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Dear Friends and Readers, Brothers and Sisters,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”
— Margaret Mead

“Ideologies separate us. Dreams and anguish bring us together.”
— Eugene Ionesco

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”
— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Call them what you will—autocrats, dictators, totalitarian, and all those who aspire to become as such—the moment that we are going through is forcing those in power to address the systemic racism that has never been resolved in our country’s history, or to put it more factually, the perpetuation of white supremacy. One thing we can say, among the endless lies generated by the chaos of “alternative facts” from the President of the United States and his White House ensemble of sycophants, from Mike Pence, Mike Pompeo, Betsy DeVos, Steve Mnuchin to William Barr, Stephen Miller, Kellyanne Conway, and Rick Perry, just to name a few, is that the word “fact,” as stated in an interview with one of our most esteemed art historians Meyer Schapiro, has a deeper meaning:

What is fact? According to most languages, it is a product of labor. Consider the word for fact in German, “Tatsache”, which means “thing done”—in French, “fait”, which means “made”—or even the Latin base for the English word fact, which is “factum”, and is related to “manufacture”, which means “made by hand”… What is the truth? The truth is what is made.

The following are facts that Trump has said publicly about our fellow African Americans, Native Americans, Muslims, Asians, and women in general:

1973: During the Nixon administration, the US Department of Justice sued Trump Management for violating the Fair Housing Act. Trump had refused to rent to Black tenants. He lost the lawsuit and was hence legally obligated to sign an agreement in 1975 not to discriminate against renters of color.

1980s: “When Donald and Ivana came to the casino, the bosses would order all the black people off the floor,” Kip Brown, a former employee at Trump’s Castle said. “It was the eighties, I was a teenager, but I remember it: they put us all in the back.”

1988: Trump accused Asian countries like Japan of “stripping the United States of economic dignity” during a commencement speech at Lehigh University. This is no coincidence that he is accusing China for similar reasons now, except this time COVID-19 was a pretext.

1989: Four Black and one Latino teenagers were accused of attacking and raping a jogger in what was called the “Central Park Five.” Trump immediately paid for a full-page ad in the New York Times in bold letters: BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY. BRING BACK OUR POLICE. After having spent years in prison, the teens’ convictions were vacated which led the city to pay $41 million in legal settlements. Trump later in October 2016 said, despite the DNA evidence, he still believes they are guilty.

1991: “Black guys counting my money! I hate it. The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys that wear yamakas everyday … I think that guy is lazy. And it’s probably not his fault, because laziness is a trait in blacks. It really is. I believe that. It’s not anything they can control.” Trump first denied this remark quoted in a book by John O’Donnell (a former vice president of Trump’s Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City) as his criticism of a black accountant, but later in a 1997 Playboy interview admitted “the stuff O’Donnell wrote about me is probably true.”

1992: A $200,000 fine was paid by the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino because it transferred Black and women dealers off tables to accommodate gamblers’ prejudices.

1993: Trump said, in a congressional testimony, that some Native American reservations shouldn’t be allowed to operate casinos because “they don’t look like Indians to me.”

2000: When the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation proposed to build a casino, Trump secretly ran a series of ads implying the tribe had a “record of criminal activity [that] is well documented.” He probably felt a financial threat to his casinos in Atlantic City.

2004: Kevin Allen, a Black contestant on season two of The Apprentice, was criticized by Trump for being overeducated, saying “You’re an unbelievably talented guy in terms of education, and you haven’t done anything … At some point you have to say, ‘that’s enough.’”

2005: Trump said he “Wasn’t particularly happy” with the most recent season of The Apprentice, so he was considering “an idea that is fairly controversial—creating a team of successful African Americans versus a team of successful whites. Whether people like that idea or not, it is somewhat reflective of our very vicious world.”

2010: A proposal to build a Muslim community center in Lower Manhattan, near the site of the 9/11 attacks, was proposed to the city. Trump rejected it by calling it “insensitive” and offered to buy out one of the investors in the project. Later, Trump said on The Late Show with David Letterman about Muslims, “Well, somebody’s blowing us up… somebody’s blowing up buildings, and somebody’s doing lots of bad stuff.”

2011: Trump aggressively spreads falsehoods about President Barack Obama, our country’s first Black president, that he was not born in the US and hence is not legally a US citizen. Trump even went to the great length of sending investigators to Hawaii to look into President Obama’s birth certificate. Obama soon released his birth certificate, calling Trump a “carnival barker.”

2015: During his presidential campaign, Trump called Mexican immigrants “rapists” who are “bringing crime” and “bringing drugs” to the US He also called for a ban on all Muslims coming to the US.

2016: At a Republican debate, when Trump was asked whether all 1.6 billion Muslims hate the US, he said “I mean, a lot of them. I mean a lot of them.” He has regularly retweeted messages from white supremacists and neo-Nazis during his presidential campaign, and has been unapologetically repeating and repeating them.

2017: In August, a week after white supremacist protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, Trump repeatedly said that “many sides” and “both sides” were to blame for the violence and chaos that occurred—citing that the white supremacist protestors were morally equivalent to counter-protesters that stood against racism. Throughout the year, Trump repeatedly attacked NFL players who knelted or remained silent as their form of peaceful protest against systemic racism in America during the national anthem.

2018: During a bipartisan meeting in January, when asked in reference to Haiti and African countries, Trump responded, “Why are we having all these people from shthole countries come here?” In addition, Trump spent months mocking Senator Elizabeth Warren for her claim of Native American heritage by calling her “Pocahontas” and even saying “See you on the campaign TRAIL, Liz!”, evoking the Trail of Tears, the ethnic cleansing in the 19th century in which Native Americans were forcibly relocated and which led to thousands of their deaths. Trump remarked that several Black and Brown members of Congress, including Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Ilhan Omar of Congress, including Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), and Rashida Tlaib (D-M) are “from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe” and that they should “go back” to where they came from. (Even though three of the four members of Congress were born in the US) Trump’s common racist devices against Black and Brown people has been associated with one of his campaign promises, namely on the policy of immigration.

To be continued …

With love, courage, and in total solidarity,
Phong H. Bui


Left to Right:


Paul Cezanne, Trees and Rocks, 1900–1904, Oil on canvas, 61.9 x 51.4 cm, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, Tennessee.

Mingjung Kim, Mountain, 2019. Ink on mulberry Hanji Paper, 74 x 51.6 inches. Courtesy the artist.
Normality is Death

BY JACOB BLUMENFELD

In Autumn 1944, amidst abominable horrors occurring in Europe, Theodor Adorno penned his essay “Folie, A Moment in Which We All Came Together.” Following it was a section called “Out of the Firing-Line”:

The idea that after this war life will go on “normally” or even that culture might be “rebirth”—as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation—is idiotic. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and that is supposed to be an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What exactly is this culture still waiting for? And even if countless waiting time remains, could one imagine what happened in Europe has no consequence, that the quantity of victims does not change into a new quality of society as a whole, barbarism? As long as it continues step by step, the catastrophe is perpetuated. One only has to think of revenge for the murdered. If just as many of the others are killed, horror will be institutionalized and the pre-capitalist scheme of blood vengeance, prevalent from time immemorial in remote mountain regions, will be reintroduced in a broader sense, with whole nations as the subjectless subjects. If, however, the dead are not avenged and mercy is granted, then unpunished fascism will have gained its victory despite everything, and, once shown known easy it is, will continue elsewhere. The logic of history is as destructive as the people it brings forth: wherever its momentum inclines, it reproduces the equivalent of past disasters. Normality is death.¹

How little has changed. It is now Spring 2020, and there is still no end in sight to the COVID-19 pandemic. With over 300,000 deaths worldwide, millions locked down, and billions unemployed, the logic of history continues step by step, catastrophe perpetuated. On top of the completely predictable barbarism of the current moment, in which some lives are deemed more expendable than others, there is the horror yet to come—the rewriting of this crisis we are now living through as a glorious battle between a unified humanity and a dangerous virus, a moment in which we all came together and sacrificed for the greater good, for the sake of civilization, for the fate of mankind. That tortured reton of the present yet to come will be drilled into our heads and our children’s heads and our children’s children’s heads until there are no more heads left to drill. The present disaster will be remembered as the moment humanity came together, precisely when it fell apart. This lie will not be merely imposed from above but also nourished and joyously celebrated from below. Who wants to relive the trauma of becoming disposable? Who wants to work through the past when it is so much easier to repeat it? The erasure of the brutality of normality before corona will soon be complete. More enjoyable, more fulfilling, and more cathartic is nostalgia for an era that never was and never will be, an era of peaceful liberal globalization in whose markets ruled with efficiency and states governed with legitimacy. The pandemic changes nothing—it offers no guidance, no lessons, no morals. Do we think the concentration camps were schools of morality? Primo Levi’s grey zone of extreme moral ambiguity did not stop at the gates of Auschwitz, but spread into the very fabric of modern life, clouding any possible path of right action in a wrong world. Who knows what ungodly harms are committed any more—just in trying to keep one’s head above water. The market sanitizes all interaction, impurity for all. But between the drowned and the saved, the sea keeps rising.

The barbarism of our era does not just appear in the calls to return to normality, which is, and always has been, death, but in the very awareness that this fabled return is all we have to look forward to. There is no more forward and no more back, there is only a treadmill with a screen allowing us to choose the tempo of our exhaustion. Would you like to go faster? Steeper? Louder? No matter what we choose, we are already chosen ourselves, already created in the image of the one true god, the god of economy. Some panic, some work, some study, some bake, some make a life in between the cracks of the padlocked present. Borders closed, supply lines in chaos, workers divided against each other, passers-by shunned as potential risks, everybody a threat, every face an infection, every drop a conduit. Central banks approach the infinite, laws suspended to uphold the law, everyone wants to escape, but there is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Try to run, you will fall. Try to work, you will die. Conspiracies blossoming from right to left and back again—why are we up from our dogmatic slumber when the dreams are so good?

Calls to reopen the economy in the face of grave danger to life are not simply irrational outbursts of corona skeptics who worship the death drive. They are authentic expressions of a collective wish to sacrifice oneself for the abstraction that gives us all life, the subjectless subject of our world, the only real community of any of us have left on this compromised planet—the community of capital. It is not people who give you jobs, pay your bills, feed you, teach you—it is the soft hand of capital. There are no more prophets, no more vessels of the divine in earthly garb—but there is a voice that speaks through us, a voice that guides us even in the most inner parts of our soul. That voice of conscience is not god, or the super ego, or the father—it is the mutilated screams of a billion price signals telling your synapses when to fire. You can’t call it identification with the aggressor when the aggressor is normality itself. Character masks or covid masks, there is nothing beneath the mask. The eyes in the mirror are not your eyes, the words in your mouth are not your words. There is no face to the economy because everyone’s face is the economy. Capital speaks through us not like a vengeful drunk through a dummy but like a script through an actor. Every performance is unique but only because all the words are the same. Freedom to choose how to act our part is our hard-won right and if they want it back they’ll have to pay it away from our cold, dead hands. To try and break free from the hostage situation of work would be madness, for how do you answer no to a question you can’t even formulate? In a mad world, a little madness might be a sign of sanity. The specter of truly insane, will need to wield its insanity like a superpower in order to escape the panic room of capital. Splintering the syntax of survival alone is suicide, doing it together is liberation. But the leap across the abyss of collective action will not come from a pandemic or any other external shock unless it is the shock of seeing ourselves as the externality to business as usual.

The real subsumption of labor under capital did not just mean a reconfiguration of the labor process but a replacement of the soul itself. Maybe it was an improvement of the faulty one we had before, even so it is definitely time for a tune-up now. Yet all the shops are closed, all the struggles of yesteryear gone. New ones arise, like rent strikes and wildcats, wallouts and slowdowns—brave acts of collective self-defense against encroachments on one’s ability to survive. But it is possible to go from negotiated to negatived, expropriated to expropriator in times of utter retribution? Some riddles of history can only be solved in practice. Levels of exhaustion start to pile on top of each other as the home becomes the workplace becomes the kindergarten becomes the bar becomes the toilet, where self-inside and outside, day and night, leisure and labor lose their meaning. Even these words I write are torn from a handful of leftover minutes saved up from the gaps between rotations of work and family and work and family and nothing is left at the end of the day but awe that life carries on despite all the obstacles against it. Video meetings, video classes, video friends, video prayers, video drinking alone together with others drinking alone together. Board games pile up, we play Pandemic to avoid the pandemic, I’ve saved the world so many times that it’s now almost more fun to try and actively destroy it, except that hits too close to home. Escapism is necessary in a world without escape, like religion in a world without justice.

Is this the emergency we’ve been waiting for? The one that will wake us up and put us back on the right path to social democracy, climate justice, human rights, a good future, in a word, progress? The pandemic is already played out, we know what will happen. This crisis will not break capitalism. It will not lead to socialism. It will not solve climate change. It will not give people better wages, more unions, less hours, more safety, better jobs. It will not lead to universal basic income, free rent, free college, cancelled debt. It will not lead to affordable housing or public infrastructure. Perhaps a new subjectivity will emerge along with a new ethics, a new corona moralia, where sickness unto health is the path to redemption. In a section of Minima Moralia entitled “The Health unto Death,” Adorno reaffirms the sickness of normality under the rule of economy:

If something like a psychoanalysis of today’s prototypical culture were possible; if the absolute supremacy of the economy did not mock all attempts to explain conditions from the inner life of its victim; and if the psychoanalysts themselves had not long ago sworn allegiance to those conditions—such an investigation would have to show that contemporary sickness consists precisely in normality.²

The longed-for normality will come again, but it will be a normality as sick as the one before. Disaster socialism, corona Keynesianism, mutant neoliberalism, state capitalism, covid communism—yes, please! Capitalism will adapt to COVID, and we will be no closer to the end of either. Perhaps we are suffering from a new stage of capitalist anti-globalization. A moment of capitalist globalization, in which a planetary sovereign arises who could declare the emergency and decide on the exception in the name of saving all. Arise ye corona levitathan and lead us to the promised land! But alas, not
Where Is She?

BY SOLEDAD ÁLVAREZ VELASCO

We met at the end of August, 2019 sitting side by side in Row 18 of the Aeroméxico flight which departs every morning from Quito to Mexico City. Mine was seat C, on the aisle. Although she had been assigned the middle seat, she did not take her eyes off the window seat, where her 5-year-old son, Juan, was sitting. Her white blouse went well with her two-piece suit: a skirt and blazer, both grey. Her black hair was nicely braided. She was wearing a pair of long gold brocade earrings. She wore black high heels and carried a large leather purse of the same color. Juan had her elegance: at 14, he went well with her two-piece suit: a skirt and blazer, both grey. Her black hair was nicely braided. She was wearing a pair of long gold brocade earrings. She wore black high heels and carried a large leather purse of the same color. Juan had her elegance: at 14, he went well with her, and — filled with nervousness — said, “This is the second time I am on a plane, but not the first time I could get off it now?”

1. Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life (London: Verso, 2005), §33, translation revised. The title of the section “Weit von Schuß” could also be translated as “out of range” or “far away”.
2. Ibid., §36, translation revised.

JACOB BLUMENFELD teaches philosophy at Freie Universität Berlin. He is the author of All Things are Nothing to Me: The Unique Philosophy of Max Stirner (Zero Books, 2018).
FIELD NOTES

would reach Mexico in four and a half hours destinely by land, but by plane, so that she but with her passport in hand; not clan-
ated the visa requirement for Ecuadorians. In November, 2018, Mexico elimi -
insistence, something unexpected hap-
to cross until she finally reached the US. would give her two more attempts not always work the first time, and that the had to try again. He said that this is how her husband in Queens insisted that she suffer the “punishment of the icebox,” nor was not sure when. She did not want to was deported. That’s why the policeman told 

a part of the same route that we were to fly over: Colombia, Central America, and southern Mexico. By land she also crossed the border between Mexico and the US, and even advanced into US territory until she was stopped. Confined in a detention centre, she suffered the same as so many other millions of undocumented migrants: “They punished us by taking us to cold rooms, ‘iceboxes’ which were colder than the moorland,” recalled Luz de América. Held incommunicado and punished, she was detained for more than six months, until she was deported to Ecuador.

Chained hands and feet, she returned on a deportation flight. That was her first plane ride. Luz de América was certain that she would emigrate again, but she was not sure when. She did not want to suffer the “punishment of the icebox,” nor to leave Juan again. So she hesitated, while her husband in Queens insisted that she had to try again. He said that this is how the clandestine journey works, that it does not always work the first time, and that the coyote would give her two more attempts to cross until she finally reached the US.

Between her own doubts and the external insistence, something unexpected hap-
pended. In November, 2018, Mexico elimi-
nated the visa requirement for Ecuadorians. This meant that Luz de América could travel, not as an undocumented passenger, but with her passport in hand; not clandestinely by land, but by plane, so that she would reach Mexico in four and a half hours and not in six weeks. The change in the visa policy coincided with something else: the increased numbers of unaccompanied and accompanied Central American migrant children arriving in the US.

The US has a legal limit of 20 days for the custody of minors in detention centers. In the face of the massive arrival of children, something exceptional happened. In order not to violate the time limit established by law, detained undocumented mothers and their children were released before the legal limit was reached, with the requirement that they appear before an immigration court. Their undocumented status did not change, but certain undocumented mothers and their children were in this way allowed to enter the U.S.2 In fact, a month and a half before Luz de América began her journey, her sister-in-law and her two minor nephews flew to Mexico and managed to reach New York.

Because the migratory context was exceptional and promised a more accelerated and apparently less risky transit, Luz de América decided to leave for a second time. The same coyote who guided her on her first attempt organized her second trip. He gave her a series of written instructions in addition to the advice that her sister-in-law gave her. That is how she knew beforehand that one of the biggest challenges she would face was crossing with her son through immigration control at the airport in Mexico posing as tourists. Luz de América had to face an immigration system that a priori discriminates against certain bodies on the basis of racialized constructions. She had to fool that system by appearing to fit into the category of tourist and not into that of potential migrant—although this is what she was—in order to consummate her migratory project, which was no less than her life project.

If she made it through immigration control, the rest seemed comparatively simple. She and Juan would be guided to the northern border, and they would turn themselves in to the US immigration authority. If all went well after they were released, they would arrive in New York in a few weeks. The path seemed clear. Yet, while still in Quito, she had a warning. The immigration agent who was stamping her passport for departure, after asking her where she was going, warned her: “You won’t be able to enter Mexico.” Ignoring this, Luz de América took her passport. She knew that there was a reason for the warning: “My passport is stained, because I hardly needed it—who had never stopped fighting for her life and who was walking in front of me on the verge of another battle.

The line to reach immigration control did not take long. She and Juan went first. Luz de América approached the checkpoint and handed her passport and her son’s to the Mexican immigration officer. There was an ebb and flow of questions and replies. They exchanged a silent dialogue of gazes. Juan, without any real idea of what was happening, waited at the side. Grabbing his mother’s hand, at the age of five, he was the greatest source of strength that woman needed at that moment. I witnessed from afar what perhaps no one else realized: how the vital power of that woman from Quinapisca—a peasant and artisan, who could barely read and write—was in fact the real passport that allowed her to cope with border control. Without further ado, the Mexican immigration stamp was inked on her “stained passport,” and with that the ill omen of the Ecuadorian immigration agent came to nothing. She and Juan entered Mexico.

I imagine her smiling. I hear in the dis-
tance perhaps her sigh of deep calm because the first challenge has been overcome. Luz de América took her son, and they just kept on walking without stopping.

II.

I have no doubt that the vital power that enabled Luz de América to enter Mexico also allowed her and Juan to cross Mexico, to traverse the border, and even to surren-
der to the US immigration authorities. Her strength will have surely allowed her to care for her son in detention. At the moment when she left Ecuador, as men-
tioned, it was very unlikely that she and Juan would have been deported. Therefore, after several weeks they may have been conditionally released, allowing them finally to begin their journey to New York.

Between the end of 2019 and the first two months of 2020, Luz de América and Juan will have begun to decode everyday life in Queens. Certainly she will be working at
some of the many jobs that the informal market of that city holds for undocumented migrants like her: highly precarious jobs, without any social protection. Together with her husband, the three of them will probably migrate through the open frontier and small place in Queens. Maybe it is a crowded place, where they have to share their lives with several other Ecuadorians or other Latin Americans, who like them probably are undocumented migrants too.

Just as an unexpected migratory context accelerated her decision to leave Ecuador for the second time, an unexpected pandemic today is certainly transforming Luz de América’s life project in a radical way. Since mid-March, 2020, a health catalysys has come to unveil the savage contemporary social inequality in which we, inhabitants of a global village, live. Despite the fact that borders have been sealed around the world, the pandemic unleashed by Sars-CoV-2 has been unfolding on its journey of contagion and devastation.

The U.S. is today the most affected country in the world, and New York the city that has been hit the hardest, with a total of cases exceeding 1.3 million by June 22, 2020. That is why Luz de América’s voice has come back to me. Her story, an individual one, is the story of thousands of other Ecuadorians who like her, stripped of rights, pushed by the violence of poverty in Ecuador, filled with courage and bravery, have undertaken inhospitable journeys to reach the U.S. and in particular New York.

Where is Luz de América? How is she? How is Juan? How are all those other Ecuadorians who undertook clandestine journeys “por la chacra” and whose mobilization was blocked by border closures amidst the pandemic? How are the Ecuadorians detained? Those who have been punished in the “ice boxes”? Those who are about to be deported? How are the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Ecuadoreans who are sick? How many of them have died because of COVID-19? Have they been buried? Who mourns those bodies?

From Quispicanchi, Dota, Cachapamia, Jipijapa, and from so many other places, Ecuadorians like Luz de América have emigrated to the U.S. Ecuador has a fragile mono-productive economy, highly dependent on the international market. There, poverty and systemic inequality have not ceased to reproduce. In fact, poverty has found a niche in its reproduction in peasant and rural living. It is no coincidence then that peasant women and men, like Luz de América, have since at least the 1960s emigrated mainly to the U.S. Because of this, the historical, social, cultural, and economic formation of this Andean country cannot be understood without paying attention to the incessant departures of Ecuadorians abroad.

Por la chacra, por la pampa, por el camino and the road; through the plain, through the road) as the clandes- tine path from Ecuador to the US is locally known, with false documents, with a visa tine path from Ecuador to the US is locally known, false documents, with a visa with the US government has proposed, hundreds of thousands of undocumented Ecuadorean migrants, in Ecuador, the bill proposed, the government of Lenín Moreno to deal with the ravages of COVID-19 also excluded migrants—indeed it did not even mention them, despite the essential role that undocumented migrants play in social and economic life in both countries.

This pervasive national denial is obscene and intolerable, given that migrant remittances have been key to sustaining the Ecuadorian economy. Over the past 20 years, Ecuador has received more than $13.5 billion in remittances which, along with exports and foreign investment, represent a main source of liquidity for maintaining the dollarization on which the country’s economy is based. Moreover, that is less than two decades remittances, which represented 3.6 times foreign direct investment, which only reached approximately $13.5 billion. We cannot simply overlook the fact that, besides commodities from Ecuador’s extractive economy and foreign investment, it is the migrant labor force, exported abroad over the past five decades, that has sustained the economy of this Andean country.

To ask about Luz de América is to ask about the history of a country of migrants that has been stripping rights from its citizens and compelling them in silence for decades. To ask about them is to acknowledge our forgetfulness and the deliberate ways in which we have made them disappear from public life, denying them the decisive role they play in the social, political, cultural, and economic fabric of a transnational country. To ask about them is to point to a failed state, to reveal its absolute inability to protect the thousands of Ecuadorean migrants that have been sustaining the country and who are fighting for their lives.

As the severity of the pandemic ravages the lives of the most disposable, our for- getfulness ravages us as a collective. It is the stories and images of their lives that demand that we make present what we have wanted to make absent. I have told Luz de América’s story to share images of her journey, of her courage and bravery. Susan Santag wanted to know about the political role of images in fostering a critical awareness of the brutality of our present times. That reflection arose from wartime contexts. War tears, breaks, disembowels, ruins, Santag said; that is why “being an observer means having the lack to have avoided the death that still haunts us.” Although we are not currently facing a war in the Americas, the atrocity of this pandemic has turned the lives of thousands of people into a battleground against death. This is the reality especially for those who have been confirmed in a state of defenceslessness, like undocumented migrants. We cannot simply be passive, memory-less observers of the barbarity that this pandemic is unleashing. If we are able to be observers, it is because thousands of others are being killed. Encountering the stories of Luz de América can help to locate us in the present, to take on the responsi- bility that we have been washed by death, have to politicize our memories and thus interrupt the reproduction of a present that wants to discard life.


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I must begin these notes by sending out my love, well wishes, and support to those who have lost a loved one or friend. Please know that I care deeply for all of you.

I LOVE New York!

By now most of you who are regular readers of the *Brooklyn Rail* know a little about me and my prison abolitionist politics. I am an imprisoned journalist and activist, currently housed at a high security US penitentiary in Pollock, Louisiana. United States Penitentiary Pollock is located in close proximity to Alexandria, Louisiana. We are approximately 30 miles from another federal prison, FCI Oakdale, which has been plagued by COVID-19. I have reported extensively on the deaths and infections at FCI Oakdale in the hope that the US government will take immediate action to free those most vulnerable to contracting this deadly virus.

Thus far we have been virus-free here at USP Pollock. This has something to do with the architectural design of the unit. However, it also has a lot to do with the way our warden, Chris McConnell, has responded to the pandemic. Warden McConnell has impressed upon his staff the importance that they submit to daily screenings for COVID-19 symptoms prior to entering the prison complex. He told me personally that if an officer even feels sick he does not want them to report—period. Aggressive screening, cleaning, and social distancing have been embraced by both prisoners and staff at USP Pollock. As a result we continue to enjoy a virus-free environment. But all is not well here.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, USP Pollock was on regular lockdowns due to pervasive violence. Nothing has changed in this regard; in fact, it’s getting worse. If I don’t get COVID-19, I could easily get caught up in the violence. You can just be minding your own business and get stabbed up here. That is the harsh reality of life in a federal prison.

Many people throughout the United States and the world have become very familiar with the terms “social distancing” and “lockdown.” I personally have been incarcerated for 13 years straight. Since arriving in federal custody in August 2019 I have not received one visit from anyone, and very rarely has the prison been up and running consistently for more than a week. For prisoners in America, social distancing is a way of life. Imagine decades trapped in a cage: no sunlight, no hugs, and no love.

I now would like to take you inside this federal prison and provide you with a glimpse of what life is like for us amidst this deadly virus.

There are approximately 11 open housing units in USP Pollock. The Segregated Housing Unit (SHU) makes it 12. There are three buildings housing prisoners in general population: A, B, and C, with four units in each building. I live in B-Building. A housing unit consists of 64 cells split between a top and a bottom tier. The cells are made to be occupied by two human beings. So at full capacity the unit can house 128 men. A cell is about 9 feet by 12 feet, with a sink, a toilet, two lockers, two plastic chairs, a small metal table, and bunk beds. This makes for a cramped existence, especially when you stay locked up as much as we do here at USP Pollock.

I failed to mention that we do have a window in our cells. We can clearly see the sky, the grass, some trees, and the birds. I often wish that I was a bird, so I could fly free of this horrible place.

In order to comply with Center for Disease Control guidelines, the Bureau of Prisons implemented protective measures. From March 13 until May 18, USP Pollock officials instituted a policy under which only eight cells, with 16 men, were allowed on the bottom tier. We prisoners call the bottom tier “the flats.” Three times a week, eight cells were open for two hours. During these two hours of out-of-cell time we must shower, use the phone to call loved ones, or use the computer to send and receive emails. Two hours every second day is not much time at all.

I must admit it is easy to social distance when there are only eight cells let out at a time. The reason why FCI Oakdale, FCI Elkton, FCI Terminal Island, FMC Fort Worth, and FCI Butner have been ravaged by COVID-19 is that in those places prisoners are stacked on top of each other like sardines. If only one prisoner or staff member becomes infected the entire population is vulnerable.

For literally months we have been trapped inside this prison unit at USP Pollock with absolutely no opportunity to go outside. All meals are served to us in a slot in our cell doors. Human beings do need exposure to natural sunlight and we also need fresh air. These are human needs. At times our minds seem to forget that we are human.

On May 18 we were offered a change from the “normal” routine. We are now provided the opportunity to go outside for up to two hours on the days we are allowed out of our cells. The schedule alternates. As I understand it, 16 cells will be given 2 hours a day outside of our cells. This is a departure from the 8 cells every other day schedule that we followed for over two months with no outside time.

Personally, I am thankful for the small things. This time in federal prison has been a really bad experience. For years in Texas and now here in Louisiana I have been denied access to a phone, email, fresh air, and sunlight. I now think about the long-term effects of such social and natural deprivation. We are expected to go outside, shower, use the phone, and check emails all within a two-hour period, then back in our cells! Talk about multi-tasking.

I have been wondering why they do not allocate separate time periods for outside and another period for phone, email, and showers. Truthfully, it may be a combination of things: security concerns, health and safety issues, staffing shortages...There are many complex dynamics at play that the prison administration must take into consideration. Things are not always as easy to solve as they may seem.

Remember—they give us four phones for 128 people. Black and Brown people are disproportionately represented inside these prisons. COVID-19 is also killing our people at an alarming rate. This is a stressful environment. Men have stabbed each other over phone access! Does anyone hear me?

An issue that has revealed itself here at USP Pollock and throughout the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is the fact that the BOP only tests those who are symptomatic for COVID-19. That means that if you do not have a fever, congestion, or a dry cough you do not get tested. I have constantly presented the prison administration here with the issue: How does the BOP address the threat posed by staff and prisoners who are asymptomatic? They present no symptoms but are spreading the virus. So far the BOP has ignored me.

The messaging coming out of the White House has been ambiguous to say the least. One minute we hear how many COVID-19 tests are available. The next minute Trump is saying that testing is not that important. Then Trump’s personal military valet gets infected, then Mike Pence’s press secretary, and then Ivanka Trump’s personal assistant!

Now the entire West Wing must get tested daily! It is May 11, 2020, and still no COVID-19 testing is available for those who want it at USP Pollock. Why is that?

On or around March 23, 2020 I was informed about the first federal prisoner who died from COVID-19. His name was Patrick Jones. Patrick was 49 years old and housed at FCI Oakdale, just a few miles down the road from where I am housed here at USP Pollock. As the virus tore through FCI Oakdale I began crafting urgent updates in an attempt to attract help for our imprisoned comrades. With the help of my sister in struggle Mary Ratcliff, the editor of the *San Francisco Bay View—National Black Newspaper*, I was able to have my updates posted on the *Bay View* website for all to see.

Amidst this pandemic, my focus has been on strongly encouraging the US Department of Justice to release to home confinement the elderly, infirm, and, those with pre-existing conditions that make them especially vulnerable to contracting this deadly virus.

My thinking on this: If I don’t fight for the lives of prisoners, who will? Anthony Francisco? Deborah Ibira? There are not many prisoners in America with a platform and a “voice” that is respected, heard, or even listened to. As I do, I know that I have a duty to fulfill: to provide a voice for the voiceless. I am not unique, however; there are others
who have the ability to articulate the nature of the wrongs to which we are routinely subjected. It takes courage to speak truth to power. Not every prisoner can stand up to the retaliation and abuse. I am a witness!

Some of you may have heard about the CARES Act. This law contains provisions that grant the Federal Bureau of Prisons the authority to release prisoners, especially those at risk of contracting the virus. The BOP has been slow in implementing these new policies giving the Bureau authority to release prisoners to home confinement. As a result of the BOP’s lukewarm response, precious lives have been lost. Infection rates are rising and so are deaths. Prisons and jails are just as much hotbeds for this virus as nursing homes. However, the mainstream corporate-owned media, such as CNN and Fox News, minimize and devalue the lives of prisoners by providing very little if any coverage of the cruel, unusual, and inhumane conditions in America’s world-leading prison-industrial complex.

I would like to tell you about a federal prisoner named Andrea Circle Bear. Please say her name: Andrea Circle Bear! She was serving a 26-month sentence at Federal Medical Center (FMC) Carswell, located in Texas near Fort Worth. Andrea was pregnant when she was diagnosed with COVID-19. On March 31 Andrea was placed on a ventilator. The next day, April 1, 2020, Andrea’s baby was delivered by C-section. Sadly, on April 28, 2020, our sister Andrea Circle Bear died.

Andrea’s death and the inability of the BOP to release her in a timely manner provide a case in point that clearly illuminates the fact that prisoners’ lives simply do not matter to US Attorney General William Barr. As of May 7, there were approximately 2,000 federal prisoners infected by COVID-19. This has been spread over 51 facilities. Shockingly, over 70% of all COVID-19 infections in the federal system have been at FCI Terminal Island in California and FCI Butner, located in North Carolina. Approximately 40 prisoners inside BOP facilities have died of COVID-19. I’m sure by the time this essay goes to print those numbers will have greatly increased.

Here at USP Pollock, as I said, we are still free of the coronavirus. The prisoners here wear masks and we practice social distancing, especially in relation to the BOP employees who come and go daily. Correctional officers present the greatest threat of spreading the virus to otherwise healthy prisoners. With this in mind, I plead with all human beings reading these words to contact the US Department of Justice and encourage William Barr to release all elderly and infirm federal prisoners now! I want to remind all of you that I am not a prisoner reformist. I am a prison abolitionist.

I have comrades in Brooklyn, members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), who continue to support my work and stand in solidarity with me. The Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee continues to be at the forefront of the prison struggle. The National Lawyers Guild and Amani Sawari of Jailhouse Lawyers Speak have provided much needed legal and media support for oppressed prisoners across the United States.

Sisters and brothers, I have been a keeping a secret which I am now prepared to share with you: In mid-April I was informed by my case manager here at USP Pollock that I have been approved for placement at a federal residential re-entry center. That is a fancy term for “halfway house.” My halfway house release date is early in September 2020! San Francisco, here I come.

I will be working alongside Mary Ratcliff at the Bay View. In her time plan is for me to ultimately have the position of editor. I am proud to have been chosen for this opportunity. This is a tremendous privilege, and I am committed to using this opportunity to share my experiences with the world.

I want to thank Field Notes editor Paul Mattick, editor Charlie Schulz, and publisher Phong Bui for providing me with the opportunity to share my experiences with the Brooklyn Rail family.

But most important, I want to again bring to your attention the numerous elders who are trapped inside US prisons and jails. There are two specific prisoners in New York who deserve our support. Help me advocate for the freedom of respected elders David Gilbert and Jaliat Muntazim (Anthony Bottom).

On August 21, our Solidarity Actions for the Prisoner Human Rights Movement will begin. Collectively we can change this world. My comrades and I hope you will join me in this effort.

KEITH “MALIK” WASHINGTON is Assistant Editor of the San Francisco Bay View—National Black Newspaper (www.sfbayview.com). He is studying and preparing to serve as editor upon his release from federal prison. Malik is the cofounder and chief spokesperson for the End Prison Slavery in Texas Movement and a proud member of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee and an activist in the Fight Toxic Prisons Campaign. Visit his website at Comrade Malik.com. Please send our brother some love and light: write him directly at Keith “Malik” Washington, #34481L-037, USP Pollock, P.O. Box 2009, Pollock, LA 71467, USA.

Higher Education and the Remaking of the Working Class

BY GARY ROTH

Economic crises, like the one precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, bring to the fore deep structural problems, some of which were barely perceptible until that point. This is notably true for higher education, whose function in society has shifted dramatically in recent decades. During its heyday following World War II, a college education was a means to lift parts of the working class into a newly-defined middle class, no longer based on the occupations of the past but instead conceived in terms of education, home ownership, well-paid employment, and household consumption. The traditional middle class of small business owners, independent craftspeople, and high-cadredific professionals morphed into the upper echelons of this new middle class, as in some cases, into the lower echelons of the bourgeoisie.

Since the 1970s, however, higher education has also produced the underemployed, that is, graduates of baccalaureate institutions who find themselves in positions for which a four-year degree is not required. By 1990, one-third of college graduates failed to secure jobs traditionally considered commensurate with their education. For them, a college degree became a means to acquire working-class employment, primarily in the services and middle and lower echelons of supervisory, managerial, and professional occupations. Their credentials factored into the competitive process whereby college graduates outcompeted the less educated. This process dramatically altered the social mobility pathways that had been established during the previous few decades. With the current crisis, the split between the underemployed and the upwardly mobile will shift further.

Higher education has become a huge sorting mechanism. At the upper end, college graduates from wealthy households and with college-educated parents attend elite and top-tier schools that by-and-large guarantee them access to graduate and professional programs, and to high-paying and educationally rigorous employment. “Top-tier” institutions, for example, draw 70 percent of their students from families in the upper income quartile. For the underemployed, on the other hand, a college education represented a chance for upward mobility. That the growth in underemployment also coincides with the racial and ethnic diversification of the collegiate student body is one of the great ironies of the last half century.

The ramifications of this situation on life in the United States have been profound. Education has also been a missing element in analyses that focus on deindustrialization and neoliberalism, analyses that assume direct parallels between political decision-making and economic activity, whereas history has been both a mediator of these processes and, in addition, a prime instigator in its own right of the changes that have beset the population.

It has been a key mechanism through which social classes have been reshuffled. This portends to the future of higher education as well.

Enrollment Growth and Diversity

At all points during the post-World War II era, higher education expanded far more rapidly than the population at large. Between the war’s end and 1970, population grew by just under half. College enrollments, however, quadrupled. By 1970, one-third of all 18–24-year-olds were taking college classes. This period, of course, was the heyday of Keynesian economics, when government stimulation of the economy seemed limitless, a matter of fine-tuning the proportion of public to private finance and balancing the timing devices for the varied fiscal and monetary stimuli at the government’s disposal.

Education was a preferred venue for government spending, if only because it did not compete directly in areas of interest to privately-owned capital.4 Education also served as an arena for job creation, more so than other favored areas of public intervention such as infrastructure creation and armaments production.4 As government spending expanded exponentially in the post-war period, higher education was a logical recipient.

The spending itself was a haphazard affair. Some educational enhancements were funded by the federal government, especially programs that provided support to students directly. The GI Bill of 1944 and student loan programs that became especially prominent from the 1970s on are perhaps the most well-known examples. Other educational enhancements were funded by the individual states, sometimes by means of publicly financed loans (banks) for infrastructural development and tax liberties in order to hire additional teachers.

The for-profit sector of education that had existed extensively in professional fields like medicine, law, and engineering had largely gone bankrupt by the early decades of the 20th century or had been merged into public and nonprofit entities. The public sector succeeded where the private sector had failed because it operated with a looser set of financial constraints. During the interwar period too, limited numbers of working class students had begun to find entry into urban-based public institutions, while the private, nonprofit sector catered to the elite and had neither the capacity nor the desire to absorb lower-class students.

The post-war period is characterized by a large-scale incorporation of working-class students into the university system. In effect, parts of the working class were invited, by means of the educational system, to join a newly-refined middle class, now conceived of in terms of education, homeownership, personal and household consumption, and steady year-round, benefits-bearing
With the current crisis, the split between the underemployed and the upwardly mobile will shift even further.

For the last many decades, one-third of all college graduates from four-year institutions wound up in jobs that did not require a baccalaureate degree. For recent college graduates, the figure hovers just above 40 percent, but then gradually declines to a steady-state of one-third. Underemployment has been a component of the collegiate scene throughout the post-war period, although the nature of the underemployment shifted dramatically around 1970, about the same time as the higher education began to supplement socio-economic diversity with racial and ethnic diversity as well. The pioneering work on this issue was done by Richard Freeman, whose The Overeducated American (1976) nonetheless lumped together two types of underemployment. In the first, considerable time was needed to absorb the initial waves of new graduates during the 1950s and 1960s. Even though managerial and professional jobs far outnumbered college graduates, employers tended to prefer experience over credentials regarding existing positions. The evolution of the workforce was a slow-moving affair wherever job openings depended on retirements, lay-offs, and so forth.

The expansion and transformation of business enterprise in the post-war era, however, altered this dynamic. The massive outpouring of commodities for which this era is known included an extensive build-out of corporate functions to handle the increasingly complex nature of manufacturing, marketing, and distribution. White-collar work expanded accordingly (twice as fast as either population growth or the increase in the civilian workforce). And government expansion itself required new layers of educated employees to handle the increasingly intricate world of government expenditures and regulation. Underemployed college graduates, who Freeman reckoned at nearly one-fifth of all graduates towards the end of the 1950s, tended to experience over credentials regarding existing positions. The evolution of the workforce was a slow-moving affair wherever job openings depended on retirements, lay-offs, and so forth.

Underemployed college graduates, who Freeman reckoned at nearly one-fifth of all graduates towards the end of the 1950s, became the principal focus of public policy and research. The recredentialing of the workforce was a slow-moving affair wherever job openings depended on retirements, lay-offs, and so forth.

Underemployment So far we have focused on “inputs” into the collegiate system, that is, the changing patterns of admittance and attendance, themselves representing a vast transformation in post-war America. But if the input aspect of higher education has been hugely successful, the same cannot be said for its aftermath. This is a realm in which the available data are relatively meager: Except for a few graduate professional areas such as medicine, nursing, law, and engineering, little information is collected directly by higher education institutions about the employment fate of their graduates. The best and most widely accepted information stems from economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, who have gathered both aggregate (national) job information on college graduates and data sorted by college major.

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In its efforts to elevate the population and alleviate hardships associated with low-paid and low-skilled employment, higher education inadvertently contributed to the further segmentation and stratification of that same workforce.

Deindustrialization and College Graduates

The underemployed remain trapped by the job market, with few attractive options available. Unable to secure positions for which their degrees qualify them, they are also excluded from wide swaths of the remaining workforce. Simultaneous with the growth of higher education during the past 50 years came the great expansion of government-sponsored occupational licenses, a situation which now covers nearly one-third of all jobs nationally (estimated at around 10 percent in 1970). Some licenses are well-known, especially those that require a graduate education. Medical doctors and lawyers are prime examples. Other licenses are based on undergraduate degrees, such as those granted to schoolteachers.

The great bulk of occupational training, however, takes place at two-year community colleges and for-profit institutes. Students earn certificates in their chosen fields of study, certificates which are required by the licensing authorities. A wide range of occupations are governed by these procedures. Employment as bookkeeping and payroll clerks, preschool aides, computer-aided technologists, paralegals, addiction counselors, restaurant workers, environmental technicians, medical assistants, personal trainers, plumbers, and hundreds of other fields, all presuppose special qualifications that have been certified and licensed. Between 1970 and 2010, the two-year community colleges expanded enrollment twice as quickly as the four-year colleges. Intended specifically to retrain the workforce, they became key factors in the deindustrialization of the United States. Higher education in general took some of the sting out of the layoffs and plant closings that transformed the nature of manufacturing. While the upper and middle echelons of the workforce were recredentialed by means of the baccalaureate degree, other sectors began to require government-sponsored licenses as a condition of employment. Either way, a measure of exclusivity was added to occupations that previously had allowed for easier entry. Where unions had been a means to higher wages and stable employment, a college education and occupational licenses were the means to replicate similar conditions.

Deindustrialization in any case was a bit of a misnomer in terms of the processes at work during the last decades of the twentieth century. That era might better be termed a process of re-industrialization: a rapid turnover of jobs, manufacturing plants moved to other regions or countries, the shift from metals production to plastics and electronics, and the physical alteration of industrial architecture that made factories, warehouses, distribution centers, and big block retail establishments indistinguishable from the outside, altered dramatically the types of work required by the new economy. While lower-level manufacturing and service jobs were further deskilled, other jobs were upscaled and identified by education, from which emerged a bifurcated service and knowledge-based sector. In this new situation, higher education partially replaced the need for workplace organizations like unions.

The industrial workforce was still larger in 2000 than at any point between 1945 and 1965, considered to be the peak decades of industrial production. The wholesale diminution of the industrial workforce did not set in until the first decade of the current century, a time when most commentators assumed that the process was already complete. That huge portions of the service sector were converted into profit-making (and surplus-value creating) enterprises also shaped this conversion. The industrial working class was deindustrialized, but what took its place was a service-oriented proletariat, of which the underemployed college graduates are a significant piece. Part of the working class confronts the economic pressures that accompanied deindustrialization—the transition to low-wage service jobs and its new status as the working poor. Another part embodies all the upwardly mobile aspirations of the middle class, even though its employment does not match its educational expectations.
Given sufficient space to evolve, capitalism destroys the sources of its own success and prosperity.

For underemployed college graduates, the licensed professions remain out-of-bounds without further education and training, additional expense and time removed from the workforce, and in many cases, lowered expectations about the future. Whereas college attendance is motivated by the promise of enhanced opportunities, graduation presents a world greatly restricted in its options.

Conclusion

In its efforts to elevate the population and alleviate hardships associated with low-paid and low-skilled employment, higher education inadvertently contributed to the further segmentation and stratification of that same workforce. The negative effects of underemployment ricochet down and add additional pressure on those parts of the workforce excluded by virtue of their education from college-based work. Even before the economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the working class existed in conditions of extreme exigency. To cite a recent analysis: “more than 53 million people—44% of all workers aged 18-64—are low-wage workers.... They earn median hourly wages of $10.22 and median annual earnings of $21,990.” This was counterpoised to the 69 million “mid-to-high-wage workers” with median hourly wages of $26.65 and median annual earnings of $54,410. This split in the workforce between sustainable and non-sustainable incomes had motivated college enrollment at all levels of the higher education spectrum; yet now, graduates are subject to these same pressures even more.

College enrollments have been on the decline for the last decade, a reversal of the trends that set in after World War II. Access to advanced education—one of the key justifications for the educational system—is narrowing, a result of the societal-wide trends that the crisis accelerates. Declining governmental support for education, another trend that the crisis accelerates. Declining education from college-based work. Even before the economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the working class existed in conditions of extreme exigency. To cite a recent analysis: “more than 53 million people—44% of all workers aged 18-64—are low-wage workers.... They earn median hourly wages of $10.22 and median annual earnings of $21,990.” This was counterpoised to the 69 million “mid-to-high-wage workers” with median hourly wages of $26.65 and median annual earnings of $54,410. This split in the workforce between sustainable and non-sustainable incomes had motivated college enrollment at all levels of the higher education spectrum; yet now, graduates are subject to these same pressures even more.

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The pandemics of interpretation

BY JOHN W. W. ZEISER

"Nothing is less sensational than pestilence."
—Albert Camus, The Plague (1948)

I’ve lost track of the days. They have taken on a different rhythm. Some parts so closely resemble life before: Wake up. A dog anxious to get out of the house and an apartment filled with cold light. Everything seems the same. But as I get to the front door I know something is different. The sky unfurling after a downpour is clear in a way I’ve never seen it. The strange mix of the familiar and the unreal is overwhelming. My dreams are the very small be rendered visible. “enemy” is invisible. But narrative necessitates the specific type of unrealness and to caution, once more, that very little about the human condition or life as it actually exists, is much like what we see on the screen.

First is the feelings of helplessness. This “enemy” is invisible. But narrative necessity situates the very small be rendered visible. Hence, medical procedurals like House, M.D. draw us into make believe, providing us electron microscopes for eyes so we can watch a virus enter a cell or an atrial valve seize up. Rendered life-sized, it becomes combatable, or at least comprehensible. But the truth, of course, is that every doorknob, elevator button, cup, and toothbrush we touch is teeming with things—threatening and non—we’ll never see. Usually, this is a good thing, at least for sanity’s sake; but these days it allows us to exist in some perpetual state of denial or preparedness.

However, the depictions on network television provide a kind of falseness, the idea that what ails us can be seen and thus defeated. Instead, we have to wash our hands, not touch our face, remain distant, and hope. There’s no Holmesian moment where the diagnosis becomes clear and the doctors rush an injection (no doubt costing a small fortune) to the patient. We know that which is killing us and all we can do is wait.

Such a state of things underscores how absurd our rhetorical dive into warfare seems. Presidents are on a “war footing,” health care workers are now on the “front lines” like Tommies on the Somme. The rhetoric of war cheapens, justifies even, the completely avoidable deaths of health care professionals, transportation workers, delivery people, grocery shelf stockers, and the numerous groups who get paid shit but are deemed essential. There is no enemy. No declaration of war. We can’t manufacture our way out of this depression. These workers are the “collateral damage” not of some bomb mission gone awry but of 40 years of austerity. Using martial language merely lets the president and the architects of our national penury shift the blame for these deaths elsewhere while allowing them to brand coronavirus with nationality to further an ongoing geopolitical struggle in place of anything scientific or useful against the actual threat.

In zombie films like 28 Days Later, the whole point is to crank up the expressionism,
to make disease and madness visual. It all has to make sense, and it had better not get too complicated. The “infected” are easily identifiable and quarantined (in this case by hacking them to bits with various blunt objects scavenged from the capitalist wreck of London). Zombie-type madness is not dissimilar to certain diseases that constitute the core of our publicized fears about pandemics, especially hemorrhagic fevers like Ebola and Hantavirus. There is clear reference to such outbreaks in the representations of 28 Days Later, aestheticizing and dehumanizing as zombies vomit blood.

But, SARS-CoV-2 has shed its predecessors’ penchant for self-advertisement. People can live for days in bilateral unavailability as their blood oxygenation dips to levels that should kill a person. They can spread it without ever knowing they have it. Its non-linear presentation that manifests as a panoply of symptoms, both respiratory and neurological, strips another point of reference from our mediated vernacular. People cough all the time, for any number of reasons. Many people in the world are overworked to the point of fatigue. Therefore, any filmic analogy for infection is far less useful. The clarity of expressionism is stripped away to leave only confusion. Besides, it wouldn’t be a very satisfying watching experience when the antagonist is an asymptomatic zombie going out to dinner with friends and coughing a couple times in their call center cubicle.

Consider Outbreak, a movie that has been dredged up for the quarantine line, as bridging the divide between zombie flics and something with more naturalistic tendencies. Outbreak takes the zombie film, sickly makeup and a decent amount of blood, while getting to the nub of why people cough all the time, for any number of reasons. Many people in the world are overworked to the point of fatigue. Therefore, any filmic analogy for infection is far less useful. The clarity of expressionism is stripped away to leave only confusion. Besides, it wouldn’t be a very satisfying watching experience when the antagonist is an asymptomatic zombie going out to dinner with friends and coughing a couple times in their call center cubicle.

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FIELD NOTES
FIELD NOTES

Propaganda and Mutual Aid in the time of COVID-19

BY ANDREAS PETROSIANNIS

A double sentiment is overwhelming: intense connectivity on one hand and dislo-
cation on the other. The expropriation of our attention and social reproduction by techno
finance and surveillance apparatuses was already pervasive prior to the pandemic,
but it has become yet more palpable—if not even palatable to some segments of
the population who face little financial or medical threat. That said, accepting the
imperative to socially distance from one another and thus the greater (physical and
psychic) separation that it compels needn’t oblige us to accept heightened alienation
and fragility as inevitable consequences, or to put aside struggles for greater
collective control of our lives (and our labor power).2 Increased online connectivity
with those in our immediate geographic communities can be utilized to build local,
extra-parliamentary power rooted in local concerns. For those workers deemed
“non-essential,” for example, time away from the workplace may allow for greater
connection with neighbors: talking about withholding rent if one can pay in solidarity
with those who can’t, organizing to deliver food to elder and immunocompromised
people nearby, building new community gardens to compost food waste given the
shutdown of municipal collection in New York City on May 4th, and so on.3 To
mention talking about what constitutes “essential” work and thus obliges greater
risk. (Are call center workers really essen-
tial?) Furthermore, if our production
continues undisturbed, in half the time,
when we don’t have to go to the office, why
should we continue to venerate the current logics of work?4

In short, social distancing doesn’t mean to distance from or abandon the
prospects of “the social.” Rather, the responsibility to stay at home, and the
immediate imbrication of our everyday activ-
ities within a local geographic position that
comes with it, can be—and has already been—mobilized by autonomous groups
across the country to invite the retooling of isolation into a collective refusal of
the injustices and violence of neoliberalism. This essay looks specifically at a number
of examples underway in New York City.

By “local,” I refer to already-existing
neighborhoods especially susceptible or pro-
posed by the apartment buildings,
to everyday life under quarantine: areas
geographies that gain much more relevance
of examples underway in New York City.

This essay looks specifically at a number
set of conditions this crisis has produced
with the goal of creating structures of aid
and care that will surpass this one crisis in
the subsequent decade—including
Woodbine itself.6

We have learned over the last decade that
today’s efforts must consider how to remain
viable after one crisis is over and others con-
tinue: how to become a sustained political
formation, one that is less susceptible to
recovery by electoralism and that can
forge permanence to transcend the “return
to normalcy” prescribed by capital after
bust, such as what followed the 2008
Woodbine’s current efforts may serve
as the beginnings of an exemplar. They
have partnered with Hungry Monk Rescue
Truck, a New York City-based Homeless
Outreach and Community Response Vehicle,
to distribute food, and have turned their
Ridgewood space into what is essentially a
food pantry. As they describe their current
mutual aid work: “On the one hand, we want to see
this shared experience into a process of col-
lective self-organization in the face of inten-
sifying crisis,” clarifying that “[m]utual
aid means not just responding to crises,
but creating the conditions to respond.3

From the networks their food distribution
will utilize and build, all person to person
and tied to a physical neighborhood, the
seeds of the other elements of a newly-con-
structed local food system could be grown,
for example, one that would incorporate
farming, procurement, and distribution,
as it collaborates with other contingents
on different scales.9

The current “void left by the state,” as
Woodbine phrases it, invites us to reconcile
a dilemma: the need for widespread state
aid and the violence, inscribed in relief,
of that same state. The term “economic relief”
had been erroneously used to describe statist
reactions to the crisis like universal basic
income schemes meant to last the crisis,
for one example. Economic crisis policy in
the US—and in European states with prom-
inent left parliamentary contingents—is far
from relief when there are federal proposals
to lower wages for agricultural workers,
when rent is not cancelled altogether, when
millions remain unhoused and food inse-
cure, and millions more without adequate
medical care. Furthermore, as technof-
fi-

name is asked to help develop surveillance
apparatuses in cooperation with policing
tools—with the applause of those on the
left and the right who now picture elements of
authoritarian statism as prophylactics
against viruses—we see the full picture
of neoliberalism come into view: divest from
communities and privatize infrastructure,

since the development of capitalism, before
and since neoliberal metropoles made pri-
vatization and violent displacement their
modi operandi. But there is an argument
by to be made that the equivalence between
rent and extortion has never been clearer
when millions cannot work but are still
expected to pay their landlords. The goal of
outreach and community involvement today
must be to aggregate intent, to build col-
lective consensus. Tenants organizations,
community organizations, and mutual
aid networks—those that are at the forefront
of reconceiving what is meant by the local
and poised to collectivize intent through
shared experience—are absolutely crucial
to providing those avenues of discussion.

This text will focus on examples of the latter
as they grow around the city.

In NYC, many recall the response of those
organizing around Occupy Wall Street in
the wake of Hurricane Sandy, who shifted
gears to mutual aid and reconstruction
efforts. This was a show of how networks
built through struggle can be quickly repur-
posed to address emergent crises; what
Charlotte Malabou has recently termed
the “plasticity” of anarchism. As Woodbine
collective describe it [italics are mine]:

Some suggested [Occupy Sandy] offered a
prospective glimpse of “disaster commun-
ism.” However, it could also be argued
that the primary function of Occupy
Sandy was that of a supplemen-
tary service provider within the void left
by the state, and that it was never able
to become a sustained political formation
able of forcing concessions from the
ruling class. At its best, it demonstrated
collective capacity to directly confront
catastrophe, and served as a crucible
for relationships, projects and spaces
in the subsequent decade—including
Woodbine itself? 8

It’s time to talk to neighbors,
to refuse to pay your rent
regardless of whether or not
we can pay, to rephrase
our isolation as refusal. It’s
also time to create forms of
communication between
different mutual aid networks
and other autonomous groups
around the city.
provide mitigated welfare to ensure minimal social reproduction, and violently surveil and police all but the white middle/upper classes—today's crisis economics have not paused this process. At a first glance, as we organize within our communities, is to delegitimize the call for “disaster relief” with a set of conditions that could allow us to build a veritable disaster communism in its place, or what Woodbine have proposed be called disaster confederalism: “the conditions for a kind of infinite strike in which communized resources and infrastructures have a crucial role to play, not only in immediate material survival but in building bases of autonomy for a citywide network of dual power.” Inevitably this would involve creating local bases for collectivity from the structures of aid that we are building now: community gardens, pantries, shared living spaces, and so on. The prediction of current reaction responses by neoliberal states is what informed Giorgio Agamben’s widely shared critique of “states of exception” in the early weeks of the pandemic. It has been roundly deemed too simplistic in its disregard of class struggles, even if with the state’s help for now—an argument that becomes “recognisably unhinged,” as Elí Lichtenstein puts it in Sal.avage, given the scale of suffering. But, the situation is tricky: there is the trap of legitimizing the state’s modes of control through expressed—if insufficient—economic aid, rather than demanding the outright cancellation of debt, for instance. Lichtenstein continues:

If we, on (and this is a recognition that sometimes, we are alive because capitalism wants us to be alive, at least for now. It is a recognition that we cannot step out of the value relation by ourselves, as individuals, and that until we do so collectively, we will— at least sometimes—be forced to play by its rules. [...] Until we abolish capitalism, the need for these sorts of emergency measures will be constantly regenerated.

In fact, we must not only clamor for greater government support for workers and communities, but also shift to supporting each other wherever possible. Food pantries can later be supplanted with larger community-based and owned agriculture systems; hotel rooms given to (only 6,000) hotel workers—have signed on, the cuts of the pie will not be retooled to act locally. One response we came up with was to create a hyper-local fund for small businesses and their workers that would be paid into by a sizable, local worker-organized network. The fund set out from the understanding that this sort of redistribution on a micro-scale is not the end of struggle but a means of forming a network between different small businesses in the neighborhood, while perhaps helping with minimal running costs and helping pay workers who were let go, but do not necessarily live close by. We didn’t start the fund by collecting donations, but rather by reaching out to small businesses first, asking them how many workers they were unable to pay, how much revenue they had lost, and whether they had to shut their doors. After a small, autonomous network was set up we began to collect donations, flyer, sharing a document online, and so on. So far, given that close to 40 businesses—barbershops, cafes, dog-walkers—have signed on, the cuts of the pie have been small, but that’s not the point, or at least not the whole point.

A central goal of the fund is to disseminate information and propaganda, both to donors and recipients of funds. Those who will donate—predominantly middle-class and housing-secure—may start to see how fragile their neighbors’ economic positions are beyond the rhetorics of philanthropy capitalism or welfare, when those they see struggling live around the block, or in their building. The other goal is to create a network between the businesses. So far email threads among members and ourselves have included frustration with the convoluted loan schemes offered by the city, information on how to organize a rent strike (particularly a stellar example put together by the Met Council), and putting different people in the network in touch. NYC Rent Strike and the Toronto housing strike are examples of this, but rather the beginnings of a formation that could reorganize itself along different parameters when future crises emerge. It’s time to talk to neighbors, to refuse to pay our rent regardless of whether or not we can pay, to rephrase our isolation as refusal. It’s also time to create forms of communication between different mutual aid networks and other autonomous groups around the city. Per Woodbine:

This is where we can imagine such hubs forming the basis for a new disaster confederalism. The first revolutionary measure is to form immediate links with each other in the midst of a survival crisis. Then comes the longer-term strategy that builds autonomy and solidarity through citywide and regional networks, while pushing the limits of the state’s capacity for redistribution, until its hold is broken. Survival pending revolution.

Engaging in small-scale political education through mutual aid networks is a great place to begin.

1. Thank you to Ethia Wick for editing this text, and for her insights shared in conversation as we think through the conditions described below.
4. Robert Fitch’s The Assassination of New York (Verso, 1993), described the displacement and violence that allowed for those offices to dominate the metropolitan landscape with plans for de-industrialization in the first half of the twentieth century. Their closure now, it’s hard to imagine, will continue the violence that guarantees increasing property values. However, it can also create the conditions for mass squatters, popular expropriation of newly-vacant office buildings, and so on.
5. The Ain’t A Woman Campaign, a grassroots mobilization of home attendants, have brought attention to the lack of protections they have received from the state. See: https://www.aintiwoman.org.
AngryWorkers want you to build an international revolutionary organization guided by the axiom “the emancipation of the working classes must be fought by the working classes themselves,” and they have a plan.

Six years ago the communist group relocated from London to a western industrial suburb called Greenford, where they found a dizzying array of industrial and logistical facilities central to keeping Greater London running. Greenford, they discovered, “typified one of capitalism’s main contradictions: that workers have enormous potential power as a group, especially if they could affect food supply into London, at the same time they are individually weak.” AngryWorkers set up shop and organized tirelessly inside and outside the union structure in a number of industrial workplaces, in community campaigns against austerity and their own solidarity network, and through the Workers’WildWest newspaper which they distribute at factory gates at the crack of dawn. None of these practices are new, and some may seem better left in the past. But AngryWorkers’ new book Class Power on Zero-Hours (London: AngryWorkers, 2020), a sustained reflection on the past six years of this organizing, reveals their praxis to be even more timely than authors could have known.

Class Power recounts the group’s organizing experiences and the lessons they have drawn from them, while underscoring the necessity for coordinated working-class rebellions throughout global logistical networks, and the imperative for the UK left to change courses following the defeat of its social democratic ambitions in the figure of Jeremy Corbyn. By sheer coincidence the book hits shelves as the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically heightened social dependency on services like Amazon and Instacart, and thrust logistics workers’ struggles into the open as increased exploitation and dangerous working conditions add more fuel to the fire across the supply chain. Simultaneously a new generation of self-proclaimed socialistists in the United States are reeling from the electoral defeat of Bernie Sanders, just as AngryWorkers found a base of operations of which many London leftists have never heard, and consistently contrast their experiences in Greenford with vogue theories of “post-industrial” societies and “immaterial labor” which thrive among urban intelligentsia. A far cry from post-industrial, Greenford is home to a highly-concentrated international proletarian largely hailing from Africa, South Asia, and Eastern Europe and thrown into fraught relations of cooperative labor at similarly heterogeneous points of production. AngryWorkers argue that places like Greenford represent the return of large concentrations of workers in space, following capitalism’s decades-long restructuring of productive relations away from large centralized factories that could serve as proletarian strongholds. Accordingly, they argue that Greenford and places like it present an Achilles’ heels of capital in its present composition, begging concerted communist organizing. One nearby office park, by AngryWorkers’ account, “boasts 40,000 workers laboring in 1,500 businesses ranging food production, custom printing, tech, transportation, laundry, waste processing, hospitality, and studio film production, alongside a hospital, international student housing, a massive supermarket, and all kinds of cafes and other working-class haunts.” We have to contrast the strategic joy of engaging with this potential jewel of a working class movement,” they write, “with the state and often airy Labour party politics and internal power-fights that many London lefties prefer to get involved with. We ask ourselves: what the fuck?!”

The group suggests that anyone can simply walk around a place like Greenford with their eyes and ears open and learn a lot about the world they live in. But the treasure trove of thick descriptions and practical wisdom which fill Class Power’s nearly 400 pages is largely derived from years of full immersion in Greenford life, and purchased at great exertion of time and energy of a group of dedicated militants. To get rooted in Greenford, AngryWorkers took in crowded proletarian neighborhoods, labored for years on end in low-wage warehouse, factory, and transportation work, and merged their social lives with the dense local networks that crisscross thousands of workplaces or nodes on the same supply chain, and conditions of daily life outside the factory. This final item has provided much of the raw material for Class Power, and demonstrates laudable efforts to move beyond the same old jargon and sloganeering and write for an audience far removed from the Facebook International. Above all, the honesty and self-critical stance from which they evaluate their organizing provides a wealth of practical reflection for organizers in a variety of settings.

For starters, AngryWorkers intend the solidarity network model to ground them in Greenford’s proletarian life and begin to tap the networks that traverse workplaces and neighborhoods. Class Power recounts a number of these campaigns, including the reader to Senegalese kitchen workers, Bulgarian apple pickers, Moroccan factory workers, Somali bus depot cleaners, Punjabi truck drivers and construction workers, Sudanese hotel workers, and Polish tenants, united by their common status as highly exploited laborers and tenants, often victimized by more affluent and better-rooted members of their own “communities.” As a kind of organizing first principle, they opt to avoid a formal organizational name or “brand” identity, concerned that a clear organizational identity could become a fetish object, obscuring from its participants the material reality that their collective activity represents the group’s power.

The group narrates its initial trouble getting over the hump of making contacts. Film screenings and open hours at community centers fail to attract workers, they change tactics and set up at working-class cafes, including a McDonald’s. This pivot attracts far more interested workers, who bring with them rich social networks traversing the region, replete with experiences of exploitation upon which campaigns could be built. Predictably enough the solidarity network runs into problems typical of the model, namely their inability to transcend the “service” model which nonprofits and social workers have conditioned working people to expect in place of direct-action and empowerment. They also have trouble getting workers to stick around after their campaign has won. Nonetheless, they rack up back wages to the tune of £25,000, and along with local efforts against library closures and the demolition of a working-class community center, demonstrate in practice the remarkable heterogeneity of Greenford’s proletariat and the invisible lines of interconnectivity that run throughout neighborhoods and workplaces. In their critical reflections, they wonder if a more formal structure could have proven more effective and sustained better over time. It is an open question with the solidarity network and all of the AngryWorkers projects, and it is a question that can only be addressed in practice.

The centerpiece of their strategy is workplace organizing, which lands AngryWorkers comrades in refrigerated warehouses, prepared food assembly lines, laundromat distribution centers, auto transportation across the so-called “last mile” between warehouse and the consumer’s home, and even a shop manufacturing 3D printers, which they discover to be a full 180 degrees away from the feel-good technocratic-utopianism of “open source” ideology. Their guiding praxis seeks to identify and

AngryWorkers’ new book Class Power on Zero-Hours (London: AngryWorkers, 2020), a sustained reflection on the past six years of this organizing, reveals their praxis to be even more timely than authors could have known.

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encourage worker militancy, rather than recruit people to a group or a particular political standpoint. Once a comrade has taken root in a shop, they begin to identify grievances and potential seeds of struggle. While these may be more tangential to the work, slowly building the trust of workers and not making their politics known, comrades on the outside distribute literature outside the shop, and stories from these various workplaces appear in WorkersWildWest. 

All the while, the comrades on the inside tend under arduous, bleak (a recurring adjective in Class Power), and near-dystopian conditions. They take months and even years to build the basis for a single campaign, all while engaged in punishing daily regiments. In the refrigerated “chill” warehouse, for instance, the comrades stood in all day mere sort boxes and trays of food at a fast pace, with their forearm adorned with a computer that gives orders for hours on end. In the cold, the flesh slowly sinks below the required pace, they receive a text message warning, followed by loss of work. All this, on temps. When they finally do have a chance to slow down, after the better part of a year in these conditions, they don’t seem so bad to go. Tellingly, the biggest obstacle facing their organizing efforts was the high turnover, and the propensity of the ablest would-be militants to simply quit in search of better conditions and pay instead of working long-term to build worker power in the shop. And who can blame them? In this work AngryWorkers draws inspira-tion from the present syndicalism renaiss-ance, in particular the organizing of Italy’s SI Cobas,1 militant unionists in the logis-tics sector whose actions AngryWorkers publicize in their factory newspaper as potential inspiration for English workers. They are appreciative but more critical of the en vogue approach championed by labor expert Jane McAlevey, author of Getting Together, who can blame them?

In contrast to the sectarian, they assertively not just to the obvious depriva-tions, but to the very personal experiences of “union reform,” but these accounts, far from revealing a desire to simply quit in search of better conditions and pay instead of working long-term to build worker power in the shop. And who can blame them? In this work AngryWorkers draws inspiration from the present syndicalism renaissance, in particular the organizing of Italy’s SI Cobas,1 militant unionists in the logistics sector whose actions AngryWorkers publicize in their factory newspaper as potential inspiration for English workers. They are appreciative but more critical of the en vogue approach championed by labor expert Jane McAlevey, author of Getting Together, who can blame them? In this work AngryWorkers draws inspiration from the present syndicalism renaissance, in particular the organizing of Italy’s SI Cobas,1 militant unionists in the logistics sector whose actions AngryWorkers publicize in their factory newspaper as potential inspiration for English workers. They are appreciative but more critical of the en vogue approach championed by labor expert Jane McAlevey, author of Getting Together, who can blame them?
Class Power on Zero-Hours is a difficult book to review, given its immense wealth of practical information and its scrupulous recounting of the high price its authors paid to earn it.

the 20th century: a clear account of how their daily activity connects with the global communist revolution. “There is no lack of revolutionary anger,” they write. “What we haven’t seen is a section of the working class that focuses on the real centres of power—the grain baskets, manufactur- ing centres, ports, power plants—with the aim and a plan to take them over. It might take a few more waves of struggle for such an organized force to emerge,” they write, but insist nonetheless on the guiding question: “So what are the bare necessities during a revolutionary transition?”

This is not to say that their plan—or anybody’s plan—could be followed to the letter in a moment of revolutionary trans- formation. Nor do they intend this text to be treated in the manner of those who offer alternative explanations more directly argued that these communities are a lucrative industry for building university infrastructure strategic to working-class insurrection, take up occupations there whenever possible, build solidarity net- works, and to generalize this practical-crit- ical work with the similar efforts of groups all over the world. Not all readers (present company included!) will be willing to cast aside whatever they’re doing and take up employment at physically punishing low-waged labor in these strategic sites. But some will, and the AngryWorkers are clear that important work remains outside the workplace, to agitate, organize in sol- idarity networks, support the comrades inside, and help build more generalized networks of shared practical knowledge. To this effect, the group has been organizing video conferences, necessitated in part by COVID-19 quarantine, and has continued a dazzling output on their website. The offers literature and flyer templates for English writing by and about SI Cobas, visit https://libcom.org/tags/si-cobas. Angry Workers of the World: Precarious and Ugly, https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com.

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1. For English writing by and about SI Cobas, visit https://libcom.org/tags/si-cobas.
LYLE ASHTON HARRIS with McKenzie Wark

Rarely does one enjoy the pleasure of being in the company of legendary people. Lyle Ashton Harris is one such person. His work has pushed boundaries and opened zones of creative agency for a generation of young artists. As a gay man he has experienced the deep traumas of losing friends and lovers to AIDS, and has brought that sadness and awareness of the human condition into his work in a way that communicates across many spectrums. What follows is an edited version of our conversation, #30 in an ongoing series that is part of the Rail’s New Social Environment, a daily lunchtime broadcast in the time of COVID-19.

MCKENZIE WARK (RAIL): Well, Lyle, you’re kind of a legend.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Hi everyone!

RAIL: So do you want to tell us a little bit about The Watering Hole in 1996 and why you chose this particular show to introduce us to your work?

HARRIS: First of all, thank you McKenzie, it’s really a pleasure! I’ve been a fan of your work for many years. In fact, I was thinking while in the shower before this Zoom broadcast [laughs] that the dates for The Watering Hole correspond to your legendary book, I’m Very Into You: Correspondence 1995-1996, about your correspondence with Kathy [Acker], and that you could speak about that period as much as I can. I decided to open up with The Watering Hole because as many of you probably know through a generous donation by my dear friend and patron Aggie Gund, MoMA acquired it a few years ago. At the time, the critic Vince Aletti told me that he thought it was great that the museum got it, but that it might never see the light of day because of its content. So I’m interested in what’s happened pre-COVID-19 over the last five to ten years in terms of social movements, in terms of cultural institutions feeling the need to somehow—I hate the word “diversify”—but in a way to get more “teethy,” in terms of the type of image-making or work that they are engaging with. So I thought it would be interesting to start with that.

I like the story of The Watering Hole, because before it made its first appearance at Jack Tilton gallery for my second show there in 1996, I remember Jack and I almost got into a fist fight because he said to me, “Where’s the winning image?” My first show with him had been widely successful, critically, etc. It was about the nation, if you will; the second show was about disintegration. Although The Watering Hole is dated 1996, there are certain images in this nine-panel work that go back to Act Up in ‘87, the exposé of Jeffery Dahmer coming to light, Magic Johnson coming out with HIV, and the L.A. uprising in ‘92—the images in these nine panels comprise a particular period of personal archive work. [Harris holds up a typed letter with the letter “D” stenciled in gold on it.] For the Brooklyn Rail (as a little “gift” to share with you), here is the letter I wrote to my father that appears with a “D”—this is the first time I’m actually showing it. This is part of The Watering Hole archive. I’ve been looking for this letter, because I did a performance at Participant Inc a couple of years ago after my father passed away and I could not find the original letter. So in order to make that piece [for Participant], which we’ll see later, I had to sample from a transparency of The Watering Hole panel. In this new period of COVID-19, when I’m starting to think more deeply about the archive, I just came across it in a vault that contained all the original content. This is the first time I’m actually sharing this—the letter that I’m actually seeing for the first time just last night since ’96, so I wanted to share it with you!

RAIL: I just want to tease out that remark a little bit, “It might have been acquired, but will it ever be shown?” So what’s in the stack and what is actually ever shown is one thing—on the institutional side—but then you’re also talking about, for you; you have your own archive of this particular slice of culture that’s really not terribly well documented. But then, there’s this selection on one side and this selection on the other side, on the institutional side; and, maybe it’s worth just pausing to ask: What gets left out of both of those?

HARRIS: I think there was a systemic shift, not just in terms of institutions, but also artists, critics, collectors—the whole culture itself. I remember growing up in the Bronx, growing up queer, being called faggot, sissy, etc. and the trauma around that. I remember the Whitney’s Black Male exhibition in ’94 that I was in, and the resistance to the type of imagery that I had in that show, how I did not fall in the paradigm of Black masculinity. But five years later I’m being hired by Vice magazine to shoot Missy Elliot and other hip hop artists. So it’s not just within the art world, it’s in the larger culture itself.

I’m part of a generation that actually applied pressure, if you will, to the culture, to give it elasticity to expand. And I’m obviously not the first, but I’ve definitely been inspired by the generation that came before me. [Harris holds up a letter in an envelope with a “Silence = Death” sticker on it, dated September 18, 1992.] Here’s another thing that I had not seen since I received it—it’s a letter from the great, late poet Essex Hemphill, which I posted on Instagram. Remembering at that time feeling numb back then, like I didn’t have a voice. It took someone like him, who was a big brother to me, telling me that’s how we earn our warrior marks. I’m sharing that with you because I think it’s pertinent to where we are today. I remember a couple weeks ago one of my students saying they’re bored—this is in the early stages of social isolation—to which I replied that when Gregg Bordowitz was dealing with the advanced stages of HIV in the late ’80s, he didn’t have time to be bored at twenty-one. He collaborated with Douglas Crimp and created the seminal work of AIDS activism, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism.

RAIL: Speaking of which, I think maybe we’ll move onto the “Ektachrome Archive,” Ektachrome being a standard of color film reproduction shared by several different companies. I love it, actually, that you named it after a media tech- nique, you know, it kind of speaks to me.

One thing I want to say is that it’s a body of work that is working with archives that are not just yours. You’re drawing in several that are kind of a family legacy if you like, you broaden it out that way a little just as well.

HARRIS: My grandfather was a photographer and shot over 10,000 slides documenting his friends and family, the church, etc. Ektachrome was first produced in the 1940s, and I think he was shooting in the late ’40s. In fact, I inherited Portrait of Lyle Ashton Harris, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.
his Leica and his archive. My first show at Jack Tilton gallery titled, "The Good Life consisted of formal Polaroid portraits that I took of my family juxtaposed against printed Ektachrome images that my grandfather had taken of his family. But the "Ektachrome Archive" itself is a separate project.

I lived in Ghana after being invited by Yaw Nyarko, an economist who was then vice provost of NYU, to go to Africa since I lived there as a child; he thought it would be good, as I could be helpful in setting up the NYU program in Accra. NYU, at that point, had campuses in Paris, London, Tel Aviv, etc., and he felt it was important to have one on the continent of Africa. So I went over in 2005 for a semester, I fell in love with the people, the culture, and someone there. That one semester appointment ended up lasting seven years. In fact, my tenure at NYU is based on the research I had done there.

Upon my return from Ghana in late 2012, I rediscovered a trove of Ektachrome slides shot in the late '80s to the early aughts that I had deposited at my mother’s home before leaving in 2000 for a Prix de Rome fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Then coming back from being a professor in Ghana and the director of an art center there, I re-engaged with an earlier punk aesthetic, if you will, from the early '90s to 2000. The initial prompt for me to re-engage these images for the first time in over a decade was a request from Isaac Julien to use some of my snapshots in Riot, the catalogue published for his MoMA exhibition of 2013-14.

The first time I showed them was as a series of fifty images for a presentation that Gregory Crewdson and Rob Storr invited me to give at Yale, thinking at the time that I would eventually use these snapshots for college-making. But then a lot of the students there (who might have been infants when these images were shot) didn't care about who was who in the pictures, but they were able to have a formal read of the work, which was interesting to see because several months later I premiered 200 of them at Carrie Mae Weems: Live at the Guggenheim, and that was a very different story. People were actually crying—like Elizabeth Alexander, the poet—because it captured something from a period that they had lived. And it also captured and evoked for them a memorial of the people who had gone on.

I remember when Eva Respini, who was a curator at MoMA at the time, came for a studio visit and she said, “You have this archive of over five thousand images and journals, but what is the work that comes out of the archive?” And that felt like Greek to me, I didn’t quite understand—I knew what she was saying, but that was a formal challenge to me: How do I take all these images and begin to massage, to extract?

It was curious to me because when I first showed these—I mean, they’re images of my friends, you know, Iké Udé, Carrie Mae Weems, or being in London shooting Isaac Julien or the great Stuart Hall, or nudes, beaches. Unlike my grandfather, who had a label for each one actually written in pencil, mine were just in plastic bags. The question was, “Is that Black’s Beach in San Diego? Or Martha’s Vineyard? Is that Provincetown?” to the point of actually having to look at the grain of the sand, you know, really trying to get into the minutiae—“What bed was that exactly? Who was that?” That was the initial editing process, separating between beds and beaches, West Coast and East Coast, London and Paris, etc.

RAIL: You wonder what is really the important information there—does it matter where this beach was? Or is it the gesture? Or is that these things are together? Is that the thing we really want? I mean, they both matter, I guess, but you know I think about that.

HARRIS: I mean, for me—I studied with Allan Sekula and Catherine Lord at CalArts—that level of specificity was important, whether or not the audience needs to know it. But for the sake of a book, we really drilled down on that. It has its own poetics. In the context of a slideshow, for example, one doesn’t really know the specifics, it’s more about affect. But in the context of a book, which is a different iteration, then that level of specificity for me is important.

RAIL: Alright, well, let’s give it a little sound check for a sec . . .

[Video plays]

RAIL: Yeah, you wanna take us through it?

HARRIS: Yeah—Greg Tate, Cornel [West], Hilton Als, my mom [Rudean Leinaeng], my former partner/soulmate Tommy Gear, Venice, Rome, Nan [Goldin], Klaus [Biesenbach], Stuart Hall, the Whitney ISP. Can we pause McKenzie? There was a slide that just passed that had the handwritten text “his cum and blood” This image—which is from the Whitney Independent Study Program in '92 and would later become part of The Watering Hole in '96—that Ektachrome image functions for me almost like a drawing, it’s mark-making. In a sense, to answer your question, it does give a level of specificity as to when the project began. That particular image offers evidence that although The Watering Hole is dated 1996, it is something that was initially triggered in '91, and it took five years of drilling down, you know, back and forth, East Coast/West Coast. The idea of having to move, if you will, through very difficult content, and apply a formal pressure, if you will, to allow stuff to emerge.
RAIL: And I love that Nan Goldin is in the set, sliding by there, because Nan would be the grandmother to the trans women who are mothers to me. So there’s a kind of temporality of it that works differently, because Nan’s about my age I think, and looking at those pictures, they’d be my age had they lived, and most didn’t.

Is it worth pausing just to reflect on what’s our responsibility—maybe that’s not the right word—what’s our agency in talking about the ‘80s and ‘90s now, for people for whom, like many of our students were not even born, we’re talking about an era before the internet really became a thing, when we were still living through the end of the Cold War—what’s your feeling about how this presents, what work we’re attempting to do to process that time, but particularly through these more specific lenses of experiences?

HARRIS: Fascinating question. I actually feel younger today than I did ten years ago, and I think it’s a result of excavating the archive and the energy of today’s youth, the hunger. In fact, I remember seeing Gregg Bordowitz doing a performance in his curated evening at the Whitney of readings of works by Black gay men writers from the ‘80s and ‘90s now, for people for whom, like many of our students were not even born, we’re talking about an era before the internet really became a thing, when we were still living through the end of the Cold War—what’s your feeling about how this presents, what work we’re attempting to do to process that time, but particularly through these more specific lenses of experiences?

RAIL: Shall we talk about Flash of the Spirit a bit? I love these photographs with masks, some of these are shot at Fire Island, some of these you made upstate, I think we established this before.

HARRIS: I think it was in 2018 that my friend and dealer Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn had asked me to show some works that the Tate Museum has recently acquired—the “Constructs” series—which were in the Whitney’s Black Male exhibition in ’94. Those works had been in storage for twenty-five years, and when they were shown again in New York at the Armory on the occasion of the publication of my book, I remember people thinking that they were made yesterday, because they had a certain freshness, even though they were done in ’89.

I can remember Thomas Lax, curator at MoMA and a friend, saying that he saw those works as a teenager when his mother took him to see the Black Male show—you never know what seeds you’ve planted. For example, when I read your book, I’m very into you, I didn’t know that many years later we’d be having this conversation. You never know the effect—that’s the power of work, the power of ideas, the ability to disseminate.

After I showed the vintage prints from the “Constructs” series, I began to think about whether it would be possible to make a new series of images to experimentally investigate the self. That happened to coincide with my uncle Harold Epps, a collector of African art who traveled throughout Africa in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, having gifted me a couple of masks. The synergy of these occurrences prompted me to explore what it means for a middle-aged person to return to the body as a site of pleasure and play. It also made me think about how to move beyond projecting onto the other. These images are a way to engage the landscape, to go into it and think about notions of the body and the landscape.

It’s so interesting just thinking about the wisdom that comes with that—the grace of being alive
number one, having lost so much through the AIDS crisis, archives etc. And what does it mean to have the wisdom of having lived through that? Or as my friend Leyden says, having seen the devil and being able to tell the story, being able to live through that and to take pleasure in play, if that makes any sense.

RAIL: That immediately makes me think of that bit in Sarah Schulman’s book, Rat Bohemia, where she talks about walking down the street and seeing a dumpster full of playbills and knowing that another gay man has died. It’s an image that trades on a cliché but it’s also real. There are pieces of culture that fell away, and perhaps more intensely then, for Black and brown and queer people—and trans people as well.

HARRIS: Oh absolutely. Getting back to issues around the Dahmeresque in my earlier body of work, just thinking about—prior to Disney moving into 42nd Street—the longing for the pleasure and the sensuality of the city, but let’s also talk about the element of violence. The Watering Hole was a way to work through that.

RAIL: Do you want to tell me about Untitled (DAD)—who is the letter to and from?

HARRIS: That’s the letter that I mentioned earlier, a letter to my late father, who I had a challenging relationship with. I remember talking to a long-time friend, the philosopher Anthony Appiah, about the fact that although we had a difficult relationship, maybe my father’s ultimate sacrifice was that he wasn’t around—because, in a way, it gave me Africa. After he left, my mother, brother, and I moved to Tanzania, where we lived for two years. Thinking about what it meant to be a second generation Saint Kitts man, being handsome and beautiful, and not being able to cope with racism, the inability to deal in a way. It’s curious to me because he produced two queer sons, and what does it mean to embody certain gifts from him, also as a way to pay forward to the next generation?

The Untitled (DAD) collage actually had its origins in my 2018 performance/installation at Participant Inc., curated by the lovely, brilliant Lia Gangitano. I was in Paris when I found out that my father passed away, and I didn’t know what I was going to do for this show. I decided to do a performance, exploring loss through ritual expressions of public grief and mourning. It was interesting because people like my mother, Mickalene Thomas, and Zadie Smith were there, and I was moved by the level of identification that people felt, the level of agency it gave them afterwards to come up and tell me their own father stories. It was interesting to me that something which is a highly personal archive engendered the possibility for others to reveal their own experiences, which up that point I was not aware of.

RAIL: Now the first thing I want to ask you about these ones, the dye sublimation on aluminum, can you just tell me a little bit about the process?

HARRIS: Dye sublimation is a printing process in which the ink is baked directly onto the aluminum itself. Red Shadow was the first one, which was done, I believe, in 2017 for my friend and dealer David Castillo in Miami. What I love about this one in particular is the sense of mark-making, I’ll shoot something, then it may be another ten years before it really emerges, if that makes any sense. The Shadow Works are definitely another deep dive into the archive. For example, if you look at the upper right image in the left panel, that image is the figure of an early romantic obsession of mine from high school, actually in my bedroom in the Bronx. I kept that image that first surfaced in The Watering Hole. You think you’re done but then images have a way of resurfacing.

The backgrounds are all materials that I sourced in Ghana, as I mentioned, when I was living there. My partner at the time, Prince Marfo, was the grandson of the village wife of a former president of Ghana. It was great that I had the academic experience there, but to be involved with him, who’s a bodybuilder, I also had sort of a high/low culture experience, if you will. I was able to gain access to Ashanti funeral rites—you don’t just happen upon an Ashanti funeral. It’s a very deep, rich, ancient culture. I was struck by the relationship to death—unlike the West, where there is a certain finality. In fact, I was doing some research and African American funerary practices are more akin to Akan funerary practices. There is an arc within that: There is clearly the grieving of the body, but within that there is thanksgiving, one is able to honor the ancestors and to be able to have an element of rejuvenation and celebration after that. The majority of the fabric I’m using is...
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Ghanaian funerary fabric. This work is titled Black Power, which is a term that a lot of people credit to Stokely Carmichael after Malcolm X died, actually it came into cultural significance about a decade before when the author Richard Wright was invited by President Kwame Nkrumah to visit Ghana as it was making the transition to independence as the first sub-Saharan African nation. Wright’s travelogue about his journey to Ghana in 1956–57 was titled Black Power.

RAIL: They seem to have a different relation to the archive in terms of a kind of elegiac feeling, maybe? That the memories come back with a different feeling? A kind of formal beauty that is maybe going on here that is kind of different. I just wonder how you feel about reprocessing one’s past at a certain, shall we say, life-stage, that these things start to feel a little different, how one starts to give aesthetic expression to that?

HARRIS: Well, it’s curious, because some images are clearly sourced from the past, then you have a portrait of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who I photographed for a cover story in New York magazine. In this particular piece, Double Gasper, dreadlocks from my 20s are embedded, that I rediscovered in my archive after thirty years. I don’t know, I guess it gets back to some of the early concerns of The Watering Hole in terms of applying a sort of formal pressure, if you will. I guess there is an elegiac element, through the use of filters, the mirroring, and also the veiling. I think that’s been a repeating motif in the work, trying to somehow excavate the surface.

For example, the piece of pottery in The Gold Standard II, (2019) is actually from something I purchased while I was in Ghana, something used to crush pepper that you get in the market for less than a dollar. This was something that I transported as if it were a very precious object. My dear friend and soulmate suggested that if something was that precious to me, after leaving Ghana to return to the states in 2013 it allowed me to hold on to the memories that were so important to me, so influential.

When I traveled there, I remember going to the airport and there was a sign, and as you know Ghana still has the British form of colonial buggery laws. So what did it mean for me to go in “professorial drag,” if you will? Often I was carrying three or four laptops as gifts for people. I know how to dress the drag, in this sense “professorial,” so I’m not checked at the border. Meanwhile, at the corner of my eye there’s a sign that says Ghanaian society does not condone pedophilia and other such things, and we know what that’s a code word for. So it was a way to reclaim that aspect. Why did I collect these materials? I had no idea how they would manifest—I’d given a lot of these fabrics away—I guess in a way it speaks to my process, in terms of, let’s say, accumulation.

RAIL: I mean how do you make work that doesn’t ignore, but kind of reprocesses western art history tradition? That’s in here somewhere, but it’s not necessarily featured, you know, it’s not the controlling discourse. How is that then reprocessed through an everyday life, through the archive of a life or a set of lives that those aesthetic practices ignore or are never accounted for or repressed? So to me it seems you’ve sort of gone through all these stages to build the material and the layers and the practices and the experience to be able to make these things, to me of extraordinary, formal beauty at this stage of your career and life.

HARRIS: Going back to the work you also love—Flash of the Spirit—I remember when Nancy Spector walked through my show at Salon 94 with me in 2018. She said it was daring, considering the controversy around the ’54 MoMA show on primitivism. What does it mean to return to that scene of the crime? Are there certain things that are left undone, that still need to be processed? And similarly, I think there is a certain masking that’s going on in these works. I always think that I am constantly in the process—in terms of making work—of leaving cues, leaving traces. I’m not sure if it has to do with living with HIV for thirty-one years—the fact there’s evidence that there’s something that exists, if that makes any sense. I mean, it’s curious. I’m just thinking, what does it mean to be anointed, to be able to tell a story in and of a grit. Does that make any sense? To reimagine what is possible and to claim that space. So it’s a personal archive, but one that is actually mapping out. And getting back to the fact of the incendiary reactions that I got to The Watering Hole [...] if all my “acting out,” of all the pleasure of youth—what was that guiding force that actually guided or hovered over the archive, that’s not only about me, but is about or for a future generation?

For example the Black Male show in ’94, and before that the Black Popular Culture conference in ’91 that happened in collaboration at the Dia Center for the Arts with the Studio Museum in Harlem—there is a level of cultural amnesia around these art historical moments, where there was a certain synergy happening, and if there’s not any evidence of that then it doesn’t exist. So my question to myself (and I’m not sure if that’s the burden of representation or not) is what was the guiding force? I think that comes up within the ancestral play that’s happening whether in Flash of the Spirit or in the Shadow Works. What was that energy? Now—and I don’t know if I can describe that, I’m not sure if it’s my role to name what that was—that was acting as a custodian of that—being a sissy, a queer from the Bronx, negotiating that and expanding out.

What does it mean to somehow apply the pressure to the culture to open up, whether that’s in the Bronx or Ghana or Paris—wherever that makes any sense? I’m thinking of a show that I co-curated with Rob Storr and Peter Benson Miller at the American Academy in Rome in 2015 because professor emeritus Frank M. Snowden, a fellow trustee at the Academy whose father (Frank M. Snowden, Jr., who was at Harvard around the same time as the great W.E.B. DuBois) had gone to the American Academy in the mid-1950s to transcribe, or to massage if you will, his thesis on Blacks in antiquity into a book. At the time, he was informed by the director of the American Academy that there were White southerners who did not feel comfortable being housed under the same roof as an African American person, a Black person. And the irony is, a few years later Frank M. Snowden, Jr., was appointed as the Cultural Attaché, the first African American in history, alongside Clare Boothe Luce, who was the first female ambassador. Basically the show was a trigger to talk about issues of Black culture in the diaspora in relationship to Italian culture. I’m just thinking about the trajectory of this young kid in the Bronx, and what does it mean to apply pressure? I’m interested in the energy that helped. I also want to give voice to those that did not make it. Let’s be clear that in 2020, how many young queer youth and trans youth today are being murdered or are committing suicide? I had a student at NYU who is queer and her father was going to pull the plug on the tuition because she came out. I think it’s important to think about how expansive we’ve been, but in the arena of what we might think of as progressive, there are deeply conservative strains and how do we deal with that—that’s what I think makes the work so much more important today, if that makes any sense.

RAIL: Oh, totally, yeah. How does one create and hold space so others can come into and make work with strikes me as particularly important, you know not least in the current moment we’re in now.

HARRIS: I’ve been talking a lot, but I want to just say that I was sheltering down with a friend for twenty-seven days—and I’ve been cooking! It’s amazing, I’ve made wild cod soup! I can’t wait to make dinner for you and Phong—that’s one thing I love to do, that’s what I’m probably best at, is making food and hosting. That’s one thing that gives me tremendous joy. [Laughs]
LAUREN BON with Phong H. Bui

Every once in a while, one will meet a visionary, but oftentimes it requires multiple encounters or repeated experiences to be able to absorb or digest that vision more readily. A Japanese proverb says: “Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.” Artist Lauren Bon is a visionary who is undoubtedly turning her vision into action. She has carved out a space between land art and conceptual art, where there is a tension that continues to generate an expanded notion of art and an expanded notion of society, the degree to which she trusts and follows her vision, and the required action this calls upon, is a most unique and rare path from and to her own “inner freedom.” Whatever else we’re trying to mediate, as spectators and activists in one form or another, in our political and social life, driven by an economy that is increasingly being detached from our human scale, Lauren is fearlessly working to bring to life the wisdom of our ancestors, which has been neglected and undermined by the institutional bureaucracy of the post-Enlightenment, to direct our productive deployment of today’s scientific resources. This unity is imminent especially in regard to our current condition, as we have entered the age of the Anthropocene.

The following is an edited version from our New Social Environment daily lunchtime conversation #27 (April 22, 2020), with Lauren as our special guest in honor of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

PHONG H. BUI (RAIL): I met you, Lauren, through our beloved friend, the legendary Jonas Mekas in late April 2016, even though I didn’t manage to see the screening of your film 100 Mules Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct at Anthology Film Archives, but I did manage to see it as soon as you sent an edition cast in clay and inscribed with “Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy.” I was so happy, and when I finally saw the large neon version, especially when Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation on June 1, 2017, I was reminded immediately of when we curated the monumental exhibit Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1 at Industry City in Sunset Park, which was supported by Industry City and Dedalus Foundation and covered that 100,000 square-foot space, and we did it in just two months. Therefore it was perfectly natural, especially when we all realized how pertinent and prescient your neon spoke of and for our time, we immediately curated a huge exhibit in just one month that 50,000 square-foot glass gallery (designed by Richard Meier) at Mana Contemporary called Occupy Mana: Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy plus its counterpart, Friends in Solidarity, Year 1, in the 25,000 square-foot of public space in Mana’s main building. It was our occasion to celebrate the Rail’s 18-year anniversary, while sharing our strong collective responses to Trump’s divisive agenda. Your neon, with your permission, became the official slogan of Rail Curatorial Projects from then onward, so I want to begin with how did this neon initially come into being?

LAUREN BON: What an opportunity to speak with you today on Earth Day and thank you for calling into this conversation Jonas Mekas. At this point I’d like to call in some other ancestors, Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway, who originally had made the statement that artists need to create on the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy for their electronic cafe in the ’80s, which was a strategy to combat the nuclear arms race, not too different from what you and the Brooklyn Rail have set up with the New Social Environment. Their idea is that Cold War dynamics could be mitigated by being able to have a cup of coffee with someone who is considered your enemy. They had originally said that statement and my appropriation of that statement as the mission statement for Metabolic Studio really came with an understanding also of the nuclear arms race as being the big challenge on the level of scale for artists working at least in the intermountain West. The intermountain West is a region that the studio defines as a watershed. Unlike the East Coast which is challenged by sometimes too much water, we’ve been experiencing the gradual disappearance of watersheds that led to frequent mega droughts. All of the major rivers that fall from the Rockies and move their way west through the Great Basin have a major challenge because the Great Basin was the location of nuclear arms testing. In mid-century modern thinking that was the least worst place to bomb, because it looked like there was nothing there. So, in thinking about what a post 9/11 art practice could look like where the commodification of art needed to be replaced with a mandate to re-envision a world along a regenerative principle: we were thinking about how could we, as a studio practice, work to the scale of the nuclear bomb? So, Sherrie and Kit’s mandate that we needed to define our scale individually to what our brain could comprehend and attach all of our work brought into it was how that neon got generated.

RAIL: And regenerated into different scales depending on different contexts. Lauren, you have an unusual background: you were trained as a dancer with Martha Graham before attending Princeton University where you studied art, then MIT for graduate school in architecture—how did those experiences bring you to become an artist?

BON: Movement has always been my most facile way of learning. I am by nature an immersive learner. Whenever I dance or I move or I experience my body in space I become the most receptive to a way of being in the world. As a child and as an adolescent, dance was my practice through which...
I learned about my environment. When I realized as a college student that I didn’t perhaps assimilate knowledge as well through books as I did through movement I was able to get an apprenticeship with Martha Graham and it was with that apprenticeship that I found myself in the back of House Space working for the Isamu Noguchi, helping make his masks for Martha Graham’s stage design. And it was my fascination in working with him that led me from dance into thinking about the story that is created through performance, through costume, lighting, and how absolutely critical it was for Martha to retell the classics. So, it was in that rubric that I realized studying architectural history and theory was critical because I wasn’t primarily interested in the theater as a stage, per se, I was actually interested in the world as a stage. And learning about the building blocks of how to make things stand up, and how you permit the movement of how to let the movement into the world, understanding through movement and social trauma what the practice of making things could be.

RAIL: That makes sense because when I last visited you at Metabolic Studio in LA a year prior to our collaboration as a Collateral Event at the last Venice Biennale, I remember we spoke about our shared interest in Rudolf Steiner, and of course dance and music was an essential part of his teaching and I remember how deeply he himself was influenced by Goethe in that thinking is an organ of perception no more, no less than let’s say the ear as it hears sound, and the eye as it sees image, hence thinking itself would perceive ideas. And I remember we talked about all these similar related activities but I would like to focus on your interest in Steiner’s ideas of biodynamic agriculture, advocating for an ecological and sustainable approach to agriculture that increased soil fertility without the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and so on.

BON: Steiner is one of the proto pollinators of my life. It’s hard to say when I discovered his work because his memory and his ethos is like a dandelion that sort of wafts through time and space and at different times his profound genius grabs one or another idea of mine. I often think that when I really came to understand Steiner’s existence was in that pivot point where I started to think about the movement between abstraction and total abstraction in art after the turn of the century and, especially after WWI and WWII. Steiner really had the courage to introduce an unsarcastic view of life which was coming from a very pure place where he was really suggesting that anthroposophy would be some kind of union between man and knowledge. That if we allowed our senses to inform us and not just our minds, if we could immerse ourselves in the building blocks of life on life’s terms then we could have a non-hierarchical knowledge base at which everyone could participate in caring and moving the world forward. I think it was this moment in time when he really was working at his high point, which was the early part of the 20th century until his death in 1925, re-envisioning a world along a completely novel line. And of course, a big part of that was to think about how our relationship with the ground and the earth could be our teacher and make us well. And, through that, how everybody could be an artist because everybody who can touch the earth can be teachable in profound ways by all of the things that make the ground possible for us to live through and by.

RAIL: I also admire his conviction to the notion of political equality and human rights as part of potential social reform. And you’re right about the non-hierarchical element because that’s how Joseph Beuys responded to him so wholeheartedly. When Beuys made the famous work—quite early in 1964—The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated, he really railed against Duchamp’s fascinations with Henri Poincaré’s limits to knowledge. Beuys proposed the opposite idea of there being no limits to knowledge. And that’s why such raw materials of warmth such as honey, fat, felt, etc. being used against the cold intellectual approach of Duchamp, one can say. Can you share with us your fascination with bees and how they became a sort of material for your work, for example, Honey Chandeliers, which were made from a collection of honey that I gleaned from an early communication project that I still continue with beekeepers.
from war-torn countries around the world. I’m interested in conversations with them about how different forms of military conflict and aggression against the landscape were affecting beekeeping. Through those dialogues the beekeepers would send me back jars of honey, usually in milk containers, that I would use to hang with light as a chandelier. This is an allusion to both the Steiner idea, the bees as an example of a social-sculptural system, and how they’re required for culture because without their ability to support agriculture we need to go back to being hunters and gatherers so an act of culture is to support bees, and therefore not supporting them implies an anti-cultural posture by definition. Beuys’s huge project for Documenta 1977 was Honey Pump at the Workplace where he took thousands of gallons of honey and circulated it around the room of the Museum Fridericianum that evokes how we’re all connected in the circulatory system around the nectar of life with all of its poetics. But I would like to draw the study that I’ve done through the years that almost every religion has the stories about the disappearance and emergence of bees and connects it to our human consciousness so that it’s been said that often famine, which is caused by the disappearance of bees, is the only thing that’s capable of stopping war. So, the disappearance of bees might also be the bee’s higher intelligence helping us save ourselves from conflict that we’re incapable of solving without famine.

RAIL: It’s such an omen that we shouldn’t take it lightly. To continue with Steiner, who was so prolific; among 2,000 lectures that he gave, towards the last five years of his life, nine were devoted to bees as an aspiration of an ideal community. The beehive is therefore permeated by the notion of love, equal distribution of labor, among other healing attributes of honey. This is evident in your Bee Box (2007).

BON: Absolutely, it was my created condition with a discarded display in your collection. But this is a work that is separate from the chandeliers in that this was a jewelry cabinet where I inserted, with the help of a beekeeper, two active hives side by side, which were mimetic of human lungs, so there are two chambers of the lungs and it was also an opportunity for us to study the competitive nature of bee hives because it’s very rare for two queen bees to set up in an adjacent space for they’re very territorial. Bee Box, among other works, was included in a show Bees and Meat at Ace Gallery on Wilshire in 2007 for nine months, which was a very long exhibition, and it was installed in a small room that had two holes cut into it so that the bees could leave and go pollinate and collect nectar during the day and then come back and build these hives. The sound was broadcast throughout the nine-month exhibition so there’s a soundtrack that became part of the piece when it was shown at the Occupy Mana exhibit with a new title, The Music Box. During the course of a nine-month duration, one hive did in fact take over the other and it was quite an interesting negotiation to watch gradually over time.

RAIL: Like Beuys, art and activism is one unity. In other words, activism in art is art. The same applies to your case. Your monumental project Not a Cornfield (2005) is a good example of that similar unity.

BON: If you take the cognitive frame of the Bee Box (turned into The Music Box) and expand it to Not a Cornfield what you’ll see is that we’re still working to create the context for bees and other pollinators to create effect and have agency. So, Bee Box puts in a very contracted space a relational piece between two working teams. But to take it into a field—to have agency means to take that frame and to support the pollinators on a much bigger territory, and, again in the work we do at the Metabolic Studio being tied to the territory of the intermountain West, the watershed territory, we see ourselves as artists whose primary role is to support all forms of pollinators.

RAIL: I could only imagine such an intense bureaucratic process you had to go through. How long did it take you from the very beginning to the completion of the project?

BON: Not a Cornfield was a complete miracle. From the day that its vision came to me to the day we completed it was one year exactly, so that was an absolutely miraculous situation and the lawyers who went with me to California state parks said, “Don’t get used to this because it will never happen again.” The journey to take this same field—this 32-acre breadbasket of the Gabrielino-Tongva Tribe, where something like corn used to
grow—and reconnect it to the LA River, has taken eight years, and we’re finally under construction. It has required 76 federal, state, and local permits to do something which is truly obvious: to redirect a small portion of a wastewater river that’s flowing out to sea and bring it to a 32 acre piece of land that used to be brownfield incapable of supporting life, and allow it to do its work so that the industrial corridor of Downtown Los Angeles can be fertile again. The genesis of this project was completely off the charts fast but the culmination of this project since Not a Cornfield in 2005 to when we expect the Bending the River Back Into the City project to be complete will be a 20-year project, so we started in construction last September, finally.

RAIL: Can you describe how the vision came to you?

BON: It came to me in a dream as corn and it was only later that I understood its epistemological connection to the Lakota Indians. This vision was sent to me by Grandpa [Chief] Roy Stone, Sr. of the Lakota tribe as an act of consciousness for sending back the buffalo that were overgrazing on Santa Catalina Island in 2004. That’s a whole other trajectory that connects to the social activism that I fill my practices as an homage to the native peoples of the North Americas whose wisdom and knowledge on how to live on the land is essential for us all to embrace. In any case, I brought a piece of corn from Not a Cornfield, and just to say that each seed here is capable of growing a plant with two cobs so survival itself connects to things like growing a dried piece of kernel that can last forever. That was the origin of the concept of what we do at Metabolic Studio. That native corn in the west was the most profound monument that even the scale might be 32 acres, it’s the seed that’s monumental, not the acreage.

RAIL: It’s true. Would it be fair to say your interest in shamanism from Grandpa [Chief] Roy Stone is no more or less different as a form of healing than Beuys’s own?

BON: Absolutely. Shamanism has had an interest in me. [Laughter] I was not trained to think about shamanism but there are such profound healers out there, and they find us and work through us artists, writers, poets, scientists, thinkers, and remind us that if we’re teachable, we can be agents that can manifest a rebalance and regenerative practice. When I began Not a Cornfield I had no idea how to plant a corn seed. So it was after we had laid 90 miles of irrigation stripping and brought in hundreds of truckloads of soil from other places that I was sitting in my trailer and heard a knock on my door from a native American man who had heard at a local thrift store about a lady who was going to plant corn in the historic core and offered his services to me. And we held an all-night ceremony on the cornfield, which was once an old freight train yard, before we planted the first seed. So, it was by being an agent for the manifestation of shamanism that this project happened. I cannot claim authorship of this concept (it came through me) but it was as a result of that perceptual frame changing that I felt empowered to work on or to a scale that I felt I had the capacity to undertake, especially now with this infrastructure monument of *Bending The River Back Into the City*. It seems that if I could reconnect the river back to the historic floodplain, that there would be something meaningful that would come as another miraculous result, would not be in the shape of my creation only, but would be a manifestation of putting the right balance back to where it once was. To re-enchant a floodplain which had been buried for more than 150 years is an ultimate work of art.

RAIL: I assume a similar and massive organization was required for your 100 Miles Walking the Los Angeles Aqueduct (2013).

BON: Oh yes, this question of water in the arid West. When you look at the floodplain of the LA River and you connect the water that I put on *Not a Cornfield* to its source, it was the snowcap of the eastern Sierra that actually was irrigating the cornfield, not the LA River. The city of Los Angeles, in order to grow and support the film industry in the middle of the 20th century which was really transforming the city from an outpost into a major city, owes a debt of gratitude to the silver mining of the West which was located in the heart of these same mountains. 60 or 70 years after silver mining ended, we would exploit knowledge of the snowcap to create a gravity-fed system that would bring the snow to Los Angeles in the form of an aqueduct like people have done for thousands of years. The stories of all great cities coming into existence have been about moving water where you want it to go. I felt that for the centenary of the opening of the LA aqueduct, an artistic action where we draw this line.
in space—again going back to my dance training to put my body in space—and to actually internalize, physicalize the 240 mile network of channels of pipes and siphons that bring the snowcap of the Eastern Sierra to Downtown Los Angeles with the labor force that built the aqueduct to begin with, which was the mule. The mules still exist and they were brought to the valley by miners as a way to carry water from the foothills of those mountains up to the mining encampments. They’ve been in the west since silver mining, and their mainstay is in the tourist industry taking people up into the great Sierra for trips, but the mules have also been a part of Metabolic Studio’s performative action of building soil for the people of the Owens Valley. One of the things that has been a byproduct of moving water from one place so that another could thrive is that the agricultural richness of the Owens Valley has been sacrificed, and Metabolic Studio has been active in creating a network of growers who can use the mules to build soil and distribute it to workers throughout the Owens Valley, or what the Paiute call “Payahuunadü,” a place where there will always be water. So, this is a unification drawing between one place and another that relies on each other for survival very much like the Bee Box was a two-chambered box. So, there’s an idea of this exploding scale and creating a relational connection between two places that are in fact one place.

RAIL: It’s beautiful but at the same time the very idea of bringing two elements together, be it objects or subjects, things or people, as one horrifies me especially now—how the politics of race is based so much on the insular attitude towards purity of one race, one nation rather than allowing or encouraging the idea of hybridization to naturally occur. If two people from two different races fall in love and get married, we’d have a better world. In other words, when I discovered that the word mulatto was directly applied to (Charles) Baudelaire’s lover Jean Duval, a derogatory term no doubt, even though she’s been immortalized in so many of his poems—“The Dancing Serpent,” “The Balcony,” and was painted by (Edouard) Manet—but her father was French/Caucasian and her mother was from Haiti. And the word “mule” means a hybrid product from the male donkey and the female horse. To some of us, considering such a unity is a beautiful metamorphosis and catalyst for harmony, not friction nor division.

BON: Thank you for bringing that up. Although we may think of the mule as nature, the mule is actually one of the first hybrid animals designed to do our labor. So we owe an amazing debt of cultural gratitude to the mule, the labor force that has built the aqueduct of the West to the Erie Canal of the East, and beyond to the Panama Canal, and I should note this is how George Washington made his fortune when he imported the mule from Europe—partly because they have profound intelligence and very unique feet that allow them to be trailblazers, and they’re still used to fight the mega fires of the West. At any rate, what we did was all of the wranglers of the Metabolic Studio team took the walk from one full moon to the next in 2013 (four weeks) to survey the aqueduct and celebrate the mule through every town and landscape that the water traveled and we learned so much from these people and they in turn credited so much of what they learned from their own hybridization of their daily work life with these intelligent sentient beings, the mule.

RAIL: What about the Liminal Camera from the Optics Division within Metabolic Studio’s practice?

BON: This is another allusion to a major infrastructural artery of the Alameda Corridor. Metabolic Studio sits not only adjacent to the LA River but next to a network of train lines and tunnels that connect the port of Long Beach with stores across the United States through the shipping container which is the standard unit of international trade. So, the Liminal Camera was a subversion of the shipping container from a container which would contain goods and services to a container which would contain nothing but image and light. So the Metabolic Studio’s Optics Division which consists of me, Richard Nielsen, and Tristan Duke, we built this camera, retrofitted a shipping container, put it on a truck, and took several tours across the United States to document failing infrastructure and developed that film using the often toxic waterways that were the subject, ourselves. So, we can use that camera as a dark room as well as a social practice/teaching space, and we can display the prints with magnets on the outside of the container. We love the idea of wherever we go, we can take pictures, then immediately develop and show the prints so people who were on location would see the results right away.

RAIL: How did such a process develop?

BON: The Owens dry lakebed, as I mentioned before, is a dessicated lake that was dried up by the removal of water from the Owens Valley or Payahuunadü in order to bring water to Los Angeles. It is held in trust for the people of the state of California as a water body, which means you can recreate there to your heart’s content. So, as a performative action, the Optics Division uses...
the dry lakebed to develop our film in. We’ve discovered the extremophilic bacteria that’s latent in those ponds actually can replace photographic fixative. So we take our photographic negatives that we developed inside the liminal camera, and under cover of darkness we go out onto the lake and we dig a hole and bury those large format prints in the dry lakebed at night, and then come back in the morning and take them out and rinse them in the river. So, in that context, we bring consciousness to the scar of the city of Los Angeles, we own it and declare this is a place that’s important to treasure and cultivate. But we also rethink the agency of even a dry lake bed. The fact that a dry lake that has photographic agency is an extraordinary thing. A lot of the images that we have are effectively scarred by their night in the lake grime, but they also bring to the surface the metal that’s latent in a photograph. Not a digital photograph but an actual photograph. Not a digital photograph but an actual photograph, which is actually made out of silver suspension onto a surface like paper or glass. So, we’re interested in exploring this natural alchemy.

RAIL: How big a size can you develop?

BON: A standard roll width, which I believe is about 3 and 1/2 feet by the width of the shipping container, which I believe is about 12 feet so I think it was roughly 4 by 12 feet.

RAIL: I should add in addition to this toxic waste land turned natural art materials, there’s a carcinogenic dust from the lake, am I right?

BON: Yes. To go back to this mid-century modern exploitation of the Great Basin—as the least worst place to test nuclear bombs—the Owens Lake is one of hundreds of basins that stretch between the Rockies and the Sierra. Once upon a time there were glacial lakes that flowed one into another through the massive basin, and a giant earthquake created a rift which ultimately created the Colorado River, which allowed that water to flow out to sea, and these basins became desiccated but had seasonal floods and many of them remained full of water. When this one in particular dried out it created dust storms that carry the world’s largest propagator of carcinogenic dust over not only the continent but the Pacific Ocean into China. So again, to come back to this mandate that somehow artists need to create on the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy, you have this 100 mile lakebed that has to be networked into a regenerative conception because even though we didn’t cause this unthinkable consequence, we are the inheritors of it. It’s affecting the biome of the ocean, the disappearance of the coral reefs, there’s no place for proto pollinators like birds to land any more. The follow-on effect of that change is so profound but it also was the critical creation of the carcinogenic dust, like this virus generated a consciousness associated with a place which was already in a terrible condition. And the US government, through the Environmental Protection Agency, mandated that the state of California get that dust under control, so the state defaulted to the city of Los Angeles which was, until Metabolic Studio got a private water right, the only holder of this water right. They’ve spent billions of dollars trying to fix the problem and it’s still nowhere near resolved. So, the question is how can we artists posit concepts that will bring consciousness to something that affects us all?

RAIL: I couldn’t agree more. That’s exactly what Beuys was trying to do in the same sense that if we believe in the practice of shamanism, we believe in the wisdom of the old, the ancient, and our ancestors. Right now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of us feel it’s really nature saying to herself, “I no longer can take your aggressive abuse, so I’m going to bring everything to a stop so I can heal my body.” We, too, are trying to heal things ourselves and our man-made world. I’m thinking of your piece Inverted Mediterranean Pine (2019), which you made for our Collateral Event as a site-specific work at the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Penitenti in Venice, as a thoughtful gesture of healing as well.

BON: First there’s two things that need to come together as context. One is that we in the West are experiencing, every November, these major megafires that are defining the imprint of the West in relation to global warming. The other, Venice, a polar opposite, is experiencing an unusual frequency of Acqua Alta with equal treachery. Venice is teetering on a perilous edge as is the West, so this piece, like the two-chambered lung of the beehive in the Box Box, attempts to bring into focus in one perceptual space these two contexts of global warming’s manifestation. What came to my mind between the rising tides of Venice and the burning forests in the West was the pine tree, which is the connecting theme. The pine tree is ubiquitous to all Mediterranean climates and Southern California is one of the few places on earth which enjoys a Mediterranean climate. So to manifest a burnt pine as a sculptural artifact in a church that had a pre-existing hole in the floor, caused by rising tides that slowly eroded the structure that holds up the floor itself, to pose them one on top of the other was a way to build a perceptual framework that’s relating these two contexts as one experience that’s happening everywhere, all the time, right now, which is climate crisis. Climate crisis is like a virus threatening human beings with extinction. It was an attempt to use the frame of the Mediterranean and the cultural tourism of the Venice Biennale to communicate what art needs to do moving forward.

RAIL: The burnt part right on the far right is a very distinct and direct evidence.

BON: It’s actually a death mask that was made around a tree of my friend, the artist Lita Albuquerque, who lost her family home and her work to the Woolsey Malibu fire, a year-and-a-half ago. We began a conversation about loss and what loss and surrender means for artists. So she allowed me to remove this desiccated pine tree to my studio where my amazing assistant Rachael (Neubauer) and my collaborators in the Optics Division of Metabolic Studio ground the carbon from the tree, made a wire mesh mask of the form, and then covered the mesh with rice paper dipped into the carbon from Lita’s ground-up tree to form that black feather-like husk of the tree that was then installed in the church in Venice. There’s a way that Inverted Mediterranean Pine sits in the space that alludes to my dance background, which in this instance feels very balletic. There is a striking allusion to the pietà that was a way of offering surrender, and creating the idea of fragility. This piece actually stayed installed during the November Acqua Alta when we were all there to close the show. My other colleague Roxanne Steinberg actually performed in the Acqua Alta in 4 feet of water above that hole—a dance to the moon and the tides. So again, the whole idea of the fetishized art object which needs to be temperature controlled and in its own building was, in our case at our Collateral Event, literally just an offering. Like throwing a flower into water and recalling Lucio Fontana’s brilliant statement that in the eyes of eternity, art that lasts a second is the same as art that lasts a millennium.

RAIL: We all experienced it together indeed. Which brings to mind your other eerie piece St. Jerome’s Study (2007), covered with tar and installed in a small, dark room, where I didn’t dare go in by myself.
BON: This was an homage to Antonella de Messina’s *Saint Jerome in the Study* (c. 1475), which has long been recognized as the first oil painting at least in the cultural history of Saint Jerome in his study as a subject. Saint Jerome was painted for his translation of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin. In the painting you’ll see Saint Jerome sitting at his scholarly desk and in the two windows on either side of his desk you can see the agricultural fields, painted as an allusion to how scholarship needs to be supported by food in order to give the scholar time to do his or her work. So, my piece was a reinterpretation of Saints Jerome’s desk. It has placed the artist, or in a sense myself or other artists like me, as translators of living systems into action. The top shelf has seed pods that are terracotta collected from the Hopi drybed farmers which is where I got my corn seeds. There’re Rudolf Steiner’s and Joseph Beuys’ books, and the first whole earth catalog on the bottom shelf. This piece has a totemic meaning for me, and the materials refer to Arte Povera like sheep’s wool coming out the desk-like innards. And then the entire piece was dipped in tar which was obviously an allusion to our moment in time where we’re dipping everything that we’re making, everything that we care about we are immersing it in the residue of the petroleum industry. It was also an acknowledgement of tars’ stickiness so that sculpture starts to re-emerge as coded like that whole thing about tar and feathers, like that thing is impossible to clean, so it says it’s a built poem in a way.

RAIL: It refers directly again to the mission statement “artists need to create on the same scale...” and so scale is a psychological condition of whatever way we mediate with the object we’ve made, be it time-based or a permanent object.

BON: I also want to mention that art is a function of privilege. All of us who have the ability to make art, or write or to think about the world in a new form or to translate, are being supported by people who are growing our food. Especially here, on Earth Day, if this piece means anything, it’s that we should thank consciously all the people out there who are bringing us food and medicine on a daily basis so we can have this conversation, and we can re-envision the way forward.

RAIL: It couldn’t be a more frightening omen, as the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill that led to Earth Day a year later on April 22, 1970. So, let’s end on an optimistic note, with your yet another monumental project *Bending the River Back Into the City*.

BON: This is the “at last” moment, seven years and 78 permits into *Bending the River Back Into the City* last September. The gleaning of all those permissions was an endurance performance. Like working with mule packers, the opportunity to work with civil engineers and the construction industry is a complex social practice—these people doing the labor to make the first alteration to the LA River Federal Army Corps Floodplain Mitigation Project which was built 75 years ago, felt that they were part of a mission-driven initiative rather than just a job. When the triangular-shaped patterns were scored into the concrete, and then lifted from the ground, we all cheered when we discovered underneath the concrete an incredible thing, which was the still-vital and enchanted floodplain of the unbridled river, full of seeds, mycelium, bacteria, and all kinds of living systems. Having excavated a trench, we then lay 48 inch pipes. This work was a probe on how we can redirect a small portion of that low-flow channel, just a portion of the water that always flowing in the LA River, and the portion of this low-flow channel is redirected under the Alameda Corridor train tracks to a water wheel which will lift it into a native wetland, and which will cleanse and distribute it to a network of public parks where we’re hoping to grow forgeable food and medicine for people, and other living systems. Fuel by reciprocity amongst one another, we will continue to strive to maintain nature’s cycles and empower each other. This “citizens’ utility” is experimental in nature but founded on our belief of interdependence as a collective action centered and prioritized around the common good and community.

An expanded version of this conversation can be found online at brooklynrail.org

PHONG H. BUI is the Publisher and Artistic Director of the Brooklyn Rail.
ART IN CONVERSATION

John Elderfield and Terry Winters on Cézanne’s Rock and Quarry Paintings

What follows is a somewhat revised version of a public conversation held on March 7 of this year between Terry Winters and me at the opening of the exhibition Cézanne: The Rock and Quarry Paintings at the Princeton University Art Museum. The exhibition, of which I was the curator, was on view for only one week before it was forced to close in the face of the pandemic. Nobody yet knows when it may open.

The subject of the exhibition is a group of paintings by Cézanne—small in number; large in importance—of rock formations, most of them made on wooded slopes, some at the bottom of an abandoned quarry. “In order to paint a landscape well,” Cézanne said to a friend, “I first need to discover its geological foundations.” This group of paintings embodies the process of that discovery from his early years, as a young artist in the mid-1860s, almost to the end of his life in 1906. Focus upon these works affords intimate access to the evolution and workings of an artistic practice unmatched in its importance for the future development of modern art. The exhibition was developed on the principle that it is precisely from concentrated attention on a set of related objects that we come closest to what the art historian Michael Baxandall called “the picturing mind at work.”

When I asked my friend Terry Winters if he would have a public conversation with me on the occasion of the exhibition’s opening, it was with the understanding that we would talk about Cézanne’s picturing mind as specifically revealed in works in the exhibition. Therefore, we agreed that each of us would choose a number of such works, plus some comparative ones. I would begin by talking about my set, with Terry responding; then vice-versa. The number has been somewhat reduced here for the purposes of publication, but it is still larger than customary for contributions to the Rail; hence the unusual layout.

Those interested in learning more about this subject may wish to consult the publication that accompanies the exhibition, which illustrates and discusses all of Cézanne’s some two-dozen paintings of rock and quarry subjects, plus related watercolors; not only those shown in the exhibition. Details of it and of on-line accompaniments to the exhibition may be found on princeton.edu. Details of all of Cézanne’s known works may be found in the extraordinary online catalogue raisonné: cezannecatalogue.com.

And anyone who wishes to visit the Bibémus Quarry, one of the sites of the paintings discussed here, or Cézanne’s final studio in Aix-en-Provence—when they reopen—should contact aixenprovenctourism.com or cezanne-en-provence.com. Captions for all images are listed at the foot of the article.

—John Elderfield

JOHN ELDERFIELD: Let me begin with Cézanne, photographed in 1904 by the critic Émile Bernard, when Cézanne was sixty-four, looking a little the worse for wear (fig. 1). (You can see in the background a vague image of the Bathers pictures he was working on.) By this time, Cézanne was reunited with the Catholic Church and went for mass every Sunday to Saint-Sauveur, the great cathedral in Aix-en-Provence; and he insisted that Émile Bernard went with him. Cézanne always sat underneath this great fifteenth-century painting by Nicolas Froment, The Burning Bush (fig. 2). Bernard said later, “It’s uncanny how Moses looks just like Cézanne.” He had, in fact, developed what Lawrence Gowing called “the Moses syndrome,” feeling that he would eventually get to the promised land although it always seemed just out of reach.

A major early landmark in that direction was the journey from Aix-en-Provence to nearby L’Estaque that the twenty-six-year-old Cézanne made in 1866 in the company of a seven-year-younger friend, Antoine-Fortuné Marion, who was already absorbed in geology. Marion would give his first academic paper on the subject at the end of the year in a conference at Aix; and this image (fig. 3) is from the presentation that he made.

One of the small oil sketches that Cézanne painted in L’Estaque is in the exhibition (fig. 4). So are facsimiles of pages from one of Cézanne’s early sketchbooks, which Terry is showing later, in which Marion made drawings of strata to explain to his friend the layering of rocks beneath the earth’s surface. Cézanne’s oil sketch shows how he is interested in the relationship between the materiality of this kind of subject and the materiality of painting—how art and nature are both material—and that his task as a painter was to bring together these different kinds of materiality, composing a painting like a layer of stratified rocks.

TERRY WINTERS: Right from the beginning, with this small landscape, it’s painted with a palette knife, which is basically a small trowel. There’s a workmanlike quality. Each painting is built, brick by brick. Like masonry. So the surfaces are an array of marks and tracks—there’s always evidence of a brush or knife being drawn across the surface. The image of Marion’s (fig. 3) is a lithograph. In terms of geology and printing, the 19th century was a second stone age. Lithography replaced woodcut
and engraving as the favored print medium. It was faster and cheaper. So that beautiful image of Marion’s specimens was originally drawn on a piece of limestone and reproduced many times.

**ELDERFIELD:** Those who do get to see the exhibition will see that in the first gallery five of the sketchbook pages with explanation of the geological strata to which Marion’s inscriptions refer. And the catalogue includes an essay and appendix by independent scholar Faya Causey, which gives far more information about this. One of the pleasures of working on the show was to be involved in this kind of investigation: to try to understand how Cézanne’s relationship with Marion developed; the different sites they likely visited together; how Cézanne’s own understanding of geology advanced; if sites they saw together.

To compare the early L’Estaque oil sketch (fig. 4) with a very late canvas painted in the Bibémus Quarry (fig. 5) is to see that the materiality of the picture surface, and the conception of painting as the creation of a homogenous surface, runs all the way through Cézanne’s career. As one goes through the exhibition, one sees that after the early work in L’Estaque, his first more mature paintings of rocks, also made there, were painted at a distance from the motif. The materiality is there. “The sense of layering is there. But the subject is further away from you. And, as you move along and see the works done at Fontainebleau, and then particularly those at the Bibémus Quarry and Château Noir, you see that Cézanne is getting closer and closer to the surface—physically closer to the motif when he’s making the paintings. And I think this is very apparent in the way in which the surface of the paintings are marked. There are some cases where there seems to be a clear analogy between the marking of the individual brushstrokes and the marks on the rocks at which he is looking. And I know later on Terry’s going to talk more about this—but do you want to say anything now?”

**WINTERS:** Regarding this late canvas (fig. 5), as John explains in his essay, [Ambroise] Vollard didn’t actually know which way to hang the painting. It was difficult to determine the orientation. And the picture is shocking. Maybe it’s no longer “the shock of the new,” but it still delivers the shock of the new. The painting is present. And all of the paintings in the exhibition have a tangible, material presence. Thrilling when combined with a compelling painted image. There’s a “harmony” when that happens.

**ELDERFIELD:** Vollard ultimately decided that work should be hung as it is shown now because of the red soil of Provence that people in Provence would have noticed in analogy to what is being painted is something absolutely unusual it feels. And also, in terms of the similarity of substance, we know that the red soil of Provence was faster and cheaper. So that beautiful image of Marion’s specimens was originally drawn on a piece of limestone and reproduced many times.

The basic principle Cézanne would have learned about geology was of stratification—the layering of rocks beneath the surface—and that, beginning with the surface, in present time, as one goes further and further down, one is going further and further into the past.

Here are two other late paintings, the great canvas from Baltimore (fig. 6), and the great canvas in the Pearlman Collection (fig. 7). They are associated in that the image of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in the former somewhat resembles the large rock among the trees in the latter, the kind of rock that Marion had published back in the late 1860s (see fig. 3). And they are different in how their layering is organized. In the Baltimore painting, the layers are collapsed on top of each other: the sky sits on the mountain; the mountain sits on the quarry; the trees appear pasted on the quarry wall, in places their slender trunks indistinguishable from the cracks in the quarry face itself. The layers are also compressed in the Pearlman painting, but you see them separately and are invited to read them not top-to-bottom as in the Baltimore canvas, but front-to-back: from the foreground tripod across from the rock that mirrors it, but without a pointed top; to the pair of trees; to the repeated triangle of the rock behind them; and to the repeated trees in the screen of forest at the back. An extraordinary piece of composition by analogy between like and unlike forms.

**WINTERS:** I’ve never seen Montagne Sainte-Victoire so clearly as a big rock, as a single stone. Somehow, now it’s both an object and an event. So that’s something I’ve taken from this show, that’s clearer to me—Cézanne’s deep connection to geology. And how the paintings are built like the land. In layers of abstraction. At every scale.

**ELDERFIELD:** Included both in the exhibition and its catalogue, are some of the black-and-white photographs of the sites that Cézanne painted taken in the 1930s by John Rewald or the painter-critic Erle Loran, and they flatten the scene as black-and-white photography does. But these images have become iconic in discussion of Cézanne’s landscapes, so I thought it would be informative to look at recent color photographs of the sites. This one (fig. 8), taken by Faya Causey, resembles the little-known, extraordinary painting from Memphis (fig. 9). And this one (fig. 10), which I took in the grounds of the Château Noir, shows the kind of terrain that we see in the beautiful, dark canvas from the National Gallery, London (fig. 11). But when you see the color photographs, you see that they resemble the paintings less than do black-and-white photographs, which flatten the scene, as Cézanne’s paintings do. My point here is not that Cézanne was influenced by black-and-white photography—although he almost certainly was—but that we see in the comparisons with the color photographs how drastically Cézanne brought everything up to the material surface.

**WINTERS:** Everything is painted with the same substance, And in a sense, there’s an equalization between the stone and the sky, that they’re physically comparable. There’s a similar density, a kind of unity.

**ELDERFIELD:** And also, in terms of the similarity of substance, we know that the red soil of Provence was used for a component of paint. We don’t know whether it’s the kind of paint that Cézanne used, but the idea of a painting done with a substance analogous to what is being painted is something that people in Provence would have noticed in these works.
WINTERS: It's inescapable. Basically, paint is colored mud. Especially those specific earth colors, the clays and ochres. That range of color between the yellow and red pigments matches the color of the building stone in Aix. It's similar material, the same stuff.

ELDERFIELD: Before going on, it needs saying that the Château Noir photograph shows a landscape that has changed enormously since Cézanne painted there. There was a forest fire, and when everything grew back, it returned in a more profuse form. But both the photograph and the London painting give one a sense of what it was like for Cézanne to work his way through a landscape like that when he painted. The London painting was made high in the grounds of the Château Noir, which rises up some twenty meters to a stone barrier at the top. Anyone who has visited there knows what a steep setting it is, and it isn't at all easy to climb to the top where the rocks are at their densest. There are stories of Cézanne late in life having to go on his hands and knees to get to where he wanted to paint. I suppose it is possible that he painted some of these larger canvases in the room he rented in the manor house of Château Noir. But I find it fascinating to imagine Cézanne hauling up almost to the top of the site his meter-tall, wide rectangular canvas for the London painting, and all of his painting materials. No wonder he looks exhausted in some of his late photographs.

WINTERS: An occupational hazard. But again, the hit of sky in that painting is really just a slab of blue. The color is right there on the surface of the painting. It's as physical as any of the rocks.

ELDERFIELD: One thing that became clear, seeing Château Noir paintings together in the exhibition, is how different they are from each other, which raises interesting questions about what was painted where and the relative dates of them. There isn't hard evidence to date them individually—Cézanne rarely signed and dated his works—so we gave a wide span of years for each of the works painted at one site that were clearly made sometime within that span. Anyone who has followed the literature on Cézanne knows how frequently authors try to explain what his style was in different periods. Clearly there are overall changes; but looking at the Château Noir paintings together made clear that he worked in differing ways in the same period. The London painting (fig. 11) is very different to the one from San Francisco and the one from the Musée d'Orsay (fig. 12), which is almost as thinly painted as a watercolor (fig. 13). One could be forgiven for thinking that the London painting is like a Picasso landscape from 1909. And it isn't surprising that Matisse purchased the painting now at Orsay.

This is probably as good a moment as any to say that, while both Picasso and Matisse said that Cézanne was the father of us all, like all artistic fathers, he is not responsible for what his children do. In fact, what the children did was, of course, very different from what Cézanne did. Certainly, the common understanding that Cézanne's principal impact was on the development of Cubism is hardly supportable. Working on this exhibition, I have felt even more that associating Cézanne with the increasingly reductive geometric painting of the early part of the twentieth century is a wrong understanding of his importance. His increasingly proximate views of surfaces to the depicted surfaces of his paintings. That constituted the great Cézannean revolution. Not that Cézanne made Cubism possible.

WINTERS: It was almost a non-sequitur. In the same sense that Pop-art was a non-sequitur following Jasper Johns.

ELDERFIELD: Yes!

WINTERS: There's a high degree of abstraction in Cézanne's approach. And it's not reductive. That complicated quality was only picked up later, maybe more by Matisse than Picasso, and ultimately by de Kooning. John's essay is titled "Excavations," which can be seen as a reference to de Kooning. Excavation being de Kooning's celebrated 1950 picture. So, there's something about seeing this focused exhibition, this specific group of paintings—minus the portraits, minus the apples—where you can plainly see the painting process, and the gravity of Cézanne's project. The paintings are radical for their moment, and relevant to ours.

ELDERFIELD: Well, Terry and I did talk about whether we should include de Kooning and Pollock and other people in this conversation, but we decided that we would hope that anyone hearing what we're saying would perhaps think of Pollock, who painted in layers, and of Cézanne's importance for de Kooning's Excavation which looks like a rock-face massively fractured in form.

And, looking at the watercolors, like this wonderful one from MoMA (fig. 13), we can see that Cézanne worked alternatively with a pencil and a brush: The result isn't a drawing with watercolor applied to it, but lines as well as patches of color that are beneath as well as above the drawn lines, all intertwining. This work doesn't look anything like a Pollock, but the method of working in layers and going back and forth between them is what you find in Pollock's allover paintings.

The MoMA watercolor has the surprise of the very straight lines; and anyone who has painted outside knows that it can be difficult to draw very straight lines freehand, particularly out in the wind and in the weather. I have to believe that Cézanne used a straightedge of some kind when he worked; and wonder whether he placed one of his paintbrushes on the paper to use in that way. Starting to think that, I found myself looking in a very different way at the Metropolitan's painting which Terry will speak about later (see fig. 21). At its center is a narrow diagonal splaying that is absolutely straight; and where it divides into two is a bunch of small marks that resemble the bristles of a brush. This may be just my fantasy that Cézanne put his paintbrush on the canvas to draw the sides of it and then painted it. But he was clearly working close to the canvas, so perhaps it is a marker of his own presence in the painting.

WINTERS: Yeah, he's right there. When you are close, arm's length, you're in his actual workspace.

ELDERFIELD: I should stop soon so Terry can take the lead; but first I want to mention two things. First, and quickly because it is well-known: the influence of the watercolors on the oils, the painting owned by Matisse, which we can see from the Orsay painting in comparison to the MoMA watercolor (figs. 12, 13). Second: The influence of sculpture on Cézanne's paintings of rocks. This sculpture (fig. 14) is by Pierre Puget, a 17th-century baroque sculptor from Provence whom Cézanne idolized. Even enlightened critics like Charles Baudelaire didn't like sculpture: he thought it was static and uninspiring. Cézanne thought that the baroque...
sculpture of Puget brought flesh to life, and he copied it in the Louvre (fig. 15). I have to wonder whether Cézanne had it somewhere in his mind when he made this watercolor (fig. 16). Rewald photographed the site in the 1930s, and his black-and-white image (fig. 17) flattens the space far more than did the color photographs we looked at earlier (see figs 8–11). Cézanne drastically compresses the pictorial space it even more, yet the drawing and shaping of the forms in space is sculptural in a manner that associates it with Puget.  

WINTERS: In a way, the subject of the pictures is space—how it is built and how does it feel. That’s a big part of their power. And the physical surfaces of the paintings themselves are a kind of sculpture. A low-level relief. Even the thinness of the watercolors is a material or sculptural decision. I have a question: how does Rewald find that site to take that photograph? Obviously, it predates any computer manipulation.  

ELDERFIELD: Well, Rewald spent a long time in and around Aix-en-Provence looking for the sites that are a larger natural— not only those that matched rock and quarry paintings. These are featured in the online catalogue raisonné.  

WINTERS: I’m beginning with a couple of images from John’s essay, which is terrific and full of information and insights about Cézanne’s work and thinking process. This image is an arcadian scene of bathers by Courbet (fig. 18). And the Cézanne detail borrows the pose from Courbet (fig. 19). But Cézanne projects much further back in time where pastoral arcadia becomes archaic prehistory. A naked human figure touches a stone wall. It’s almost a reference to cave-painting, to the origins of painting. In a second pairing, the Courbet shows a classical rendering of a quarry (fig. 20). It depicts the stratification, the bed-lines, the layering of geologic material. This is an image of new scientific understanding—seeing a slice of earth as a picture of time. It’s all presented clearly in this Courbet painting. And in the Metropolitan canvas with the brush-like tree that John mentioned earlier, Cézanne transforms the painting itself into a laminated structure, a sequence of pictorial events (fig. 21), analogous to the Earth’s formation.  

ELDERFIELD: And the Courbet is actually a painting that was commissioned by a geologist who is just visible in the bottom of the painting, working. There is one Cézanne painting of Bibémus with a figure in it which unfortunately is not in the show. Having figures in geological subject-paintings, which of course had been done earlier in the 18th-century, was as commonplace as having sheep or goats to give a sense of scale to the landscape as a whole. Cézanne doesn’t do this, which I think is one of the ways that he affects the transformation. You don’t have the people there, so you can’t really tell what the scale of this is.  

WINTERS: Yes, viewers bring their own sense of scale, which can be open-ended and shifting. Are we seeing the painting as a specimen or as evidence of a larger natural event? Maybe both. Here is an image of a 300,000-year-old hand-axe (fig. 22). These artifacts were just being discovered in the countryside around Aix when Cézanne was painting. He was aware of these archeological discoveries, of these stone age objects. And here is a detail of one of his paintings that has a similar faceted surface (fig. 23). Hand axes were made by striking flint with a hammer rock. The facets are a consequence of the hammering process, and also of the physical qualities of the stone itself, its grain. I think that’s true for Cézanne’s paintings— you get a sense that he is mapping forces across the surface of the painting.  

ELDERFIELD: I would also suggest that each of the marks of the hand axe represents one movement. Each of the brushstrokes also represent one movement. Once, when he was asked what his method of painting was, he famously said, “one stroke after the next.”  

WINTERS: And they’re all actual size.  

ELDERFIELD: Yes.  

WINTERS: Here are just a couple of images that I like from the notebooks. On one you can see a drummer-boy, a common figure from the Epiphany parade in Aix (fig. 24). And next to him is a trio of mushrooms. Scientific discoveries of the fossil record are happening while Cézanne is re-calibrating the painting. I love that combination of images. At the bottom of the page and on the next (fig. 25) are diagrams of stratification and mountain formation; plate tectonics had not yet been discovered. And this is the painting from the Nelson-Atkins (fig. 26). I really like that little yellow spot right in the center of the painting. Cézanne said that he was interested in making “a harmony parallel to nature,” and that’s really what this painting achieves. A becoming equivalent to nature. It’s not exactly a representation, it’s more like a reenactment. He’s constructing a parallel structure or situation. And he’s functioning in a lane adjacent to much non-Western art. Ananda Coomaraswamy claimed that for Indian artists “art is an imitation of nature in its manner of operation.” I think that’s Cézanne’s method also and each of his paintings generate an image of equivalence. Of parallel processing.  

ELDERFIELD: Since working on the catalog I came across this wonderful sentence from Fairfield Porter, a painter himself, who said that these sort of pictures “have presence albeit nothing stirs and they have no sound, they have the liveness of mushrooms.”  

WINTERS: Well, mushrooms are the interface between life and death.  

ELDERFIELD: Yes!  

WINTERS: This sense of working in parallel allows Cézanne to generate images that resemble nature. There are shapes and forms that take on facial or figural characteristics that are not necessarily intended. De Kooning said that “even abstract shapes must have a likeness.” That idea originates with Cézanne. Abstract shapes have a likeness and they exist all throughout Cézanne’s paintings. As emergent pictures. In this painting, there’s a profile figure that appears (fig. 27). It references and plays off more conventionally anthropomorphic engravings (fig. 28).  

ELDERFIELD: I think this painting is really the only one of Cézanne’s that is explicitly anthropomorphic.
All works are by Paul Cézanne unless otherwise noted.

1. Émile Bernard, Photograph of Paul Cézanne (detail), 1904.


5. Rocks and Branches at Bibémus, 1900–1904. Oil on canvas, 61 × 50.5 cm. Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris, France.

6. Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen from Bibémus, 1895–1900. Oil on canvas, 65.1 × 81.3 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art. The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland.

7. Cistern in the Grounds of Château Noir, ca. 1900. Oil on canvas, 74.3 × 81 cm. The Henry and Rose Pearlman Foundation, on loan since 1976 to the Princeton University Art Museum.


25. Page 27 of the Paris 1 carnet.


28. Wenceslas Hollar, Anthropomorphic engraving, 1646.


30. Rocks near the Caves above Château Noir, 1895–1900. Watercolor on paper, 31 × 47.5 cm. Private collection.


32. Odilon Redon, I Plunged into Solitude. I Dwell in the Tree being Me, 1896.

33. Charles Bodmer, Paul Cézanne in the Middle of Ferns in the Forest of Fontainebleau, 1894. Silver print, 12.4 × 7.5 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
ART IN CONVERSATION

MINJUNG KIM with Helen Lee

Minjung was born in Kwong-ju, Korea, and studied calligraphy and ink painting at the Hongik University in Seoul, where she received a Masters degree. In 1991 she furthered her studies at Brera Academy in Milan, where she expanded her art historical studies of the Western canon and wrote about the spiritualism of ink. Most recently, Minjung has had international solo shows at the Langen Foundation in Neuss, Germany, and the Gwangju Museum of Art in Korea. Her work is also included in a number of international public collections, including the British Museum in London and the Asia Society in New York. She recently had her first career survey at the Hill Art Foundation in New York, which had to close prematurely due to COVID-19.

The conversation that follows is an edited version of our lunchtime dialogue on the Rail’s New Social Environment. Ours was conversation #28.

HELEN LEE (RAIL): Hello Minjung! How are you doing?

MINJUNG KIM: Hello! I’m doing well. At the moment I’m in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France, about 15 minutes by car from Nice. It’s a very well known place for its art community. I’m just outside of town, with a nice garden. It’s spring here, 20 degrees.

RAIL: 20 degrees Celsius! Is that warm enough for you?

KIM: Very warm, yes. When I arrived, I had some bad news because a fox ate three of my chickens, so I was a little bit sad. Now I have only two. But tomorrow, I will be getting another three chickens. One white color, one black, one brown.

RAIL: I know you are an avid gardener. Is there something you can share with us about this time of growth and planting and enjoyment?

KIM: Right now, there are strawberries. Last year, I took from the mother strawberries the small baby strawberries, and I put them in a pot, and cared for them over the whole wintertime. Now they are growing, and I am waiting until they become red-ripe. It’s relaxing to care for them.

RAIL: I wish we could be there in France! I know you left New York a little less than a week ago, and you lived in Korea for a lot of your life, and also lived in Europe and other parts of the world. Where does it feel most like home for you?

KIM: At the moment, I feel Saint-Paul-de-Vence, because the greenness is so entertaining. Of course, I don’t speak good French and when I go out from my house I don’t feel at home. But when I’m inside my house, I feel very much at home.

RAIL: It’s so great that you’re surrounded by nature. What’s the situation there compared to New York?

KIM: In New York you can still see people around, because it’s natural in New York. But here, I don’t see anybody. Normally this place is very well known, a destination spot. Millions of people come to this small town but these days there’s nobody. When I’m walking, there’s nobody. All shops are closed. But when I came back here, I immediately started doing artwork, repetitive-like collages. I finish work so fast, one in only three days.

RAIL: As we segue into talking about your work, I thought we might discuss your material and your process, so that people who may not be familiar can better understand how you approach your work.

KIM: When I was in the first two years of university in Korea, I learned all kinds of techniques. The third year, I had to choose my main subject. They divided us in groups that specialized in sculpture, oil painting, or what was called “Oriental painting,” or Asian painting, which used inks and what I’m doing now. I decided to do Asian painting with paper. My father owned a printing company, and at the time, there were no computers. One wrote on silk screens and made a book, and then once they would cut out the book precisely, they always had paper remnants, which they had to throw away. I took these paper remnants for fun. Somehow I chose my material, which was something I was used to playing with from the time I was young. And then, when I finished my university, and went on to do my masters, for the theory and history of Asian art, I chose to go to Milano at Academia Breda, around ’92, ’93. It was a very fashionable institution at that time, and they had started studies in video art and photography. All of my class was interested in this material, but I felt like I was never good with machines, so photography and video seemed impossible. I thought, “What can I do? I have come here to Italy to do something.” And then I decided just to keep doing what I’ve done before. I started doing ink paintings with a lot of rice paper I bought from Korea, but this time not as a calligraphy but as a form of expression of abstraction and gesture.

RAIL: This is an important point. Your father used to bring home paper to you as a little girl, and that’s what you were absorbed with, what you were fascinated by and would play with. You work with Hanji paper now, which is made from the inner bark of the mulberry tree, especially the Korean mulberry tree.

KIM: Yes, it’s like wine. Throughout Asia—in China, Korea, and Japan—they make mulberry paper. They take the inside of the mulberry trees and fiber, and they chop this fiber and with the water and a little bit of glue, they form paper the way one normally does. But this paper has many good characteristics. First of all, the paper is stronger than canvas. Because the paper is alkaline, which reduces oxidation, it doesn’t yellow and it is very strong while also transparent. And it depends on the fibers how things distribute. When you paint ink, you can see they are absorbing differently. It is the material which gives its own voice. So if I paint, it depends on the character of the paper, it absorbs differently, changing color and shininess. So I really like paper more than ink, more than the brush, more than gesture. Each time they make this paper, it’s always different because one year was more dry, or one year might have had more rain. But to know this, you have to use a lot of paper so you know when to drop the water, how it will be absorbed.

RAIL: I know you are a paper expert and especially with this type of paper. Your sister, who is an art conservator, explained to me how the paper you use is especially strong but that you also use glue to paste layers together, to reinforce it and give it even more strength. This is a completely different quality and type of fibrous paper than we’ve used in the West. You mention that it is like something growing out of the earth; the tree is something growing out of the earth, and like wine, it has a character to it. When you think of paper, you don’t really think of works that are this format and this size. Is this something that you thought about while you were doing these works,
given the strength of the materials and your love of the paper, that this was something that you wanted to make this size?

KIM: The Korean masters, of course now they are all old gentlemen, normally have two formats: one, the 70 cm by 140 cm is a very normal size, and then the biggest one could be 150 cm by 200 cm. Normally I use full paper that size, sometimes I cut different formats, but it is good enough to express what you want to do with this paper. I could not make a big painting, like a 2 by 3 meter with this paper, I'd have to glue it together. Some paintings you can see this transference of joint parts, so it's difficult for a painting, but if I do collage work, maybe I could make 2 by 3 meters of work. In general I use the size in the show at the Hill Foundation: 150 to 2 meters.

RAIL: Are the standard sizes that come from your purveyor in these formats?

KIM: Yes, I buy from the paper shop, where they sell only this kind of paper in Korea, and unluckily, it's a very hard job so no more young people are doing this work. As these old masters are dying, I'm not sure what will happen. This business is very narrow because not many people are using this paper. It could be material which has an end of story, but I hope not. I hope Asian people start to look at their own material like ink paper, and they produce more of it into the future.

RAIL: Do you want to talk about some of the other materials you use, such as ink?

KIM: Ink and paper—they are like a couple. The ink is made by the smoke of the trees. You burn the trees and you put a panel on top, so the smoke goes on this panel. The more faraway the smoke, the better quality. If you put this panel too near the burning, it's a bad quality. This bad quality means there is not a smooth expansion when you use it on the paper. But it all depends on the tree; if you burn a pine tree, you have a more brownish black color, and some special trees have more of a blueish color. These are in China and already for a long time they divide into movements; the blue ink and another ink have some differences, but only slightly. You don't see it. It's only with expert eyes you can see the ink color has a different tone.

RAIL: It sounds like you are not only using traditional forms of paper, but the preparation and process you use for the ink is something that is very classical and artisanal as well.

KIM: Yes, and the difference of the black color of the watercolor, the ink can make so-called 122 grades of the grey, which is very difficult with the normal black watercolor. Because they are smoked, you can really have many grades of grey.

RAIL: The works from your show at the Hill Art Foundation are slightly different in their process from the initial works we've seen. These include collage and torn paper and have a singed, burning element to them too. During your studies and while growing up, whose works did you spend time looking at and studying? What influenced you from a young age to while in university in Seoul? Did you have mentors or other artists you were able to discuss these beautiful materials and your work with?

KIM: I grew up in this small city in Kwon-ju, which was very well known for keeping a lot of traditions. So almost all of the gentlemen could write calligraphy. There were very traditional bamboo paintings and some chrysanthemum paintings, all landscape but normally you can see these older Chinese paintings. I was sent to this private school where you learn calligraphy and the Asian masters paintings and you basically are copying these old masters. At the time I thought about artists all day. Before you go to university, there is a term for watercolor painting, so I did many many years of watercolor painting with the ink, and then of course in university you start approaching Western art. It was quite confusing because they were so different for me at the time. But the Old Masters like Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, and of course Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael—those Western artists were also on my mind.

RAIL: Is it right that some of the works from Asia are not necessarily attributed in the same way that they are in the West? For example, that some works are known by certain masters at a certain time and a certain place, but don't necessarily have their names as recognized as Leonardo and Michelangelo and Botticelli?

KIM: Yes, in China and in Korea, there are two types: one type are like scholars, they write the letters and calligraphies after the ink remains. With a dish, they dilute with water then paint flowers and landscapes. But they are scholars, they are not professional painters. The other type, they are professionals that make colorful, decorative paintings. They are divided into two types, the painting group and the artists. But more importance is given to the scholars that had a free mind and one can see their own character. What the other professionals do was very standard but of course very skillful.

RAIL: Let's talk about your move to Milan and how looking at and studying the Western art canon influenced you. Did you have much exposure to Western art previously?

KIM: At university, they teach Western art histories, so you have a vast knowledge of what has happened from antiquity to Picasso and what is contemporary. When I came to Italy, of course I was interested in contemporary art history and modern art history, but I also wanted to see the Western artists who were influenced by Eastern art: where it could be, how they accept using their own techniques influenced by Eastern art, and then of course from the 19th century looking to Van Gogh and so many other artists that were influenced by Japanese art. The result was they simplified much more, and it's not realistic and somehow more decorative. So I was interested in both sides of Eastern and Western: how they learned from and why they were interested in each other. For example, looking at a contemporary American artist like Franz Kline using brushes similar to Eastern art, I asked myself, “Minjung, what would you like to be with your own material, your own individual things?” And then I was not forcing myself to be different. It came very naturally to me, using ink and papers in a contemporary way.

RAIL: It was more than a two-way street—it wasn't just your looking at Western artists and how they...
were influenced by Eastern artists or vice-versa, but that you were also trying to figure out a language that would combine the two that was not just pieces of this and influences from here and there. You were finding your own language from both East and West artistic influences. Your solo retrospective was up all of two-and-a-half weeks before the Hill Art Foundation, along with so many other institutions, had to close its doors until things can safely reopen. Tell us a bit about how the exhibition came together, which looks so beautiful hanging in the Hill Art Foundation’s space. The architecture and the light perfectly suit your works. Boon Hui Tan, the director of the Asia Society Gallery, curated the show. How was it to do your first retrospective?

KIM: Boon Hui was very greedy, and gave me a week. Boon Hui chose 50 works, so we brought these works in, and took some out until we had under 40. But he had a very clear idea and I like to work with people that have a clear vision. When I’m doing single paintings, or a single work, it’s a finished thought. But hanging the works in an exhibition space is another frame of mind. Boon Hui knows my work very well, so he chose quite good work to show as a retrospective in New York.

RAIL: I've seen many of your works, but I thought the show flowed beautifully along the different spaces. In the smaller works from the series “Mountains,” we can see red and blue mountains. It's interesting how the different formats are equally powerful and impactful. In Mountain (2019), it's hard to tell from looking at a computer screen what we are seeing, so can you explain how you made this work?

KIM: I was staying in a small house just above the cliff by the sea, so I could hear the sounds of tides and I thought, “oh my god, this tide, how long it is doing these sounds?” and I looked back to primordial times. The world starts with earth, sea, something, and then ok: how can I paint these sounds of the tides? I came back to the studio and I started to adjust the ink color very lightly, and the tide comes. Then I put the second tide to come, the third tide to come. It was for me, the sounds of tides. And then I see this movement of tides, I turn it out, it looks like a mountain. And that idea, I really loved it, because you start with the water and the sea and they combine with each other, they penetrate each other. It looks like a mountain.

Then I decided this is no longer sounds of tides, this is a mountain. And this is not a real mountain, there is no mountain like this, but in Korea we have a kind of very, we don’t have high mountains, but kind of rolling. So I have this memory of Korea, near my hometown, and I just started painting, and without any real scenery, no photos, it’s just practicing with ink and water on the paper. It comes out very serene and I like this work, I feel like it is one of my major works, and when I painted this mountain, it’s so relaxing, not stressful. When I feel sad, when I feel bored, when I don’t know what to do, then I paint mountain paintings.

RAIL: I think we have another Mountain work that we can show.

KIM: There are many mountains, different mountains as I told you. Mountains come by moods. This is Red Mountain, but it was not my plan to make a red mountain. Some gallery asked me, “Can you make a red mountain?” I said, I will try, the transparency could come with red watercolor. So it comes out like ink, they have this very clear transparency, so I did red mountains. Then some people asked me for blue mountains, so I did blue mountains. But for me, color or no color, it’s the same gesture, same technique.

RAIL: You barely use ink in this work but instead you’ve used the gradation of the ink that you prepare to give a three dimensional effect.

KIM: Yeah. You can go on with the other imagination of the mountain.

RAIL: Can you tell me about Mountain (2018)?

KIM: I wanted to give this mysterious space on the right side, and I leave this emptiness, that’s what, in Asian painting, the emptiness is so important, a void. And I just leave some part of this empty. You feel something mysterious.

RAIL: How about Timeless from 2019?
Kim: This is more like very abstract, there’s no wave, it’s just—I think this isn’t a mountain, no, this is Timeless.

Rail: So this is a different process?

Kim: Timeless was… I do mountains as a painting, but then I wondered, if I cut all the mountains, what happens, because you give that feeling of time. I thought about how to make a very elaborate work, basically this is a kind of mountain I painted, and I cut this one in these little stripes, and each stripe, I burned it. So the burning, you can see, is a black charcoal color, so then I glued one by one. It’s so many layers of the stripe, which was cutting up the mountain painting, and so I feel like the mountain itself, you see the mountain, you feel the time. This is another transformation of the mountain.

Rail: I love the transition, but also to see this work in person, and to understand how many of these strips this is composed, is really amazing. Just gorgeous.

Kim: This looks like a sea, looks like a mountain, so yeah.

Rail: The paper almost has like an impasto—a quality of thickness to it. And the color gradations, which are different, but definitely there. Can you talk about Phasing (2017)?

Kim: Yes, this is the “Phasing” series, this work, you don’t see much through this. There are three layers of the paper, first I do a gesture, and then I put another paper—thinner—above the painted paper. And I take it out with incense, take out the painted part. So this is two papers. One painted with gesture, the other one I burned out. So there’s a hole in this paper, and I put together, glue it, then I put another thick paper behind it to fix up. So this is three layers of paper. It is like you have two different emotions, two different characters of yourself. One, when you do the gesture, you are impulsive, use faster movement, you are convincing, it’s a powerful movement. In the second movement, you look at your past, you take out where your power has been, so make an empty part. But it’s so slow, cause you are getting it the instant, taking out these forms. So it’s a completely different attitude with the paper, and then I put it together, and you get two different characters together in one work.

Rail: I like the way you describe it. It’s very striking and somehow it captures your spirit in a very direct way. And it is a bit unusual. Do we have other works from this series to show?

Kim: This is a work I painted with a broom, and then after I took it out, I burnt out the hole, and it was very difficult because once you burn it out and the paper was like really, too reluctant, too moving, it was difficult to fix up with glue. You just need patience to follow all the stripes, the line on the paper.

Rail: Meditative and powerful. Is there another series we’re going to look at together? Here’s another “Phasing” work just to look at as a comparison.

Kim: Yes, this is also.

Rail: How did you get these marks?

Kim: For a long time I’ve done Tai Kwon Do, the martial art, with a brush. I took this ink, I never touched the brush to the paper. It was like you are painting in the air, kind of dancing, using your pulse, and then you increase your stroking down, and make these very free forms. And of course then after I burnt out with other paper on top and I glued it.

Rail: So you’re actually doing a dance or a martial art while you’re painting. That’s beautiful. One more “Phasing” work from this series.

Kim: Oh, it’s not nice to look at through my little telephone! I don’t know, somebody who has a big computer can maybe look at it better. But all of you in New York, I invite you to go to see these works in person.

Rail: We all have to go see the show. It will be up for a while, so it sounds like we have a good chance. But let’s just look for now. This is a favorite of mine. Can you tell us about making this work and the process behind this one.

Kim: They dye the color of the paper. It’s always Hanji paper. And I cut out donut forms, and then I start to glue the smaller one, on top and on top. I choose the color moment by moment and glue on top. And what I was only concerned with was to make it more vivid, with more contrast between color and darkness. Somehow in my lifetime I remember it as the happiest time.

Rail: You burn the middle of the works of paper—that you singe to make a hole, is that right? I love the idea that there’s an oppositional motif of being full of color and energy but there’s also an emptiness in the middle of these.

Kim: So that’s why I gave this the title Full Emptiness because each element of the round form, in the middle, is empty. So basically this
small emptiness became a fullness, so Pieno di Vuoto is Italian for “full of emptiness,” basically.

RAIL: I know all these works are different—in your energy, the time you take, the period that you do it—how long did this particular work take you to make?

KIM: [Gasps] Yeah, it’s the cutting first and glueing. One work will maybe take one week, but only one week because I’ve become very fast. Somebody who really wants to do it themselves might take more time, I think.

RAIL: I imagine working sort of full-out, nonstop.

KIM: Yea. You should have the same mood, you have a happy mood and you go on with this mood because then color changes.

RAIL: I know exactly what you’re talking about. I can feel the mind space that you’re sharing in these works. I wonder if you can tell us—you’re using fire, and paper, and glue, and also your breath. You’re giving breath, breathing life into the forms that you’re creating, in a way.

KIM: Yea. It’s because the paper is very thin. So when you are using these small candles—nearly I use these candles which make warm the dishes. Smaller one very low, and then the paper is so thin that when you just touch it with the fire “boom,” it burns. You keep breathing and then you burn throughout. Keeping the breath means you are mindful also if you have so many thoughts, your breathing stops or—the breathing shows the status of your anima. To burn these papers, at a certain point your breath becomes the same breath. So when you start to do this breath for a long time you go into a meditative situation without any strange thinking, any disturbance. And you go on, like you become a machine without thinking. And I like to do this process for myself. It makes me calm and my mind meditative.

RAIL: That is so beautifully said. I’m really taken by your process because there’s this element of mastery that you have and that you’re fully aware of. When you create there’s this feeling of not having so much on your mind, that you’re so mastered in what you’re doing that you can feel free.

KIM: Yeah. And mainly my world is very simple. Simple and repetitive. Very much elaborate and it’s not that difficult, these paintings. I consider when I see my work and it’s always important when artists choose their materials, the materials should become their skin so you have to feel the need in it, so the vibration of your material has to be very in line with your emotions. But in my case I’m continuously controlling my emotion, so controlling my emotion being the same status of anima and through the material. So it helps me, the material helps me and also to having this situation, it’s born in this so called artwork. But I think it’s not different than any lady who sews, you focus on something. I never gave that much importance to my art to be behind any special philosophy or special theory or special issue. It was just to make myself in the calm and transparent mind, having the same breath, not to be excited, not to be sad. It is a method, it’s reserved for so-called art, for me.

RAIL: That’s wonderful thank you for that. Can you tell me about the fantastic piece, The Room, (2007)?

KIM: I read some funny book, by Osho, that there are so many different kinds of meditation. One kind of meditation can make you feel like your mind goes floating up in your room, and suddenly yourself becomes too big and you call fill yourself up in the room. So I thought about “what if my spirit departed from my body and went on the top of the ceiling, how would the room look?” Then I made a very funny geometric form of the room because I didn’t know how to use a computer for the perspective so it comes out very interesting in its geometric form. You can see I did always this stripe and edge and it’s just collage. I cut, and burn, and collage for this form.

RAIL: I love the idea of the random aspects of the control and the mastery of the works. At the same time there’s this oppositional thing where you’re not sure how the burning will turn out exactly, but you’re just experimenting as you make the work. Do you feel that you enjoy a certain level of uncertainty or is this so well practiced that it’s almost ok whatever happens?

KIM: When I burn, yeah. Because I know so well when I choose the paper I know that this paper will burn easily, or not easily. You can burn almost very regularly. I know that burning the stripe, this burning, more or less has the same undulation so I can use it all the time, more or less. It’s easy for me because I burn, I don’t know, tons of paper.

RAIL: Do you have any thoughts about being a female artist in a culture, and a generation, that perhaps has additional obstacles that we may not fully appreciate in the West? Everybody knows that female artists often get their due or success later in their careers. Judy Chicago has made comments that she doesn’t mind having her successes later in life, because it’s given her a chance to do her work outside of any external confirmation or expectations. Have you thought about what it was like to stay a dedicated artist as a Korean woman and how that might be different from your male peers and perhaps different even from your Western female artist colleagues that you have gotten to know? Have you thought about that at all?

KIM: Well the main thing is that I’m a Korean woman and you know the women, they have a certain duty and everybody at a certain age has to marry and I’m not married but I have a kid. I have two kids. Each kid took two or three years to carry them completely, so I know my other practice is behind but life is too long and when your circumstance gives you more time for yourself you keep going on. And if you’re too busy you leave it, but it’s that parallel, really that being an artist, if you are an artist then you’re an artist all of the time, so of course in my case and many women’s cases, they have kids, it’s quite normal to grow old but if you’re really born to be an artist, it doesn’t change. Also men could say “I have to make money for my family,” and they have the same, different, but a problem. All artists have a problem not to parallel with your normal life, to produce your artwork and lots of economic problems. It’s very normal. And artists, they somehow don’t stop. And when the success comes late or early it’s not the main thing that you consider. You consider the way you make your own art, which makes you convincing. That’s the most important thing to parallel.

RAIL: That’s a great answer. It’s reminiscent of something that Peter Brook said in his interview yesterday, when he was asked about the difficulties and obstacles of acting and he replied, you don’t really question it. It’s just something in you that you have to do. It’s wonderful to hear that you have that same energy and inspiration.

An expanded version of this conversation can be found online at brooklynrail.org.

HELEN LEE is a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.
PENNY ARCADE with Nick Bennett

Many of us find ourselves using the words “strange,” “trying,” or “surreal” to describe “the times we find ourselves in,” but no one else may understand just how ridiculous the New York of the past and present is than Penny Arcade. To quote directly from her bio, Penny is an internationally respected performance artist, writer, poet, and experimental theater maker. She is the author of 16 scripted performance plays and hundreds of performance projects. Her work has always focused on the other and the outsider, giving voices to those marginalized by society. Her willingness to speak truth to power, and her decades-long focus on the creation of community and inclusion as the goals of performance, and her efforts to use performance as a transformative act, mark her as a true original in American theater and performance.

Having seen Penny live and many other of her performances online and on her Patreon page, you can understand why she is called “the Queen of New York Underground Theater since the 1980s,” a title she has earned through her respect for artistic lineage, her tireless process of self-individuation, and her passionate interaction with her audience. The way in which she draws the audience into a truly living theater is something that transcends any physical space, and can be felt even from the quarantine of one’s home.

The following is an edited conversation from our Zoom conversation that took place on April 14, 2020, the Brooklyn Rail’s 21st New Social Environment daily lunchtime conversation. To get the full essence of Penny, I urge you to watch her animated presence in full on the Rail’s Youtube page.

NICK BENNETT (RAIL): It is my absolute pleasure and honor to be in conversation with you, Penny. Before we start our conversation, I want to know how you are doing?

PENNY ARCADE: I’m excited, I love the Brooklyn Rail! The Rail has been a blow against mediocrity since it started. There’s so little out there that isn’t a co-optation. We’ve been dealing with the commodification of rebellion for years—honest, since the ’80s. The Rail represents lineage, it represents the generations of people who are interested in history, in going forwards and backwards. I don’t think people really understand what “contemporary” means. This is a huge problem in the world. Contemporary means everyone who is active right now, not everybody who is active between the ages of 18 and 37. Someone like Jonas Mekas was contemporary until the absolute last second that he was alive. And who was younger and more engaged than Jonas Mekas? Nobody. I think that is this very important and it’s something that the Rail holds space for.

But I’m doing great. Even though we’ve lost so many friends, including the music producer Hal Wilner, and Rose Royale, also known as Eddie Shostak, who was a great painter and performer, both just last week. There’s a lot of people that I know who are sick right now. I think many people aren’t taking this seriously. Given the life that these friends have lived, for them to be killed by this very small virus, which is doing so much damage, is such an ignominious way to die. But I’m very happy that some friends have survived.

RAIL: That’s great news to receive.

PENNY ARCADE: I’m an introvert, so being at home is no sweat. All the introverts are having a great time, because we don’t want to go out anyway. I’ve been so busy because I do Facebook live twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays at 5 p.m. There are a lot of people who want to converse, we want to be together. That’s the whole point isn’t it? I came back to New York in 1981 when I was 30, for one reason and one reason only: for artistic community, and that does not mean just artists. It means artist and audience, it means all people who are interested in culture—politics being what we do to each other, culture being how we talk about what we do to each other. For me, the audience has always been a part of it. They’re not the wallet; they’re not separate in the experience of art.

Steve Zehentner, my long-time collaborator of 28 years—it’s actually his birthday today! Steve is saying the same thing, “Oh my God, I’m so busy!” A lot of us are busier now than we were before. I’m currently writing my memoir, and I’m connecting with the public live on social media. Long before art schools promoted a thing called “social-practice,” I was giving out my phone number to the entire audience after every show! I did that from 1985 until 1996, and then when more people were online, I started giving out my email. I still give out my phone number and people call, “Oh! I thought I’d get a machine.” And I say, “You would ... if I wasn’t home.”

RAIL: [laughs] Happy birthday Steve! What projects were you working on just before we all had to enter quarantine?

PENNY ARCADE: The last show that we just started, Notes from the Underground at the restaurant and event space Pangea on Second Avenue and East 11th St, which has been around since 1985 as a place where artists and audiences have gathered intergenerationally. This new focuses on what Steve and I feel is happening in this country and around the world with this enormous swing to the right; this anarchiste de droite—right-wing “anarchism” from the liberal world which includes this horrible form of censorship and controlling language, particularly from the academic queer world, where you want to just slap them. In Notes from the Underground we were grappling with watching so-called liberals play right into the hands of the right wing and unwittingly supporting totalitarianism. I get so tired of hearing about “the Left” in the US—there is no Left left. Now I’m doing a lot of research on the conspiracy theories around COVID-19. I am very worried about the failure of democracy, of totalitarianism, but I’ve been worried about this since I was 17.

The supposed queer liberals are all “Marsha P. Johnson!” and all “Jack Smith!” But they have CO-OPTED those artists who are dead and cannot speak for themselves. Marsha P. Johnson would be smacking them all! For example, saying that Marsha P. Johnson was a trans woman—sorry, Marsha P. Johnson was a queen. There was no way that Marsha wasn’t going to be full-on Malcolm three times a month. Marsha did not want to be a woman. Marsha wanted to be Marsha except when they felt like being Malcom! That film Happy Birthday, Marsha! (2015) had me in a rage. The act of portraying Marsha in some perfect pink boho art-deco apartment, when Marsha was in fact homeless except for when she stayed with Randy Wicker, was THEFT. What part of Black Street Queen do these people not understand? Then they show Marsha on her pink telephone telling someone she is performing at Stonewall that night—well Stonewall didn’t have performances in those years, and certainly not on the
evening of the Stonewall Uprising. Marsha wasn't there during the initial fight. These same kinds of people try to co-opt the artist Jack Smith, and they have no idea that they would not have lasted two minutes in Jack's presence. But what can you do with this erasure of history that we're dealing with? It's a critical issue. One thing I always found really supportive and endearing in the Brooklyn Rail, is that the Rail also fights against the erasure of history. I don't know why every 25-year-old wants to be important. Your crowning glory is you're 27? Develop! I'm going to be 70 and I'm just hitting it! There's no 25-year-old that can out rock me.

RAIL: Not possible.

ARCADE: Every generation is tethered to the values it comes up in. This is a super-reality that we cannot escape from. The values of my generation put it on what it means, because a lot of people, even you Nick, have asked me how I feel toward COVID-19 vis-à-vis my experience of the peak years of the AIDS epidemic in the '80s and '90s. Except for the not knowing, which is a similarity between then and now—how you get it, who's getting it, why is this person dying in three days and this person survives—we could still go out, be together, and gather. Now, it's this enforced isolation, which is hard for so many people, especially the extroverts. People think I'm an extrovert because I'm a performer, but introversion and extroversion are just about how you act in and process the world.

RAIL: Nostalgia and longing are at the core of your show Longing Lasts Longer (2015–2019). When I saw the show last October at Joe's Pub, I was reminded at one point of Fran Lebowitz in Martin Scorsese's documentary Public Speaking (2010) where she says, "The culture is soaked in nostalgia. That's caused by the older generation, not by 17 year old's—Whoever is driving, they're the one that has the accident." Who do you think is behind or responsible for this saturation of nostalgia? And do you see it as a threat to the future of New York?

ARCADE: Gentrification has been a hallmark of my work since 1981. But the situation right now in New York relates to the hyper-gentrification we've been suffering from since 1993. There is so little left of the East Village. This was a neighborhood that virtually stayed the same from when I was 17 years old until I was almost 50! And thinking of Jonas Mekas—the East Village and the Bowery remained the same for him from 1949 until 2000! That is a
Some people are thinking about COVID-19 like, younger generations for the rest of your lives. What is happening economically is going to define these futures out there, as you experience it right now—The New York that exists for all you younger creatives. They are part of my capillaries, my veins, my interior communication network. I do want to say to everyone that for as little now with these horrible towers you cannot see the sky anymore. We live in this moment where we all have the time to meditate on what will be lost. Even in Bushwick, where you get a sense of an alternative similar to the East Village of the ‘60s to ‘80s, a lot of that’s going to disappear too. Because of what Naomi Klein has called “Disaster capitalism,” that is what happened after 9/11. But now there is a sense of overwhelming poverty of the working poor, the underclass, and the homeless.

By March 12 we realized we had to cancel our upcoming performances, so we immediately created the “Penny Arcade Performance” Patreon account, where we are uploading over 2,300 unique videos of my performances, of full-length plays, of talks I’ve done from Australia to the Bronx. I have interacted online since 1993 and with video since 1985. Always I say the idea that people my age are Luddites—who does anyone think were the first adaptors? Us! For those of you who know astrology, Uranus is the most elevated planet in my chart and Uranus rules electricity, television, and new communication forms. I’ve been recording all my work since the ‘80s, and I never put it out because, being an anarchist, I was anti-product, but I videoed everything and I knew that eventually I could make that available at any time I felt like it. I am totally committed to my relationship with my audience and to dignity for everybody, so anyone can see the work and can participate in live events as those are being set up.

RAIL: I do want to say to everyone that for as little as $1 per month, you can support Penny’s work through her Patreon account. Please support your local legendary anarchists.

ARCADE: We want our Patreon to be available to everyone, with dignity for all involved, and I want young people to be able to see all the work we made and how we made it! There is a master class on my Patreon page. The whole concept of the “emerging arts” — which is such a pyramid scheme — it is there to destroy young people. Because from time immemorial there were young artists who became old artists; now you have to have this hothouse environment so these young artists can “hatch.” People have this concept that you go to school for four years and that makes you an artist—and that’s stupid! You become an artist over time. And honestly, here’s a $10,000 gift I’m giving each of you: You become an artist in your own time. You are living in a world where you’re being told that if you don’t have your point of view, your voice, your unique blah blah blah by the time you’re 23 years old—why we failed. That’s the whole point of incredible cooptation of your power. What if you’re somebody who’s designed to be what you dream of, with that thing ticking inside of you, not at 35 or 25 but at 47, at 41, at 38, at 70? You’re really going to sit on your creativity — block your own creativity — so that you can fit into some one else’s mandate? That’s pathetic.

Right now, we’re streaming La Misericordia (1991) which I wrote when I was 40. Before that in 1985 (at 34) I was doing completely improvised rock and roll theatre with an incredible band. I was doing character work and talking directly to the audience and singing songs by songwriters I knew — and I remember saying: “If I don’t get reviewed now, well, this is as good as I get, I don’t get better than this!” I think that is a natural thing for someone in their mid 30’s to think because you have been going since you were 15 and you finally get something together and you want it to be successful. I seriously believed that what I was doing at that moment, at 35 was the best I could achieve. I actually said the words “I don’t get any better than that.” I was so lucky I didn’t get recognition by the press or that’s all I would have ever done!

RAIL: What year was that?

ARCADE: That was 1987 when I was 36 years old. I had a huge audience, sold out every night, four nights a week when nobody did shows four nights a week. And I did not get reviewed. All the critics, and arts administrators in the not-for-profit industrial complex didn’t like me because I was doing rock-and-roll and I was talking directly to the audience. They had no idea what I was doing. They didn’t understand that I was doing something new. That I had already been doing experimental theatre for almost 17 years then! From 36 to 40, I didn’t get any attention, I couldn’t get booked for a while, not even at Performance Space 122. But between 1990 to 1993. I wrote four full-length plays, and I had one review. And in Bushwick, where you get a sense of an alternative similar to the East Village of the ‘60s to ‘80s. I would have never made that work, I can tell you right now, if I had gotten the attention that Karen Finley or Holly Hughes was getting then. I respect Holly and Karen a lot, but they were the critics’ darlings and I was ignored. But these days they’re not performing as much anymore, and I have never stopped working and I am working more than ever now! [Laughs] They’re both artist-academics now. I did 193 shows of Longing Lasts Longer in 45 cities from 2015–2019. I have contributed to new art forms every decade since the ‘60s. Excuse me, but where’s my MacArthur grant?

To go back to this thing of what New York is going to be—it’s we who are going to carry that New York forward, and the Rail is one of the few places that will, in an existential way, carry that history because we may lose everything. I have said gentrification is the erasure of the visibility of the alternative. If all you know are Starbucks, then you can’t imagine a hole in the wall coffee place. There was never any room for big chains in New York. We didn’t want them. I was walking in the West Village
about six months ago and there were like 30 people standing on a corner, and of course curiosity is my most elevated character trait, so I said, “Excuse me, what’s everybody looking at?” And this girl who is maybe 26 years old, points up and goes, “There’s the apartment where Friends was filmed.” And I said, “No it’s not, that’s the exterior shot.” I said “Are you serious? You’re in Greenwich Village. Do you know what happened in this 15-block area? Do you know the poets, artists, thinkers who walked these streets? This is what you’re interested in—the exterior shot for Friends? Are you insane?”

RAIL: At this point, I would be remiss to not share with our audience some of the legendary people you’ve worked with, such as John Vaccaro at the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, as well as Andy Warhol, appearing in Women in Revolt (1971). I’m interested in how you’ve maintained the spirit of improvisation that the Playhouse of the Ridiculous was known for, and that you continually improvise and create works in front of your audience. You break down that line between stage and audience literally in your show on censorship of a rock band on stage—in fact the writers Ragni and Rado who wrote Hair (1967) used to come to watch the Playhouse of the Ridiculous rehearsals. All of the work we were doing was improvised, and we would do this every night for two or three months and then put the show on stage. When I started making my own work, the only way I knew how to make theater was to improvise so that’s what I did in front of the audience. And the audience is not people who are on boards, or funding panels, or people who have jobs in the arts—that audience was and remains the amazing people that are up for anything. The audience is the midwife. You do not have an art scene because you have a bunch of artists. The audience can go anywhere an artist goes and they are brilliant, and without that audience you don’t have art. The real art scene is two-thirds people living an artistic life to one-third people making art.

I grew up doing theatre that knocked down the fourth wall when I was 17, 18, 19, and so on. I was 34 years old before I started making my own work, even though I started performing at 17, and I was there to knock down the other three walls which were between me and the audience. The important thing with the Playhouse of the Ridiculous is that when John Vaccaro talked about camp, it wasn’t like goofy, feather boa, bullshit. It was about showing your political point of view, even though John is the person who pioneered the use of glitter on stage, so he invented the whole glitter/glam scene! The people on stage ranged from their 20s to their 50s— it was always intergenerational. So, when I started making my own work, of course I put elements of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous in it, it’s in me. The Ridiculous manifesto was: We have gone beyond the absurd. Our situation is absolutely ridiculous—the ridiculousness of real life. That’s why my work is all non-fiction. Who needs fiction?

My play La Miseria (that’s streaming now and forever on the Patreon page) has 33 people in it from age 8 to 80, with 95 percent of whom are non-actors, including a completely homeless person. So, I look for the ridiculousness in life. Which is like the cupcake, to go back to Longing Lasts Longer, where I say: “New York has gone from being the Big Apple to being the Big Cupcake. There are a hundred cupcake shops in a 10-block radius of my apartment. People are staggering from one cupcake shop to another.” Isn’t there something scary about a group of 30-something-year-old women oohing and awing over a plate of cupcakes? It’s the infantilization of an entire generation.

RAIL: Tracing your artistic lineage back to people like Vaccaro, and to other collaborators such as Quentin Crisp (who referred to as you as his soulmate), for example, can you talk about how this lineage has formed your own trajectory and been a part of your own self-individuation?

ARCADE: Brilliance and individuality come in the package of highly self-individuated people, and I invite all of you to honor your own self-individuation, as I have honored mine. I think that’s where my relationship with Quentin Crisp came from, and I’m thinking specifically of The Last Will and Testament of Quentin Crisp which is an amazing performance we did together in Vienna in 1995. This was after I had been friends with Quentin for nearly a decade and I had presented him many times to new generations. And I’m thinking just now, as always, about Jonas Mekas. I watched Jonas from afar since I was 17, and I was 42 the first time I knew that he came to see one of my shows. Then sometime when I was 44, two years later, Jonas was receiving the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Embassy, and I got a phone call from The French Embassy and they said “Jonas Mekas has asked us to invite you as one of his very dear friends.” And I was honestly gobsmacked. My mouth is still—not now, you can’t see it, but inside—30 years later, I’m still going, “Me? A friend?” It was overwhelming. So, I still have at all times in my mind and in my heart that example. We need examples. If you never see the work of highly self-individuated artists, of someone who has made work for a long time, who has spent years developing their craft and aesthetics, it won’t trigger something inside of you that you might want to follow. If you only see the work of young artists, where will that get you? You don’t necessarily have to want to be a performance artist or a theater artist or a poet or an oral history person like me, but you might see my work and that might trigger something else in you. We ask only one thing of art and that is that it be good.

Someone recently wrote to me and said he was afraid to look at my work because he didn’t want to be influenced. I said, “Hon, you’ve got to be worried about copying. Don’t worry about being influenced.” Influence is agreement. You see something and you go, “Ah, I agree with that, that resonates with me.” We look for these signposts in our lives.

RAIL: Mentioning Jonas Mekas and Quentin Crisp makes me realize that your career not only deals with a history of New York and of the counterculture, but of the history of queerness. You yourself were at Stonewall on the second and third nights of the riots (which I know you prefer to uprising), and have always worked, collaborated, and lived with queer people. I’m thinking especially of Jackie Curtis, Jack Smith, and again of Quentin Crisp.

ARCADE: I was at Stonewall the first night and each night after, but later at night and not inside the bar, I always make that distinction. I was at Max’s Kansas City when people came in and told us what was going on, so of course we went to check it out. But to answer the bigger question, that was a time on the cusp of becoming for those that were gay and marginalized. Coming from a small town, I was branded at 13 a slut because people saw me as a sexual being, something I did not know was somehow apparent. Imagine if they knew I was
biseuxual? When I came to New York I met a lot of other people who were different like me, who also had come from small towns having had similar horrible experiences on one level or another of simply being different. New York was a melting pot, and we were queer and we were artistic. I didn’t know I was an artist. I was a working-class kid with no education and no privilege of any kind. The most disruptive art at the time was made by people like Vaccaro, Jack Smith, Warhol, H.M. Koutoukas, all who came from working-class backgrounds. They had no preconceived ideas of theater, so they reinvented it. And the queer world was full of people who weren’t gay, like Patti Smith, David Johanson, and Iggy Pop. In the gay world of downtown art, there was a lot of permission and permissiveness, precisely because it was an outsider gay world. This transgressive energy cannot function as it did then because now there are all these PC rules in the queer world. How can there be experimentation if you have to account to a committee of people’s opinions for every word or action you try? 

RAIL: At the heart of this history of queerness is a transgressive will. Is there a future for this transgressive spirit in New York?

ARCade: People deciding who is queer and who isn’t—I have to share an example of how this really annoys me. C.A. Conrad, a great poet who’s a queer radical anarchist and is also super promoted by the powers that be, wrote this piece SIN BUG: AIDS, Poetry, and Queer Resilience in Philadelphia for the Poetry Foundation and dedicated it to me, writing me this big thank you note, saying this piece was going to be dedicated to me because I have always been such an ally of the queer community. And I wrote back and said, “Ally? You cannot call someone like me who has lived their entire life in the gay world an ally! The gay world that exists right now exists in part because of me, and people like me. I am a bisexual fag-hag. I am not an ‘ally.’ I’m so queer I’m not even gay!” This is the exact opposite of the kind of thinking that went on in the ‘60s through the 80s. It was my culture. No one thought I was a tourist in the gay world. It was a time when we were under siege and someone on our side was one of us! But it shows you the bias that still exists today.

Once in Portland when I was performing Longing Lasts Longer someone in the audience asked me, “Penny how do you explain the fact that you make incredibly queer work for a very heterosexual audience?” Because 75 percent of my audience is heterosexual, and why is that? First of all, that’s the percentages among humans. 10 percent of people are queer or homosexual. Young queers don’t come and see my work because they are very mandated societally. If you’re not trans, or a person of color, with one green eye and one blue eye, they’re not coming to see you. They don’t go to see work or historical lineage, they go see who they are told it is acceptable to see according to their identity. There is no lineage left in the gay world.

So, I turned to Steve Zehentner, my collaborator who was sitting in the audience, who always wants to take a back seat in public, and I said “Steve, you are a heterosexual man and yet for 28 years you have made completely queer work. How do you explain that?” And Steve, even though he doesn’t want to be in the spotlight, said that growing up in Dubuque, Iowa, it was gay men who showed him in his late teens and when he was in college what was possible in being a man that wasn’t the same old macho crap. What was available to him growing up was this very narrow definition of what it meant to be male. Regardless of how you identify yourself, you can learn and be inspired by others, in different worlds from you, for instance, in the gay and queer community that don’t identify as you do and vice versa.

In gay bars all throughout America and across the world, from the ‘70s to some places now, a gay bar is the place where all the outsiders hang out. If you go to any gay bar in middle America, nobody is asking if you’re a card-carrying homo. That only happens in Bushwick or in Williamsburg, where so-called queer people are creating the same institutions of oppression and judgement that so many gay and queer people gave their lives to break down, and that is a serious indictment.

RAIL: This touches on two things you’ve said that come to mind. We’re talking about young queer people and we’re also talking about an intergenerational exchange. There is also the problem of groups of people communicating only with people of the same age or interest range. How do you think we can better foster these intergenerational exchanges?

ARCade: Well, what was considered the downtown art scene in the ‘40s to the ‘70s was co-opted by marketing and advertising in the late ‘70s, when college students started reading the Village Voice and the Soho News in their dorm rooms and deciding what was cool and what wasn’t cool, that type of marketing had not existed before. The mentality became, “Oh, the Talking Heads moved to the East Village, so we should move there.” And it started to become more and more monogenerational. But bohemia and the alternative world is always intergenerational. Life is intergenerational. When I was 18, if I went to a party and everybody was 18, I was at the wrong party. I wanted to see someone older, to meet people who could tell me something, who had done something.

I started The Lower East Side Biography Project (episodes also available on Patreon) in 1999 with Steve Zehentner as an ongoing oral history archive with the goal of stemming the tide of cultural amnesia. For example, we recorded the great Betty Dodson, the sex educator whose work was buried under The Venus Monologues, which Eve Ensler obviously used Dodson’s work as a jumping off point for her own but gave her no credit. Dodson is in her 90s and rocking right now. Gwenneth Paltrow just featured Betty Dodson on her Netflix series to give you an idea how long mainstream recognition takes for original thinkers. One of the motivations for why Steve and I started this project was all these incredible people were dying and nobody was interviewing them or recording these oral histories. When we started, I was approached by public television, and they wanted to have artists elevate what was on public access. I thought I could train all the artists I know to use video, and then everyone could document their work. But no one my age was interested in that. So, then we started a training program through the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, and Steve came up with the idea to give these interviews to young people to shepherd this history forward, because of course young people don’t have ideas! I was a Warhol superstar when I was young, and I didn’t have any ideas. I was looking for an idea. When a young person is confronted with a human being who is a ball of ideas, no one can interact with those ideas better than a young person because they can see the distinct elements of those ideas. They bring all of their hunger for understanding, their comprehension, and even actualization to these ideas.

I think we have 70 finished biographies and 150 that we need to make so anyone who knows how to edit video and who’s interested should just send me an email at mspennyarcade@gmail.com and I’ll hook you up with Steve to edit one of these great biographies of so many amazing people that we have.

The whole idea is to continue this intergenerationalism, because I was the youngest for 50 years, and now I’m the oldest. And, like I said to you the other day, you’re not a legend only because of what you do, but because of what you participate in. I participated in the late ‘60s with people who were 25 years older than me, like Jonas Mekas, Judith Malina, all of these people who came before me but who I’m always jumped in with. It’s a great honor but I don’t deserve it because I’m still super young. I’m not 92, people, I’m 70!

RAIL: We’re all throughout our lives in a process of individuation, whether we’re old or young.

ARCade: Exactly. Of becoming, that’s very important. You want to do everything in your own time. It’s very important because the last stage of life, which really starts to begin when you’re around 48, and then it really ramps up when you’re 60, and then you end up in placid waters when you’re 70 but still floating down the stream. I’ve talked about this with Marianne Faithful and used to talk about this with Judith Malina of the Living Theater: the last stage of life is so important!

They keep telling you that the most important time in your life is between 15 and 40, or 15 and 45. No! The most important time is this last part of your life, which is the completion of character. Now why do I say it’s the most important time? Because many never get there. If you’re bemoaning that you’re 25, or you’re 30, or that you just turned 40, or 50, or 60, you’re abdicating! You’re running away from your old age. You’re losing the opportunity. You have to be present for the completion of character, and it’s harrowing and exciting. Because you have to face your life: what you created and what you didn’t create, and you have to face who and what you became. I’m very lucky because I grew up to be the kind of person I wanted to be.
Portrait of Tom McGlynn, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.
Based on a photo by Maya McGlynn.
Not all artists consider themselves writers too, let alone critics. The poet Alice Notley, in reviewing a new collection of poems by Edwin Denby in the St. Mark’s Poetry Project newsletter of 1976, prefaced her review (not quite a disclaimer nor a benediction) by stating, “Poets can’t write criticism because what they understand about a poet they adore is what they themselves do or would, it is visceral—death to analyze? critics can’t write criticism because they never are knowing.” Notley succinctly expresses the passion of a reader/writer as not disinterested, opposite the un-knowing objectivity of the critic. It’s this lack of disinterest that makes her an accurate reader of Denby. As a passionate reader/writer she has skin in the game, which allows for an intimate play of critical precision.

Most visual artists I know are quite well read, and many poets and writers I’m familiar with see more museum and gallery shows than some of my painter friends. The abidance of such clichéd distinctions as the inarticulate painter and the writer solely caught up in language has never jived with what I’ve experienced in reality, which is usually a vast commingling of knowledge beyond such romantically-limited job descriptions. As a child I constantly made drawings but also read promiscuously. My primary aha! moment in reading, after voraciously consuming a polyglot mix of non-fiction (mostly picture) books of world history and the natural sciences, happened with Victor Hugo’s Notre-Dame de Paris—my first experience with the novel form. I was about 9 or 10 when I picked it up, mostly, I’m sure, because of its promise as a horror story, but was pleasantly surprised to find myself “hearing” the voice of the writer while I read. I may have tried to relate this epiphany to my mother (whose book it was I had borrowed) at the time, I don’t recall that as clearly, but what I’ll never forget is the incantatory power of that meta-cognitive voice: it’s presence, its “sound,” the aural dimensions of the words. I didn’t really fall in love with the novel form at the time, (I was otherwise oddly pragmatic in my childhood reading—I loved exploring the dictionary, for example), but what it implied: the figurative power of words to manifest as literal phenomena. I was what is called today a “visual learner.” I reveled in the power of images as I found myself translating my youthful experiences into daily drawings. Pushing around stuff on a page was also how I experienced reading, I was an intentionally slow reader, almost sculpting my way through passages, re-reading in order to grasp them as real. I could speed scan when I had to, I just mainly preferred not to. Perhaps the deliberate, physical character of my reading habit set me up for writing about the phenomenal object of art, both my own and others.

The book that broke things open for me with regards to the interconnectedness of the artist’s roles as both “maker”
CRITICS PAGE

and “speaker” was The Writings of Robert Smithson, first published in 1979, when I was still an undergraduate art major. By that time, I had been made aware of the writings by such critics as the “three mountains” of post-war American criticism, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Leo Steinberg as well as younger writers, cultural theorists, critics, and art historians such as Susan Sontag, Lucy Lippard, Gregory Battcock, and Linda Nochlin, to name just a few. Many more literary and critical influences, both older and newer, would rush in later. Smithson, however, stood out early among this crowd as both artist and writer. And surprisingly (refreshingly) he wrote on his own work in the same voice that he wrote on the work of his peers. I came to understand Minimalism and Post Minimalism much more clearly through his writings than the contemporaneous writings of Robert Morris or Donald Judd.

It took me a while to become attuned to Smithson’s voice, as it was witty beyond my jejune radar for irony and seemingly, intentionally abstruse. But something about its peculiar throwness kept me re-reading. I came to understand his intent to undermine literary pretense and expectations in critical writing through a metaphorical physicalization of language. One of my favorite drawings of his is Heap of Language (1966), a very funny yet pointed critique of the place where language becomes just another pile of dirt. Whether that dirt is fertile compost for the imagination or just a barren accumulation of rhetoric is a question the artist keeps playfully open. Geology for Smithson was, like the Anglican catechism for T.S. Elliot, an adopted proprietary lever with which to pry open “improper” meaning, or at least poetic/artistic meaning yet-to-be-determined. Their shared radicalism? That the immutability of the primary phenomenological “site” or the ecclesiastical “body” could both be just as easily displaced by language (as Hugo’s subject, his cathedral would be metaphorically replaced by his novel). This is the figurative subtext of Smithson’s Non-Sites and Elliot’s The Wasteland alike. Yet the important takeaway from Smithson was that a temperate “climate of sight” needed to be maintained via a taut dialectical play between word and thing, image and support. Neither the figurative nor the literal should take precedence over their suspension in a clarifying solution of the artist’s physicalized perception. Wow. What freedom from the “cultural confinement” that Smithson would also write so brilliantly about. And my personal understanding of this immense license to meander across freed topologies of otherwise gate-kept disciplines now seems clearly pre-determined by the glacial grind of my reading. Maybe visual learners have the potential to be very creative writers precisely because of their innate tendency to sculpt new figurative meaning from their rearrangement of the literal expectations of language. That was Gertrude Stein’s main English lesson after all: her Cubism.

My own work has often derived from complexes of conceptual thinking that I come to prove by their ultimate dismantlement. Just as likely is the fact that I have “no idea” what I’m doing while “making” and then I realize the work’s potential complexities later. I’ve come to accept that both ways of working are valid: the way of logical fallacy and the way of improbable reason. Both approaches might seem deeply skeptical, but what they really represent are ways to get out of my own face: the mirror displaced. Seeing any new object into being demands a certain critical largesse, as the best children are generously raised, not particularly owned. A similar interested distance, one that artists come to know intimately in “raising” their own work, can position them as extremely close interpreters of the works of others. In the words of Alice Notley: “it is visceral.”

For this month’s Critics Page, I’ve invited a group of my fellow artist/writers from the eclectic band of the Rail’s Artseen cadre to present accounts of how they got to that place where their inner critic resolved to make peace with their outer artist, and how their apperception of the phenomenal object of art helped to convene the two there.

**TOM MCGLYNN** is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the NYC area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design 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.

**An Artist Writing**

**BY DAVID RHODES**

I think that there are some surprising common aspects of making art, and writing about it, in handling paint and in handling words. For me this is because both are as much about finding as about doing. The act of doing is always generative whether it is obvious or not, to the point where it is often the most interesting aspect of either. It can seem when this is happening that they produce themselves. Gerhard Richter said that he wanted his paintings to be smarter than he was, and I think he was referring to this process. I certainly don’t have an explanation for this, as much as I might try it always remains out of reach. To try though is philosophical endeavor. There are insights into process, as a painter, that come from the experience of doing, these are not exclusive insights of the artist, as I
was once tempted to believe—the writer and poet Barry Schwabsky, for example, often proves this in his writing on abstract painting, the kind of painting I make. Even within any one category of painting, it is still too various for any one painter to know completely, from the inside. We are all viewers.

For me as a working class Jew from an industrial city in the north of England, and entering school at the lowest rung possible, I also have my own evolving perspective on culture. My first experience of upper-middle class life was aged 17 through an Armenian girlfriend and her family. It was the entering of another world: a foreign and attractive land. One unavoidable lesson learnt was that no perspective is ever universal. Class, like race or gender, provides a thoroughly different nuance to life—think of an Auden poem and its simultaneous, multiple points of view. Class though, in the art world is not discussed, primarily because it is still not largely represented. Class does however; thoroughly shape our societies, culturally, socially, politically.

By 18 I had excelled academically at least to the stage where I was qualified for university—I could use words, and I could draw—I chose art school. This was rather perverse as there was zero family, and meager government support for this. But painting was inexplicable, its material and visual mystery and sensuality irresistible. At art school I read everything I could find in the library concerning painting, and made monthly journeys from the school in Bristol to London, and the Chelsea College of Art's library for the excellent collection of art magazines and exhibition catalogs. And I would visit The National Gallery, Serpentine Gallery, and Whitechapel Gallery. I had to look and read voraciously because I didn't receive any of it as a given, or as an entitlement. Beginning here, and then over the years, reading writing on art as different as, for example, Charles Baudelaire, Georges Bataille, Hubert Damisch, Clement Greenberg, and Donald Judd has been important to me. After moving to London I began giving museum talks after hearing a rote description of Blinky Palermo's work by a docent. I decided there to counter this with my artist's view in solidarity with other artists. This led to many more such talks and some lectures, and coediting and reviewing for a short-lived, London-based magazine called Fuse in 1988. By 2003 I was living in Berlin and was generously encouraged to write a regular Letter from Berlin by John Yau, then the Art Editor at the Rail. This is where my art writing really got going. Artist friends Sherman Sam in London and Sonita Singwi in New York also encouraged me to pursue writing. Barry Schwabsky made it possible for me to contribute to Artforum and later in 2019 to publish a book on the abstract painter Bernard Frize. David Cohen also invited me to contribute to his journal Artcritical.

Writing, like painting, offers up thoughts that one didn't know one had from the process of doing, or at least the kind of writing and painting that I do. In painting I work in a way that allows me to be quickly in the position of a viewer, as I work blind, so to speak, and with speed—without seeing the painting before it's complete, there is only adjusting, assessing, changing as I progress with no going back—I then have to see what it is. My paintings are relatively simple and each one closely connected to the next, but I still find them each so much more complex than I can ever hold.

Over time the paintings change, both in the perceptual sense of looking and also in returning to them over lived time, to look again. Like Jorge Luis Borges said, if one reads a new book each time and you will always read the same book, but read the same book again and again and you will always read a different book. I can really appreciate what he was getting at. I see writing as joining a dialog, like talking in studios and galleries and museums. And painting too, joins a dialog, wherever it is seen, or written about.

**When We Are Given a Voice**

**BY ANN MCCOY**

In the ’70s and ’80s I had written a few pieces about fellow women artists who could not get any coverage, because men got most of the ink. It began as a sort of public service for my sister artists, marginalized and discouraged. During the Frankfurter Inquisition when Adorno in his “Theses Against Occultism” preached that “the idea of the existence of the spirit [or of spirit] is the most extreme height of bourgeois consciousness,” it was hard for a Druid like myself to get published. We were relegated to feminist journals dealing with spirituality like Heresies. Mira Schor and Susan Bee were my early champions in M/E/A/N/I/N/G, an important journal of artist writing. I remember discussing the problem with Malachy McCourt at a meeting of the Irish American Writers Society. Malachy said, “Art writing is so ‘feckin’ boring, make it amusing.” I took his advice. In 2013, I submitted my first Judith Bernstein review to the Brooklyn Rail, where my editor at first blanched at sentences like, “I love big dicks—my Priapic Cult library spans a shelf.” I persisted, and Phong Bui, who is an artist...
himself, as publisher of the Rail gave me a platform and a voice. I am forever grateful. A 2014 guest editor slot followed on art and the unconscious, tackling the subject of art and madness. It included a response by the brilliant Marina Warner, author of Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (1976). As a battle weary old maenad I felt like I was pulling ancient voices onto the pages, perspectives long forgotten, occluded narratives, limping sisters. The God/G_d Rail conversation with Helène Aylon was a theological milestone, and one that helped revive her career after years of neglect. The October journal posse’s suppression of alternative perspectives had been deadly for expansive definitions of writing on art, especially for those of us who bucked the party line. Topics like Jung, Rudolph Steiner, Smithson's Catholicism, Beuys’s shamanism, and Carolee Schneemann’s erotic cat goddess worship were discouraged. It became a sort of academic flat earth society with no mythical dimensions. Departments became bulwarks where those not in lockstep with a strident atheistic Marxist agenda could be tossed over the ramparts, especially if you were an irreverent woman like myself. There were some alternative voices like Jack Burnham and Thomas McEvilley, but they were men writing about men, big difference.

I came to art history from studio art, Native American archeology, classics, and Jungian psychology. When I came to New York, I was more interested in the Hopi Snake Dance than the New York School—Clement Greenberg meant nothing to me. The Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakwaka’wakw had more interesting approaches to art than the academy in my view. Even when those ideas crept into the art world with exhibitions like Magiciens de la Terre (1989), women were largely excluded from the exhibition and the catalog, even though they were often the first to think about these issues. Women supported artists like Joseph Beuys, but very few were allowed to actually participate in this tribal dance orchestrated by the curator Jean-Hubert Martin. To not include Carolee Schneemann’s Meatjoy (1964), or Mary Beth Edelson’s cave rituals, not to mention their pioneering writing, was shocking.

Then there was the religious problem. Catholic intellectuals got a battering in the academy, unless they were lapsed, angry, and apologetic. Our brains are wired differently to include thoughts about transcendence, mysteries, and the living numinous realities of the spirit. Christianity could only be discussed in the art world from a secular point of view as an outdated practice with no current presence. Rose d’Amora, Joe Masheck, and other scattered believers discussed this in corners at parties, and were thankful to have a haven at the Rail. It went beyond discussions of transgressive Catholics making art about the body, some of us were committing the ultimate transgression of still being sincere believers and practitioners. The artist Linda Montano and I held firm in the face of the opposition. The Gospels and Marian devotion trumped priestly nightmares, we could have our disputes with the Pope without abandoning our beliefs. The endless attacks from the secularists got old for those of us occupying the Dorothy Day wing. When it comes to dialogues about spiritual practices, Montano’s performances, writing, and interviews are treasures.

When I read artists writing about art, I find their voices the most interesting. Brian O’Doherty and Barbara Novak paved the way for me, because they both make art and understand the artist’s brain. They were huge influences on how I approach art and writing about it. Barbara brought me into the Barnard Art History department for 20 years, and valued my perspectives, when few others did. My colleagues and myself at Artseen have been very lucky to have the Brooklyn Rail provide us a wide-open platform, when many other publications prefer safer, more mainstream academic scribblers. I think of the Irish philosopher George Berkeley as he rejects the argument of the English empiricist, John Locke, with the retort: “We Irish think otherwise.” This Paddy certainly thinks otherwise, and Berkeley’s retort is true for many artists writing about art. Artists have an inside track. I used to wonder why are critics and art historians so afraid to discuss what artists really think about? Artists writing about art are not afraid to have these discussions. As artists and autodidacts with reading, interests, and imaginal structures outside of the box, we get it.

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.

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Playing Solitaire

BY WILLIAM CORWIN

At age 14, in my sophomore year in high school, I was in Dr. Nikol’s Advanced Placement European History class. The syllabus was thorough and in the section on the Enlightenment we paused briefly on Descartes, to note his contributions to mathematics, and secondly his Meditations on First Philosophy, which have to this day
never left me a moment’s peace. The premise that there is in fact nothing making up the universe but just me and either an entertainingly malevolent demon or a very mischievous God, is hard to shake. On revisiting the First Meditations again this quarantine, and reading the whole thing very carefully, it’s obvious that Descartes, seated comfortably at his table in a bathrobe and a glass of Sancerre, was never able to convince himself either. He could prove his own existence, and he surmised that we need some source material. Beyond that, if we can’t really trust our senses, it’s hard to tell if all those people out there are real, and are really making things. Or is this just a great big hive mind, our parti-colored adversary, set on teaching us a very long drawn out series of morality plays and teleological lessons?

Descartes has pursued me these last 29 years becoming a bit of an adversary himself: he’s intruded on romantic relationships and affected my art practice as well. If it’s all just for an audience of one, what’s the point really? And if it’s all an illusion then one is only doing it for oneself and selling work isn’t a problem and money is also a mirage. As an art writer in this context, you can find yourself becoming something of a regular (almost daily) therapist to this clever creator. Art, and the art world, with its wide spectrum of creative efforts and personalities, presents a microcosm of the wider panorama of this dazzling, constructed humanity. This God-like mentality regularly fires ideas at you, and composing careful opinions is a way of sussing out a path through this intractable reality. Sometimes the demon is brilliant but lazy—clearly most of the work at the Dia Foundation has been created by one entity, working their way through string, zinc squares, holes in the ground, holes in the ceiling, boxes in all materials and bands of color. Other times they are absurdly singular and can conjure up in a gesture all the emotions of what it means to be a human being in a single object, like Tracey Emin and her bed, something that no one had thought of, but can never think of again.

So there is this volley of thoughts directed at me like a machine firing tennis balls in all directions. Me, I sit here trying to decipher them, and occasionally bat one back. One tries to sort it all out through one’s avowed profession, maker of objects of no apparent use-value. Art is simply the decorative instinct applied to the fundamental problems of existence. In the context of a lifelong conversation with philosophy, I see it as the only possible profession, a weird niche market of activity devised by myself and Mr. Descartes. But what does this malevolent genius want me to do? Do I supplicate them so that the tennis balls slow and become much easier to return, or do I turn my back and let them go everywhere? At this point, after assessing the opponent’s serve, I think I’ve almost seen everything. The writing serves as careful notes in these therapy sessions with God, and the art becomes an anchor in an effort to sum up some sense of one’s personal space in a meandering conversation, clearly meant to impart some wisdom but with so many digressions it becomes impossible to keep the facts straight. While these endless interior dialogues assure me of my own existence, as Descartes promised they would, the goal would be to go one step further and to accomplish the much older precept to actually “know myself.”

WILLIAM CORWIN is a sculptor and curator based in New York City. His work has been reviewed in the Brooklyn Rail, ARTnews, Sculpture Magazine, Artcritical, and Art Monthly. In 2018, he organized a Cyborg at the Gazelli Art House in London. He currently teaches with the Meet the Met program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hosts a program on Clocktower Radio.

Transmission \ Translation

BY JOAN WALTEMATH

To my mind it’s significant that the Rail’s current Guest Editor, Tom McGlynn is soliciting a response from artist/writers on being an artist who writes about other artists’ works. This is not a consideration that usually receives a lot of attention, especially in the recent past when a theoretical approach dominated art writing and the credibility of an objective viewpoint had not yet been debunked. Often a deeper look into the relationship between an artist and what they have written on art takes place either at the end of a long career or posthumously, or only for familiar names. Soliciting a response from artists on their unique, but not unusual position as art writers is also timely, as the movement to greater transparency and rethinking of modes and methods is on our horizon at the moment. In so far as it betrays an awareness of the deeper insights into both the artist/subject and the artist/writer’s works, a look into the world of artist/art writers courts the limits of subjectivity.

What an artist chooses to write about a given artist and how this subject is approached, often brings foundational and obscure interests and influences to light with a passion. At times I find I only understand another artist’s works through the eyes of yet another artist, someone who sees what is at stake and is also deeply invested in the issues or formal concerns found in that work. Yet, most of what inspires me about the question of artist/writers has to do with the undertaking to make the felt sense comprehensible through a translation into language.

When I started writing about works of art I began with a notebook and a pencil in front of something in which I
felt I had seen a deeper layer of significance operating. I had no spoken language with which to talk about what I was experiencing in my looking, so I carefully tracked my entry point into a work and wrote down exactly what I was seeing. How did the light fall on the surface? Being primary for my own work, naturally it was the first thing I would see, even though for most artists this is not such a consideration. What did the materials communicate to me? What sensations was I receiving through my skin? Being an artist means having the need to express oneself in certain ways and through certain materials, and maybe we could say that this is our own particular language. Writing about art for me has meant expanding my ability to understand other languages, though certainly in thought my own language naturally forms the core of my point of departure.

I observe how I can navigate through, around, and deeper into certain works and not others. When does the composition lead me clearly to the subject? What is it that is functioning to keep me in there for a longer period of time and allow the work to unfold, or is the unfolding itself that captured my attention?

I began to notice that many paintings had a kind of invisible place that I came to call the breathing space; it often took quite a long time to find it, but then it was clear the formal structure resonated to its movement. The dark shadow in the el Greco portrait at the Frick is a prime example. After writing for a while I would have several pages filled with observations about what I was seeing. Inevitably thoughts and associations would come to mind as I wrote, so I carefully noted these as well, considering the work as having led me to these thoughts as I left myself to roam free sitting or standing in the vicinity of another artist’s efforts.

As a young artist I was fascinated by pictorial devices in the works of the past and would search until I could determine the mechanism that was giving me the information I had obtained from looking. It never occurred to me to try to articulate anything at that point; I came to think of these long sessions of reading works of art, mostly paintings actually, as a kind of transmission. One could also designate it, for those who can only find credibility in scientific terms, as a kind of osmosis, or a process akin to mirror neurons that we now have from neurology.

Through the careful observation of how something is made, we glean another level of understanding of an artist’s intent. For a reading of the nuances of making art, it’s hard to match the informed vision of an artist’s lifelong experiences. This is not to privilege the artist’s point of view nor should we privilege the non-artist’s. Scholars, poets, and other writers who bring their unique formal experience in their respective disciplines to art writing garner insights of another nature and bring to art perspectives an artist would not likely be seeing. Works of art set a stage for the complex dance of “knowing” and “being” where we can slowly begin to perceive how our thought not only informs but determines what we see.

JOAN WALTEMATH is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She writes on art and has served as an editor-at-large of the Brooklyn Rail since 2001. She has shown extensively and her work is in the collections of the Harvard University Art Museums, the National Gallery of Art, the Hammer Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. She is currently the Director of the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at MICA.

I Run My Hand Over the Race

BY TANEY RONIGER

The words in my title belong to Robert Irwin. I came across them years ago in Lawrence Weschler’s much-loved book of dialogues with the artist, and since then they’ve become something of a personal shibboleth. Referring to his technique for placing bets at the track (a second vocation in which he enjoyed great success), Irwin relayed that, after carefully studying the statistics for each horse, he would forget all the facts, close his eyes, and “run his hand over the race.” I don’t think I’ve encountered a better metaphor for tacit thinking: the kind of thinking we do unconsciously, without language, with and through our bodies. Nor can I think of better words to describe what I do, both in my work as an artist and in my art writing. For in both—and indeed in looking at art, itself a kind of art—my body is my primary instrument and most trusted informant.

Hands and the haptic sense are behind everything I do. It’s not just that I make things with my hands; I think and see with them too, if only internally, intramuscularly. But there’s another sense in which touch is fundamental to my work. In fact what all artists have in common, be they object makers or not, is that our work touches other bodies: transmitted as pulsations originating inside us, it enters and activates the flesh of others—sometimes, if we’re lucky, long after we’re dead. Rather than calling ourselves makers of objects, then, we might better say we craft corporeal experiences. We artists have our hands all over the place.

In the making of form in my studio, my hand demands a strict departure from language. It’s not that I want to dismiss it forever (God knows I’ll need it later, lest my world be reduced to chaos); it’s just that my instrument
won’t fully show up otherwise. To give the latter a good tuning, some kind of physical movement is usually necessary: the twirling of a coin, a bit of pacing back and forth. Gradually, the I who thinks recedes and a greater intelligence emerges, articulating itself in visual rhythms and relationships. Qualities announce themselves—a sharp edge is needed here—often with an authority that takes me by surprise. Problems emerge and are resolved, all piloted by my knowing viscera. Concepts will show up later as a concession to reason, but I know the work’s real content is implicit in its form.

This insistence on implicit content is something I bring to the work of others. Knowing that the kind of empathetic encounter I want will be violated if I’m assailed by concepts (and how often does an overeager gallerist deliver exactly this?), I avoid all explanatory literature until after a thorough viewing. Apprehension of the whole always comes first: the mood and atmosphere of the space, the smell of the materials. As my eye runs its hand along the contours of each work, my body registers new rhythms as I entrain with their qualities. Mental associations arise and are not dismissed, but are rather folded into my sensory experience. If I’m sufficiently moved, the shape of my consciousness shifts a little. If it shifts a lot I know I want to write about the work.

If my making and looking are done in the absence of language, the writing component of what I do of course cannot be. But here too my body maintains sovereignty. Since the act of reading is a somatic as well as mental event, here too I am crafting an experience for another body. Rather than what they will denote, then, it’s what the words want to do that comes first. What kind of rhythms and pacing; what structure and tone; what verbal atmosphere will transmit a felt sense of the work’s presence? Then there’s the aural texture, the chromatic resonance, of each word. And just as artists use negative space to give shape to form, what will be left unsaid is established early on, bounding my piece with its silent presence along the borders. Arriving last is the work’s explicit content, which is delivered, as it must be, in discursive prose. But the reader’s body knows better than to fall for this ruse. If I’m successful, her viscera will flicker with signals that have travelled all the way from the body of the artist, through her work into my flesh, on from me into the flesh of my words, and finally out from them into the electrochemistry of her organism. For I trust that the reader, too, consciously or not, will be running her own knowing hand over the race.

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1. Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees, University of California Press, 1982.

TANEY RONIGER is an artist, writer, and frequent Rail contributor.

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I worship twin gods, the image and the text. They are like two chemical elements, irreducible to one another. Words calcify meaning, while images abide by a logic of infinite growth. An image can contain the universe, as in a spiral carved upon a stone. Looking at such an image, I often think, what more can you say? But of course, such pure and sacred images are too vast to hold comfortably in our minds. We require the narrowing, petrifying poetry of the text to balance the mystifying poetry of the image. Art always negotiates this alchemy of the image and the text. Poetry brings image to the text; painting brings text to the image. A good metaphor is a magic spell that binds image and word to cast a meaning greater than the sum of its parts.

Writing art criticism is an attempt to discover the text behind a work of art, but also to grease the boundary between the two. Drawing and writing are siblings. If I compose art criticism by hand, the activity can slip back into drawing. Sure enough, the words drip slow and uncertain from my pen as I attempt to write this piece, but in the margins of the page, images unfold. I draw a gaping mouth with shining lips, a curled tongue searching past its gate of teeth for flavors of knowledge. Beyond its reach, two serpents rise in a twisted column, a double helix of bodies pressing hard to become a single strand. Isn’t it interesting how you have now seen these images yourself (I hope), even though I have not shown them to you? You have consumed a text and made your own image. In describing a work of art, the critic in effect remakes it. Then it is remade again in the mind of the reader. I love this exercise.

Criticism also lets me appreciate my distance from another artist’s work that I will never really have from my own. It is not an objective view by any means, but it is an arm’s length at least, far enough that I am not breathing its smell in the morning. I hope this position is equally helpful for the artist I am writing about. If it were me on the receiving end, I would be relieved to discover that an “outside view” of my work exists at all. Like all artists, perhaps, I suffer from an anxiety that the work will fail to translate outside of me—what if this is all just taking place inside my head? It would be nice to know whether it is concrete enough to hold analysis and interpretation;
solid enough to be dipped into currents of history and myth by another hand. When I am asked whether I’m a writer or an artist, I sometimes vacillate in answering. In truth I am uncomfortable declaring either title, but my obsession lies in reconnecting the two. In the beginning, before the world became so woefully specialized, those we now call artists and writers fulfilled the same role—as receivers of visions. I am a seeker of visions, at least, following the image and the text in their spiral confluence.

ALEX A. JONES is a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.

Milling Stone
BY MIRA DAYAL

The way a review’s argument takes shape is not dissimilar to the way an artwork’s premise comes about. Selected from the lot of pebbles-cum-premises, the rock is given some time in the tumbler, from which it emerges smooth, clear, yet with enough of an edge to feel distinctive. The process is subtractive. See just how much is enough, at what point the structure no longer holds. Get close, attend to the mechanics. (Subtraction is still subject to a certain order of operations; citations and multiplications may be executed first. Less may be positioned within a bracketed expression.)

The tumbler holds more than this one stone. Other mineral clusters rise and fall, too. Water is the matrix within which all is shaped, the gentle carrier, persistent agitator, temporary container. Here it is more acidic than basic, its bite amplified by a bit of grit—productive friction, critique, editing, and conversation. Use rougher particles at the start, finer grains toward the end. Nothing happens to a rock in a vacuum. The relative forces, conditions, and interactions of these elements (rocks, water, grit), will shift the target stone’s final shape.

This rock is not unlike its cousins. They may have been formed in different places and times, and they may be destined for different ends, but they share literal elements and are influenced by each other’s presence in the matrix. (Some can bruise others.) The target may later be confused with or taken out alongside its twin, or another rock might beckon instead. The grit affects the whole group, but it works differently on each candidate. A few lose their distinctions. The stone from the river looks pale green now, the one from the mountain clouded blue. Both were previously gray.

A precursor to this process is the search for rocks to tumble—inevitably frustrating yet necessary and usually pleasurable. A wide, deep search helps one clarify and defend a certain focus. Not every rock will perform well in the tumbler. Look for pre-existing lines of fracture (rocks have the appearance of solidity but are often porous or flaky). Many will be structurally compromised to a fault; others will reveal just a hairline crack, which could be fruitful to test.

Plenty of sources index the best stones for tumbling, from fancy jasper to tiger’s eye. Read them, but experiment with lesser-known stones—see what you can make of and learn from them. Consider your overall roster. Combining varieties, you might demonstrate differences between minerals; tumbling a number of the same, you could illuminate internal variegations. A pleasing alternative is to exceed the category altogether, dropping in, say, petrified wood. Occasionally, throw in a stone that seems to be a dud. Over time, it may prove worthwhile and affect what you tumble next.

Check on the tumbler frequently. The stone removed early stays jagged, but the stone kept in too long becomes precious. Clean the drum periodically. Don’t let the mud settle. All those traces of excess will clog the system. Things harden.

All of this takes time, hundreds of rotations, so much energy. (Another reason to choose all of these ingredients carefully and maintain your machine.) But if it were otherwise, the exercise would be far less rewarding. You’ll give more consideration to a rock you’re tumbling than to any other. Still, I’ve found that some stones—works or ideas—ask not to be run through the tumbler. Their intrigue could be compromised by its turns and extractions; they might have to be broken down to fit; they might benefit from a different treatment altogether. Leave some stones unturned.

MIRA DAYAL is an artist, critic, and curator based in New York.

Writing on Art and Muscle Memory
BY LOUIS BLOCK

The postscript to Werner Herzog’s Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2010) focuses on a population of albino crocodiles thriving in a tropical reptile park near the paleolithic paintings of Chauvet cave. Herzog suggests that the
mutant crocodiles are born of radioactive runoff from a nearby powerplant, and he imagines the creatures climbing the river valley to reach Chauvet cave to stare at the ancient paintings, looking “back into the abyss of time” as modern archaeologists do. Is this just a dalliance with science fiction, or is there truth to the idea that the crocodiles, with their primordial gaze, might be perfect critics?

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Though there are certainly advantages to writing about art as an artist, I am mostly concerned with the challenges, chief among which is the gulf between sensation and language. It is not that artists are the only ones who struggle with this scarcity of words to describe the nuances of the felt world, but that they have been taught—in opposition to other fields—to transfer their sensory experience back into the sensory world without the mediation of language. Between input and output are fuzzy concepts and considerations: composition, alchemy, color—words that only hint at processes reliant on intuition, memory, and feeling.

Face to face with another artist’s output, it seems natural to employ techniques learned in the studio to force different viewpoints. There is a sort of acrobatic nature to these actions: squinting to clarify color, leaning in over the security line at a museum to see detail, or twisting to view the composition upside down. Often, I find myself pressing my face against gallery walls in an attempt to glimpse a sliver of the back of a canvas, knowing that it holds secrets to the work’s production. Some paintings, overly saturated in the midday sun, beg to be returned to on a rainy day, while others disappear in the gloom. This set of tools, gathered through direct experience in art-making, might seem to present an advantageous position for the artist as critic, but sometimes they only succeed in revealing distractions, passages in a piece that destroy its illusion, or drown out the rest of the composition with their visual noise. It was only after minutes of scanning the surface of an Agnes Martin painting, for example, that I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity betraying the careful lateral movements of the composition. Now, I noticed a tiny orange drip, its downward velocity bet

What brings me back to a painting is often a feeling, like a nagging muscle memory, of wanting not only to see, but to sense the painting’s facture. At the Met, I always return to Degas’s Portrait of a Woman in Gray (c. 1865), and the strange way in which the sitter’s black scarf seems to dominate the picture. Looking in closely, to the point where the weave of the canvas is visible and catching against the streaks of thinned oil, I find my wrist twitching with the desire to repeat the artist’s marks, anticipating the slight give of the fabric against the brushstroke, the soft friction of the bristles as they run out of pigment. It follows that my eyes’ movements are bound by this black shape that blends into the woman’s bonnet and resembles a figure holding an umbrella against the wind or wielding a scythe high in the air. Other portions of the painting seem secondary—the sketched-in right hand, the unfinished left eye—the whole composition just scaffolding for this burst of gesture. The tugging at my wrist lasts well after I leave the picture, each tightening of my fingers against the imaginary brush pulling the scarf back into focus.

Maybe this tugging sense could be written as tropism (from the Greek tropos, “turning”), which Nathalie Sarraute has used to describe those movements that “slip through us on the frontiers of consciousness in the form of undefinable, extremely rapid sensations. They hide behind our gestures, beneath the words we speak, the feelings we manifest, are aware of experiencing, and able to define.” Thus sensations felt in front of artworks cannot be accurately transcribed, but exist as latent perceptions, not quite memories, not quite desires, always beneath what is tangible. The challenge might then be to extend that chain of intangibles backward and forward, to place oneself halfway between the artist’s sensation and that of the reader. To say, of Degas, that the anxious gesture of the scarf leads to a larger truth about the sitter, allows us to see past her amiable expression to consider the tense creases of fabric at her armpit, the way her fingers seem to nervously grasp at her dress, and the overall stiffness of her pose.

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There is a fiction at the core of Herzog’s postscript. The crocodiles are not the result of radioactive mutation—they were actually shipped from Louisiana and are, in fact, alligators. But suppose they were to climb up to the cave and find the paintings. Imagine the creatures looking up at the cave walls. Alligator has its root in the Latin lacertum, the muscular part of the arm. What sensations would be transmitted to those bodies lacking pigment, that pure primordial muscle, traveling beneath the anist paintings across the bones and bear tracks of the cave? And would it manifest in some slithering, sprawling trace in the mud?

LOUIS BLOCK is a painter based in Brooklyn.
Artists and Writers

BY BRANDT JUNCEAU

Authors say that writing sometimes writes itself, notably when their characters seem to speak out in their own voice. Visual artists claim a pristine silence for their own, which they prize, eye and hand alone together gladly, no words. The word that breaks that silence is often recriminatory, and resented. It came upon a scene uninvited, that should not have been witnessed. Words, they say, compromise sight, and the silent work of the eye.

Some of that is true enough. But for me writing is practice, without distinction between word and sight. I write my way to my work and I work my way to words, performing both tasks with one instrument, as if it has a front and back. The task hones both faces. They are both windows.

Artists don’t admit how often a word soothes and liberates a tangle that won’t undo, in which the eye finds no shape. The dichotomy of sight and word is real, but it is as much a terrain as a divide. It may be visited. When artists write on art, they travel between silence and sound. Coming from there, they would be translators here. Translators perhaps more than authors.

Translation reveals the subject, like an X-ray, or turning on a raking light. What is reportage, or critique, to discovery? To see more than I could see before? I am, no exaggeration, mad for that.

BRANDT JUNCEAU is a sculptor, currently teaching at the New York Studio School.

Of Masonry and Shadows

BY STEVEN PESTANA

I keep a modest library of books on the subject of artists’ writings. I began acquiring it as a young artist in high school with books like Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912) and The Diaries of Paul Klee (1964), hoping to absorb their lessons on synesthesia and abstraction. The compendium Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art (eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 1996) followed during my time as an art history student. Growing as both a visual artist and an art scholar in my own right, I was particularly drawn to the writings’ emphasis on creative intention. I found my kinfolk in these artist-writers’ eloquent, idealistic words.

I also noticed that their writings would gravitate towards certain areas. To name a few: aesthetic theory (manifestos and the like); art criticism and counter-criticism; something like philosophy; language experiments along the lines of concrete poetry; descriptions akin to narrative; and, oddly enough, instructions. But don’t be fooled by this tidy schema. These artist-writer-critics were almost never traditional in thought or format.

As visual artists, there isn’t much pressure on us to be conventionally methodical or scientific. In fact, in my practice, I welcome fanciful syntheses. It’s an approach that artists can share with poets, philosophers, and fellow speculative travelers—moments where divergent ideas can dance together around a bonfire of correspondence theories of truth. Just on the periphery of the flames however, the surroundings can quickly fall into shadows. It’s in that darkness where the writerly flashes behind my eyes catch the light. Meaning is valuable to me, and must, at the very least temporarily, be anchored to something—a word, an image, so I appreciate the utility of a discrete and robust concept in both my art and criticism. I’m not referring to the deliberately ephemeral concepts that might come to mind when musing on the post-Duchampian artistic enterprise. No, the concepts that bear on my writing and art making are object-like, dense, and consume (imaginary) physical spaces of varying sizes. They become architectonic, revealing or obscuring sightlines onto the world; perceptually tactile but hidden from sight, for better or worse. I like the solidity of that idea as a counterpoint to dematerialization. It draws us into a masonry of relationships and interrelationships and poses a potent challenge to solipsism, that tattered scavenger always sniffing at the trails of Western civilization.

So much of critique involves persuasion, winning over the reader (you) to a certain viewpoint or conclusion, usually the author’s. The art object, too, tries to convince you of its own authority, with all its contextual garments and finery. But what if our goal was not to evaluate or promote the quality, relevance, success or failure of an artwork, and its principles? In 1964, Susan Sontag posited an “erotics of art” precisely to address these sorts of questions: “The function of criticism should be to show how [an artwork] is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.”
On the Make

BY MARK BLOCH

An intriguing proposal, but I would suggest a variation. Rather than "show" or reveal anything at all, as though the artwork-document performs a quasi-legislative function, the artist-critic might instead adopt a mode of reintroducing the flickering shadows at its edges, a gradient of silence dissolving into its ontological horizon. Just on the other side of Sontag’s erotics, through the firmament of the object’s authority, an ekphrastic vista of oblivion awaits. We will never fully know certain things, and this is okay.

1. To quote conceptual artist and critic Mal Blochner, “It is important not to confuse what is referred to as ‘conceptual’ with the artist’s ‘intention’.”

STEVEN PESTANA is a visual artist and writer living in Brooklyn. He holds an MFA in Digital Media from Rhode Island School of Design and a BA in Art History from New York University.

I have often felt I was crazy as an artist who doesn’t feel the need to make art. I’ve received so much of it over the years I don’t care if I ever see or make another image. That is why I write. What is there to do but ponder the work of other artists as a point of departure? I have come to view writing about others as my latest work of performance art. The goal is not to critique but to describe and to make associations for my own edification, which I then share with others. The learning curve is steep and gratifying, and receiving feedback makes the end of the process as collaborative as the research I do in the beginning to understand the artist.

I consider Marcel Duchamp the most important artist of the second half of the 20th century and Ray Johnson the most important artist of this century, one he didn’t live to see. Duchamp convinced me to eschew all art objects and my friend Ray taught me to chew up the art market to embrace the moment. This has put me in a lousy position as a career artist. Sometimes I catch myself and think, “Oh shit, I forgot to make the art.”

My own practice as an artist originally gravitated to “mail art,” because it was a perfect strategy for giving one’s work away. I liked the ephemeral look and gift-economy-potlatch-philosophy of mail art, which seemed to walk the walk of egalitarian, democratic ideals I claimed to care about. I stayed for its networking and community aspects—a lifestyle or permanent performance art piece—not just a way to crank out tchotchkes. I switched to online activity in 1989 for the same reason. There, in that text-only world of teleconferencing, I like to think I found my voice via trial and error interactions with other people, some with similar interests, some different. In those days there were more scientists online than artists.

I didn’t develop a love of Dada or the underground or the politics I have because I was a mail artist, it worked the other way around. Duchamp referred to some artists in his time as “stupid as a painter.” Though I’ve never actually seen anyone use this term in print, I still take Duchamp’s word for it that this was an expression, or as he clarified it: “in love with the smell of turpentine.” I always thought the art most people were making was sophisticatedly stupid and deceptively simple-minded, reinforcing my disbelief about the public reception to Duchamp a century earlier. Few seemed willing to change their approach. Sure, they quoted Duchamp, but they kept making crap. And by crap I mean they kept making anything at all.

I don’t mean I don’t see work I like. I don’t mean that people in the art world are not sometimes fun and interesting to talk to. And I don’t mean there aren’t some great artists out there (both within and outside of mail art circles). I don’t think I am better than anyone else. In fact, I couldn’t begin to make the art most artists make. I hereby declare you all better artists than me. Nor do I consider myself an exceptional writer on art. Perhaps my harsh attitudes derive from an anxiety of being naïve and uninformed—including fears I am alone in such feelings. Those attitudes inform what and how I write and what I do occasionally make. I carry around a sketchbook to write and scribble and draw in constantly, attempting to make sense of things. Meanwhile I seek out collectors, publishers, and other big shots as much as the next guy, hoping to be bestowed with prosperity as they bless my work. So I’m a total hypocrite. Call me a hypocritic.

Duchamp spent the last 20 years of his life working on l’Étant donnés (1946 - 1966), revealed upon his death in 1968, and never quit art after all. He checkmated us with that and his best intentions in his 1957 speech, The Creative Act. Meanwhile Ray Johnson’s ideal to invent art that would be seen whizzing by on trains by coyotes, not people, takes on new meaning after his own suicidal endgame and an art press that romanticized his “hermit” status. I call that exaggeration the ultimate centerpiece of his very social anti-art form. In one of our many phone conversations Ray assured me that he saw no difference between his collages and his mailings “or the nice wobbly drawings I do when I’m driving through Ohio.” He told me “a letter from Jim Rosenquist and a kid in Nebraska” are “equal as activity.”
In the end, like everyone else, I’m led around by my brain chemistry through a Jungian collective unconscious populated by impossible archetypes. It’s why I sometimes think it would be fun to paint like Pollock or Rothko in their “genetic moment” before Abstract Expressionism. But mostly I think the best thing to “make” would be a new theory of life that the truly living could adhere to with a modicum of integrity.

MARK BLOCH is a writer, public speaker and pan-media artist from Ohio living in Manhattan since 1982. His archive of Mail/Network/Communication Art is part of the Downtown Collection at the Fales Library of New York University.

What Lives in the Work

BY COLIN EDGINGTON

What it is to see is not already defined, and our eyes can thus remain open upon an infinity of views, of sights.

—Luce Irigaray

Making came first and then writing. It began with images and is how I learned to see, not just the external world but the clouded interiority of my self. What drew me into the world of images was an initial experience in the darkroom. The first print I made was the physical conjuring up of a scene that until then only existed in my mind’s eye. Through exposure with the enlarger, I brought from thin air an image into a kind of permanent state on the paper. That experience was (and for some still is) a common one: the excitement of seeing an image appear in the print as one agitates the developer. Darkroom magic. Of course when my image came up, it was bad: muddy, too dark, the framing askew on the paper. That experience was (and for some still is) a common one: the excitement of seeing an image appear in the print as one agitates the developer. Darkroom magic. Of course when my image came up, it was bad: muddy, too dark, the framing askew on the paper. It was the beginning of a long evolving form of knowledge through craft. But that magic for me was not located in the chemical process working with the light-sensitive silver. Looking back now, I realize what it was then: the latent image. The presence of something there, its potential emergence and intrinsic action, its existing invisibly, is what truly struck me.

The process of making is one of constant push and pull where an openness to the unexpected cohabits with original and shifting intentions for the work. Craft, and what it can offer, designates a certain discourse that I often look to in order to broaden or deepen my understanding. As such, I converse with it and slowly a collection of forms, concepts, thoughts, and feelings begin to round out what the work is. An artist compiles a language uniquely their own, built from previous experiences, gained knowledge, intuition, and a compendium of resources and techniques. This is always present in a work of art whether obvious or not. To make is to become sensitive to the invisible and immaterial existences that are imbued in the works of others.

Each time I respond to another’s work it is a return to the beginning, of developing the latency that lives in the work. In this way I allow myself to experience the unfolding of forms, of space, of intent, and of meaning in total. To approach it openly is to be receptive to its message or reality, as a conversation between mind and object, or eye and image. From that, something arises that only the maker and viewer can make known. It is a conversation because I, in the end, speak back. My experiences, knowledge, memories, and idiosyncratic vision inform my response to the work. This kind of symbiosis opens up the possibility of an understanding of the innate properties between head and hand, concept and material; it prep the writer for a kind of slow looking and slow thinking that draws out from some latent state what the work actually does.

COLIN EDGINGTON is a visual artist and writer currently living and working in the greater New York area. He was born in Denver, Colorado but grew up in Central New Mexico, a place that has shaped (and continues to shape) his practice and understanding of the world.

A Real Connection

BY HOVEY BROCK

Communicating why another artist’s work matters—to me, or anyone else—forces me to flex the same muscles that I use to discern the germ within the husk of my painting habit. Art, if it deserves the name, demands that I meet it on its own terms, where I least expect it: at the margins, in the interstices, in the places I thought I knew and consequently ignored. My acid test for whether I have made a real encounter with art is the surge of energy I feel when I have connected with it. In both my painting and my writing, this revelation comes through small increments that on rare occasions bloom into a new way of being in the world.

In the spring of my freshman year at college, I experienced just such a flowering, which cemented my ambition to become a painter. I had the good fortune to take
a painting class with Elizabeth Murray. She had been pushing me, with the formidable force of her personality, to work on a painting well past the time I thought I should have been finished with it. For about a month, I had been steadily building up the surface of this abstract painting, playing a little game with myself in making a map of random shapes with only three colors: red, green, and black. One Saturday, when I should have been out enjoying the good May weather, I was in the classroom alone, working on a passage in the center of the painting where the three colors were jostling each other in a complex interface. At a node where the three colors came together, I suddenly felt a stream of energy, like a puff of wind, pushing against my face. It felt like a pricking sensation on my upper lip. The closer I came to the node, the stronger the sensation. I then noticed other nodes of energy in the painting, all in places where I had built up boundaries connecting the three colors. It dawned on me this painting had come alive in some way, and its energy was arcing across the gap that separated us.

I experienced another kind of flowering when I reviewed Joan Snyder’s paintings for an exhibition titled Sub Rosa, at Franklin Parrasch Gallery in 2015. I had followed Snyder’s work since my college days. It was a known quantity to me, or so I thought. To this day, rereading my review, I feel a pilot light—to borrow Nabokov’s metaphor in his essay on Lolita—reigniting the sensations that built up over the course of writing that piece. I remember the space, a converted townhouse on the Upper East Side, that, unlike the sterility of a typical Chelsea white box gallery, lent an intimacy to the paintings. There were the paintings with their eloquent surfaces, bone-white grounds dominated by Snyder’s signature “roses,” vortices of alizarin and deep violet painted with thick, wet strokes. And there was the catalog copy written by Snyder, discussing the death and mourning of an unnamed loved one. In it, she explains that the Latin phrase Sub Rosa literally means “under the rose,” said flower placed above ancient Roman partygoers as an injunction to silence about whatever happened during the festivities. Themes of mourning and celebration in Snyder’s paintings and words created an affect so powerful, so true to the absurdity of being a sentient being that loves and dies, that my writing was an effortless transfer of thought to the page. Again, here was an energy transfer telling me that Snyder’s work had connected with my world on a level I would have never anticipated.

In our consumer economy, it’s all too easy to fall prey to the spectacle of art as entertainment. But the point of art is not to distract us but to charge us: to reveal the unexpected, to take us to a place we haven’t been before, to communicate what cannot be articulated in any other way. By that definition, art is a rare thing. I have only felt that energetic connection a handful of times, but that’s enough.

HOVEY BROCK is an artist and has an MFA from the School of Visual Arts Art Practice program. He is a frequent contributor to Artseen.

A Correspondence With Motherwell

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

My initial contact with artists’ writings happened in the beginning stages of learning to paint while keeping a journal of notes and drawings in the process. I was in my early 20s and living in Santa Barbara, California. It was the 1970s and I recall seeing an exhibition at LACMA where two large paintings from Robert Motherwell’s “Open” series (circa 1969–70) were on display. I was deeply moved by these works and decided to write the artist a letter. Upon completion, there was the question as to where to send it. Being cognizant of the fact that the poet Frank O’Hara had been the curator of Motherwell’s exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art some years earlier, I decided to send my letter to MoMA in care of Frank O’Hara.

A week later a hand-written letter arrived from Motherwell, thanking me for my comments on his work and inviting me to come to New York to meet him. I immediately purchased a used car for $250, then contacted a friend in Brooklyn to confirm that my companion and I (and my dog) would be able to sleep on his front room floor. The following day we set off from Santa Barbara to begin our drive across the country.

We managed to arrive at the Brooklyn Bridge eight days later. It was 8:30 a.m.

I called Motherwell on a pay phone and let him know we had arrived. His wife, the artist Helen Frankenthaler, answered the phone in a pleasant voice, then called her husband “Bob” to the phone. “We’ve been expecting you,” he said. We spoke briefly before arranging to meet at their home on the Upper East Side the next morning at 11 a.m.

During our lengthy conversation, I discovered much about Motherwell I did not know. In addition to being a painter, he was a scholar, an editor, and a writer. What intrigued me about his point of view as a writer was his dual commitment to writing letters on a consistent basis and his ability to work in relation to scholarly research as shown in his well-known classic, The Dada Painters and Poets (1951). Secondly, despite his ongoing allegiance to Abstract Expressionism,
my impression was that he functioned as a painter with a highly independent mind. His historically romantic orientation was closer to artists from southern Europe—Spain, in particular—than to anything conceivably American. He may have been “The Homely Protestant” by chance only. Nevertheless, when Motherwell wrote about aspects of his own work or on the work of other artists he admired, he made an all-out effort to avoid academic language and superfluous editing. He wanted his voice to be apparent, that he might be heard directly in relation to his experience. I find a certain resemblance between Motherwell and the writings of the French critic Max Jacob or even Apollinaire, who sought to make their experiences credible through a discreet use of linguistic constraints. In each case, their writings contain a credibility wherein the texture of the language gives the presence of the painting under discussion a persistently heightened effect.

In addition to reviews, essays, and interviews, Motherwell was a great correspondent and would often employ written letters as a means to argue a position. His two letters on Surrealism (1978 and 1979) sent to Edward Henning, Chief Curator of Modern Art, at the Cleveland Museum of Art, are a clear example. While the issues addressed in these letters would in most cases deserve a major essay, Motherwell was content to keep them in the lesser context of a correspondence. A clear example would be his letter to Henning, dated 18 October 1978, that begins: “What I’m going to say is … something that is as complicated and subtle as Proust’s novel and, to be truthful, ought to be written with as many subordinate, qualifying clauses.”

Numerous other letters are replete with this sort of collegial candor, written with magnificent ease and subtle prowess. This could easily become a major research project unto itself, but is not the point of the current project. Rather I would like to suggest by way of Motherwell that whatever we do as “artist writers,” the source of our writing will most likely depend on a desire to communicate, that is to present what we know both honestly and pervasively. Carefully conceived writing is an important manifestation of how artists think whether inside or outside the medium they normally work. To incite a critical edge in this process through a sense of well-being is what opens the dialogue.

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1. Motherwell titled his 1948 painting The Homely Protestant (which he later commented was a rough analogue for himself) based on a Surrealist operation that involved picking a phrase at random from James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake (1939).


ROBERT C. MORGAN is an art critic, historian, and painter. He is Professor Emeritus at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and currently teaches at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Morgan is the author of Conceptual Art: An American Perspective (McFarland, 1994) and Art into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art (Cambridge, 1996). He served as co-curator (with Hyun Soojung) for the exhibition, Robert Barry, Not Personal, Gallery Shilla, Republic of Korea, 2018.

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UNTITLED
(On amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds)

BY SADIE REBECCA STARNES

Where does the writing begin?
Where does the painting begin?

—Roland Barthes

Where does the writer end and the artist begin? From Arabic calligraphy to the avant-garde, the Tang dynasty to Twombly, there has long been a graphic intimacy between our arts—in form as much as practice. Developing in parallel, visual art birthed our most beautiful writing systems. The Korean alphabet, Hangul, imitates the positions of the mouth when pronouncing each letter’s sound, while the Chinese character for rain falls. As the technology of writing was further abstracted for the sake of expediency, so too was it abstracted for enlightenment. The “drunk” and “crazy” monks of 800 BC China were among the earliest to create illegible calligraphy, a practice further refined in the Japanese Hitsuzendo—a search for Zen through brush. Centuries later, under Dada and the post-structuralists, asemic writing enjoyed a revival, reaching its apex in the late 1980s with artists like Xu Bing and Luigi Serafini. Not surprisingly, this was just as handwriting and cursive began its decline, and a decade after painting had been pronounced dead.

Born between these extinctions, I could never quite accept this mass turn from the tactile and, as we’re forced further into screen virtuality during this pandemic, I want to linger on that most graphic connection between artist-writer, that hyphenated gap: its function as both barrier and bond, fissure and filling, a way of showing and telling some way forward or, more accurately, between.

“Make a loop: you produce a sign; but shift it forward, your hand still resting there on the receptive surface, you generate a writing.”

—Barthes

In an essay on the French artist Bernard Réquichot, Roland Barthes tells the story of an archaeologist’s translation of “graphisms” arranged along the rim of an ancient Mycenaean jar. These inscriptions were later discovered...
to not be Greek, but *greeking*: a decorative arrangement of loops. As writers, we can sympathize with his eager archaeologist—we *read* a painting, liberally excising meaning from the art, no matter how “illegible.” As artists, we make marks that become those signifiers to be read, whether we intend them to be or not. The artist that writes traverses between this categorization and production of signifiers; as Barthes argued, they are of the selfsame “tissue.”

Though Barthes was a central champion of asemic writing in the 20th century, the first critical study of the field was released only last year. In *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (2019), Peter Schwenger offers a history of the practice, linking modern era pioneers like Barthes, Henri Michaux, and Cy Twombly to lesser-known contemporary practitioners Michael Jacobson, Rosaire Appel, and Christopher Skinner. Pulling examples of asemic writing from a diversity of fields—across contemporary art, comics, notation, and even nature—he demonstrates poet Michael Jacobson’s fitting definition of his field: “Without words, asemic writing is able to relate to all words, colors, and even music, irrespective of the author or the reader’s original language.”

Barthes and Schwenger both present Cy Twombly as the modern godfather of asemic art. A cryptologist trained in the art of code breaking, asemicism was an answer to the artist’s overwrought relationship with semantics. Like a blind piano player, Twombly honed his senses by drawing in the dark, learning to depend on feel, even sound, rather than sight. Like the earliest examples of asemic writing, his paintings formed from a *HitsuZendo* state of “no-mind”—a search for pure gesture over conscious intent. The humming tension of Twombly’s lines against surface, gash against gush of color, created some of his century’s most ecstatic examples of lyrical space, that illumination of interval, *ma*.

Though un-representational, Twombly’s work is nevertheless narrative: his titles are often “leaving” or “returning” from, looping in their Homeric voyage from interval to island, *ma* to Ithaca, across barren expanse. They are just as frequently *Untitled* (only to be followed by a title), to reveal a central concern of Twombly—the space between image and word. Take for instance another island, 1970’s *Untitled* (New York City), wherein he arranges lassoed loops in six pearlescent bands of crayon on gray ground. A massive blackboard painting, this is Twombly’s most iconic asemic piece—his vigorous scrawling creates a palimpsest both rudimentary and revelatory, evoking the ephemerality of childhood and eternity at once. In (un)title and gesture alike, New York reveals the limits of visual and semantic language, as well as their symbiotic relationship.

“How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, and frightening that it does not quite...What we feel most has no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds.”

—Jack Gilbert, “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart”

The contemporary asemic artist, Rosaire Appel, pushes this tension further, causing it to quiver. In *A Collection of See Songs* (2012), inspired by John Cage’s 1969 *Notations*, Appel’s staff lines are landscapes, recalling the “fly-ing-white” cursive of Zhao Mengfu, the tire prints of Rauschenberg and, at their most violent, seismic activity. In their trembling you hear, and even feel her drawings as you read them. Indeed, musicians have spontaneously been able to interpret and perform Appel’s illegible scores, proving an earlier observation by Barthes that painting and drawing’s original gesture was neither figurative nor semantic, but rhythmic.

Like Twombly and Cage before her, Appel is an artist of the interval—the in-between of hearing and listening, reading and seeing, writing and mark making. Her recent *Corona Panic* scores (2020) could not illustrate this intersticio more precisely, or more in time. In a feverish torrent of scribbling across empty music paper, the drawings capture our precarious spring of 2020 in sforzando; arranged in aggressive repetition, sweeping slur, her marks waver between boredom and desperation—across, between, and around the staff lines that (after so many days in quarantine) resemble blinds. Unlike the breathing room Twombly affords, Appel’s notation forces us to *read* left to right, killing time. Reading it now, I hear both the emptied streets of New York and the frenzied corridors of Mt. Sinai, the punctuation of sirens and the sparrows on my parapet. What adjective or images can one use for our new century? What color, note, or tense is it? I can only turn to such post-literate language. At a loss for words, it creates them.

*SADIE REBECCA STARNES* is an artist and writer from North Carolina. Now based in Brooklyn, she has held a number of solo exhibitions between NY and her former home of Tokyo.
Writing about art is like talking about feelings

BY GABY COLLINS-FERNANDEZ

Writing about art is not like making art. Jack Whitten\(^1\) said that a painter's sensibility is the ability to feel, entwined with plasticity, two sides of the same coin. Writing about art is like talking about feelings. It validates interior experiences by externalizing them, helping us understand what is acting upon us and what this means.

My most powerful experiences in the studio come from dancing with control over my tools and ambitions; this allows otherwise unwatched inclinations, emotions, to run the show, to surprise me. A lot of the time, this is enough. Submitting to one’s own power usually is, whatever the circumstance. But there are other, vulnerable times, which are also true, when making art feels futile and lonely, disconnected.

I will never know how my work makes anyone feel, really; as Adrian Piper or Elizabeth Murray will never know how seeing their work makes me feel so filled that my only recourse is to cry.

This is art’s most generous gesture, to be with us, alone. So when I am feeling the acuity of my work’s solitude, its dependence on others who I don’t know, I think about how art endures in personal connections which can’t be controlled. This is good, it prevents artists from too much megalomania or grandiosity; and it prevents anyone else from being able to claim absolute meaning over an art object.

Ideological attempts to assimilate art into provable theories arouse a deep suspicion because they feel like exercises in control, where art objects are deployed as examples, or data. On the other hand, interpretations of art wholly justified by subjective reactions ring gratuitous. As a critical attitude, “People can think whatever they want about the work” deprives us the risk of ever being wrong. What, my studiomate might comment, are the stakes?

Writing about art is a way of treating art as common ground. Because I am an artist, I would like to believe that I can, in fact, communicate in specific terms. When writing, I want to be able to point to what I’m talking about so you don’t just have to take me at my word. Meaning lives and dies and is transferred through what is there, in front of us. Art is language, and language is a skin.

Writing, then, is a way to model touch, but the senses are all tied up in one another. Once in a studio visit, because I had been making paintings of disembodied tongues, the artist David Humphrey gave me a copy of the *Journal of Victorian Literature* which included an essay titled “Pater’s Mouth.” The text, by Matthew Kaiser, takes Walter Pater’s taste seriously as a fully developed faculty Pater used to engage lovers, food, cigarettes, art, the Renaissance, a historical sensibility. Unlike the stomach’s drive to consume and the mind’s dematerialized assessments, the mouth can apply sensorial aptitude as accumulated on and verbalized by the tongue. A tongue can be an ambassador for a whole body. Not the ideal body: tongues have the capacity to gauge particular material conditions, they are desirous for specific things. No: foregrounding taste means rejecting a neutral baseline.

Never has it been clearer than we are what we like. Taste is not a mood board; it is a sense and a skill. It has consequences. When we don’t like something, it’s personal.

For a while, anything seemed like a tongue to me: retinal screens capturing impressions as on taste buds; my mind turning images over like morsels, at risk of being burned or frozen; my fingertips little tongues seeking out flavors. I even ate a tongue in one video work, and tripped over my speech in another. On the tip of the tongue: both reaching for words just outside articulation and the analysis of flavor.

Usually, I write about art when there is something on the tip of my tongue, a cloud of almost-articulation in relation to someone else’s work. Because I’m not vocationally tied to writing, I take my time (years, usually) to figure out if my feelings about something have teeth, which is the only way I will actually do it. Nothing about writing is fluid or fun, and I hate deadlines and often fail to meet them. But the writing helps to make art less alone, it hopes for a community dedicated to charting the drift between feeling and form, form and sensation, sensation and feelings.

I believe that art writing is didactic. Not that it should teach people the eternal meaning of art. The best art writing teaches us how to look and feel and respond, by example. It is not neutral, because it comes from a body which has felt first hand what art can offer. Not a blank slate or an abstraction; the transmission is from one particular sensibility to another. For me, this is the most important thing, giving my faculties over to the sensibility of another, and trying to document what that’s like, with all of my history of making and thinking, art historical references, and sense of being alive, now.


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RASHID JOHNSON
BY AMBER JAMILLA MUSSER

Rashid Johnson, Untitled Anxious Red Drawings Hauser & Wirth

The intensity of Rashid Johnson’s Untitled Anxious Red Drawings is what pulls you in. Each drawing is a mixture of broad kinetic strokes and aggressive overdrawn circles. They feel symptomatic of this collective moment of frenzy and containment. If these are portraits of anxiety, however, it is of the ambient variety rather than personified. These are frantic times defined by uncertainty, emergency, and dread. Worse, there is seldom space for anything else. Johnson’s drawings capture these heightened emotional states, but instead of producing catharsis, they keep viewers hanging in the air. There is nowhere to go: each drawing’s white border points to this claustrophobia as both an emotional and physical situation.

Johnson’s “Anxious Men” series, which premiered at the Drawing Center in 2015, offer a visceral point of comparison. Most of those were made from black soap on white tiles; features such as eyes and mouths were produced through erasure. There are many ways to read these images, but what binds them together is that they are portrayals of anxiety, Johnson’s drawings externalized through personalization. In Untitled Anxious Red Drawings, however, the anxiety is the thing. Johnson is acting as a vessel for its manifestation, but the anxiety is abundant and everywhere.

Interestingly, this channeling of collective mood finds an echo in the portal through which we are invited to view the pieces. These drawings, created during the time of stay-at-home orders are, thus far, only available online on the Hauser & Wirth website. They are for sale (and sold out) with a percentage of the proceeds donated to the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for the World Health Organization. Their ability to speak to our moment, then, is deliberate rather than accidental. This coincidence even finds a cheeky resonance with the downloadable Zoom backgrounds that the gallery has made available. Frustrated with the overload of screen time? Let Johnson’s drawings do the emotional lifting for you. Perhaps this is Instagrammable art for a new era?

But the question of how to translate these drawings for online viewers runs deeper than offering remote emoting. Hauser & Wirth offers many solutions. Their website contains a short film of Johnson drawing. He stands at a wall, moving his entire arm over large sheets of paper, methodically making circles and zigzags for faces that he then draws over. As his voice-over describes his own difficulty processing the loss of in-person social interaction and the uncertainty over what happens next, one can sense the pressure on the paper and even imagine the smell of the oil stick. This offers proximity to the art by introducing viewers to Johnson’s process such that they can feel for its sensual qualities even as they are not otherwise easily perceptible.

The video also, however, offers footage of Johnson’s son playing Für Elise on the piano. These shots remind us that Johnson, too, is at home with family and that there is actually a countertrend to anxiety. Over the song’s soothing melodies, Johnson muses on his son’s dedication to his practice and impressive skills, guiding us toward thinking not only about the state of the world, but multiple strategies of coping.

In juxtaposing anxiety with the intimacy of home, Johnson also gives us ways to think about the drawings within the larger framework of Blackness. Here, the framing is both historical and ecological. Meeting atmospheres of threat with moments of succor is not unusual in the history of Black people. So, alongside portraits of our time, Johnson offers strategies for survival. This is not only in relation to his son, but in his recipe for BBQ, his Spotify playlist, his recommendations for what to read and what to watch. In essence, Johnson is not only channeling anxiety, but offering access to his own tools for survival. It is striking that these are all ways that produce connection to community. If you follow his recipe for ribs, you are (in a way) being fed by Johnson and you are feeling into the larger history of Black survival, perhaps setting anxiety aside for a moment. This, too, is another way to engage with the drawings; anxiety is everywhere, but it cannot be the only thing. While the drawings offer anxiety as spectacle, Johnson also provides a counterbalance—a dash of nurturing.

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SINDY LUTZ
BY WILLIAM CORWIN

Sindy Lutz, Seascapes
Ricco/Maresca Gallery

Being indoors the vast majority of the time causes one to note the weather a lot more carefully, both while looking out the window or, on rare occasions, when leaving the house. Sindy Lutz’s heavy and gritty seascapes, on view as a purely digital exhibition at Ricco/Maresca, are a rich repast for those of us with this heightened meteorological awareness. Drawn from the “deep memories” of an artist who grew up on the sea shore, these drawings are all meditations on brooding and melancholy, but that is not to say they are uniform in appearance. Lutz works within a mnemonic framework of visual cues that generate these specific feelings, and then modulates form, color, and cloud typology, fiddling with nuance, like a composer developing a musical theme and its variations.

The bottom of the page is the shore, then some sea, but most of the page is cloud. But a cloud can seem like a solid mass expanding to fill the sky, a storm coming in off the water, or it can be leaving. The rain can be ending, allowing a clear sky or sunset to break through—an uplifting experience—or the storm might give way to a darkening and gray sky or worse, just night—leaving us feeling deprived of our fair share of sunlight. In this series of 20 mixed media works on paper, all Untitled, all 8 by 8 inches, Lutz has presented a cycle that positions the viewer as a beach regular. We are familiar with the emotions elicited by the sea, sky, and shore in tandem, an ever-changing

THE ART OF DAILY LIVING

BY TAUSIF NOOR

Lodged within the contours of daily life and hidden between its repetitive rhythms are moments of exaltation, potential conduits to transcendence rooted in the ordinary rather than the astounding. Our attention is often distracted by the trivial proceedings of life, as Andrew Epstein observed in his 2016 study of everyday poetics, *Attention Equals Life*, constitutes an ethereal move—one that gives meaning to the mundane and in so doing, makes artists of us all. When the German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven began a series of computational and notational experiments with the Gregorian calendar in 1968, marking variations and repetitions within its ordered grids, she recognized that the thrum of the quotidian held enormous potential. Initially trained as a musician, Darboven primarily considered herself a writer, and her daily writing regimen became a catalyst for her systematic inscriptions of numbers and text on grids as boos or in immersive, monumental installations, these works functioned as records of both historical and personal events, such as *Ein Jahrhundert (A Century)* (1971–75), which catalogued the daily passage of 100 years beginning with the number 00 and ending in 99. With its dedication to repetition, logic, and language, Darboven’s programmatic practice resonated with those of contemporaries such as Sol Lewitt and Joseph Kosuth, but its attention to the simultaneity, or confluence, of personal experience and collected history warrants closer comparison to the serial works of On Kawara. Like Darboven, Kawara often used the calendar as the basis for minimalist gestures informed by his own subjective experience, most notably in the “Today” series, which comprises nearly 3,000 works made daily throughout 112 cities between January 4, 1966 until the artist’s death in 2014. Kawara’s “date paintings,” as they have come to be known, are representative of the artist’s methodological approach to the quotient, indexing the trajectory of his life without divulging personal detail—a practice he veered away from in later series such as *I Got Up*, *I Met*, and *I Went*, produced between 1968 and 1979. In stamping the exact time the artist left his bed (*I Got Up*); typographing the names of everyone he encountered that day (*I Met*); and recording his daily travel routes on photocopied maps (*I Went*), Kawara produced works outside the categories of the traditional art-object, in what Benjamin Buchloh termed Conceptual art’s “aesthetics of administration”—a term that also gestures to the banal and bureaucratic modes by which Kawara produced these works.1

While Darboven and Kawara’s projects represent a subset of Conceptualist approaches to the quotidian rooted in abstraction, the frank realism of Bernadette Meyers’ 1970s conceptual practice offers another route to the everyday sublime. Her installation *Memory, shown in 1972 at Holmes Solomon’s 98 Green Street loft, presented the artist’s daily experience in a straightforward, documentary mode while still adhering to Conceptualist constraints.

Each day for the month of July 1971, Mayer shot a roll of 35mm slide film and kept a diary of her activities. The slides were then presented as color snapshots and arranged chronologically in a massive grid on one wall of the gallery space, accompanied by a recording of Mayer reading aloud an edited version of her journal. Taken in an offhand, casual style, the photographs—totalling over 500 in quantity and composed to depict Mayer and her friends making art in Manhattan and taking trips to the country, intimate moments between Mayer and her lover, and her self-portraits in mirrors. Here, the everyday is filtered both through Mayer’s and Kawara’s lens, whether she lived alone or she remained; it; later; because; Mayer; edited her diary entries after the images were printed, the project is infected by a double remembering by the artist of her own impressions, thoughts, and dreams.

Mayer’s exhaustive account of one month in her life through text and image, in a manner almost simetic, appears now to anticipate contemporary artistic practice as well as contemporary developments in real and social media: revalued exhibition in the Village Voice in 1972, the critic A.D. Coleman referred to the work as an “enormous accumulation of data.” More recently, contemporary artists such as Ian Bogost have presented such accumulations of data as aesthetic objects in their own right in works that meditate between public record and personal archive. In her 2019 solo exhibition at SculptureCenter, Cennetoğlu presented an abridged narrative of her life in a 12-hour long moving-image installation, culled from personal files, documentary footage, and recorded clips of newsreels stored in the artist’s various personal hard drives and devices over 12 years.

As with the monumental installation of *Memory* in its initial form, the film, *I Went January 1970 – March 2018*, was, like its full 52-word title, too much to take in at once, unspooling as a portrait of the artist vis-à-vis her network of social interaction. Viewing the work from beach chairs installed in the cavernous space, visitors could witness the joys, heartbreaks, and banalities of Cennetoğlu’s life over the last decade: the birth of her daughter, landscapes shot from a moving car, the end of a relationship. The beginning of the day and the end of the day are all distinctly seen and collected into a single narrative. An adjoining gallery displayed the artist’s various newspaper projects, 20.08.2010 (2010), 02.11.2011 (2011) and 04.09.2014 (2014)—leaf-bound volumes of Turkish, Arabic, and British dailies, respectively, that were organized chronologically and reflected the political and social upheavals of daily life as reported by the media. At first glance, the works bore resemblance to Kawara’s *One Million Years* (1999), a two-volume artist book divided into *Past* (99.01 BC to 1969 AD) and *Future* (1993AD to 1,001,992 AD). While Kawara’s work lists individual years in columns in rows to dizzying effect, Cennetoğlu eschewed this accounting-ledger style for the collected daily reportage of newspapers, that, when gathered together and subjected to comparison, begin to reveal motivations, biases, and aims. Presenting chronicles of clipped newspaper articles, Cennetoğlu uncovered sparks of spiritual humanitarian within an age of information.

By imposing chronology upon a January 1970 – 21 March 2018, and Memory, respectively, and presenting these works at grand scale, Mayer and Cennetoğlu score the ephemeralment and incalculability of value of life’s discrete moments. The impossibility of registering either work in a single glance or even a single sitting suggests that the events of a day and the grand impressions and memories of one’s experiences cannot be boxed to the constraints of a medium, structure, or institution. Though their works are not defined solely by such self-imposed constraints, Mayer and Cennetoğlu, like Darboven and Kawara, invite the viewer to attend to the evanescent latent in the everyday that, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, return us to “existence in its very spontaneity.”

1. *I see myself as a writer, which I am, regardless of what other visual materials I may use. I am a writer first and a visual artist second* http://www.artnet.com/artists/hanne-darboven/


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ALICE MOMM

BY SUSAN BREYER

The *Gleaner’s Song* Arsenal Gallery

Today, as it rains in northern Brooklyn, I sit indoors dreaming of Central Park’s Ramble. There, amid the bustling Upper East and West Sides, one feels anonymous and protected. Thick beds of oak leaves pad the city’s bricks, boulders and bird songs create partitions that allow for private thinking. My nostalgic musings are inspired by the documentary project of Alice Momm, whose solo exhibition, *The Gleaner’s Song*, opened in Central Park’s Arsenal Gallery on March 12th. The show presents roughly eight years of work driven by playful imagination and deep sensitivity. Momm’s artistic practice—which includes poetry, sculpture from found materials, and photographs of nature—delights in revisioning and recycling. In a manner neither self-righteous nor insistent, the artist’s humble materials gesture toward a gentler inhabitation of urban and cultural settings—one that draws gladly and respectfully from natural resources at hand.

*The Gleaner’s Song* fuses interior space with natural imagery and outdoor ephemera. *Collections* – In the *Betteling* (2012–2020) constitutes an array of palm-sized compositions, installed across three panels, that blend organic materials, paint, bits of paper and cardboard, and pictures of Momm selected these compositions from a “collections wall” kept in her studio, wherein past and present interventions are invited to

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ALICE MOMM

*The Gleaner’s Song*

ARSENAL GALLERY
coexist. Featured here are rose-colored leaves from which thin swivels have been cut; a black-and-white sandpiper pecking along a catalpa seed pod; loosely woven pine needles; and chains woven of fibrous links. The collection's value stems from its inherent flexibility; from new meanings found in ever-shifting dialogues.

Reinvigorated inanimate objects emerge as a theme throughout the exhibition. According to Momm, crisp, brown leaves are not lifeless; they have simply entered a “new stage in their evolution.” This reasoning provides the framework for Gleaner’s Song: The Ragged Beauty of Picked-Up Things, a group of 47 whimsical works on paper carried out between 2017 and 2020. Displayed against a chocolate-brown wall on short lengths of shelving, they present new life cycles of organic remnants: shards of bark, pine needles, leaves. In some works, Momm accentuated her subjects by applying delicate stitches of thread, which zip around objects and events that captured her attention. silky white puffs escaping a milkweed pod, bulbous protrusions that transform tree trunks, a lone turtle perched atop a rock. Another series of photographs titled Emotional Guardrails (2020) pictures the weathered wooden posts and beams lining Central Park’s throughways, whose cross sections yield humorous characters with rusting bolts for eyes. Momm asks “You see them too, right? The faces all around us?”

Momm perceives the natural world to be a theme throughout the exhibition. While Walking, Central Park (2020) includes six and eight inch square photographs interspersed throughout the gallery, depicting objects and events that captured her attention: silky white puffs escaping a milkweed pod, bulbous protrusions that transform tree trunks, a lone turtle perched atop a rock. Another series of photographs titled Emotional Guardrails (2020) pictures the weathered wooden posts and beams lining Central Park’s throughways, whose cross sections yield humorous characters with rusting bolts for eyes. Momm asks “You see them too, right? The faces all around us?”

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“Things” is an art historian and writer based in Brooklyn.
Sam Lavigne and Tega Brain
New York Apartment
Whitney Museum of American Art

Lately, many of us are spending much more time in our apartments than we originally anticipated. For those lucky enough to be able to work from home, our living spaces have become small tele-republics of their own, beaming us into the homes of coworkers, bosses, and friends. Life stains the edges of our Zoom boxes. I'm in your bed; you're in my kitchen. In this way, we might imagine that some of us are already living in Sam Lavigne and Tega Brain's online project New York Apartment, a virtual apartment encompassing five boroughs and 300 million square feet, stitched together from thousands of real estate listings in New York. The project is funny and absurd, but too lofty for the way that it documents a rapidly gentrifying city from the inside-out.


The interface is reminiscent of the spare, slightly sketchy, no-frills utilitarianism of Craigslist. Eight columns set in Times New Roman: New York, Miami, and, for McCollum working in the medium of painting, which for him meant dyed swatches of canvas assembled into series. While McCollum's later works explore the ideas of endless repetition of infinitely varying forms, and copies with no original set the post-structuralist's arts afloat; these works on display at Petzel's website explore a transitional, or even originating period that embodies the indefinable term "formless" on a messy and uncontrollable level that the artist was soon to forsake.

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The dinosaur footprints in Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah I saw in Peter's class immediately captivated me, as would most of McCollum's projects that I came into contact with later on. Like a carefully and thoughtfully laid out textbook chart of genetic diversity in the pea plant or the gorgeous blown-glass microbe display at the American Museum of Natural History, McCollum approaches multiplicity and diversity with a gentle omniscient hand that both demands that we examine each and every object with a fresh eye, but also, through his presentation, quells the inevitable rising panic of the human psyche in the presence of infinity. There's a nihilism in his "Surrogate Painting" series (started in 1978) and his numerous arrays of almost identical objects: an acceptance of the fact that over time, everything happens again and again, but the cleanliness of the execution makes the banality of history look good. This is in stark contrast to the early works. The online viewing room begins with the bleached painting series, followed by the constructed paintings. Susan Holz (1971) is a painting composed of stained strips of canvas which are arranged like brickwork on the wall. McCollum places the swatches so that their varying densities of dye form large horizontally oriented chevrons of different shades of grey. While he's working in units, and these are arranged on a matrix (as with his later works), the dying process offers a different kind of variety and multiplicity. In
the empty frames, or the 10,000 indeterminate objects, composed of parts taken from industrially produced packaging and toys are always aware of the artist’s hand—he is in control. But with the staining on the fixed base of canvas, he’s just holding on to his agency.

In the works Centro III and Beauty is as Beauty Does, (both 1972) McCollum moves from strips to squares, and dies each piece of fabric along a diagonal. The gallery provides close-ups of all the works, which is helpful as I always like to get my nose right up against the art. We can see the blossoming fingers of the stain as it expands down the weave of the fabric, different on each patch. Quite a few archival photographs are included on the site as well, but none is more telling than Constructed Painting in process, Venice, California, 1971. Orthogonally piled in neat stacks are hundreds of canvas squares. On the one hand, these piles take on a sculptural quality—the sheer number creates rectilinear towers of cotton, and may or may not have been a catalyst/inspiration in moving towards sculpture. But even more alarming in terms of McCollum’s aesthetic is the infinitude of fuzzy fibers emerging from the untrimmed sides of the swatches. They dangle, they weave randomly: this is more the sticky, raw unpredictability of Eva Hesse. The fibrous edges are visible as well in the finished works. McCollum doesn’t shy away from this formlessness that emerges from the proclivities of the medium itself—an embodiment of the dirty, base material origins of art that was highlighted in Formless: A User’s Guide in ’66. In fact, if anything, he embraces it by amplifying the gesture of the frayed edges of the cruciform canvas units by texturing the striated brush marks in the black paint with a thick irregular impasto, as in his seminal The Dog of Pomper (1991). The plastic material is cool, hard, and smooth, and the artist is in the driver’s seat. Early Works on the Petzel website is a welcome return to a dangerous but brief episode in Allan McCollum’s life. Maintaining this kind of affectionate underbelly of an unseemly art market, or as Rosalind Krauss formlessly put it the flâneur: a strolling city dweller of 19th century Paris, a persona that back then no longer form a representational sliver this again feels transformed. The objects are figures of decay frozen in time. It is a tenuous balance of a life strung between nonessential businesses. Part of what I think has changed, or that the world has changed, but that Ndife’s art has changed as well. It is simply no longer the set of objects that it was before, although it might become something like them again. This is, in a sense, the theme of the sculptures anyway. They are mixtures of plywood, resin, foam, discarded plastic, broken ceramic, roots, and corn husks. They are somewhere between organic and inorganic, biding the distinction, showing that all things rot, even as all things can be preserved for a time. They reflect the tenuous balance of a life strung between stability and incipient devastation.

DAPHNE FITZPATRICK

BY KSENA M. SOBOLEV

Sitting down next to me on a bench by the Williamsburg waterfront (six feet apart, of course), Daphne Fitzpatrick pulls out a series of objects that she picked up on her walk that morning. “Aren’t these great?” she exclaims, holding up a shiny piece of wire, some rusty nails, and a red plastic item that I can’t quite identify. Since the late 1990s, Fitzpatrick’s sculptural and photographic practice has increasingly revolved around such found objects. Undeniably influenced by the Dada movement and Surrealism’s amour fou, Fitzpatrick extends to her objet trouvés a distinctively playful tenderness, often drawing in visual puns and irreverent titles such as Lesbian Seagulls for Maya Rudolph and Kristen Wiig (2020) or Your Zipper is Down (2020). Born on Long Island in the 1960s, Fitzpatrick has somehow retained an unconditional enthusiasm for the simple textures of the world, a tendency that usually disappears with the onrush of adulthood.

In the Spring of 2003, Fitzpatrick felt compelled to walk the length of Manhattan’s Broadway, a span of nearly 33 miles. While she thought it would be possible to accomplish this within a single day, it ultimately took five, spread out over an extended period of time. It was then that Fitzpatrick realized the streets’ potential as an endless source of inspiration, something that could reflect both human activity and the poetic rhythm of the city. Going on walks became an intrinsic part of Fitzpatrick’s artistic practice—she now considers herself a modern day flâneur. The artist strolls for at least an hour each day, collecting small objects that spark her interest for later use. She also routinely documents her findings through photography and video. Working in analog before switching to digital in 2003, Fitzpatrick ultimately replaced the traditional camera with her iPhone. Since 2012, Instagram has been a main outlet for her artmaking, capturing subtle inanimate absurdities, from oddly shaped fruit to the chance encounters of sidewall debris. Viewing the Instagram format as a 4×3 camera, Fitzpatrick’s approach to photography shares a sensibility with that of Stephen Shore, who started using Instagram in 2014.

As the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear, social distancing began, and traditional venues of artistic display shut down. Fitzpatrick’s decision to bring her practice onto Instagram eight years ago took on a new urgency—and her activity notably increased. While in quarantine myself, I began to notice daily posts in which Fitzpatrick documented the debris saturating an empty Williamsburg, where she has lived since 1986. Oftentimes, the objects appeared to be activated by Fitzpatrick’s attention: a plastic bag starts dancing in the wind, a forsaken bucket suddenly rolls over—as if touched by some supernatural power. While many artists have lost access to their studios, or are limited in their usual approach to creation, Fitzpatrick’s way of artmaking has not changed. Yet the landscape she wanders has been drastically altered. It was Charles Baudelaire and, nearly a century later, Walter Benjamin who first established the most well-known definition of the flâneur: a strolling city dweller of 19th century Paris, a persona that back then embodied privilege. Who else had the time to spend their days strolling around? It was also Benjamin who said that “living means leaving traces.” These traces vary depending on the season, the weather, and, of course, the state of a global pandemic. A neighborhood that is typically bustling with tourists is now deserted, and the most frequently featured object on Fitzpatrick’s Instagram is the now-ubiquitous discarded plastic glove, in various colors and with its different signs of wear. Like Candy Jernigan, who documented the Lower East Side drug epidemic in her 1986 piece Pound Dope, Fitzpatrick comes to function somewhat as a detective, or a forensic specialist, as she documents the textures of existence during a time of adversity. Fitzpatrick’s use of Instagram, which has swiftly gained momentum as an artistic tool, is a tenuous balance of a life strung between stability and incipient devastation.


The show was set to open the same day that Governor Cuomo ordered the closure of all nonessential businesses. Such questions as I might have posed to the work previously no longer make sense. It is not just that my perspective has changed, or that the world has changed, but that Ndife’s art has changed as well. It is simply no longer the set of objects that it was before. Had I seen this show in person, I might have written this review about the apparent contradiction between Brandon Ndife’s rotting sculptures and the peaceful and picturesque East Side gallery in which they sit. I might have interrogated whether the work functioned as an exposure of the seedy underbelly of an unseemly art market, or if it merely trafficked in the grotesque as a niche practice. But I did not see the work in person. No one did, besides its installers.

Brandon Ndife is a sculptor and curator based in New York City. His work has been reviewed in the Brooklyn Rail, ARTnews, Sculpture Magazine, Artcritical, and Art Monthly. In 2018, he organized I Cyborg at the Gazelli Art House in London. He currently teaches with the Meet the Met program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hosts a program on Clocktower Radio.

BRANDON NDIFE

BY AAVRAN C. ALPERT

Brandon Ndife
MY ZONE
Bureau

Had I seen this show in person, I might have written this review about the apparent contradiction between Brandon Ndife’s rotting sculptures and the picturesque East Side gallery in which they sit. I might have interrogated whether the work functioned as an exposure of the seedy underbelly of an unseemly art market, or if it merely trafficked in the grotesque as a niche practice. But I did not see the work in person. No one did, besides its installers. The show was set to open the same day that Governor Cuomo ordered the closure of all nonessential businesses. Such questions as I might have posed to the work previously no longer make sense. It is not just that my perspective has changed, or that the world has changed, but that Ndife’s art has changed as well. It is simply no longer the set of objects that it was before.
of meat, going to waste. “My zone” feels less personal and idiosyncratic and more like an open invitation for identification. Transformation and decay are, to be sure, in the nature of things. In his philosophical poem of that title—On The Nature of Things—Lucrétius noted that though this was always the case, to actually see decay was not possible: “Whenever things waste away, decayed by age, or cliffs beetling over the sea are devoured by the corroding brine, you cannot see what they lose at any single moment.” Sam Taylor-Johnson took up this challenge in her video still life, which showed slowly decomposing fruits covered with mold before our eyes. Ndife’s work may also now be showing the same thing, but, again, we don’t know. The online viewing room reveals only the moment when the install shot was taken, not the process of the work. It may be well-preserved, or it may be beginning to rot. This is, I think, the hopeful irony of viewing Ndife’s work remotely. Even as it feels like a representation for the mass decay we experience, it is also, if only accidentally, a like an open invitation for identification.

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derelict apartment building to construct tiny scale models of the rooms in that building. Framed behind glass and hanging like pictures, the fourth wall is removed allowing a god-like viewer to observe tactile details of these fragile spaces—plaster peckmarked, cracked, or scored with grid patterns to resemble tiles; wallpaper tearing off sheet-rock; splintered wood forming miniature construction frameworks. Open closets and water closets provide space to imagine moving in and out, but the entrance doors of these vacant apartments are all shut. Even as the work commemorates ruin, the visible hot glue holding the seams together reveals the invisible crust and mantle into the depths of memory—though the topographical forms run uncomfortably steep, the past the Earth’s crust and mantle into the depths of memory and the unconscious. The papers, rendered unreadable in the stacks, form an archive that exists now only as manifest content, Freud’s term for dream images, while the latent content or meaning remains hidden beneath the surface.

The idea of the archive is more explicitly at work in Alejandro Rodríguez’s Descriptive Memory (2018). Here, the artist carved curving landscape topographies atop 15 stacked volumes of yellowed papers—all recovered architectural plans and building records from an abandoned building—modified by occasional strata of dull browns and faded reds. (The complete series contains 64 stacks arranged in a square grid, with a model of the building from which the papers were recovered carved into the center stack.) If the topographical forms were scaled up to the size of real landscapes, then the towers upon which they rest would run unthinkably steep, deep, the Earth’s crust and mantle into the depths of memory and the unconscious. The papers, rendered unreadable in the stacks, form an archive that exists now only as manifest content, Freud’s term for dream images, while the latent content or meaning remains hidden beneath the surface.

Prolog 02 (2019) is a set of two pristinely constructed dictionary-sized books with navy blue hardcovers and silver type—the design of the volumes recalls official bind- ing on 1950s or ’60s government texts. Inside, carved into the blue pages of the first volume is a scale model of a disinfection center stack.) If the topographical forms were scaled up to the size of real landscapes, then the towers upon which they rest would run unthinkably steep, deep, the Earth’s crust and mantle into the depths of memory and the unconscious. The papers, rendered unreadable in the stacks, form an archive that exists now only as manifest content, Freud’s term for dream images, while the latent content or meaning remains hidden beneath the surface.

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SAUL STEINBERG

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

Saul Steinberg
Imagined Interiors
Pace Gallery

Saul Steinberg, Sphinx II, 1966. Crayon, graphite, colored pencil, and pen and ink on cut brown kraft paper mounted to Strathmore, 30 × 40 inches. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Steinberg’s modernism, embracing the many contemporaneous and stylistic movements of the 20th century, extends to a frenzied futuristic display in Speeding Still Life (1979), set out precariously on a simple work table; the ink, rubber stamp, and pencil on paper drawing hints at a con-fused reflection on Italian Futurism. The picture’s components balance precariously on the table.

Swiss Still Life (1988), by contrast, is more enigmatic—or simply “absurd,” with a sculpture of a cute stylized woman’s figure vaguely draped. “I play with the absurdity of reality,” he said. “There is something absurd about what we consider to be real—even what we consider to be absurd.” And even more to the point is the drawing Bedroom Sphinx (1987) showing a slightly disheveled sphinx presiding from a very Art Deco bed being gazed at by a monkey bellhop.

Steinberg willingly poked fun of himself through the subjects of his own creation. His Untitled (Drawing Table) (1966) takes the viewer through his cubistic head as he draws himself into his composition featuring a tough, statuesque cat on the table at his right hand and, in an abrupt shift, a window onto a lounge area with puffy seating perhaps trying to seduce him away from his work, and probably succeeding, as we see a man with a scratched-out face reeling as if drawing a blank.

Most revelatory of the artist in his interior is a small (roughly 1 by 2 inches) untitled drawing from 1981, in which a bird–artist-man sits intently at his desk in a large living room, with big windows and a grand array of his animal characters expressively confronting him. A large doggie-wife figure presides: A Steinbergian version of Gustave Courbet’s The Artist’s Studio (1854–1855).

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Andrews' work. Be it explicit, as in her recent solo show, I See You, at Jack Hanley Gallery, the threat, is, ironically, invisible. Like Julio Cortázar's “Blow-Up,” the short story that serves as inspiration, about a photographer who, without permission, snaps, enlarges, and then ruminates on the story of his subjects, it is “strange how the scene”—a multimedia installation of performance video, sculpture, and photographs—takes on “a disquieting aura.”

In Exposure (2020), a two-channel video that is the centerpiece of the show, we watch as nine dancers, standing in close formation, slowly begin to remove their coats. Silent save for the rush of fabric over shoulder, a loud, shocking snap as coats hit the floor, anxiety builds as we watch the dancers repeat the gesture over and over—removing, dropping, donning, tugging—in unison, gaining speed. The dancers’ breaths of effort and competition become audible. They join us in our voyeurism, watching us as we watch her.

But the human form in Andrews’s work isn’t so much fetishized as empowered, watching us as we watch her. The dancers (off, off damned coat!)—ripples throughout. The headless self-portraits and blindfolded busts underscore anonymity, the degree to which we are our bodies, but also, now, the way that every body encountered is a threat. In Exposure, the dancers who exit the scene assume a place of watching and recording—cell phones up, flashlight on—as we collectively observe the final dancer, her increasingly frantic movement. They join us in our voyeurism, watching us as we watch her.

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As COVID-19 restrictions continue, finding art that can be fully experienced while ensconced at home requires diligence. Under (2020) by Blanc Scoel, the partnership of artists Stephen Shill and Hannah White, shows a subaquatic photograph of pink flower petals spreading over a surface of water. A hydrophone recording taken in London’s Lighthouse Basin Marina provides a creaky, watery background track over which fragments of words spoken by a woman skitter and jump. The fitful utterances interrupt the lulling rhythms of boats rocking in the water as if trying to jolt the dreamer awake. The listener feels both soothed and agitated, poised somewhere in the transitional moment that precedes waking. Under water, under sedation, and under a spell, the power to awaken slips out of reach as soft vocalizations form a lullaby that overtake the wordless speech. Towards the end of the piece, the woman describes a sequence of things seen in a dream. We enter into this shop full of curiosities and crystals... There is lunch. There is a holiday... There is my studio. Listening to the piece is like inhabiting someone else’s dream. There is an intimacy to the sound of the hydrophone; the recording captures what is heard underwater, while the sounds of the land are muted and even one’s own breathing stops. Within this quiet, the vocal elements intertwine with my own thoughts. When the recording ends, I feel as if I have come out of a deep, meditative state—that I have somehow resurfaced.

In contrast to this immersive atmosphere, artist Gabi Schaffner shifts the perspective from dreamer to observer in The Lion Dreams Of Hunting (2020). The image she provides shows Jean-Léon Gérôme’s Der heilige Hieronymus (1874), a painting featuring a napping Saint Jerome, projected onto a weathered statue of a lion. In the audio file, the clicking buttons of an old tape recorder punctuate cut-up lines of text spoken by a young woman, musings of what Saint Jerome (Hieronymus) and his beastly companion see in their dreams. The lion dreams of hunting... Hieronymus. He does not dream of God, nor the angels. He dreams of being young again. The words have the soothing quality of a bedtime story. Schaffner mells church bells, the crunch of footsteps in snow, the hum of an air conditioner, and the wailing of a musical saw into a soundtrack that starts and stops behind the steady voice. A dog pants, or is it the lion? The whistle of the tape recorder’s rewinding and fast-forwarding sounds like a stalled-out car. When both awaken, they’ll find the space around is a poorly lit staircase. The murmurs and snaps of the tape recorder remind the listener of Schaffner’s process. Considered in the parfance of dreams, it yields a lucid quality to the aural trance she creates. A final snap and the sound shuts off. We are at the end of the tape.

The stand-out piece of the show comes from John Roach, who masterfully orchestrates sound effects recorded in the field and files captured from 1999 to 2007 on his Sony MZ-R700 minidisc walkman (the accompanying image is a photo of the acid-green device). You’re gonna be ready to jump as soon as you tape it (2020), unfolds sequentially, much like a narrative, through a series of audio portals, each a repository of artifacts from the past. Oral slates provided by sound recordists to identify the effects they record are used here to mark the beginning of each chapter—Big wooden door opening and closing or later, Another door it’s smaller, opening. In the first section, staccato strings create a bed over which bird songs and wind weave in and out. A voice laughingly calls, That is not your swimming. In another section, a conservatory door hauls the sound of an accordion lesson and the voice of a small child saying hi, hello. A timer beeps. Clocks chime. Time is passing, echoing through these chambers of memory. Roach does not focus on somnolent hallucinations for
inspiration, but instead turns to his mini-disc journal to sift through the remains of moments gone. His fascination with the temporality of sounds both preserved and transformed culminates in a structure reminiscent of cinema in both its division of scenes and its waking-dream quality. In the final section, the strings return, and the voice of a man says, *just keep playing it and replaying it as Roach gently fades us back into silence.*

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WITH PLEASURE

BY OLIVIA GAUTHIER

With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art, 1972–1985
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Over the last few years, certain craft-based works and ideas have emerged in fine art: the woven works of artists such as Diedrick Brackens or ceramics like those of Anna Sew Hoy. A certain nostalgia is exuded in the renaissance of craft aesthetics—the vibe of the 70s ripples throughout art, design, and fashion as exemplified by the resurgent interest in macramé, needlepoint, and clay. Until recently, the recuperation of craft aesthetics in fine art has gone largely unnoticed by critical histories. *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles presents an affirmative and celebratory survey of a less-studied yet deeply influential movement that presents a historical background for some of the trends we see in contemporary art today.

Organized by Anna Katz with Rebecca Lowery, the exhibition features nearly 100 works of art by almost 50 artists from across the country, taking an expansive view on the Pattern and Decoration movement (P&D) and its broader range of social and political approaches to revisiting the history and dynamics of P&D. What transpires is the visual antithesis to dominant art world trends of the time, aesthetics which negate the tenets of a modernism that favored clean lines, an invisible hand, monochrome industrial colors. Joyce Kozloff, who was a key member of P&D, wrote a polemic in the form of a pamphlet in 1976 called “An Answer to Ad Reinhardt’s ‘On Negation’ - Negating the Negative” which accompanied a group exhibition at Tony Alessandra Gallery (and is reprised as a wall vinyl in the exhibition); in it she denounced values associated with modernism and patriarchal culture: “anti-pure... anti-formalist... anti-imperialist... anti-universal... anti-rational... anti-dogmatic... anti-pleasureless... anti-heroic... anti-master.” Instead, she affirms “additive, subjective, romantic, imaginative, personal, autobiographical, whimsical.”

What Kozloff argues for is a value shift, one clearly in the feminist spirit (“the personal is political”), that she and other artists found P&D’s freedom of expression, liberation from controlling narratives of the art world, and the genuine pleasure found in indulging in sumptuously ornamental, material, and colorful aesthetics. This, as Katz makes clear in her contextualization of P&D, was not celebrating kitsch or bad taste in an ironic way but was a deeply genuine exaltation of the decorative.

The galleries are organized thematically and folding them while a popular radio show shows Girouard caring for fabrics she inherited—washing, wringing, sewing, and folding them while a popular radio station plays in the background. Girouard highlights this mundane activity, focusing the camera on the fabrics as the patterns dance across the screen. Made in the year between Nixon’s impeachment, reelection, and eventual resignation, and approaching the end of the Vietnam war, Girouard’s video is a subtle rumination on the cultivation of taste in culture (music) and a deep questioning of authority at the intersection of American culture and politics. *Maintenance III* meditates on a seemingly neutral art as the artist listens to upbeat tunes on the radio, there is a subtle critical undertone pointing out that the radio, a symbol of mass media, is itself not neutral. The same message of popular music also influences our political environment.

Revisiting the exhibition while in quarantine reminds us of the myriad ways in which art can help us to envision new methods and strategies for challenging the powers that be and reimagining a world that is inclusive, diverse, loving, and celebratory of all forms of expression. It is no surprise that the similar ethics of the P&D movement have percolated in recent years. As Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon wrote in their 1978 *Heresies* article, “We, as artists, cannot solve these problems, but by speaking plainly we hope to reveal the inconsistencies in assumptions that too often have been accepted as ‘truth.’” Let us continue to question these truths.

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**BY SAHAR KHRABANI**

HOW CAN WE THINK OF ART AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

In the beginning it seemed innocent enough, a simple hope to compensate for her loss of sight.” Thus begins Lynn Hershman Leeson’s 1996 Seduction of a Cyborg, as it chronicles the journey of the protagonist, a blind woman, who agrees to a physical treatment that allows her to see images via computer-screen transmission. Presenting technology as an infectious disease, the video walks us through this surreal experience of the therapy, dragging the protagonist into a different, hyper-mediated world that ultimately affects her health after an initial period of intense pleasure: “Though her hearing was acute, she was born with eyes that lacked the ability to absorb light. The choice seemed simple. It didn’t take long and it didn’t hurt. In exchange, the rewards of recognition guided her forward, seductively linked to computer transmissions—images of simulated worlds, sounds, masked passions gave enormous pleasure,” declares a woman in voiceover. A woman touches the screen, enamedored by the light it provides, and we soon realize that she has no choice but to fall into it. The narration continues: “The manipulation was thorough and unprejudiced. She witnessed the pollution of history. Her body, a battlefield of degraded privacy, loneliness, and terror, succumbed to the inevitable.” Leeson, an early pioneer of new media artworks, has long explored the moral and ethical quandaries raised in a culture obsessed with technology and artifice, as well as the tantalizing idea of creating new life forms and reproducing ourselves, touching on the utopian and dystopian scenarios inherent in both.

Seduction of a Cyborg is currently streamlining as part of How Can We Think of Art at a Time Like This? and although created in the mid-90s, its poignancy has only increased. Co-curated by Barbara Pollack and Anne Verhallen as a platform for the exchange of art and ideas at a time of crisis, How Can We Think of Art at a Time Like This? is an exhibition without walls, created almost overnight to respond to museum and galleries’ closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a platform for free expression, inviting visitors to post responses on its Comments page. Exclusively an online-curated exhibition with no end date in sight, it is one that is not, as the curatorial text states, “funded by a corporation, tear gas distributor, or pharmaceutical company.” With a new entry posted every day since March 17, Art at a Time Like This wishes to be more than a presentation of artworks opened to the public online: to actively engage with its visitors, sharing personal reflections on how the current crisis touches and impacts each of us as an interconnected art world.

Framed as a question, the title—and consequent premise of the exhibition—brings to light the need to examine the ways in which we consume art; habits, as such, made especially conspicuous at a time like this. With an abundance of online viewing rooms, and bricks-and-mortar museums and galleries turning to the digital realm, this exhibition has been created solely for the purpose of being viewed and experienced online, ushering in a digital renaissance—if one was even needed. Showcasing a variety of media—namely photography, mixed media, illustration, video work, as well as documentation of installation art—Art at a Time Like This’s unifying criteria is its inclusion of works from artists who have addressed social and political issues throughout their careers. Though the video work is the most efficient medium for online viewing—particularly because it gives access to art that is normally hard to find outside of exhibition walls—the accompanying still images paint a holistic picture of the projects. The curators aimed to address the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other crises in the world, driven by the belief that the current disruption of our behavior can facilitate long-awaited change.

I approached this show in a way akin to how I used to experience exhibitions in the flesh. I closed all other browser tabs, looked at the artworks, read about them, took notes—on paper—and then sat with my lingering thoughts, taking time to absorb. Experiencing artworks this way is very different in nature, as the energy that seems to emanate from them is inherently that of the screen. What sets this experience apart is the ability to consult the work on the go, rather than rely on memory, phone documentation, or notes jotted down quickly amidst crowds of bodies. I wondered, how am I truly thinking about art at a time like this?

Perhaps the beauty of such an experience lies in the fact that we can look at artworks at a leisurely pace; when, in our busy days, do we find the time to “think about art at a time like this?” Unbridled by crowds or opening hours the experience becomes more intimate, more jarring, less futile. Take, for example, Mary Lucier’s Leaving Earth (2020), a sample video/sound excerpt from a work in progress. This new, mixed-media installation is based on the final writing of her late husband, the painter Robert Berlind. The text, which was composed of her late husband, the painter Robert Berlind. The text, which was composed, is currently streaming as part of The Beginning and The End. The text, which was composed, is currently streaming as part of The Beginning and The End.

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**STEPHEN KALTENBACH**

**BY PATRICK J. REED**

Stephen Kaltenbach

The Beginning and The End

Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis

Stephen Kaltenbach’s story is framed by hereafter. He comes and goes, came and went, reappeared to prove he never left. Fitting that the hereafter is a euphemism for something unending—Kaltenbach is always in the ether of contemporary art. His legend, in summary: upon completing the fledgling graduate art program of the University of California, Davis in 1967,
CANDICE BREITZ

BY JASON ROSENFIELD

The Beginning and The End is a continuation of Breitz’s community-based and collaborative artistic productions that engage in contemporary political debates and challenge mainstream media-driven dialogues. A commission of the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt-on-Main, in 2017, the title stands for “too long; didn’t read” and the installation is a triptych, with a portrait-format full-length image of a 12-year-old boy, Xanny “The Future” Stevens, in the Virgin Mary/Christ position in the center. There are landscape-format wings on either side with five figures against a dark backdrop, each of whom serves as a saint in a sacra conversazione religious tableau and who collectively function as a chorus that sings or holds up emoji masks to their faces, or confounding spaces, adjacent to time yet an artifact of it, much like the artist’s innumerable and self-explanatory “Time Capsules.” Kaltenbach began to make these as early as 1967. They are seldom dated but always labeled. “INVERTED OBSERVER” reads the epigraph on one. Another: “FUGITIVE IMAGE.” The show itself has entered an extended denouement, drawing out the conclusion of the arc indefinitely.

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are ready for decrim”; “they’ve seen us on the news, but have no idea who we are”; the national anthem of South Africa) while an informational text directs viewers to a nearby room to watch ten interviews with members of the chorus (now just a click away). The film then becomes a raucous extended cast dance party. At the very end Stevens returns and says “Ok, I’ll take that from the beginning,” recommencing the loop—all video art should adhere to round time lengths as Breitz’s smartly does!

The connection between the criminalization of sex work and the dangers faced by these members of SWEAT is made chillingly clear in Breitz’s stark and tenebrous set, with its black void of a background and brightly lit participants. The sound is full-on, and must be even more absorbing in a gallery presentation. Back at the 36-minute mark, Stevens muses about humans’ shrinking attention spans and the challenge of conveying information. And yet, through her young medium, Breitz airs her self-awareness of the manipulations of the video, the script, and its delivery. Stevens, who admits to having received the day off school for the shoot, discusses Breitz’s aims. Not only has the artist used a tween to deliver the message, but, as the narrator notes, “She’s shameless; you know. She’ll even use Hollywood stars to get your attention.” This is the partial approach of the earlier piece in the exhibition, Love Story of 2016, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2017 when she represented South Africa with the multi-media artist Mohau Modisakeng. Here, Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin voice the words of six Asian, African, and South American refugees whose own stories, some stretching to four hours of recorded video, form the rest of the work (two are unavailable as the subjects’ asylum applications are being processed). It is a nice complement to Krysztof Wodiczko’s recent installation, Monument, in Madison Square Park that featured filmed interviews with refugees projected onto the Farragut Monument.

Watching Breitz’s films at home on one’s own devices allows you to see the running time, to pause the videos, to rewind or fast forward. In the four galleries allotted for the BMA exhibition, time would have been dictated by the willingness to sit or stand still, to wear headphones, to pace yourself—the challenge presented in TLDR’s title. However, what has become clear in the two months of global shutdown is that when it comes to fine art online only single-channel video really works; it has been a thrill to see the Holt/Smithson Foundation release hard-to-see films by Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson on Vimeo for 24 hours every Friday, or to watch James Nares’ magical films as Kasmin Gallery releases one every weekend. The Breitz show was going to be ticketed (with free return entry). But museums and galleries might consider extending this new tradition of releasing films online for a limited period once the world begins to reopen, so that people can get a better appreciation of what these artists are doing, even if the presentation is not ideal. Breitz’s pointedly political videos deserve absorbed attention from the widest possible audience.

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**MICHAEL WILLIAMS**

**BY PHYLLIS TUCHMAN**

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Michael Williams was among the unlucky artists who had a solo show shuttered when New York went into lockdown in mid-March. On view for only two weeks, his exhibition at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea featured 11 large paintings and five small collages. While these works are now accessible on the internet, this isn’t an ideal way to view them—partly because of the way they were made, and partly because his installation was integral to how you respond to his art. For starters, Williams composes his canvases on a computer and then prints them with inkjet. In an instant, on command, he can change colors he’s considering without any consequences. He doesn’t need to scrape off paint or sand surfaces. For this exhibition, he didn’t emboss his work with additional paint, something he’s often done in the past. Consequently, when you look at his art on a website, what you see is almost exactly, is what he sees before his paintings are fabricated in canvas in a different set of dimensions.
Irrigation Veins

BY JOSEPHINE ZARKOVICH

The digital exhibition *Irrigation Veins: Ana Mendieta and Carolee Schneemann, Selected Works 1966–1983* (2021) pairs Mendieta’s work with Schneemann’s in several group exhibitions and essays beginning in the 1970s, this is the first time that the artists have been put together in several group exhibitions and essays in dialogue with one another in a two-person show. Eschewing some of the artists’ better-known works (notably absent in this exhibition draws parallels to her 1966 film *Irrigation Veins*: *Water Light/Water Needle*, which also incorporates elements of aerial play as participants move between suspended ropes in the woods.

Mendieta’s *Parachute* (1973) also takes on a sense of elemental flight. Made in collaboration with a group of elementary school students from Iowa, the grainy black-and-white video captures the students in an outdoor playground as they play a classic children’s game, rhythmically lifting and lowering a parachute cloth. The fabric rises and swells with the passing breeze and the children step closer and further apart. We hear the sound of their shouts and giggles as the cloth domes and flattens fluidly. Though the setting of the work is obviously urban, the children’s rhythmic interaction with the air animating the parachute resonates with a broader theme within the exhibition: the human body’s relationship with the natural elements of the earth, sky, and water.

In Mendieta’s photographs, *Untitled* (1981/2019), an abstracted female figure is dug into the wet sand of a beach, the edge of the tide line emphasizing the truly temporal nature of this gesture. These silhouetted figures appear throughout Mendieta’s work and across a variety of landscapes, from rural Iowa to Mexico and, later, in visits to her native Cuba. They are created through a variety of methods, from gathered natural materials such as flowers, branches and rocks, to time-based gunpowder pourings and physical carvings in earth or stone.

In place of Mendieta’s symbolic prone figure, Schneemann’s *Evaporation - Noon* (1974/2019) uses the artist’s nude body, caked with thick mud that has dried against her skin as she lay out in the sun. This black-and-white photograph has been treated with another layer of hand-applied, gestural color that extends across both figure and ground, further blurring the line between body and earth. The self becomes a performance, an earthwork, an archetypal form of elemental energy. Mendieta takes this earthly submersion further in *Burial Pyramid* (1974/2019), a suite of five color photographs in which the artist is all but completely entombed in the ruins of a Mesoamerican archeological site, only portions of her head or body visible under the pile of stones scattered on a lush green hillside. Like the structures themselves, too is Mendieta swallowed by the natural landscape.

Closing out the exhibition, which is viewed as a single scrollable webpage, are two works, each featuring their creator’s nude body abstracted against a colorful backdrop. In three stills drawn from Mendieta’s super-8mm film *Butterfly* (1975), a figure in highly saturated color morphs into partial abstraction, the outline of wings assembling itself behind her and then fracturing. The only consistently identifiable features in the work are the outline of Mendieta’s form and the dark shapes that identify her hair and pubic triangle. In Schneemann’s *Illinois Central Collage* (1967/79), the artist is shown with her arms raised, as if ready to take flight, a moment Schneemann describes as a spontaneous impulse, an act of release and joy. Together, both works evoke an iconography of pre-modern female power.

Connections like these are visible across *Irrigation Veins*. Both artists left behind legacies that position the feminine as a universal animating force while defying essentialist categorization. Together they articulate a shared language that describes the generative forces within their bodies, a language that has often been overlooked and ignored. At the end of the exhibition I thought back to Mendieta’s *Volcano* and how it reminded me of a quote from the author Ursula Le Guin: “We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains.”

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JOSEPHINE ZARKOVICH is a writer and curator based in Queens, NY. Her writing has been published by Linfield College, Oregon Visual Arts Ecology, and CUE Art Foundation. She is pursuing a PhD in Art History at Stony Brook University.
Joel Sternfeld’s American Prospects

BY GRETA RAINBOW

American Prospects
Joel Sternfeld
Steidl (2020)

Joel Sternfeld’s road trip photography from the late 1970s and early 1980s is about the complexity of capturing America. He published American Prospects in 1987, a book of 55 photos taken over eight years on periodic cross-country trips. Critically acclaimed at first release, it gets an update this year with a revised Steidl edition, enlarging the chromatic prints and adding 16 more from the archive. Sternfeld started as a Leica-wielding street photographer, snapping bad jobs and periwinkle pant suits in 1970s Manhattan. While he was inspired by Walker Evans, he never shot in black and white; the density of Kodachrome slide film is essential and inseparable from his work. Based on his bright urban scenes, Sternfeld was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, helping fund his first tour of the states. He drove a Volkswagen RV like a draft-dodging hippie, armed with an 8 x 10 large format camera like a fon de siècle portraitist. The American Prospects photos are of people, buildings, and mostly landscapes from the multiple trips Sternfeld took between 1978 and 1984.

The new edition is ordered (somewhat) geographically, beginning in the West: bikers surveying the blue of Bear Lake, Utah, and cows surveying the camera on a central California ranch. Flipping its pages enables readers to step by a space shuttle rusting in the sand in Texas, January 1983 © Joel Sternfeld.

In American vistas he sees the marks of human attempts to be charming or efficient, to make money or to play. A dirt road lined by wildflowers in “Matanuska Glacier, Matanuska Valley, Alaska, July 1984” leads the eye, renaissance-like, to the base of a postcard mountain. In the foreground, a sign advertises “MAJESTIC VIEW ESTATES,” decorated with a textbook illustration of a ram. The picture couldn’t be a real postcard because black electrical wires cut through the sky—though it wouldn’t be America without them. The thin but noticeable lines are proof of territory and power; as if to say, “Our supremacy is so certain, even Alaskan mountains can be made inhabitable.”

The narrative of Matanuska in 1984 is imminent development; Sternfeld captured a touched landscape’s delicate in-between. It wasn’t until after American Prospects was published in 1987 that public knowledge of climate change exponentially grew. We now have carbon taxes and UN climate summits. (The 2005 conference was memorialized by Sternfeld for a separate project titled When It Changed.) We know that America is second only to China for biggest environmental impact. American Prospects offers the story of how we got here. In her essay for the book’s first edition, Anne W. Tucker, then-curator of photography at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts, recognized the pictures as “not morally neutral… one perceives trouble in paradise.” Artificial waterways made for the Palm Beach Bike ‘n’ Trike club, an abandoned freighter sagging into the sea, and Kelly-green lawns in suburbia are evidence of a crisis we caused. The book’s last photo is of “approximately 17 of 41 sperm whales that beached and subsequently died” on the Oregon coast in the summer of ’79. Sternfeld’s vantage point is from the dunes, creating a less specific image that stretches beyond this particular incident. In 2019, over 120 gray whales were stranded on Pacific beaches.

But Sternfeld isn’t a documentarian. His photos are part fantasy, sympathetic to the kind of sunset John Steinbeck described in The Pastures of Heaven: “And the air was as golden gaze in the last of the sun.” Young couples frolicking in Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon’s sheer existence, the colors of East Coast autumn—these are also America. Through Sternfeld’s eyes, we could be convinced that this mess of a place is worth saving. It’s not too late to raze the estates and catch a glimpse of the mountain view.

GRETAT RAINBOW is a writer, editor, and radio producer living in Brooklyn. She recently published an audiovisual zine about women working in radical political journalism in Montreal.

Excerpts from the 1971 journal of Rosemary Mayer
This new edition gives us more of the real stuff: a woman reckoning with herself, her body, her art, her world.

BY KATE SILVER

Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer
Edited by Marie Warsh
Seabrooke Press (2020)

On New Year’s Day, 1971, the artist Rosemary Mayer wrote in her journal: “New thoughts: to stop being invulnerable.” At age 28, she was searching for balance, adjusting her emotional aperture to modulate how much of life got through: “Before everything could get to me—now nothing can—the next step is to let selected aspects of the real stuff of days get to me.”

The second edition of Excerpts from the 1971 Journal of Rosemary Mayer gives us more of the real stuff: a woman reckoning with herself, her body, her art, her world. As a genre, journals appeal because they let you inhabit, in some small, voyeuristic way, another’s subjectivity. For that alone, this book is a gift to young creatives. There is solace in Mayer’s capriciousness and candor as she develops her style and navigates the New York art scene. In her journals, she creates and performs herself, composing an unguarded self-portrait of an artist as a young woman.

The first edition of Mayer’s 1971 journal, a slim paperback, was published in 2016 by Object Relations in conjunction with an exhibition at SOUTHFIRST Gallery in Brooklyn. One of many journals she kept over the years, it documents the time after Mayer separated from her husband, the artist Vito Acconci, and before she became a founding member of the women-led A.I.R. Gallery in New York City. During this time, she created “Veils,” a series of large looped, knotted, and painted fabric sculptures that materialize like bush, brood, spirits. The new edition of her journal includes additional photographs of her domestic life, preliminary sketches from her notebook, installation images, and precise, structural illustrations rendered in bright colored pencil. The updated book also comprises a much vaster collection of journal entries. This extended length makes all the difference—not because it matters, really, what Mayer did on any particular day, but because the accumulation of content gives her shape, the way small colored tiles form a mosaic.

In place of a traditional narrative, Mayer’s thoughts meander, fluctuating between formal modes and moods. Journal entries that might otherwise be tedious are kept fresh with a mixture of dead-pan delivery (“I came home feeling rotten. I bought a turtle. He won’t eat.”), melodrama (“I should cut my pair of pantyhose to shreds—and mail them to who’s responsible for people having to work”), and moments of philosophical insight (“The Aloneness hit me briefly this afternoon. To have continuity with no one”).

In 1971, Mayer was living in an apartment on Brome Street in Little Italy. Downtown Manhattan was in the midst of a creative revival. Mayer had met and befriended influential artists like Sol LeWitt, Donna Dennis, and Adrian Piper. An endorsement from LeWitt in 1970 reads, simply, “Dear Museum of Modern Art, Rosemary Mayer is a real artist.” Conceptual art was on the rise. Galleries moved downtown and multiplied.
Some of her work is purely material, others link the physicality of the object with a clear subject. Following a pregnancy scare, for example, she creates a new piece inspired by abortion, a visceral mess of beige cloth draped and stained "red as blood."

In his 1967 essay, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Sol LeWitt argued that "the thought process[es] of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product." Mayer's journal proves the value of what LeWitt calls the "intervening steps," the "scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, models, studies, thoughts, conversations." Her records add new detail to the history of the New York art scene and offer a perspective on the creative life that is intimate, imperfect, and as interesting as any final work of art.

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**Dayanita Singh's Zakir Hussain Maquette**

A facsimile of Singh's original maquette showcases her cut-and-paste working method.

**BY MEGAN N. LIBERTY**

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Dayanita Singh

Steidl (2019)

Dayanita Singh's photobooks are architectural—both physical objects and sequences of images, like her *Pathi Box* (2018), an unbound book that includes 30 photographs as single cards inside a custom wooden box with an opening at the front that reveals one visible card. The black-and-white photographs show documents and archival materials, as in *File Room* (2012) that documents the shelves of papers in file storage archive rooms, a subject she has returned to throughout her work. *Pathi Box and File Room* are more concrete examples of Singh's interest in the photograph as object, archive, and personal memento. But this method traces back to her very first book about the musician Zakir Hussain.

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The new publication *Zakir Hussain Maquette* (2019) reproduces in facsimile Singh's original maquette for the book, showcasing her cut-and-paste working method with handwritten text and her class notes for the project published as an accompanying reader (that also includes an essay by curator Shanay Jhaveri). Together, the maquette and reader reveal the centrality of craft and sequence to Singh's practice. The maquette offers insight into the bookmaker's specific and meticulous choices.

Published by Steidl, it underscores tactility—the sense that the book object Singh built is not just a sequence of images within...
The Outwardness of Art: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes

A new collection edited by Thomas Evans focuses on Stokes’s formative writing on outwardness and early essays and unpublished writings on ballet from the 1930s.

BY JONAH GOLDMAN KAY

It’s difficult to categorize Adrian Stokes’s writing—he is frequently referred to as an art critic, but that belies the breadth of the British writer’s oeuvre. While Stokes was largely interested in art, and sculpture in particular, his essays touch on architecture, ballet, pop culture, and travel. Long before “visual culture” would come to divide the images without being redundant, viewing, revealing its fullness and reflecting the otherness of its surroundings, Stokes began to explore outwardness as it related to sculpture, but he would later discuss this notion in ballet—which he said occupied a “uniform corporeal outwardness”—and as a phenomenological tool in describing architecture and place. “All art is the conversion of inner states into outward objective form,” Stokes remarked in To-night the Ballet (1934). His skill as an observer of his environment, drawn from this fascination with outwardness, as well as his mastery of the essay form, makes Stokes’s writing especially enjoyable.

Born in London in 1902, Stokes straddled two distinct eras in art writing. His earlier writing followed in the footsteps of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, while his later works were steeped in the then-pioneering field of psychoanalysis. Early works like The Quattro Cento (1932), wherein he first formulated his theory of outwardness, were shaped by the writer’s friendship with Ezra Pound. The two had met on the tennis court and quickly bonded over a shared interest in the Tempio Malatestiense, whose bellicose commissioner—the feudal ruler Sigismondo Malatesta—was featured in several of Pound’s cantos. However, that relationship was short-lived—Stokes, who was both gay and Jewish, was disturbed by Pound’s embrace of fascism and distanced himself from the author. Luckily, he found a supporter in T.S. Elliot, who became his longtime publisher at Faber & Faber. It was Elliot who championed Stokes’s writing and diligently published all of his early works.

These earlier essays, pulled from Stokes’s books published with Faber & Faber between 1932 and 1951, form the bulk of The Outwardness of Art: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes, a new collection edited by Thomas Evans. Unlike Richard Wollheim’s popular 1972 collection, which focused exclusively on Stokes’s earlier works and grouped them by theme, Evans takes a chronological approach and includes later works published after he and Faber & Faber parted ways in 1952, as well as early essay collections and unpublished writings on ballet from the 1920s. But the focus remains on Stokes’s formative writing on outwardness and devotes a substantial portion of the collection to excerpts from these earlier writings.

In Stones of Rimini (1934) Stokes developed the now-famous distinction between carving and modelling in sculpture, building his aesthetics of outwardness. Like The Quattro Cento, the essays in Stones of Rimini focus on Agostino di Duccio’s sculptures in the Tempio Malatestiense. Stokes defines carving as an act of cutting down in which the stone itself, as opposed to the carved figure, comes to life. “A figure carved in stone is fine carving when one feels that not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure, has come to life,” he writes in “Carving, Modelling and Agostino,” one of the selections from Stones of Rimini. Modelling, on the other hand, is a process of building up, a “plastic conception” wherein the material is formed around the subject. While Stokes sees these values most clearly in sculpture, the dialectical relationship between plastic and stone in his writing forms a broader typology for classifying visual objects.

In an essay on the ballet La Boutique Fantasque in Russian Ballet (1935), Stokes explores plastic and stone values in relation to dancers’ bodies. For Stokes, ballet is the epitome of outwardness—the “turned out” body was a means by which a dancer “continually shows as much of himself as possible to the spectator.” In La Boutique Fantasque, dancers perform as wooden dolls, their malleable forms bestowing “plastic characteristics upon movement.” But when dancers posing as children enter the stage, their actions become forceful, “no less directed than are the carver’s blows upon his stone.” What makes these essays so enjoyable is the way in which Stokes moves the reader along, interweaving evocative descriptions and nuanced arguments.

In the 1930s, Stokes began psychoanalysis with Melanie Klein, a controversial figure whose work was crucial in the development of object relations theory. While inklings of psychoanalytic theory show themselves in Stokes’s early works, the selections from the 1950s onward are saturated with Kleinian theory. Indeed, as Evans notes in his introduction, this approach could veer toward the reductive, as was the case in Michelangelo (1952), which Faber & Faber declined to publish on the grounds that it was overly psychoanalytic. That criticism is not without merit—the selections from Stokes’s Klein-influenced work, such as “The Ego-Figure” (from Greek Culture and the Ego (1953)) and the previously unpublished 1962 essay “On Resignation” are bogged down in psychoanalytic lingo and lack the prosaic observations that define his other writing.

In any case, Stokes’s pioneering approach to psychoanalysis led to a younger generation discovering his work, both in Britain and the US. In the States, his most passionate supporters included Meyer Schapiro and John Ashbery, as well as painters like Philip Guston and Barnett Newman. Regardless of criticisms leveled against him, the popularity of Stokes’s psychoanalytic writing among mid-century thinkers preserved a broader interest in his work. Today, nearly four decades after Stokes’s death, the selections in The Outwardness of Art still retain their relevance. Evans’s inclusion of Stokes’s ballet writings, as well as a fascinating essay on Mickey Mouse, reveal the writer’s prescient genre-bending approach. Likewise, Stokes’s demand that art expose itself to the viewer and that the viewer, in turn, interrogate their own interest is a timeless testament to the subjectivity of art writing.
Among the many challenges of life currently, one of the truly exhausting aspects—more than the incessancy of kids, the inability to engage in familiar distractions, the rote ceaselessness of the day-to-day, or the existential despair that that’s really all life is, day after day of dishes and distractions while hoping meaning presents itself—is the confrontation with self. Our old outdoor lives allowed for a distraction or distance from our actual selves, which distraction/distance allowed us to believe the stories we’re telling about ourselves and living. That our lives are bigger than the punchline stereotype we cut. Profiles we cut.

We are? And, darkest, don’t we all believe something sweet in how these characters ring? You know that. Buried at the heart of the day-to-day, or the existential ceaselessness of the day-to-day, or the existential pursuit of what makes us feel most alive, there’s a rubbing against or running from what we believe to be meaningful objects.

And so even though you know fairly early in the novel that Lindy will be found, and you know fairly quickly that—like Jorie Graham’s poem “Prayer” argues—“Nobody gets what they want… What you get is to be what—and who—we’ve been to not be what—and who—we’ve been to not be. And, like everything won in April is just as important as one won in late September. And, like everything played out, with what teams might end up contending in the postseason already. Whatever—but ultimately it’s all a sort of fiction knows, there’s no such thing as meaning.

And while I in my basement have “nothing” in common with the majority of characters in The Cactus League, I felt deeply connected to each, as Nemens allows them a full existence complete with half-glimpses of themselves that are critically, with the ability to stretch and surprise themselves. That’s all it is.

Emily Nemens’s The Cactus League and Luke Geddes’s Heart of Junk

BY WESTON CUTTER

The Cactus League
Emily Nemens
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (2020)

Heart of Junk
Luke Geddes
Simon & Schuster (2020)

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sweet for how hard they try; for how their efforts—like most of ours—don’t quite pay off as we’d expected.

There is, in *The Cactus League*, just one off-note, which comes as the voice of an announcer who preambles each of the chapters. He’s got his own font, and he’s recognizable, and while the essence of the trick—he addresses topography, how time transforms things, noting consistingly how baseball is a long game, and how events from the start matter through the end—is fine, it’s entirely unnecessary, like the moment in a film when someone seductively beautiful says “follow me,” as if anyone wouldn’t. The criticism here is actually praise: Nemens’s *The Cactus League* is strong beyond needing tricks, and both it and Luke Geddes’s *Heart* are wonderful, necessary reads to remind you how infinite and wild other people can be. They are jolts to encourage you to hang in there until we can all get out again and wave to each other, wondering about everyone’s story.

**WESTON CUTTER** is from Minnesota and is the author of *You’d Be A Stranger, Too* (BlazeVOX Books, 2010) and *All Black Everything* (New Michigan Press, 2012).

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Joyelle McSweeney’s *Taxicon and Arachne* and Rachel Eliza Griffiths’s *Seeing the Body: Poems* by John Domini

*Taxicon and Arachne*

Joyelle McSweeney

Nightboat Books (2020)

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April 2018 was a momentous occasion: it was the birth of McSweeney’s and Griffiths’s double-text *Seeing the Body: Poems*. Now we are partially upon the occasion of another double-text: McSweeney’s *Taxicon and Arachne*. Even if the best of McSweeney’s and Griffiths’s work awaits us in the separate texts, we wonder: have these two texts together, in the same poetically literal translation, made more than twice the length of the original? About midway, *Taxicon* makes room for “Taxicon Sonnets,” a “crown” of 14, dedicated to John Keats. The doomed young Romantic wouldn’t know what to make of these, though each runs 14 lines and some bear traces of a rhyme scheme. Another offender appears in *Calliope* (Google: muse of poetry would be the theme, nothing like Love or Spring, but rather the poet’s fatal “tuberacle.” Yet the sequence whips sickbed language into a tour de force, boldly facing the moment when “life converts its currency.” Now and again, too, McSweeney speaks of her method:

My throat’s an ulcerated weapons cache where radioactive gunfire bleeds their toxins in groundwater.

Those weapons poke out everywhere, in *Taxicon*, and the ground often reeks of poison. The stanza includes the festering of slaughtered innocents, in poems such as “Sisterhood of the Guerrilla Rapist” (Google: massacred Mexican schoolchildren), a densely textured *arpillera* of rage and sympathy. There’s more than one “mass grave” and plenty of scuzz: “like the condemn/ passed through the drug mule.” Such material yanks the stench includes the festering slag-heap, whirling through links both sonic and associative:

If there is a ticket, rip it, a ticket, rip it up, a spinning wheel, a bit song, flag it, a golden hair.

In *Arachne*, however, the moves are decidedly easier to follow. Reading *Taxicon*, I needed outside sources to confirm the work had to do with her third pregnancy, its many tests and worries. In *Arachne*, the poet spells out the core tragedy: “I have two living daughters and a third dead daughter.” That last was Arachne, and in fall of 2017 she lived an “odd allocation of thirteen days,” rendering her mother “the matron-king of hell / in yoga pants and a disused bra for a laurel.” Her infernal year thereafter occupies the rest of the book, shambling but in chronological order. It even relies on a clear recurring image. In Rust Belt Indiana (McSweeney teaches at Notre Dame), pathetic fallacy takes polluted form:

I am like the river:

thick as beer and with a sudsy crown

polylethylene bags drape the banks...

This garbage dump too sees some sophisticated migrants. There’s a refrain from Edmund Spenser (see: *PoetryFoundation.org*), a vicious bit of cheer amid the gloom.

Then there’s this breathtaking spectacle:

the wings of hymenoptera

like a helicopter

performing its opera

all above Indiana

bearing the babies away

Yet note how the verbal fireworks drop into anguish. McSweeney remains clever, far cleverer than I, but by the end of this masterful double-text—in which even the unequal past police seem appropriate to staking off the poet’s mourning—any sensitive reader should feel as if they’ve shared in the poet’s singular struggle: that of finding some formal, some phrase, that might convey what’s set your back-hairs pricking. Either could mistake McSweeney’s heartbroken stammer for hard work. And now in a coinage, however, the moves are harder and Griffiths likewise keeps things succinct. Most bouts of mourning wrap up in about a page, and when they do go longer, they engage greater material. The outstanding case in point would be the stately centerpiece of the final section, “My Rapes.” Taking a long, sharp-eyed view, this poem neither soft-pedals its bad news, like “walking alone on the street/ in ripped clothes,” nor wallows in it. The narrator encounters violence not just as a victim but also as a counselor, thus allowing for concerns about “the wrong way to go” (similarly, other poems acknowledge that Griffiths could be a handful for her father and husband). On top of that, “My Rapes” makes canny reference to “fairest tales” and literature, working towards a sistership with the suicidal Woolf and Plath.

Small wonder that this full load of a poem provides a light-fingered summary, quite marvelous, of what her mother did for the writer: “She showed me how to follow my heart into hard places.” Rather, what’s truly the wonder is the great company both these artists make, in our current hard place.

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*Seeing the Body: Poems*
The Exene Chronicles is a YA coming-of-age story set in 1980s California. While offering a slice of punk rock nostalgia around influential punk band X and frontwoman Exene Cervenka, the book also explores racism, sexuality, and the ways society often positions young women as transactional commodities with their worth based on their whiteness, their appearance, and their ability to please men.

In many ways punk rock is at its core rebelled against such cultural strictures but, as Patricia Morrison (ex-Bags, The Damned) sums it up, in Los Angeles, "women started getting pushed out of punk when the (male) violence started." For Exene Cervenka, the early LA punk scene was diverse but not consciously so: "We were just kids. We were girls. We were men. We were women. We were gay. We were straight. We were Black, White, Chinese, Asian, Latino. Nobody made a badge out of their hyphenated being." But both Morrison and Cervenka are White; Lia, Collins’s protagonist, is a young Black girl in a place and time where Black people are rare (Lia’s school had only three Black students) and racism is rampant.

That’s not to say that it’s any better these days. Racism is entrenched in American culture; punk has largely become a male amalgamation of pop and over-produced commercial teen fodder. There are exceptions of course (Russia’s Pussy Riot is the most obvious). Listening to the new X album (Alphabetland April, 2020) while reading Collins’s novel, it’s difficult not to be overcome by waves of nostalgia. But the world Lia lives in is one I can’t claim to understand. The dangers of being a girl in the world of men, of trying to form an identity other than the feminine—sex is too ambiguous and grey for any meaning on earth. To me, it’s not a binary. To be so grossly simplifying it is to ignore the ways young women learn to be themselves in a world that often wants them to be someone else.

Camille A. Collins
Kindred Books (2020)

The Exene Chronicles

The Exene Chronicles is the first novel under the imprint Kindred Books (2020) in the hands of Camille A. Collins. Collins holds an MFA (The New School), two MAs (NYU), and is in the process of earning an MLIS (Palmer). She was right there in the center.

Kathy Valentine
All I Ever Wanted
University of Texas Press (2020)

The Go-Go’s existed roughly from 1981–1985 and though there have been reunion shows and tours, the importance of their early records has never been eclipsed. They were, for long-time bassist Kathy Valentine stated in her memoir, the first all-woman band of many us saw on MTV or on stage. The Go-Go’s were too pop for my teenage self: growing up with pictures of the Runaways and Iggy Pop hidden in my journal and posters of Led Zeppelin and Queen on my walls, a bunch of semi-punk-girls from California didn’t hold much appeal. In 1981, I moved to the East Coast and met other people who listened to punk rock, to bands like CRASS, The Damned, and PIL. DJing a late-night radio show, I got lots of requests for the Go-Go’s and I liked a couple of their songs, but really, they got on my nerves. I didn’t then know anything about the band’s history or their place in the Los Angeles punk scene. LA punk to me was the Vandals, X, or the Germs. But the band had much deeper roots than the music press of the day granted them. Instead of the cute “America’s sweetheart” often depicted, the Go-Go’s were a hard-partying, loud-mouthed, rock band; maybe the sound wasn’t the punk rock I preferred, maybe they looked “too California” for me, but their attitude and musicianship, as Valentine writes it, helped make them one of the most successful all-woman rock bands of all time.

Whenever I read a celebrity memoir, I ask myself, “Why does this story matter? What can readers learn from this?” There has to be more to a celebrity memoir than just tales of sex, drugs, name dropping, fame, and survival. What Valentine provides is not only a thorough accounting of her harrowing childhood, her hard-fought rise to stardom, subsequent collapse and redemption; she provides a window into an important part of rock history. The 1980s were a watermark for change in music: 1981 witnessed not only the release of Joan Jett’s “Bad Reputation” video (the first time many of us saw a woman being “tough” on camera) but also the release of the Go-Go’s wildly successful first album. Punk was supposedly “dead” and yet had influenced the sound of countless bands; women were appearing on stage playing guitars in larger numbers than ever before, and the Go-Go’s were right there in the center.

The Go-Go’s story is one of the most compelling stories in rock history (there’s even an index). It’s not hyperbole to state that the Go-Go’s were one of the most successful all-female rock bands of all time. The importance of their success to thousands of young women (whether musical or otherwise) cannot be underestimated. Without the Go-Go’s initial success, the Bangles would have never been given a chance (nor would the Pandoras, the Muffs, etc.) and many of us would not have grown up seeing women performing on stage as something other than a sexy singer. Valentine carefully describes the incremental rise of the band and the factors that led to the band’s initial breakup in 1985: a combination of mis-management, poor decisions, and bad timing. When lead singer Belinda Carlisle launches her highly successful solo career, Valentine is left scrambling to find a way to keep playing music. She tries various producers and combinations of musicians (including a brief stint playing drums for a band from Girlfriends) but nothing really clicks. And all the while, her substance abuse continues. It’s a common enough story—talented musician parties too much, band breaks up, reckless comes for. For Valentine, the reckoning took a few years, but she survived and even thrived; ultimately making the decision to get sober with the help of long-time friend Carlene Carter. Predictably, the last part of the memoir details Valentine’s struggles to achieve sobriety—although, like most projects she sets her mind to, she appears to swing into AA with complete dedication, even making the hard decision to break up with long suffering boyfriend Clem Burke (ex-Blondie).

Valentine’s story is also a circle of celebritie_ries: she writes about touring with David Bowie and the Police, partying with and then mourning the death of friend John Belushi; there are sidelines with Rob Lowe, Bob Dylan (who commiserates about the Bangles’ success), and Keith Richards (who asks her to will a guitar to him). After a brutal home invasion she holes up at the Sunset Marquis.
with Charlie Sexton and long-time friend Carlene Carter (June Carter and Johnny Cash pick up the tab). But this memoir isn’t about name dropping; it’s about music and how, at her core, Valentine lives to play. The memoir ends with a Go-Go’s reunion and memoir is both a gripping and entertaining read and an important addition to the history of American music.

YOVONNE G. CARRETT holds an MLIS (Palmer), anMFA (The New School), two MAs (NYU), and is currently working on a PhD in History & Culture at Drew University where her dissertation focuses on women & gender identity in 1980s American pop rock. She is Senior Fiction Editor at Black Lawrence Press.

IN CONVERSATION

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN with Tony Leuzzi

Happenstance led me to Jason Schneiderman. In the final hours of an AWP booklist, when many publishers were unloading their backlists for lower prices, I passed the Red Hen Press table and was drawn to a jaunty, posterized drawing of a man in a suit with a briefcase and sassy shoes. This was the cover image for a book of poems called Primary Source (Red Hen Press, 2016). Based on the juxtaposition of that cover and title, I assumed the poems inside would be quirkily and smart. They proved to be much more than this, for it was immediately apparent that Schneiderman has a rare and distinctive voice in American poetry. His tone, which is transparent and serene, functions as a flexible instrument that lends his poems an unusual texture. This achievement is matched by a deft-ness of form. His well-sculpted lines are as spare and pleasing as the grafted limbs of a bonsai tree. Thankfully, such mastery of tone and form do not preclude a sense of humor. Even in their most serious moments, Schneiderman’s poems are liable to wink at their readers, suggesting a playful irony that tempers earnestness. The result is a voice that just feels like they’re speaking or that this is just what they do. Technique often leads to the appearance of ease, as well as that sense of flow, which is how I understand duende.” The conversation below occurred across five days in May through a series of email exchanges. Schneiderman’s responses show him to be a graciously invested citizen of poetry who cares as much about clarifying his aesthetic as he does about articulating forms of human suffering. TONY LEUZZI (RVAL): Congratulations on your new collection of poems, Hold Me Tight, a book you have organized into five sections, each with its own character and focus. As a result, this collection reads like a series of interconnected chapbooks: “The Book of Wolves”; “The Chris Burden Suite”; an untitled collectio of individual poems: “The Book of Lasts”; and the long opening poem called “Anger.” Can you take a moment to discuss the aesthetic and/or thematic impetus behind each of these sections and explain how they work together to make Hold Me Tight a cohesive work? JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: Once I mostly knew which poems would be in Hold Me Tight, I had two models in mind—either the book would blend the various sequences together, sort of like the way the various melodies keep coming back in Swan Lake—or I would let each sequence remain intact. I settled on keeping the sequences together because each sequence seemed to make more sense as a fitted and interlaced fingers (if you’ll allow the poems to be fingers for the purposes of this metaphor). I found that each section had its own self-contained arc, and that each section had its own tonal and emotional coherence. Your idea of chapbooks is spot on. “The Book of Wolves” was the hardest sequence to keep together, in part because what “wolf” means keeps shifting—sometimes the wolves are wronged innocents and sometimes the wolves are vicious predators, and sometimes the wolves are neither or both. “The Chris Burden Suite” very clearly needed to stay in a single unit. What unifies the book for me is that each section is really about what it means to live together. I thought that in the early years of the coronavirus, we would begin to see the powerful interdependence of humanity—that your access to healthcare is dependent on health care—but the protesters with guns at statehouses make it pretty clear that they are doubing down on “every man for himself.” But, for me, the central concern of the book is that you can’t get away from the way that humans need one another and you can’t get away from the ways that humans do violence to each other. One of the things I love about a book is that the poems are read against each other. The way I often explain it to students is that whatever comes first informs your reading of what comes next. So, if you start with a poem about the Holocaust and move to your grandparents, your grandparents become an example of the Holocaust. If you start with your grandparents and then move to the Holocaust, the Holocaust is what happened to your grandparents. It’s often a very subtle distinction, but I think that as you build the book, each poem rests on the one that came before. I’m making it sound a bit more complicated than it is. The process is actually very intuitive. I felt the sequence below occurred long before I could say anything coherent about why that shape was correct or what impact I wanted the final shape of the book to have on the reader. When I was younger, I couldn’t write long poems to save my life, but the attempts at long poems would often fragment into sequences that seemed satisfying. Once I realized that the sequences could extend across books, I liked the idea that my work could have a unity across the books as well as within each book. RVAL: I definitely see how the main concerns of the book are “the ways that humans need each other” and “the ways humans do violence to each other.” As you say, we can’t get away from these realities, which, as your poems demonstrate, are often interconnected, or even concurrent. This means much of Hold Me Tight hovers between despair and affirmation. You’re able to pull this off so well because you always strike an appropriate tone, which respects both realities as part of the human condition. Back in December, you and I talked about the importance of tone in poetry. It represents an attitude or approach that is hard to define but instantly recognizable, even when a poem is translated (well) in another language. You admitted, for example, how crucial Wislawa Szymborska and Dan Pagis have been to your understanding of poetic production. Can you articulate a theory of tone? Or discuss your considerations of it while writing the poems in Hold Me Tight? SCHNEIDERMAN: One of the things that I love about poetry is that it’s a space where thinking and feeling aren’t separate operations, but basically the same thing. And I so I’ll need to explain what tone is—the combination of thought and feeling; or the way you feel about what you’re thinking; or the way you’re trying to make your audience feel about your thoughts. I was rereading the work of Binyon recently for an essay. I was shocked by how sneering their tone is. I mean, they have all these brilliant ideas, but the tone is awful: condescending and annoyed. They strike this repeated, petulant note of, I’ll explain this one. more. time. It’s actually a tone I can find a bit charming in a satire or a little frisson of naughtiness in their haughtiness—but I know I would have found it insufferable if I’d had to actually be in a room with one of them giving their paper as a lecture. I think that form can be a kind of asbes- tos glove that lets you handle topics that would otherwise burn you, and I think tone provides a kind of reassurance. Szymborska and Pagis, like Kafka, manage this incredible reserve and calm in the face of the tragic. I think that it doubles down on women & gender identity in 1980s American punk rock. She is Senior Fiction Editor at Black Lawrence Press.
RAIL: “Anger,” the nine-page poem that opens the book is one of the most satisfying moments of verse I’ve read by any poet in years. How did the poem come about? Were you conscious when writing it that it would be the lead piece in the collection?

SCHNEIDERMAN: Thank you! I don’t think I had any plans for it when I started, except to get it written. To some extent, the poem actually traces its own writing—the narrative is true—even though I knew that the poem has very little autobiographical information in it. I was thinking of Sharon Olds’s “Satan Says,” where the psychological stakes are clear, but the facts are not revealed. The poem never says what I’m angry about, and that was one of the hardest parts of the poem, to see if I could write it on my own terms.

Most of the poem was deeply personal, but the Pulse nightclub shooting gave the poem its ending. Reports that the shooter was essentially trying to murder his way out of his own desire for men resonated so strongly with me. I feel like the dominant effect of the poem is an accusation, a charge and shame, and I suspect that most violence and rage is a way of covering up fear and shame. I know empathy is not an obvious choice for responding to a mass murderer, but I think that empathy and condemnation can exist together. It often feels like American culture will do anything it can to refuse a sense of interdependency, and this poem was my way of insisting on that slightly old saw of Terence that nothing human is alien. But that insistence can’t be simple and scary.

After I wrote it, I was watching the TV show Wanderlust, and there’s this episode where Toni Collette has a therapy session in which she experiences about three years’ worth of episodes of a single story. In the school of Storytellers, there is a call to reinvent oneself but, as you say, when you wrote that story you find yourself retelling again and again.

RAIL: Your poem “Storyteller” from “The Book of Wolves” section of Howl magazine is another stunner. After the initial declaration that “Little Red Riding Hood is the most told story / in the world,” your poem pans in on the School of Storytellers where a girl is crying because “She’s just been told that she will never know / any other story,” that her life’s responsibility is to tell countless variations of it. This is a calling and a condemnation, as “no one escapes the School of Storytellers.” While the poem deals specifically with storytelling, poems tell stories, too. I’m wondering if you believe poets (and indeed all artists) are presented with the same gift and burden—to tell the same story over and over again, through whatever means or means they can. If so, what are the implications of this?

SCHNEIDERMAN: I have this theory of the absolute scale of artists. For example, Assassins is a 10 on the absolute scale of Sondheim, while A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum is a 1. For Almodovar, Bad Education is a perfect 10, julietta is a 4. Every artist has their own quirks and tricks, and sometimes they smooth them out and sometimes that let their freak flag fly. I love Kafka for the absurd bureaucracy, the bodily confusions, the muffled emotional responses to horrific circumstance. I’m great at seeing what forms the identity of other people’s work—but I have no idea what would be a 10 on the absolute scale of Schneiderman (or a 4 for that matter). It’s a bit like the joke I used to make about why I have no gaydar: it’s like trying to use a compass at true north. But that may be true for all artists—we just do what we do, and it’s great when that’s what other people want.

When I was in graduate school the cliché was that we all try to “find our voice.” There’s been a lot of push back against that metaphor in the last couple decades, but I think it’s actually a really useful metaphor. I’ve watched a lot of poets work to that point where they can write poems that just feel like they’re speaking or that is just what they do. Technique often leads to the appearance of ease, as well as that sense of flow, which is how I understand duende.

I was teaching Introduction to Children’s Literature at the time I wrote “Storyteller,” and I had started the class with the multiple version of Little Red Riding Hood. As W. H. Auden said in Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature. I started there so that I could get a grant to take my students to see a production of Into the Woods. But about six or seven versions in, I got really sick of Little Red Riding Hood. I even had my students write their own versions—which seemed like a great assignment when I devised it over the summer—but then I went from bored to overwhelmed to drowning. My friend (to whom the poem is dedicated) had just published a memoir about her complicated relationship with her mother, who had been a well-known storyteller.

The problem with getting what you want is that you don’t know the bad parts until you are waist deep in them (like reading and grading 25 versions of Little Red Riding Hood). The poem was a way to bring all those moments together.

As poets, a lot of us have characteristic concerns that have a gravity we can’t escape. With each book, I’ve tried hard to reinvent myself, and find a new way to work, but as soon as I finnish the change, there I am again. Perhaps it’s the military brav in me. No matter where I go, I’m me in a new place.

RAIL: So, with each book you’ve tried to reinvent yourself but, as you say, when you finish you think you are “there again.” What or where is “there” for you? What is that story you find yourself retelling and again and again?

SCHNEIDERMAN: In the first scene of Tom Stoppard’s The Real Thing, we watch a man accuse his wife of infidelity, and as she’s about to leave him, she says, “There’s a right thing to say if you can think what it is.” I think that may be the story I tell myself over and over again. There was a right thing to say, but I didn’t think of what it was, and now something is broken that I can never fix. Or maybe that’s what my poems are: me thinking of the right thing too late to make the change in the world. In the play, I hear the wife telling her husband that he has to be better—that he has to let go of his petulance to make things better—but he won’t, and I think that’s the story I keep coming back to—the story of how we messaged things up. The story of how we said the wrong thing. I keep trying to figure out how we can hold on and how we can do better? How can we acknowledge what hurts us in a way that builds up, rather than tears down?

Of course, if you know The Real Thing, that first scene is a play within the play. The infidelity and the separation are doubly unreal, so maybe Stoppard is trying to tell me something about the real thing is a fantasy two layers deep, a fantasy written by a character he wrote into a play. But I think of that line all the time. There’s a right thing to say. I can’t stop until I find it.

RAIL: I enjoyed “The Chris Burden Suite,” which is situated in the center of the book. Admittedly, I did not know who he was before reading these and was intrigued by what I found in a Google search. Any number of these poems are intriguing apart from their connection to the artist, but so much more rewarding in relation to his identity and the approach we take from each of these pieces—they feel like pieces as well as poems—and revel in their oddities, their strange clarities. Several of them make interesting propositions about art and that is where a girl is crying because “She’s just been told that she will never know / any other story,” that her life’s responsibility is to tell countless variations of it. This is a calling and a condemnation, as “no one escapes the School of Storytellers.”
Restrain 9. I’m also fascinated by the ways that performance is documented—is the image of Zhang Huan’s “To Add One Leaf” the way we live in the world. Rather than speaking/singing of inevitable apocalypse in a tragic register, you hint at greater losses through various metonymies, whereby portions or fragments to be lost are conjured with the kind of tone we were discussing earlier. Rather than perfect Szymska-like balance between sincerity and irony. My favorite of these is the penultimate poem, “The Last War,” which poses a “solution” to war by eliminating disagreement. In doing so, it makes a reflection that we no longer believe in the search for a perfect age of Google or an age of memoranda. What can you tell me about this poem, and, perhaps, some more general thoughts about the section as a whole?

SCHNEIDERMAN: “The Last War” took me forever; I had a really hard time finding the right ending. I had to acknowledge what I would miss in the world if there were no war. I’m not a pacifist (though I’m getting there), because I do think there are things worth fighting for. The beginning of the poem imagines a sort of universal humanist reset, in which the pains of history are not merely forgotten, but in which histories of oppression and oppressed are quite literally divvied up evenly among all people. That fantasy of a reset, or a do-over, or “turning over a new leaf” is a common one—maybe even a necessary one—but it’s just a fantasy. And I realized that if that reset was possible, it would have to be perpetual, and that’s where I think that poem reaches its climax, inducing climaxes, where the Orwellian erasure reaches a moment of zeality. Years ago, I was learning about the Library of Alexandria, and I kept coming across different accounts of its destruction. Of course, as a scholar, the burning of the Library of Alexandria stands out as one of the great losses in history. But as I kept researching I found out that we don’t know who destroyed it because so many people and groups wanted to be credited for it. Historically, the destruction of knowledge was a point of pride rather than a burning shame. I think that also entered the poem.

The sequence of last things had begun fairly abstractly with poems like “The Last Mirror” and then got closer and closer to me. Writing “The Last Ace of Base Entertainment” was a lot of fun, but I also wondered if anyone under 30 would even know what I’m talking about. I think that the poem allowed me to move into an elegiac mode while celebrating the thing before it gets lost.

When I grew up, I had a great sense of living after great tragedy. The Holocaust and the civil rights movement felt like the major shaping events of the past, and I was young enough to feel that the collapse of the Soviet Union heralded a better future. Protease inhibitors came out when I was in college, and I think AIDS got its death sentence to chronic condition (at least for those with health care and a tolerance for the classes of drugs on the market). I had both a sense of optimism and a sense that I was lucky to have missed the worst. Cue the Trump administration and Covid-19. I think that part of the sequence was my bafflement at the emergence of American Pessimism. I’m shocked by how pessimistic we have become. I was a store in the other day and EMF was on the playlist, and I heard the lines “Right here, right now, there is no other place I’d rather be.” I just thought, my god, I can’t imagine that being on the radio. But then, again it was on the loudspeaker.

I hope that those last poems are me making peace with where I am in time and space, and offering that peace to my reader. The final poem in the book is trying to find the equilibrium that has tentatively arrived in the first poem in the book. Equilibrium is finding a way to live with the fact life keeps going, but that it will also end. Equilibrium is not falling over. Peace is so much harder. Peace is so much harder.
What It Contains, What It Obscures: A Dialogue with Five (mostly) Debut Authors on the Relationship Between Writing Fact and Fiction

INTERVIEW BY BEN TANZER
City with our young daughter in 2011, we start a thriving coffee business, grow our family, and are living our American Dream. After the 2016 election, we suddenly unsure about our new home. Reclaiming the tradition of coffeehouses throughout history, our coffeehouses become hubs for local organizing and action. Moving from despair to hope, this story is ultimately about discovering meaningful community, and fighting for our dreams.

JUDITH KRUMMECK: My book, Old New Worlds: A Tale of Two Immigrants, is a work of creative nonfiction entwining the stories of my great-grand-grand-mother, Sarah Barker, who emigrated from England with her missionary husband, John, in 1815 to minister to the indigenous Khoskihi of South Africa, and my own immigration from Africa to America, almost 200 years later. Because I had scant facts about Sarah's life and had to rely on secondary sources, I used my imagination to flesh out her life. So, is it fiction or nonfiction? Similarly, is the term "autobiographical novel" an oxymoron? Well, Karl Ove Knausgård wasn't shy about owning his six autobiographical novels, My Struggle—-to give a characterization of his wife and others were outraged at being "outed." On the other hand, one theory about why Elena Ferrante chose to write under a pseudonym is that it was because her four Neapolitan Novels were autobiographical.

STEPHANI NUR COLBY: Walking with the Ineffable: A Spiritual Memoir (with Cats) is the story of one woman's walk through the mystery of spiritual experiences and a personal relationship with God. It is about the changing weather of belief: what we believe, why we believe, and when we believe. When we draw on childhood experiences to the present, it raises questions about readers' own repressed positive experiences with the Divine and our relationship to the Creation brimming over with divine Nearness and accessibility. It is anti-traditional in that it is respectful of tradition, but as free as possible from the weight of convention. It is about joy—joy, as defined by one quoted spiritual teacher, as "knowledge of the perfection of God."

SHARYN SKEETER: In Dancing with Langston, a novel, Carrie, a business manager who always wanted to be a dancer, has two commitments today. She made a promise to her late father to move Cousin Ella, a former dancer, from her condemned Harlem apartment to a safe place. She's also committed to catch a flight to Seattle with her husband for his new book signing. She is leaving the apartment where she's had salons with Langston Hughes. She also has a mysterious gift that she wants Carrie to carry. If she does, a revelation about Carrie's father and Langston Hughes will change her life.

RAIL: A writer I know who is known for blurring fact and fiction in his work was once asked by a wife of a nonfiction author whether he was in fact fiction or nonfiction, he responded, "No one ever asks an artist that about their paintings." So, I ask you, does it matter if one's work is identified as fiction or nonfiction? I mean yes, I mean No. Why must I choose? The two are often blurred as they intersect. A fictional story is fabricated based on the author's imagination, but a nonfiction story must hold to a higher standard and could lose all credibility if sprinkled with a few fabrications, I believe that nonfiction uses many techniques of fiction to make it more appealing. A few lines of fact in a nonfiction work doesn't change the facts in the context. If you see, I agree with your writer friend. To me, none of this distinction between fact and matter matters in art. As I see it, the point of creating art is much more than simply recording facts. An artist searches for the truth in that raw complexity. The novel, poem, painting, dance, music, play—whatever art it is—may give the reader or viewer a new way of looking at his or her world. Whatever facts or fictional techniques the artist uses are simply tools to that end.

RAIL: We immediately find ourselves with a "tension," to quote Judith. Facts can be tools for creating art, but with truth so often blurred these days, is there an obligation to be clear about what is fact and what is not. So now I ask you, in the realm of both fictional and social chronicle, do you think artists have a greater obligation to focus on identifying what is truth and what isn't?

PRABASHI: The obligation of artists is to be true to their art. If that art is story-telling, then the obligation is to the story. All art is political, in what it contains, what it obscures, or who it centers. This is not to say that art is about politics, but that art is shaped by power relations, and societal norms of the time, and the artist's own place within that society. An artist makes choices in how to tell the story, and those choices are also revealing. The interplay or the dynamic tension is what makes the art interesting. As a writer of mainly creative non-fiction, I feel the obligation remains to tell the story well, whether it is fiction, non-fiction, or something in between.

SKEETER: Though these were certainly not the first to blend fact and fiction, I think the most recent trend might have started with the New Journalism writers of the 1970s. Those were writers like Wolfe and Capote who, like regular journalists, investigated for facts, but then used fictional techniques to write their books and reports. (Unfortunately, some New Journalists abused this by using more fiction than fact.) This worked when readers understood that what they were reading were dramatized accounts of factual material. This morphed into what we call now "creative nonfiction." With that, I think readers expect facts as presented through the writer's view- point. Fiction writers saw this as a way to expand their own writing to use facts in their own imaginative works. It's not unusual to see actual events and characters in literary novels. (Of course, this has always been done in historical fiction.) One example is Charles Johnson's characterization of Martin Luther King Jr., in his novel Dancer. I would say, it is my call my novel Dancing with Langston biofiction because I use some of Doyle's biography—and to a lesser degree that of the other characters—in a purely fictional setting. The question of "what is truth?" is one that has challenged philosophers for ages. However, for me and many artists in all media, truth is looking beyond what is known and considering facts for deeper meanings that might give the readers or viewers a better understanding of their own humanity. To me, that view of truth is what art is about.

KRUMMECK: Well, let's take The Testaments by Margaret Atwood. When Atwood is asked if her sequel to The Handmaid's Tale on the dystopian world of Gilead, her response is, "Let us hope so." Even though artists are a reflection of their personal and social climate —it’s no secret that Margaret Atwood’s sequel was spurred by the Trump administration— I wonder if she is not considering facts for deeper essence of being artists if they take too literally their responsibility of identifying what is truth and what is not. Atwood's response to the current political and social climate was to revisit the dystopian world of Gilead. It makes just as strong a statement by being set in a world that is (for now at least!) pure fantasy. While a good journalist does a superb job of sorting truth from untruth, I think a cre- ative writer's most important job is to be more about striving to be a trustworthy writer, in the sense that we trust Atwood’s world even as we know it’s made up. It’s for that reason that I felt I needed to take the reader into my confession about giving my imagination free reign in trying to recre- ate Sarah’s life in Old New Worlds, so that it was clear I wasn’t trying to pass off my suppositions as fact.

COLBY: Vivid writing is present in both fiction and nonfiction categories, to our benefit and pleasure. However, I do not believe that colorful writing blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction unless we want it to do so. While acknowledging that everything described in a nonfiction book cannot usually be factually exactly true (as in some recalled childhood dialogues), descriptions can be extremely accurate in relation to the true character and history of what took place. And I believe that identifying the book's genre in this respect matters. For example, my nonfiction book is a spiritual memoir. I worked very hard to make it as true to life as possible. One of the reasons I wrote this book is to encourage people who may have been afraid to acknowledge their spiritual experiences, perhaps even to themselves, to do so as something meaningful and real. If there is a question in the reader’s mind as to whether I might or might not be making up certain incidents or ex- periences, that would undercut one of the main purposes and possible benefits of the book. In my relationship with some of my fellow writers' attempts to delineate this tricky territory with terms such as “biofiction” and “fiction,” but I also think that “autobiographical novel” remains a useful and respectable term—as is “cre- ative writer’s response to facts.” Given that “truth [is] so often blurred these days,” it is more important than ever to make these genre distinctions. A feeling of hopelessness and pointlessness can arise when we are not sure what to believe.” Speaking from my experience as a group-home housemother to troubled boys, I think the lack of standards based
in truth, not just subject to the whims of the moment, was as damaging to them, if not more, than the active abuse they received. Truth may be varied but it does exist. Being clear with our readers about the dependability of what we’ve written is a critical responsibility that affects society and the ongoing tone of our culture.

PARABASI: Do I have an obligation as an author to identify what is true and what is not? There is no simple answer. I have a chief concern: ordering between fact and fiction is sometimes blurred. There is no simple path to truth. But there is creative justice. As a journalist your first responsibility is to the truth. It is true, writing nonfiction means you have to have the courage to be truthful and relax the facts. But you also have to craft a compelling story for the reader. You must use dialogue to accomplish this. You must show more than tell. You actually contract with a reader that if they will commit to reading your book, you will tell them a story. If you break that contract, the reader will no longer trust you. In a work of nonfiction you are sharing to the best of your abilities about what you think is true. I heard an author say, “fiction is true in one universe or another.” At times fiction can tell more truth than nonfiction. But basically readers go to fiction for entertainment and fun, and nonfiction for content and subject matter. For example, you cannot take libel or when writing about military history, you must be factual. But if the issue is not of accuracy, but of aesthetics you can take certain liberties like describing a museum that you never actually entered. Many writers are not seeking authenticity even in works of fiction, knowing that nonfiction is believed to be authentic. On the other hand, memoir authors often alter facts to suit their needs. Changing names even slightly can give the author greater freedom. But considering that the most interesting characters are those that are made up, created in the writer’s imagination, we sometimes misrepresent the truth. I think whether something is true or not is what is actually perceived by the reader, not that there are facts to go by the facts when necessary and to leave the other information up to the reader’s imagination or belief system.

RAIL: I am now struck by Sarina’s comment, “All art is political, in what it contains, what it obscures, or who it centers.” And I agree. My question then is, if all art is political, what is the artist’s obligation on commenting or heightening the political discourse of the day? Said differently, if the work is already political by the very act of making it, is that enough, have we done our job, to be truthful or do we also have to be conscious about providing insight into what’s happening around us at any given time?

PRABASI: Art can illuminate without comment directly on the political discourse of the day. Or it can provide powerful first-hand accounts of living through political and historical moments. Artists can tackle big political topics head on, or indirectly, by building a whole other world, or by focusing on another period in human history. At its worst political art can be didactic, or lecture-y, and at its most interesting, it can linger, reveal, and surprise. I attended a talk by Barbara Kingsolver where she said she starts each novel with a question that she wants to explore, asking herself what is the big-overarching question she wants to answer. And out of that, comes everything else. This is so different to any process I have used or had even imagined, that it stuck with me, and I find myself pondering about this a lot as I start work on my next project. What’s the big question that I’m grappling with?

PARABASI: There is some truth to art and politics being historically intertwined. Some art is political both in its intentions and in the way people experience it. Clearly artists (authors) are free to make political claims. It is a good thing to be able to express your political beliefs, but I find it absurd to think that all art is political. If it were true, it would be a sad state of affairs. It implies that art is sending political messages. Many things in life are designed to send clear messages and some art does just that. But I believe most forms of art rise above the simple delivery of messages. Art deals with themes, with feelings, with beauty, things much deeper “all art is political” is a convenient phrase. Art affects us at a deeper level. To see all art as political reduces the grand function of art into something much more shallow. Our beliefs about the world influence everything we do and say and create. Our politics don’t form our beliefs, our beliefs form our politics and are very much behind our art. I have enough politics in my life already delivered to me from all sides all the time. If there is one thing that I don’t seek when I read a novel, work of art, or visit an art gallery, it’s politics. When I experience art I want to be refreshed. Not everyone perceives all art to be political, therefore how could it be? I certainly don’t.

SHARYN: I’m not sure how you’re defining “political.” If you mean that all art represents its time—and the business move—then it is part of every piece of art, yes, some aspects of art can be political. In recent history, we’ve seen this in an extreme in Soviet era art and now, among others, art in North Korea. But for most of us outside of those societies, artists are much more able to choose from the metaphors of their cultures to paint, dance, write, or do any other art. We can watch 24/7 news about politics. But I think too often we only see the subject of our art—which could be current politics—and miss the deep underlying themes. For instance, we could watch Roma and Julie’s political and miss Shakespeare’s enduring discussion of love in various circumstances. I don’t think it’s necessary to know the politics of Black America to appreciate Verdi’s operas for their art to move us to joy or sorrow. Sure, art can have political elements. But since artists aren’t journalists, their artistic work should also be about love, honor, compassion, and any other human qualities or questions they wish to express through whatever their sense of aesthetics might be. So, to answer the question, I’d suggest that our human spirit demands more from art than CNN can offer.

KRUMMECK: I think I may take issue with the idea the art all is political. I wonder if van Gogh’s sunflowers are political, or a Chopin mazurka. But, insofar as much— even if not all—art takes a stand, I would want to reserve “political” to political principles rather than didactic. Yes, we all write from within the context of our time and place, and we inevitably reflect that in our work, but I think our obligation, if we have one, is as observers more than intercessors about this lot as I start work on my next project. Jane Austen— with her focus on bonnets and drawing rooms and marriageability—is not a political writer. But her satirical insight into social mores is piercing, not withstanding its deftness and lightness of touch. Was there ever a clearer case made for the property rights of women than in Sense and Sensibility? But the point is that we feel the horror of the gen- teen poverty of the Dashwood women not because Austen overtly comments on it, but because she creates circumstances and characters that make us identify with, and care deeply about, their fate. Certainly, there is the option of driving home the point so that the audience addresses the argument head-on in a conscious and objective way—and Bertolt Brecht used that alienation technique effectively in his plays. But I think it is more important to connect than to instruct. There is no doubt when you write on issues of racism, anti-semitism, xenophobia, and evangelism in Old New Worlds, but I don’t have the answers. I can only offer my lived experience, and the most I can hope for is that it might touch a chord of recognition in my reader and make them think about it.

COLBY: The political aspect is just one shade—watching the rainbow, or visit any art gallery, you’ll find new art coming from an artistic work—important but not all encompassing. The implica- tion, the slant, has to do with power in relationship. The political is present but not necessarily dominant or the central theme, even though in certain cases it may be. Love is not political; neither is faith. These can be great and powerful themes that can throw off the shackles that necessarily limit the only-political. Wasn’t it Mary Oliver who said, “Always leave room for the unimaginable,” or words to that effect? We do see through a glass darkly and in fragments, which is not to say that the fragments are not important, because they often are. But there is much more to discover, to explore, to stretch our understanding—and, as artists, for us to attempt to describe. If we are seeking the deeper meaning of things, we will inevitably be “providing insight into what’s happening around us.” Staying faithful to that principle will affect the degree of benefit and awareness in all of life’s aspects that we can help bring to our readers.

RAIL: “To discover, to explore, to stretch our understanding...” That’s not a question, but this is with your books out in the world, what’s next for you, and how will (can) you discover, explore and stretch your understanding of the things you’ve written that are important to you as an artist and author?

KRUMMECK: The Egyptian-born writer, André Aciman, (Call Me By Your Name) maintains, “A hidden nerve is what every writer is ultimately about.” His is about place, as is mine to a certain extent. More specifically, my hidden nerve is about immigration—my own and, in the broader global sense, in the context of the xenophobia that is swirling around the world, both in my adopted country and around the world. My first book, Beyond the Babash, was a collection of essays about my immigrant experience; Old New Worlds intertwines the immigrant stories of my great-grandmother and myself across two worlds; my latest work, On the Road Less Travelled, progress also touches on immigration as one of its major themes. My hidden nerve may change over time but, for now, this is the theme that I continue to explore, to write about, to talk about in the context of my writing, and to raise awareness about, if I can.

SKEEPER: I recognize that we’re in a time of fast-moving transitions in many areas that affect our personal lives—climate change, migrations, technology, cultural issues, economic shifts, politics, and more. That creates anxiety-provoking challenges for all of us—including writers because, like my character Cousin Ella, we prefer to stay in our comfort zones. To remain there, some create false narratives, fake news, and the like that look to a mythical past to escape the real. We must all need to understand the past, as truthfully as possible, for guidance as we move ahead. But we can’t be stuck there. Since this is the transitional era we’ve been dealt, I see it as what I need to explore in my writing. So, my question I try answering in my writing is, How can we live through inevitable changes while keeping the integrity of our basic humanity?

PRABASI: I’m working on some shorter pieces while bits and pieces of my next story start to emerge. I have ideas, and some paltry notes, but nothing structured and committed to the page yet. I want to continue to explore the themes and ques- tions that are important to me: how do we make and remake home and a sense of belonging when so many of us are on the move—by choice and by political and economic forces? How do we remain curious and open to the unexpected and connect with each other across bound- aries? How do we make meaningful art and contribute to a more fair society in a world that is coming to believe in extreme power? And for me, all of these questions are connected to how will we as a species respond to the existential threat of climate change? A novel or a memoir cannot answer all these questions, of course, but it can grapple with them, playfully or seriously, and contribute to a larger narrative about any of the issues of our time.

PARISI: What is next for me as an author? I have begun writing a second book con- tinuing with the theme of “The Gift of Forgiveness.” I didn’t realize how vital it was to share this message until I presented my book Today My Name is Billy, to the senior citizen crowd. Everyone needs to learn to forgive in order to have peace and power. This forgiveness includes forgiving oneself. To date, I have presented at nine senior facilities. The book is an educa- tional event but has turned into an exercise of love, patience, and good humor. I have combined my stand-up comedy with my book presentation and it has been suc- cessful, well received, and has proven to

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be a lesson in love that has touched my heart and many others. In these facilities the seniors look forward to a variety of activities. They want to be valued, laugh and feel loved. I provide all of these for them and they usually leave smiling and stimulated. I ask the participants to read quotes from my book and to express how they relate to them. It has been enlightening to listen to the stories and happenings from their lives. Many have laughed and many have cried as they shared good and bad memories. I always conclude with emphasizing the power of forgiveness. I promise them that they will experience peace and power if they practice forgiveness. I see my value with these exceptional citizens and am humbled and grateful to be in their company.

COLBY: In terms of what is literally next for me, I am working on three books: two are nonfiction and one a YA fantasy novel. In terms of the ongoing pilgrimage of my life, I hope that I will be able to continue as long as I can to explore mystical reality and relationship with the Unseen Power that undergirds all existence. I hope to continue to interact with the “speaking” qualities of the Creation, shedding whatever is in the way within me to allow wider understanding and to make space for deeper truths, as sparked and potentized by the action of grace. There is always unending richness before us, if we are willing to both ask and receive.

RAIL: To close, what have I failed to ask you today and/or what else would you like to add?

KRUMMECK: Your questions have been so probing and thought provoking with regard to the role of the writer as a voice of conscience, truthsayer, political commentator. All of that is vitally important. I also wonder, though, about that liminal place of imagination, chance-taking, fun. My MFA writing program at the University of Baltimore had the motto “Fork,” which is a portmanteau word from Play-Work. As writers we certainly have an obligation to get up serve drivel and falsehood, and to value the best work we can, but I think it’s also important not to lose sight of that magical place of creativity—that crucial place where ideas can be allowed to flop around and try things on. So often, really important concepts can come out of that uninhibited place.

SKEETER: Why did I choose a building that’s being gentrified as the setting for Dancing with Langston? Very generally, we think of “gentrification” as the displacement of lower income residents in an established community, while higher income people move in. Though I don’t have an alternative name for this economic process, I don’t think “gentrification” is an appropriate term. In my novel, Cousin Ella and Jack, despite their problems due to age, are quite culturally astute and dignified—ironic in a gentrified space. They’ve collected paintings, rare books, antiques, and other artifacts that represent the history of their cultural experiences. Those who are forced to move are being replaced by people who are single and market oriented. They’ve painted collections, rare books, antiques, and other artifacts that represent the history of their cultural experiences. Those who are forced to move are being replaced by people who are single and market oriented. It is time for them to move. As many of us might in this situation, they resist the change that their building represents. But the fact is that neighborhoods and regions are constantly changing, everywhere. (As hard as it is to imagine, after the indigenous people, Harlem, itself, began as Dutch farmland.) All of the characters in the novel have to find ways to handle the changes happening all around them while keeping their humanity intact.

PRABAS: These questions have been thought-provoking, and led me to start thinking about the tension between art and market forces, a tension that has existed throughout history, but one that seems particularly striking now, with so much concentration. What does it mean to choose art? I’m always interested in the people’s stories, including the story-tellers’ own stories.

PARISH: I would like you to know two things, first why I wrote this book. It began as a healing process, a cathartic journey, but quickly evolved into a challenge, a competition, a contest. I wanted everyone to know what happened to me when I was wronged and mistreated. Originally I wanted revenge, an eye for an eye, but I truly learned forgiveness throughout this process. I had hoped to warn people about what could actually happen to them. Instead I learned that the negative events in my life could be turned into a positive outcome. And second, I want everyone to know how grateful I am for the caring, outstanding people who were part of my journey, who believed in me, supported me, and loved me, my angel Mom who never gave up on me, my friend Steve Eisner who believed in me and my story, my editor Peg Moran who knew exactly what to say, my judge Steve Rohr who recognized my efforts and inspired me, my publisher Dede Cummings who applauded me and my efforts, my fellow authors who unsellably helped me, and my multi-talented, creative, caring publicist who held my hand, and whose husband and me, praised me, edited me and loved me enough to make me a better writer and a better person. I am so blessed and eternally grateful.

COLBY: That we were built with great beauty and purpose, and that this holy splendor exists in every human being and every aspect of the Creation. The closer we get to the great underlying Matrix, the more joyful and authentic and powerful we become, and the more able to communicate in a more direct way with the rest of the Creation. And to do so while also still remaining “fools,” fallible and inadequate—this paradox in itself has great power, enabling us in our more lucid moments to hand over the authority to where it belongs, to God in the center of all of that. Architecturally speaking, our view of ourselves tends to be of a low-ceilinged, dirty garage, useless things piled in the corners. But this view is just the result of the “bad stories” we’ve been told as we grew up. Instead, we are each really like the most magnificent cathedrals, full of soaring light and glories, breath-taking. The humility of letting go, defenses and the courage to move however minutely toward a more active, communicative relationship with God opens up doors to this authentic splendor, surpassing all our hopes and expectations. No matter how difficult our life or circumstances, this magnificent inheritance cannot be taken away from us.

BEN TANZER is an Emmy-award winning coach, creative strategist, podcaster, writer, teacher and social worker who has been helping nonprof- lits, publishers, authors, students, small business owners and career changers tell their stories for over 20 years. As an author, Ben has had eight books published, and been a nominee for Pushcart and StorySouth awards, a finalist at the 12th Annual National Indie Excellence Awards and 2019 Eric Hoffer Book Awards for Be Cool - a memoir (sort of), the recipient of the 2015 “Dave's Kitchen Literary Festival/Fiction Prize Award for his essay collection Lost in Space and a Bronx medallist at the 2015 Independent Publisher Book Awards in Science Fiction for his novel Orphans.

Nick Flynn

IN CONVERSATION

Activations: NICK FLYNN with Elizabeth Trundle

Stay
Nick Flynn
ZE Books (2020)

It’s possible that Nick Flynn has invented a new kind of printed object with this latest book, Stay. He has selected poems, mem- oir, and essay excerpts, choice bits from his own work and others, and an intimate treasury of visual art, much of it created in collaboration with friends. A thoughtfully designed art book infused with the spirit of anthropology, Stay offers glimpses into Flynn’s living, as well as his writing, and chronicles his persistent inquiry into how living and writing merge to both define and reflect reality.

ELIZABETH TRUNDLE (RAIL): Let’s talk about how this book was put together, how you decided what to include and what to leave out. Some of the visual material in Stay could’ve as easily appeared in a family scrapbook. Photos and archival documents, like a letter from your father on a strange piece of stationery stamped “the Fact Foundation of America.”

Nick Flynn: The Fact Foundation of America. After my father got out of federal prison, he made up this shell company, this fake company. It only existed as a post office box and this letterhead. He’d write letters to people on this letterhead—Patty Hearst, Ted Kennedy—famous people, mostly. And me. I put one letter in Stay to have something with his handwriting on it. And that particular letter, also, is from right before he became homeless, which seemed significant.

RAIL: When you were putting these arti- facts together, you were working with one designer or with a design house. You said you got matched up with them through ZE Books.

FLYNN: ZE Books founder, Michael Zilkha, hooked me up with With Projects in SoHo. I worked there for about six months. I’d bring them boxes of things: collages, books, photographs, collaborations.

RAIL: How did the design grow around the objects that you brought in?

FLYNN: The main designer, the owner of the company, is a woman named Jimmie Ha. Jimmie was overseeing the project, but she’d assign me to various designers. For some reason there was a large turnover at that time. I’d show up and there’d be a different person I’d be working with. And they were always named Nick. I worked with three Nicks. And her dog was named Nikki. It was very strange.

RAIL: That is strange.

FLYNN: I’d bring in originals of things and figure out how to get them scanned. Like of my collages or of the letter. And we’d figure out how to get them into the book. As I’m flipping through the book now, I think I brought in mostly original things.

RAIL: Can you talk a little about that? How did you bring all the content into order?

FLYNN: The book’s divided into five or six sections. The sections are—just to read them over—“Begin,” then “Sleeping Beauty (The Mothers),” then “Nebuchadnezzar (The Father),” Sleeping Beauty is a way I’ve written about my mother. Nebuchadnezzar is a way I’ve written about my father, so those pieces are included in the book. And they go on for quite a while. Nearly half of the book is the mother and father. Childhood, fatherhood, my mother, my father, me as a father. These are things I’ve written about a lot, so I was trying to show how I move one thing through—I move through this idea and try to look at it in different ways through different books. The “Sleeping Beauty” section about the mother starts with my first poem from my first book, “Bag of Mice,” from Some Ether (2000). Then it keeps returning to ways I’ve tried to understand who my mother was.

RAIL: Is this your biggest literary project, would you say? Trying to understand your mother and your father? Family?

FLYNN: Sure, but hopefully it expands out into other, more universal themes, something other people can have access to, too. It’s not always just about my mother. It is about the idea of motherhood. I do
RAIL: Let’s look at one spread, maybe starting with this photo of your mother from 1947. I love the choreography of these pages.

FLYNN: I love this layout, too. This is a photo you took when she was seven or eight in our hometown standing in water that I’ve stood in. And it’s facing “Hive,” a poem that’s not ostensibly about her.

RAIL: Then there’s an excerpt from The Ticking Is the Bomb (2010) about your father and his caretaker. Then we go into “Last Kiss,” an excerpt from your new book, This Is the Night Our House Will Catch Fire (2020), then it’s back to “Dissolve” from The Reenactments (2013). And then, a photo of your daughter dancing with a giant bat. Next page, simply a line from Blues (2009) by Maggie Nelson. And then, a snippet from a conversation you had with some colleagues, “On Compulsion.”

FLYNN: And also you skipped a photo in the middle of it, too, of Julianne Moore.

RAIL: Oh, Julianne Moore. Right. Playing your mother in Being Flynn (2012). Can you tell me more about this sequence and how the pieces work together? How you made these choices?

FLYNN: Well, before that first photo of my mother is the poem “Hive,” which ends with a house being set on fire.

RAIL: Right. We could keep going back and back and back.

FLYNN: It all connects. Before that there’s a strange jellyfish collage and before that is “Canopic,” the fire. There was an intuitive thing to it. There’s always a release of information and then sometimes something will be clearly spelled out, and sometimes something will only be suggested or hinted at. I find that the poem “Hive” before the “Canopic” piece where it’s revealed that my mother set our house on fire… if “Hive” and the photograph of my mother came before “Canopic,” the flow would have less energy. It’s my experience… I’ve looked through these pages, my grandchildren playing her and then I talk about that. That experience. We go from your mother’s death to Julianne Moore, to talking about the experience of watching Julianne Moore and then this photo by the artists Kahn and Selesnick, my dear friends. They put another friend in a bat costume and put my daughter Maeve in a fairy costume and took this photo of them dancing. It somehow ties into the rest because Maeve is the same age as my mother in the earlier photograph.

RAIL: And then you tie it off with this conversation about compulsion. It does seem like you are compelled to keep going back and back to the same images, symbols. And you’ve said you like to think of it as a practice, not a compulsion. Here in this piece you say, “I keep returning to the burning house. I think I’ve put the compulsion to return to the scene of early trauma.” And you mention Buddhism in this same passage.

FLYNN: Meditation is the other side of compulsion. I do think meditation is a way to channel the compulsion into something more positive, less destructive. So the compulsion is always there. It is like a fuel. But it needs to be tempered with meditation, the compulsion, otherwise it would be more destructive. Too destructive.

RAIL: You transform it into a practice, then. A writing practice. A meditation practice. By transforming a compulsion into a practice you flip it into something more positive?

FLYNN: Not as destructive.

RAIL: I know that you use meditation in your workshops, as part of the generative writing process. As a portal into what you call “the psychic realm.” In an interview with the poet Rachel Zucker, in Stay, you say if you’re not delving deep into the psychic realm, you’re not really being authentic.

FLYNN: I’ve talked about that in workshops too, something Brenda Hillman said, that a poem begins in the seemingly automatic, mechanical and then, as you keep working on it, it pushes into the universal. But in order to become a poem, it has to cross the threshold into the deeper mystery. And that’s what I mean, too. The psychic realm, that’s the deeper mystery. The self is connected to all other selves and other connections, but the deeper mystery is even below that or above that. That’s where the hard work is. Otherwise, we’re staying on the surface.

RAIL: And how are these poetic practices, and this deeper mystery, related to your experience with Buddhism?

FLYNN: I wear it very loosely, because I’m not a Buddhist. I don’t think about it too much. I just do it. I haven’t committed even to be connected to a Zenō, which I’ve done in the past. I find meditation to be very helpful in accessing what I think is the psychic realm where poetry lies, where it hides. It hides in that realm. You know, it’s the subconscious. All those realms can’t be unsaid and bewilderment. It all exists in those realms. You can’t look at it directly. You have to figure out a way to access it. Meditation is one way to access it. That’s why I don’t call myself a Buddhist. I use the tools of Buddhism which I find very effective, in order to do something else. I use them for my own—

RAIL: Creative practice, for your artistic practice—

FLYNN: Yeah. And I think hopefully it would somehow extend into my daily life also. Because I think the precepts are very good. But it’s not the path I’m on.

RAIL: The Buddhist precepts, then, adapted into creative practice. You describe your father, and his suffering, and your mom and her suffering—suffering seems to be one of your abiding interests. And alongside it, a tremendous amount of compassion in the way you write about both your parents. Was there ever anger, or blame, or judgment? Because I don’t see a lot of those in your books. You never bad mouth your dad? You were never mad at him?

FLYNN: Oh, no. If you read— I think I have moments of anger. When he was homeless and I was still using drugs and alcohol, I thought about running over him when he was sleeping outside. With the van. That would solve everything. That sounds angry to me. That sounds like an angry thought to have. I definitely have those. There are passages in Stay, and in the book that’s coming out, This is the Night Our House Will Catch Fire. But even that rage… I sit with it for a while. I sit with the anger and the confusion for a while in order to find compassion in some way. It’s necessary. You can’t automatically have compassion. It feels like you need to go through all the stages of it to get there, for it to be genuine. You can’t just decide, “Oh, I love everybody.” You have to actually see what you feel and recognize what they do and your part in what they’ve done.

RAIL: In your workshops you have an exercise, a prompt to write about the person that you hate the most as a hero. To turn the person you see as a devil into a saint. And to write about them that way.

FLYNN: A lot of people don’t like that, when I bring that up. A lot of writers get angry when I suggest they try that.

RAIL: Well, is that maybe an instinct of yours? A natural way of being? To feel compassion for your mom, for example, and the out of control things that she did?

FLYNN: No. The new book goes into really dark destructive things, impulses of my mother that I am looking at very clearly. There will always be compassion or I’ll always work toward compassion for them and just generally for all beings in some way. I’ll try to do that. I mean it’s hard. It’s a hard thing. I don’t think this either Buddhist Night (2004) or in this new one, I don’t think I pull any punches or try to skim over anything. Both of them go deeply into problematic behavior, both of those books. But, in the end, more anger feels false in a way. Like you’re still stuck in the entryway. You haven’t actually entered into the whole experience, with your anger. I don’t see the purpose of it; doesn’t seem the place for it, in a book.

RAIL: Was there any sense of retrospective finality when you finished putting this collection together? A feeling of “this is your life”?

FLYNN: I might have felt that way if it wasn’t one of three books coming out this year. I might have felt, “Now what do I do?” But things are moving forward, you know? Stay is like a time capsule. It holds these 30 years in place. So far, I’m still here. And the other book is coming out in the summer.

RAIL: What do you think of the copy on the book jacket, which calls Stay a self-portrait?

FLYNN: That was the subtitle from the publisher, Michael Zilkha. But I always had the subtitle “threads, conversations, collaborations.” I’m very happy we used that.

RAIL: But Stay certainly has an element of self-portraiture. Can you tell me about that first photo of you on the fifth page of the book?

FLYNN: Jack Pierson took that photo on my boat in Provincetown when I was 29 or so and something and recently sober, Jack and I are the same age. We were both in our late 20s and he had not had his big show yet. He’d come up in Boston and he was moving to New York. This was just before that. So we were hanging. He was this young artist and he was doing these drawings and taking photographs. He took photographs of all of us. All of us in Provincetown. The title of the book... Stay. That’s from Jack’s piece Stay from 1991, which is also in the book.

RAIL: Right. In the book you explain that you came across a label for the “new-iconic wall sculpture” Stay at a show at the New Museum in 2013. The show was called N.Y.C 1983, and the museum label traced Pierson’s use of found letterforms back to the boat you lived on in Provincetown— “the boat was christened Evol (“love” spelled backwards) after a 1968 Sonic Youth album, spelled out in mismatched
letters on the stern—the format that would become Pierson’s signature.” You name several other friends whose ideas and letters you were involved with, the boat, the birth of the artwork Pierson later made.

FLYNN: The whole thing was a type of collaboration, almost an unconscious collaboration, we were influencing each other. Just the influence of Jack—seeing that Jack could look at those letters and see it as art was powerful. That he could make something of it. It was also the time, back then, the early days of hip-hop, of appropriation, of sampling. That was influential to me, sampling culture. Taking something and making something else out of it. The Beastie Boys’ “Paul’s Boutique”, or Enso and David Byrne’s “My Life in the Bush of Ghosts.” Sampling all of these sounds and putting them together. Jonathan Lethem wrote a beautiful essay about that was in Harper’s” (“The Ecstasy of Influence,” 2007). The entire essay was made from appropriated language. The entire long essay, and it was an argument for appropriation. It seemed to flow perfectly, but every word in it, he had taken from somewhere else.

It’s a way to break out of the hero myth of the individual artist that creates from their own will and to see that nothing is created alone. It’s always a network of people that help you and lead you to where you are, even if it’s just influences. People like Jack, and my friend Neal Sugarman, the musician I lived on the boat with. And my friend Phil Terzis, who found the letters for the back of the boat. And Richard Boston, who turned Evel into Venal. All of these people, the book doesn’t exist without them. And my relationships with those people, those friends and artists. That’s why I wanted to put the book together, too, like this. Rather than doing a collected poems or selected writings, I wanted to have other people in it. Not just to acknowledge these artistic relationships. It’s not just acknowledging them; it’s so essential. It’s more than acknowledging. Acknowledging seems secondary. It’s primary. The relationships are primary. The books don’t get written without everyone else. None of them do.

RAIL: Maybe that’s why you didn’t embrace the idea of calling the book a self-portrait. Maybe you feel it’s more of a group portrait.

FLYNN: That’s interesting. Maybe that’s why.

RAIL: I enjoyed reading about these relationships, the personal connections between you and each piece of visual art you included, and your own collages, each with its own story. You’ve been collecting scraps of paper from cities, streets, catalogs, any kind of surface, it seems, for many years. Appropriating, clipping, recombing. Stay is a collage of many collages. It’s a unique book with a distinctive visual flow.

FLYNN: A lot of that was the collaboration of the designers, the various Nicks. The thing is when you arrange it on a computer you have to be aware of which pages will be facing each other. It adds another level of meaning to what you read right before it. Connecting pages that don’t go together in time. For example, a page from Another Bullshit Night in Suck City facing a page from The Ticking in the Bomb. The artist Mark Adams painted over the page. He painted on the actual book with walnut ink. It’s his own thing. I don’t even know why he chose to put this painting on this page. But I think it’s beautiful.

RAIL: You call Mark’s ink drawings activation. Can you say more about that?

FLYNN: It’s a word we use a lot in my collaborative art class at the University of Houston. How to activate a page, how to make it come alive. It’s one of the questions you ask when you’re making art, or writing, or anything. What activates it? How does the interaction with the reader activate it, or with the viewer? What happens in that moment of activation?

RAIL: Right, and your students, too, you invite them into collaboration. You include a cento in the book, a collage poem, “Confessional.” This is a group poem you composed with students in a workshop you taught at the Omega Institute in 2017. You asked that you “arranged and transformed” the lines. I think you used that word, transformed.

FLYNN: Because I change the lines. Too. You change the lines to fit the poem. In the end, it’s weirdly about the poem. You honor the people who began each sentence, but I’m not beholden to the sentence itself. I’m acknowledging the person, then I shape their line or lines it to fit into the poem. I wrote a group poem yesterday with my undergraduates. Over the last month, I’ve had them writing pandemic or corona or plague observations. And then I’ve had them, a couple of times, cull the lines from their notes that were good. Early on, I did it, a month ago. Told them to cull a line from what you wrote that was resonant, and we’d put it all together. We’d make something with it. Then I had them do it again. And a month later, their lines got much better. They got deeper into the writing. Their writing has gotten much better. They did a whole corona pandemic-year poem, which is the only thing I’ve written in the last two months.

RAIL: I love the importance you place on group energy, the fellowship.

FLYNN: We’ve been much more serious about the undergrads at Houston. Before, we used to have all the grad students teach them, and we would just teach the grad students. But we’re focusing on the undergrads. I realized that I wouldn’t be a poet if I hadn’t taken an undergraduate workshop with James Tate. I wouldn’t be a poet now. I might not be a writer now if I hadn’t done that. I thank him in the back of the book. Tate. I thank him. I was the teaching assistant. When I write about Phil Levine.

RAIL: I especially loved the essay about Phil Levine. Maybe because it addresses poetic practices that have influenced you in a broader sense. I want to call them poetic philosophies, but maybe that’s not right. You mention something learned from Levine, that “a poet’s job is not to play fast and loose with the facts of this world.” You add: “What this would come to mean to me is that there is a world, one that demands—requires, rewards—our attention to it, the type of attention Simon Weil describes as a type of prayer.”

FLYNN: Yes, “Absolute attention is prayer,” I think she says.

RAIL: This feels like another spiritually inspired artistic practice, like meditation, or compassion. This idea of sacred attention. I’ve heard you talk about trying to be “utterly present,” and something called “the eternal present.”

FLYNN: Yeah, the eternal present. I don’t know if it’s that exact term. I don’t know if I showed anywhere or where I got that term. I guess it’s Buddhist. It’s a way to think of being present in the world, that if you’re deeply present in every moment, then you’re eternally present. We’re just here. We’re in this moment together. It sounds kind of terrifying in some ways.

RAIL: It is terrifying. You also reflect on something you learned from Stanley Kunitz, in your words, that “if you read a poem you like, you must become the person who can write that poem. That’s a life’s work. How one lives one’s life is important.” Attention as prayer, eternal presence, the effort towards right living, how that affects what you write, the art you make, your mother, your father, you... it’s all so powerfully glued to the mat by the word Stay.

FLYNN: I had always thought of Stay as the title for a book. At one of the recent events I did, one of the Zoom events I did for Stay, a woman I hadn’t talked to in 20 years who I knew from Bread Loaf said that she remembered I used to wear a Stay t-shirt.

RAIL: Oh, it’s on a t-shirt?

FLYNN: Jack Pierson made a t-shirt. I think it was for the Swim for Life, which is something that we do in Provincetown, swim across the bay. And they had a t-shirt every year. And Jack’s, that year, was Stay. It just said Stay on it. I really loved that t-shirt. I actually went up to the attic and found it. I still have that shirt, which is crazy. And so I always thought about it as the title for a book. I mean, for years, I thought it was a good title. When I did this, it made sense for the whole thing. It just made sense for the whole thing.

ELIZABETH TRUNDLE is a writer and performer whose work has appeared in numerous publications including The Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, and The Nervous Breakdown. Her e-book, Seventeen Gold, was published by 3 a.m. analog and is available on Amazon. She tells stories live, and has won the Moth StorySLAM in New York City. She sits by the story-spiritual abyss on her website, fitchyanquan.com. What It Is: Race, Family, and One Thinking Black Man’s Blues by Clifford Thompson Other Press Books (2019) IN CONVERSATION CLIFFORD THOMPSON with David Winner

CLIFFORD THOMPSON: What It Is: Race, Family, and One Thinking Black Man’s Blues meticulously details one black man’s loss of innocence after the election of Donald Trump. In searing, sometimes funny prose, Thompson tells of his growing up in working-class, African American Washington DC, his marriage, and fatherhood. With bracing honesty, he admits a degree of youthful naïveté about racism that was shattered by the 2016 election. Not content with just anger and outrage, Thompson actually goes out to try to get some idea how the majority of white Americans could have voted for a lifelong open racist, perfectly happy to have Trump’s support. Ignoring the refrain of “we can’t talk to them,” echoing throughout much of America after the election, Thompson asks white Trump voters in California direct questions about race and culture. He delves bravely into our cultural divide while illustrating the book with his own poignant artworks showing himself from the back, vulnerable, in an alienating era.

DAVID WINNER (RAIL): On SNL, soon after the election, Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock mocked liberal white women who just didn’t get the extent of American racism and were surprised by the result. I felt unfairly left off the book as a white man, so as an exposure of deep divisions that were there all along. It’s not news, of course, that there is a sizable number of Whites out there who are not just casually, unhappily racist but unapologetically so. What surprised some of us, even (some) people of color, was that the majority of White supporters voted for the race-baiting Trump, and the question became how many of them voted for Trump in spite of his racism, while holding their noses, and how many did so in part because of it. The other question is whether it makes a difference. Those were among the questions I set out to explore.

I don’t want to speak for all Black people, because I think Black people’s reactions...
to the election results probably run the gamut. One of my best friends, who is Black, was as jolted by the election result as I was; on the other hand, I know Black people who were predicting that Trump would win even when, for example, *The New York Times* was saying that Hillary Clinton had an 85 percent chance of becoming president.

RAIL: Your book has been compared with works by James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, and you discuss Albert Murray and Joan Didion. But I don’t think those writers went around the country interviewing people a la Tocqueville. Wanting to get a handle on why people would vote for Trump inspired some of that, but I wondered what got you to write a book with interviews. You do very little editorializing. I get the feeling that you give us exact transcripts of these conversations.

I haven’t read anything like it.

THOMPSON: I’m glad to hear you havn’t read anything like it! What I wanted to do, in part, was put my own spin on some things my literary heroes did, James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Joan Didion, but I never interviewed White supporters of conservative Republican presidential candidates, but in *The Fire Next Time* he recounts his visits with Elijah Muhammad and other members of the Nation of Islam, with whom he had some differences of opinion, Joan Didion, another hero whose work I refer to in the book, certainly interviewed a lot of people. If I sought to emulate anything with my approach, it was Didion’s determination to see for herself what was going instead of basing her beliefs on second-hand reports. And yes—those are exact transcripts.

RAIL: You confess to wondering when young “if Black people should be doing something to help [them]selves,” and later you look back and declare “Oh, Clifford” after someone pretty racist espouses the same view. It’s personal.

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IN CONVERSATION

50 Unorthodox Years:
KEITH ROWE with Todd B. Gruel

British musician and painter Keith Rowe is known as the godfather of electroacoustic improvisation (EAI). EAI departs from traditional principles of musical language—such as melody, harmony, and rhythm—in favor of a strange physics of spontaneous sonic gestures based around unorthodox approaches to both instruments and objects. As a founding member of AMM in the mid 1960s, and MIMEO, which formed in 1997, the music Keith has created endures with subversive conviction, continuing to inspire a passionate circle of nonconforming creatives well beyond the reign of mainstream culture. This conversation in part celebrates Keith’s 80th birthday.

TODD B. GRUEL (RAIL): You’ve mentioned in a Paris Transatlantic interview with Dan Warburton from 2001 that around the time of AMM’s formation you had an early interest in Gurdjieff, Taoism, and Buddhism. Can you explore how some of these philosophical ideas have informed your life and work?

KEITH ROWE: Gosh, Todd, in at the deep end! It’s an ongoing problem for me to be reliable about accounting with hindsight what these areas contributed at the time. Looking back there is the temptation to romanticize, dramatize something that we at the time sleepwalked through. Regarding Gurdjieff, at the very least there is a struggle against sleepwalking through life, trying our best to be conscious of what we are doing during the day. In order to study Gurdjieff, it necessitated joining a group called The Work, a very secretive organization in which members had to pretend not to recognize each other outside of the room where meetings took place. This secrecy was the inspiration for AMM to keep its group name a secret, and it’s still a secret more than 50 years later.

I studied perception, with a monk from the North Indian tradition, which taught me how to “see” the world. But maybe at this point I should admit to the probability that I suffer from the Groucho Marx syndrome in that “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.” I walked away from both these groupings, Gurdjieff and Buddhism, and I can add the small communist group to that list too. As Edmund Burke would have it, I was disappointed by the tendency of these groups “to be economical with the truth.” Nevertheless, I was changed by these experiences for the better, I hope so.

RAIL: Although a net virtue, there’s a sense of hidden tension that sustains your work. How is this embodied experientially and conceptually within performances?

KEITH ROWE: I’m full of contradictions, I feel confident about what I’m working on, and how it’s developing, its correctness, and yet, simultaneously, I have a total lack of self-worth, a lack of self-regard, feeling that what I’ve produced is total rubbish, a total waste of time. Is this the tension you detect?

At its most stark and crude level, AMM’s counterpoint and politics comes down to a choice: Juxtaposition or Conflation? and, in the context of a performance, “What is the nearest sound I should contribute?” One that fits in, or is an alien? An improvisation or a pre-composed event? A sound that shows you have been listening, or not? What degree of opacity, allowing other sounds to become eclipsed? The degree of affection, how wet or dry the sound should be? Where in the performance space should the sound be projected, near or far? Aligned vertically or horizontally? Disclosure or withdrawal? Presence or absence? Masking or un-making? Delayed recognition of mood? Different rates of perception? Seduction or rejection? Self-canceling ambiguities? Danger of effect over evidence? So on and so on… It’s a long list, possibly 250 lines in length.

What AMM decides at each juncture concerns the politics of free improvisation. I cannot bang on the table to say this is right and this is wrong. I prefer to live in the Theatre of Questions rather than the Theatre of Answers.

RAIL: In an interview of mine with one of your collaborators, Rafael Tarial, he shared some thoughts about a moment during a performance in which the rest of the MIMEO players built themselves up into a grand crescendo while you pulled away from the rising tide, refraining from playing at all. What do such refusal to play along mean to you ethically?

KEITH ROWE: The “zone of indifference” was something that grew within me while at art school. I recall not wanting to become like the Modern Jazz Quartet, a group that represented “indifference” as lacking tension and invention. I preferred the daring of Faustian, not, or the concepts of Analytical and Synthetic Cubism. Being drawn to anything disruptive, I stood against the opined establishment who were intolerant of any departure from the rules. I was hostile to anything popular.

As a consequence, I never developed a liking of pop music. “Iconoclastic” would be a description that I still adhere to. Being iconoclastic, I would want to develop a wider spectrum of listening, ranging from “Hyper Close Listening” to “Not Listening.”

RAIL: How do you comprehend the historical context behind the rise of the type of music that you helped develop? And what distinguishes AMM’s approach to free improvisation in contrast to that of free jazz?

KEITH ROWE: If in the 1970s you were to ask a free jazz improviser, “What characterizes your music, and how does it relate to composition?”, a response might be, “Free improvisation is a work in progress, continually in the state of development. Unlike composed music, it is never finished. A composition is written down, signed off when completed, it is finished.”

Ha! No! It’s slightly more complicated than that. Surely the opposite can be argued, when we perform an improvisation, we arrive at the end, and with nothing more to say, we stop, it is finished, nothing more can be done to it. Whereas, when a young string quartet from Bratislava opens the pages to Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 8, they bring new perspectives, building on the earlier performances of the Borodin, the Beethoven, and Tanev quartets. A composition is never finished.

Who knows what contribution to music we will have made (if any, that is). As an unintended consequence, it’s possible that we improvisers helped to put composers back in contact with the art of improvisation.

RAIL: Within your 50-year history of music making, is there one recording that continues to surprise you the most?

KEITH ROWE: AMM’s _The Cry_, recorded June 1968, most represents AMM’s impenetrability; an ugly brutality that is uncatchable and impossible to grasp. It does not say what you think. It screams, “Beauty! I’ll show you Beauty!”

RAIL: Have there been any developments regarding technique or philosophy in your recent work?

KEITH ROWE: About six years ago I started the process of stripping away all redundant material, both from my music and my performance setup—everything I could consider as not necessary was assessed and possibly removed. It was a slow and painful procedure challenging every nook and cranny of my work and history. Bit by bit I managed to obtain a clear objective of what I was attempting to escape from. Asking myself, “What was I objecting to?”, and “What was it I wanted to remove myself from?”, I settled on three words, “Hyperventilating Visceral Chic.”

In May 2012 Adrian Searle wrote, “The urge to see everything leads to the frustration of not seeing anything, of always being driven on to the next thing, without absorbing the last.” This idea of being a member of a secretive organization, becoming central, I became slower and slower, more and more considerate of every detail, reducing, reducing, reducing. Then in August 2018 at a performance in Sokolowska, Poland, I arrived at a 24-minute construction containing 50 clicks, or musical gestures, performed in total darkness. I had arrived, this is where I wanted to be, I had reduced my traveling setup to 2 kilos and my music to 50 clicks.

RAIL: As a musician and painter with a broad interest in cultural history, if you chose one piece of music and visual art to preserve for all time, what would it be?

KEITH ROWE: I’m sure you’ll understand that to single out one piece of work is difficult, but what I’d like to do is draw attention to minute details that might have been missed. Clifford Curzon’s first note on the Adagio from Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488, on the Decca recording from London in October 1967: the touch, the touch, elegance, timing. For me there is a sense that this single note contains all of music. I’ve listened to it hundreds of times.

Euan Uglow’s painting of a pie shares many of the qualities found in the Curzon: a slow painting measured point by point in careful, considered navigation of its object. Curzon talked about how “No one knows the cost of a phrase.” For Uglow it’s the cost of measurement.

TODD B. GRUEL currently lives in Spain where he teaches English as a foreign language. His writing has appeared in publications such as _A Closer Listener, Fluid Radio, Oily Arts, PopMatters, ThurstonTalk, Tiny Mix Tapes, and Washington Hospitality Association_. Besides writing he also experiments with abstract photography and makes left-field music. His work can be found at toddbgruel.com.
Suddenly, the globe is flooded with livestream music on various scales, either broadcast solo from bathrooms, or via the Zoom teleconferencing platform, its screen-spread Routinely hijacked by entire bands. For bassist, composer, and improviser Mark Dresser, such instantaneously transmitted transcontinental gigging has been a regular reality for over a decade. He’s an avid proponent of Telematics, a system that facilitates real-time musical interaction in multiple cities, taking advantage of the advanced resources usually found in the music studies of universities and other similar institutions.

In New York, composer and conductor Sarah Weaver is a major organizational figure presenting performances at NYU. Weaver provides a pivotal presence at UCSD (University of California San Diego). There are also strong connections with Seoul, Banff, Belfast, and Zurich. Regular players at Telematics concerts include drummer Gerry Hemingway, reedist Marty Ehrlich, trombonist Michael Dessen, soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, altoist Oliver Lake, flutist Nicole Mitchell, pianist Myra Melford, and trumpeter Amir Elsaffar.

Telematics is uniquely valuable when considered within the present live streaming lockdown existence. “The present life reality makes it completely clear why someone would participate,” says Dresser. “I had a similar motivation, but it was due to moving from New York to San Diego, and being cut off from my natural community of collaborators. The scene that I was, and am still very attached to, is centered on New York.”

Dresser, a native Californian, lived in NYC from 1986 to 2004, when he was offered a teaching position at UCSD. Dresser was introduced to the Telematics concept by composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros, who was teaching at UCSD when he himself was a student. Dresser was impressed by Oliveros performing as part of the Avatar Orchestra Metaverse in 2007, investigating the potential of a virtual community, and employing the Telematic process. He immediately decided to become involved.

“While developing it technologically at UCSD and other institutions was that we had access to high bandwidth internet,” Dresser continues. “What we do is not plug’n’play at all, it’s very resource intensive. To set up a concert would typically take months to organize: space, technical crew, production crew, and then all of the musically collaborative things that you would do. It was almost like a theatrical performance, at the level that we were planning. Of course, the sound quality is superior, but it’s not integrated audio and video. We’re still using the same audio platform, called JackTrip, that was designed at Stanford by Chris Chafe and his team.”

Participating musicians need high-quality microphones and an audio interface for acoustic instruments, which is why universities are the axes for Telematics, rather than the bedrooms of performers. “Also, it requires ethernet connections,” says Dresser, “but it was due to moving from one city to another. The challenge is how do you create a musical community, and work between levels of access?”

Now there is a practical need for Telematics, more than ever before, but amusingly, Dresser, ensconced at home, has also been toying with Zoom. “Now, we’re seeing concerts on Zoom, which has become the ubiquitous platform, designed for teleconferencing. We can record with relatively good quality, but there’s an issue of three musicians playing at a time. Once you get over three, you start having dropouts, and it doesn’t really work well with visual content. You have to think of events in a very different way. Large ensemble events, using that technology, aren’t going to work.”

In past years, there was more demand for retaining control over the various stages of the process, which was best experienced as part of a live audience, in whichever city. Lately, the Telematics clan has been switching their thinking, as virtual existence is now the consumer reality. Zoom is easier—for a makeshift, spontaneous encounter—and for discussion or rehearsals. Even so, when returning to inviting live audiences, the Telematics emphasis will remain on high quality documentation as well as instantaneous streaming, conceiving of an orchestral sound for the environmental performance. Dresser’s final thought on Zoom, though: “It’s not the best, but it’s not bad.”

The bassist is currently performing on a regular basis, and just did a set with singer Lisa Sokolov, trombonist Steve Swell, and saxophonist Jon Raskin, bouncing between NYC, Sacramento, and San Diego. On February 13, the most recent large-scale Telematics work made its mark, as the second part of Changing Tides bestrode UCSD and The Seoul Institute Of The Arts. “Every time I go out, I’m figuring how to make it better,” says Dresser. “How to make it more dimensional.”

There’s a huge difference in production values between when the band began, over a decade ago, up to this recent performance. Lately, they’ve been getting into capturing visual footage and blending this into the mix, sometimes even after the event, feeding past images into a current concert. As bandwidth has improved it’s now more likely that the end artistic perception will be a more accurate reflection of the intended experience. Even now, JackTrip retains its superiority on the audio quality front, unrivaled since 2007, when Dresser began appreciating having the lowest latency on the block (latency is the micro-delay that’s an unavoidable side-effect of sonic communica-tors). Dresser has been dealing with this during his entire involvement with Telematics.

“Depending on how you perceive the music, that can be a non-issue,” Dresser concludes. “I played with Jane Ira Bloom the other day, something in tempo, it sounded and felt like we were connected. It defied what I know about the actual delay. If musicians are listening, strong in their own space, consistent with their own tempo, and stay open, the impact of latency is not really felt. It’s not like you just have to play open, you can play in time, but it depends on how you do it. I would not try to play unisons. Also, the bandwidth fluctuates too. When we played together, it defied our knowledge of what the latency was—the actual experience of playing—we’re talking two-thirds-of-a-second delay. I think of this as the Telematic swing. It’s a big, wide beat. All these issues become music performance practice, compositional issues. You’re not going to play fast funk rhythms in a church.”

Dresser’s talking about the big acoustics rather than any likely restriction of The One by The Lord. “You have to conceive of a musical space for what it can do. You can do some amazing things. The challenges of the moment are asking, well, what can you make work? If there’s one rule in improvising, it’s ‘make it work.’”

Even back in 2010, bandwidth capacity at universities and other institutions was impressive, so the Telematics crew has always been working at a sleekly-flowing rate. “What’s changed is our experience, in the last decade. How to work through all these problems. The thing that’s so wonderful about JackTrip is that we can do multi-channel, uncompressed audio at CD quality, or better. There was no other way, at the time, for us to do it in a meaningful way.”

One major aim that remains is to expand the number of artists who can be playing at the same time. “Up to now, in our work, we’ve chosen close-miking, because we bear the details of what someone is playing.”

This facilitates a sonic unity, jetisoning any problems with varying space acoustics. “We’re dealing with latency all the time. I’m dealing with latency in my brain. Being able to articulate that I’ve got in my mind, to be able to verbalize it, and turn it around in real time. There’s a delay in that. I think that the whole latency problem is overblown. Sound quality is another issue, and I think we can get better at that.”

Mark Dresser. Photo: Jim Carmody.

On its 100th Anniversary, the World’s First Electronic Instrument Continues to Awe

BY NICK GALLAGHER

Ethereal hums buzz around the walls of an industrial storage room in Williamsburg, now used as a makeshift classroom. It’s a brisk March afternoon, and the renowned theremin performer and instructor Dorit Chrysler guides nine eager participants in an interactive lesson about the theremin—the world’s oldest electronic instrument and the only one that produces sounds without any direct contact from the player.

“We have a beautiful dissonant cluster here,” says Chrysler. That’s a generous way of saying that everyone is a little out of tune but showing improvement.

Besides frequent lessons like the one in Williamsburg, Chrysler hosts theremin-building workshops, orchestral performances, and kids classes as the cofounder of the NY Theremin Society. She also collaborates with theremin players around the world and advocates for the instrument’s legitimization in prestigious music circles.

The theremin turns 100 this year, a time when for decades now musicians and recording artists have opted for software and digital synthesizers to replace the sounds of analog instruments. But an ever-growing community of theremin players is fighting to keep the instrument alive, despite its obscure origins and challenging learning curve. They point to the meditative qualities of playing the theremin as well as the expressive, haunting sound that the instrument produces, which can’t be fully replicated digitally.

The theremin was created accidentally when an eccentric Russian scientist named Leon Theremin was experimenting with electromagnetic fields. He noticed he could alter the pitch of a sound by moving his hands around an antenna and gradually turned his discovery into a musical instrument. Theremin developed new prototypes until he came up with one that included two antennas—one for controlling volume, the other pitch—as recounted by Albert Glinsky in his book, Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage.
In the late 1920s, Theremin landed in New York City and secured a deal with RCA to create a mass-produced version of the instrument, using commonly available parts. Although it never gained mainstream success, the theremin became an important feature of New York’s avant-garde music scene. The instrument and its descendents appeared in everything from pop songs like the Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations” to the eerie sound effects in horror films.

More recently, the NY Theremin Society has curated performances at ISSUE Project Room, Pioneer Works, and other experimental venues across the city. An album released by the NY Theremin Society to celebrate the instrument’s 100th anniversary features pieces by musicians from 18 countries, including Japan, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Japan, in particular, has cultivated a vibrant theremin scene, and in 2015, 272 players set a world record for the largest theremin ensemble ever assembled.

Theremin performances are inherently theatrical—players’ expressive movements translate directly to the sounds that the audience hears. The act of playing is also a metaphysical experience for many performers who become hyperaware of subtle body movements and breaths that shift the instrument’s pitch. As Chrysler puts it, “your body is turned into the instrument.” For example, rapidly moving one’s hand back and forth causes the theremin to quiver, like a guitar’s whammy bar or the vibrato of an opera singer.

“On a good day, when things are really working, you imagine that you can feel the air,” says composer and thereminist Bob Schwerz. Schwerz has worked with acts as varied as the pop supergroup Simon & Garfunkel and Grammy-award winning jazz musician Esperanza Spalding. He says the theremin’s idiosyncrasies are also what make it especially difficult to play, especially at the beginning stages. “I was convinced a few times it had to be a hoax because it was the most impossible thing,” Schwerz says.

Electronic music pioneer Robert Moog cited the theremin as his inspiration to begin exploring electronic sounds in the mid-20th century. Although Moog became most famous for creating the first commercial synthesizer, his company also helped popularize the theremin by producing its own versions of the instrument. Moog’s modern edition, the Theremin—now equipped with numerous tonal choices and pitch-correction applications—is among the most commonly available models today.

When the theremin became accessible to the public, it was often misunderstood as a gimmicky toy that was only capable of producing strange sound effects. With no reference points, like piano keys or guitar strings, novices found it particularly difficult to play coherent melodies. Although the number of casual theremin players has ballooned in recent years, partly because of reduced production costs, the therapist’s scientific roots, she has also played with scientists study particle physics.

Back at the theremin workshop, students were mesmerized by the wavy sounds of Chrysler’s theremin as she performed “The Swan,” an elegant melody that Theremin often played for spectators. When it was their turn to play, the musicians were still struggling to hold a single note. They were hooked, nonetheless, by the cosmic power of the instrument. They noticed, perhaps for the first time, that their fingers could wield sounds out of thin air. NICK GALLAGHER is a Brooklyn-based art and culture reporter from North Carolina. He is pursuing a Master's degree at the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. His work has appeared in Indy Week, the Brooklyn Eagle, and the NYC News Service, among other outlets.

Horse Lords, The Common Task

BY JUDE THOMAS

Rock quartet Horse Lords’ latest album, The Common Task, dropped in March of this year just as the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed the country. The new record features five tracks from the band, which are noted not only for avant-garde aesthetics, but also for the use of refretted guitars tuned to “just intonation,” the tuning system utilized by Lo Monte Young and the bass for Harry Partch’s 43-key scale. Just intonation tunes pitches to each other using ratios—rather than the predominant equal temperament which sets equal distance between pitches—and aligns with the natural overtone series to create clean and ringing harmonies that give chords and melodies a more distinct and visceral quality. Just intonation in the West has origins in ancient Greek music theory and was one of many tuning systems used for thousands of years before equal temperament became dominant. In the last quarter century Western musicians have returned to pursuing it in earnest, along with other deviations from the established norm.

Until recently, microtonal techniques were found almost exclusively in the music of composers such as Partch and Young, or in non-Western music. Horse Lords, however, are part of a movement of microtonal rock musicians that have been simmering steadily since the turn of the century, and they are one of several groups that have succeeded in attracting a following, not only from the standard milieu of fans of any group or artist, but also from among the proponents and aficionados of microtonality.

Horse Lords formed out of the noise scene in Baltimore in the early 2010s. Andrew Bernstein (saxophone/percussion), Max Eilbacher (bass/electronics), Owen Gardner (guitar), and Sam Haberman (drums) originally got together for a single show, and the idea of being a rock band seemed quaint to them: “Somewhat of a joke at the beginning,” and “definitely not meant to be a serious project,” are how Eilbacher and Bernstein described their feelings when the band came together.

“At the time (in Baltimore) there weren’t a lot of rock bands, the noise scene was vibrant,” said Bernstein. Gardner even lovingly described the various noise groups as “a bunch of shit on the table.” For them, the important difference was the opportunity to focus on composition, that is, thinking about structure. According to Bernstein, “It felt good. I didn’t consider myself a noise musician, and maybe that’s what makes Horse Lords seem fresh.”

Electronics, tuning, rhythm, and grooves have become the defining elements of the entire band’s work. Normally, rock musicians working with alternate tunings use them to create a strangeness that draws attention, not only to itself, but also to our own expectations of harmony and melody. In their case, however, the tuning is just one facet of the music—all of which point toward the reality of sound itself. “The moments of visceral, ringing harmony—along with their use of groove fragments and rhythmic techniques which deny the familiar sense of a rock song—combine to make the sound itself the focus of attention. This indicates both a different structure to the music and their sensibility as noise musicians. Sound, not music, is paramount.

And while their use of just intonation is novel, the band’s rhythmic character that defines their music more than anything else. Most notable is how the snare drum is divorced from the other instruments, especially the bass and remaining drums. Their tuning system—and the odd sound of Steel and Glass. Their approach to grooves gives the band another unique character: normally, a single groove might define an entire song

(Stevie Wonder’s “Superstitious”), but Horse Lords utilizes groove fragments and lays them on top of one another. As a song moves toward a point of convergence, the grooves will shift abruptly (yet logically) in the midst of a track with little regard for the previous groove—almost as if the previous material is abandoned. In this sense they have given us on the possibility that grooves can develop in a meaningful way. Instead, they simply give us the essence of each groove juxtaposed against driving rhythms, which are themselves thrown off kilter by the divorced snare drum.

Structure is most apparent in these abrupt changes. The sound moves organically from section to section, and it’s there where tracks sound like composed works rather than driving jam sessions. Even though the band admits to moments of indeterminacy and improvisation, everything is thoroughly composed and workshopped.

Electronics are used in a similar manner, functioning either as “an extension of a compositional theme,” said Eilbacher, “or adding another textual dimension.” Often, the electronics overtake the endings of their songs—in one sense obliterating the music with an overwhelming wall of sound. It affirms the noise aesthetic by expressing a concern with the facts of the sound itself, and not what that sound might communicate.

The Common Task differs from their last full-length record, Interventions (2016), yet still retains the unique character of the band. For any group, moving in a new direction while still retaining one’s distinctiveness is a mark of success. Where Common Task differs most is instrumentation and the connections between the tracks. They feature the entire band (with the notable exception of “The Radiant City,” which leans hardest into Horse Lords’ tuning); and, unlike Interventions, the songs were conceived and composed with the intention of flowing from one to the next.

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of the composition,” where “as little input as possible produces the most varied output.”

One track of particular interest is the album’s B-side, “Integral Accident.” Beginning with recorded sounds of the murmurings and chatter that precedes any recital, it then moves into the staggered entrances of strings and voices, which are then eventually joined by Horse Lords themselves. Unlike Common Tasks’s other tracks, “Integral Accident” was commissioned by the Peabody Conservatory’s new music ensemble, Now Hear This. “David Smooke, [Peabody] faculty member and composer is around in Baltimore and is an acquaintance of ours,” explained Bernstein. “He recommended us as the artists in residence for the semester. We’d been talking about doing a Horse Lords expanded ensemble piece for years, and this gave us the opportunity to do it.”

“Integral Accident” wasn’t the only work by Horse Lords in this vein. In February and March of this year they scored the music for an opera, The First Thing That Happens (libretto by Lola B. Pierson, produced by The Acme Corporation). Composing an opera was remarkably different from their usual process of composition and performance.

“We had to work with what we were given, which didn’t make it easier,” said Gardner. Previously planned spring and early summer performances, of course, have been canceled. Those included the usual shows in bars and clubs, but also the Bang on a Can LONG PLAY Festival, scheduled for the first weekend in May. The Common Task tour included electronics that were integrated with the full band, and the band still hopes to “try that out sometime in the future.”

JUDE THOMAS is a microtonal composer living in New York City. He is also the producer and host of XEN RADIO, a weekly internet radio program of microtonal music.

Listening In:

Vision and Revision

BY SCOTT GUTTERMAN

It was early March, and I had a plan. I was going to interview Patricia Nicholson, choreographer, activist, and cofounder of the Vision Festival. The interview would focus on the growth of the free jazz festival, now in its 25th year and scheduled to take place in May at Roulette. The whole thing would kick off with a concert at Town Hall featuring the Sun Ra Arkestra and William Parker’s Sun Ra Arkestra Vision Festival. The interview would focus on the full band, and the band still hopes to “try that out sometime in the future.”

The next night I DJ’d a party, and everyone danced. Could everything really be so bad? I interviewed Patricia at her apartment over the weekend, tossing out my idea that perhaps this time of downtime emergency might lead to other kinds of artistic and social emergence. “That would be nice,” was her wry answer. It was all still unreal, still abstract. I figured I would type up my notes, submit the finished piece, and carry on with my life.

But as the boxer Mike Tyson said, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Within a few days, the reality of the change hit us. “Cancel Everything” declared a stark headline, and what started as a sucker punch, a bolt out the blue, began to look more like a force-gathering tsunami.

Workplaces closed. Whole industries, ways of living, collapsed with no clear way forward. Massive unemployment. Social inequalities magnified. And with all this came a profound uncertainty: would the pandemic go on for weeks, months, years? The virus began taking its toll not just on our day-to-day reality, but on our sense of time, the medium for producing meaning in all of our lives.

In the midst of the growth of the outbreak, with the curve shooting upward daily, I came down with a case myself—thankfully, a rather mild one. It started with the chills, followed by a walk after a through Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn; I couldn’t help wondering if this was some kind of grim foreshadowing. What followed was two weeks of recurring fever, loss of all sense of taste and smell, and general malaise. But the telltale respiratory symptoms never materialized, and after about 12 strange days and nights filled with worry, I started to improve. Regaining my appetite felt like a revelation.

During my time of sickness and since, I’ve read the obituaries, fixating on people from the world of music who had died of the virus: the gifted songwriter Adam Schlesinger, the genius curator and organizer Hal Willner, the rediscovered bassist Henry Grimes, myself past honoree of the Vision Festival. Besides taking these people’s lives, it was also taking the last of many musicians’ livelihoods: money from recordings had almost already dried up, and now live shows were no longer possible.

Every day in the news, the medical and economic news were fighting each other over which was worse, which struck the deepest fears. Several commentators noted that the two were inextricably intertwined, and that nothing could be expected to improve until we “flattened the curve.” So millions around the world set to work... waiting.

All the forced downtime of our collective quarantine made us reflect on the way we are living. On a political level, it made many realize that our current social structure is broken, that the dismantling of government begun under Reagan and pursued by zealots in the years since then has left us woefully unprepared to face a national emergency. What happened to a government of the people, by the people, and for the people? On a financial level, we rediscovered (though we always knew) the dangers of living paycheck to paycheck. We saw again the risk not from what we know, but from the much larger field of what we don’t; while we were hoping to guard ourselves against terrorism, gun violence, and the like, we missed a different threat entirely.

In the process, we also rediscovered aspects of our inner lives that had been obscured by the rush and distraction of urban existence. “Don’t just do something, sit there,” urges the Zen Buddhist, and staring out our windows can force a larger referendum on meaning itself. It has been difficult not to give in to darker thoughts at times. This passage by Milan Kundera seemed especially haunting: “Most people deceive themselves with a pair of faiths,” he wrote. “They believe in eternal memory (of people, things, deeds, nations) and in redressibility (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs). Both are false faiths. In reality, the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed.”

In other words, does anything we do matter? In the grand scheme of things, probably not. But it matters to us, and that may have to be enough. As a consolation, I found myself turning back not just to music, but to poetry, seeking out its distilled wisdom. I found a great deal of it in the work of Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi poet from what is now Afghanistan, in particular “The Guest House,” his meditation on worldly change (translation by Coleman Barks):

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably.

Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Change is difficult, and sudden change even more so, but it is a necessity. Surrendering to it begins with a kind of radical acceptance, a gratitude for what remains. Vision leads to revision, and the cycle of adaptation continues. The place we return to can never remain the same. For all the talk of hanging on, we also have to let go.

As for the Vision Festival, it is postponed for now, but hosting various online offerings (www.artsforart.org). Embedded in its artistic message is something along these same lines: honor the past, hold on to it fiercely… and when the moment demands it, let it go.

SCOTT GUTTERMAN has written about art and music for Artforum, Q, The New Yorker, Vogue, and other publications. His most recent book is Sunlight on the River: Poems about Paintings, Paintings about Poems (Prestel). He is deputy director of Neu Gallerie New York and lives in Brooklyn.
ANNIE-B PARSON
with Ivan Talijancic:
Drawing the Surface of Dance

“When you go on a trip, and come home, there is a closure to putting everything away in your drawers,” Annie-B Parson writes in the introduction to her recently published book, *Drawing the Surface of Dance: A Biography in Charts*. In this intimately curated volume, the tirelessly inventive choreographer, and cofounder of Big Dance Theater, charts her body of works by tracing the fil rouge of images, objects, and patterns—laying bare her creative methodologies in the process. Serendipitously, the drawing Parson made for the *Rail* in 2011, titled “All the Props in my Basement,” graces the inside cover of her new book. And, as pièces de résistance, in the final chapter Parson shares a modified deck of Mexican Loteria cards, repurposing it as a choreographic tool. I chose to shuffle the deck myself to divine the questions for Parson. The following conversation took place over Skype in early May 2020.

**IVAN TALIJANCIC (RAIL):** When a performance you make runs its course, there is a kind of strange nostalgia that ensues. In the introduction to your book, you wrote: “Post-post-post everyone else involved in the work, the choreographer (me) reclaims stolen property in some dingy bus station.” Tell me more about complicated feelings that emerge after a work you’ve made is done—done.

**ANNIE-B PARSON:** When the show is being performed, it is necessary that I give the performers physical and emotional space to own it—to stay out of their way, and be in relation to their audience. They like me to be around, but it becomes a duet between them and their audience. It’s a very necessary and weird feeling! Then after the show has closed, the load-out is over and it’s been written about—or not written about, as is more common these days—the piece exists in my body, almost on a cellular level. It’s like I am taking the piece back psychically. So—I begin to draw it.

The metaphor there is dark (dingy bus station)—I think it’s hard and dark because there is so little feedback in our community and society.

**RAIL:** In the “Structures and Scores” section of your book, you create a historical chart tracing the use of certain objects across the timeline of your productions. For instance, you noted that you started using furry objects as props in 1999, then in 2010, they disappeared. If you were to dramaturg yourself, what would you say might be the source of your fascination with certain types of materials or objects?

**PARSON:** Over years, I have been creating work(s) that depart from and relate to past works as I use up ideas and discard them. But I can’t discard them when they are still pulsing and present for me. So a texture or object or sound may find its way into many pieces until it’s not interesting to me anymore. To your question: it’s about resonance(s). Meaning, certain objects have personal resonance, historical resonance, and topical resonance and, of course, aesthetic resonance. Furry was funny and beautiful from 1999 until 2010, and then it lost its appeal, I guess, and fell off my radar.

**RAIL:** Do you ever find yourself going back to certain notions or objects you’d previously been interested in but then discarded? Or is it an evolution of sorts?

**PARSON:** I don’t think so—I think I would consider it undisciplined. Of course, some I have never left, like aprons. I still feel adventurous around an apron. I still feel adventurous around a braid.

**RAIL:** There is so much history in a braid.

**PARSON:** Timeless imagery laden with narrative, character, archetype, beauty, and algorithm. It’s the perfect marriage of form and content.

**RAIL:** The way in which you spatially set the stage in your works always feels deeply intentional. It’s almost like a playground that has a very exacting set of rules under which the action unfolds. How do you go about “formatting” the space as you embark on a creative process?

**PARSON:** Ah, that’s inside baseball! Usually I have a secret spatial structure underneath each piece that serves almost as a game to play with myself. And, each area in the room has its own power, or tonality, I just need to figure out how to play it. The chart structure, which is more overt, gave me a certain freedom, or way to use the space of the page as well.

The personal use of the space is part of expressing the depth of surface. One of the tools (to use a dry word) a choreographer has in her power.

**RAIL:** We were talking earlier about certain objects and materials that act as a recurring reference across your body of work. Can you handpick one of your leitmotifs and tell me more about its significance or symbolism within your choreographic vocabulary?

**PARSON:** I think there is a recurring use of grammar in dancemaking. The use of verbs; the use of prepositions and nouns—all as distinct movement materials. Language/text and the space in the text, the appreciation of writing, how an object and a piece of movement material are related by shape and structure is an abiding interest to me.

I’ll trace the path of a stick as best I can—I may not get it all. I’ll love to have a glass stick that was used to fly, transform, and have multiple meanings.

**RAIL:** To what extent do chance and intuition play a role within your creative process?

**PARSON:** Although I carry dice in my backpack, I don’t use them. I guess they are there just in case I need to summon the goddesses. And, though I teach the use of chance in dancemaking, I personally don’t use it with the intention of rules any more, Cunningham, where I ostensibly give over authorship to the universe. My work is sort of the opposite: the place where chance enters and is welcome is whatever I can capture from real life in rehearsal.

**RAIL:** I wanted to circle back to the title of your book: *Drawing the Surface of Dance*. What does the word “surface” mean to you?

**PARSON:** The surface is underrated as a place of depth, paradox intended. I have always leaned into it, felt that it can be exploited for its endless theatrical opportunities. For instance, the use of clothing in dance. When I was young, everyone wore drawstring pants and t-shirts on stage. I felt this spoke to a certain rejection of theater with a capital T. I didn’t agree with that rejection; I wanted to exploit the use of costume without using the idea of character or type as signifier. When I first started making dance, many of my works referred to post-Holocaust culture in Germany. I was obsessed with European kitsch and muzak—this was all on the surface. I made no attempt to even get near using it as articulated content, I felt it on the surface to resonate as it would on an almost subconscious level. I think articulating what you see in one of my dances would be an interesting way to approach them. So I drew everything visible in them. We can never ever regain the kinesthetic, empathic experience of watching live dance; this is what is left.

**ANNIE-B PARSON**’s Drawing the Surface of Dance: A Biography in Charts was published in 2019 by the Wesleyan University Press. 

**IVAN TALIJANCIC** is a time-based artist, educator, and journalist and cofounder of WaxFactory. He is the Artistic Director of the Contemporary Performance Practices program at Wesleyan University. He is the recipient of the 2020 Performance Award from the Café Royal Cultural Foundation, and a member of the Bessie Awards committee.
PAM TANOWITZ with Susan Yung

Pam Tanowitz was among the busiest choreographers working when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. Over the past year, she premiered commissions at New York City Ballet, Paul Taylor American Modern Dance, Martha Graham Dance Company, and London’s Royal Ballet. At the exact hour that we spoke by phone in May, her own company had been scheduled to perform New Work for Goldberg Variations at the Sadlers Wells in London, which was canceled in the worldwide shutdown.

IN CONVERSATION

SUSAN YUNG (RAIL): How are you? Are you keeping in touch with your dancers, and working at all?

PAM TANOWITZ: When this started we didn’t know what was going on. Every phone call was something being canceled, very depressing and upsetting. It was hard for me to muster energy and inspiration, but I also felt it was important for everyone. I tricked myself into thinking it was for the dancers, but it was actually for me. I wanted to figure out a way to keep working, stay engaged, be able to pay them. As a project-based company, the cancellation of all these shows—performances, rehearsals—was so hard. We’re supposed to be performing Goldberg Variations at the Barbican, right now. But it’s happening to everyone.

A lot of the time I start with a new phrase, movement, or idea, but I’ll also bring along old material that feels interesting, that could be worked on more, or failed in another piece but I want to bring it forward, because part of the nature of a project-based company is that we don’t have a repertory to rehearse. That always inspires me. We’re not like Mark Morris Dance Group, working on a new piece in the morning, and rehearsing old pieces in the afternoon. What we’re working on is what we’re working on.

It’s also bringing my history forward. I had a phone call with each dancer. Dylan [Crossman], Lindsey [Jones], Maile [Okamura], Melissa [Togood], Jason [Collins]—I keep track of what I’m doing with each in a file folder. A lot of it’s similar, but they’re all on different tracks. We make a list of all the dances they’ve been in—and what material is interesting to me, what’s interesting to them. It’s a collaboration, like it always is with dancers. Sometimes it’s another dancer’s movement they never did that they loved. Part of the process is to relearn old material. I say, “Whatever you remember is what it is; don’t look at the video.” It’s interesting what you remember, and then how you manipulate it. We do reversals and splice phrases from two different pieces.

In Dylan’s folder, he has material from Spectators. Half of it is reversed, and the other half is taking a duct he does with Melissa, reversing that. From another piece called The Story Progresses...From 2016, he’s splicing it with a different piece from the Guggenheim. It gets very complicated. So each dancer has their own specific list. That’s one of the assignments.

We come up with a list of what we’re interested in doing, and then they work on it by themselves. Then we FaceTime; I’m manipulating, and we’re working on timing and rhythm, or I’ll rearrange the order. It’s good, but hard—you’re not in the room together; the screen is an extra layer of buffer. Every session starts out with an emotional check-in: “How are you? What’s going on?” It’s harder to create mental space for this—even though we all want to do it.

It’s really sad. New York City is broken. You’re in your house and go outside for groceries in your mask, and everything’s closed. I come back and I’m like, why am I even doing this? What’s the point? So I go back and forth between feeling inspired by the limitations and really devastated, and not sure if I should try to just get a new career. RAIL: Do not do that! After the pandemic started, for a month, I couldn’t do anything. Then I rewatched a video of New Goldberg Variations, and I thought, this is why I do what I do! It was the most beautiful, touching thing I’d seen in months. It really did stir something in me—to summon up energy. It does make a difference.

I know performance is the last thing on the list of things to go back to normal...

TANOWITZ: It’s literally the last thing.

RAIL: People say, who needs the arts? But that’s why people come to New York—for dance, and museums, everything you can’t do right now. So don’t stop.

TANOWITZ: I don’t know if I could...but it feels like “why?” when everyone’s feeling that way.

And then I come back to the work....I was looking through my old dance history books, which I usually never have time to do. I went to Kinko’s with my mask and gloves and xeroxed all this stuff. I’m making these storyboards from iconic photos. It’s the basis for what we come up with; we manipulate shapes, create transitions. One is a written exercise, where I make a “list phrase.” Sometimes the phrases are very specific—saut de basque, arch—or very open-ended—do an arabesque, and then comment on an arabesque. Different ways of getting at movement.

Amazing pictures of Doris Humphrey, Helen Tamiris... It’s like putting together a puzzle. Agnes de Mille, Katherine Dunham. Some are ballet duet photos; sometimes my dancers are doing both parts: Vaslav Nijinsky, José Limón. Or chance procedures: I made a pattern based on this poem, a sestina. I’ll give the dancers the pattern, and they can choose which movements are A, B, or C. It’s hard to work on space; everyone’s in their living rooms doing it with me. All the composition stuff is hard. But I’ve been working one on one, which has become more intimate than I thought.

A lot of the time my work is really about the people in the room. Whether it’s Goldberg, or Four Quarters, a piece for City Ballet or Royal Ballet, it’s about who’s with me. I also play off of how the dancers are together in that room, and how they’re with me. It becomes about my relationship with that specific dancer.

RAIL: Apropos of relationships, New Goldberg Variations is imbued with greater emotion than many of your works. Did you feel that choreographing it? And how did the music affect that? TANOWITZ: It’s the way Simone [Dinnerstein] plays the Goldberg Variations. She plays it for the Paris Opera Ballet for Jerome Robbins’ Goldberg Variations. Her style is very different—more open and warm. When I started working on it, I started with steps, but in my gut I knew it’d be more communal, more open. In recent work, I’ve been trying something different; I don’t want to keep making the same thing. I want to work and evolve, push myself in ways that feel uncomfortable. I had a lot of history on top of me this year—it was Graham, Taylor, City Ballet... It started with New Goldberg Variations: “Robbins, what is she thinking? He did a dance with 20 or 60?” I had eight. But why not try?

RAIL: Good thing you tried. That said, would you ever consider doing something like a story ballet, or something with a narrative?
I thought, “I need those steps!” What’s amazing is that Graham had nearly all her music commissioned. To her, dance was number one; she wasn’t a service to the music. That’s really important. Basically, I had my steps, and I had Graham steps. It was interesting to see how the male dancers learn female roles and vice versa, because those are so separated in her work. I tried to drain the drama out of her steps and that was challenging with the dancers. There’s an iconic male solo, and I separated it into a trio for men—one did the head, one the arms, one the body. One day they were rehearsing Maple Leaf Rag with the sets out in Westbeth and I thought, I need this! So I got to use the set for Maple Leaf Rag. There are Steps in the Street blocks in the back; the idea was that whatever pieces they toured with, we could use—they weren’t extra.

RAIL: Your company seems really constant and loyal. How does that contribute to the artistic process?

TANOWITZ: I think a lot of my dancers stay because we have a good working environment. We are serious about our work but don’t take ourselves too seriously. Each person brings in, have to fall in love with; I have a gut feeling and I know they’re going to work. I’m so lucky because I have the best dancers in New York. For my work you need to be highly technical, but you also have to be super smart; they’re always problem solving. I would be nothing without them.

RAIL: You’ve collaborated with artists such as Brice Marden and Cecily Brown. What kind of give and take did you have?

TANOWITZ: I collaborated with Cecily long ago, 2004. I’ve only worked with two visual artists. It’s hard to figure out, besides using their paintings as a backdrop, how else can I use them? Brice said yes to Four Quartets as I told him I wanted to use the paintings to change the space in the world—I don’t just have it be a backdrop—which is beautiful, but I wanted to see what else was possible. I worked with Clifton Taylor, the genius lighting designer. We went through Brice’s material, and he suggested some paintings—of course we said yes to Cremson, many times at Guggenheim’s Works & Process. She said, “I don’t like everything you do, but I think what you do is important.” Now, that is a person who supports artists. I still have people supporting me, and I try to do that for other artists.

RAIL: Any upcoming projects you can talk about?

TANOWITZ: NYCB postponed me until next year; it’s the dance they originally commissioned. It was to be earlier, which is genius. I thought, “I need those steps!” What’s amazing is that Graham had nearly all her music commissioned. To her, dance was number one; she wasn’t a service to the music. That’s really important. Basically, I had my steps, and I had Graham steps. It was interesting to see how the male dancers learn female roles and vice versa, because those are so separated in her work. I tried to drain the drama out of her steps and that was challenging with the dancers. There’s an iconic male solo, and I separated it into a trio for men—one did the head, one the arms, one the body. One day they were rehearsing Maple Leaf Rag with the sets out in Westbeth and I thought, I need this! So I got to use the set for Maple Leaf Rag. There are Steps in the Street blocks in the back; the idea was that whatever pieces they toured with, we could use—they weren’t extra.

RAIL: Your profile has risen dramatically in the last few years, after nearly two decades of creating dances. How has that been?

TANOWITZ: I’m 50, I moved to New York when I was 24. Five years ago, I never thought that I’d be making dances for Graham, Taylor, NYCB, the Royal Ballet. But any opportunity to make work I’m so grateful for. Some will be more successful than others, I know that. No one really knew who I was for about 15 years. It was hard, but it was actually good for me. All the rejection shaped the artist that I am. I have a folder of rejection letters. You had to send in your VHS tapes and they’d mail you a rejection letter, because there was no email in 1993.

When I first moved here, I worked with friends; we didn’t have money. I did my first show at CBGB’s gallery. We were treated like a band; I got half the door, and I had Glen Rumsey from Cunningham in a CBGB window, improvising. I didn’t know how to make a press kit until a visual artist friend taught me. I wasn’t prepared for any of this stuff; I just sort of did it. When you’re naive, it’s easier to plow through and try stuff and not overthink—like what if it fails? What if nobody comes?

When I graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1998, I rented Westbeth for a show. There was a huge snowstorm, and 10 people were in the audience. I was crying, thinking, “why am I doing this?” Then Viola [Farber, Tanowitz’s teacher, mentor, and Cunningham alum] passed away, so I had to do it.

All those bad dances, rejections, and pushing through obviously affected me and shaped my art. I guess I’m in for the long haul. And everyone has a different path in dance. Dance is very hard. I’m a visiting guest teacher at Rutgers University and all students want to know how to do it, how do I have a company? I think what they’re really asking is, how do you be an artist in the world? I don’t know the answer, but I try to help in different ways. A lot of people helped me. At the beginning, no one wanted to book me. But Laurie Uprichard booked me at Danspace Project, Carla Peterson at D’WT, and Mary Sharp Comson, many times at Guggenheim’s Works & Process. She said, “I don’t like everything you do, but I think what you do is important.” Now, that is a person who supports artists. I still have people supporting me, and I try to do that for other artists.

RAIL: Any upcoming projects you can talk about?

TANOWITZ: NYCB postponed me until next year; it’s the dance they originally commissioned. It was to be earlier, which I couldn’t do; not enough time, so they gave me two. It’s an amazing score by Ted Hearne. I started it; I made a beautiful duet for Russell Janzen and Sara Mearns, and a group section for other amazing dancers—and then we stopped. I have all my notes; I have my whole plan mapped out on paper, and I can’t do it. I’m dying to do it.

SUSAN YUNG is a New York-based culture writer.
Dancing Alone

BY GEORGE KAN

“The music ain’t worth nothing if you can’t lay it on the public...”
— Louis Armstrong

Gillian Wearing, Dancing in Peckham, 1994

We can’t hear the music, just the echoed footsteps and murrurings of passers-by. But it appears she must hear something, as her body wiggles and shakes to this unknown beat. Stopping her head, she whips and flicks dark hair across her face. Bouncing in her knees, her wrists flutter at her sides, feeling for the groove. She’s lost in it, endless oscillation, shimmering up and down.

Her moves are loose, sloppy, indifferent, not made for others to see but for her to feel. She’s dancing alone in her room; she’s letting go. Except, she’s not. Surrounding shoppers idle past. As seen through the VHS recording, the brown and beige tones of her boot cut trousers and floral top match the pale, narrow floorboards are crooked and translucent. Light pours in through the window, tinge in the corner. Instagram informs that 161 other users are somewhere here too, avidly awaiting these brief fizzes of interaction. I am skeptical of her indifference. Instead, I regard her—and she jiggles on regardless.

We can’t hear the music, just the echoed footsteps and mutterings of passers-by. But it appears she must hear something, as her body wiggles and shakes to this unknown beat. Stopping her head, she whips and flips dark hair across her face. Bouncing in her knees, her wrists flutter at her sides, feeling for the groove. She’s lost in it, endless oscillation, shimmering up and down.

Her moves are loose, sloppy, indifferent, not made for others to see but for her to feel. She’s dancing alone in her room; she’s letting go. Except, she’s not. Surrounding shoppers idle past. As seen through the VHS recording, the brown and beige tones of her boot cut trousers and floral top match the faux marble floor. Center-stage, she’s lit by the domed glass ceiling of a shopping center. The room is Robert Rauschenberg’s and her own. At moments when the movement is particularly frantic, virtuosic even, viewers hit the heart shaped button and a flurry of hearts blow out across the screen. Their rainbow cheeriness falls mute across Blackhaine’s tormented. This visual contradiction, that comes as a substitute for applause, symbolizes a kind of wrestling with the online gestures are agitated, tormented. Both flows, it seems it is for herself, too. The sneering sideways glances of passers-by betray a look of jealousy. What if I let go like Wearing? She gets low, jamming on her air guitar, swinging forward over her feet, then back, head banging, rifting a silent boogie.

Blackhaine, FOUR THOUSAND HOLES IN BLACKBURN, LANCASHIRE [excerpt] 28th March 2020

Joining the dim room, I squint. A solitary pink light stands in the corner. Instagram informs that 161 other users are somewhere here too, watching the live stream. The phone camera struggles to adjust to the darkness as it scans the small area. A light switch and plug socket reveal it is a domestic space, emptied out to form a stage yet still intimate enough to make our gaze feel like a prying one. There’s a figure here: a tall, thin frame that has appeared in her many performances and gesture makes a conversation with unique histories, both trapped—caged and wild, skin and flesh. As he leaps against the walls, we grasp the smallness of the room, echoed in the smallness of the phone screen through which we peer.

At moments when the movement is particularly frantic, virtuosic even, viewers hit the heart shaped button and a flurry of hearts blow out across the screen. Their rainbow cheeriness falls mute across Blackhaine’s torment. This visual contradiction, that comes as a substitute for applause, symbolizes a kind of wrestling with the online medium—a struggled striving to connect. Silently, we witness a body in isolation, desperate to demonstrate his entrapment, to make known an inner anguish.


A room. Small, yes, but the walls here are translucent. Light pours in through the wall to the left, while, to the right, blurred shapes beyond, perhaps branches, cast faint shadows. The room feels warm; the pale, narrow floorboards are crooked and delicate. Eiko, gazing up at the misty glow, moves as quietly as a breath. The room is Robert Rauschenberg’s studio in Florida, from the 1970s. Having been isolated in China in January, and later quarantined in Japan, Eiko has assembled this short film from footage of her dancing there in 2017.

Eiko Otake’s work was filmed in residency at Rauschenberg Foundation. Room and other works are available through her virtual studio with Wesleyan’s Center for the Arts. Eiko Otake is an artist, writer, and performance maker from London, now based in New York. He holds a BA in Art History (Cambridge, UK) and an MA in Performance Studies (Tisch, New York).

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Though unable to share her performance live, Eiko personally invites any viewers to write to her via her website. This invitation for correspondence opens up the intimacy of the artist’s studio—both Rauschenberg’s and her own.

Having previously performed among the ghosts at Fukushima, and the bustling commuters at Fulton Center station, Eiko is adept at responding to each environment. Replying with movement, her work begins a conversation with unique histories, both of the space and her own.

And though, at first, Room appears to be about isolation, there emerges communion. Unlike in Blackhaine’s work, the handheld camera moves in step with the dancer’s soft tread. DonChristian Jones, who often dances with Eiko, takes on the role of the camera. In filming her, his attentive following of her gaze and gesture makes Room feel more like a duet.

In her hand, a red cloth, the very same that has appeared in her many performances across the world. She holds it up to the after-noon light. Floating, she too appears taken, absorbed in some internal world. Carrying it up toward the translucent wall, there is a deliberate force in her grip. A quiet determinacy, a gentle pressure toward the outside.

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Whil...
Philosophy For Living: Lisa Marie Malloy and J.P. Sniadecki’s A Shape of Things to Come

BY MATT TURNER

“Underneath it all, I’m just here enjoying life on planet earth,” says Sundog, the radial environmentalist protagonist of Lisa Marie Malloy and J.P. Sniadecki’s A Shape of Things to Come, stating his philosophy for living during one of the few moments in the film in which he speaks. Despite being present onscreen for 90 percent of the film and active as a key creative collaborator, Sundog is arguably still not the film’s principal subject. Rather, Sundog is a cypher through which to focus on the desert landscape in which he lives, scavenging self-sufficiently in direct opposition to what ecophilosopher Derrick Jensen has termed the “the dominant culture.” For both every aspect of the way that modern civilisation is arranged is in some way harmful, so to participate in mainstream society is to be complicit in the earth’s destruction.  

Sniadecki met Sundog whilst making El Mar La Mar (2017), also co-directed (with Joshua Bonnetta) and also shot entirely (albeit one with an unusual sensitivity to sensuous details) of Sundog’s life in his makeshift shack, a homestead abode that he shares with one black cat and a small drove of pigs. The film traces him as he undertakes a series of activities in the desert wilds such as plant-picking, pig-feeding, herb-mixing, and even toad-smoking, all the while avoiding supplying any background details. These routine behaviors lead to a series of small crescendos, events which problematize our understanding of this character, revealing more about his relationship to the land he lives in symbiosis with and the wider society that he is distanced from.

Like much of the work of filmmakers with former associations with Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab, the film has aesthetic qualities that rival anything contemporary documentary has to offer. Images are remarkably composed, with consistently interesting framing and smart manipulation of natural light, as well as sound design and editing that intensifies the visual environment being depicted or serves to link scenes together smoothly and create continual flow. Seemingly minor observations are heightened in sensation, shifted slightly in focus, or tweaked and dialled up in some imperceivable way. As a result of these alterations, regular actions and ordinary scenarios seem unusually interesting; the routine is made engaging again, the ordinary is rendered sublime.

The film’s first sequence evidences this, opening with a closeup of Sundog snoozing in a field, his bushy beard almost indistinguishable from the reeds that surround him. His eyes are shut, his expression restful; the scene should be dull but the images in it are rich, suggestive of a coming meaning that lies just beyond current comprehension. Indeed, his situation seems idyllic, but it is quickly complicated. The scene is intercut with a shot of a grave in the desert that recalls similar ones seen in El Mar La Mar, an unmarked patch with a small cross that suggests it marks a life lost during an imperilled crossing. Next, Sundog slings a rifle over his shoulder and readies for a hunt. Though his eventual target is a stray javelina—which he is seen gutting, cooking and then sharing with his pigs in the extended, particularly fascinating sequence that follows—the scene’s initial ambiguity is such that it is not clear who or what he is going after. Abstraction, as engineered here, produces a tension which, it later becomes clear, is intentional.

These scenes set several precedents that the film’s trajectory follows. Sundog is particular and principled, and whilst his off-grid life is seemingly peaceful, it is also—subject as it is to a violent state and a destructive society that poses a threat to both man and nature—tinged with danger. Sundog’s purpose then, as he sees it, is to resist the infringement of the state on the land “in any way [he] can think of,” or at least take strides to “slow it down, fumble it up, stop it in its tracks.” From this informational tidbit, viewers are left wondering several things about Sundog: What led him to this life, but equally, where does this life lead? While for now, he explains, this mainly means smuggling migrants across the border or committing petty acts of resistance, the assumption that the film’s title invokes is that soon this may translate into something more severe.

While the film’s early scenes then place the film in the territory of a lineage of artist filmmakers with a fascination for hermetic characters—recalling Luke Fowler’s Bogman Palmijaguar (2007), Ben Rivers Two Years at Sea (2012), or Ann Carolin Renninger and René Frölke’s From a Year of Non-Events (2017), to pick a few examples—a closer comparison might be James Benning’s Stemple Pass (2012), which takes a protracted look at the Montana mountains in which “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski built his isolated cabin. Late in the film, Sundog is seen engaging in an act of eco-terrorism, which firmly establishes him—at least within the context of a film in which fantasy and reality are never clearly delineated—as someone prepared to take action when he deems that such action is required. The title’s other inference—referencing The Shape of Things to Come, a book H.G. Wells wrote in 1933 that offers speculations about the future of the world through to 2106—gives another indication as to what the film might be about—beyond simple portraiture of this landscape and its solitary inhabitant. That which Sundog strives to protect is certain to face considerable imminent change, and whatever you make of it, the way he lives is certainly a more sustainable model of engagement with the world than is accomplished by most. The film then, while not exactly a prediction of “the shape” of things to come, does offer “a shape,” a sketch of one of many possible futures for how life will be lived in the form of a lone man making do within a hostile land.

Lisa Marie Malloy and J.P. Sniadecki’s A Shape of Things to Come. Courtesy CPH:DOX.

2. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/p-sniadecki/
4. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/p-sniadecki/

MATT TURNER is a freelance film writer and programmer. He also works at Open City Documentary Festival in London.
IN CONVERSATION

ZIA ANGER with Mike Tully

What does it mean to be a filmmaker in the 21st century? The democratization of image-making and the cultural impact of the internet are shaping cinema in ways that increasingly lay bare the medium’s essential fluidity. Zia Anger, an artist working in moving images, has embraced this evolution. Her performance, *My First Film*, repurposes our new media landscape into a vulnerably personal narrative of inquisition into her own creative process. Describing it as an “expanded cinema performance,” Anger traces the last ten years of lost and abandoned work on her first feature film onto her laptop’s screen. Beginning by sharing past Instagram stories and text messages with the audience, Anger proceeds to scrub through footage from her film *Always All Ways, Anne Marie* while typing out a parallel commentary. Leading us through the slippery territory of autofiction, Anger asks viewers to reconsider notions of personal identity, communal relationships, and adversities facing emerging filmmakers. *My First Film* builds on Anger’s unconventional body of work, including her past short films which have premiered at the New York Film Festival (My Last Film, 2015) and the Locarno Film Festival (I Remember Nothing, 2015). Additionally, she has directed music videos and collaborated widely with artists including Angel Olsen, Mitski, Beach House, Zola Jesus, and Jenny Hval.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Zia via video chat at her office and home in Hudson, NY following one of her livestream performances in April. We discussed the origins of *My First Film* in 2018, her touring performances of it throughout 2019, and how the performance evolved after the global pandemic prompted its current livestream iteration in 2020. She shared her thoughts about finding strength within one’s self through community, understanding image making as a human right, and expanding the inclusivity of moving images in her art and practice.

ZIA ANGER: I’ve been thinking that this performance, when I’m doing it for people in quarantine, I feel like I’m catching them while they’re mid-flight watching a movie. [Laughs] Like, they’re totally hungover, they haven’t had any sleep, they’re the most anxious they’ve ever been, and that’s why they’re responding to it in the way that they have been. [Laughs]

MIKE TULLY (RAIL): Like the rawest possible conditions. I think that has some truth to it. You begin the film sharing old Instagram stories with viewers via iMessage, and then you encourage people to start texting each other videos. You describe it as reappropriating an Instagram-esque digital architecture, something that requires a lot of effort. What do you think is the importance of asking viewers to reclaim these commonplace digital spaces?

ANGER: Digital spaces make it so easy for us to share things with each other. Digital spaces also basically own anything that you upload to them. I don’t know what the ancient word for that type of agreement is, but it’s a bad agreement. [Laughs] We basically give away all of our ideas and privacy in exchange for the ease of it. So I think that the entire performance, especially when it was in a theater, was about changing your relationship to the theatrical experience that leads you to be more present and open and ready in your own life. Also to really question all of the middlemen and structures that we have allowed into our lives, out of ease or out of necessity.

RAIL: You’ve done a lot of work with Jenny Hval. I’m curious how your past experiences with her, as a creative collaborator and stage director, might have influenced...
or shaped the way you thought about doing these performances of My First Film.

ANGER: When I worked with Jenny for the live stuff I was the stage director and I performed on stage. I did a certain type of homespun theater with her and my cousin, the artist Annie Bielik, and sometimes with other people too. When I was a young person, I really loved theater. Working with Jenny brought me back into the kind of the space of these ideas about theater and also it could be that I really got to understand the process of developing something in front of an audience by working with Jenny and I did it for this performance. Now it’s a little bit more difficult, it’s online, it’s very hard to read the room. I have to rely a little bit more on googling myself after the show and seeing what people are talking about. Which they say never to do, but whoever they are, fuck them. [laughs]

RAIL: What do you think of as the benefits, threads, or creative challenges between a performance like this that’s livestreamed and something like a more traditional film that’s edited and has a set runtime?

ANGER: I’ve always thought the best films are ones that you can revisit many times and each time you revisit them they mean something really different. It doesn’t mean that every time you watch it you find that it has to be amazing, but eventually it becomes relevant again. So I think that the performance is kind of that but on a very condensed timeline. Over the course of 2 years, it has bumped up against the world in many different ways. I think eventually, and kind of “pretty soon,” the performance will come to an absolute end. But I think that I could do it again in 10 or 15 years. I think that it would be really interesting and there would be so many other meanings that I don’t even know that it has yet.

RAIL: What do you think about “saving” one of your performances for posterity or for archival purposes? Is that something you’re interested in?

ANGER: We always wanted to do that with the theatrical performances and the best that I did was record a… what are those stupid little cameras called? A GoPro version of it. [laughs] So the live shows, besides the little GoPro thing, there’s no archival of that. Scared me a little bit. I would always save the written documents so you could compare those things. With no record, all of that stuff would be lost. But the livestream versions, we found a way to save the performance. So for the first time, we are building an archive, which I really don’t know if it will be interesting. But, like I said, it’s so interesting because it’s live and because you’re on an airplane watching a movie with a whole bunch of other people. Maybe someday when I watch those archival recordings I’ll better understand.

RAIL: There’s an almost Jenny Holzer-like quality when you’re using TextEdit as a tool for creating a running commentary throughout the narrative in your performance of it. You’ve written about the importance of literacy of moving images in comparison to that of writing. How do you think about making an artwork that’s both watched and read?

ANGER: It started out of practicality. I can’t really speak without choking up and crying and being anxious. I always really wanted to be an actor and I realized pretty early on that my stage fright, which affected mainly my voice, was going to hold me back. I think the piece works in a way because I’m writing but I’m not a trained writer. [laughs] Even if I wanted to be academic about what I’m trying to say or be didactic, which in the past I admit I’ve tried to do, I couldn’t be because I’m not that good of a writer. I think as I was doing this I realized that I had to keep things really simple because that was the only way that I would be comfortable with writing and showing what I’m thinking. In a way, the writing really led me to a pure and simple way of telling a story that in the past I think I’ve struggled with, wanting to show all those ideas into something whether it be making a character say something or whether it be in the mise en scène or whatever all the elements are. I think that making a very simple piece of writing is very exciting for me because in general the only kind of writing that I’m able to read and respond to.

RAIL: Repurposing your film, Always All Ways, Anne Marie, could be described as a process of creative reuse. You’ve written about your interest in efficiency before. Can you speak to what efficiency means to you in a filmmaking context?

ANGER: I think that I carried around so much guilt and sadness for the past eight, nine years. I think that’s why I had started with something very small. Because it was not seen by an audience it felt like I had wasted not only my own energy and creative output but that of all of the people who helped me make that film. I could feel people not wanting to do something else with me. Because people really want to make something that is seen. I was struggling from a very communal place, where I felt like I had let my community down and then I was suffering from a very kind of deluded capitalist place where I felt like I had wasted my one chance at being seen as the thing I wanted to be seen as. Let it be noted that I’m so happy that that first film was never seen, because that type of filmmaker is not the person who I wanted to be seen as.

So there’s something for me that’s very gratifying about being able to take this thing and feel like this was finally met by the energy of an audience. In fact, what has been the most amazing experience is that even though the original film did not work in the way that I wanted it to in affecting an audience, for whatever reason it now works in that way. It’s about coming together as a community and creating something. The original film is about someone giving birth to themselves. It’s about finding strength in power within yourself through all of the people who are around you. I think that the audience’s reactions have led me to believe that a lot of people have walked away feeling very inspired to revisit themselves and to revisit all the things that have made them who they are, the people around them, revisit all of those relationships, and think about all the potential that they have inside of them. All the potential that their community holds and what can come from that.

RAIL: You’ve written a lot about how economic hardships and inaccessibility challenge young filmmakers and female filmmakers to actualize work on their own terms. When you talk about these hardships or community, or the political roles of performance and filmmaking, can you play in a cultural moment like we’re in?

ANGER: I remember when I was about 18, I started reading celebrity gossip websites and I started to have a really profound sense of what a celebrity was. Celebrity is very tied to film culture. There’s no art that is more tied to celebrity than films. So much so that a lot of times I really don’t think film is art. I think it can be art and I think that art can be very capitalistic and celebrity-obsessed, but I think there are ones that you can revisit many times and feel like this was finally met by the energy of an audience.

RAIL: Your body of work focuses largely on feminine experiences in an overtly physical and bodily sense. For instance, the process of pregnancy and abortion in My First Film. Can you speak to working with the body as a primary instrument in making artwork or films? Is there an inherent accessibility or autonomy to the body as a creative instrument?

ANGER: I was thinking recently about who has taught me about storytelling. I was thinking a lot about my moms—I have two of them—and how in my life they were the first two people who I saw as storytellers. Now these are my literal mothers, one of them gave birth to me, but when I let the idea extend outwards I started to think about all the other mothers who are not literal, some who have never or will never give birth, but have also taught me about storytelling. To me a mother is simply someone who creates with their body. All you need is a body to tell a story. All of the tools that people tell you that you need to make something whether it be a camera or a computer, a phone, even a pen and a piece of paper, you don’t need any of those things to be an amazing storyteller and to tell a story. That’s really an exciting thing to remind yourself of when you’re an artist, especially if you’re struggling to make something, is taking away all the tools that you think that you need. Relying solely on your body, your mind, your spirit, was all the things that you hold within you. Everybody can be a mother.

Mike Tully is a designer, educator, and writer. He is the Rail’s Design Director.
IN CONVERSATION

JUMAANE WILLIAMS AND BRYAN DOERRIES with Lucas Kane and Shadi Ghaheri

Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and theater director Bryan Doerries reflect on *The Oedipus Project* and the arts in the current COVID-19 climate.

We first spoke with Doerries, cofounder and artistic director of Theater of War Productions, back in April during one of our lunchtime conversations here at the Rail. We were taken, not only by his view that ancient tragedy can be utilized to engage in communal conversations around trauma, but also by his critique that much of the contemporary theater world fails to use this powerful art form to engage in such necessary work.

Doerries found a willing collaborator in this mission with actor and then city council member, Jumaane Williams while working on *Madness of Hercules* in 2016, a project aimed at fostering discussion around gun violence. Since then Williams has become, as Doerries jokes, ‘Theater of War Productions’ “secret weapon,” appearing in many different productions since that first meeting.

This is their latest project together, and it premiered May 7th via Zoom, and reached an audience of over 15,000 people from around the world. The project starred some very familiar names—including Francis McDormand, Oscar Isaac, Jeffrey Wright—as well as featured a discussion with panelists from various New York communities working in direct contact with COVID-19: Anthony Almejera, a lieutenant paramedic with the New York City Fire Department; homeless and housing advocate Paulette Soltani; physician Dr. Robert Gore; and Jo-An Yoo, executive director of the Asian American Federation.

We were struck not only by the power of the performance itself but also by the eloquence and intimacy of the hour-and-a-half community conversation that followed, including responses from both panelists and audience members. We spoke with Williams and Doerries the following day.

**LUCAS KANE (RAIL):** Last night was the premiere of *The Oedipus Project*. Bryan, do you want to give us an introduction to what you were doing and the goals of this project?

**BRYAN DOERRIES:** The *Oedipus Project* was born out of a conversation with Jumaane Williams asking me if I had anything that we could perform that addresses isolation and the pandemic. We’ve been working on this *Oedipus* translation for years. We’ve been thinking about it as our environmental climate change project because we thought this theme of intergenerational curses and denying prophecy and ignoring what’s in front of us would be relevant to talking about climate change. Then, when the pandemic hit, it became clear that *Oedipus* was a plague play written and performed in 429 BC after a plague afflicted Athens. So the idea was to try something that was new for us, performing for an online audience, and see if we could reach people in ways we reached people in live settings. For me, just briefly, I think the metric of success was could we communicate with each other and could we connect?

**RAIL:** Jumaane, this was your first time performing this version of *Oedipus*, and performing on Zoom. How was that for you?

**JUMAANE WILLIAMS:** It was amazing. My first love is drama and acting and I’ve always loved politics and civic empowerment. It’s amazing to have the ability to use my talent in a way that intersects with politics, with empowering people and giving them a space to get away for a second and engage in a conversation that’s probably needed and they don’t quite know how to engage in it.

**RAIL:** Is there a kind of conversation that happens through theater and, specifically, through Theater of War Productions that you haven’t experienced in your time as a tenant organizer and as Public Advocate?

**WILLIAMS:** Absolutely. When I’m tenant organizing or I’m Public Advocate, I’m talking about real things to real people in real time. Sometimes it’s very stressful to focus on that where you are right now. What theater and *Oedipus* and others are able to do—it allows us to remove ourselves for a second. We’re talking about the same things except there’s a huge space: it’s not necessarily us, it’s other people; it’s not necessarily this pandemic, it’s another pandemic; it’s different leaders—and creates enough distance that you can have a real conversation but it’s close enough that it’s personal.

**RAIL:** Last night you played the Chorus. Is there a specific line of the Chorus that you find particularly relevant to this situation that we find ourselves in?

**WILLIAMS:** Well, there was a line, actually, that was cut by Bryan...

**DOERRIES:** [Laughter] You can put it back in!

**WILLIAMS:** In one of the monologues, the Chorus was asking, “Why should I dance?” That was a very key line for me because I’m often asking, “What’s the purpose of this? Is it having an effect?” But even in the lines that were in there—trying to channel the energy of the person who contains these things was important. Asking “Why are you putting fuel on the flame? Why are you acting so swiftly?” People who act swiftly and don’t think, it never ends well for them.

**RAIL:** Bryan, I know you’ve talked about abolishing the hierarchy in the physical structure of a theater—in a raised stage and lowered audience. It occurs to me that Zoom actually does that in the sense that we’re all here in the same sized rectangle talking to each other. And so I’m curious if you both could respond to what Zoom might allow for in this project of dismantling the hierarchies of culture in theater and society.

**DOERRIES:** It’s not Zoom that eradicated the trappings and the baggage of 20th century theater that we were still holding onto—it’s the pandemic. We can’t have a prosenium, we can’t have all these bullshit lights with the conceit of naturalism any more, we can’t have all the ushers yelling at us and telling us where to sit and people scolding us for using our phones. It’s all been leveled. And what’s left is essential. And it turns out that we don’t need anything except human presence and the ability to actually hear and see each other. And we can tell these stories in, I might argue, more compelling ways.

**RAIL:** Definitely, and something that seems so essential to Theater of War Productions is that only half of the performance is actors acting and the other part is this community dialogue where you often have very disparate members of a community—whether they’re police, people formerly incarcerated—all different folks in one room to, as you’ve said, “communalize trauma.” Was that successful last night?
DOERRIES: I think so. I really do feel it like it created a space where people, for the time that we were together, felt connected. Were there times when you turned it off and you’re alone again. And what’s the half-life of that feeling and does it bolster you? I’m an evangelist for Greek tragedy, because I think it actually brings us hope—not to read it in isolation—but to come together and to face what we’re doing. And what we are (the Oedipus within us, the Jocasta within us, the Messenger within us) and I think it was successful at creating the conditions for people to come together across really disparate geographic and temporal boundaries and in that sense of community. I’m excited to see where we can take it.

WILLIAMS: I was concerned about how people were going to interact because you feed off the people around you and the energy around you. So I was concerned about how people would respond on screen, having maybe never been on a screen interacting like this. I actually found the responses even more intimate and more real than when we’re together in the audience. It might be what’s happening with them, they might have just been waiting for a release. My eyes are there, those two seniors—one of them was just laid back in the bed, and the husband was in the front. I was like, “I want to be them when I grow up.” They were just chillin’. That’s, I think, the magic of what this does. [It] allowed everybody the freedom to allow you into their space, and vice versa, in an incredible way.

RAIL: That panel was extremely eloquent. Every time a panelist spoke, I felt like I saw something that I had never thought of. I’m wondering if you had anything for the play that you didn’t initially see?

WILLIAMS: The one thing that struck out to me and I don’t know if it was a panelist or someone who was watching, I didn’t really pick up on it until she said that Oedipus was okay with killing people until it was somebody he knew. It just hadn’t hit me until right then that, “Oh shit! Yeah that was true then and it’s true now.” That applied to the violence in the play but also applies to other things. Because people very often looked down on “essential workers” when we were fighting for $15/hour for them and now it’s affecting their lives in a way it didn’t before. The best place to look at this is the people who are now looking for rent relief. The folks who were just chillin’. That’s, I think, the magic of them was just laid back in the bed, and might have just been waiting for a release. But again, this is the play.

DOERRIES: Yeah, that’s what I think there’s a great insight. We always talk about how we try to curate audiences with skin in the game and for this one we wanted to curate audiences disproportionately affected by COVID-19, but the thing is we ‘ve all have a way in because it affects everyone. Peter Brook often talks about how much we prepare as performers to then engage an audience. Well the pandemic has prepared the audience to engage with the play and with the performers; and when both are prepared, the scale to which the exchange can go, I think, is much greater in terms of the net effect of communalizing. But I think, as Anthony Almojera was saying last night, now that we’ve been touched by some form of suffering collectively, now the question is: how do we make meaning out of it collectively? When people are in contact with the fragility of our lives and the fleeting possibility of making meaning before we get sick and die—it’s heightened environment in which to make theater.

And that goes back to what’s so critical to these plays: the whole Athenian theater is; it’s the ensemble out of relationship to these catastrophic events. Eighty years of war, eighty years of contact with human suffering, eighty years of death. And the plague, in the late 5th century—or around 430 to 427 BC—is just one wave of endless waves of death and destruction that this audience is trying to make meaning out of. And out of that was built this theater; this technology for doing that. And now we are being directed back to contact with what that tool can do. And all that belongs to the 20th century—the entrapments, the mise-en-scène, the construct of what makes theater theater, even experimental theater—begins to fall away in its importance.

I mean, Chekhov used naturalism to address the isolation caused by pestilence in the late 19th century, and it worked well; this idea of confinement and the intimacy that we saw on the screen last night—there is a kind of naturalism—but we are also working with plays that were performed outside for 17,000 people at a time and all that they demand—an intensity that can’t be held within the walls of cultural institutions. So, where does it thrive? In nontheatrical spaces. In non-institutional spaces.

RAIL: What do you say to someone who is working within those institutions, who is interested in pushing the line when it comes to theater?

DOERRIES: I’m really on the fence at this point. There’s still a part of me, at 43 years old, that would like to bring the institutions along. The ones that are really great experimentation has happened, like BAM. I am hoping that the economic consequences of the pandemic are such that they don’t destroy the cultural sector completely, but they strip it down to what is important and force those who are in these institutions to ask the really hard questions. I’m afraid, rather than doing that, most institutions are just furrowing and firing people, who are actually human resources that could be answered by a few questions of how do we pivot and adapt during this time to start making new forms that will serve the moment and also that would potentially make us more solvent in the end. Instead, all of these nonprofit institutions—or many of them—seem to be following the behavior of for-profit entities, like: “let’s cut the people first, and protect the product.” That seems so ill-advised, and unfortunately, I think the institutions that follow that route will end up reap what they sow. And they may not exist after this is over. And, if that’s the case, for those who thought that their line of work belonged in institutions, I have to say that there’s infinite work to be done outside of them. That said, some of these institutions can be really powerful amplifiers. But, there was a pandemic before the pandemic, and there was something diseased about capitalist and the way that it affected arts and culture.

RAIL: Of course, and it’s what Jo-Ann Yoo said in the panel and Jumaane kind of restated, “normal was never normal. It was always iniquitous.”

DOERRIES: We’ve got to come up with an entirely new economic model to support them. The federal government has to step in. There has to be a whole WPA federal investment in the arts that doesn’t rely upon the old structures of the NEA or NEH or the resident’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities—these very anemic, band-aid, barely-hanging-on-by-a-fingernail solutions to the problem, but an FDR-scale New Deal response that treats artists and writers as essential workers in the rebuilding of society. And the idea that wealthy people have to just step up and that’s going to solve this issue for artists is how we get to the sickened place that we’re in right now where we’re beholden to a privileged class of people who consume art.

I was on a board call for a nonprofit arts organization recently and I was just startled by how frozen in their tracks everyone was—all in the arts. All that generous spirit of philanthropy and innovation of being behind this arts-based organization—you could just feel the fear and the frigidity and the sort of inability to see outside of the threat to their own privilege. And when people are in that position, how are they ever going to be expected to address social inequality? And the whole nonprofit model is based on that equation. We’re beholden to people with privilege.

Is an ambiguous federal response the answer for all time? No. The answer for all time is to build a society that values artistic, spiritual, emotional innovation and technologies over centuries. And then something wholly new can come out of this experience. And I don’t know how far we have to go before that’s possible. And whether—it maybe it’s the next plague.
IN CONVERSATION

JACK, Sanctuary of Art and Activism: Before, During, and After COVID-19: ALEC DUFFY AND JORDANA DE LA CRUZ with Mei Ann Teo

The theater has always been a sanctuary for me: a safe place for communal gathering where, through enacted stories, we are offered possibilities for contemplation and change. A place where we wrestle with the complexities and nuances of our humanity. A place to revel and celebrate life. On March 12th, due to the global pandemic, many of our theaters closed. Now, ghost lights illuminate empty stages, props lay like abandoned lovers, and costumes hang sad and still. The air, where once we shared breath, is potentially poisoned. I hear our theater community asking ourselves, what do we do now that we cannot physically gather? How do we continue? How do we protect our most vulnerable? What action can we take?

Of all the answers that our community is finding, one is particularly inspiring. Since April, JACK (an experimental theater in Brooklyn), has been partnering with the mutual aid group, We Keep Us Safe Abolitionist Network, to feed 120 individuals and families in their Clinton Hill-Fort Greene area each week. This direct action has converted the theater from being a sanctuary of the spirit, where nourishment is offered through art, to a sanctuary of the body, where nourishment is given through food.

The seeds for this action were planted since the theater’s beginnings. Founder and co-director Alec Duffy knew that starting an experimental theater that was connected to the surrounding community required getting involved with that community, e.g. attending community board meetings, joining the board of a local organization, and going to church. The impulse towards activism also came like a tidal wave from the artists who performed there. Duffy reminisces that “Our artists were sharing work that was deeply personal, often rooted in stories of trauma and oppression, and of trying to find joy and liberation. It spurred us to have more of a ‘viewpoint’ as an organization—to be an active part of a larger movement towards a better world—and, as a result, we expanded our mission to include activism.” Jordana De La Cruz, co-artistic director, also sets this course: “with JACK it has been very important to me that [our] values come first in every decision. That has been a driving force for me.”

True to their values, JACK has been an active responder to the realities of the communities they serve. Around the time of the non-indictment of the murder of Eric Garner, when protests filled the streets in NYC, JACK started the series “Forward Ferguson,” a monthly performance and conversation series on racial justice. It addressed police brutality and offered an opportunity for folks to speak in public about their rage, fear, and trauma, and also about what liberation could look like. This was followed by “Reparations365: From Memory To Movement.” co-created with DeeArah Wright, a series envisioning distributive justice for Black Americans.

Even the way JACK’s board of directors is structured reflects these values. They strategically invite artists/activists to be board members, in order to hold JACK accountable to their mission of “fueling experiments in art and activism.” There is no minimum give/get contribution; each member contributes according to their own ability. Board member Britney Williams, a dancer who’s performed at JACK and an organizer with No New Jails NYC, connected Alec and Jordana with organizer and activist Samantha Johnson, of the We Keep Us Safe Abolitionist Network. It turns out Alec had served with Samantha on the community board for several years. “This was someone I knew, and we trusted each other...that made it so easy for all of us to say, ‘Yes let’s do it. Let’s start next week’... It really is those relationships bearing fruit,” he says, “those connections in our neighborhood and beyond that set the stage for something like this to happen so smoothly.”
I ask Alec and Jordana how are you wrestling with the uncertainty of the now? What will JACK become next?

ALEC DUFFY: We are taking it month by month, right Jordana? We don’t have a grand vision laid out yet, because things keep changing. We are doing a lot of listening.

JORDANA DE LA CRUZ: We are listening to the complications experienced by other organizations in the community, those of and not of our size. We have postponed all of our spring and summer performances so far…I know a lot of people are not committing to even starting programming till 2021.

MEI ANN TEO (RAIL): I think about paradigms and the capitalist system we are under—the way the system might ask you to consider renting out the space to pay your bills.

DE LA CRUZ: This may be naïve. But it feels very wrong to rent out the space at this time, when our community is struggling. I mean, everyone is struggling. It just feels wrong to me, morally.

DUFFY: This is a period that we are keenly aware of the danger of making decisions too soon. This food effort has given us a chance to build relationships with neighbors, many of whom have never stepped into JACK. What does programming that is developed with input from these neighbors look like? How can we keep that relationship going even after everyone goes back to work?

RAIL: Why make art when people are jobless and hungry? Will you turn your space over in the next year and a half if it is needed to feed people? Why make art in such urgent and traumatic times? How do you wrestle with that?

DUFFY: I’ve grown to see the relation of art and life as a very symbiotic relationship and not at all opposed. At its best, art is a driver of human opinion and of thinking about what we are doing as humans on this earth and how we can take care of each other. And of course not all artists are going to be creating work about that, and that’s fine. But it’s also not a zero sum game; we don’t have to choose between being of service to our community through feeding our neighbors, and presenting a work that may not speak directly to the crisis. We can do all of that…I remember this class that the director Peter Sellers teaches at UCLA…he invited food justice activists to speak to the class. He interviewed them in front of the class for an hour and a half, and at some point I was thinking, “When’s he going to start talking about theater?” And then at the end, when the conversation had never turned to the theater I came to understand that Sellar’s lesson was that life is art and art is life. I draw a lot of inspiration from that fluidity.

RAIL: Beautiful, thank you. What do you need? What does JACK need?

DE LA CRUZ: Some of these relief funds.

DUFFY: That’s right.

DE LA CRUZ: Hey…if you know anybody who is making those decisions…I feel like I need to see the domino effect. I feel like someone does a Zoom reading, and everyone’s like, “Fantastic, we’re doing Zoom readings,” and someone does a Zoom monologue series, and everyone’s like, “Okay, now we’re doing that.” And I would love to see that more on the civic end of things. Because I know the more I see, the more I feel inspired and empowered as well.

DUFFY: We know we are going to get through this, but we’re not going to do it without help from new sources of support, and deepened support from the folks with whom we are already in relation. We intend to be a part of the city’s cultural conversation for many years to come. But for sure, it’s a perilous time for everyone, and we’re trying to find as many ways as possible to raise financial support, and also to build our community. As they say in meetings of ACRE (Artists Co-creating Real Equity): our goal is to build a net that works. So that we are not alone. We can be in solidarity and interdependence with other arts organizations, with other art makers, with other community organizations—so that when they are in danger, we’re there to help out, and vice versa. Either financially, or by just showing up. Advocacy. People power.

RAIL: I am with you. I find you both so inspiring and the depth of the net that you have built…it’s like a live spinning web that does indeed hold us together. What do you say to the artists of JACK?

DE LA CRUZ: It is okay to not be making art right now. It’s okay to be struggling. I want everyone to just take care and to value themselves, because it doesn’t make you any less of an artist if you’re not making right now. We are not looking for you to prove to us what you have been doing through this time. You need to sleep and breathe. We are committed to people and that includes you. We just want you to be you…I think you are beautiful.

Three times, I’ve been thinking about a sutta in Buddhist scripture (Samyutta Nikaya) that compares two actions. The first: feeding 100 people morning, noon, and night. The second: the practice of developing a mind of goodwill, even for a quick moment—morning, noon, and night. It posits that this second action is more fruitful than the first.

JACK is a powerful manifestation of this: their mind of goodwill before the pandemic led to the practices of creating a home for radical artists, becoming a leader in the theater and non-profit community, building a hub for envisioning how we can achieve racial and economic justice, and now also the first action—the feeding of hundreds of people.

JACK’s spring programming includes an online candidate forum for the State Senate District 25 and Media Tools for Liberation: a radical virtual laboratory for artists. For more information upcoming events and ways to support visit www.jackny.org
STEPPING BACK

by Anne Waldman

so, through our desolation,
thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
through gloom

—I. D. The Walls Do Not Fall

I noticed the night
noticed a new half moon
I noticed it looked liberated
sharp, piercing

The sky was clear

I noticed my panic

I heard remote birds
I noticed the beggar I noticed
the dancer

Hesitation

Apprehension, speed
and speed I noticed

Someone fumbling
with a slippery glove

I noticed a quarter here's
something, something

Was money safe?
Was larynx?
Sex safe?

I noticed hesitation
And how to think invincibly

That's what it means
to be wise
think before you touch

You can't touch
It's invisible
I noticed

Someone was kind

I noticed efficacy
I noticed warning
I noticed signs signaled
doom

Touch of optimism
I noticed rituals

I noticed
shifts of mood
flicker
I noticed momentum

This was readiness is all
This was an almanac

I noticed closing's closure
I noticed the Cloisters
I noticed distraction

Shuttered
I noticed
Shuddered

Words closer
to action

I noticed
a book

I noticed poetry
might save
you now

Save you
if you let it
It's time

I noticed
startled words
jump on the
page
I noticed my speed

See what you
cannot see

120 POETRY
to stay alive

Speed is purpose
I noticed

Stand aside
Was something there
I noticed nothing

A subway stalled
I noticed anxiety

I noticed crying
People moving

Would I be
subject for interrogation

Was I abiding

Was I living rules

I counted them
I am behaving

What did one know?
Know this could be still empty
Know this could be full

I noticed breathing

I noticed someone
freaking out in the bank
what he used to be still elegant

But not what you see now,
he told them
He told them he used to be on with credit

I was one with credit
He said, I heard, I noticed

I noticed speed again
I noticed thinking itself a victor

Speed is a vector

No one saying what's going on when you are in business

Put on a face

I noticed how your faces are in my vocabulary now
I am in yours too, I noticed

I noticed out of pity
I noticed unheeding

I noticed the mirror of wisdom

All things equal shimmering mirror holding tight in brain

I noticed no one in the streets

I noticed the outcast
And around the world

The broadcasts in my head
I noticed walking by

I noticed remembering how one touched a small thing gently and it expanded a rail, a glass, a corner a trigger

Button to set off a bomb

How one stayed calm
I noticed
her beautiful eyes closed
I noticed thinking
open them please
Help me

I noticed children
I noticed obedience
Tender faces in routines

I noticed insouciance
Noticed determination

I noticed the listings
What is missing

What I won’t be able to notice
I noticed hesitating, stepping back

I was in the world
I noticed it

World, world?
The parks are closed I noticed

The parks are closed I noticed the hardship of rain when you live on the street

I remembered Berlin before the wall came down
I remember things opening

I noticed elsewhere things closing down Beirut
I noticed barriers and guns

I noticed shorter hours, longer days
I noticed the silver foil I dropped afraid to pick it up

Wipe it down
I noticed a cough

I remembered a conference in Wuhan bustling city, the lake in happy translation

I notice the care in transition How far we came and back a step

I noticed the invisible scourge

The invisible body invisible embrace

I noticed the child in the hallway stepping back Good, good stop I noticed

Stepping back
I noticed what parts of the body shut down
I noticed my eyes peering into screens
Eyes awake, and ears

I noticed my voice next to yours noticing a continent away.

March/April 2020

Photos by No Land, 2020
www.maepoe.com

ANNE WALDMAN is the author, most recently of Trickster Feminism, Penguin 2018, and Sanctuary, Spuyten Duyvil 2020, and her vinyl album SCIAMACHY was just released by Fast Speaking Music with support from the Levy Gorvy Gallery in NYC.
DANK EDITIONS

by John Coletti

for Sara

A haze of flowers
braids of utterance
dreams false, or
and memory
so I kick myself, gently
I like seeing my beard pink
crisp waters, solid air refreshener
inner places are telling their worlds
now. handwashing as the rinse
cycle of between spaces
a treasure to me through many valleys
that’s the best we are doing now
this biproduct. what we trained for

MULE ATTACK

I realized I realized that my heart sunk in deeply
whoops. I should know by now
there’s a shadow mirror fucks about me
my world has become so narrow. do what I can
do what I can that’s it
the flakes are motions I miss the heart grades
with a curve now is a heartbreaking reality
switching stations pause okay, let your mind be free

BASTILLE DAY

by Rachelle Rahmé

Bastille day weekend, seagull man worn
exhales phlegm rattled cough over swelling plumage
day-glo festival band from last night
frays
like pollen, he is always here and the festival both
miscellany conjoined last sips
his key edges digging
awakes
horror vacui
adaptation of the orchidean word
peripatetic

ACCOUNTING FOR THE LOSS OF AUGUST

So much so
I play with fire
so much so I
in proximity to this train of thought
that combs me now
to it am strapped
I thought it so
what difference is the act
what difference between sediment in the mind
and to act in the world?

Distance is the doctor
unwittingly you inoculate the mind from here
tear around these changes
the glacial melt eternity makes
it easy to dust over
the tracks of your species
hide red under winter snow
the petals bruised
and set forth from their sepals

— in coma stage ferment
fuzzy world
I deliver my action to you
you must take it
amber arrest at dawn received
and give the time we rock away
to the first chatter and siren
to defibrillate the clock
thwarted by parhelia

JOHN COLETTI is the author of Deep Code (City Lights Books) and has a book forthcoming in 2020 from PUSH titled Peppermint Oil.

RACHELLE RAHMÉ has published poetry, essay and fiction with 72Press, Aventures Ltd., VLAK magazine, The Blue Letter, and FPBJPC. Recent presentations of her text and sound have appeared at Issue Project Room, MOMA PS1, and Roulette Intermedium. Born in Lebanon, she lives and works in Queens, NY.
THE DECREE

by Alamgir Hashmi

You are lucky you have your masks, nearly all your personal protective equipment. And you have your instructions. The virus protocol is a complete code of life. Use the Coronavirus App on your [expletive] smart phone before it puckers.

Value these precious minutes of the lifetime SIM now ululating for the occasion. Of course, you will wash your hands ever, but you will not wash your hands off the world entirely. Every one of you is a unique touch-me-not.

Reports agree the virus, a novel terrorist, is omnipresent; nothing’s out of its reach, mineral or vegetable, animal or human. Caught half way casting off its uniform, it seemed to escape from one spot, then from another, leaving numbers and ghost towns gasping for breath; yet it has stayed. For this, we have no prophylactics, only sticky prefabs, porous border walls.

Touching folks is lethal. Sanitize 24/7, and keep your sanity. See no one, shake no hands. Ask no one to coffee. Dating is out, though chatting via video link is O. K., and for G-7 parties, kosher. Love without touching is chemically pure, neat. (Ah, Plato!) Weddings are banned. Funerals are such a lazy dispatch. Why stand on ceremony for bodies on the redundancy list?

To all ends and purposes, online, you will be homeschooled. In your pueblos and cramped tenements, you have you and your rotor fix, to work and play in splendid isolation, your new society.

Stay within your national bubble, Let no one puncture it. If you want to know the weather, check the stock market chart. If you have other ideas, it’s past prayer time. Beware all doors, (save makeshift hospitals and morgues), all possible doors, outlets, exits, places of worship, parks, colleges, have wired Yale locks.

Feel socked in? Turn on your service laptop, full screen, and take a good look at how the world was. See how the purple and yellow crocuses spread wild in the city’s main squares? Given the chance! No wallpaper, it’s the name of the fragrance in real time.

In here, true angels in spacesuits will feed you manna-o-salwa. The state’s done up. You will be watered round the clock with the choicest drinks. The houries will nurse and please you, even if all the fine perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten their smelly big feet. You will activate or rest in their caring celestial arms; and in good time with their beguiling charms they will lovingly put you to sleep.

© Alamgir Hashmi

ALAMGIR HASHMI is the author of numerous books of poetry, including My Second in Kentucky (Vision) and A Choice of Hashmi’s Verse (Oxford), as well as several volumes of literary criticism. A Pushcart Prize nominee and a Rockefeller Fellow, he has won high honors and awards for his work, some of which has been translated into several European and Asian languages. He has taught as a university professor in North America, Europe, and Asia. He is Founding President of The Literature Podium: An Independent Society for Literature and the Arts.
MCCLURE

by Bob Holman

Michael McClure’s poetry will never die, ever-centered on the page, ready to take flight. He himself did both (died/liked), May 5, 2020, in the midst of the COVID. Complications of a stroke. But to us now, death at the doorstep, cause of death barely matters. He is taken, another.

I last saw Michael and Amy a couple years ago in their magical Mews, high up in the Oakland hills. Quick walk to mountain peak, see both sides -- into the Valley, down to the Bay. Perfect sitting for our Great Mammal Poet, the roar of the lion, the ping of the whale. We strolled down memory lane to when Bob Carroll, the radical performance artist, brought me by Michael’s house on Ashbury Street the first time, trading poems at his pad, a home base for Beat social life.

This was just before Howl Happening’s “Beat and Beyond” gathering, where Michael starred, sang, bopped, cried, cracked and cooled. The convocation featured a live reenactment of the Six Gallery Reading. Michael didn’t want to replicate himself. Instead, he took the role of Kenneth Rexroth, hosting the event, dean of the scene. He and I talked often. He blurbed my recent book Life Poem, we said hello via video conferencing a year ago when HOWL and City Lights did a bicentennial birthday party for Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He was true Beat, remarkable figure, loving man. He always spoke of humans as just one aspect of Mammal Life. This is one Mammal we will sorely miss.

10 Things for Michael McClure

1. What do you do for an encore, when your first reading is the reading that changed the world? October 7, 1955, the Six Gallery, San Francisco, where Ginsberg performed “Howl!” for the first time. Kerouac passed around a jug of red, shouting, “Go! Go! Go!” and Michael McClure read publicly for the first time. You can read Kerouac’s pitch-perfect version in Dharma Bums.

2. One of the poems Mike (he was Mike then) read at the Six Gallery was “For the Death of 100 Whales,” which many consider the Ur poem of eco-poetics. The earth and its ecosystems will be a theme in Michael’s poetry throughout his life. His final cellphone message: “white chrysanthemums/ripening persimmons.”

3. Grahhr@pachell was his email handle. Grahr is the signature word of McClure’s Beast language, a language of sounds which explodes in his remarkable City Lights book, Ghost Tantras. Check out #51, the one that he reads to the lions at the SF Zoo. They roared right back. You can find the old black and white footage on the Net.

4. Michael would often begin his readings with the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, read in Middle English. Now that opened audiences’ ears. Expecting a screaming Beat, they’d receive a mellifluous “What that April with his showers soothe,/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,/And bathed every veyne/In swich licour/Of which vertú engendred is the flour.” You can hear him read it in Scorsese’s The Last Waltz, with the Band.

5. Yes indeed, McClure wrote Janis Joplin’s hit, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?” and Bobby Neuwirth composed the music. It has been covered by everybody from Elton John to the Supremes to Pink, Mercedes-Benz used the song in several ad campaigns, including at the Super Bowl. Michael laughingly would say that the song brought in more money than all his other poetry.

6. His play, The Beard, a dialogue between Jean Harlow and Billy the Kid, takes place in a blue velvet Eternity. It sparked police raids and shut-downs for “obscenity” when it opened in 1965. Since then it’s been performed world-wide, including a version directed by Rip Torn, and won two Obies for its New York production. I directed it at Bard with 12 Jeans and 12 Billys. McClure wrote numerous other plays – Taylor Mead originated his Spider Rabbit in New York and performed it every few years, digging out the old bunny costume.

7. Michael was friends with everybody from Freewheelin’ Frank, the leader of the San Francisco Hell’s Angels (they wrote a book together) to Jim Morrison of The Doors. He was influential in Morrison’s poetry writing, and performed with Ray Manzarek, The Doors’ keyboard player, for many years.

8. In 2016, at the HOWL Happening-Bowery Poetry “Beats and Beyond,” Michael and his wife, Amy Evans, were royalty. Michael played Kenneth Rexroth at the Gallery Six reenactment also in the cast: Hettie Jones, Allen Ginsberg; Andy Clausen Philip Whalen; Ava Chin, Gary Snyder; Max Blagg, Philip Lamantia. Michael and Amy were working at the time on a series of prints, The Appaloosa Series, which was on view at HOWL, and included a deck of cards with images, the Appaloosa Deck. They were the inspiration for a live improved that Michael and I performed with Ginsberg and Burroughs, as painted by Mark Turgeon, part of a mural behind.

9. Amy Evans, painter and sculptor, Michael’s wife, was with him when he died at home at the Mews. They were partners in art and life. Michael’s first wife, Joanna, is a terrific poet, Catchlight is the title of her Collected. Their daughter Jane has two children.

10. Highly recommended is Scratchings on the Beat Surface, McClure’s personal history of the Beats, along with other essential poetry, ecology, and the universe. His book-length poem, Dark Brown, recently reissued, is a great read. Read The Beard with your partner in quarantine. Read Ghost Tantras aloud. Call in the lions.

BOB HOLMAN’S TWO NEW BOOKS, The Unspoken and Life Poem, were written fifty years apart. You can order them from YBK Publishers.

JUNE 2020
Allentown, Saturday

by Gabriel Bump

Allentown, Saturday

All these bored people, I thought. Okay, I thought. This is fine.

For example, I was on the concrete ground, on my back, lying in a circle with the others, all of us on our backs arranged in a star with our feet spread apart and touching at the toes. Someone in the circle, one of us, had taken a vacation to San Diego. There, this person went to parties where successful people, once they had drunk and smoked enough, laid on their backs with their feet touching. Arranged like a star. We tried it for ten minutes before high-tempered participants staged an inquisition, led by Flip.

“Coastal-elite mind gymnastics,” Flip said. “Don’t tell me about your lifted soul.”

“Easy,” the mastermind said, stood up. “It’s just an idea. It’s just a try.”

For example, someone walked into the beer garden with this book about the Amazon River. They had pages dogeared from start to end. They called for attention and we accepted their demands. At that point, we were sitting on the ground listening to a minor altercation through the fence.

“The Americas,” they said. “North and South. Both named after a bumbling Spaniard.”

“We know,” we said. “Christopher Columbus.”

“Wrong,” they said. “All wrong. You have no idea.”

“We know,” we said. “The rainforest is dying.”

“No idea,” they said. “Can you believe how little you know?”

“The documentaries,” we said. “The pink dolphins.”

“Do you know?” they said. “Do you know? What do you know?”

“The Amazons,” we said. “The women with the bows.”

They dropped the book, threw their hands up.

“Those Pizarro brothers,” they said. “Like genocidal Kennedys.”

“How?” we asked, pulled in.

“There was a handsome one,” they said. “Theirs were young and violent deaths.”

We listened for thirty more minutes about failed expeditions, waters that turn from brown to black, snowmelt in Peru, powerful currents reversed by full moons, riverbanks raised ten meters by rain, otters sized like point guards; the people, they kept saying, you wouldn’t believe the people, fighting off those Spaniards with bows, arrows, clubs, and boulders; the people, they said one last time, you wouldn’t understand, gifting those Spaniards turtles and fish and cassava prepared seven different ways. Here, they cried a little. We sniffled too. Not just for the Amazon tribes hunted and relocated, under constant threat...
We sniffled for humankind and the earth and the earth's bounty and baby birds falling from nests. We asked them to please leave us alone. They asked for a seat on the concrete; they didn't want to go home yet. There was no air conditioning at home. There was no group of strangers, overcome with the universe, sitting in their living room. Flip scooted over, wiped his cheeks. Of course, we said. Please, sit. Thank you.

For example, the bar owner came out and sprayed us with a hose. Twenty of us, packed in, getting soaked. It was past closing time. This was madness and a violation. A liquor license was at stake. Half past four in the morning. The bar owner was thin with grey hair all over his face and head and chest. His tank top had a drawing of Bayard Rustin riding a rocket ship like a horse.

“We have neighbors,” the bar owner said. “Children and dogs sleeping in beds.”

“We march!” Flip shouted.

From a window, out of sight, a voice yelled and wouldn't stop yelling. It was all boring and filled with joy. Floating, I'd say. We marched. In a horde we marched down Allen Street and cleared the sidewalk. We absorbed souls as we stumbled, glided, sung different songs at the same time. We reached the corner of Elmwood and Allen and cheered for a young couple kissing against a trash can. Love, we chanted.

We cheered, further up the street, when three young women took turns kicking a burly man in the stomach. This man, the young women yelled at us. This man is all men, the young women yelled at us. They spoke as one, like us. We stood and applauded. They bowed. I noticed blood on their boots, how it splashed up their pants legs, somehow, reached their exposed midriffs. They called us beautiful. We called them beautiful. We called the man an ambulance and took the young women into our blob. We walked up Elmwood with purpose knocking on closed businesses, seeing if anyone could let us in for one last beer, one last bag of chips. It was frightening, catching our reflections in the storefronts.

We reached Flip's house with powerful numbers. It proceeded as you'd expect. We finished the beer. We finished wine and juice cartons and boxes of crackers. We cooked eggs and bacon when the sun rose. We couldn't get the toast right. We'd put it down, let it warm, let it burn, let it smoke—try again. What we didn't finish, what we burnt: we dropped on the floor. You wouldn't believe the mess, how it smelled, how everyone laughed when Flip stood on a table and asked for a cigarette and four-dozen cigarettes bounced off his body.

I figured my body didn't belong to me anymore. Music came down and took my limps all over the place, wild-like. I found myself wrapped in a stranger's platonic embrace, shrieking into the kitchen sink.

That was just five minutes.

As you'd expect, sleep came for us all. And that was beautiful too. A man sacrificed his body as a pillow, allowed his friends to place their heads on shin and thigh and belly and so on. Leaned against a wall, a woman remained standing and peaceful. What a statue, with her turquoise hair and yellow fingernails.

That polyamorous quintet in the living room, petting, warm in their pile, kissing each other goodnight, singing goodnight with harmony.

I found myself in the backyard with Flip and Fauna, sitting on a couch somehow. My body was mine again, numb. A neighbor off to work waved goodnight.

Fauna put her fingers around my neck.

“Can you imagine?” Fauna asked. “Having a different life?”

“I did,” I said. “Yesterday.”

Fauna released me.

“I once lived in Oklahoma City,” Fauna said. “For fifteen years.”

“What do you think?” I asked Flip.

Flip didn't respond. He kept his eyes up in the blue sky, followed sluggish clouds.


“Understood what?” I asked.

“Woman and men are the same,” Fauna said. “Some are good kissers; some aren't.”

“I'm not good,” I said. “I know that for sure.”

“It's a practice thing,” Fauna said. “My girlfriend is a hockey player. She says it's similar.”

Fauna shook my hand, kissed Flip's cheek good morning, waved back at us until she turned a corner. I could have slept there, at that moment, like that, knockout.

I was halfway down when Flip tapped my shoulder. I saw him crying in a quiet way, his eyes red and glazed and out of this world.

I was glad when Flip spoke first; I didn't know what to say.

“There was a summer,” Flip started. “I don't know when. Like dates and years. I know I was young. I know I had these yellow shorts with blue bananas on them. I know I had a skateboard, which I couldn't ride without falling down. I know
I carried my skateboard more than I rode it. I think that says something about me then; I think that says something about me now. Get the picture? There were these clouds, like green, like emeralds covered in black dirt. Can you see it like I did? This was in Kansas. This was soon after my mom went away. This was with dad and his family. Everything you’ve heard about Kansas is true. I don’t care what you’ve heard: it’s true.

“I had these yellow shorts on. I had my blue bananas. I had my skateboard. I had my sour candy in the line, waiting to pay, holding my skateboard under my other arm. I had five people in front of me. At the register—I could smell her perfume. Strawberries and mint. I’m not sure. A berry and a spice. I think about a lot. How could I remember the smell, smell it now, sitting here talking to you and not know what it was? I think it’s an aura thing. Like our aura’s melding and attracting.

“I hadn’t heard a tornado siren before. Still, this howl, going from dull to screech, over and over, loud, like right in my head.

“Can you believe it? The world and the wind were fighting each other. I wasn’t thinking about my family. I wasn’t thinking about us getting sucked into the atmosphere and thrown into Utah. I was thinking about looking cool for her, this young woman I didn’t know, with a tattooed tiger on her shoulder, three nose rings, red eyeshadow, black hair slicked into a hard ponytail. Nature was coming to kill us. And, I was trying to look at this woman without her knowing.

“ Doesn’t it make sense now? Don’t I make sense? Knowing that about me, doesn’t that tell you everything you need to know? What else is there to say?”

Flip looked at me again. He put his hands together, cracked his knuckles, fidgeted his fingertips along his thighs. Now, he wanted me to say something.

What do you say to that? What do you say to your crying cousin?
A feeling of sleep without sleeping. Or maybe sleeping without sleep. Asleep maybe and yet the body listens. The body listening with an almost seeing. The senses alert to every motion of the boat. He knows a larger vessel would have been smashed by now. Instead the panga rides each mountainous wave like an insect. Now and then he climbs out of the cooler with his body hunched, his arms bailing heavily in the dark. Seeing by the dying headlamp. A deepening sense the storm is blowing itself out. Without words he understands that the true meaning of a storm is what it reveals, how chaos describes itself, gives form to what no eye can see. What he knows now but does not tell Hector. That this north-easterly is blowing them far out. We must be a hundred miles out into the Pacific. No one will look this far.

A dream of silence. He wakes to a clear sense of things. Water lapping the boat. A still light. He inhales the cooler’s in-baked smell of brine and fish. For two days and nights he has watched his life from within some dark cell of the mind. Eternity within each waiting moment. Climbing out of that dark to bail water. Snatching at sleep. Now he can hear Hector asleep with a rasp in his chest.

Bolivar climbs out of the cooler and has to pull at his stung-shut eyes.

The sun soaring over emptiness.

* 

The panga is low in the water, the water in the boat sits past his ankles. The bailing bucket is still tied by the stern. Behind him Hector climbs as though broken-backed out of the cooler. His frame shrunken, his pallor grey, the under-eyes swollen and black. He cannot see yet, keeps rubbing at his eyes with his fists. Bolivar sits huddled and blinking. For a long time they do not speak.

Then Bolivar mutters something, his voice a scratched whisper. Hector tries to focus his eyes on Bolivar. He winces and continues to rub them.

Bolivar begins to knuckle the boat with amusement. He says, this thing is indestructible.

He leans forward and points to a pomegranate bruise above Hector’s left eye.

He says, what happened your head?

Then he slaps the hull and laughs loudly.

It looks like Hector is forcing the eyes to see into the laughing mouth before him, the bronzed teeth, the tongue lolling. Bolivar clapping his hands again as he stares with amazement at the cooler. Then he turns and sees in Hector’s eyes the panicked look. The youth climbing to his feet, the youth turning around to
take in a smooth and single plane of ocean. The world containing nothing but its perfection.

Bolivar fishes the two-way radio out of the water between his legs. He thumbs at the button, stares at the blank screen. Then he smacks it against his knee. The GPS screen is also dead. He puts the two devices on the seat and stares at their plastic shapes, the electrical life dead inside them, their buttons beyond use.

The small bilge pump is dead. He spends time quietly bailing water, Hector watching with a half-turned head, his arms long on his lap. He has become aged in posture as though looking back on a life, hateful and bent. Then he stretches his body across the seat to dry in the sun, a crimson sickled gash along the length of his ankle.

For a moment Bolivar stops bailing and studies the youth. The draped arm. The half-risen knee. The sighing mouth.

He thinks, it is something within the spirit, the spirit always against the doing thing. Here we are half-dead and still he has no use.

So many things are lost. The petrol cans, the plastic bags with food and clothing. The lines that gave ballast torn from the boat. Bolivar counts eight floats that can be used to cup water. He finds an eight-inch gutting knife and a wrench. Sees that his watch has stopped working. He pulls from under the two seats a four-foot plank used to clear debris before the propeller. There is a five-gallon container full of water. Bolivar uncaps it and takes a look in. They each measure the other’s sip.
For some time, I have been interested in the writing one is doing when one is not writing. I email often throughout the day with Anna, a more successful writer, living in a different city. We have both been under contract for our respective novels for several years. Art is time, Anna writes me, a novel especially, it must be slow; it must take the time it needs. All that summer, I attempt time. I try not to let the days bleed. I attempt to be in the room, outside of the internet. That summer, along with my daily black journals that accumulate in rows like gravestones, I begin keeping a notebook that I think of as the Drifts notebook, its cover a canary yellow that matches my copy of Walser's The Tanners, which I read in short increments each season, never finishing.

I crane my head now and see the first of the yellow notebooks on the small table across the room, in a pile with other filled and partial journals, legal pads, printed-out notes, manuscript pages, photographs. Inside the yellow notebook I wrote my address and my name, except it was a slightly different version of my last name, which made me feel I had entered the space of fiction. The notebook was for a book called Drifts, but it is a different book from the one I’m trying to write now. I was surprised to find these notes inside the notebook. This Drifts desired to be a detective story, or maybe a murder mystery. Like something out of an Antonioni film. Searching for something lost or missing, but I didn’t yet know who or what.

How summers are spent following my little black terrier, Genet, as he shifts into various dark shapes on the rug or wooden floor, following patterns of light. He paces nervously in the office, waiting at the door, eventually settling for a time on the fake-sheepskin rug under my desk, all these soft spots I plant for him around the house. He does not like to keep still within the office, it isn’t close to any source of sunlight, to any window from which he can look out. To get any thinking done, I must ignore him, his desire to be fed, to play, his pushing the ball into my hand. I feed him my dried mango slices, which I eat so that I can chew on something leathery, chewing as thinking, thinking as chewing. In the morning, after John leaves for the museum, coffee after coffee, the key is not too many cups, and to remember to eat breakfast— granola, yogurt, and fruit, or toast after toast. The key is to remember to turn off the internet and to allow it to stay off. The key is to try to stay still. The distraction of Genet’s bark. His periodic eruptions at possible intruders. His call- and- response to Fritz, the absurd blond Labradoodle next door who yelps from the window of the first floor of the pale yellow colonial. The psychotic burst of the mail slot, my dog’s heart beating inside his small barrel chest. A low
growl that builds as he flies through the house, careening around the corner, nails scratching, toward the front window, erupting at another delivery for the apartment upstairs, his sympathetic nervous system that I sponge from, his paranoia and intensity that I share. I see the postman smoking his brown little cigarettes outside the house. We wave at each other. I suspect he lights one after he visits here. He has seen me in various states of undress, after having been on the couch all day, staring at screens. How so often, when inside, I look at my inbox like an oracle, to remind myself that I still exist.

Fragile Fritz. Nietzsche's nickname. I tried to pet him once. He doesn’t like other dogs or even other humans—a true loner. I also think of the Austrian writer Marianne Fritz, how she stayed inside with her scraps of paper, endlessly writing her dense and increasingly indecipherable body of work. I'm still obsessed with who is romanticized in literature as a hermit, and who, by staying inside, is viewed as simply crazy. The madness of writing versus the madness of not writing. Walser, who went to Waldau not to write, he said, but to be mad.

Throw away your notes, the unpublished male novelist advised me, in the depth of my spiritual crisis, the first summer here. This is when I was working on a different book, with

around me. The frequent desire to do nothing. How Genet stares at me, with his amber eyes, and I stare back. Somewhere in the piles on my desk, I could excavate a stained, partial printout of Susan Sontag’s “The Aesthetics of Silence,” which tells me that animals don’t look but stare. I pull at my dog’s little white Sontag mohawk as he rolls over for me to scratch his soft pink belly or I pick him up to kiss his little monkey muzzle. Genet is tranquil on the porch, sedated by the sun, as he gets up and collapses, alternating between patches of light, or shadow when his coat overheats. In summer we stare at the purple butterfly bush at the bottom of the steps, as the butterflies loiter about. But the landlord will cut it back in the fall, and last summer it didn’t flower at all. A line from Sontag’s journals I keep writing down in my notes: “All great art contains at its center contemplation, dynamic contemplation.”

Quiet, quiet, I say to Genet as dogs walk by, which he obeys by ruffling softly yet firmly to himself. Together we watch the promenades of dogs in the neighborhood. I wave at the Nepalese woman who lives in the apartment building on the corner, walking the silver pit bull with sleek muscles who was a puppy when we moved here. There is the Yorkie who erupts constantly from her perch high up in a building in the middle of the block. How sensitive they really are, these city dogs, but they cannot see it in one another. The ice-eyed Alsatian puppy, gangly and manic, whose owner is an older, muscular trainer, always in shorts, who lives with his wheelchair-bound mother in one of the houses on the street. While writing this, I realize that the Alsatian is no longer a puppy now but a full-grown dog, yet retaining a puppy’s jitteriness. I often wonder if the trainer thinks I’m lazy when he sees me on the porch in my sun hat, watching the procession of the neighborhood with my dog. But I am working, taking notes and thinking. Not just laziness, I’ve decided, but what Blanchot calls désœuvrement, translated variously as “inoperativeness,” “inertia,” “idleness,” “unworking,” or my favorite, “worklessness.” A spiritual stance, more active, like deprecation. The state where the writing of the fragment replaces the work. Kafka filling up notebook after notebook at night, sitting in the living room, blanket on his lap, having to cover his cage of canaries until they quiet, everyone else in the family asleep. In his notebooks he complains about the factory, Felice, his family, and later about how much time the publishing of his first little book, Meditation, takes away from his potential literary powers. Although when finally confronted with publishing his writing, he is panicked with how little work has accrued from the hours he spends in the middle of the night on his series of notebooks, the fragments he has published occasionally in journals. The artifice, he complains to
himself, of trying to prepare a text for publication, when what he desires is to let a work take shape unforced. What he desires is a new prose. I email Anna, asking whether I should rename my book *Meditation*, after Kafka, or *Contemplation*, an alternate translation. No!—a one-word reply. It is irritating, someone else's book crisis. The lists of titles she sends me as well. All this, of course, is fervent procrastination. That summer, we were both on a deadline—now your book is out, is on all the best-of lists. I am still here.
Alexandra wanted to be wry and knowing, like the women in New York who somehow had it all, calm and casual in their thin cashmere sweaters, buttering bread for their children at brunch on the weekend and stepping crisply to hail a cab from work at five, and all of it, their happiness, ignored like a given. There was an unfeathered romance to these women, how normalized the abundant life was to them. But it was abashing a little, the big weather of feeling for him. At night Jeremy Jordan astonished her body, his much stronger than the drawn face and lean legs would suggest, a thin man but sprawling, with all that warmth rising off him. He was capable of reminding her how wide his shoulders were as they blotted out the cool cast of the moon in the window. The rage of his rising and falling matched her own; they knew each other then as they couldn’t in words.

In his apartment in Islington, they lay looking at each other side by side with the tips of their fingers just touching on one side of a breath, pulling apart on the other, a sort of stretching come from their lungs. The voice of someone famous reached from another room. A newpaper.

“But you love your job,” Alexandra said. “You obsess over it.”

“I am preoccupied by it,” he said.

“I think the word for it is occupied,” she said. “You are occupied. That’s what an occupation does.”

“I want to do something valuable,” he said, “instead of lucrative.”

“You could do both,” she teased, “be a regular George Soros.”

“And break the Bank of England?”

“A humble man would allow that perhaps in his hypothetical second career he would only cause the market to tank occasionally, but you, you must be the architect of national economic crisis.”

“In my hypothetical second career, I will not settle for less than disaster,” he said. “I will know my worth.”

She could see he did not want to think for a while. He moved his hands into her hair, and then her shirt, pants. She spread out on the bed. When he collected the bone of her pelvis in his hands, she closed her eyes and there was depth in the darkness.

“Look at me,” he said, and she watched his eyes grow closer to something like alarm. What it is: tiny tilts, shifts, but the objects, views, fell off, and then she heard something her own, plaintive and undemanding, an unresigned sigh, and there were no qualifications between them.

Or else, there was only one irking detail, one marring absence.

But that could change. She believed that. Change, after all, was what she had done with herself.

Join us to meet our artists-in-residence and view their work at CADAF online, June 25-28.

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The Rail presents daily lunchtime conversations in our New Social Environment. An ongoing series.

Conversations are held over Zoom with artists, writers, poets, activists, and musicians every day. Each day’s event is completely free, and can be attended by up to 1,000 individuals, who are placed directly in conversation with the visiting artist, through moderated question and answer sessions. Guests have included Noam Chomsky, Dr. Vandana Shiva, Stanley Whitney, Julian Schnabel, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Anne Waldman, Shirin Neshat, Peter Brook, and many more. Join our events on Zoom, every Monday through Friday, at 1pm EST.

Weekend Journal

An ongoing IGTV series.

The Rail presents the Weekend Journal, short visits with artists in their workplace, showcasing works in progress and talking through their creative process, influences, and inspiration. At a time when our physical access to works of art is limited, these videos are an antidote, offering an intimate, personal space to connect with art and the artist’s journey. Catch the videos on Instagram TV, every Saturday and Sunday, at 11am EST.