers and begins to sketch. “This house is like a Manhattan grid.”

“Is it that bad?” Rosa asks.

Victor puts the sketch down and holds out his palms once more. He hovers by the bed. He double and triple checks, and draws a line that crosses through the rectangle meant to represent the bed.

“We need to move it right now. When you lie down there’s an Energy Line running through your breasts, and you have been sleeping like this for what, ten years?”

Rosa nods. She has been so stupid. “And what about Anna?” she asks, peering over the map.

“We’ll move hers next.”

They push Rosa’s bed to the opposite side of the room. It is heavy, dead weight. A miniature statue of Ganesha falls off the nightstand in the disturbance. Victor moves the small elephant-being to where he saw it before, on the pine shelf that is Rosa’s shrine. Its familiars include an 8×10 of blue Christ, 8×10 of Pharaoh Zoser, a 4×6 of Sathya Sai Baba. There are also crystals, turquoise stones, rosary beads, and a tiny gold pyramid, recommended by Victor himself for its ability to balance energy. “Think of it like an air filter,” he had told her, “but for the spirit.”

He takes a seat in the middle of the repositioned bed, careful to avoid lines. “How is July,” he says. “Next month too soon?”

“No, let’s book it. I’ll see if Anna wants to come along.”

“Great.” Victor scratches at his short, wiry beard. “This your pillow? The memory foam?”

“Yes, A. J. prefers the hotel marshmallow kind.”

“You should see if you can change that. It’s no good he sleeps like that.”

“I tried already. He won’t budge.”

“Just switch it out.” Victor takes Rosa’s memory foam pillow and plops it by the foot of the bed. “This way from now on, too.”
Rosa studies the bed and envisions nights of feet-to-head with A. J. like raw, Yin Yang shrimp.

“Tea break?”

They leave the room with the nightstands on the wrong end and the flat screen hanging oddly above the head of the bed. All to be dealt with.

* 

Rosa is out of Lifestyle Awareness, and has been drinking Traditional Medicinals’s chamomile. She pours a cup for herself and Anna—one with a print of an aardvark and the other with one of a dingo—and leaves an empty cup for Victor, like an offering. He likes to drink from the pangolin.

When he comes back three days later, they rotate Anna’s bed ninety degrees to the left. Rosa changes the floral bedding to a baby blue, winter-themed set identical to her own. The material is cotton and good.

“Feng shui is off,” Anna says.

“There are health risks, Anna. Want to look at the map?”

Rosa opens Anna’s dresser drawers and begins to unravel its contents: T-Shirts, undergarments, pajama shorts. “You’re going to need to make two piles. Victor knows which materials are bad for you. You can label the tags with a Sharpie. I’ll be doing the same.”

Anna scratches at the tag on the back of her shirt. On it is a family of meerkats—lengthy, wide-eyed, and of course, nude. Her father bought it at a zoology conference. He is fond of odd animals.

Victor stretches his palms to the shirt. “That one is bad.”

“Anna, take it off,” Rosa says.


“No. Clearly after Victor leaves.”

Rosa pulls out three flabby hundred dollar bills. The new ones, touched most recently by the print machine, were also no good. Victor pockets the cash and kisses Rosa on the cheek.

“Let’s talk on the phone later this week,” he says. “Track any improvement.”

* 

On Monday nights, the video which normally plays on all TVs in the house, as Victor recommends, is replaced by Dancing with the Stars and The Bachelor in the bedroom. At all other hours, there is nothing to see but a floating head. In the video, Victor never speaks and never moves. Occasionally he shifts an inch to the left, or to the right. His eyebrow twitches. Mostly he stares. He is there even when he cannot be. He is an energy guard dog.

A. J. always arrives home in the middle of The Bachelor. By five he is out of the lab, and by eight-thirty he is out of McGillicuddy’s, a loosely Irish pub. Afterwards he makes his ritualistic run to Stop and Shop to buy a bouquet of lilies. He never seems to remember that Rosa is allergic to them.

“Give me one, Chris!” Rosa begs the TV. She and Anna are scrunched in the middle of her bed, chins up to the screen like they are sitting in the first row of a movie theatre. The bed is littered with Twizzlers and dried apricots.

“Mom, Chris is not that hot,” Anna says.

“What does it matter?”

Anna hands her mother a hair brush.

“Thank you. I accept this rose.”

Rosa combs through Anna’s hair, like she is a little kid and not a sprouting teenager. There is ripping at the roots.

“Ouch,” A. J. says from the doorway. “Your hair is dead, Anna. It’s obviously the do-it-yourself dyes.” He puts down a vase of lilies on the dresser.

“Did you buy any nasal decongestant with those?” Rosa says.

“It’s in the cabinet.”

“Hey, Dad, want?” Anna holds up a Twizzler.

“I’m okay.” He kisses Anna on the forehead, which is stained slightly orange. The red color strips off more with every wash.

A. J. goes into his office down the hall, which is more of a deep, cleaned-out closet. There is room for a small desk, computer, and chair. He shakes the mouse to wake up the screen and types: “Novilase Breast Therapy.” Columbia University’s Medical Center webpage offers the treatment.

* 

That night Rosa dreams of decapitation. She feels like she has experienced death so many times that if it were to happen in real life, she would know what’s coming for her. Once, she dreamed she was a male soldier covered in mold. Her throat had been sliced by a sword, though eventually her head grew back. Another time, Anna’s science teacher came up from behind Rosa. She was sitting at a lab table that stretched long and infinitely, like a highway. The teacher chopped her good.

When Rosa wakes up, it is still night. She knows Anna has barely sorted through her clothing, so she takes her Ganesha statue and moves it into Anna’s room, just in case.
A. J. does more research throughout the week, and asks around to be sure about the treatment. Before joining Rosa in bed, he dabs his feet in the bathroom with a handful of flaky toilet paper. Rosa is wearing an eye mask, but he knows she is awake. She is one of those people who are very bad at sleeping.

“Found an alternative method,” he whispers.

“A woman from the Sivananda retreat—we were sharing a room and she showed me her padded bra. I do not want to wear a beanbag.”

“You wouldn’t need to. You wouldn’t need a mastectomy.”

“What I’m doing is working.”

“It’s not.”

Rosa kicks at the headrest. “Let’s ask the pendulum. I’ll go get it.”

She paws through the jewelry in her dresser drawer and chuckes empty boxes saved for re-gifts on the floor until she finds the thumb-sized purple crystal. She holds it up by its chain.

“Move up and down for ‘yes’—left and right for ‘no.’” Her hand is shaking and it swings wildly.

“Is what I’m doing working?”

“Rosa, don’t start. Let’s talk, you and me. Leave the crystal.”

“Is my tumor getting smaller? Will it spread? Is the house making me sick?”

“I don’t see how it could with your pyramids and your herbs and your army of religious figureheads and whatever else.”

is her bed, which has folded in on itself. The walls around them are gray, like graph paper, and Rosa identifies what feels like the essence of basement, though it is unclear what kind of room they are in. She looks up, assuming blue, and sees white cobwebs running through and around the birds. They are motionless.

“Show me what you got, Annsy,” Rosa says. “How many degrees? The bed is the shape.”

“My test tomorrow is European History,”

“Then—how many migrations?”

“Ask the Starlings.”

“I will if they have nice accents. What do you think a British chirp sounds like, Victor?”

“Chop-chop,” Victor says. He is in the webs, sitting lotus.

“Cheep-cheep,” Rosa calls. She caws.

“Mom, I gotta study.”

“Flying North?” Victor asks.

“Not yet,” Rosa says, suddenly stern.

“Where’s my meerkat shirt,” Anna says in the morning.

“Where’s my stuff?”

It is Monday again, and Anna sees that more is missing. Rosa’s bedroom is empty. The snowflake sheets are gone, there is only one pillow, and it is fluffy. The shrine has been cleared away, except for a purple jewelry box Anna painted in Pre-K that now holds her mother’s Rosary beads and healing stones. Pictures have been taken down. The mirrors have been wiped clean, and still have streaks of Method all-purpose spray.

“Anna, I booked a retreat before my retreat. I am leaving tonight.” There is a rolled up, green yoga mat by the door. “You’ll like the Ashram, the peppermint tea, the sauna rooms. Come with me. Victor will drive us.”

“Where’s Dad? I’m getting Dad.”

“You don’t know what I need, Anna. You don’t.”

“You don’t know what you need. Or what anyone needs. And you should know, neither does Victor.”

“This home is making me sick. You have to understand. Please, come with me.”

“No, Mom. Just let me know when visiting hours are. Okay?”

“At the Ashram?”

Anna leaves the bedroom and shuts the door to Rosa’s room and hers. She turns off the lights and watches the dancing and The Bachelor on her phone. She pretends not to hear Rosa drive away, and Rosa pretends she is going nowhere. A late night run to the store.
A. J. returns a couple hours later with apology roses. In the office across the hall, the computer is on from the night before, but the tabs with medical centers are dark, in sleep mode.

* 

At the Sivananda retreat, Rosa composts her food scraps and helps cook meals made with vegetables from the gardens. She takes yoga classes every morning and afternoon. There are campfires at night, and when it is warm she and her friends sleep in tents. After the few weeks are over, Rosa re-books her room. At three o’clock on Saturdays and Sundays, she calls Anna, and sometimes A. J. They do not always pick up, but if they do, she asks them about their day and shares a singular joy: a sunset, a mint leaf, a funny joke. She does not want to indulge.

After the first two retreat sessions, Victor returns home. They do long-distance healing over the phone. Sometimes, when no one is around, she swims topless in the lake behind the Shiva temple.

* 

Rosa is visited at Mercy Hospital. Hours are between 10 a.m. and 9 p.m. Anna and A. J. bring a bag of dried nuts and fruit. Sometimes Rosa asks for Pepsi. She has not seen Victor in months. He stopped visiting as the tumor started seeding in her bloodstream.

Anna drops her school bag on one of the puke-green hospital chairs. There is a meerkat stuffed animal on the window sill—a gift bought at the hospital gift shop.

“Where can I sit?” Anna asks.

“Anywhere. You can bring the chair anywhere.”
The siblings, DOROTHY AND DASHIELL MORSE encode their cryptic adventures at cartooniologist.blogspot.com

MARIKO SANCHEZ oversees the Miskatonic romance anthology, Cinderella Love. Insta: cmot15

T. MOTLEY will continue his fake jam comic, The Road to Golgonooza, at Penumbric.com
7. The History of David and Cecily

"Mister Willis, a wealthy American farmer from Florida," said Murph, "had a young slave by the name of David, who worked in the infirmary on the plantation. He found David to be of uncommon intelligence and deeply sympathetic and attentive to the sick, whom he cared for attentively when carrying out the doctors' orders. He also had a unique aptitude for medicinal botany and, without any formal learning, had compiled and classified a manual of all the plants on the farm and its environs. Willis's plantation, located by the shore, was fifteen or twenty leagues from the closest city. The local doctors, rather ignorant on the whole, were reluctant to travel because of the great distances and the difficulty of the roads. The colonist, wishing to correct what was a serious inconvenience in a country subject to violent epidemics by always having a qualified practitioner on hand, decided to send David to France to learn surgery and medicine. Delighted by the offer, the young black man left for Paris. The plantation owner paid for his studies and, after eight years of prodigious effort, David, now recognized as a medical doctor of great distinction, returned to America to place his knowledge at the disposal of his master."

"But David must have considered himself as free and emancipated by law once he set foot in France."

"David's sense of loyalty was highly unusual. He had promised Willis he would return and he returned. He also didn't believe that the instruction that had been paid for with his master's money was his. But he also hoped to be able to morally and physically mitigate the suffering of the slaves who had been his former companions. He promised himself he would be not only their doctor but their supporter and defender back on the plantation."

"The man must have been endowed with unusual integrity and have great love for his fellow man to return to a master after a stay of eight years in Paris, surrounded by the most democratic youth in all Europe."

"By this trait you may judge the man. So there he was back in Florida, where, it must be admitted, he was treated with consideration and decency by Willis, eating at his table, sleeping under his roof. But, this stupid colonist—mean, sensual, and despotic the way some Creoles can be—thought he was being generous in giving David 600 francs in salary. After a few months there was an outbreak of typhoid on the plantation. Willis was affected but was quickly healed through David's excellent care. Out of 30 seriously ill slaves, only two perished. Willis, delighted with David's services, raised his salary to 1,200 francs. The doctor was very satisfied although with great difficulty it is true, obtained an improvement in their condition. But he hoped for more in the future. Meanwhile, he moralized, he consoled those poor people, entreated them to be resigned. He talked to them about God, who watches over the black man as well as the white, of another world, no longer populated with masters and slaves, but good and bad; of another life, eternal, where some were no longer beasts of burden, the possession of others, but where those who were victims here below were so happy that they prayed in heaven above for their tormentors. What can I say? For those unfortunate who, unlike other men, count the steps with bitter joy that lead them to the grave, for those unfortunate who hope only for death, David brought them the hope of immortal freedom; their chains then seemed lighter, their work less harsh. David was their idol. About a year went by in this manner. One of the most attractive slaves on the plantation was a young métisse by the name of Cecily. She was fifteen. Willis developed a potentate's fantasy for the young woman. For what may have been the first time in his life he came into contact with refusal, determined resistance. Cecily was in love with David, who had tended to her during the recent epidemic with admirable devotion. Later, love, the most chaste love, paid the debt of gratitude. David was too refined to boast of his happiness before the day when he would marry Cecily; he was waiting for her to turn 16. Willis, unaware of their mutual affection, had proudly tossed his handkerchief to the pretty métisse. Tearfully, she told David about the callous advances she had so narrowly escaped. He reassured her and immediately went to Willis to ask her hand in marriage."

"Dear Murph, I'm afraid to learn the response from this American potentate. Did he refuse?"

"He refused. He said he had taken a fancy to the young girl, that at no time in his life had he brooked rejection by a slave: he wanted her and he would have her. David could choose another wife or mistress of his liking. There were on the plantation ten métisses as attractive as Cecily. David spoke of his love, which Cecily had shared for a long while, but the planter merely shrugged. David insisted, but his efforts were in vain. The Creole was imprudent enough to tell him that it would set a bad example to see a..."
master give in to a slave and that he was not about to set such an example by giving in to David's whims. He begged; the master grew impatient. David, ashamed at humiliating himself further, reminded him in a firm tone of voice of the services he had provided and his fairness; for he had been satisfied with the lowest of salaries. Willis, now irritated, told him with contempt that he had been too well treated for a slave. David exploded. For the first time in his life he spoke as a man of the enlightenment, sure of his rights, which he had learned from his eight years in France. Willis, now furious, told him he was a rebellious slave and threatened to put him in chains.

David said something bitter and violent. Two hours later, attached to a post, he was whipped, as Cecily was led toward the planter's seraglio.

“The planter's conduct was stupid and offensive. It's the absurdity of cruelty. He needed the man after all.”

“He needed him so badly that, on that very day, his anger, coupled with the drunkenness to which he succumbed every evening, gave him a very severe indeed impression of becoming their leader in order to display the seeds of a rebellion due to the influence apart by the whip. Willis thought he detected in this their sorrow, rather—when they saw David torn of their gratitude, loved David: he had been their of vengeance and jealousy. Willis' s slaves, because after great sacrifice, decided to employ the doctor the end he triumphed, to the great surprise of the agonizing hesitation, Willis had David released from the generosity of his slave. After a period of disease, broken by suffering, and believing that, he had done. Finally, terrified by the progress of the disease, broken by suffering, and believing that, he was going to die, he could at least appeal to the generosity of his slave. After a period of agonizing hesitation, Willis had David released from his chains.

“David saved the plantation owner!”

“For five days and five nights, he watched over him as if he were his father, battling the disease toe to toe with admirable knowledge and skill. In the end he triumphed, to the great surprise of the doctor who had initially been summoned and who didn’t arrive until the following day.”

“And when the colonist was returned to health?”

“Not wishing to be embarrassed in front of the slave who might destroy him at any moment from the heights of his admirable generosity, the colonist, after great sacrifice, decided to employ the doctor who had been sent for initially and threw David back into his cell.”

“Why that’s horrible! But it doesn’t surprise me, David must have felt great remorse for the man.”

“His barbarous conduct was dictated not only out of vengeance and jealousy. Willis’s slaves, because of their gratitude, loved David: he had been their savior, body and soul. They knew how well he had taken care of the owner during his illness. And by some miracle, escaping the deadening apathy into which slavery ordinarily plunges mankind, those unfortunate gave free rein to their indignation—their sorrow, rather—when they saw David torn apart by the whip. Willis thought he detected in this display the seeds of a rebellion due to the influence David had acquired over his slaves. He believed David capable of becoming their leader in order to avenge the master’s ingratitude. This absurd fear was yet another reason for the owner to mistreat David and render him incapable of carrying out the sinister designs he suspected him of harboring.”

“From the point of view of the man’s profound terror, his conduct seems less foolish, but no less cruel.”

“Shortly after these events, we arrived in America. His Highness had chartered a Danish brig in Saint-Thomas, Incognito, we visited various homes as we sailed along the American coast. We were magnificently received by Willis. The evening of the day following our arrival, after several drinks, Willis, as much from the excitation of the wine as by cynical swagger, related, with various tasteless asides, the history of David and Cecily, for I forgot to mention that he had also thrown the unfortunate young woman into a cell to punish her for her initial scorn. Upon hearing this story, his highness thought Willis was simply boasting or was drunk. The man was drunk but he wasn’t boasting. To overcome his incredulity, the colonist rose from the table, ordering a slave to grab a lantern and lead us to David’s cell.”

“And then?”

“I have never seen such a heartrending spectacle in my life. Weak, wretched, half naked and covered in sores, David and that unfortunate girl, chained around the waist, one at one end of the cell, the other opposite, looked like ghosts. The lantern cast upon the scene a more lugubrious color. David did not say a word when he caught sight of us; his gaze had about it a terrifying fixity. The colonist said to him with cruel irony, ‘Well, doctor, how are you feeling? If you’re so smart, save yourself.’ The slave responded by slowly raising his right hand, his index finger raised upward, and, without looking at the colonist, in a solemn voice said, ‘God!’ And remained silent. ‘God?’ the planter replied, as he broke into a laugh. ‘Tell your God to come and take you off my hands. I defy him.’ Then Willis, maddened by his fury and the wine, raised his fist heavenward and yelled ‘Yes, I defy God to take my slaves before their death! If he fails to do so, I deny his existence.’”

“The stupid fool.”

“The man made us sick to our stomach. His Highness didn’t say a word. We left the cell. The chamber was situated, like the house itself, along the ocean shore. We returned to our brig, which was anchored a short distance away. At one in the morning, when everyone on the plantation was asleep, his highness returned to shore with eight well-armed men, went directly to the cell, forced it open, and took David and Cecily. The two victims were taken to the ship without anyone noticing we had been on shore. His highness and I then returned to the owner’s house.

What a strange phenomenon. Those men torture their slaves yet take no precautions against them. They sleep with their doors and windows open. We could almost say that the unfortunate woman’s natural perversity, which had been dormant until then, required no more was made of this adventure?”

“Assume David married Cecily when they arrived in Europe.”

“The marriage, a most happy event, took place in the temple of his highness’s palace. But an extraordinary reversal followed this amazing turn of events. Cecily, forgetting everything David had suffered for her and she for him, ashamed, in the new world in which she found herself, of her marriage to a negro, and seduced by a man of terrible depravity, committed her first offense. You could almost say that the unfortunate woman’s natural perversity, which had been dormant until then, required nothing more than this dangerous upheaval to develop with terrifying energy. You know the rest, the scandal caused by her adventures. After two years of marriage, David, whose confidence was as great as his love, learned of her infamy. It was like a bolt of lightning, and it shook him from his deep-seated but blind conviction.”

“I’m told he wanted to kill his wife.”

“Yes, but thanks to his Highness’s efforts, he agreed that she be locked up for life in a fortress. And it is this very prison that his highness recently opened—to your great surprise and my own, Baron.”

“Frankly, his Highness’s resolve is all the more astonishing as the governor of the fortress has informed him upon several occasions that the woman is incorrigible. They were unable to break either her rebelliousness or her propensity to vice. And in spite of this, his Highness insists in sending the scandal caused by her adventures. After two years of marriage, David, whose confidence was as great as his love, learned of her infamy. It was like a bolt of lightning, and it shook him from his deep-seated but blind conviction.”

“I am as much in the dark as you, Baron. But it’s getting late. His highness would like your courier to leave for Gerolstein as soon as possible.”

“He will be on his way before two o’clock. I’ll see you this evening, then.”

“To the point!”

“Have you forgotten the ball at the embassy? His Highness will be there.”

“You’re right. Ever since the departure of Colonel Warner and Count d’Harnheim, I keep forgetting
that I’m supposed to carry out the duties of a chamberlain and an aide de camp.”

“Concerning the count and the colonel, when are they returning? When will they complete their missions?”

“As you are aware, his Highness wants to keep them away for as long as possible; this affords him greater privacy and freedom. As for the mission—one has been sent to Avignon, the other to Strasbourg—I’ll reveal it to you one day when we’ve both in a bad mood. For I challenge the most disconsolate hypochondriac not to burst out with laughter when he discovers the true purpose of their mission and reads certain passages from the dispatches of those worthy gentlemen, for they have taken their so-called responsibilities with the utmost seriousness.”

“Frankly, I have never understood why his Highness took the colonel and the count into his service.”

“How’s that? Colonel Warner is the quintessence of military bearing. Is there anyone in the Germanic Cordish tradition who cuts a finer figure? Why, he’s the acme of martial grace. And when he’s been saddled, caparisoned, bridled, and plumed, where could you find a more triumphant, more glorious, a prouder, or handsomer… animal?”

“True. However, that beauty prevents him from appearing excessively spiritual.”

“Well, his Highness says that, thanks to the colonel, he can now tolerate the dullest people in the world. If he’s anticipating a tedious audience, he locks himself up with the colonel for half an hour and when he leaves, he’s confident and high-spirited, ready to confront boredom itself.”

“Like a Roman soldier before a forced march, he wears lead sandals that will lighten his load upon their removal. I am now beginning to see the colonel’s usefulness. But the Count d’Harneim?”

“He too has proven most useful to his Highness. For when he hears that old, hollow rattle, shiny and resonant, braying at his side; when he sees that soap bubble swollen with… nothingness, glittering so magnificently—which represents the theatrical and childish side of sovereign power—his Highness is made even more aware of the vanity of such sterile pomp and, by virtue of contemplating his useless and twinkling chamberlain, often has the most serious, the most fruitful ideas.”

“For that matter, to be fair, in what court could you find a more perfect model of a chamberlain? Who knows better than the excellent d’Harneim, the innumerable rules and traditions of etiquette? Who is more solemn with an enamel cross around his neck or more majestic with a golden key across his back?”

“Yes, Baron, his Highness claims that a chamberlain’s back has a unique physiognomy. He says it wears an expression that is simultaneously pinched and rebellious, painful to see. For it is upon the chamberlain’s back that the symbolic sign of his duties shines. That is why, according to his Highness, the worthy d’Harneim is always inclined to introduce himself backwards, so that one may immediately judge of his importance.”

“The fact is that the incessant subject of the count’s meditations is the discovery of the malignant imagination responsible for placing the chamberlain’s key behind his back. For, as he be so aptly remarked, with a kind of irritable sorrow, ‘Why, you can’t open a door with your back!’”
The Tower
by Paul Legault

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