

ISSUE // 09

# THE SEEN

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THE SEEN  
Issue 09

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Stine Deja and Marie Munk. Installation view,  
*Synthetic Seduction* (2019), ANNKA KULTYS  
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# THE SEEN

## Issue 09

# Chicago’s International Journal of Contemporary & Modern Art

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Stephanie Cristello



## OPERA AS FORM

In the course of assembling this issue, one reference has been particularly present: opera. To paraphrase Lina Lapelytė, one of the contributors to the Lithuanian Pavilion, featured in an interview by Natalie Hegert in *Notes on Venice*, “Opera is as related to the visual arts as any other kind of installation. It is literature; it is music, it is a *gesamtkunstwerk*, and none of the features are more important than the other.” This sentiment rings true for the Golden-Lion-winning project, entitled *Sun & Sea*, whose operatic critique of the issues facing climate change unfolded in perhaps one of the most complex, yet delicate, works in installation I have seen in recent years. The concept of ‘opera as form’ is further explored in a range of texts included within Issue 09, such as in Jill Danto’s writing on Anne Imhof’s *Sex* at the Art Institute of Chicago, or Caroline Picard’s meditation on the exhibition *Bel Canto* at SITE Santa Fe, which features eight distinct projects by contemporary artists responding to the operatic tradition through a series of individual works ranging from photography, sculpture, and film. As Picard notes in her piece, the origins of opera date back to the 1600s, through the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice from Greek mythology, whose account is as embedded

in the form as it is to the implications of art itself. ————— To position an operatic turn in contemporary art may be a stretch, given the fragmented state of our twenty-first-century landscape, but it is certainly an argument, in the truest sense of the term—a description of the scene at the beginning of an act, before the drama fully unfolds. ————— In comparison to opera, the time we spend in an exhibition of contemporary art is minimal. This issue seeks to adopt an operatic time, allowing the narratives, references, and ideas within the work of the contemporary artists discussed to slowly develop. While artists whose work touches upon the sonic or filmic is privileged—such as Hong-Kong-based Samson Young’s first museum solo exhibition in the United States at the Smart Museum of Art, a piece on the recently institutes Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Archive and Listening Room at Corbett vs. Dempsey, or Minh Nguyen’s feature on the rise of slow cinema—other pieces take this tempo to its limits, the texts existing as works almost in themselves within the context of cultural critique. Specifically, Mayne’s *On the Death of Camp*, that grafts the form of Susan Sontag’s seminal text to examine the phenomena of

the Met Gala, to Volume I of *The Sirens* by Ruslana Lichtzier and Shana Hoehn, an image-based essay that explores the visuality of women and madness across time and space. On the cover is a collaborative work by Danish artists Stine Deja and Marie Munk, whose practice was introduced to me by Artistic Director of the Kunsthall Aarhus Jacob Fabricius. Deja’s work, which looks at how intimacy is affected by our increasingly digital environment, is further explored through a Special Edition Insert. ——— The unconventional use of the journal format that THE SEEN proposes joins the approach of our Staff Writers, feeling into different ways we can write about and publish on art.

**STEPHANIE CRISTELLO**  
Editor-in-Chief

—  
*An immense thank you to THE SEEN Staff Writers; Managing Editor, Gabrielle Welsh, for her work in assembling this edition; Editorial Assistant Claire Bentley; our dedicated advertisers; Newcity Custom Publishing for managing production and distribution; and Ashley Ryann of the JNL Graphic Design for her continued excellence in the artistic direction of the journal.*

## Reviews

# Eight Views on Opera

**BEL CANTO: CONTEMPORARY ART & OPERA // SITE SANTA FE**

By Caroline Picard



The story is well-known and repeated often: Orpheus and Eurydice are in love. Orpheus is renowned for his voice. Eurydice is an oak nymph and the child of Apollo. Just before the wedding, she is bitten by a snake and dies. Unable to accept his grief, Orpheus travels to the underworld armed with only his lute. Surely, if he can sing the sweetest song, Hades would be compelled to return Eurydice to the bard and the land of the living. Somehow, Orpheus succeeds. His music is so profound, so incredible, the human convinces Hades to make an exception—one that could disrupt the balance of life ever after. And yet, Orpheus doubts the audacity of his wager, doubts in the power of his music and talent, he even doubts Hades’ word. Orpheus’ fatal, human insecurity undoes the effect of his art. Against Hades’ single condition, which is that he not look back as he and Eurydice ascend from the underworld, Orpheus turns despite himself—only to watch the specter of his beloved withdraw into the afterlife, where she will remain forever. The earliest surviving operatic work, *Eurydice*, from 1600 by Jacopo Peri, tells this story. It sets a baseline for the operatic gesture, establishing opera’s premise and aspiration. Art has the capacity, opera suggests, to overcome the bounds of mortality and its affiliated heartbreak.

Given its enduring prominence as an artistic form, it makes sense that contemporary artists would mine the musical field of opera—its affiliated compositions, librettos, politics, architectures, socioeconomics, and history. SITE Santa Fe’s current exhibition, *Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera*, presents the work of eight such artists, produced in partnership with the Santa Fe Opera who furnished the show. The selection of artists on view, including Vasco Araújo, Suzanne Bocanegra, Candida Höfer, William Kentridge, Guillermo Kuitca, Matthias Schaller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, and Bill Viola, each present work within a range of mediums—from video and performance, to installation, music, drawing, animation, and photography. Rather than offer one cumulative argument about opera, the show unfolds as a series of small solo exhibitions, each utilizing different aspects of the form—its architectural spaces, stories, formats of distribution, history of performance, or music—as inspiration.

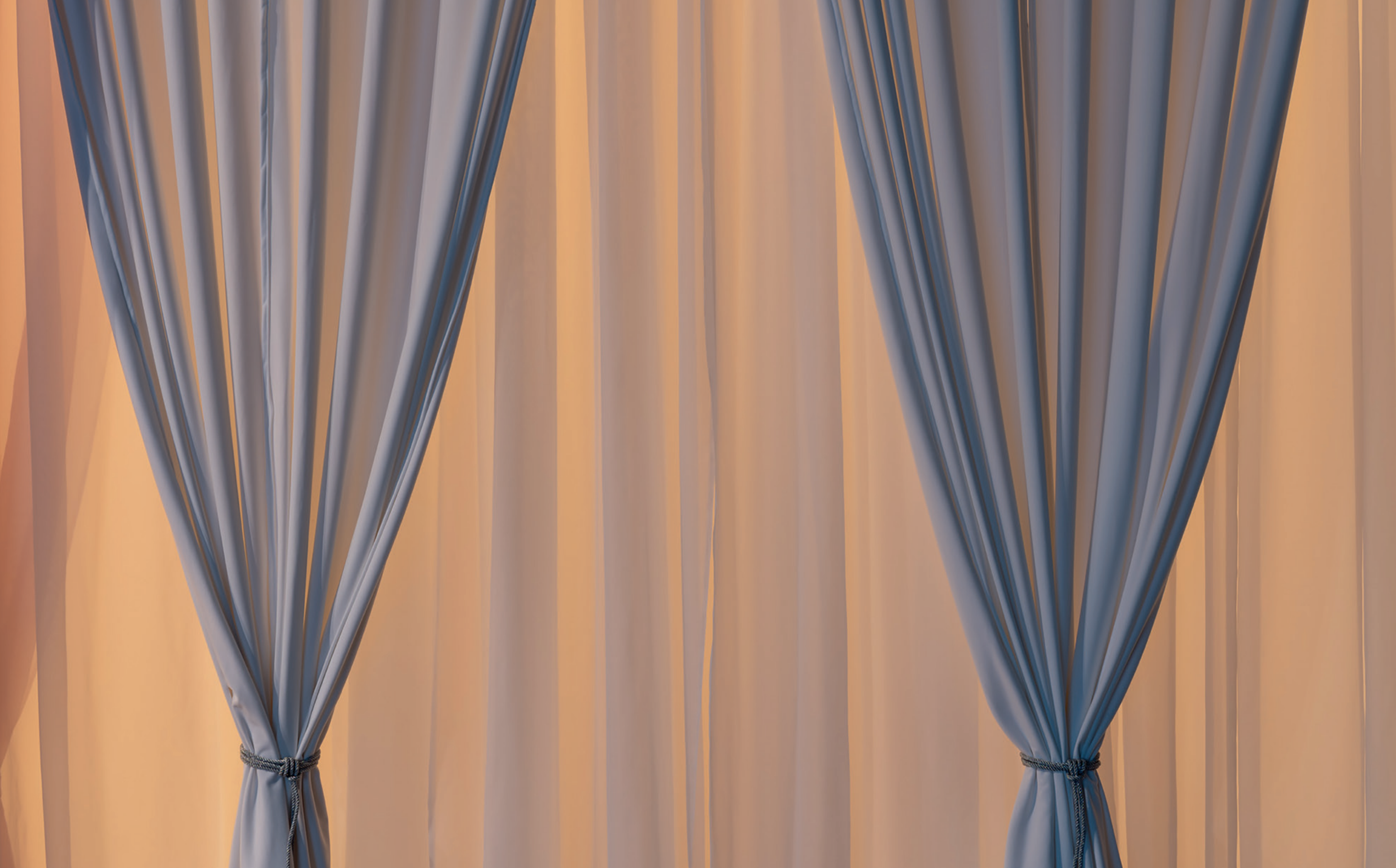
—A series of distinct violet and green curtains billow around the exhibition’s entry. As contemporary art museums typically prefer spare

environments to perform (for better or worse) aesthetic neutrality, the gesture is striking. Variations of this fabric occur throughout the show at each transition point between a given room and hallway, recalling in some way the Baroque aesthetics of an opera house, while also attempting to unify the various artists. Through these visual cues, the exhibit is intentionally playful. The museum is positioned as an active participant, creating a correlation between the galleries and the theater where each artist’s installation functions like a separate act———The textile embellishments also cue the show’s interest in architecture—a theme that plays throughout the works on view. For instance, the first piece encountered is *Fratelli d'Italia* (2005–2017) by Matthias Schaller, a grid of 150 photographs of Italian opera house interiors. For twelve years, the artist traveled the country documenting theaters to create an indirect historic and anthropological national portrait of Italy. Perhaps responding to the legacy of Bernd and Hilla

Becher, Schaller has a controlled and regimented approach to documenting each space. The photographs are beautiful, yet spare and drained of most color; light corals and blues stand out from the details within the ceiling paintings, while theater boxes are dark, appearing almost like blackened teeth—the bones of the room are blown out to near-whites. Taken from the perspective of the stage, what is consistent in each photograph is a blood red ground of velvet chairs, inscribing a sense of duality, as if the ‘body’ of the opera house is tethered to a light soaked, and thus seemingly ethereal, ceiling. Unlike the more fleeting and industrial subjects of the Bechers’ portraits, each opera house is presented as a relic of culture, not industry—enduring spaces dedicated to a communal, but fleeting, appreciation of the voice. —

———Candida Höfer, a student of the Bechers, also has two large format photographs of opera houses included within the show, including *Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna* (2006) and *Teatro*







*Degollado Guadalajara* (2015). The latter photograph of Mexico’s 1886 Neoclassical opera house, like Schaller’s photo suite, is taken from the stage, capturing the immersive lush chamber of red chairs and theater compartments. Architect Jacobo Gálvez’s mural *El Limbo* (1880–90), featured in the top of the image, occupies roughly the same amount of space as the stage, as though to suggest a mirror between the two. Inspired by Dante’s *Inferno* (1320), the paintings captures one of the final circles of Purgatory, home to those virtuous pagans—Plato, Socrates, Virgil, Homer, et al,—who were not baptized, but did not sin. Both Schaller and Höfer’s photos provide meditations on the order of life and death alongside those who bear witness to vocal expression.

—Höfer’s *Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna* frames the back of the theater, capturing chairs on the audience floor and stage against additional architectural backdrops that hang behind, as if to suggest the ways in which operatic productions create the illusion of depth and complexity. Indeed, the exhibition as a whole plays with this idea—each artist devises ways to tease the viewer’s imagination to life. It conceives of the generations of audiences in attendance, the musics composed and performed within these spaces, the tragedies and comedies, rife with death scenes and weddings, all through these rooms. Unique as an example of a suburban private theater built by an amateur actor in 1763, implicit in Höfer’s work is centuries of careful and ongoing restoration, inscribing, and securing a stable rendition of history, even as opera’s relation to class and popularity has fluctuated.

Troubling these more stable perceptions of the theater is an entire room of drawings and collages by Guillermo Kuitca, including three large format collages from 2005. Entitled *Acoustic*

## “...Implicit in Höfer’s work is centuries of careful and ongoing restoration, inscribing, and securing a stable rendition of history, even as opera’s relation to class and popularity has fluctated.”

*Mass (Covent Garden) I, III, and IV*, each captures a view of the London West End theater from the vantage point of the stage in a limited pallet of black, white, and red. Kuitca adeptly creates an illusion of space through a minimal visual repertoire of squares and lines that nevertheless fall out of sense. In *Acoustic Mass I*, white rectangles and periodically broken lines layer upon one another atop a black background, concentrating in a streak that travels, almost vertically, through the center of the audience. It looks as though an earthquake is erupting in the middle of the picture plane. Compositionally, it suggests that the viewer is witnessing the impact of sound as it ripples through a darkened room.

This last May, in Sydney, an opera called *Outback* closed its first act with the song of a stampede of kangaroos sung by a 100-person chorus. The sound was so big and low that it produced cracks in the foundation of the building such that the opera had to be rewritten. Kuitca’s compositions remind us that these spaces have been created to house sound—that it is not enough to look at them. The sounds that are produced within the operatic theater are shattering—whether in music’s ability to bridge the gap between the seduction of music and the heartbreak of weakness, or its societal and historic implications.

—On another wall of the gallery, Kuitca includes large format drawings of three CD album covers of composer Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring Cycle)* (1874), including the company logos that produced, manufactured, and distributed these works. On the one hand, these covers present a different idea of sound—a flattened one-dimensional recording most often enjoyed by oneself, in one’s own home or car. On the other, Kuitca recalls an epic work of the operatic tradition composed by one of the historically most controversial composers. In this way, Kuitca asks viewers whether artistic gestures can be separated from the politics of their time.

—A nearby installation by Vasco Araújo, which consists of burgundy-painted walls that hold gold-framed black and white photographs, along with a clothing rack of costumes, depicts the dressing room of the artist as an imaginary diva. Underneath lie various vintage shoes—both men’s and women’s—as well as a small chair and ottoman with a bouquet, a vanity table with flowers, an electric shaver, makeup, and perfumes. Araújo’s installation calls attention to the history of gender fluidity in operatic traditions; from the controversial role of the Castrati in Europe, which reached its peak in popularity in Italy in the eighteenth-century, to

the various female roles that were played by men. An adjacent and wonderfully intimate theater with roughly eight chairs features the artist-as-diva singing various arias. Part of what makes this room so special, however, is that we do not hear the artist’s voice, but rather a female interpreter speaking a translated English libretto. The way in which this projected performance excludes its audience from sound compounds the performance of time and nostalgia that Araújo’s objects present, especially because the crisp tones of the overvoice feel like such a contemporary intrusion. In this way, Araújo explores variations in how the operatic form plays with the time and repetition to dislocated audiences.

—The show includes more formal collaborations as well. For example, animations and drawings by William Kentridge that were produced when the artist was commissioned to work on *The Magic Flute* by the Belgian Opera House in 2003. Another video installation by Bill Viola, *Becoming Light* (2005) was produced in relation to a commissioned collaboration between Viola and director Peter Sellars for the Paris Opera’s 2005 production of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. The room is empty and dark, with a large projection screen on which two figures—a man and a woman—float slowly and effortlessly in dark water. Viola’s work often elicits highly produced emotions, and this is no exception. The figures are beautifully illuminated within the cross hairs of light, drifting closer and closer together until they disappear into a bubble of air. Still, as a response to Wagner’s epic and difficult opera, Viola’s installation lacks any awkward or trembling variables, interpreting a tragic love affair without either the grotesque stutters of drowning or the atonal disease of Wagner’s compositions.

—At various times throughout *Bel Canto*, one hears the voice of Nadine Benjamin—a London-born soprano of Jamaican and Indian descent—singing an aria from *La Traviata*, infusing the air with a sense of beautiful yet profound tragedy. In a large screening room, she is seen singing throughout Yinka Shonibare CBE’s *Addio del Passato* (2012), a film that plays with art historical tropes in order to call attention to racial and colonial hierarchies implicit within the Western Canon. The main focus of this piece is Benjamin and her aria; she plays the role of a Caribbean-born English lady, Frances Nesbit, lamenting the estrangement of her husband while singing the final song of *Violetta*, who dies of tuberculosis. Benjamin-as-

Nesbit sings Violetta’s song while walking through a historic English manor, an English garden, and a greenhouse. The screen is periodically interrupted with still scenes of Lord Nesbit, positioned to reenact works paintings like Henry Wallis’ *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), or François-Guillaume Ménégeot’s *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I* (1781). The costumes within the work are fashioned out of Shonibare’s signature Batik cloth, a fabric that is typically associated with African identity (despite being originally produced in Indonesia and circulated by Dutch colonial shipping routes). The film, as with every element of Shonibare’s work, is a carefully crafted acknowledgment of complex layers of history, aesthetic aspiration, and political identity. It is a gut-wrenching masterpiece.

—Unlike a live production, Benjamin’s character is doomed to iterate and reiterate this moment of suffering over and over again. She is not permitted to die. Even when she collapses, she is forced to rise again, making her way through the same garden path, past the same diasporic plants, through the same libraries of leather-bound volumes of white male opinion. This feels like a key point in the show—perhaps also the most incisive and importantly critical—for it asks the viewer what we are to do with the aesthetic forms and societal structures that we are at once attached to, critical of, but often doomed to repeat.

—Often, I find myself asking what art is for. What is it intended to accomplish? I do not mean this either as a rhetorical question or an embittered one, but *what does it do?* What *should* it do? As a birdwatcher maintains a divided mind, at the ready to see some new species arrive on their periphery when least expected, so I watch for answers to this question. I enjoy that opera has an origin story rooted in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice—the idea that music provides a chance for transformation—but such a reason for being is not what *Bel Canto* supplies. Perhaps because this exhibit was co-organized between such prominent cultural institutions, the show does not make a case for why opera, or art for that matter, is significant. Rather, it relies upon the individual contributions of its artists to share their own respective insights, troubles, refractions, and critiques of the form.

—Its ultimate expression is that opera is of interest. Fortunately, I would agree.

—  
***Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera* at SITE Sante Fe runs until January 5, 2020.**

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Aruaujo, Vasco\Divas, a portrait - foto 3.tif  
Vasco Araújo, *Divas, A Portrait*, 2000. Installation: Dressing table, clothes rail hanger, items of clothing, props, fresh flowers, 16 black & white photographs. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of António Cachola Collection, Portugal.

**PAGE 15:**  
Matthias Schaller, *Fratelli d’Italia*, Italy, (2005-2016). Photographic series of 150 Italian Opera Houses. Courtesy of the artist.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Detail view of *Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera*. 2019. Courtesy of Eric Swanson.

**OPPOSITE:**  
Suzanne Bocanegra, *Dialogue of the Carmelites* (detail), 2018. Mixed media installation with sound. Fabric Workshop and museum commission. Courtesy of the artist.

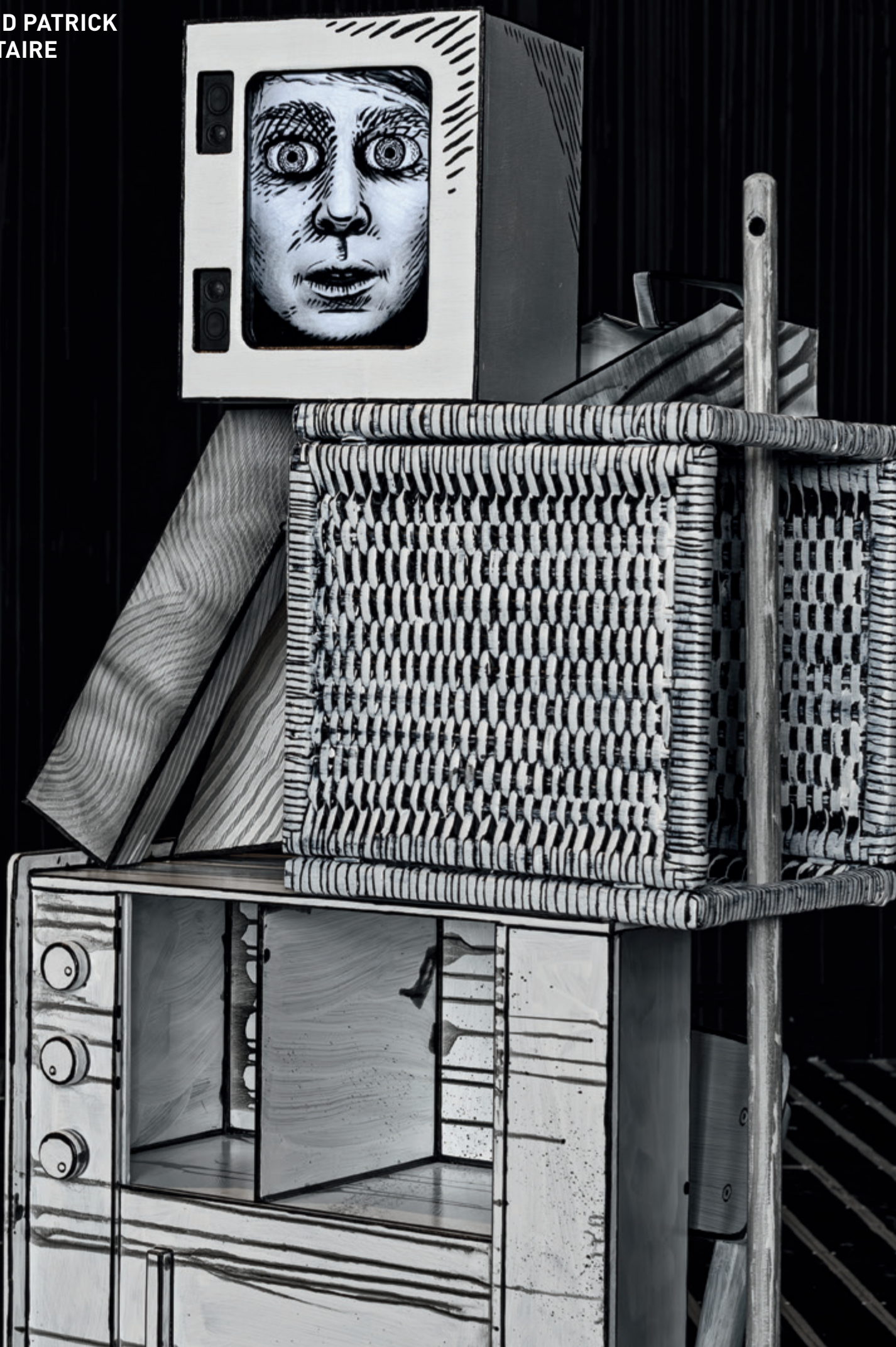
**BELOW:**  
Bill Viola, *Becoming Light*, 2005. Video installation, photo by Kira Perov, Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery.



# Rand/Goop

MARY REID KELLEY AND PATRICK KELLEY // STUDIO VOLTAIRE

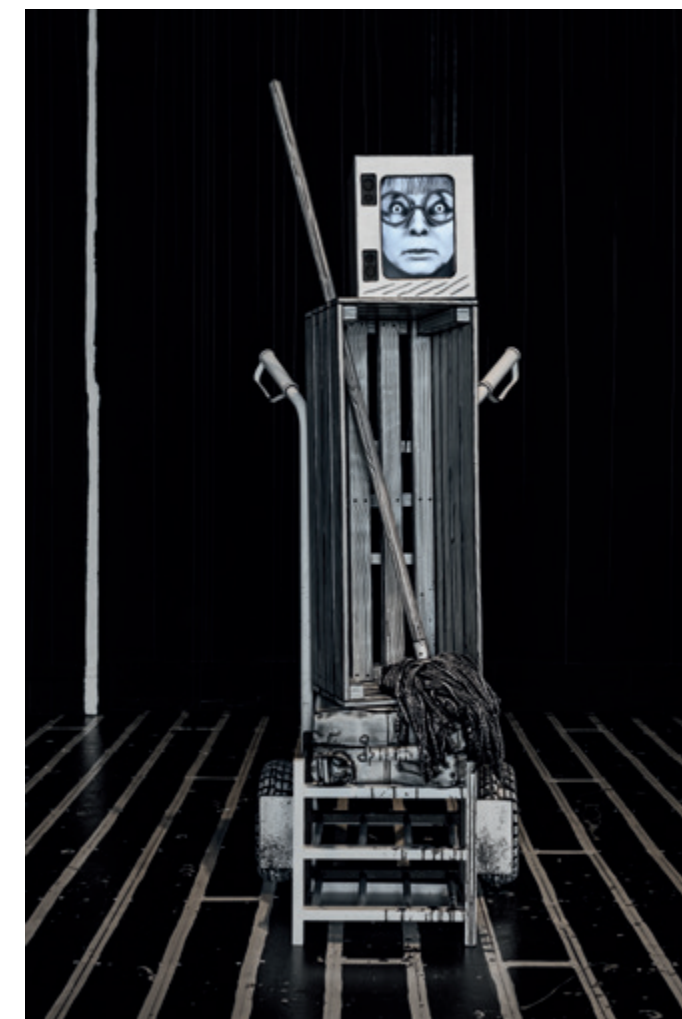
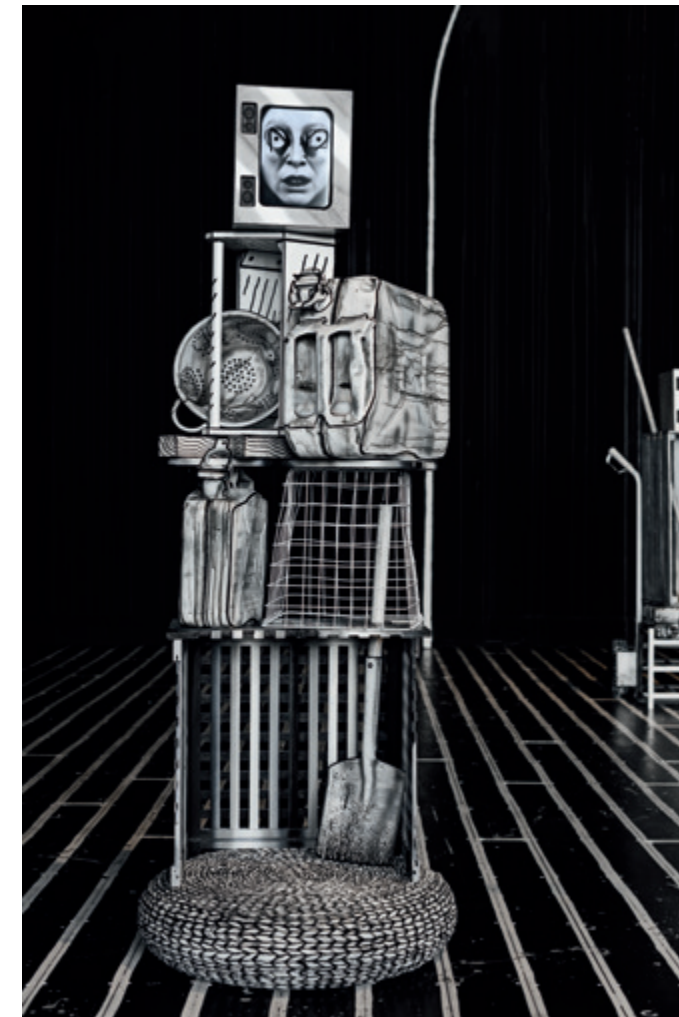
By Claire Phillips



What does a mogul of a wellness empire have in common with a philosopher best known for espousing the virtue of selfishness? Oscar-winning actress and founder of \$250 million lifestyle brand Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow, is the least likely bedfellow one might expect for Russian-American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand. Yet, at their first institutional show in London, entitled *Rand/Goop*, American husband and wife duo Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley have brought these two women into conversation.

“What is the proper function of government / When people irritate us / With avocado / At every successive disaster?” a shrill voice demands to know. Inside the converted Victorian chapel of Studio Voltaire’s gallery space, six towering video sculptures posit, retort, and query. The pithy lines recited by the characters on-screen (named Tiff, Paige, Nell, Liv, Cher, and Dawn) are created by splicing together the voices of Rand’s most ardent followers with the titles of articles from Goop’s website. Their faces flicker and contort. They are unstable. The results are laughable, capricious, and unsettling.

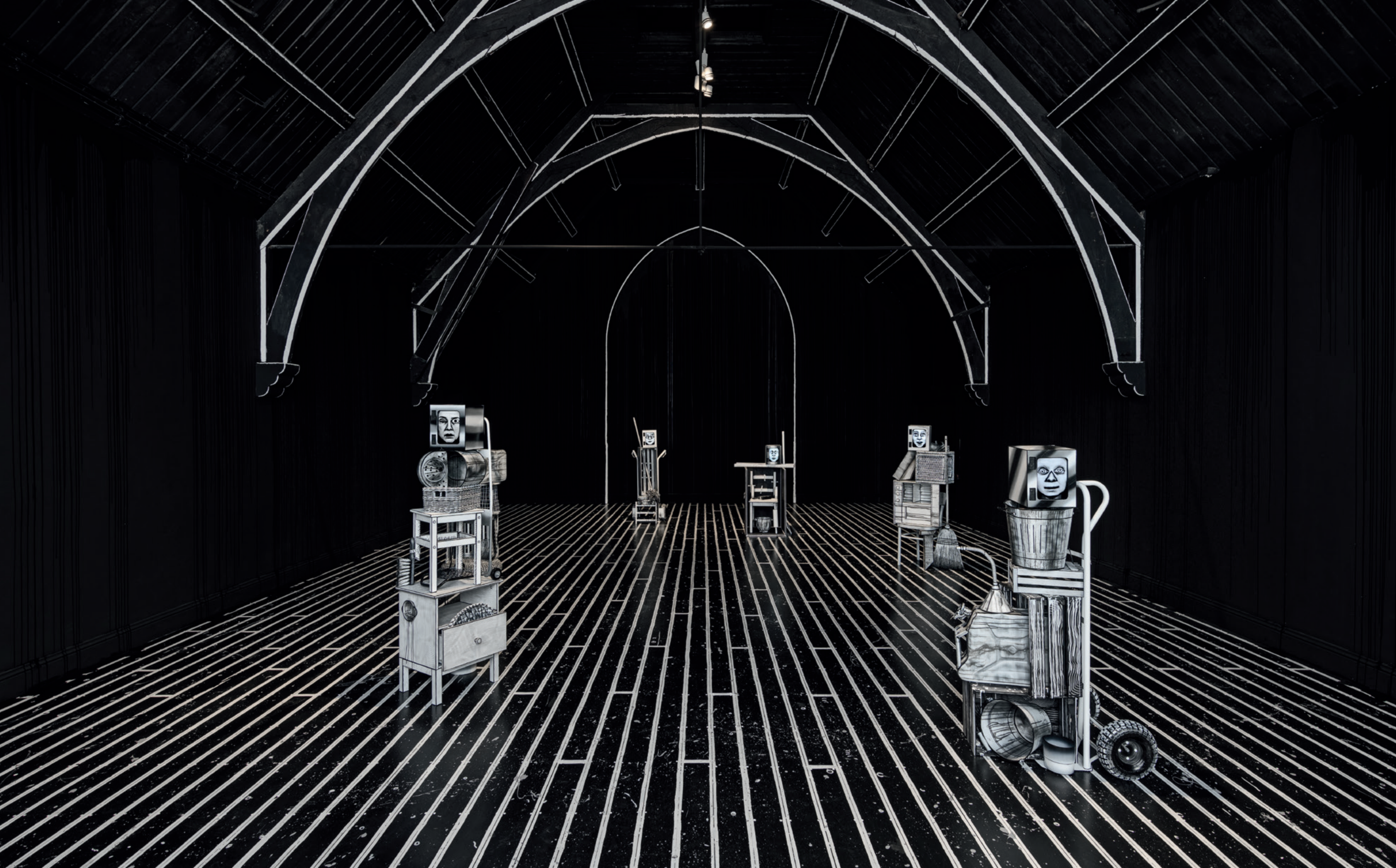
For those not au fait with her philosophy, Ayn Rand (born Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum) is the leading theorist of Objectivism, which argues that “man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself.”<sup>1</sup> Brought to the brink of starvation and persecuted for her Jewish heritage during the Soviet revolution, Rand fled to America in 1926 and became known amongst a cult following as the author of novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). In both pieces of writing, Rand’s protagonists lionized the alpha-male capitalist entrepreneur. From fiction, Rand



continued to explore the principles of Objectivism through copious articles, lectures, and courses at her own institute, the Foundation for the New Intellectual.

At the height of the Cold War in the 1980s, during the eras of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, Rand’s brand of selfishness and laissez-faire capitalism became entwined with neoliberalism. Today, Rand has been reincarnated as the poster child for the princes of Silicon Valley and tech billionaires like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. Despite her devout atheism, Rand has also become a valued resource for Republican Politicians such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan, who notoriously gifted his staff copies of *Atlas Shrugged* each Christmas. Another, perhaps surprising, admirer of Rand is the leader of the free world himself, Donald Trump, who has described *The Fountainhead* as one of his favorite books.

Gwyneth Paltrow and Ayn Rand might seem incompatible, but upon closer inspection, they are perhaps cut from the same cloth. Goop was launched in 2008 when the global economy was crashing, and the sub-prime mortgage disaster was at its height. Paltrow prides herself on the brand’s aspirational, cutting-edge techniques and products, which provide a one-stop-shop to heal mind, body, and soul. Hashtag live your truth. Hashtag live your best life. While Paltrow is often the source of ridicule for new age schemes, like her infamous ‘conscious uncoupling’ from Coldplay front-man Chris Martin, Goop is frequently criticized for being elitist. Inviting its followers to wellness summits that cost upwards of \$8,000 for a weekend, Goop proffers detoxes, cleanses, and sprayable elixirs to eliminate bad juju and jade eggs to regulate menstrual cycles that your average



consumer could never possibly afford. Greed is good, Rand might say.

—In the hands of Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, Paltrow and Rand’s mantras are removed from their context and remade into a series of double-edged puns and quick quips, complicating the meaning of each snippet and making their follies evident. Cake and cancer, soviet takeover and plant milk, body language and NATO, all somehow converge.

—Language has played a vital role throughout the artist duo’s career—lifted from literature, myth, and history, and translated into contemporary syntax, words are often strewn together and set to a specific poetic rhythm with spell-like results. As with other films by the husband and wife, limits are enforced upon the language used in *Rand/Goop*, as speech is only in the format of a four-line cento poem: a ripped up and reconstituted “patchwork” of lines taken from different third-party sources. This tactic is recurrent in the Kelleys’ practice, as they restrict themselves to an austere palette of black and white in their sets, props, costumes, and makeup, in a way that feels timeless and dreamlike. At Studio Voltaire, the entire space of the gallery is painted from floor to ceiling, surrounding visitors in the artists’ stark aesthetic, like the color has been drained from a faulty television screen.

—Feted for their ultra-stylized monochromatic films, the Kelleys’ works lie somewhere between fine art, performance, and poetry. The artists are at once burlesque and Shakespearean, comedic and tragic, ridiculous and sincere. While Patrick shoots the videos and digitally creates their backgrounds from Mary’s drawings, Mary takes the spotlight in front of the camera and transforms herself into a cast of characters that range from the



**“Their faces flicker and contort. They are unstable. The results are laughable, capricious, and unsettling.”**

—Claire Phillips



terrifying Minotaur and a prostitute from World War I, to a corpse on a pathologist’s table and the drowned soldiers of the USS Sturgeon.

—At Studio Voltaire, Mary’s embodiment of six different female figures is intoxicating and fearless—words filled with humor and fallacy in a way that veers between the vapid recommendations of Paltrow and the dark philosophies of Rand. Within the setting of the converted chapel, the cento poems are heard as feverish prayers or sermons delivered from the pulpit, their verses like the warnings of the three Fates: “You cannot have wealth without / Spilling the beans / On the mud floors of / Human progress.” The disjointed arrangement of words mimics a short-circuited machine—a recorded voice now garbled and perplexing. Do they believe what they say? A curious arrangement of hand-painted objects makes up the six structures within the gallery, including buckets, mops, chairs and, wicker tables. Each resembles the jumble of bric-a-brac from a child’s den, or otherwise the remnants of civilization after nuclear disaster.

—Soaked in a deep understanding of the rise of wellness in the cultural zeitgeist and doctrine of Objectivism, Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley reveal their ability to quote from both the high and low brow with equal fluency. Woven together with such care, Paltrow and Rand’s words echo and ridicule one another, setting them curiously side by side in the market of vampire facials, crystal healing, and nut milk. Which is worst is left for the viewer to decide, but the artists’ distaste for both of these capitalist prophets seems unmistakable.

1 Jonathan Freedland, ‘The new age of Ayn Rand: how she won over Trump and Silicon Valley,’ *The Guardian*, April 20, 2017.



**Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley: *Rand/Goop* runs at Studio Voltaire in London through October 6, 2019.**

**TITLE PAGE, PAGES 21–23, ABOVE:**

Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *Rand/Goop*, 2019, A Studio Voltaire Commission in association with Forma Arts & Media Limited. Courtesy of the artists and Studio Voltaire. Photo: Francis Ware.

**OPPOSITE, TOP:**

Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *Ayn Rand*, 2019, A Studio Voltaire Commission in association with Forma Arts & Media Limited, Courtesy of the artists and Studio Voltaire. Photo: Francis Ware.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:**

Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *Gwyneth Paltrow*, 2019, A Studio Voltaire Commission in association with Forma Arts & Media Limited. Courtesy of the artists and Studio Voltaire. Photo: Francis Ware.

# Sex

## ANNE IMHOF // ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

By Jill Danto



[ THE SEEN ]

Berlin: in the recent past, it has been marked as a cultural capital within the contemporary art world. Though I have never been to the city, its image appears to be a utopianism that was dreamt in response to the darker sides of its history. After World War II, the thematic of German art ranged from Socialist Realism in the communist East, to the rise of Conceptualism and other international trends in the West. After the wall fell, and Germany became a still grief-struck yet united force, Berlin became the hot spot as it is known today.

— There is an estimated 20,000 practicing artists in the city alone. So how is it that Anne Imhof has risen to fame so cataclysmically, becoming both definitional to contemporary German art, as well as an international icon? Like a rocket in an unstoppable mission to the moon, she has a team of collaborators—her superstars—who have allowed her to go from having her first solo show in 2012, to winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2017. During her short time as an active artist, she has constructed three multi-venue operas, and a slew of other ventures with the help of remarkable talents from her home base to the wider world. What led her to a Chicago-debut is equivalent to a marathon within the span of a second.

— Perhaps a history of Berlin is a bad place to start, given that Imhof is from Gießen, a college town in central Germany near Frankfurt, about five hours from the capital. Known for Mathematikum, a science museum with interactive exhibits, and the Castelo Gleiberg, a Medieval castle, the landmarks of her hometown can be seen interpretively through her panoramic installations and technically advanced performance works. While often questioning the imbrication of technology, commodity fetishism, and media-influenced isolationism, the place of her performances—the constructed architecture of art institutions—provides a spectral home, lapsing the real with a perceived memory palace.

— In the words of Gaston Bachelard, “Indeed, dreams go back so far into an undefined, dateless past that clear memories of our childhood home appear to be detached from us. Such dreams unsettle are daydreaming and we reach a point where we begin to doubt that we ever lived where we lived.”<sup>1</sup> Anne Imhof is foremost considered an international artist, but even under layers of an aesthetic daydream, there are notions of home, or a disbelief in that notion, which parse through the artist’s minimalistic sensibility. Every item is loaded with signifiers, and every step is a reenact-



ment of a step that is taught throughout a life. In other words, nature and nurture both haunt at the same pace.

— In an interview with internationally-renowned stylist Lotta Volkova, Imhof noted that she is in a phase of transition, moving constantly between Berlin, Frankfurt, and occasionally New York City. They bonded over this feeling, in Volkova’s words being, “everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”<sup>2</sup> Their dialogue confirms a growing trend amongst artists, and specifically performance-based artists: the demand to be nomadic. Given Imhof’s underlying critique of neoliberalism, subjecting oneself to this surreal demand may seem to undo the potential degree of any possible criticality. Yet, Imhof’s submission to the virtual community that her work questions—actively allowing social media to inform the formal qualities which are archived online forever, as well as the image circulation which never ceases—while being visibly present at each of her performances, has allowed for this demand to roll into the oeuvre beautifully.

— In essence, unlike how performance art has been defined within art curriculums since the 1970s, Imhof is not exactly the performer in her performances—instead, the artist primarily operates as a producer. She can be seen watching the work unfold amongst the crowd, with a heavier hand in the creation behind the scenes. The object in question is never her own body, but a construction of collaborators whose both intentional and non-intentional affect

appear to predict the futures of an apathetic community.

— In her latest work, *Sex*, performed in its second iteration at the Art Institute of Chicago, Imhof maps contemporary politics and aesthetics into something that looks like a four-hour opera, but evolves into a romantic mythology. Performers are adorned with Balenciaga, images of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Grateful Dead, Adidas track pants, normcore gothic attire, and the occasional polo all in the same space; each of them acting steadily disaffected by all movements made. Though this is one of three parts of what will be considered a single vision, the mysterious nature of Imhof and her co-artists likely being the only people to see the entirety of this cross-continental artwork leads me to question this: what can abstraction do to conjure emotion when toying with depersonalization? Why are the aesthetics of disdain more unifying than anything else in this moment?

— Looking back to her previous endeavors, Imhof has been known to construct peculiar bodily honesty under impending hegemony. Though her practice is rooted in drawing and painting, her career began to take off with performances such as the *School of the Seven Bells* (2012–2015), *Aqua Leo* (2013), and *Rage* (2014-2015), all of which combined aspects of sculptural practice, live durational performance, and gestures of minor emotionlessness within gallery walls. The popularity around her ephemeral installations has allowed larger institutions to



take note, and summoned the opportunity to expand while bringing each of her previous performances inwards towards the creation of her first large-scale, multi-venue performance, *Angst* (2016). *Angst* was also to be her first foray into the form that she is most known for: exhibition-as-opera. In Latin, *opera* translates to, “work,” both in the sense of labor involved and the result produced. Pushing performers to their limits, as well as an audience patiently rotating through the activation of the work, Imhof uses opera not only as a test of physical ability but also as a test to its monumental cultural tradition, questioning what deserves to be celebrated or recognized on a larger scale. —

—In placing a mirror in front of consumerism and popular culture through iconographic mythology—such as staging live falcons in the role of the Prophets for *Angst*, while adorning the space with Pepsi and Diet Coke—Imhof locates a framing device through which chaos can ensue. Her next large-scale performance would be *Faust* (2017), performed at the Venice Biennale within the German Pavilion. Transitioning between performers reclining under a glass floor, sitting at the edge of a twenty-foot tall gate at the border of the premises, and occasionally walking around the space amongst onlookers, the work took a further turn towards abstraction. Instead of blatant branding, the interest turned towards communication. Relating to the title of the work, *Faust* takes on the German legend of selling one’s soul to the devil by speculating how an obsession with power and excess may be born anew through means that render our bodies as a material commodity, rather than an operational point of empathy. —

—The trajectory seems clear, and even after taking a year break between *Faust* and *Sex*, the similarities that unite each of her pieces seem to culminate into this most recent performance to date. Each iteration of *Sex* is approximated to be around four hours long, touring the world from its debut at the Tate Modern, London; onto the Art Institute of Chicago, notably curated by Dittmer Curator of Contemporary Art, Hendrik Folkerts; and ending at Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin. Alongside frequent collaborators Billy Butheel and Eliza Douglas, and a slew of models and actors including Jakob Eilinghoff, Ian Edmonds, Sacha Eusebe, Josh Johnson, Enad Marouf, Stine Omar, Nomi Ruiz, and Kizito Sango, Imhof provides her most complex work to date. —

—While hearkening back to symbols used throughout her previous performances—such as a falcon statue as an illusion *Angst*, the mattresses installed throughout the gallery are ever-present in each of her operas to date—*Sex* finds further footing between worlds, this time using binaries as a symbolic methodology to splice open and collapse any semblance of order. At the Art Institute, the pier that tears the room into East versus West, dark versus light—and through interaction; male versus female, inside versus outside, life versus death—remains only partially used, akin to the installation surrounding the performers. Modelos sit unopened. Kink gear is used as a frame rather than a promise of pleasure. Mere suggestions. The performance unfolds amid strobe lights, slow drags around the gallery, trust falls, texting, vaping, grunge music, spoken word, and a whole

## “Sex finds further footing between worlds, this time using binaries as a symbolic methodology to splice open and collapse any semblance of order.”

lot of La Croix in a kiddie pool. —

—Upon leaving one of the performances of *Sex*, I felt either emptied or still too full of Imhof. It is not that I felt fucked, as the title of the opera may suggest, but rather more comfortable within my prior claustrophobic-state. Within the context of the exhibition, I made a home for myself and felt at peace with the four hours of endurance that led me to stand without leaving. Home is not necessarily made of materialisms, but instead a willingness to let it take a person in each night. —

—Somewhere, perhaps in accordance with other cinematically-inclined live endeavors that are increasing in mainstream

popularity (such as work by artists Brendan Fernandes, Tino Sehgal, and the most recent phenomenon of *Sun & Sea* within the Lithuanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale), the *new* notion of *home* takes place in a non-space past where dreaming can lead. The disbelief in ever having a home is more comforting than the baggage that a domestic life may carry. There are some who may argue that this is of generational distinction—that the smartphone leads to an addiction to instant gratification—yet, there are always exceptions. —

Counter-cultural movements have provided an escape from the trappings of a conventional life throughout history, and leaning against a wall in a club, body clinging to an ambient shoegaze thump, is not a new pastime. Each day I hear more people longing to move to Berlin, or a place like it, teeming with artists and opportunity. The truth is, the next Berlin is nowhere. As explored in Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling*, isolation is less associated with a medical condition and is now more of a culturally unifying force. Unification does not happen under order or categorization; unification will always be unsettled. For Imhof, the prescription to be filled is how to get an audience together to realize that nothing will be realized. —

**Anne Imhof: Sex ran at the Art Institute of Chicago from May 30–July 7, 2019.**

1 Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958); trans. Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Onion Press, 1964); reprinted (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 58.

2 *Interview Magazine*, “Anne Imhof is Creating Hard-Core Performance Pieces That Speak to the Anxieties of a New Generation.” Online.

### TITLE PAGE:

Eliza Douglas in Anne Imhof, *Sex*, 2019. Art Institute of Chicago. Photography: Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/ Cologne/New York.

### PAGE 27:

Eliza Douglas, Jakob Eilinghoff in Anne Imhof, *Sex*, 2019. Art Institute of Chicago. Photography: Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

### PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Sacha Euseube in rehearsal for Anne Imhof, *Sex*, 2019. Photo by Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/ Cologne/New York.

### OPPOSITE:

Sacha Euseube in Anne Imhof, *Sex*, 2019. Art Institute of Chicago. Photography: Nadine Fraczkowski. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



# Tending a Public

COUNTERPUBLIC TRIENNIAL // ST. LOUIS

By Joel Kuennen

MOUND  
CITY

WHITE  
RUINS

GENO  
CIDE

OCCUP  
ATION

PIPE  
DREAM

WHITE  
FLIGHT

STERIL  
IZATION

SAV  
AGE

REBEL  
LION

The Luminary, an anchor arts organization in St. Louis helmed by founders Brea Youngblood and James McNally and curator Katherine Simóne Reynolds, undertook its first triennial this year. The triennial, *Counterpublic*, took form as a series of installations and provocations within local businesses in a predominantly Mexican business district known as Cherokee Street. — On the first day of my visit to *Counterpublic*, in an already sweltering Missouri summer, I sought refuge from the heat in a charro store called Carillo Western Wear, a concealed exhibition site. I thumbed through brocade, pearl button shirts, and gazed around at the stacks of cowboy hats that cascaded down from the ceiling in shades of tan. There was a pink one, with spikes, and then another and another, mixed in with the rest. I looked through more shirts and found one with odd, iron on patches with a script that read like a dare:

- Do TWO of the following, choosing a different group for each:
- Go to a festival, celebration, or other event identified with one of the groups. Report on what you see and learn.
  - Go to a place of worship, school, or other institution identified with one of the groups. Report on what you see and learn.
  - Talk with a person from one of the groups about the heritage and traditions of the group. Report on what you learn.
  - Learn a song, dance, poem, or story which is traditional to one group, and teach it to a group of your friends.
  - Go to a library or museum to see a program or exhibit featuring one group's traditions. Report on what you see and learn.

I remembered this...why did I remember this? It seems so altruistic nowadays, these dares to go experience the diversity of our nation. Or maybe it seems sinister—post-9/11, it is hard not to read the command “Report on” in Orwellian terms. Then it dawned on me: they were steps to fulfilling the requirements for a Boy Scouts of America merit badge, specifically the *American Cultures* merit badge. Requirements for the *Citizenship in the Nation and the World* and *American Heritage* badges clung to other panels of the shirt meant for peacocking. —

—This was the work of Yowshien Kuo, and while the cheap, iron-on patches felt unconsidered, but albeit necessary—the majority of the artist stipend went to purchasing hats and shirts from the store—the gesture was perfectly executed. Here I was, in a charro store, a store I would likely not have gone into had it not been on the map of *Counterpublic* locations, having an hour-long conversation with the store owner's son about the development and maintenance of charro culture, his experience as a first generation American, and this triennial that had inserted itself into the Cherokee Street neighborhood. Kuo's work illustrated acculturation while avoiding appropriation, forming ties with cultures that exist as a way to create something new, something that can be called home. —

—“Counterpublic,” a term coined by Nancy Fraser in the 1990s, is used to describe groups developing counter-discourses within the public sphere to construct identities in opposition to the dominant paradigm. In the past, these groups have always existed voraciously, but were separated by distinct media spheres. Independent publishing arms like AK Press, for example, served as a hub for the anarcho-communist inclined, within a hardening neoliberal America. Those on the evangelical right would scarcely ever know or hear of this press. Counterpublics developed in relative isolation. However,



## “THAT IS WHERE WE ARE NOW, A FRACTURED PUBLIC.”

all this changed when the media that shapes and holds the public sphere went online. Michael Warner points to the Internet's ability to breakdown the broadcast model from three main networks that determined public discourse for decades, saying it has “fractured the language of the public.”<sup>1</sup> — That is where we are now, a fractured public. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Yes, we see a lot more of the repugnant counterpublics; the alt-right, neo-nazis, straight-up racist dumbasses. But we also see Queerness, Blackness, Desiness,

MOUND CITY	CONSUME	IM PRISON	ZOMBIE	SOVEREIGNTY
REMEMBER	DISSENT	PARASITE	CONSUME	INVASIVE
GENOCIDE	AMERICAN	EXILE	MOUND CITY	TRADITION
CONSUME	STERILIZATION	WHITE FLIGHT	PIPE DREAM	REBELLION

MOUND CITY	WHITE RUINS	WHITE FLIGHT	STERILIZATION	GENOCIDE
ZOMBIE	AMERICAN	PIPE DREAM	MOUND CITY	REBELLION
EXTRACTION	EXILE	SAVAGE	INVASIVE	SOVEREIGNTY
CONSUME	DISSENT	OCCUPATION	PARASITE	IM PRISON



Latinxness, Indigiousness. We see a normalization of socially progressive values at a speed unheard of in the last century. The public sphere of today, it could be said, is one of many counterpublics entering an expanded sphere of public discourse and power.

—This public of today is seen in Kimi Hanauer’s dedication posters that cover a building at the corner of Cherokee St and Jefferson Ave, which state, “TO THOSE FOR WHOM THE ENTIRE WORLD IS A FOREIGN LAND.” It is seen cater-corner to Demian DinéYazhi’s placards that read “OCCUPATION, GENOCIDE, STERILIZATION,” covering the shop windows of the coffeeshop, Foam. Posters on the wall inside the shop implore patrons to “LISTEN TO INDIGENOUS VOICES,” while outside, a towering, stereotypical statue of a “Cherokee Indian” erected in the 1980s by the local chamber of commerce, in an attempt to gin up business on Cherokee Street,<sup>2</sup> gazes eastward towards Cahokia—the site of the largest Native American city north of Mesoamerica. The city, which at its height in the thirteenth-century was larger than London, traded in Mill Creek chert, a valuable stone for making tools to farm the land. The concrete sidewalks of Cherokee Street are flecked with bits of the brownish-ochre chert, now used as aggregate filler.

Once counterpublics are acknowledged by the realm of the hegemonic public sphere, they can begin to grow. We see the negative aspects of this phenomena in the rise of Trumpian white supremacy and the transformation of long-dormant racist ideology into mainstream dogma for an entire party. Conversely, *Counterpublic* artists like Cauleen Smith and Isabel Lewis

remind us that the new paradigm of an expanded public sphere allows for the development of new ways of being in community that can do away with discourses of hatred and exclusion.

—In Treffpunkt, the former St. Mathew church turned lecture hall, Cauleen Smith’s installation *Sky Will Learn Sky* (2019) fills the nave of the church with sheer, orange banners bearing lyrics from Alice Coltrane: “AT DAWN / SIT AT THE FEET OF ACTION.” In the church basement, her film *Sojourner* (2018) plays on a stage, working through the radical imagining of alternative futures represented by the work of Simon Rodia (the artist behind Watts Towers); Noah Purifoy’s sculptural desert town; and founder of the first Black shaker community, Rebecca Cox Jackson. Smith’s film inserts young people of color into these sites of alterity, bridging the gap of history to show that the imaginaries of new futures are possible, are rooted in what has been and are, ultimately, possible.

—My time in St. Louis ended with a performance of an alternative future—one built on love, on tending, on joy. Isabel Lewis hosted an “occasion” at Cherokee Street Yoga. The Berlin-based artist danced around the studio, into the space of each person present, vibrating the air of the yoga studio as the sunset’s golden light filled the room. In dance breaks she shared vials of scents, asking “What would rational thought smell like?” before passing around a bottle that smelled of burdock, citrus, and steel. After another round of reiki-like dance confrontations, a short discussion on Alcibiades’ desire to satiate his thirst for Socrates’ wisdom through erotic love. Then came the scent of

Intellectuality—a swamp overgrown with periwinkle—followed by a short lecture on Martha Nussbaum and Profane Love. The third scent, created in collaboration with Sissel Tolaas, represented the space of integration and was based on the smell of Berghain, the notoriously hedonistic club in Berlin. It smelled of poppers, the body, citron, and polycarbons.

—Lewis’ occasion ended with her turning to the audience to ask about gardening. What does it mean to tend? To allow for flourishing? Audience members shared their experiences living with plants, caring for them, and the eventual realization that the love we show plants, providing a conducive environment for growth without forcing control, is how we must tend to each other.

—*Counterpublic* ran throughout the city of St. Louis from April 13 to July 13, 2019.

- 1 Michael Warner in conversation Harry Kreisler. Recorded on 03/21/2018. Series: “Conversations with History”, University of California TV. Accessed July 26, 2019.
- 2 Merkel, Jim. “Cherokee Street Sculptor is his Own Worst Critic,” *Suburban Journals of Greater St. Louis*. Accessed July 26, 2019.

#### TITLE PAGE:

Demian DinéYazhi’, *falling is not falling but offering*, installation view at FOAM. Photograph by Brea Youngblood.

#### PAGE 33:

Kimi Hanauer and Press Press, *Commune Diverge Shift Connect: A Press Press Chronicle*, installation view at George Peabody Library, Baltimore.

#### PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Demian DinéYazhi’, *falling is not falling but offering*, installation view at FOAM. Photograph by Brea Youngblood.

#### OPPOSITE:

Cauleen Smith, *Sky Will Learn Sky*, 2019. Vinyl banner installation at Treffpunkt. Photograph by Brea Youngblood.

#### ABOVE:

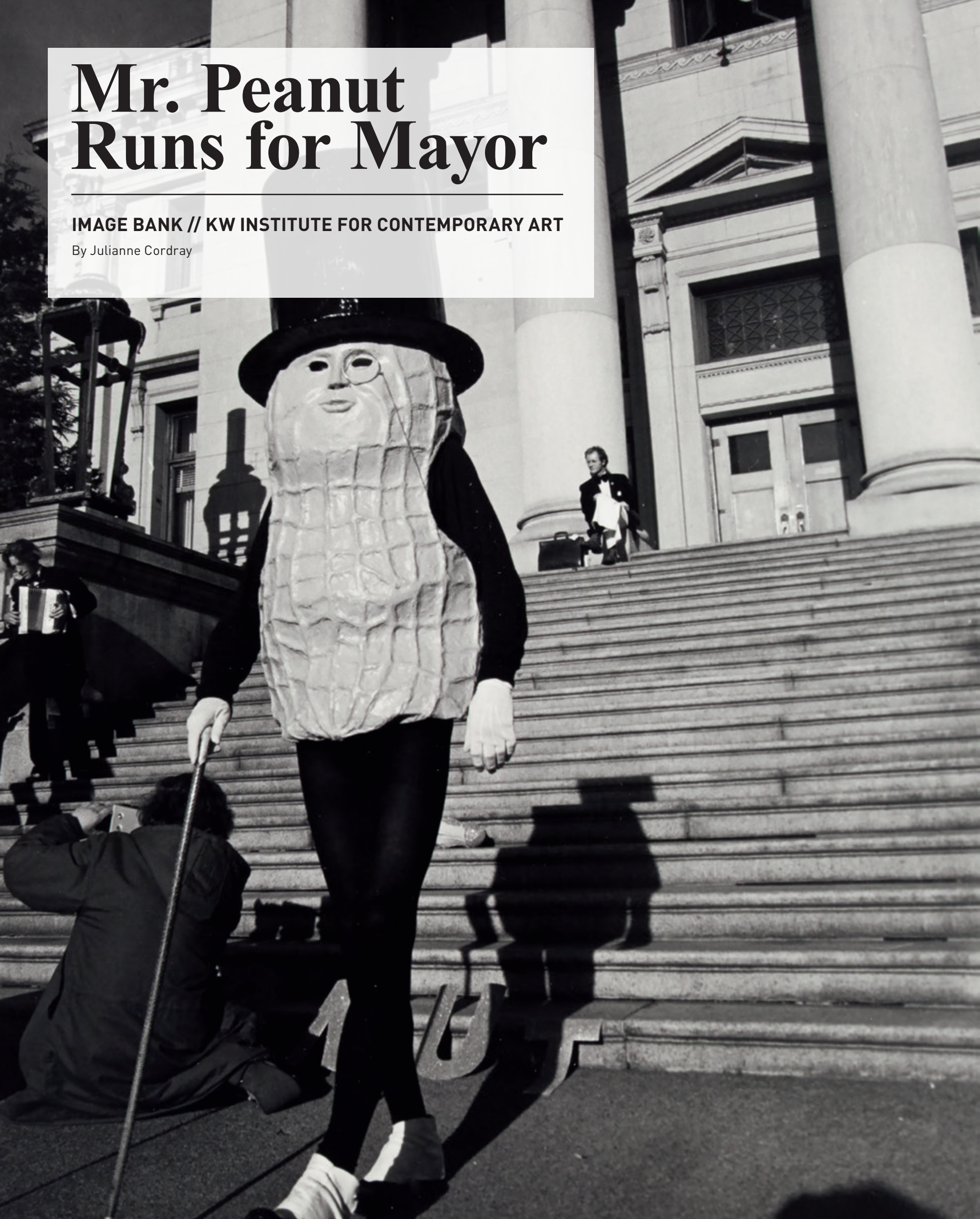
Joseph del Pesco and Jon Rubin, *Monuments, Ruins and Forgetting*, installation view at 2712 Cherokee Street. Photograph by Brea Youngblood.



# Mr. Peanut Runs for Mayor

IMAGE BANK // KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

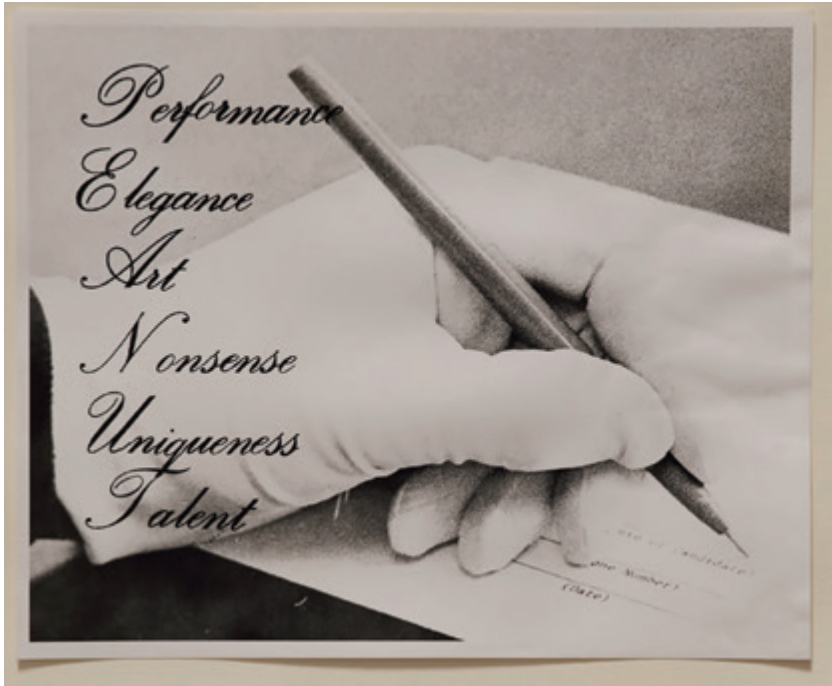
By Julianne Cordray



In the 1970s in Vancouver, Canada, Vincent Trasov and Michael Morris established the correspondence-focused artist collective, Image Bank—now emblematic of a practice that was at once distributive and acquisitional. The current Image Bank retrospective at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin presents an extensive archive of correspondences in the form of written notes and postcards, as well as visual juxtapositions through collages, video compilations, props, and photographs, elucidating the often Duchampian approach to mass visual culture and language practiced by the network of artists. The exhibition touches upon a vein of ‘70s mail and correspondence art that has been in high circulation recently. Just across the street on Berlin Mitte’s Auguststraße, a recent exhibition at Museum Frieder Burda’s Salon Berlin featured the work of correspondence artist Ray Johnson (in collaboration with his estate, another archive), physically manifesting the network connectivity between these artists through their proximity in neighboring institutions. Johnson, and his New York School of Correspondence, had retained a close connection to Image Bank and its activities from the start—his letters and collages can be found among those displayed at KW. —In the exhibition halls, statements such as “Are words things?” or “The word is not dead: it is simply changing its skin,” are printed among the postcards that line the interior of a large central vitrine. These texts point to a use of words that is material, further articulated through the prevalence of puns, appropriated brand names, acronyms, and pseudonyms that crop up

throughout the show. —The name ‘Image Bank’ itself was borrowed from William S. Burroughs’ novel, *Nova Express* (1964). Meanwhile, affixed to one large wall of the space is wallpaper printed with an artist directory and image request list compiled by Image Bank and published in *FILE Magazine* (1972–1989)—a publication of General Idea (another Canadian collective and close collaborator). The visual identity of *FILE Magazine* becomes quickly recognizable as a quotation of *LIFE Magazine*, appropriating the font, color, and layout of the magazine’s logo, and simply rearranging its letters. This cut-and-paste restructuring of elements was a characteristic mode of production employed by the artists, with the aim of opening up the possibility for new meanings to materialize, and thus unsettling dominant and accepted structures of the time in the process. This mode of upturning the system at once recalls the collage and assemblage techniques of a Dada tradition, while predating both institutional critique and current processes of mass image distribution. —Alongside the distribution and solicitation of images via mass mailing (which bears a strong correlation to the now extremely prevalent sharing and networking channels of the Internet), Image Bank’s work can be seen in parallel to alternative modes of production in contemporary art: namely, production as exchange, facilitated via the connective tissue of collective creative consciousness. Contemporary artist collectives, such as the Switzerland-based Louise Guerra Archive—which was initiated under the umbrella of a single





alias—function as a mode of collective identity fabrication, akin to myth-making. Likewise, Image Bank artists were known for having established numerous interchangeable aliases in order to counter the notion of the solitary artist figure, underlining the fluidity of identity. Fluctuating between personas, the group dematerialized the distinction between manufacture and authenticity.

—The most visible example of the aliases adopted by the artists of Image Bank is the character-performance of “Mr. Peanut,” a clear reference to the brand mascot from Planter’s Peanuts. The actual mayoral campaign of Mr. Peanut—undertaken during Vancouver’s municipal election in 1974—is documented throughout, with further peanut imagery, in its particular brand of recognizability and banality, dispersed and reappearing across all corners of the KW Institute space. Like Trasov’s peanut drawings, at times depicting an entanglement of peanuts, snaking, intestine-like, or his *Eternal Peanut Column* (1977), which stands at the exhibition’s entrance, the image of the peanut forms a strong visual link that ties together various media. These types of formal linkages, in fact, appear throughout the exhibition at different points, weaving the broader theme of connectivity—network building—into the physical layout of the exhibition itself.

—The infiltration and destabilization of the institutional framework that supports the art world is at play in the very foundation of Image Bank. Their approach to traditional visual media, such as painting, is distilled down to its literal building blocks throughout the exhibition—whether in the form of gradating color bars, or geometric patches of light. These elements appear in different manifestations across the show: an installation of physical color bars float up from the floor in one darkened room, forming into pyramidal patterns across a spectrum of colors. Adjacent photo and video works show the color bars placed in a natural landscape, sometimes alongside the artists themselves, configured as static geometric structures among the grass and trees. Similarly, another video projection depicts the artists, naked and reflecting light onto one another’s bodies via a small mirror. Image Bank draws with light—enacting the function of light in image making in a material way.

—This research impetus is revisited in another corner of the exhibition, wherein Morris’ work on paper, *Eight Step*

“...Image Bank artists were known for having established numerous interchangeable aliases in order to counter the notion of the solitary artist figure, underlining the fluidity of identity. Fluctuating between personas, the group dematerialized the distinction between manufacture and authenticity.”

*Spectrum and Grey Scale* (1970), is placed adjacently to *Colour Research* (1972–73), a segment of video that gives textual cues to consider the properties of light and surface. Collectively, this body of work is illustrative of a performative gesture that places the focus on process and communication rather than the art object as a closed, autonomous unit. Elements of painterly practice are transmuted into three-dimensional props and sets for an experimental mode of visual research and exploration. The geometric formations of bars of color, moreover, are evocative of analog pixels, facilitating further references to image construction—another type of ‘bank’. —As a whole, these works are enveloped in a soundscape by Canadian electronic composer Martin Bartlett, which escalates from an even-toned levity to a maddening, carnivalistic cacophony. This crescendo is visually accompanied by projections in the form of a triptych, flipping through catalogues of digitized slides at regular intervals. As the score builds, photos of Mr. Peanut engaged in a romantic encounter with General Idea’s Granada Gazelle pop up in a series across the wall. Directly across, *Hands of the Spirit* (1974)—also from General Idea, comprised of five hands made of clear Plexiglas with elongated, highly-gestural fingers attached to sticks—are propped up, their shad-



ow-like presence adding to the overall effect of the psychedelic atmosphere. The sculptural hands, used as a prop within various contexts, reappear in documentation of the group’s performances—an emphatic articulation of artificiality injected into the realm of the real. Such forms of camp and theatricality serve as an extension of the impetus to counter traditional modes of visualization.

—The notion of the archive, both as artistic mode of production and as a site for research and study seems to have taken a central position in recent years, as research-based art practices and collective modes of artistic production increasingly take shape. Through its breadth and frequent redundancy, the material displayed in the exhibition at KW enacts a visual and textual bombardment: a sort of simultaneity and anti-stasis that underscores the absurdity and superficiality of popular imagery in the context of capitalistic culture through its hyper-realization. Reacting to the illogical nature of contemporary culture and politics, Image Bank constructed an archival framework that played with notions of temporality and embraced paradoxes, while meticulously adhering to its own cataloguing, record-keeping,

and system-absorbing tropes—regurgitating them to amass a decentralized, non-hierarchical structure. In short, Image Bank eludes simple categorization.

—*Image Bank ran at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art from June 22—September 19, 2019.*

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Vincent Trasov, Mr. Peanut Mayoral Campaign: Mr. Peanut descends steps of Vancouver Courthouse, 1974, Collection: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Morris/Trasov Archive, University of British Columbia, Photograph: Robert Strazichich.

—**PAGE 39:**  
f.l.t.r: Michael Morris, Light-On, 1972; Vincent Trasov, Endless Peanut Column, 1978/2019; Installation view Image Bank at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019, Photo: Frank Sperling. Courtesy the Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Art Gallery, University of British Columbia [CA].

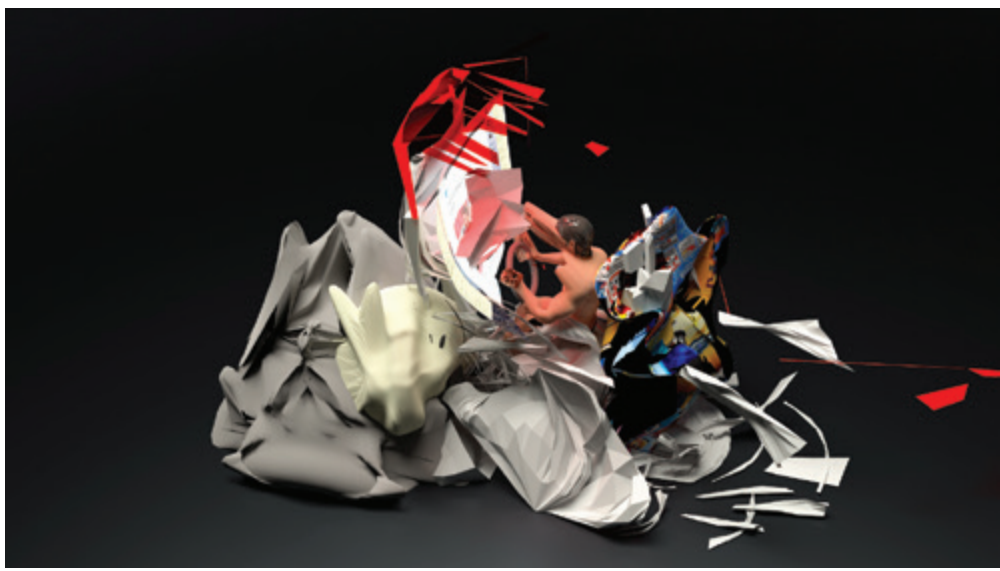
—**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Vincent Trasov, Mr. Peanut on the Staten Island Ferry, New York, 1972, Collection: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Morris/Trasov Archive, University of British Columbia.

—**OPPOSITE, TOP:**  
Keith Donovan, Peanut Party Platform, 1974, Collection: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Morris/Trasov Archive, University of British Columbia.

—**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:**  
Image Bank, archival materials in 12 sections, detail from ‘Annual Report, Image Requests and Mailings’; Installation view Image Bank at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019, Photo: Frank Sperling. Courtesy the Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Art Gallery, University of British Columbia [CA].

—**BELOW:**  
Installation view Image Bank at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2019, Photo: Frank Sperling. Courtesy the Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Art Gallery, University of British Columbia [CA].





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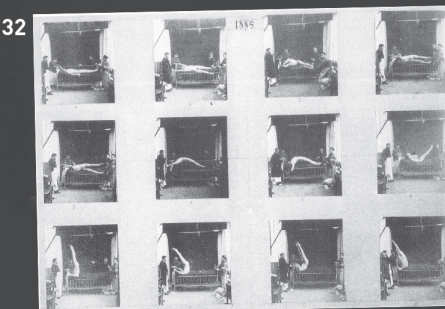
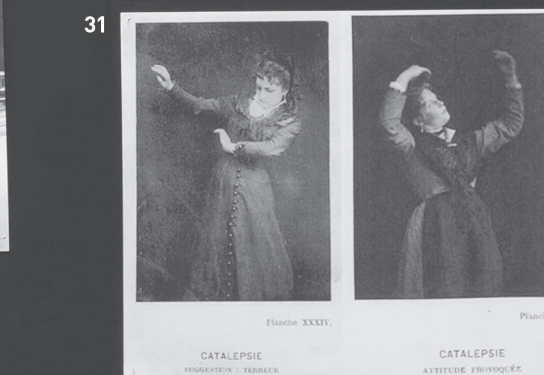
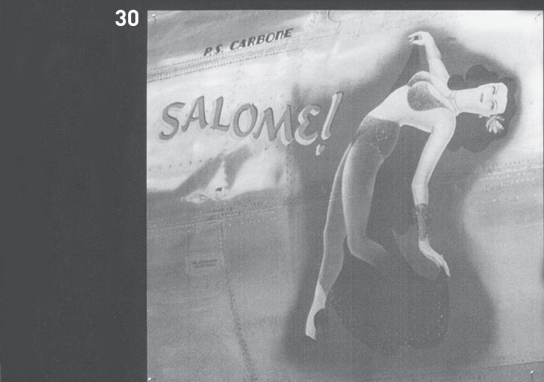
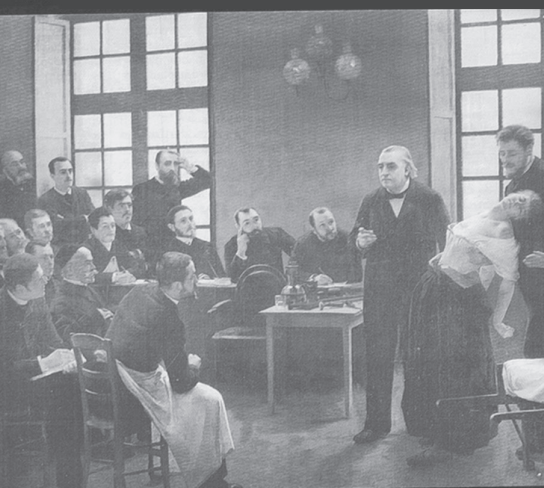
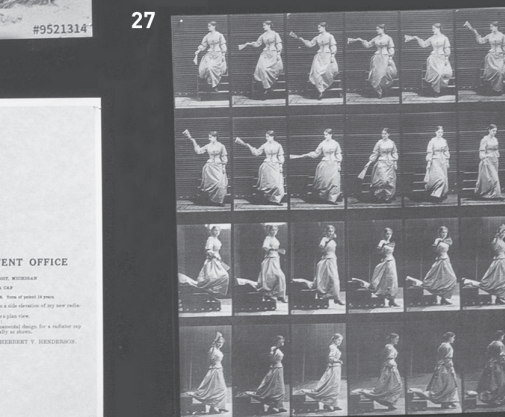
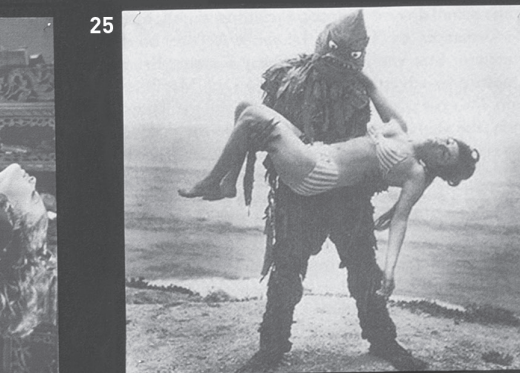
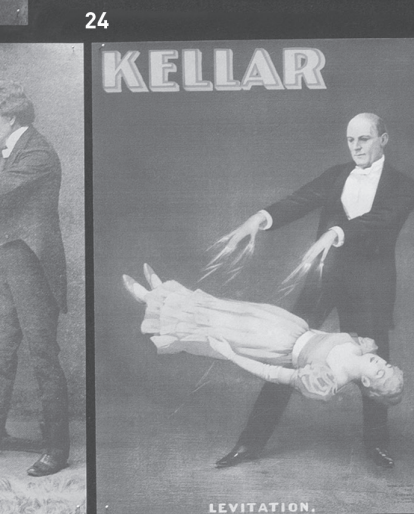
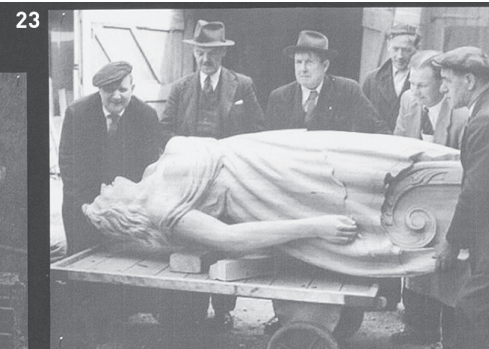
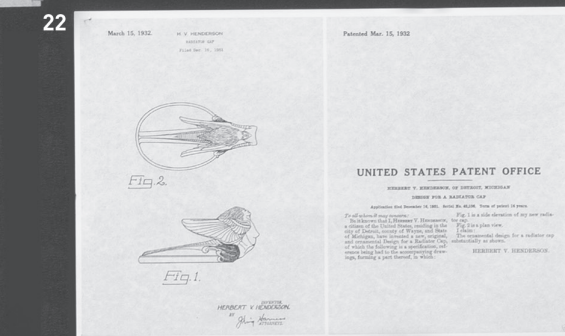
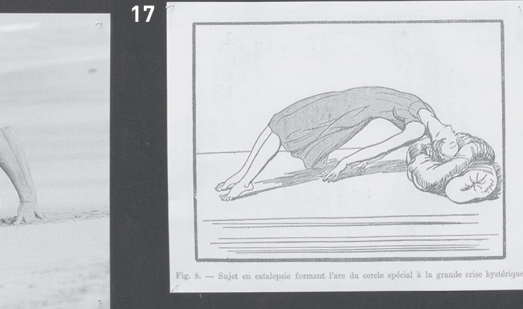
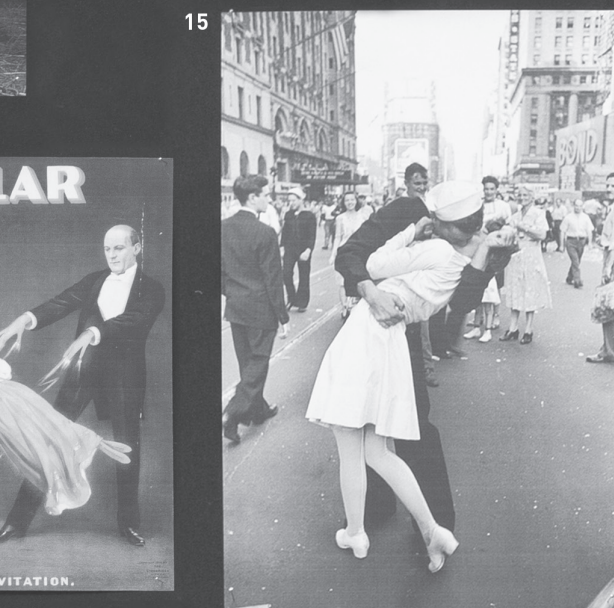
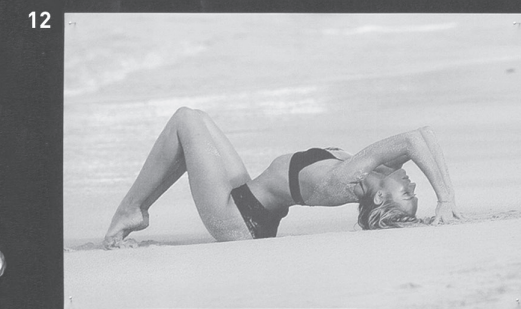
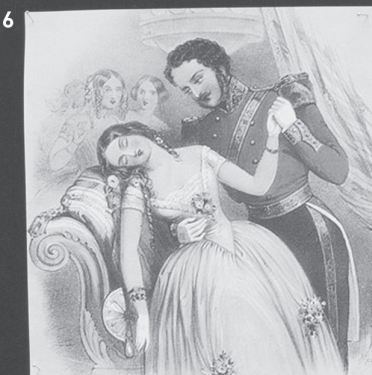
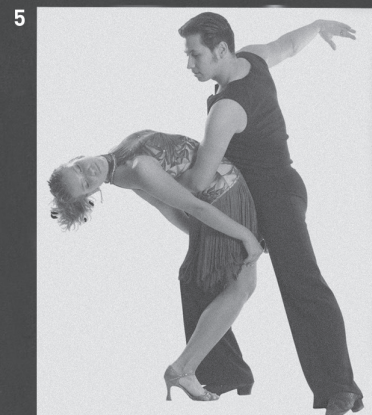
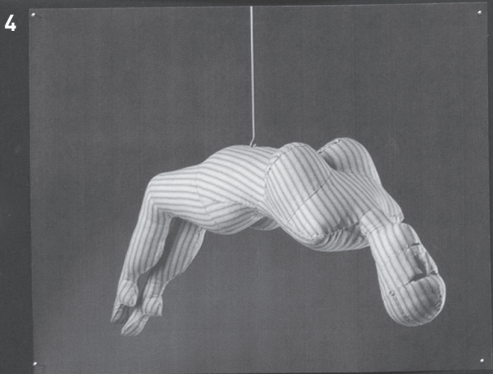
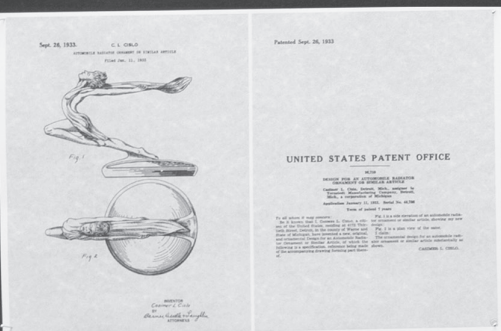
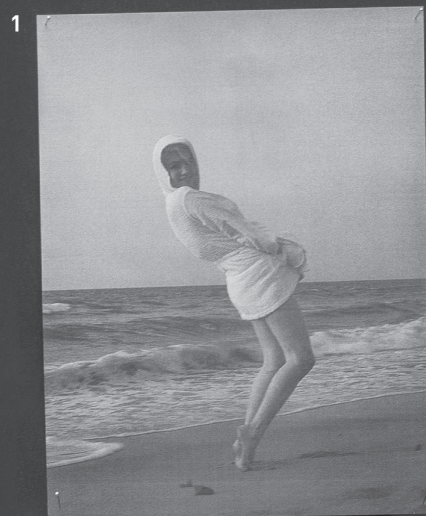
BREAD, BUTTER, & POWER

Special Editions

# The Sirens

## VOL 1 // WOMEN'S BODIES, MADNESS, COLONIAL HISTORIES, AND COLLECTING

By Shana Hoehn and Ruslana Lichtzier



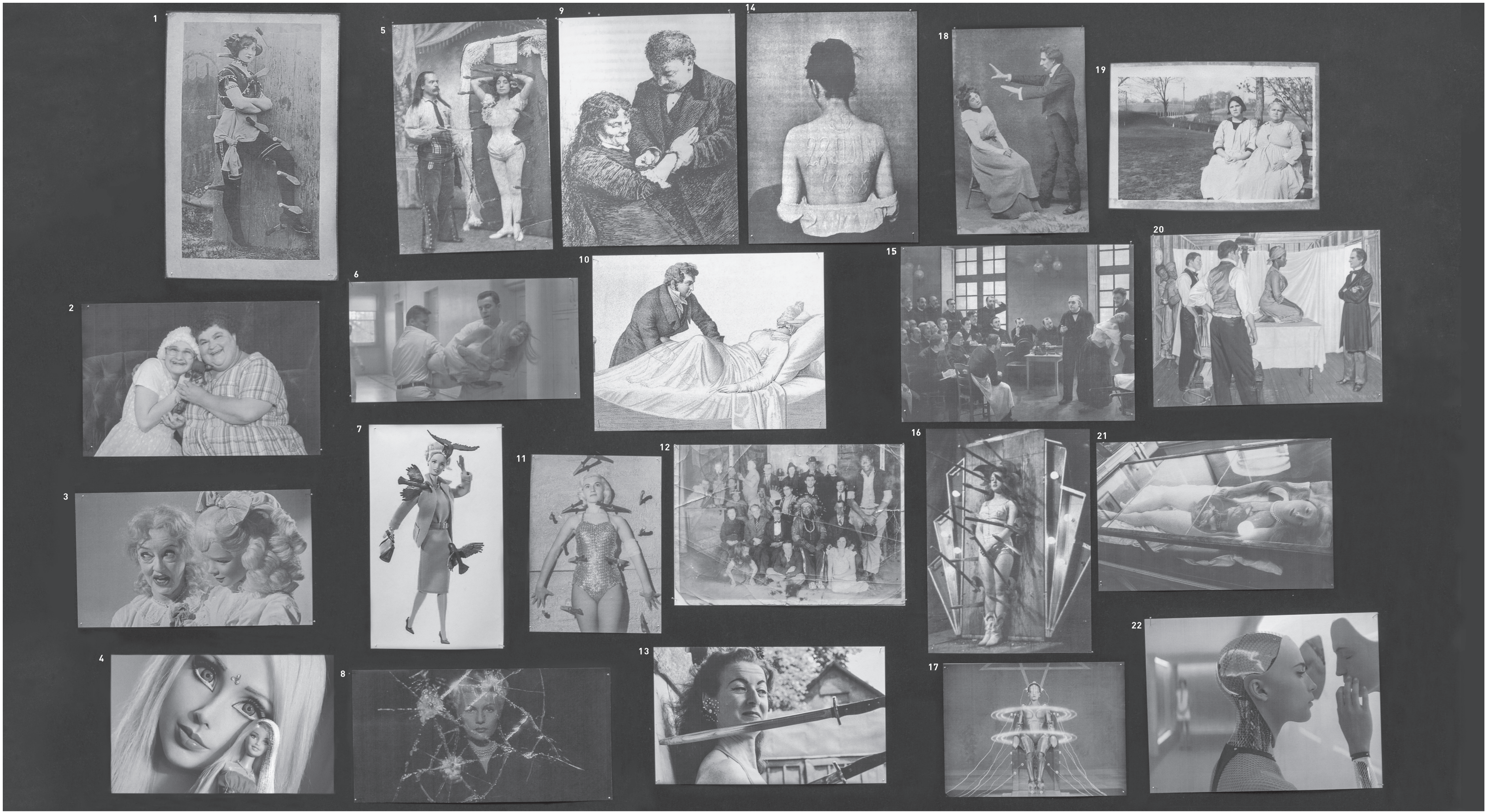
1 George Barris. *Marilyn Monroe, The Last Photoshoot*, appearing in *Vanity Fair*, 1962. Photograph. Web. 25 January 2019. 2 Dir. George Steven, *Giant* featuring George Stevens, Elizabeth Taylor, and Rock Hudson. Film still. Warner Bros, 1956. 3 Cisto, Cosimer. "1935 Buick 96S Hood Ornament." Ebay. Web. 10 May 2019. 4 Louise Bourgeois, *Arch of Hysteria*, 2004. Fabric. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Web. 3 February 2019. 5 "Dancing Adult Couple Dip." *trzcacak.rs*. Web. 10 April 2018. 6 John Brandard, *A Delightful Waltz*. 1850-1860. Color lithograph. Courtesy The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 7 Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*. 1781. Oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. 8 Cadillac Goddess Hood Ornament, 1931, Chromed steel. 9 Dir. Daniel Stamm, *The Last Exorcism*, 2010. Film still. Lionsgate. From *Seems Obvious to Me: Adventures in Pop Culture Studies*. Web. 1 March 2019. 10 Henry Hathaway, *Niagara* featuring Marilyn Monroe and Joseph Cotton, 1953. 20th Century Fox. From *The Hollywood Archive*, Cell Code. Web. 1 May 2019. 11 J.M. Charcot and Paul Richer, "Contortion phase l'arc de cercle." *Les démoniaques dans l'art*, 1887. Ed. Adrien Delahay and Émile Lecrosnier. 1887. Bibliothèque Nationale de France Paris. Web. 25 August 2018. 12 "Candice Swanepoel in a Victoria's Secret Photoshoot in St. Barts." 2015. Pinterest. Web. 25 June 2018. 13 Bourneville and P. Regnard, "Catapleisie." *Iconographie Photographique De La Salpêtrière*, 1878. Archive.org. Web. 20 June 2018. 14 "Levitaton of Princess Karnac," Promotional poster for Harry Kellar, 1893. Wikipedia. Web. 12 May 2019. 15 Alfred Eisenstaedt, *V-J Day, Times Square, New York City*, 1945. Artsy. Web. 15 May 2019. 16 Dir. William Friedkin, *The Exorcist*, 1973. Film Still. Warner Bros., 1973. *Horror News*. Web. 11 March 2018. 17 R. J. Simard, "catapleisie sous hypnose." *Manuel Pratique d'hypnotisme*, 1941. *Au carrefour étrange*. Web. 10 February, 2019. 18 Bourneville et P. Regnard, "Lethargie," *Iconographie Photographique De La*

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A woman (Augustine) is led into darkness: a room. She is inflicted with a disease, presenting dramatic symptoms; the cause unknown. Inside, obscured in isolation, she is suddenly assailed by light. Shocked, her body freezes into a picture.

How fucking terrifying it must have been.

The picture is seductive (he thinks, “Sirens”). He took it, it compels him, the picture that is, not Augustine. He thinks he knows it, knows how to read it, and through it, he reads (invents) the dark corners of the female psyche: a project of identity, identical to his imagination.

You hear voices, so am I.

On Tuesdays, accompanied by his hysterics, the doctor held his famous lectures, where they performed, over and over again, their famous attacks. The doctor loved to see it: his force, their bodies, obeying, like sweet automatons. At times, a fellow from the amphitheater’s crowd—of mostly nonprofessionals—will yell: “Here, Monsieur, over there perhaps, yes, you, over there, go ahead, order her to do something, yes, anything at all.” The doctor will oblige. After all, by then he had some competition; the circuses, the magicians, and magnetizers were displaying shows “based on Professor Charcot’s experiments at the *Salpêtrière*.” Provoking secrets, he moved their limbs, their bodies, that were subservient, as if they were only dolls.

Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. 5

At the edge of the pool, he is transfixed. Locking eyes with his reflection, his back is turned to the world, the world where Echo is.

And we have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze. About the scorch of it, with the eyes staying in the head. 4

To recognize yourself by touching, hitting boundaries. How does one live this way? How can you live otherwise?

Since I left (you), I resist writing (I write). Clinging to the wish—my voice, your grain—I am afraid to hear it. It’s miserable as much as it is pleasing. Maybe this way I will keep you here for a bit longer. I have so many others too.

The collection of photographs was produced in the late fifteenth-century in the Parisian Institute for the Care of Women, the *Salpêtrière*. It received a title from its creator: the “museum of living pathology,” presenting symptooms, objects, of exhibition.

If you ask me what I want I’ll tell you. I want everything. Whole rotten world come down and break, let me spread my legs. 3

My love, I am asking you to consider yourself. Your identity—that which is not “another”—is always driven by identification (because you want me, and I change). To reiterate what our poststructuralist mothers claimed, the center of identity is nonidentity, and it is ok. It’s wonderful. Then, let’s also reconsider how we can address, differently, the politics of identities.

overexposing yourself to your image disintegrates you into darkness

How to:  
Avert Your Gaze

The birth of psychoanalysis can be dated to Freud’s 1885 trip to Paris, where he studied under a man who became his greatest mentor, Jean Martin Charcot, the Head Doctor of the world’s largest mental hospital at the time, the *Salpêtrière*, a charity hospital for mostly women. Treating nervous pathologies, Charcot employed photography, believing, as Freud notes, in his special ability to see clearly, which, vis-à-vis photography, introduced order into an illness that “seems always outside of any rule,” stabilizing the “instability, the mobility of its symptoms” into diagnosis. It is interesting to note that, upon Freud’s return to Vienna he turned away his gaze, and began to listen.

I wrote that “I re-learned to eat food as to respect ignorance.” I lied. I was defeated. I gave up on madness. I still give up on it, almost every day.

“Dissociative disorders involve experiencing a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions, and identity. People with dissociative disorders escape reality in ways that are involuntary and unhealthy and cause problems with functioning in everyday life. Dissociative disorders usually develop as a reaction to trauma and help keep difficult memories at bay.” “Dissociative Disorders.” (Mayo Clinic, www.mayoclinic.org)

A bond was tied, of want and want. He desired pictures (of Hysteria), they desired his gaze. To earn it—his attention—they retained their illness. And then, they raised the bar, theatricalizing further and further their own bodies.

The doctor and his patients enter into a dance, a whirl of transference.

You see.  
You recognize.  
You find pleasure.  
You name it.  
You find pleasure.  
You find Order.  
You find pleasure.

Diagnosis:  
-The doctor found true pleasure of using the flash, at the time a fairly new technology.  
-The doctor equally enjoyed painting and retouching his photographs, achieving sculptural effects.

The doctor declared the photographs to be of a medical necessity and value, but they ooze with cravings of the gaze. Holy, sinful, innocent and insidious, the “pathologies” display virginal positions and the filth of sex.

“What are transferences? They are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for the species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician.” (Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” 1895)

I’m sick to death of this particular self. I want another. 2

By his own account, the doctor had a “nature of an artist,” he was a “visuel,” a “man who sees.” Staring at his photographs, the doctor “used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, ‘til suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him.” Then, suddenly “in his mind’s eye,” “the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order: the new nosological pictures emerged, characterized by the constant combination of certain groups of symptoms.” (Sigmund Freud, “Charcot,” 1893) The doctor found order, he found pleasure.

Writing about narcissism, Freud turned to the image of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. Aside from that picture, he pretty much ignored the myth, and, most importantly, he shut his ears to Echo.

The photographs depict women. Frozen, contracted bodies, gripped by anguish, extreme emotion, or confusion. The collection is hysteric—the outcome of an unregulated want—nervous, and explosive.

To be, to be constituted, without reflection, no mirror. To doubt your image (your relationship with it is torturous, exhausting). To renounce Narcissus.

With pictures, the doctor silenced the hysterics’ “delirious” verbal flow. What a pleasure it must have been, to look at tongue-tied photographs, away from the “incessant babbling” of women.

Hysteria (n.) Pathology.

A functional disturbance of the nervous system, usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties (Also called colloquially hysterics). Women being much more liable than men to this disorder, it was originally thought to be due to a disturbance of the uterus and its functions: cf. hysteric adj. and n. and the German term mutterweh. (Oxford online dictionary. Entrance: July 12, 2019)

Former names: vapors, hysterical passion, women’s asthma, melancholia of virgins and widows, spasms, nerve aches, nerve attacks, uterine suffocation, womb suffocation, uterine epilepsy, uterine strangulation, metro-nervy, metric neurosis, metralgia, ovaralgia, utero-cephalitis, spasmodic encephalitis.

right measures, moderate tones.

full sentences. At any moment it all can be erupted.

I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able. 1

Hysterical neurosis was removed from the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, in 1980(!). Today, hysterical symptoms are considered to be manifestations of Dissociative disorders.

You keep falling. Your legs give up; thesciatic nerve goes into spasms. It repeats itself because of your betrayal. Your body rages against you like an abandoned child that demands attention. Before this you didn’t know that “blinding pain” is not a metaphorical description. When you fall, the pain strikes with sound, a high pitch note, that in its peak turns into silence; a heavy, full silence. It blankets your insides and hollows you out: you cannot think, you cannot see, you cannot move. Pain now became your body.

I wrote elsewhere, that I was (still am?) an anorexic (reading it— the word—I choke). I was in love, deeply in love against my body. I ate hunger, consuming and being consumed by the desire to eat my desire away. I felt so strong and pure as I got weak.

A secret.

What caused Hysteria? Charcot did not know. He knew so much, but not the cause of his beloved illness. It is quite astounding that he imagined so many causes, aside from one. As a result, the women were denied the comprehension of their own knowledge. Their fragmented testimonies of repressed sexual assault were heard as “incessant babbling.” Their bodies, their sensations, memories, their very own existence, they were forced to deny. And they denied it gloriously.

I want you to pause, and grasp the fact that psychiatry and neurology began on stage, and in the dark rooms, where women rehearsed their violation, over and over again, in front of men.

TEXT BY RUSLANA LICHTZIER

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892. 2. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, 1928. 3. Kathy Acker, *King of the Pirates*, 1996. 4. Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*, 2009. 5. Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, 2012

# A Virtual Rose

## STINE DEJA // PROFILE OF THE ARTIST

By Stephanie Cristello



A rose passes from the hands of a gardener, gloved fingers covered in earth, before it is snipped, bathed in acid, its guard petals removed, thorns stripped, and placed into a refrigerated chamber known as the ‘cold chain.’ There, the flower lies dormant—the optimum temperature for a red rose is just 1 degree Celsius above freezing—before being transported in the same wintry box, soon to be thawed and displayed at your corner market. Later, you would throw the long stem of this flower at the feet of a figure skater, whose diamond-starred skirt flutters above the mass of red as it touches the light blue cloudiness of the ice.



A series of rose petals fall like snowflakes, fluttering across a black background of indeterminable depth, swaths of crimson billowing in space by an unknown source of wind. If you could extend your hand into the darkness, you might feel the hydrated surface of its skin-like sheets against your palm. Yet, suddenly you see that as they pool upon the ground, the petals do not belong to the real flower you originally perceived. They are merely red silk. The rose is a replica. —————You cannot pick this rose; it exists only in digital space.

The two descriptions of a rose enacted above establishes a kind of foundation for Danish artist Stine Deja’s work, which examines how closeness is affected by connectivity. This dual-experience of the red flower—both as a ubiquitous industry object, alongside its use as a reified symbol of romance—is just one of the registers Deja uses to observe examines the impact our increasingly digital lifestyle has on intimacy. The comparison between these registers of ‘rose,’ as a hybrid object, was drawn from the artist’s work *Self Service* (2017), which consists of a monitor that plays a video piece of petals floating amid the rendering of a metal shopping cart. As a sculpture, the screen of the film itself is placed within the actual device of a cart inside the gallery space. The bottom of its caged structure is filled with silk petals, some permeating through, scattered upon the concrete floor. While notably different in terms of tactility and levels of sentimentality, the only real difference between the story of the rose and its proxy is a matter of temperature. —————

—————This is a recurrent theme in Deja’s work. Through installations in physical space that take form through digital means, Deja articulates themes of wellness, human interaction, communication, and the limits between our technological and embodied selves. The artist’s critique of these systems is achieved through works that relate to the human body as a warm-blooded vessel, in contrast to the cold, sterile aesthetic of digital space. Take, for example *Thermal Womb* (2019), a sculpture of figure suspended upside down that recalls the practice of cryopreservation. The structure is indeed a replica of the mechanism used by companies such as Alcor, which prepares bodies before they are submerged in liquid nitrogen—figures indefinitely frozen, waiting for technology to catch up and revive them. The film component of the work reveals a pair of bright blue eyes, whose only animation is to blink, adding a time-based layer to the otherwise static nature of the piece. —————

—————A similar aesthetic is used in Deja’s collaborative exhibition of works with artist Marie Munk, entitled *Synthetic Seduction* (2018), which incorporates seating forms that resemble bodily organs from which viewers

can watch films such as *Foreigner* (2018) and *The Intimacy Package* (2018). In the case of *Foreigner*, the video work features an android singing “I Want to Know What Love Is” to himself in a vanity mirror, a song by the band of the same name of the work. In this sense, the ‘foreigner’—an other—appears as a newborn learning to experience emotion. The installation of these films and sculptures are immersed within an environment of sterile blue curtains that surround the gallery space, reminiscent of those one might find in a clinic. We can imagine the feeling of our clothes suddenly transforming into the dry touch of a hospital gown, accompanied with the absence of safety that results from having an open-backed garment. —————

—————While the aesthetic use of virtual reality, avatars, and artificial intelligence is present throughout Deja’s work, the technological platforms she uses are not as futuristic as they appear. Instead, the artist uses technology to underscore how humans more often transfer the same systems of history and behavior we have learned onto these new platforms. In the promotional image of *4K Zen Hat* (2018), a woman wears a VR headset against the backdrop of a bright blue sky. —————On this, one could write a similar comparison to the rose—from the cerulean hue of a curtain, to the color of a cloudless atmosphere, to the rendering a perfect day simulated by a headset.

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Stine Deja, *Self Service*, 2017. Video, 1 minute and 5 seconds. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, London.

**FOLLOWING SPREAD:**  
Stine Deja and Marie Munk. Installation view, *Synthetic Seduction* (2019), ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, London. Courtesy of the artists.

**PAGE 58–59:**  
Stine Deja, *4K Zen Hat*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, London.

**PAGE 60–61:**  
Stine Deja, *Thermal Womb*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY, London.









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Cameron Harvey, *Untitled*, 16 x 24", acrylic and spraypaint on paper, 2019

# THOMAS STRUTH

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MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Thomas Struth, *Wabash Avenue / Madison Street, Chicago*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, 26 x 33 in. (66 x 83.8 cm)

## Features

# On the Death of Camp

By Mayne

1. *Camp is esoteric— something of a private code [...] To talk about camp therefore is to betray it.* –Susan Sontag.<sup>1</sup>
2. The unrestrained, bombastic opulence of the Met Gala has turned the hoi-polloi into a teeming rabble of amateur fashion critics decrying the ‘Death of Camp.’ Though when asked, no one, least of all those on the red carpet, could tell you what Camp is without pointing to the outfit they were wearing that evening.
3. The downfall of Camp style is not its ambiguity; it has undoubtedly persisted amor phously over decades. This is a rare feat for an aesthetic [Example A: Disco].
4. Camp resists definition because it is not an entity, an object, or a proper noun. Camp can exist only in a dialectic between the rich, the powerful, and the beautiful—and the marginalized oppressed.
5. *In a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically etc.), or has the upper hand.* –Jacques Derrida.<sup>2</sup>
6. Camp arose as a way for a hidden undercaste in American society to aesthetically flout their subjugation as an act of protest. By willfully exhibiting a visual style that society deemed to be a marker of the “gauche,” or simply *bad taste*, the creators of Camp were able to exercise a sense of ownership over their marginalized bodies in the public sphere.
7. Camp is considered to be *bad taste*, but not all *bad taste* is Camp.
8. *Bad taste* cannot exist in a vacuum, rather it is a perversion of good taste. Taste is only considered *bad* when it is witnessed or recorded, and thereby incurs social opprobrium.
9. Designations of *bad taste* thus must be imposed by those with *good taste* onto other members of their outgroup who differ in ways the *good taste* group deems to be significant. By designating someone of *bad taste*, the elite and powerful exclude others from their echelons even if those in question have all the other implicit requirements to be a member of this in-group (possible “requirements” include: white skin, mainstream religious affiliations, significant amassed affluence, et al.).
10. *Bad taste* has a particularly acute impact on social relations in the United States. This is likely due to the fact that American society purports to be egalitarian and thus lacks institutionally-codified social distinctions, such as title structures or castes, that were used to distinguish between peoples in many other nations. The elite needed to get creative to maintain their power, and thus, taste.
11. Camp exists as a mechanism of power for the invisible American lower classes to eradicate the stigma associated with taste.
12. This utilization of the arts—fashion, literature, fine and visual arts—as a means for the oppressed to reclaim social standing from the oppressive majority is a recurrent leitmotif in American history. See: the universal perverse fascination at the disgust of Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce or Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). See: the popularity of rap music during Reagan’s ‘War on Drugs’ and ‘Tough on Crime’ initiatives.

13. *[Camp means] you have to be able to see the absurdity of life from outside of yourself. [...] Then you can laugh at the absurdity.* –RuPaul.
14. So what say this of Camp at the Met Gala? In a plain-vanilla Marxian sense, the co-opting of the Camp style by the most visceral extreme of the monied and be-famed was akin to the bourgeois alienation of the product from the proletariat. Camp was created & popularized by the Black and queer subcultures, yet they were not the ones getting recognition for the Camp style [both on the Gala runway and in the Met exhibition], rather it was wealthy white men and women.
15. While Black and queer people were present in the hallowed halls of the Met on this first Monday in May of 2019, having representatives is not sufficient to claim diversification. This is tokenism.
16. In more modern vernacular, the theme of Camp is a form of cultural appropriation. It is an exploitation of those who created their culture (i.e. the worker) by co-opting their style (i.e. the “product” of Camp) without due recognition.
17. When Camp enters into the mainstream in such a fashion, as in the Met Gala, it dislocates the aesthetic style from the power it wields. Those marginalized, who championed Camp, can no longer use its bombastic self-parody, or its ‘view from the outside’ (of social stigma), as a means of restoring their autonomy in society.
18. After the Met, Camp was irreparably altered. Camp, once a manifestation of power and protest, is now merely decorative accoutrements.
19. It seems fitting that exploitation would be a theme in fashion, an industry that thrives off the abusive utilization of Black and brown bodies in non-Western countries to create the pieces they sell for hundreds or thousands times more than one of their worker’s hourly wage [the minimum wage in Myanmar, to name one, is \$3.60/hour].<sup>5</sup> The fashion industry could not help but let the moral tar of their oppression seep out from under the carefully crafted coats of invisibility they place over their supply chain and into the very aesthetics of the garments that they put on the runway.
20. Beauty is pain, but only if the pain is outsourced.
21. Simply showcasing Camp in the *space* of the Met is enough to wrest the power of Camp as a means to undermine oppression away from those who are oppressed.
22. *I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.* –Glenn Ligon.<sup>4</sup>
23. To place Camp in a museum, especially one that garners a religious respect in the Western world, is to render it dead. Camp, in this regard, is not an anomalous outlier: any object that enters a museum is dead.
24. The art object hanging in a museum is enshrined as ‘significant,’ yet simultaneously also as ‘history.’ Entering a museum makes an entity ‘classic,’ yet this is also at the expense of ‘cool.’
25. ‘Cool,’ and all of the term’s variants [rad, groovy, hip, funky] are vacuous. Cool means nothing and is instead populated by what is à la mode.

26. What can be defined, however, is the antithesis of cool. The antithesis of cool is what we call today ‘the mainstream.’ Cool requires novelty, implicit political critique, and reactions of disgust from those who do not understand. (Though these criteria are necessary and insufficient burdens.)
27. Social progress occurs from the universal overcoming of disgust. ‘Contemporary’ and ‘successful’ Art is the vanguard that introduces palatable disgust to the populace in order to prime systemic change.
28. By placing it within the context of the Met, Camp has been canonized. It is classic, rather than cool. Camp as politics, Camp as power, Camp as disgust, is dead.
29. The enemy of the subculture is erasure without political recognition.
30. The enemy of the subculture is culture.
31. The Met Gala is thus a send-off to a bygone trend. It has rigorous code of dress [wearing all black] that separates in-group [those who mourn the loss] from out-group [those who witness]. Only a select few [mourners], who are deemed to have ‘really known’ fashion, are invited. In these ways, the Met Gala is indistinguishable from a funeral.
32. The dress code for the Gala is never merely to dress according to theme. One is not expected to simply dress ‘Camp’ in its literal sense, but rather one must take the theme and exaggerate it to its extreme. Attendees were instructed to ‘Campify’ [parody through excess] Camp itself.
33. This was the Gala’s greatest success: the camping of Camp both aesthetically and politically.
34. The theme of Camp at the Met Gala has been controversial and scrutinized—not because the clothing worn was not Camp, but rather because it *was* an expression of Camp, in all its ecstasy. The Met Gala wrested Camp as a tool of revolution from the hands of oppressed and used the style to bolster their own superior status. And it all happened in such a public fashion.
35. The Met Gala was an unintentional exposure, a peeling back of the curtain to reveal the gears within. One goes to the Met to learn something of fashion, and we have. Only it was not the intoxicating appreciation of craft and opulence that they wanted to peddle. Instead, it was something closer to the Truth behind the artifice, the thread of exploitation that binds the fabric we drape across our backs day-after-day—we have Camp to thank for that.

1 Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1961) 275.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 41.

3 The Late Show with Steven Colbert, “RuPaul Charles: Who was ‘Pure Camp’ at the Met Gala?,” video, 2:04.

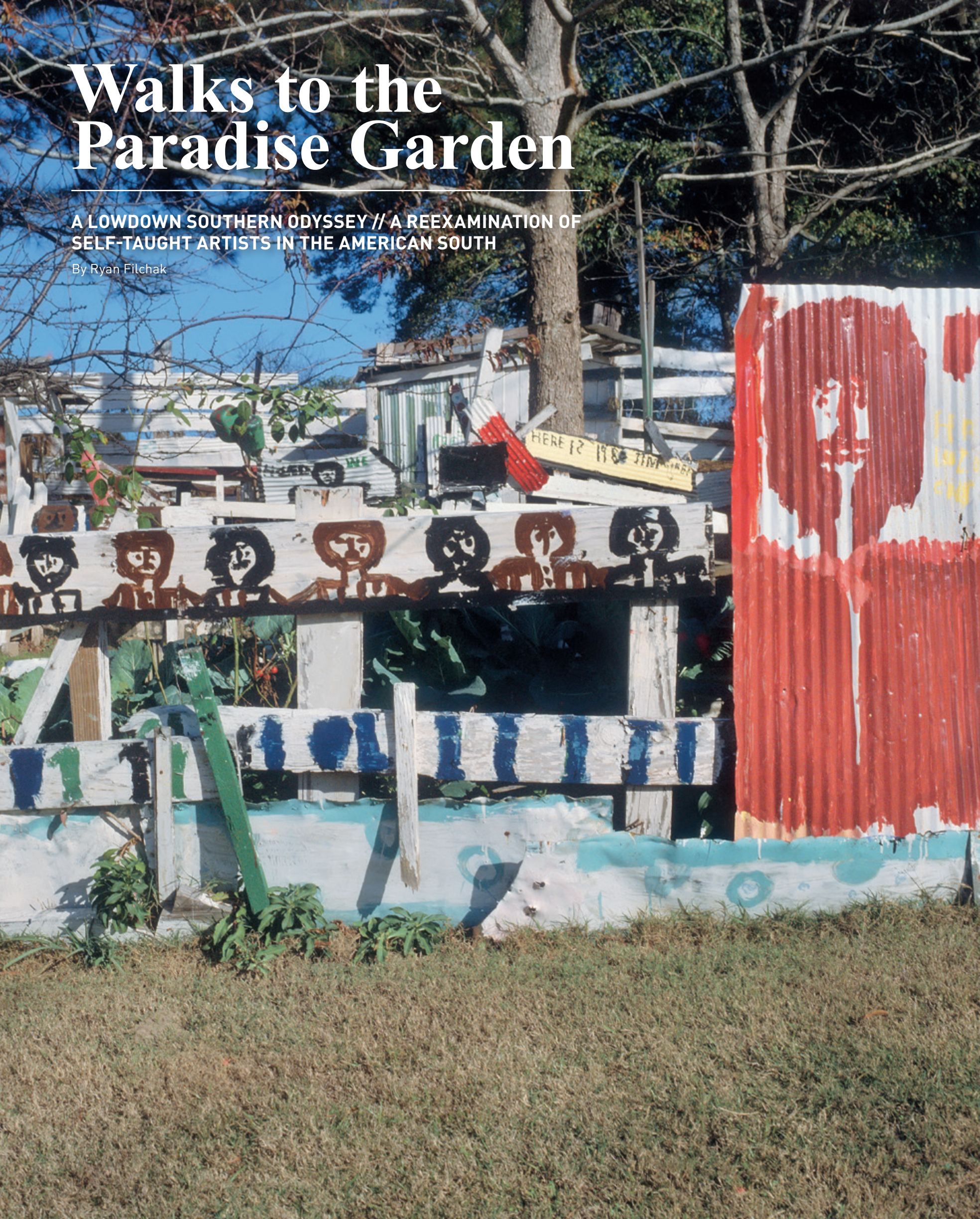
4 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND)*, 1990, Whitney Museum of Art.

5 Nyan Ling Aung, “Government Makes it Official, Basic Wage is K4800,” Myanmar Times, May 15 2018.

# Walks to the Paradise Garden

A LOWDOWN SOUTHERN ODYSSEY // A REEXAMINATION OF SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

By Ryan Filchak



In 1992, Jonathan Williams wrote the Editor’s Note of his proposed book *Walks to the Paradise Garden*, writing, “We’re talking about a South that is both celestial and chthonian.”<sup>1</sup> Williams—an American poet, founder of the Jargon Society, and Black Mountain College member—wrote this statement to preface his uniquely personal documentation of over eighty artists and eccentrics from the American South. Names on this list include Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Howard Finster, Martha Nelson, Sister Gertrude Morgan, and Little Enis, among others. Through poems, photographs, and prose, Williams’ travelogues described and showcased the talents of a region not dissimilar from the one we know today—a place and identity built on contradiction and societal complexities; hospitable and unwelcoming, sacred and profane. \_\_\_\_\_

Williams originally intended for his manuscript, along with the corresponding photographs taken by his most frequent road warriors Roger Manley and Guy Mendes, to be published at the time he wrote the aforementioned note. Though, due to a lack of interest, these attempts at publishing proved unsuccessful for Williams. Twenty years later, Mendes suggested to Institute 193 founder Phillip March Jones that they publish *Walks to the Paradise*

*Garden*, or as he had suggested they call it, *Way Out People Way Out There*. With the help of Manley and Mendes, Jones took on the task of organizing a single cohesive volume encapsulating Williams’ now posthumous project. In 2019, *Walks to the Paradise Garden* was published on the occasion of a corresponding exhibition at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta titled *Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads*. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_Named after Howard Finster’s *Paradise Garden* in Pennville, Georgia, this atypical book of art history reads like a road map of the South (Florida excluded),<sup>2</sup> and given the delayed publishing date, as editor Jones writes, thus operates as an account “both ahead of and firmly grounded in its time.”<sup>3</sup> Williams’ jaunty and loose voice makes no apologies for his approach to the artists he champions, and Mendes’ and Manley’s photographs capture an aesthetic of a region that is often misunderstood. “It’s a collection of outlandish findings by three Southern Persons, all white and all male. This is something we don’t really fret about, and hope you won’t either. May we please both okra-eaters and non-okra eaters alike!”<sup>4</sup> writes Williams. Often working within the confines of poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural invalidation, Williams’ enthusiasm and commitment to

profile these artists humanizes their efforts, where others faltered to acknowledge the undeniable richness of creativity residing below the Mason Dixon. Manley describes Williams as, “like having Churchill visit you, he was equally comfortable talking to royalty as he was a gravedigger.”<sup>5</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_Despite the lack of academicism in Williams’ prose, *Walks to the Paradise Garden* serves as an intellectual bridge between two museum exhibitions that both feature artists profiled in the book; the seminal *Black Folk Art in America* (1982) curated by Jane Livingston and Jane Beardsley at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C., and the de Young Museum in San Francisco’s *Revelations: Art from the African American South* (2017). While *Black Folk Art in America* represented a moment for artists like Mose Tolliver and Sister Gertrude Morgan to have received recognition as artists in any capacity, *Revelations* functioned as a ground for further examination into the lives of living artists such as Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial.

\_\_\_\_\_Each of these exhibitions possessed the curatorial mission to exhibit Black artists from the South—a parameter Williams had not placed on his own research—yet, all three projects highlight the presence of spirituality

common amongst the work. In the exhibition catalog for *Black Folk Art in America*, curator Jane Livingston writes, “Virtually every artist in this exhibition claims to have been commanded by an inner voice or by God to make art. On the face of it, we discover a nearly unanimous testament to personal revelation.”<sup>6</sup> Between Eddie Owens Martins, known as St. EOM of Pasquan, and Howard Finster, Williams profiles two additional examples of artists who prioritize the influence of religion in their practice, each in support of Livingston’s claim in their own right. Finster, a fire and brimstone Baptist from northwest Georgia, follows the voice of the Old Testament to construct the works he displays in *Paradise Garden*, and the other, St. EOM, follows the beliefs of a self-made denomination, and from this practice built his own artist site, the “Land of Pasquan.” Whether drawing on the imagery of Christianity, or the Post-New Age movement of Pasoquanynism, these two artists represent two sides of the same coin—where site and spirituality homogenize a Southern art vernacular. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_Beyond conceptual themes, the exhibition entitled *Revelations* represented how current institutions have begun to expand their collections of self-taught artists. From an objective standpoint, *Revelations*



**“Often working within the confines of poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural invalidation, Williams’ enthusiasm and commitment to profile these artists humanizes their efforts, where others faltered to acknowledge the undeniable richness of creativity residing below the Mason Dixon.”**





represents the acquisition of sixty-two artworks from the William S. Arnett Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Acts of institutional inclusion like this—such as the recent acquisition of fifty-seven works by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, also from the Souls Grown Deep foundation—has caused an increase in market value for self-taught artists on the secondary market. Adding to a litany of dualities, *Walks to the Paradise Garden* delves into only two examples of such financial matters that forecast today’s financial climate: one, a promising reflection on Arnett’s patronage of Southern artists, and the other a cautionary tale of exploitation and copyright infringement. —

“[William S. Arnett] has firm arrangements with some twelve artists. In exchange to the right of first refusal of what they make, he pays them each \$1,000 a month,” writes Williams “It sounds sensible and fair to me.”<sup>7</sup> By this account, Arnett’s methods look progressive in comparison to current models of commercial gallery representation. Contrary to Arnett’s methods, the tale of how Cabbage Patch Doll inventor Martha Nelson had her ideas copyrighted by a man who sold her original baby doll designs named Xavier Roberts, resulting in a five-year long lawsuit, stands as proof of exploitation occurring at this same time for these Southern artists. —

In addition to commercial value, *Revelations* addresses the current effort to reexamine the language surrounding the field of Southern self-taught artists, claiming the adjectives of “outsider,” “folk,” or “naïve” reductive and inadequate. Williams’ own use of language further humanizes artists previously unmentioned in such a context. “Figures with a touch of Miró and Dubuffet play guitars; wagons and horses move,”<sup>8</sup> he writes of the wind machines made by Vollis Simpson in North Carolina. Continued efforts by collections like the High Museum, publications like *Raw Vision Magazine*, and non-profit spaces like Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art in Chicago, have all admirably exhibited work from the American South for decades now, contributing to the discussion of potential classification. Furthermore, the willingness of institutions like the de Young Museum to contextualize the origins of this visionary work in terms of both American and global art history in a museum setting, further validates Williams grand gestures of inclusion. —

In discussing the subject of this paradigm shift, Editor Jones notes, “I think the increased art world attention around the work and lives of *self-taught artists* represents an acknowledgment that creativity, ambition, and even



genius, can reside with individuals who are not formally integrated into the financial and educational systems of the world. I have always been perplexed by the barriers to entry but am glad to see them being somewhat relaxed.” —

*Walks to the Paradise Garden*, now in its second printing, stands tall as testament to the diversity and importance of artistic achievements made by men and women of color, and as well as by artists working with mental and physical disabilities. Their shared lack of resources, regional disparities, and societal marginalization are not positioned as a hindrance to their creative output, but instead point to the systematic failings of an art economy that accounts for such delayed recognition. Williams’ manuscript, now exhumed, provides a welcome catalyst for the reexamination of the discourse surrounding self-taught artists, both in relation to the major museum efforts for inclusion and the shifting language used to place this work within a larger canon of art history. —

***Way Out There: The Art of the Southern Backroad* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta ran from March 2–May 19, 2019.**

***Revelations: Art from the African American South* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco ran from June 3, 2017– April 1, 2018.**

***Walks to the Paradise Garden*, by Jonathan Williams, Roger Manley, and Guy Mendes, was published by Institute 193 in 2019.**



- 1 Williams, Jonathan, et al. *Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey*. Institute 193, 2019.
  - 2 As Williams writes, “The state of Florida is downright ignored, totally. Ever since Frederick Delius left Piccolata, Florida in 1886, the place has given me the willies and I’ve refused to travel amongst the Loto-phagoi, Midianites, Republicans and Ophidians, even though Roger Manley knew of five revelations that would have graced our book.” *Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey*, 20.
  - 3 Ibid, 15.
  - 4 Ibid, 20.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 Livingston, Jane, and John Beardsley. *Black Folk Art in America: 1930–1980*. Univ. of Mississippi, 1983.
  - 7 Williams, Jonathan, et al. *Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey*.
  - 8 Ibid.
- TITLE IMAGE:**  
Guy Mendes, Mary T. Smith’s Yard, *Hazelhurst*, MS, 1986. Image courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.
- 
- PAGE 71:**  
Lonnie Holley Lonnie Holley, *Memorial at Friendship Church*, 2006. Metal, found debris, plastic flowers and ribbon. 38 x 31 x 27 inches. Image courtesy of James Fuentes.
- 
- PAGE 72:**  
Guy Mendes, *Sister Gertrude Morgan in her Everlasting Gospel Revelation Mission*, New Orleans, LA, 1974. Image courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.
- 
- PAGE 73:**  
Roger Manley, *Lonnie Holley*, Birmingham, AL, 1987. Image courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.
- 
- OPPOSITE, LEFT:**  
Roger Manley, *Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden* Summerville, GA, 1987–88. Image courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.
- 
- OPPOSITE, RIGHT:**  
High Museum Installation View Installation view, *Way Out There: The Art of the Southern Backroads*. Image courtesy of the High Museum of Art. Photo: Mike Jensen.
- 
- ABOVE:**  
Roger Manley, Vollis Simpson Whirligigs, Lucama, NC, 1988. Image courtesy of the artist and Institute 193.

# Slow Cinema

## TAKING OUR TIME // FOR AN OVERTHROW OF HOROLOGY

By Minh Nguyen



Abbas Kiarostami’s film *Seagull Eggs* (2014) begins where it ends, with a close-up of water crashing into a sea embankment. Three eggs wobble on a rock as waves lash them in a loose rhythm. That’s all that happens. I viewed this bare piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago for an event honoring Kiarostami’s work. As a packed audience, we faced the film’s unwavering repetition—the surges of water blending into an undulating pattern, the gull-calls and ocean roar sprawling into a sonorous drone. As it pressed on, my focus grew restless, spiraling outward. I peered at others shifting in their seats and sensed a faint, shared agony. *When will it end and release us from its grip?* I saw us mirrored in the shaking eggs. There we were, battling for grounding, for stillness and peace, against distraction and other present-day forms of being swept-away.

—How to think about the slow film as a cultural product born from this frenzied, escalated world? As contemporary life becomes increasingly stripped of pause, this genre’s popularity suggests eagerness to design speed bumps for time’s passage. ‘Slow cinema’ is generally defined as “nothing is happening,” when there is little editing, dialogue, or action. Imagine a snail-paced pan shot across a barren wheat field landscape. Or a close-up of a character’s expressionless face, where only flutters of flyaway hairs confirm that the image is, in fact, moving. Though on-screen inaction has existed as long as cinema itself, this latest iteration of the genre, according to critics, came of age at the turn of the millennium. Jonathan Romney, credited for popularizing the term in a 2010 article for *Sight and Sound*, describes ‘slow cinema’ as “a cinema that downplays event in favor of mood.”<sup>1</sup> The canon is as porous as the definition of ‘slow’, but of this recent wave of practitioners there is likely mention of Pedro

Costa, Chantal Ackerman, Jia Zhang-ke, or Apichatpong Weerasethakul. As a form of endurance sport, slow cinema may be best represented by Béla Tarr’s *The Turin Horse* (2011), an outrageously austere 146 minutes of a farmer attempting to feed his horse during a windstorm, filmed in black-and-white and only thirty long takes.

—This wave seemed a direct retort to mainstream cinema’s fast-and-furious industry complex, a defense against the endangerment of what Susan Sontag, in her 1998 essay “The Decay of Cinema,” deemed the “vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative—of the darkened theatre.”<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the centennial of the filmic medium, Sontag lamented that what used to be sensorially transportive had become assaultive, the craft reduced to “the unprincipled manipulation of images to make them more attention-grabbing.”<sup>3</sup>

—A defense of vanished erotic cinematic rituals, yes, but for others, slow cinema’s lack of action amounts to a torturous sadism that yields no fruit. Its dominance in the film-festival-circuit over the past decades has transformed it into a homogenized trope, spurring fatigue and resentment. A popularly cited ‘breaking point’ in the discourse is critic Nick James’ exacerbated review of Semih Kaplanoglu’s 2011 film *Honey*. He raises concern that these films are just ways pretentious people torture themselves for cultural credibility:

“Admit you’re bored and you’re a philistine.”<sup>4</sup> He questions the genre’s payoff: “[These movies] demand great swathes of our precious time to achieve quite fleeting and slender aesthetic and political effects.”<sup>5</sup>

—In James’ point, a ring of truth. Time does feel precious in the sense that to “waste” it means spilling one’s incalculable, yet finite, reserve. His comment locates the particular relationship between the ‘precious time’ of our lives and the ‘dead time’ of slow cinema (translated from the French *temp morts*, meaning minimalist long takes). Is the former the sunken cost of the latter? *Dead time*: sinister sounding, not only for its characterization of life’s end, but for its evocation of a sink hole through which time is irretrievably vanishes. Since in capitalism, time is a labor relation, the idea of *dead time* strikes fear into our hearts as potential that burns away, to nothing. The calculation is internalized: *if I exchange my time for (insert any possible activity), what will be the nature of my returns?*

—Since its beginning, cinema has always been viewed dialectically, as both a product of capitalist time and a tool for its rebellion. As Moira Weigel expands in “Slow Wars” for *n+1*, the medium came of age under the Fordist arrangement of leisure and labor. Filmgoing—traveling to the theatre to succumb to the larger-than-life screen with others—became inscribed as a sociality that

complemented existing time-folds: the film’s roughly two-hour-run easily slotted between after work and before bed.<sup>6</sup> Yet film has always carried a radical promise of digging its fingers into time, kneading and pulling apart its sticky mass. Henri Bergson noted its potential to antagonize modern society by militarizing against what he called *spatial time*, which parceled time into discrete units of experience, represented by the form of the clock.<sup>7</sup>

—Fordist time parcels still persist—as the ‘work shift,’ the ‘weekend,’ or the ‘lunch break’—but since this period of cinema, these measures have overgone the dissolution that neatly separates leisure and labor. The expansions of digital labor, per-task contractual work, and information as an economic product, have all smudged the line. Vanished too is *filmgoing* as an intentional experience. Today’s film viewing is more casual and decentralized, on screens of varying sizes at home and in semi-public spaces. Museums are a part of this, reflecting a larger shift in contemporary art. According to Claire Bishop, in their article “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone,” this phenomenon is transformed from *event time* into *exhibition time*.<sup>8</sup> Whereas *event time* entailed a set of temporal and behavioral conventions (arriving at a venue for a seat and watching from beginning to end), *exhibition time*’s conventions are much more diffuse. A film plays on loop in a museum, and the viewer joins whenever—unsynchronized

“What is the relationship between the ‘precious time’ of our lives and the temp morts, or ‘dead time’ of slow cinema? Is the former the sunken cost of the latter?”

“Perhaps this is part of why the popularity of slow cinema is so vexing, because it is unclear (always so unclear), whether visual experience is pressing or passing, significant or trivial. An event in itself, or fleeting stimuli.”



with others, and the film itself. If a viewer brings their personal device, they can tend to both screens simultaneously. Perhaps this is part of why the popularity of slow cinema is so vexing, because it is unclear (always so unclear), whether visual experience is pressing or passing, significant or trivial. An event in itself, or fleeting stimuli.

In *Chronophobia*, Pamela Lee examines new media art as stern commentary “on the accelerated pace of life as naturalized.”<sup>9</sup> One piece she referenced was Michael Snow’s *La Region Centrale* (1971), a three-hour recording of a Canadian landscape established by a camera setup rotating around itself. Lee writes that such experiences of slowness can enable the viewer to parse their present with a distance, “[restoring] to the

everyday some degree of agency, perhaps some degree of resistance.”<sup>10</sup> In considering the stakes of looking at something that is slow, for attentional resistance to disentangle time from labor relation, I think about how the urban environment renders visual experience as information. Ever-advancing systems of mass communication (news media, advertisements, the Internet), continually change our perceptual ability, the way we register what is around us, mine it for digestible capsules. In this regard, can a slow film be a small act of ‘anti-information’, a method of transgressing accelerated life by remaining still?

Slow cinema presents a paradoxical issue, a cultural product that provides a salve for afflictions that its industry exacerbates. Yet, its enduring popularity reveals a vested interest in art that provides a locus of temporal and visual deceleration. The genre is often delegated into the elitist corners of academia, but its glimmering possibility—to defy not only the standardization of time but against perception as “information”—is relevant to us all. Attention, Bishop writes in “Gray Zone,” can be simultaneously experienced with “trance, reverie, daydream, hypnosis, meditation, and dissociation.”<sup>11</sup> These internal states, once regarded as essential to a rich inner life, are in today’s calculations devalued as nonproductive. They are under-practiced, and even when practiced, are co-opted to serve the logic of productivity. Rest becomes a way to recharge the battery of activity, daydreaming a way to harness the entrepreneurial spirit. But slow cinema’s potential is not art that provides another form of horology (the study of the measurements of time), but as its overthrow. As practice of chucking one’s inner watch, set to the outer watch, into the ocean.

1 Jonathan Romney, “In Search of Lost Time,” *Sight and Sound* 20.2, 2010, 43-44.  
2 Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 1996.  
3 Ibid.  
4 Nick James, “Passive Aggressive,” *Sight and Sound* 20.4, 2010, 5.  
5 Ibid.  
6 Moira Weigel, “Slow Wars”, *n+1*, Issue 25: Slow Burn, Spring 2016.  
7 Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004.)  
8 Claire Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 62, Number 2, Summer 2018, 22 – 42.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid.  
11 Ibid.

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Béla Tarr, Still from *Turin Horse*, 2011. Courtesy of Cinema Guild.

**CURRENT SPREAD:**  
Apichatpong Weerathasekul, Still from *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Kick the Machine.

# In Sickness and In Health

ANNE BOYER: THE UNDYING // READING THE WORK OF GREGG BORDOWITZ AND BARBARA HAMMER

By Gabrielle Welsh



In her recently published book, *The Undying*, Anne Boyer writes, “Only certain kinds of sick people make it into art.”<sup>1</sup> The book—a poetic meditation, if one could define it by any means—stems from the poet’s own diagnosis of a particularly aggressive form of breast cancer, and the results of such illness. She writes on the varied (and loaded) reactions of friends and acquaintances, the necessary navigation of the capitalist death-machine that is big pharma, the responsibilities (motherhood, waged labor, friendships, and care) that do not stop when one is ill.

Perhaps the absence of ‘sick people’ Boyer infers are those of figures in canonized ‘art history.’ As Boyer describes looking at a painting at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, an institution near the art school campus she teaches at (Kansas City Art Institute), and the museum I was first introduced to ‘fine’ art at (Boyer and I are both from suburbs of the sprawling Kansas City). In looking at the Romantic painting of a clown in a sick bed, *The Illness of Pierrot* (1859), Boyer notes, “I’ve never seen a painting of an incarcerated woman sick from breast cancer hanging on the wall of the Louvre. I’ve never seen one of a sick person in a car in a rural emergency room parking lot on the walls of the Met, or a sculpture of a homeless encampment tent at the Vatican, or an installation of a suicide-inducing Foxconn factory at the Uffizi.”<sup>2</sup>

And yes, images of sick people are largely absent from the so-called canon of contemporary art, for better or worse.<sup>3</sup> Oftentimes, illness is treated a metaphor rather than a lived existence, or as a profitable enterprise—the *Fault in Our Stars* brand of life-meets-death-but-luckily-not-for-you films and books (and not to mention, the protagonists are white, straight, adjusted). As Boyer notes, the majority of these stories are told from the perspective of a healthy person—the mother, the sister, the survivors. I am not so much interested in using illness as a metaphor, especially within the realm of my own writing.

But there is something to be said of the way Boyer situates cancer as not only something affecting her body and lived existence, but as a navigation of the bureaucracies of medical industries, the gendered nature of care and hospitality labor, the loss of language and physicality (through chemotherapy’s effects), and the isolation of simultaneously being a patient—dependent upon doctors and medical care—and a numerical piece of data floating in the lands of


medical servers. There is illness, and then there is a confrontation with one’s mortality coming sooner than expected: *the dying*. This is a piece about pain.

I type cautiously, aware of my positioning *as* the reasonably (and visibly) healthy relative, the writer of moments not my own. I am worried that I am stealing words; that I am being

unfair. I am writing on contemporary literature and art when contemporary art (and perhaps lesser so, literature) is a monster—a monster of inequity and exhaustion that I exist within, alongside artists and authors writing of their ills.

When I think of Boyer’s analysis of art, I think of its missing bodies. I think of the portrait of St. Agatha at the Art Institute of Chicago, the patron



A bouquet of several pink roses with green leaves is arranged in a clear glass vase. The roses are in various stages of bloom, with some showing more open petals than others. The background is a solid, deep blue color. The text "THRIVING WITH AIDS" is overlaid on the right side of the image in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**THRIVING  
WITH  
AIDS**



“We are supposed to, as the titles of the guidebooks instruct, be feisty, sexy, snarky women, or girls, or ladies, or whatever. Also, as the T-shirts for sale on Amazon suggest, we are always supposed to be able to tell cancer that 'you messed with the wrong bitch.' In my case, however, cancer messed with the right bitch.”

—Anne Boyer

saint of breast cancer offering her severed breasts on a plate. I think of Barbara Hammer. I think of authors like Kathy Acker and Audre Lorde and Yvonne Rainer, and the other lesbians who at one point had breast cancer, and at one point were compared to warriors battling an abstraction of bodily self-destruction.<sup>4</sup> I think of Gregg Bordowitz and ACT UP’s DIVA TV, and films filled with mourning, anger, and loss avalanching from the AIDS Crisis (still ongoing). I think of the artists lost, and the artists who were then championed as survivors. In *The New Yorker*, Boyer writes, “We are supposed to be, as the titles of guidebooks instruct, feisty, sexy, snarky women, or girls, or ladies, or whatever. Also, as the T-shirts for sale on Amazon suggest, we are always supposed to be able to tell cancer that ‘you messed with the wrong bitch!’ In my case, however, cancer messed with the right bitch.”<sup>5</sup> Across these referents, what I find most

interesting are how artistic confrontations with one’s own body and mortality are blunt: not metaphorical abstractions of, or for, the benefit of those in healthy, seemingly abled-bodies.

Let’s start with Hammer, the iconic filmmaker known for experimental films of representations of lesbianism in the 1970s. First introduced to me in an Introduction to Queer Film History course, films such as *Superdyke* (1975) and *Sync Touch* (1981) established her work as focused on visually relaying touch sensations all the while creating new, imaginative worlds and scenarios. But later in her life (she died March of this year at 80), her work moved towards confrontations with her own body, dying, and illness, as she lived with terminal ovarian cancer for thirteen years. In a performative lecture held at the Whitney in 2018, *The Art of Dying (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety)*, Hammer advocates for death as

“one of the most potent subjects we can address,” with this lecture arising from her own fight with state bodies towards a dignified death—or her right to die when she pleases.<sup>6</sup> She continues, “I am angry, not about my impending death—though there have been times when I have been angry about that, of course—but that the government has determined that I must linger through probable unconsciousness, pain, or in a deep drugged state, preventing me from being aware.”<sup>7</sup>

—Her later films confront similar themes to Boyer’s—that of discomfort with a larger societal notion of the dying patient, as she recalls (likely good-intentioned) comments telling her she would get better; that she was much stronger than this illness. Instead of playing into this exhausted narrative, in 2008 she made the film, *A Horse is Not a Metaphor*, outlining *what* actually happens to the body during chemotherapy treatment, as she had never seen a filmed account of such. *A Horse* splices clips of hair follicles falling out and wrinkled, scarred, and much older bodies than those starring in Hammer’s iconic lighthearted lesbian flicks navigating hospital rooms, swimming, riding horses. There are lighthearted moments of Hammer sitting with a horse—they touch toes to hooves and hold each other in the tender but clunky way a human holds a creature much larger and more cumbersome than itself. The words, “A HORSE IS NOT A METAPHOR” flash on the screen every few minutes, with spliced scenes of Hammer’s chemotherapy IVs dripping poisons. The film, though prefacing, speaks to her last work, *Evidentiary Bodies* (2018), a three-channel installation of collaged footage sourced from previous works. The film is a meditation on her life and her dying, an exit.

—Before she was diagnosed with any terminal illness exhausted of modern treatment options, she was like me—familiar with death, but in terms of relatives and loved ones confronting their own mortality, and confronting them with empathy (and perhaps, as I fear I do here, co-option). Her film, *Vital Signs* (1991), inspired by the untimely death of her father and the suffering many of her friends due to the outbreak of the AIDS virus (and the refusal of the United States government do to anything about it), opens with Hammer slow dancing with a (presumably) plastic skeleton. The short nine-minute film unfolds with footage of hospitals and patients, loved ones kissing the heads of those bed-ridden, patients wheeled through halls, and

newspapers underlined with passages like, “The moment that sickness [is] turned into a spectacle.” I would like to think we are working against the spectacle of the sick, advocating instead for the liberation of the sick and dying. —I think of a Gregg Bordowitz film, also screened in this same Queer Film History class where I meet Hammer and Vaginal Davis and Kenneth Anger and Dynasty Handbag. In his film, *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) (that never fails to make me cry), Bordowitz takes the viewer on a journey of his AIDS diagnosis and activism(s) resulting from such. We follow him through an authentic conversation with his mother and stepfather, discussing when he first came out, and weeks later told them of his HIV+ status. Though documentary in aspects, including footage of ACT UP rallies and protests in New York City, the film also includes crucial moments of fictitious characters Bordowitz and few other characters take on, all swimming through the complexities of an illness so politicized (and quite similar to the way cancer, specifically breast cancer, is so heavily capitalized upon in such a gendered manner). He plays Alter Allesman, a panelist on a fictionalized TV segment, “Living with AIDS.” Allesman is bitter at the host, a nondescript, over-enthusiastic talk-show-type that asks how he continues to thrive with AIDS, playing into the positive clichés both Boyer and Hammer find so profoundly irritating (e.g., *you’re stronger than this!*). Ending the segment, Allesman gestures the camera closer, saying, “Fuck you, fuck you! I don’t want to be yours or anyone else’s fucking model. I’m not a hero, I’m not a revolutionary body, I’m not an angel. I’m just trying to reconcile the fact that I’m going to die with the daily monotony of my life.”

—Perhaps Bordowitz-turned-Allesman’s anger is indicative of the connecting threads throughout these three artists’ works. All three are confronted with mortality earlier than expected, and in turn, possess a glaring lack of previous conversation or mentorship on what to do when one is put in such a situation. Are these situations not akin to Boyer’s confrontation of the American healthcare system, having to work through aggressive chemotherapy? Bordowitz’s illness is politicized and villainized into a being much larger than himself; Hammer’s desire to die, while the state denies such a right (and of course continues to kill those not white all the same). Much like Boyer, in that he is a writer himself, Bordowitz brings *Fast Trip* to a head with archival footage spliced with him speaking, meditating on his positioning as a sick person:

*People have been dying and suffering of all kinds of things for some time. I guess I’m just a part of history. Until now, youth and ignorance have afforded me a kind of arrogance. I thought I was unique, my suffering was different, my misery was a new kind of misery. What’s new about it is the way we speak about it, the meaning we make about it. What’s not so new is the misery.*<sup>8</sup>

This film, in its vulnerability and intimacy, mashes varied emotions and ways of reacting to the diagnosis of a terminal illness. It is angry, loaded, and felt. —I sit in the odd conundrum of being bored and burnout by contemporary art, yet also being deeply touched by these films. I wonder how all of this sits within museum and institutional settings—these self-meditations on illness. Recently, as with Bordowitz’s massive exhibition that just closed at the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Wexner-funded exhibition of the last works of Hammer’s life, the museum/gallery presents an odd sensory experience of works that derive from illness. The museum focuses on the positive

and happy, despite how negative and unhappy the world-at-large seems to be. Artist Martha Rosler writes of this in her essay, “Why Are People Being So Nice?” published in *e—flux*, when she says, “In the experience economy, a primary mission of museums has become the promise not of cultivation and contemplation, but rather edification and amazement...like public relations happytalk, museums and galleries are publicly thrilled, excited, and delighted.”<sup>9</sup> This is all, of course, a selling point. Underpaid and overly stressful labor and relations in the arts are disguised as formality and politeness, necessities to please the art patrons.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps these angry, mournful meditations on the sick, like Bordowitz’s and Hammer’s works, break this wall. Or maybe they are sucked back into the vacuum, I have no answer. —Near the end of her book, Boyer confesses she is *undying*, meaning the chemotherapy worked (and by worked, it bore serious risks that will follow her throughout her life, but her cancer has stopped growing). She writes in this state, reflecting upon her continual pain and exhaustion, both from the surgeries and therapies, and the medical bills and unpaid time off. She writes,

*It can hurt that we enter and exit, are entered and left, that we are born into another sentient other’s hands and into the environment more sentient others built around us, born into the rest in the world, all capable of pain, too, which will make us hurt even more. A reminder of our un-oneness is at least one counterpurpose of literature. This is why I tried to write down pain’s leaky democracies, the shared vistas of the terribly felt.*<sup>11</sup>

I would like to think that this why artists such as Bordowitz and Hammer continue to make: to fill in the gaps within the sprawling landscape of shared pain. Or rather, their attempts to expose it.

- 1 Boyer, Anne. *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer,...and Care*. FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 2019. [105]
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 This is a question of which is worse: representation within a corrupted system, or none at all?
- 4 Throughout the book, Boyer engages with those before her that wrote of illness and art, illness and femininity, illness and dying, such as Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf, Kathy Acker, and Audre Lorde, among others.
- 5 Boyer, Anne. *The Undying*. [78]
- 6 “The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety),” The Whitney Museum of American Art, October 18, 2018.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Bordowitz, Gregg. *Fast Trip, Long Drop* [1993]. Collection of the Video Data Bank.
- 9 Rosler, Martha. “Why Are People Being So Nice?” *e—flux*, Journal #77. November 2016.
- 10 Rosler notes too, that the majority of underpaid labor in the artworld is done by women. Boyer notes the same of the hospitals and outpatient centers she navigates.
- 11 Boyer, Anne. *The Undying*. [29]

**TITLE IMAGE:**  
Barbara Hammer, Still from *Evidentiary Bodies* [detail], 2018. Three-channel HD video installation [color, sound]. Dimensions variable; running time: 9 minutes and 30 seconds. Courtesy of The Barbara Hammer Estate, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, and COMPANY, New York © The Barbara Hammer Estate

**PAGE 81:**  
Raphael Vergos, *Saint Agatha*, 1492–1505. Oil and gold on panel, 69.25 x 36.75 in. Gift of James Deering Danielson to the Art Institute of Chicago.

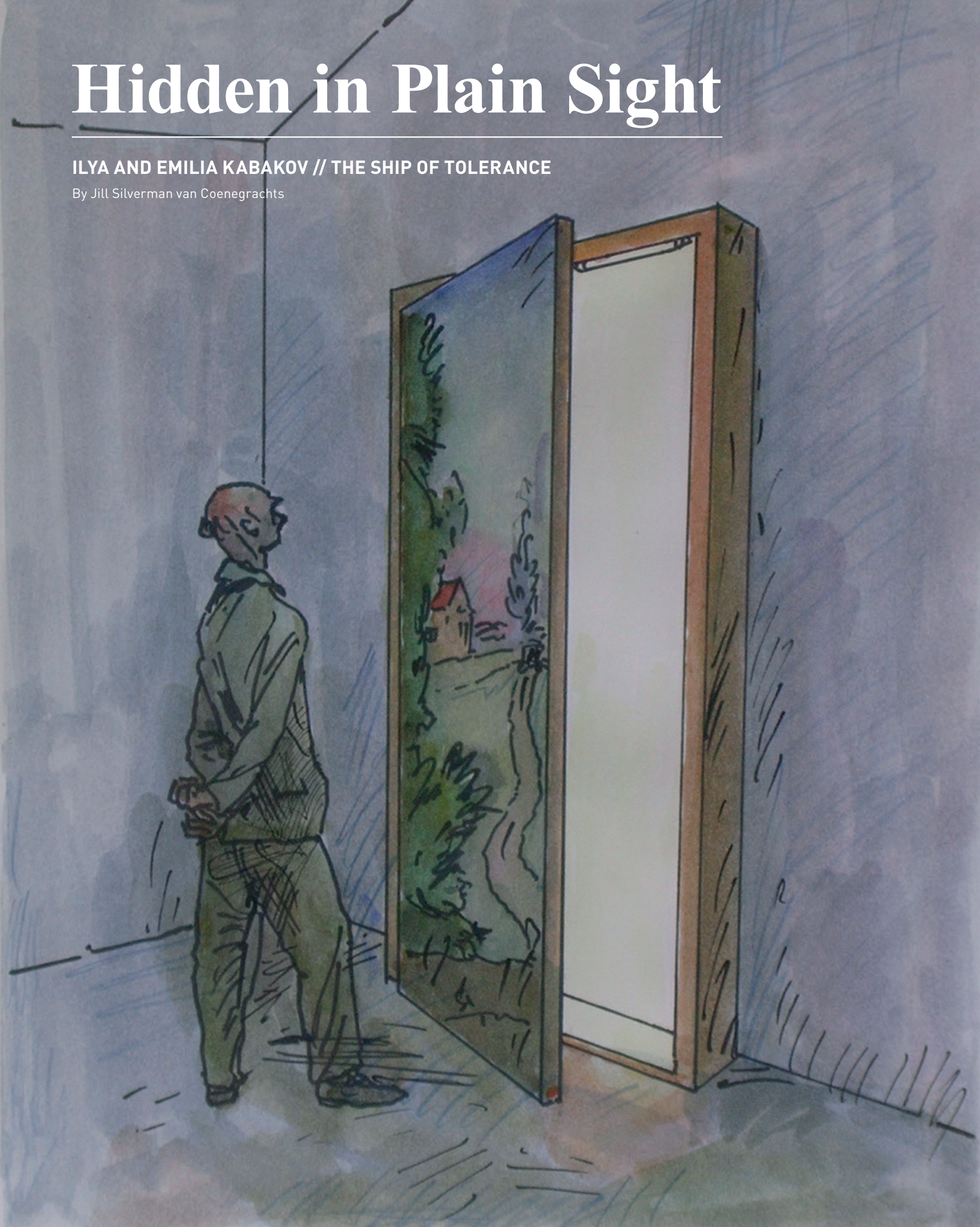
**OPPOSITE:**  
Barbara Hammer, *Vital Signs*, 1991. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**FOLLOWING SPREAD:**  
Gregg Bordowitz, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, 1993. Video Still. © Gregg Bordowitz. Courtesy of Video Data Bank. School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

# Hidden in Plain Sight

ILYA AND EMILIA KABAKOV // THE SHIP OF TOLERANCE

By Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts



Since 2005, USSR-born and New York-based artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have presented *The Ship of Tolerance* in twelve locations around the world. The work began in Siwah, Egypt, as an installation where children of diverse backgrounds made drawings that became part of a boat’s sail. In some way, this almost fairytale vision of a wooden-sided vessel—perhaps how children imagine Noah’s ark—has a special set of qualities that question its nature as art or performance, as well as an articulation of one cryptic understanding of the universal need for tolerance. Across each of the cities, contributors to the installation are connected, if only by suffering the indignities that many large-scale cities do: poverty, violence, racism, discrimination against one ethnic group by another; similar headlines fill newspapers in whatever country you read them.

—————The extended oeuvre of the Kabakovs has, in this project especially, seemingly leapt beyond the page, beyond the canvas, beyond the museum, beyond the gallery, and into a society that includes the young. Every iteration is somehow different; each time it is presented, the audience of children who have participated gather like a magic carpet around the boat—they are laughing and happy, as if the subject of tolerance itself evaporates into the daylight that surrounds the structure. This is not exactly the display an art installation usually garners, but the Kabakovs have never done art like any other artists.

—————*The Ship of Tolerance* is both beyond the so-called “serious” studio practice many contemporary artists adhere to, and yet very much connected to it. I would suggest, in spite of their philanthropic and educational intentions,

*The Ship of Tolerance* bears a resemblance in its presence to certain large scale installations I have seen and often helped stage in exhibitions and museum shows.

—————In the catalogue for their recent retrospective at the Tate Modern in London, *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into The Future*, both Robert Storr and Matthew Jesse Jackson, interestingly came to a similar moment of shared vision, though through much different methods. The trope of failed utopia, which often appears in the work of the Kabakovs, is used as a device that does two things at once. It presents the viewer with a likeness of something that appears to be ‘real,’ but is taken from a remembered past—notably, from



a time before the fall of Communism. Yet, there is an underlying sigh of relief within their work, audible as we walk through or past the Kabakovs’ iconic large-scale installations. In the case of the piece *The Toilet*, exhibited at Documenta IX in 1992—a replica of public toilets the Kabakovs were familiar with in the USSR—viewers stand, noticing the dank smell of used clothes, old damp linoleum, and furniture from thrift shops. One is overwhelmed with the notion that even within this dreadful structure, we humans found a way to make a daily, happiness-filled reality, even if it was necessary to turn a communal out-house into a home. The Kabakovs’ installations show us one thing while meaning something else—yes—but then the two opposite positions might be sides of one coin.

—————Perhaps this dialectical position is what makes *The Ship of Tolerance*, in its apparent innocence, so interesting. The young participants are part of a larger picture; they bring the pain of real-world discrimination and racism to the work. Ilya Kabakov revealed this same type of desire—magical thinking and hunger—in *The Man Who Flew into Space* (1982–84), a staged installation of the aftermath of a man (the artist) who catapulted himself into outer space, like a Cosmonaut. While every one of us has felt this need to escape, few of us understand the seriousness of the Kabakovs’ desire to escape Moscow in the 1970s and ‘80s. As a young artist working under the watchful eye of the USSR, Ilya illustrated children’s books in which utopias were imaginative and story-like. In a sense, one can argue that these young eyes were his very first audience. Here, decades later, they become his interlocutor—they are his imagination in a *defacto* conundrum where we are forced to see the impotence of art’s potential. This type of contrived naiveté in the drawings continues to be an immense source for the Kabakovs’ installations today.

—————At its best, the Kabakovs’ viewers have a sense that walking through and experiencing their works could somehow make us better human beings. Wash our souls. Ignite a glimmer of celestial humanism for just a split second. This perhaps is a tongue-in-cheek unraveling of the utopian thinking fascists often employ for support, like the happy peasants that pepper the Kabakovs’ installations and paintings. *But was not everyone happy under Stalin?*, they seem to ask us, beseeching our credulity to understand how history of any moment is written.

“The Kabakovs’ installations show us one thing while meaning something else—yes—but then the two opposite positions might be sides of one coin.”



Yet, for these conceptual artists emerging from the darkness of Soviet Russia, irony—a strategy unfit for the danger that lurks in a totalitarian regime—was not necessarily a friend. One needed a double vision. Perhaps the initial desire of *The Ship of Tolerance* was to inspire the next generations to face these issues and respond from their own hands. But maybe the work is, in its own way, one of the great Kabakov installations hiding in plain sight, dressed as something we must only see as a brilliant philanthropic idea. Perhaps in actuality, it breaks through the third wall; a performance work that brings the audience into another original structure all together.

The Chicago iteration of *The Ship of Tolerance* at Navy Pier runs through October 2019.

#### TITLE PAGE:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Door I*, 2003. Watercolor and ink. 22 x 19 inches. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov. Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma, Milano/Napoli.

#### PAGE 87:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Door I*, 1997. Oil on canvas on wood. 90 x 41 x 6 inches. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov. Courtesy of the artists.

#### PAGE 88:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1982–84. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

#### PAGE 89:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, concept drawing for *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985. Watercolor and ink on paper. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

#### OPPOSITE, TOP:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Toilet*, 1992. Installation view as part of Documenta IX. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

#### OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, concept drawing for *The Toilet*, 1992 in preparation for Documenta IX. Watercolor and ink. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

“But was not everyone happy under Stalin?, they seem to ask us, beseeching our credulity to understand how history of any moment is written.”



# I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White

ON AGENCY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE  
// THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL THEN AND NOW

By Noah Hanna



When critic Glenn O'Brien received an admission tag at the Whitney Biennial in 1993 baring the statement; "I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE," he bluntly reflected on the experience in Artforum, "No fucking way was I putting that on." Designed by artist Daniel Joseph Martinez, the tags gained notoriety due to the response they evoked, but also encapsulated a Whitney Biennial that was at the border of ideological reformations. Now close to three decades later, Martinez's work continues to offer substantial implications for the consequential exhibition of American Art. The 1993 Biennial was a polarizing iteration of the then forty-six-year-old exhibition. Curated by the Whitney Museum of American Art's own Elisabeth Sussman, the Biennial followed what scholar Nizan Shaked described as a period of division between fault lines within American discourse and the art field.<sup>2</sup> American policy—both economic and social—through the 1970s and '80s, paired with the calamity of the AIDS crisis and continued racially motivated violence, forced artists and art institutions to negotiate both the rise of an art market increasingly driven by capitalist expansionism, and a greater necessity for political consciousness within artistic practice.<sup>3</sup> For Sussman, the exhibition would serve as a way to "consolidate artworks concerned with actual political situations, which, for example, ask what constitutes a community, or examine its relationship to identity formation."<sup>4</sup>

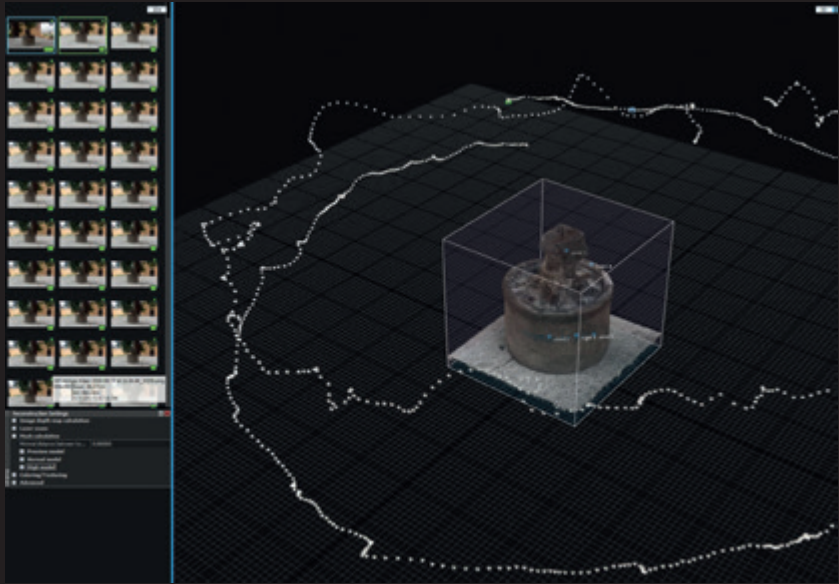
The Whitney, like many of New York's cultural cornerstones, aimed to draw the chasm between artmaking and political realities closer. As Shaked notes, exhibitions such as *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* in (1990), hung collaboratively by The Studio Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the New Museum, as well as the New Museum's own *Let The Record Show...* (1987–88), which featured the now iconic neon installation *SILENCE = DEATH* (1987) by Gran Fury and ACT UP, sought to bring the turmoil of the AIDS crisis and struggles for representation into the institutional mainstream.<sup>5</sup> While these exhibitions featured work by many of the decade's most prominent and politically active artists, such as Barbara Kruger, David Wojnarowicz, and Adrian Piper, they remained generally conceptual experiences. The museums set the stage and curated *discourse*, even while activist-minded artists composed much of the rosters. However, in the case of Martinez and the Whitney, this barrier was broken down in a way that was outside of the institution's control, presenting what is perhaps the most significant considerations for the most recent presentations of the Biennial.

There are various interpretations of Martinez's work at the Whitney in 1993, officially titled *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture) or Overture con Claque—Overture with Hired Audience Members*. For example, the tags, once distributed at the front desk upon purchasing



“The 1993 Biennial lends credence to the most recent exhibitions in 2017 and 2019, which while being commended for increasing the space given to artists of marginalized groups, were also subjected to intense and public debates over artistic and institutional objectives.”





admission, could be read as a socioeconomic exchange—essentially mimicking the sale of artwork, scaled down to the level of the everyday consumer. The work also questioned inherent bias within art museums, as it occurred at the point of transition between public life and the socially autonomous institution, where judgments are passed between communities.<sup>6</sup> However, the continued poignancy of this work is ultimately derived from the expanded notions of social practice and relational aesthetics that occupy our contemporary moment. Once acquired, agency for the work essentially became that of the recipient, who was free to interpret it as they saw fit. Documentation of visitors at the Biennial displayed the many ways that the work became appropriated; guests intentionally and unintentionally arranged the tags upon their bodies to make statements about personal identity—including race, class, and gender. The museum security staff, a position that was disproportionately held by minorities, wore the tags on their own accord as a display of subversion.

Discussions of agency have steadily continued at the Whitney. The 1993 Biennial lends credence to the most recent exhibitions in 2017 and 2019, which while being commended for increasing the space given to artists of marginalized groups, were also subjected to intense and public debates over artistic and institutional objectives. For example, the outrage generated from the inclusion of Dana Schutz’s controversial painting *Open Casket* in 2017, depicting the body of Emmett Till, and the Whitney’s ongoing financial connection to arms dealer Warren Kanders, which defined a noticeable portion of discourse surrounding the exhibition in 2019. While the Biennial itself has done little to reach resolution on these matters, the nature in which these debates have occurred has fueled new considerations in exhibition making, especially as institutions address colossal overarching themes such as ‘identity’ to produce snapshots of entire geographic zeitgeists. At the heart of this transformation continues to be the role of agency and social practice.

In the cases of Schutz and Kanders, discourse was overwhelmingly developed and executed by members of the public and museum staff members in non-leadership positions. Artist and activist Hannah Black’s open letter<sup>7</sup> calling for the removal of Schutz’s painting, as well as Chicago artist Parker Bright’s performance and subsequent documentary painting *Confronting My Own Possible Death* (2018), came to define the most pressing concerns of artmaking and representation, despite neither being commissioned by the

Whitney. Theorist Aruna D’Souza’s careful documentation of Tweets, letters, manifestos, and memes about the controversy unfolding at the Whitney amounted to a what could be considered a participatory artwork in itself—providing as much insight into the present American ideology as the 2017 Biennial curators Christopher Lew and Mia Locks provided in their curatorial statements.<sup>8</sup> As a result, it has now become impossible to disassociate the 2017 Biennial from the public’s engagement with it.

Similarly, the scrutiny faced by the Whitney and other major institutions over the role philanthropy, and the methods in which wealth is acquired and distributed, brought activists again into the space in 2019 due to the Whitney’s associations with Warren Kanders, CEO of Safariland—a munitions manufacturer whose products have been used in conflict zones from Gaza to the US/Mexican border. Organizations such as Decolonize This Place and its many affiliates challenged the Biennial on their accountability, pressuring the institution to recognize an ever-growing variety of perspectives. The 2019 Whitney’s inclusion of *Triple Chaser* (2019), a video investigation by artist collaborative Forensic Architecture and Praxis Films, which compiled crowd-sourced research and computer algorithms to track the use of Safariland’s Triple Chaser tear gas grenades across the world, was a conscious effort by the co-curators (Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley) to acknowledge the need for such debates. However, despite the commendable and groundbreaking research done on behalf of Forensic Architecture, the work can only be interpreted passively in a gallery setting. Visitors enter the exhibition space, observe the atrocities committed with the aid of Safariland, Forensic Architecture’s attempts to document it, and subsequently move on to other work. The structure of communication and agency remains unchanged, despite curatorial intention. In July, when Forensic Architecture found ties between Kanders and the lethal suppression of protests in Gaza, numerous artists demanded their work removed from the Biennial. Faced with another identity crisis, the Whitney allowed the artists to protest and Kanders resigned his seat on the board of trustees shortly after.<sup>9</sup> Even with Kanders gone, the affair has ultimately spurred far more questions than resolutions. The successful campaign against Kanders legitimized artist and public activated discourse within institutional space, but has left many wondering what precedent the 2019 Biennial will inevitably have on future exhibitions and social practice.

While much of the necessity that fueled the 1993 Biennial and Martinez’s museum tags remains unchanged in America, it feels wrong to gaze upon this work with a sense of nostalgia, or as a means to debate what constitutes a successful artistic practice within the frame of a substantial exhibition like the Whitney Biennial. Rather, it seems prudent to examine the continued relevance of this project analytically—asking how work like this can aid in accomplishing the many objectives faced by any exhibition of such a scope. How can exhibitions address representation in art and those it has historically neglected? How can it foster discourse and expression? Panetta and Hockley make note of such a desire in their introductory essay, stating, “Fundamental to the Whitney’s identity is its openness to dialogue, and the conversations that have occurred here and across the country became a productive lens through which to synthesize our own looking, thinking, and self-questioning.”<sup>10</sup>

As the perspectives for exhibitions expand, so too must our practices. Progress must be collective, and agency malleable.



### The 2019 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art runs through September 22, 2019.

- 1 O’Brien, Glenn. “Dividing the Sheep from the Goats.” *Artforum* 31, no. 9 (1993).
- 2 Shaked, Nizan. *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 156.
- 3 Ibid, 157.
- 4 Ibid, 166.
- 5 Ibid, 161-162.
- 6 Ibid, 175-176.
- 7 Greenberger Alex, “The Painting Must Go”: Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work,” *Artnews*, March 21, 2017.
- 8 D’Souza, Aruna, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018).
- 9 Greenberger Alex, “It’s Just the Beginning: Art World Responds to Warren B. Kanders’s Resignation from Whitney Board,” *Artnews*, July 26, 2019.
- 10 Hockley, Rujeko and Jane Panetta, “2019 Whitney Biennial Introduction Text”, 2019.

**TITLE PAGE:** Gran Fury and *ACT UP, SILENCE = DEATH*, 1987. Neon. Installed at the New Museum, Let The Record Show..., November 20, 1987–January 24, 1988.

**PAGE 93:** View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Museum Tags: Second Movement (overture) or Overture con claue – Overture with Hired Members*, 1993. Paint and enamel on metal. 12 x 15 inches. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**OPPOSITE:** Forensic Architecture, *Triple-Chaser*, 2019. Video, color, sound, 10 minutes 24 seconds.

**ABOVE:** Forensic Architecture, *Triple-Chaser*, 2019. Video, color, sound, 10 minutes 24 seconds. 3-D models of the Triple-Chaser grenade and images of used canisters, distributed in digital space, help train a computer vision classifier.

# The Institute of Complex Systems

NEÏL BELOUFA // PROFILE OF THE ARTIST

By Guillaume Désanges



For French-Algerian artist Neïl Beloufa, cinema belongs to an aesthetic model that is both industrial and moral. Throughout his practice, the conventions of film are often made into materials for sculpture. While films also exist within the artist's oeuvre—installations that function like the pans of a movie, elements that perform as stage sets, and collages that appear like story-boards—Beloufa's relationship to cinema is most closely observed through the many genres of film itself: Western movies, spy thrillers, science-fiction, or college-movies. It is through the regime of cinema that the artist conducts his work. Within this context, the component of Beloufa's practice that remains within the 'visual arts' appears only in the ways in which the structure of his films is built; through either absence or potential. While it is true that cinema is an art, it is also an industry.<sup>1</sup> The economy generated by film is paradoxical; at once technological and symbolic, narcissistic and collective, commercial and idealistic. Each of these dichotomies contribute to the confused state of *where* the capital in film lies. It is this same complex economy that haunts

Beloufa's practice, which allows viewers to grasp the invisible coherence across his purposefully disparate works.

— In the aftermath of the May 1968 events in France, the professionals at the head of the *États Généraux du Cinéma*<sup>2</sup> imagined an aesthetic revolution—one that was political, but also firmly economical. They attempted to not dissociate the critique contained within bourgeois content from a critique of the systems that dictated production at the service of the bourgeoisie, instead responding equally to new ways of both making and disseminating film.

— This connection—between artistic and economic means, which had long since boiled below the surface of the film industry—positioned Jean-Luc Godard as its (evil) genius. Until this time, no other director had attempted to dismantle the very mechanism of cinema through cinema itself. Godard did so in a way that did not only refused to spare the artist, but further insisted on pronouncing the insufficiencies of all artists. An idealism realized through fatalism.

Over the length of his career, Godard developed new relationships between mythology and industry, poetry and politics, the sublime and the contemptable. His feeble arrogance belongs to an identity that is at once liberal, but also subordinate, which the director's work continues to draw on today. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Neïl Beloufa, who was immersed in the world of political cinema from a young age,<sup>3</sup> has drawn such a renewed attention to positions that do not separate critical modes of production from the criticism of modes of production.



SYSTEMS OF SCULPTURE

The ‘molecular’ structure that characterizes each level of Beloufa’s work, (i.e. his installations, exhibitions, his global approach to production, and the *mises en scène* of his films), exists as a system of autonomous modules, which are more or less interconnected, that use and diffuse energy. From mechanized sculptures, which incorporate elements of architecture and integrated exhibition design, to a series of *tableaux* that adopt penetrable robotic structures, Beloufa’s ‘entertainment machines’ are conceived through their relationship to the body. Their logic is at once pragmatic and disorderly. The aesthetic of the artist’s installations within the walls of galleries and museums would appear equally at home in the chaos of a geek’s bedroom. The works are at once artisanal and technological, ergonomic and precarious, and readily associate with DIY digital practices and video projection, or pizza boxes and cigarette butts. The works function like a type of sensory carnival, blurring the viewer’s perception while actively producing images, to create sensations between a spectrum of delight and disgust, without ever quite succeeding in completely reaching one or the other.

In doing so, Beloufa’s work recalls the origins of cinema itself, which was originally presented as a technological attraction, more so than a spectacle to be viewed. By exhibiting within unconventional spaces—such as commercial showrooms, game halls, fabrication labs, and ephemeral concept stores—this range of exhibition contexts plays upon the ambiguity of the work’s role between industry and service, function and décor. As such, they remain open to interpretation (a function of art) as well as to use (a function of utilitarian design). In this way, Beloufa’s work forms a series of open systems, rather than closed circuits—they exist as networks, rather than sole units. The exhibition site becomes a space in which the transaction of

images, films, objects, and the viewers themselves are exchanged. The global economy of the artist’s work follows the same logic; a set of clusters of activities in permanent negotiation with one another, whose positions are inherently mobile. Identifying as a producer, director, screenwriter, decorator, and distributor, Beloufa assumes all of these roles within his definition as an ‘artist,’ which is to say, an autonomous individual that maintains connection to the centers of production and profit.

At the heart of Beloufa’s network, film, object, but also *software* is at play, capturing and redistributing the ‘energy’ of the artist’s varied outputs across the ‘hardware’ of the works themselves. Film is used as a sort of fuel, an ‘input’ and ‘output,’ that feeds both the process and the product, though it is not made clear which feeds, or serves as the pretext for, the other. Beyond the circuit of the works, the systems they employ are connected to the ‘outside’ world—contemporary current events, political contexts, and cultural ideologies, among other factors. Given that Beloufa pointedly does not participate as a mere observer within these contexts, but also as an agent for change, one could even consider the complex problematics that emerge from the chaotic state of economic and social issues in our current twenty-first-century state of globalization through his work. Within this position, Beloufa’s practice is one that is constantly striving to outmaneuver the potential insular field of the artworld by confronting adjacent economic realities—be that the market of real-estate speculation, as explored in his 2016 exhibition *The Next Tenant* within a model apartment, supported by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, or his research into the film distribution industry, which he activates through his feature-length videos.<sup>4</sup>

BEHIND ‘SOCIAL REASON’  
AND ‘MORAL PERSON’

Perhaps most importantly, Beloufa’s use of components within an interchangeable system echoes the concept of convertibility, which exists at the heart of many of the ideas within his work. The guiding question of the work belongs to that of observation—to how the role of each object, statement, or event is altered within any given scenario. Objects and images can be observed as much as people. It is in this way that the artist’s films (notably, *Monopoly* (2016), *Real Estate* (2012), *World Domination* (2012), or *Sayre & Marcus* (2010) function under the guise of wargames—the sort of roundtable negotiation or sociological panel, where each actor defends an arbitrary position, pretending to be able to take the place of another. More than a cynic position, the guiding tenets of Beloufa’s work conceives of the world as a field of diplomatic tensions and contradictory strategies, both of which recall the function of the artist and his studio.

An acknowledgment of how Beloufa operates is essential in capturing the work of the artist who, from a very young age, has questioned his work as equally as he has questioned its means of production—focusing both on the place of the artist within systems of valorization alongside the means in which one can become autonomous while simultaneously being in command of operations. In response to these challenges, Beloufa has developed the model of a studio/workshop that is fully integrated into his practice. More than just a tool for production, the artist’s workshop is a project in itself, driven by a social and political ideal that is directly related to themes Beloufa deals with in his work. In short, the artist studio is a critical space as much as it is a physical space. It is a reality, but also an image—a form of a branding, a site that is invested in producing desires and fantasies. This is the immensity of warehouse in Villejuif, a commune in the south suburbs of Paris, which

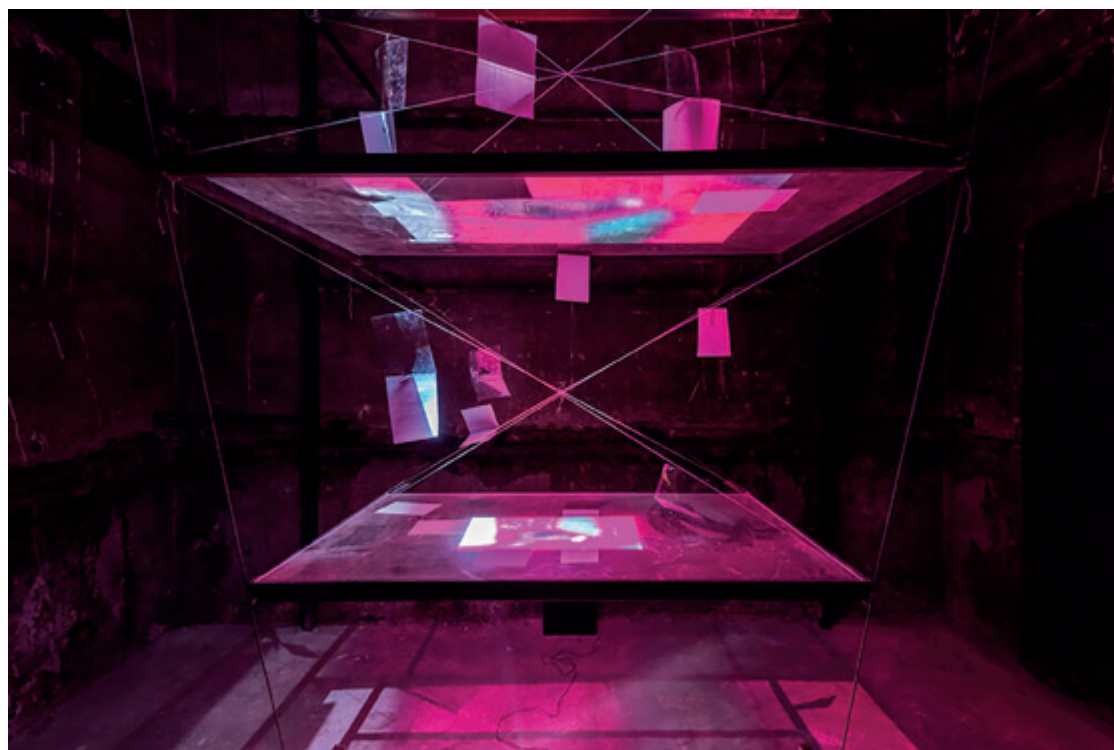
“In short, the artist studio is a critical space as much as it is a physical space. It is a reality, but also an image—a form of branding, a site that is invested in producing desires and fantasies.”



had been gradually transformed from the *trompe l'œil* set of a hotel for the artist's film *Occidental* (2016),<sup>5</sup> before becoming a live/work-space for the artist known as 'Occidental Contemporary,' which involved artists and curators, but also the public, each pursuing separate activities within the same structure. The significance of a hotel as a backdrop to what became this multi-use space is emblematic in this respect: the hotel is an area for circulation, a fixed system within which relationships are formed, and where parallel lives can either intersect or diverge—all with the potential for affective, perhaps even libidinal, action. —

It is interesting to note that in French, certain jargon purposefully adopts a philosophical or moral connotation. For example, the technical term for 'legal entity' is '*personne morale*,' which literally means to signify a 'moral person.' From this perspective, one could say that Beloufa's studio is, in effect, a moral person. Or, at least, a type of autonomous and industrial entity that assumes a vague identity, but is no less legally responsible. This semantic relationship can be said to inform the very system the artist denounces across his work; all power is a fiction that is held together by nothing other than myth. Yet, it is the role of a 'moral person'—which is to say, a reflective person—to never cease in questioning, both in concept as well as in production, the line between the true and the false, sincerity and posturing, or rigor and seduction. In short, the morally good and the morally bad, while continuously playing with the potential volatility and reversals inherent within these polarities of thought. Following the same logic, the term for 'business name' is '*raison sociale*,' which directly translates to 'social reason.' A closer acquaintance with these semiotics resonates with a kind of organizational structure that attempts to denounce hierarchy—responding to an almost egalitarianism or collectivist idealism, in which material and symbolic capital is shared. —

This systematic and moral approach reflects Beloufa's own function within the artworld. From the start of his career, he has challenged his autonomy as an artist (such as in his first film *Kempinski* (2007), made as a student), while also positioning this derailment as an acceptable response. Rather than ignore this reversal of expectations, Beloufa has made an entire regime of his practice that is found subtly across all his works. By revisiting the historical positions between formalism and



politics in art, one could say that Beloufa's vast reflection on material research into economic systems is also met with a facet of spirituality; the critique of agency, but with a certain love for the same system that produces it. A system that integrates its own criticism, its own negotiations. In this way, the work does not offer definitive solutions, but instead underscores an aberrant complexity of values, whose aesthetic and moral horizon is constantly blurred. Beloufa's hybridization of the organic, the material, and the technological could pass for a type of nihilism—but it could just as easily be the mark of an unshakable faith in the power of forms when they confront forms of power.

*Translated from French by Stephanie Cristello.*

—  
**Neil Beloufa, as part of the *Méthode Room* led by Guillaume Désanges, will be in residence in Chicago at various points in 2019–2020.**

- 1 Known from the famous line, "Par ailleurs, le cinéma est une industrie", the last phrase of *Esquisse d'une Psychologie du Cinéma* (1946) by André Malraux.
- 2 *Les États Généraux du Cinéma* was founded in the end of May, 1968, and was the location for political debates across the profession. The group assembled through 1500 professionals (directors, producers, technicians) as well as students.
- 3 The artist's father, Farouk Beloufa, is an Algerian director. His only film, *Nahla*, was released in Lebanon in 1979. His mother was an editor for Apostrophe Films, who notably produced films by Alain Cavalier, Chris Marker, and Orson Wells, among others.
- 4 *The Next Tenant* by Neil Beloufa took place in the frame of the exhibition *Hausbesuch*, from November 5–26, 2016, at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany.
- 5 *Occidental* was the first feature-length film by the artist. At the end of the filming, the studio was transformed into a center for contemporary art, named OCCIDENTAL TEMPORARY, in which exhibitions, marriages, and smaller productions took place over the course of one year.

**TITLE IMAGE:**  
Installation view, Neil Beloufa, *Neoliberal*, 2015. Balice Hertling, Paris.

**PAGE 99:**  
Installation view, Neil Beloufa, *Counting on People*, 2014. Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

**PAGE 101, TOP:**  
Neil Beloufa, installation view, *The Enemy of My Enemy*, 2018. Courtesy of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

**PAGE 101, BOTTOM:**  
Neil Beloufa, Various works, 2018–2019. Mixed media. Photo: Italo Rondinella. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

**ABOVE:**  
Installation view, Neil Beloufa, 2017. Pejman Foundation, Tehran.

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# In Advance of an Archive

THE JOSEPH J. MCPHEE JR. RESEARCH LIBRARY  
AND LISTENING ROOM // CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY

By Patrick J. Reed



## I.

This is a story about jazz and thinking about jazz, and thinking about the moment both were on my mind when a teenager passing me in a car hurled a homophobic slur in my direction. True, the bag I was carrying was filled with zucchini and sake, but he did not know that; so I responded with a middle finger. ————— In that electric moment, a current within me jumped from one thought to another—from “the bird” to the Bird, so to speak; I remembered the power of defiance and, consequently, the power of jazz. Heretofore, I missed the politics embedded in the music; misunderstood its moxie, febrility, and lightning-flash inspirations. Do not mistake me; I am not arguing jazz (and by extension, improvisational or even experimental music) is some long-held, infinitely-elaborate “fuck you” to anti-gay sentiment, but is not jazz-at-large a long-held, infinitely-elaborate resistance to the oppressive status quo? ————— Is not this everything trembling in a blue note? —————

————— The illustrious Sun Ra, whose experimental music encompasses and surpasses most categories— jazz included—and whose aesthetic is a lodestar for queerness and Afrofuturism, certainly seemed to operate on the assumption that improvised words, improvised sounds, and whatever inspirations that followed were powerful enough to manifest the personal mythology according to which he lived. In Robert Mugge’s 1980 profile documentary, *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, the artist, whose reputation as a self-styled, Egypto-revival man from Saturn, was by then well-known, said his music relayed “unknown things, impossible things, ancient things, [and] potential things” rooted in deep time. It suggested freedom unburdened by the shadow of unfreedom; it generated a different ontology.<sup>1</sup> ————— Sun Ra championed universalism, but spoke directly to a Black audience, whom he offered an exit from racist paradigms and an entrée into radical utopia. “They say history repeats itself. They say history repeats itself. Repeats itself,” he intones at the end of Mugge’s film, “but history is *his* story. It’s not my story. What’s your story?”<sup>2</sup> His final question, delivered with a gentle smile, is less a rhetorical one than an invitation to speculate untold futures. Visions built upon a bespoke heritage that reclaims Black identity, and rejects the Eurocentric *historical* narrative that undermines it. As sociologist Tricia Rose explained in “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose” by Mark Dery, “If you’re going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you’ve come from; ancestor worship in Black culture is a way of countering a historical erasure.”<sup>3</sup> —————

In recent years, Afrofuturism gained momentum among artists reacting to far-right politics. Although, its presence in Black creative communities, and the problems it seeks to disable, are anything but new. Prominent art world figures such as Larry Achiampong, Arthur Jafa, and Cauleen Smith each work at the forefront of this movement—utilizing the moving image to explore issues of postcoloniality, the African diaspora, violence against Black bodies, Black identity contra white America, and Black identity uplifted by technology. In pop culture, Janelle Monáe’s “Cindi Mayweather” video and music enterprise from the early 2010s assumed the mantle of Sun Ra’s most Sci-fi tendencies, coupled with a hefty dose of machine-age glamor. The 2018 blockbuster film *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler, dispelled any notions lingering about Afrofuturism’s status as a niche phenomenon or novelty. —————

————— Swept into the mainstream on a wave of exaltation, Afrofuturism

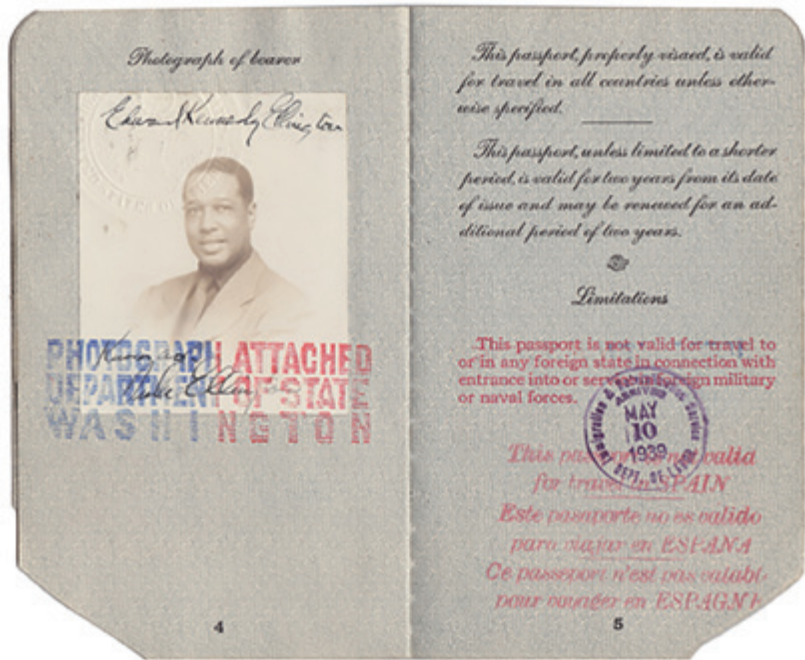
also fell prey to the vorticoise misuse that spins critical social issues into cultural caché. Consider, for example, *Milchstraßenverkehrsordnung* (*Space is the Place*), the August/September 2019 exhibition at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin that sought to combine Elon Musk’s enthusiasm for colonizing outer space with Sun Ra’s aesthetic philosophies.<sup>4</sup> That these two ideas are obviously incompatible apparently did not trigger alarms during the curatorial development of the show, nor did the egregious fact that all but three of the twenty-two participating artists on the roster were men, and all but one were white. The Internet, predictably, exploded on this point—the semi-anonymous cultural watchdog group, Soup du Jour (aka Soap du Jour) issuing an open letter to the curator, Bethanien’s artistic director Christoph Tannert, entitled “WHITEY ON THE MOON.” The letter charged the organizer with the exploitation of Afrofuturist concepts, disregard for non-white voices, and the perpetuation of white, patriarchal heteronormativity. Social media circulated news of the scandal with such efficiency that I knew of it before many of my colleagues in Berlin. The incident suggested something particular about the Internet: as an information ecosystem, the cultural climate of summer 2019 is the hottest on record to date.



## II.

Maggie Nelson wrote in *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2011), her treatise on brutality in art and culture, about the perils of image flow that characterize the Internet. The book raises the ethical questions of what to do with images that spark outrage one day, and stultifies an increasingly desensitized public the next. A kindred peril, I would argue, is the false sense of erudition offered by the information structure that also supports the Internet-based image regime Nelson describes. The same structure responsible for the high-speed information exchange that makes an armchair guru out of anyone, on the subject of anything, is similarly entropic.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Internet has aided in dissolving barriers regarding who has access to what kinds of knowledge (depending on where in the world one finds oneself), it has also flattened the learning experience into a text-and-image putting green in which material qualities, degrees of import, and general discernment are themselves filtered through text and image, ad infinitum. The result: criticality, made defunct by the hive mind, is divorced from knowledge, and knowledge, denied its old correlation to empowerment, becomes cheaper



# “Reconfiguring the ‘I see it, therefore I reiterate it’ mentality, which believes itself always the expert, is necessary.”

than air.<sup>6</sup> In part, it is the ubiquitous presence of the lens that has created these circumstances. But just as lenses bend light to form an image, so too do they distort reality. This old insight is worth repeating in a world glutted with phone cameras, dashboard cameras, ATM cameras, traffic cameras, police body cameras, supermarket self-checkout monitoring devices, computer cameras, underwater cameras, Google Maps satellite views, military surveillance, and the endless number of livestream cameras that document highways, tundras, international borders, animals in backyards, and Antarctica. This is, of course, nothing to say about those cameras that enter bodies and those that explore the firmament. Each iota of twenty-first-century existence is mediated through a lens and uploaded to a network.

*Milchstraßenverkehrsordnung* made a fad out of Afrofuturism; it was a gambit permitted under the conditions created by this faux omniscience, wherein the idea of wondering about the lives of others for the betterment of humanity—once an ethical responsibility—was supplanted by the nabbing of personal experiences that are decontextualized, disenfranchised, and prostituted as relevant cultural experience. Ironically, the backlash made a fad out of being outraged by *Milchstraßenverkehrsordnung*, such that those who were sincerely outraged, and those who defaulted to outrage because it was “trending,” generated more hype around the exhibition than any standard press coverage did or could.

## III.

Do not mistake me: I do not want to shut down the Internet or police its use. I do not propose a reinstatement of knowledge hierarchies long maintained by ivory-tower institutions. Nor am I railing against the democratizing possibilities of technology like camera phones.<sup>7</sup> Such arguments are facile—moreover, they run counter to the basic tenets of Afrofuturism. But the need to run diagnostics on the ‘health’ of critical thinking, in the age of image and information saturation, is integral to living critically. Reconfiguring the “I see it, therefore I reiterate it” mentality, which believes itself always the expert, is necessary.

The frequent caveats, qualifications, and asides in this essay (one of which you are reading now) alone illustrate the degree that the see-it/reiterate-it formulation corrodes and complicates basic critical thinking, even under the most well-intentioned circumstances. I attempt to outmaneuver its deleterious effects, sentence by sentence, but I fear I am simply perpetuating the toxicity by participating in the same loop. One that routes protest into promotion, and dissent into complicity. I, too, am drinking from the poisoned river, but I am seeking the sweetwater.

## IV.

I have found the sweetwater. It is in the museums, libraries, and archives. It ripples in the IRL houses of study; the sites where one can verify facts beyond a checkmark badge. It is within these spaces that one can challenge veracity outside of an algorithmic echo chamber, with stable evidence instead of a wily open-source database. Moreover, the library is one of the last bastions where one can browse without being monitored.

The digitization of collections, although helpful for people who are without the access or wherewithal to visit these facilities, has done little to strengthen appreciation for study-based institutions. Their reputation for stuffiness precedes them, as does their need for climate-controlled rooms, trained caretakers, and demanding upkeep. *God, the upkeep!* runs the typical lament against archives by bureaucrats, who slash budgets and liquidate anything that fails to turn a profit. Archives, in particular, get a bad rep. They seem daunting and are often the subject of derision for their shortcomings; the most devastating being the sad fact that what is excluded from an archive is excluded from the historical record. This is one point where advocates for the Internet noösphere potentially have the upper-hand, but I posit the following: archives are cisterns for preserving knowledge derived from history. They can be corrected, or they can lead to further study that halts the erasure produced by what they lack. The Internet is a turbine, churning information taken from anywhere, that often propels a runaway international disinformation machine.<sup>8</sup>



# “...A potent installment within the artist’s ongoing examination of, as he put it, the catastrophic violence directed toward Black people...”

## V.

Studying a document or object in person is essential to understanding its nature, the nature of its maker, and the nature of its collector. Material culture sustains heritage—the intelligence of the hand, and all the intimacy that comes from responding to an artifact.

Although artists like Achiampong, Jafa, and Smith use the lens as their modus operandi, they do so with a firm grounding within an archive. Jafa, who won the Venice Biennale’s 2019 Golden Lion for his film *The White Album* (2018), has accumulated over his lifetime a massive image archive that supplies inspiration for his films, as well as being an artwork in its own right. During a discussion with critic Jörg Heiser on the occasion of his exhibition *ARTHUR Jafa: A SERIES OF UTTERLY IMPROBABLE, YET EXTRAORDINARY RENDITIONS* at the JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION’s Berlin outpost in February 2018 (an event that I *did* attend in person, for all those keeping score on the internet-information paranoia front), the artist explained that he stores the image clippings in plastic to protect them from fingerprints—a testament that powerful images compel touch.<sup>9</sup>

Jazz and science fiction are Jafa’s two major influences, and within his sphere of thought, they come together often. In his conversation with Heiser, for example, he speaks of Miles Davis in nearly the same breath as Stanley Kubrik’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film he outlined as a story about “white people being confronted by the vastness of the Black universe.”<sup>10</sup> In his work *APEX* (2013)—a potent installment within the artist’s ongoing examination of, as he put it, the catastrophic violence directed toward Black people—he activates his archive as a slideshow that juxtaposes Black cultural icons and images of science fiction with images of the most heinous, racist brutality.

Cauleen Smith’s *Black Utopia LP* (2012) also activates archival research through the slideshow format, although her source material is the preexisting Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra, housed at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. Smith initiated the project in 2010, during her tenure as an artist-in-residence at Threewalls, a non-profit contemporary art space in Chicago, and it has since become a sort of archive in its own right—albeit one that evades the potential sclerosis of a traditional collection, thanks to its status as a living, breathing artwork. Described by *Hyperallergic* contributor Matt Turner, in his review of the project at the 2019 International Film Festival Rotterdam, as “...a kind of Afrofuturist collage of sound and language, rhapsodizing on the utopian potentials and possibilities of Black space travel and astrology,” *Black Utopia LP* is a cooler illustration of Sun Ra’s aspirations than one will find in Jafa’s apocalyptic montages.<sup>11</sup>

## VI.

The Series I: Biographical Inventory list of the “Guide to the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra,” includes a slim entry: —

Box 1, Folder 49, John Corbett, “Inherit the Sun,”  
Down Beat, 1993.<sup>12</sup> — If one were unaware that the author of “Inherit the Sun” also happened to be the former custodian and forever donor of the Alton Abraham Collection, the mother lode of all things Sun Ra, to the University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, then the poetry in the article’s title might not resonate like it does for those in the know. The collection was, of course, once the property of the man for whom it was named: Alton Abraham, Sun Ra’s pal on the terrestrial plane and long-time manager, but it transferred to John Corbett and his wife, Terri Kapsalis, shortly after Abraham’s passing in 1999. It remained under the couple’s care until 2007, when it moved to its current home. —

Corbett, who is one half of the duo behind Chicago’s beloved gallery, Corbett vs. Dempsey, is a collecting fiend; while acquiring the Alton Abraham Collection was a boon, it only added to his already impressive cache. During a phone conversation in mid-July, Corbett informed me that he has, for the past thirty-five years, privately collected extremely rare posters, publications, ephemera, and archival material related to the history of 20th century art in Chicago and the Midwest, and, for the past fifteen years, done the same under the aegis of the gallery, with co-founder, Jim Dempsey. —

In February 2019, Corbett vs. Dempsey relocated from their original location to a significantly larger space on Chicago’s West Fulton Street, where they continue exhibiting, promoting, and collecting the notable artists of the Second City. The new location will also serve as the headquarters for The Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Research Library and Listening Room (aka The McPhee), an archive named in honor of the American jazz luminary, and founded upon the collections mentioned above, in addition to a vast jazz and experimental music module comprised of, but not limited to, ten thousand LPs, thousands of vinyl singles, yards upon yards of magnetic tape recordings, the musical archives of contemporary free improvising percussionist Paul Lytton, original drawings by Sun Ra, and Duke Ellington’s 1939 passport, which he carried during his passage through a Europe that was about to explode into war. —

Paraphrasing Dempsey, Corbett expressed enthusiasm for the passport in particular because it tells the story of a single person’s experience at a level of detail that one cannot learn from mere descriptions of textbook rehashing. The object lures fascination because sustains its heritage—the emotions in the hand that held it—and all of the intimacy that comes with knowing that one’s proximity to the object reduces the proximity to the person who once owned it. — Proximities to The Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Research Library and Listening Room will be limited at first. It is still a treasure trove taking shape. But, in time, Corbett believes it will provide an invaluable resource for artists, curators, and other researchers who wish to conduct the kind of very specific analysis their collections will support. “We are material culture nerds,” he tells me. I think of them more as custodians of rare voices. There are, after all, objects and sounds in the archive that cannot be found anywhere else. —

This is the story about jazz and thinking about jazz that was on my mind when that weasel in the passing car sent my mind on a boomerang’s path around Saturn. But it came back in time for the dawn of an archive, another cistern of still, golden light.

—  
The Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra 1822–2008 can be found at the University of Chicago’s Library Special Collections, with the majority of the collection open to the public at request of the library staff.

The Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Research Library and Listening Room is located within Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago.

- 1 Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise, DVD, directed by Robert Mugge (1980; USA: MVD Entertainment Group, 2015).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cybernetic Culture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 215. Dery is often credited with coining the term “Afrofuturism” in the preamble to his interview with Delaney, Tate, and Rose.
- 4 The German title “Milchstraßenverkehrsordnung” translates to “Milky Way Traffic Regulations.”
- 5 Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 39. To clarify, I am certainly not hitching my argument to Donald Trump’s ridiculous assertion that the occurrence of multiple mass shootings is among the “perils of social media”—the very same social media he uses to indiscriminately agitate, lie, and misspell his own name. If anything, Mr. Trump symbolizes the knowledge integrity breakdown I describe in this essay.
- 6 Perhaps this accounts for the pervasive meteorological jargon associated with modern computer technologies, i.e. MacBook Air, AirPort routers, “the cloud,” etc.
- 7 Recall how camera phones precipitated a sea change in twenty-first-century journalism and are integral to exposing authoritarian brutality, especially against people of color.
- 8 Jo Becker, “How Nationalism Found a Home in Sweden,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2019, New York edition. Special thanks to investigative journalist Jo Becker for the phrase “international disinformation machine.”
- 9 Arthur Jafa and Jörg Heiser, (artist talk, JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION, Berlin, February 12, 2018).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Matt Turner, “Cauleen Smith Projects a Futuristic Black Utopia,” *Hyperallergic*, February 7, 2019. Accessed August 12, 2019.
- 12 University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center, *Guide to the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra 1822-2008*. Accessed August 12, 2019. For concerns regarding the online nature of this resource, see Note 10.

**TITLE PAGE:**  
John Corbett’s record collection, installed at The Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Research Library and Listening Room. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

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**PAGE 105:**  
The door to The Joseph J. McPhee Jr. Research Library and Listening Room, also known as The McPhee. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

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**PAGE 106:**  
Jazz musician Duke Ellington’s 1939 US passport. Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

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**PAGE 107:**  
Plastic, reel-to-reel tape box with Sun Ra’s handwritten annotation in marker (c. 1972). Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

# Gladys Nilsson



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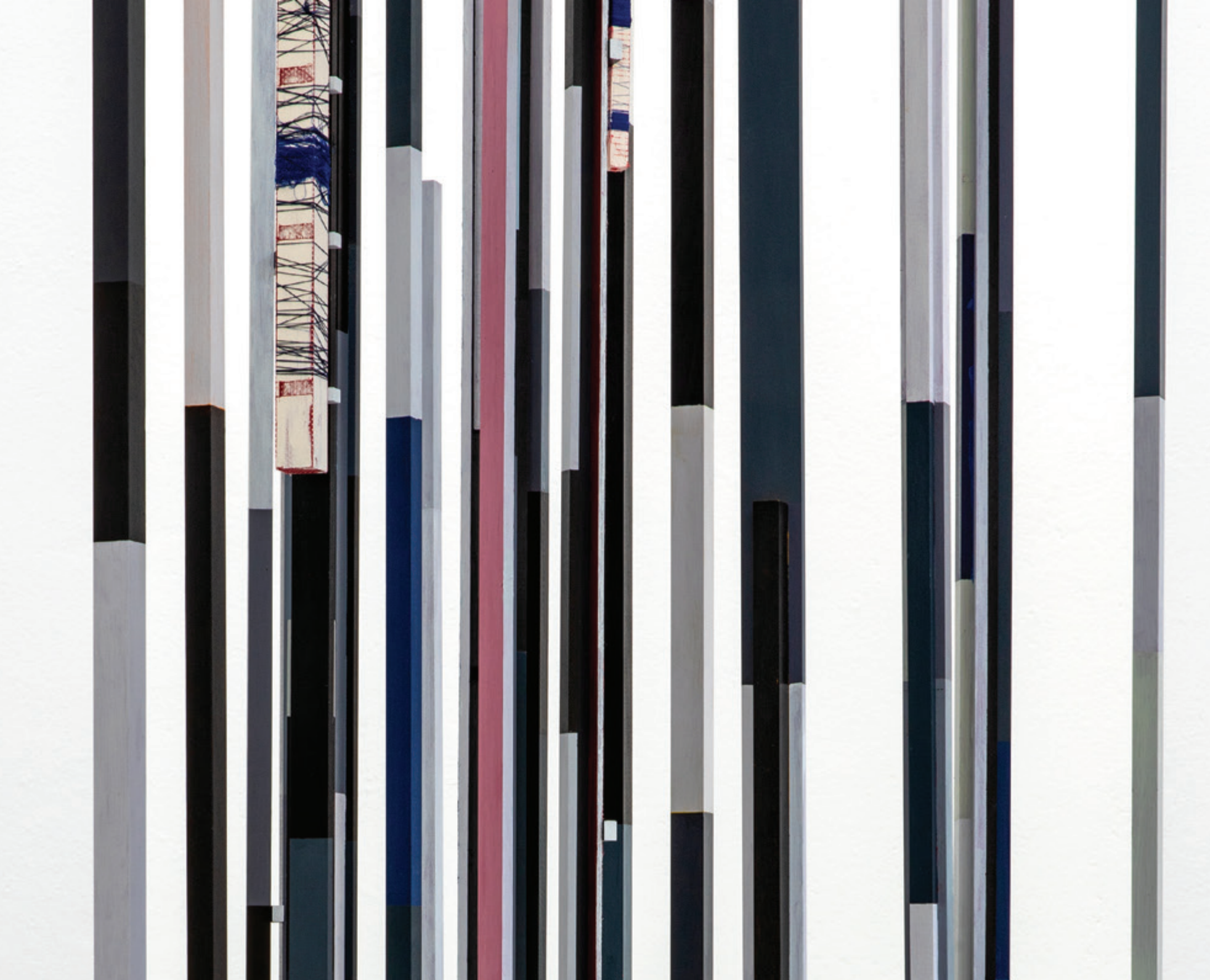


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## Notes on Venice

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Every two years, the Venice Biennale reenacts the city-wide theater of an international event that seeks to represent the artists of the world through encapsulating installations and exhibitions representative of nationality. Besides this manifestation of spectacle, the Biennale reaches beyond its physical limits—for months before each iteration artists, maintenance workers, unpaid interns, administrators, cultural embassies, and more, labor tirelessly towards the relatively short event. Despite all of the costs of all incurred through this labor, the Biennale remains as the producer of some of the most breath-taking, and culturally significant artwork seen today. —————

————— In celebration of the 58<sup>th</sup> iteration of the La Biennale di Venezia, THE SEEN gathers reviews and interviews in *Notes on Venice*, a collaborative feature by Staff Writers on the sprawling exhibition. Prefaced by a more telescopic review by Rashayla Marie Brown grounding the feature, interviews by Natalie Hegert with the artists of the Golden-Lion-winning Lithuanian Pavilion, Anna Searle Jones with Sean Edwards on Wales, and Dr. Kostas Prapoglou with Larissa Sansour on the Pavilion of Denmark follow.

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# The Privilege of Proximity

LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA // A SINKING SHIP

By Rashayla Marie Brown

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Writing a first-time review as an emerging artist about the largest and oldest art biennial has led me down a corridor of binaries, squarely placing myself somewhere in the middle of maker and critic. These binaries function to preserve the terms which give touristic art criticism its meaning—quality, curation, economy, and proximity. Like all binaries, they are unsatisfying conclusions that leave us stretched thin, which feels very much like the Biennale, the most stressful vacation one might take. In *My Art Guides: Venice 2019*, this edition’s curator Ralph Rugoff admits that “being in Venice completely distresses [him] unless [he] runs into a herd of tourists.” After being ignored by waitstaff in one restaurant and cursed at for attempting to charge my phone in another, I come to the conclusion that maybe he meant white tourists.

—This leads me to a first set of binaries—the privileged versus the underprivileged. The concept of the nation-state and a global Olympics appeared around the same time that the first Venice Biennale took place in 1895, ten years removed from Leopold II eviscerating the Congo as his personal playground. The history of the world’s fair, an event in which colonial endeavors and scientific advancements of European nations and the United States could be put on display for entertainment, weaves itself so deeply into this history that we often hear calls to burn down the concept altogether. Critiques of how vulgar money has become in the art world usually only manage to hold together if we imagine art was ever polite or untainted by it in this context of display.

—The issue of financing the Biennale has come up in reviews published within *The New York Times* and the UAE’s *The National*, pointing to the gallerists present in Venice to “find homes” for artworks by artists on display in the former, and the hidden cost of presenting in the latter. A lack of funding may even make this year’s award-winning Lithuanian pavilion incapable of restaging the performance more than once a week for the remainder of the exhibition. After refusing to wait in line for three hours to see Lithuania, France, and the United Kingdom, I opted to take a detour to pavilions that nobody would care about, the poorly-financed triad of pavilions tucked away: a Caribbean hideaway for the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Guatemala. What I found was a group of Italian artists and curators representing these nations, a video screen turned off, and a sad

hanging of paintings with tropical themes. Finally, as I arrived at the Grenada Pavilion, I came to a tender and emotionally wrenching filmic installation by Grenadian artist Billy Gerard Frank, which paid tribute broadly to queerness, Derek Walcott, and a relentlessly cold father. Upon searching the pavilion’s contribution, I found that Frank had to launch a GoFundMe campaign to participate.

—Artists and curators alike have lamented the cost of the privilege for being in this artworld, and with this in mind, it would even seem pointless to critique quality without it. What is a good work, all things being equal financially? A standout piece—maybe just for scale and cool factor of engineering—could be Sun Yuan and Peng Yu’s massive robot, compulsively painting blood-like material in the main exhibition *May You Live in Interesting Times* at the Giardini, entitled *I Can’t Help Myself* (2016). Even better, might be Yuan and Yu’s *Dear* (2015), a hose whipping violently from the seat of a replica of the Lincoln monument, scarring the plexiglass cage around it on view in the same exhibition at the Arsenale. However, in this discourse about money, the pieces could also generate conversations about financing, subjectivity, and national identity. The ridiculousness of the individual artists’ subjectivity becomes most apparent in a context of international travel that buttresses national identity through their work. This binary—one subjectivity versus a nation’s culture that programs it—compels us to travel, to be a citizen of the absurd social fiction we call the artworld.

—Within that fiction, a compelling question remains—were these artistic choices the right ones? Briskly reviewing the Arsenale and Giardini’s main exhibition housed in two parts, I noted most artists used the two chances to represent their practices (a first that nods to Rugoff’s oft-noted “playful” sensibility as a curator) by opting to show a range of multi-hyphenate diversities and mediums. Examples include Arthur Jafa, choosing to show a film and a set of objects, Tavares Strachan’s neon installation followed by a set of prints, and the collaboration between Korakrit Arunanondchai, Alex Gvojic, and boychild, that begat a film in one sector and a nature-inspired installation in another. Then, their choices could not possibly be wrong.

—In the aforementioned *My Art Guides* interview, Rugoff states his curatorial position was to find art that had

fluidity, openness, and multiple interpretations, but also work that makes the viewer aware of things that most do not pay attention to. The fact that Jafa won the Golden Lion for a moving film about white people being violent and terrible, as much as they are subjects of his love, means that perhaps white people still do not know how they look to anyone who is not. My takeaway from the pavilions: if you are not talking about the immigrant, the Other, bodies, technology, and the Internet as tools or weapons, and you are not being mysterious enough to be misunderstood, then what are you talking about?

—Many national presentations desperately evacuated themselves of this contention, such as the women-centric presentations by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are formally and physically impressive while maintaining anachronistic political neutrality, complete with friendly, smiling female attendants. Others bang you over the head with their history of violence, such as the well-designed, well-researched, and extremely didactic Chilean pavilion—replete with a gory Subalterns portrait gallery. In these such examples, there is nothing left to be misunderstood. It is within this landscape that the eagerly anticipated Ghana Pavilion is perfect, without blemish. Intergenerational, moody, and formally consistent, photography

and painting are shown alongside films with up-to-the-minute social critique and alarmingly emotive cinematography. Yet, what I noted at the super-exclusive Ghana party was the all-star component of this installation, and that the stylishness of African classism often produces work that does not do anything to systemically change institutions that uphold unequal representation and discrimination. This contrast between style and substance is easily confusing if one expects it to change how Black bodies will be either accepted or misrepresented in Venice in the future.

—This polemic drew me to the most “emerging” artist in the group curated into the Ghana Pavilion, also one of the few to actually be Ghanaian, Selasi Awusi Sosu. Her video installation, which contemplates glass as both a metaphor and an actual material produced in Ghana, highlights issues of national importance while simultaneously acknowledging the people who helped her to produce the work. She admits the fears of national representation (“I understood that I could not disappoint the nation. Neither could I disappoint my teachers, nor students, nor family!”) while also retaining a generous view of the touristic aspect of the Biennale (“The ‘cult object’ is not totally shattered! The aura of authenticity is still relevant and sought after.”) Sosu plans to show the

“This binary—one subjectivity versus a nation’s culture that programs it—compels us to travel, to be a citizen of the absurd social fiction we call the artworld.”



work after Venice to underprivileged audiences in Ghana, including young audiences both in and out of school. For some artists, the work is never really done. The Venice moment extends far beyond what is happening in the Pavilion itself—perhaps one reason why more and more artists will likely go into debt seeking to participate.

Talking to Strachan as a return participant (he previously represented the Bahamas in 2013) about his work, we landed on the subject of privilege at my prodding. Beyond the formal characteristics of his work, he spoke to the moments when his work went beyond the magical into the practical: “When I think of the context [of Venice], and the elements of potential tokenism, it is good to remember that the needle is not moving for a lot of people.” There was a moment when, beyond making a beautiful object, Strachan’s work actually led to the inclusion of first Black astronaut Robert Henry Lawrence Jr. in a major research archive. This leads me to another binary art criticism relies on—does the work do something political or does it only represent something political? Recent critiques of the Whitney Biennial claim that since the work does not destabilize the power that actually exists at the museum on a board level, it failed. When we evaluate work based upon that criteria, then we must start to question whether our first evaluative criteria—quality, curation, economy, and proximity—mean anything at all.

One of the most polarizing pieces in regard to this moral dilemma regarding political art could easily be Cristoph Büchel’s display of the wrecked boat where almost 1,000 African migrants died on their way to Italy. Panned by *The Art Newspaper* and *The Guardian*, Büchel’s *Barca Nostra* (2019) prompted an experience where many viewers took selfies, having no idea what they were looking at (because no label was provided). However, the piece prompted DC-based artist Tsedaye Makonnen to stage an impromptu performance in front of it, to memorialize the lives lost. Speaking over the phone, Makonnen stated that her performance produced an intervention by plainclothes police that led to harassment of Black viewers to produce “papers” or their passports. In this context, Büchel’s piece, with the help of Makonnen, did the work of producing a political effect in real-time. Routine state violence against Black bodies and the particular brand of Italian racism was staged in front of a piece dedicated to the callousness with which migrants are treated. Only a couple weeks later and some feet away, a luxury cruise ship crashed into the dock of Giudecca Canal, injuring multiple tourists. The threat of climate change and tourism to Venice’s unique layout puts it a precarious position to even be a refuge for people who experience anti-Blackness that refuses to call itself such. The work now highlights this.

I was curious about Makonnen’s inclusion in the Biennale, as a relative outsider. The binary of inside and outside previously discussed is highlighted by her work—she represents the majority of artists who attend the events. She speaks to those who feel like they are maneuvering for visibility to a group of the socially blind through metaphors of migration and color: “I feel like I am a similar boat, trying to figure out what it is that I want. Am I chasing this validation from white people and white culture? Visibility is necessary for black and brown people. We need to be able to see ourselves in them, but I think about being blacklisted a lot.” In this sense, the strength of the artist’s work is that it requires our investment—in her career and over time—to assess it. As artists of color, we share a fear that perhaps the systems we want inclusion in, such as the Ghana Pavilion, are reproducing the same paradigms of power by proximity.

We will have to see if these interventionist gestures of visibility place us on the sinking ship.

**PAGE 115:**  
Christoph Büchel, *Barca Nostra*, 2018-2019. Shipwreck 18th of April 2015. Photo by: Andrea Avezù. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia.

**PAGE 117, ABOVE:**  
Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Can’t Help Myself*, 2016. Mixed media. Photo by: Francesco Galli. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia.

**PAGE 117, BELOW:**  
Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Dear*, 2015. Air pump, air tank, hose, sofa. Photo by: Italo Rondinella. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia





# Gathered on This Beach

SUN & SEA // LITHUANIAN PAVILION

By Natalie Hegert

In this last of meeting places  
We grope together  
And avoid speech  
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river...  
*This is the way the world ends*  
*This is the way the world ends*  
*This is the way the world ends*  
*Not with a bang but a whimper.*

—T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

Ah well, what matter, that’s what I always say,  
it will have been a happy day, after all, another  
happy day.

—Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

In Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel, *On the Beach*, his characters—among the last people alive in the world after a hemispheric atomic war—live out their final days waiting for an inevitable cloud of radiation borne by global air currents to finally make its way to the southern tip of Australia. The book is boring and hopeless, as are these last humans puttering in their gardens to plant flowers that no one will ever see, taking on last-minute efforts at self-improvement, worrying about sex and fidelity. —“Couldn’t anyone have stopped it?” the wife asks helplessly in their final hour. —“I don’t know...” her husband replies patronizingly. “Some kinds of silliness you just can’t stop,” he says, referring to the nuclear war that annihilated the planet. —The much-acclaimed opera-installation *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, in the Lithuanian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, likewise portrays passive, helpless bystanders to the end of the world, but it is a much more ambiguous apocalypse. A group of disconnected vacationers lounge on the sand of a nameless beach—at first nothing seems amiss, but as they sing, the details of their world come into focus. “The colors of the sea and sky have changed,” they sing. The sea is “as green as a forest”—owing to the process of eutrophication<sup>1</sup>—the Great Barrier Reef is a “bleached, pallid whiteness.” They complain of sunburns and strange weather, airport delays and trash on the beach. Their concerns are immediate and minor, while the world is clearly falling apart around them. —While other depictions of a post-climate-disaster world succumb to visions

of the apocalyptic sublime—such as *Waterworld* (1995), or *Mad Max* (1979)—*Sun & Sea* is decidedly restrained, non-epic, banal. Instead of a deliciously outlandish doomsday scenario, it is just a rather disappointing day at the beach. In both setting and attitude, the installation more closely recalls the absurdist play *Happy Days* by Beckett,<sup>2</sup> which finds its protagonist buried in a mound of sand, furtively trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy in her life. Likewise, the characters of *Sun & Sea*, though they find it strange, have clearly adapted to the new normal. And while it is clear that “Everything is out of joint” in the climate, it seems there is nothing to be done (“There is so little one can do,” laments the protagonist of *Happy Days*). So, you might as well try to enjoy yourself: “After vacation, / Your hair shines, / Your eyes glitter, / Everything is fine,” they sing. —Staff Writer Natalie Hegert speaks with theater director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, playwright Vaiva Grainytė, and composer Lina Lapelytė about their Golden Lion-winning production and the message behind it. —“Couldn’t anyone have stopped it?” the wife asks helplessly in their final hour.

**IMAGES:**  
Installation image of the Pavilion of Lithuania, *Sun & Sea (Marina)* at 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, May You Live in Interesting Times. Photo by: Andrea Avezzu. Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia.

1 An effect of particular concern to the Baltic Sea, on whose coast Lithuania is situated.  
2 Whose title, perhaps coincidentally, finds echoes in the Lithuanian artists’ first opera, *Have a Good Day!* (2014).

Natalie Hegert: Not only has *Sun & Sea* received abundant and unanimous praise among the critics and the most prestigious prize at the Biennale, it is also proving to make a most lasting impression on spectators and continues to be talked about. Did you have any idea your contribution to the Biennale would be received like this?

Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė: This was beyond our expectations of course.

Vaiva Grainytė: If you ask me, I felt our opera-performance might look distinguishing in the context of Biennale, but we did not have much time to think about success—the logistics and preparation were quite challenging and intense.

Lina Lapelytė: It was not an easy project and it was risky on many levels—so the jury team in Lithuania already was brave enough to select it. What happened during the first week of biennale feels like something that almost does not belong to us. Someone said, *It is a Cinderella story*.  
This was definitely not written in our scenario. Before the opening, we were preparing our performers to be ready for an almost empty pavilion and find a joy in performing if there was only one member of the audience. Now during the performance days, we receive an average of 1,300 people. Every role on the beach has to have at least three people able to perform it.

NH: Why did you create this as an opera, as opposed to another kind of performance art, theatrical spectacle, or visual art? How did you approach its staging within the context of the Biennale—to place it among what is primarily a showcase of visual arts? Was it much different from its first staging, in Lithuania (besides the language)?

VG: Our trio started with debut piece *Have a Good Day!* (2014)—a contemporary opera for ten singing cashiers, supermarket sounds, and piano. I find opera to be the perfect genre for us to unite our artistic practices (text, music, and visuality). Nonetheless, the durational version of *Sun & Sea* crosses the boundaries of other arts. ‘Opera,’ I would say, indicates the marriage of different arts, but this piece itself can be called something else: installation, architectural poetry, concert...

LL: Opera is a very particular place for the three of us—we kind of invented a method of working in this genre. Opera is as visual art as any other kind of installation, sculpture, or painting. The genre itself often belongs to the music world but personally, in my own practice, prefer to look at music—opposed to the idea that it is only for listening. Opera is literature; it is music; it is fine arts. It is a gesamtkunstwerk, and none of the features are more important than the other.

RB: *Sun & Sea* grew from the visual, and still is a very visual work. Other elements—mainly text and music—bring different layers, form-wise, so the work becomes more complex. However, in this complexity we seek for simplicity.

NH: One of the things that is so striking is the opera’s placidness. There seem to be no great highs or lows, no climax or crescendo, no great emotion expressed. The singers are, for the most part, singing while lying down. There is very little movement, most of it being incidental, and the musical accompaniment is minimal. Even the scenery is quite pared down—there is simply sand, with no unusual lighting or representation of the kind of toxic sea that is suggested by the libretto. It is anti-apocalyptic, but also almost anti-theatrical. Can you tell me why you decided to present it in this way?

RB: You have put it in very right words. We have static bodies, but very often their minds are active, transforming from reminiscences to reflections, dreams, etc. Waves of these inner monologues grow into choirs, then flood back into solos again. Performers are static while they are singing, but other times they are free to move alongside kids, dogs, and other volunteers who are building castles, playing beach games, eating, etc. This brings uncontrolled reality into the fictional construct.

LL: In our case, the representation is based on a very clear conceptual grounding—all the further details of the work follow that concept. We try to restrain ourselves from using self-oriented tricks and effects; therefore, most of the details are there because of the true necessity.

VG: The light picture of lazy holidays is just a surface: we are sunbathing while the world is crashing.

NH: What kind of research into climate change and its effects did you undertake to imagine the world of *Sun & Sea*?

LL: The research spanned from mainstream media, scientific investigations, personal views, experiences and dreams, and conversations and reflections.

VG: Before writing the libretto, the research was done. It was necessary to understand what CO2, emissions and food miles are, and why our planet is in its current state. After dealing with that scientific information, we came up with the realization that catastrophe is caused by our—homo sapiens—uncontrollable consumption. Consumption, which is so pleasant and stands as the core of our lives. The idea was to reveal the tragedy by personal approach, employing micro-stories, as ecology is such a huge topic. That is to say, disastrous pictures of dying and choked-in-plastic animals seem to be too anonymous, too difficult for our brains to process what is happening.

RB: Climate change is such a popular topic, but we did not want to manifest scientific facts, or to be moralistic. It was important to deepen the knowledge in this field. We were reading specific literature, but *Sun & Sea* is not about facts at all. It is about mundane narratives of holidaymakers, surrounded by apocalypse. But on a daily basis [it reflects something] other than that.

NH: What kind of message did you set out to impart? Do you feel that the installation gives any sense of hope for our future? Or is this scene something of a foregone conclusion for our world?

VG: It is up to each spectator to read the message on their own. The mosaic of characters and their songs suggest a kaleidoscopic approach, so there is no conclusion or “one truth” as such.

RB: To expand the beach topic in a global perspective: sunbathing may soon become available where polar bears used to live. I think we are neither giving a sense of hope for the future, nor taking it away. We do not know the right answer, and this is probably our luck.

LL: The work is a question, but also a reflection, on where we are and who we are, but the hope is in every one of us. In the tiny things, the love that we all share. Though that love must also be super critical and questioning many things that are taken for granted. It is hard!

NH: You three have worked together before, on the opera *Have a Good Day!*, and *Sun & Sea* is your second collaboration. In light of your spectacular success, do you have plans to work together again?

VG: Success might breed rush and greediness, but our trio is rather slow in terms of developing a new piece. Each piece needs time and mental energy so it could grow in a healthy way. After this prolonged Venetian adventure (the performance is running twice a week until the end of October) we need some time to reflect on what has happened, plus a tour with *Sun & Sea* will require special attention. We have some ideas for a new work, so probably one day it will be embodied.

RB: Each of us have individual practices, which are extremely important for our common work; everything we learn separately we bring in as an experience. I think we all need some separate creative space and time before considering going into the next trio work.

LL: We do not force the situation and it may take some time for us to come up with a new idea for a collaborative work. The fact that we all have individual practices makes things slower, but also creates a real need for coming back together.

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The Pavilion of Lithuania, *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, at the Venice Biennale runs through October 31, 2019.



# Sean Edwards

## UNDO THINGS DONE // COLLATERAL EVENT OF WALES

By Anna Searle Jones

Representing Wales in the 2019 Venice Biennale, Sean Edwards’ pavilion piece, *Undo Things Done*, is reflective of his wider practice, weaving a range of mediums—sculpture, photography, film, audio, prints, textiles, artist’s books—into a poetic meditation on working class life, inheritances, and interdependence. These new works draw in particular on the artist’s experience growing up in public housing in Cardiff in the 1980s, recalling an atmosphere he describes as “not expecting much.”

**ANNA SEARLE JONES:** The venue for *Undo Things Done* is a former Catholic convent, and many of the works within the exhibition point to other such institutions: the orphanage where your mother was raised, state schooling, and the British media. Would it be fair to say that this body of work takes the position of an ambivalence towards them? The tension between the active and the passive in the title seems to really embody this.

**SEAN EDWARDS:** Very much so. I think the work came about from wanting to reconcile, or at least consider, some of this ambivalence. When I first began this research, I was reading a lot of [artist] Moyra Davey’s writings, and came upon something she quoted from Fassbinder about putting the “most honest version of yourself” into a show. I knew for this project that I wanted to return to a way of working that centered my biography, similar to my 2010 film, *Maelfa*, which was shot in a 1970s shopping center near where I grew up. ————— I initially thought I was going to return to moving image, but trying to create this tension—between the personal and recent history, between different cultural, political, and social implications, all of which are bound up in school, the state, and community—became much more of a challenge with sculpture. How could all this information be packed in, but exist as if on the brink of collapse? ————— The title, *Undo Things Done*, came from something my estranged father, who died as I was making this work, once said to me when talking of the past. It originates from bad grammar, but also achieves so much in its brevity. The institutions you mention, many of which are Catholic, were a central part of my formative years, much more than any cultural experience. For quite a while, I thought about the Catholicism at the

heart of my childhood, and belief is an inherent part of this show. I think that belief has this active and passive tension inherently within it, and, like the sculpture on view, it teeters on the brink.

**ASJ:** What does it mean for you to be representing Wales in this particular moment? And, conversely, how has it been to present this work at the Venice Biennale to an art world that has been very slow to acknowledge issues of class and the perspectives of those outside of geographic centers? The show seems quietly subversive in the way that it holds space for—and, in the case of the work on view, entitled *Refrain*, explicitly gives voice to—experiences that are not often represented in these circles.

**SE:** It is a huge honor to be representing Wales, but one that is fraught with complications. I am very aware I am presenting a singular and particular story from Wales. There is a lot of discussion within the United Kingdom at the moment about representing the working-class, particularly within theater and literature, but less so in the visual arts. I wanted to think about what a working-class voice could look like, not just in what it depicts, but how formally it might have an accent, a dialect within materials. ————— Every day at two in the afternoon my mother performs *Refrain*, a radio play in three acts that is delivered live from her apartment in Cardiff and displayed in the gallery in Venice. I had hoped that this moment of liveness, intimacy, and its small details might create, as you say, space for an actual voice very rarely heard on such a stage. Hers is one shaped by a childhood in care, by moving around—by being a single mother, by struggling financially, by what many people would think of as a hard life. The play moves through impressions



of her time in the children’s home and my own recollections of growing up as part of an unemployed, “underclass” family. It also uses found texts—including those by Benjamin on gambling and addiction, Mieke Bal on memory, and extracts of my father’s welfare assessment from shortly before he died.

**ASJ:** Something that is consistent across all your work is a sense of close looking, of being attuned to the various forces that converge in a given moment. Can you talk about your process of making work and what living in Cardiff affords your practice in terms of this kind of attention?

**SE:** This idea of close looking, or slow looking, is something that has run throughout my practice. It is funny, at the opening of the Biennale someone asked me about how I started making work. I spoke about the painting I made for my final show as a Foundation student, and I realized, standing there in front of *in parallel with the past i-iv* (2019), how much the two were intricately bound: the making and formal qualities of that painting and this installation were very much the same. Both are a series of hundreds of small observed moments, abstracted through an ongoing process of “looking.” The same with *Maelfa* (2011). Both are pieced back together in a way that only functions when the viewer undertakes their own process of close looking. ————— As for living in Cardiff, it was very much a decision of choosing to live off-center—relative to the geography of the

wider UK, which is largely still oriented around London—in an attempt to find a place for slow making and looking. I am equally now trying to think about how to allow this slowness into the work itself. If I am looking for anything, it is an attention focused on the small details.

— Sean Edwards (b. 1980, Cardiff) graduated from Cardiff School of Art & Design before receiving his Master of Arts in Sculpture at the Slade School of Fine Art. Edwards returned to Wales in 2005, where he has since contributed to the development of the Welsh artistic landscape through his own artistic practice and supporting the development of emerging artists via artist-led space g39 and now as lecturer in Fine Art at Cardiff School of Art and Design, Cardiff Metropolitan University. Edwards has exhibited widely nationally and internationally, including Spike Island, Bristol; Chapter, Cardiff; and Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany. He has developed permanent public artwork with Studio Response and Future City; in 2014 was awarded the Gold Medal in Fine Art at the National Eisteddfod, and is a former recipient of Arts Council of Wales’ Creative Wales Awards. He is represented by Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

— *Sean Edwards: Undo Things Done* runs through November 24, 2019.

**IMAGES:**  
Sean Edwards. Installation view, *Undo Things Done*, 2019. Photo: Jamie Woodley.

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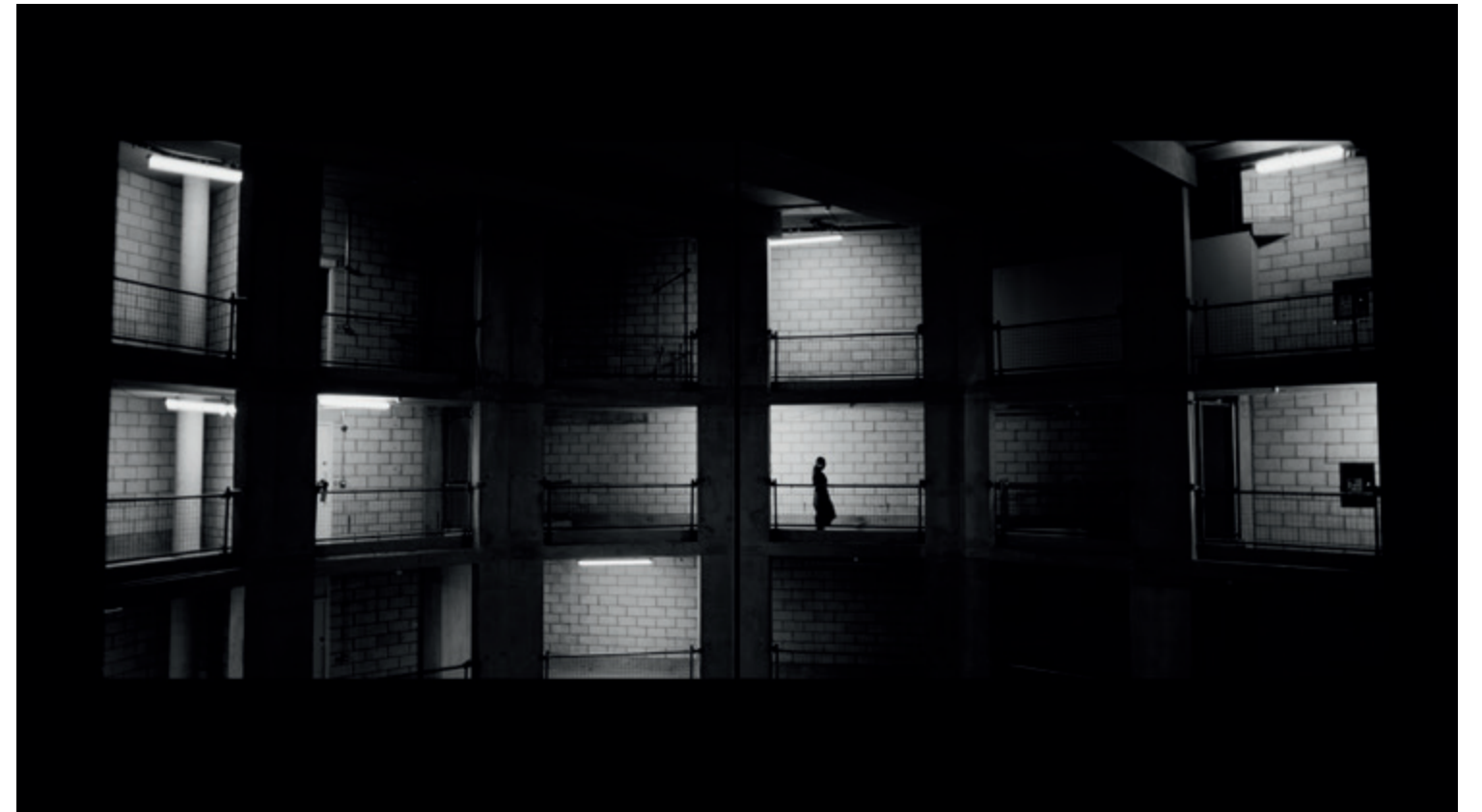
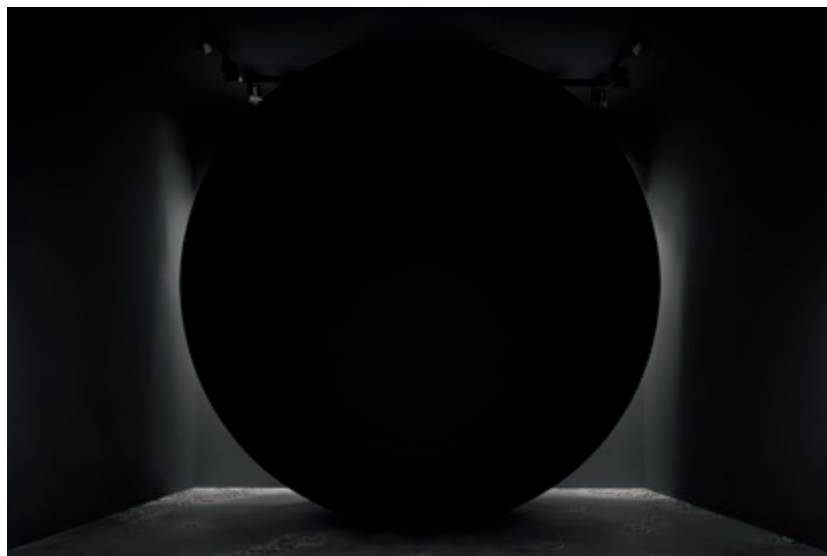
# Larissa Sansour

## HEIRLOOM // PAVILION OF DENMARK

By Dr. Kostas Prapoglou

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*Heirloom*, curated by Nat Muller, is the title of the Pavilion of Denmark, which encompasses the work of East Jerusalem-born and London-based artist Larissa Sansour. In *Heirloom*, the pavilion is divided into two conceptually interconnected parts; the first, a dark room with the mixed media installation *Monument for Lost Time* (2019), a gigantic black sphere whose presence occupies the entirety of the gallery volume to represent a type of repository of memories, which visually appears in the second room’s two-channel film installation, entitled *In Vitro* (2019), directed by Søren Lind. ————— The gravitas of the pavilion lies in the philosophical dialogue between the two women within *In Vitro*; Dunia is a survivor of a world disaster and Alia is a younger woman and a clone who carries in her DNA the memory and identity of the past. Set in a post-apocalyptic environment where the two women live underground, the film explores how the dynamics of socio-cultural, and personal or inter-personal, narratives can be organically inherited through generations, or whether it is a construct based on well-orchestrated parameters. An exchange on how the future can be built on the memories or experiences of the past gradually unfolds. The grayscale aesthetics of the film in combination with the brutalist architecture of the underground settlement and the images of the city of Bethlehem (from both historical footage and digitally processed images to depict science fiction scenes) pronounce the artist’s interest in both human and environmental conditions—taking into consideration serious historical events for humanity—filtered through the need of continuity and survival.



Kostas Prapoglou: The two protagonists of *In Vitro*, Dunia (a survivor from a world catastrophe) and Alia (a clone), engage in a philosophical debate embracing the sense of belonging and the polarities of existence. Did you conceive the clone as a liberated life-form, or as a trapped and troubled man-made being?

Larissa Sansour: *In Vitro*’s clone, Alia, is born underground and has never seen the place she is destined to rebuild. She is raised on the stories passed onto her and is expected to recreate the future in the image of the past. Her inherited memories and traumas constitute her primary entrapment. She is brought up to see the underground compound she was born into as a temporary and involuntary exile, a place she is expected to eventually abandon. Liberation, she is taught, comes later, so her entire upbringing is based on the concept of entrapment—both physical and psychological—with even her future limited to a destiny long since mapped out for her. Throughout the film, her rebellion against her predicament increases. She resists the idea of her life underground as a state of exile, just as she rejects the memories of the past as a convincing foundation for a functional future. It is within these rebellions and dismissals that her own definition of liberation begins to take shape, and the conflict she is going through probably reflects that of many people born in a state of exile.

KP: Dunia states in her dialogue with Alia, “Entire nations are built on fairy tales. Facts alone are too sterile for a cohesive understanding.” How significant are the ways in which nations construct their cultural identity and collective memory to your work, and how do you interpret them?

LS: I have been dealing with the iconography and symbols of national identity frequently in recent projects—the topic interests me a great deal, especially in cases where cultural heritage and national self-understanding are under threat. With no ‘present’ to speak of, the Palestinian psyche is suspended between past and future, between the collective memory of pre-disaster and shared ambitions for a future state. The present is mainly defined by its absences, its voids, its lack of clear definitions. This accentuates the need to pin down a sense of identity—of who you are as a person—but the very urgency of this need also makes the attempt at a unifying gesture, manifest and unyielding in its simplicity. I tend to reach for the most basic and simplistic tropes, which applies to national narratives generally. The urge to identify indubitable signifiers of heritage and belonging is a reductive and revisionist endeavor. The need for a national pathos increases in times of despair and disunity, as emotional content lends a gravity that is difficult to challenge. Nation-building and the preservation of national identity are difficult disciplines. These challenges are central to the generational showdown in *In Vitro* between an older scientist who has experienced the world before the apocalypse, and her younger successor who has been chosen to lead the rebuilding of the future in the image of a past she has never seen.

KP: Why did you choose the Palestinian city of Bethlehem as the conceptual setting of your narrative? What are those symbolic parameters that collide with your own origins?

LS: I grew up in Bethlehem, and my family still has a home there. It is a city I know intimately, and it has gone through many transformations during my lifetime due to the political situation. Today, Bethlehem is a very busy, overcrowded, and in many



ways stifled town—very different from the sleepy and quaint Bethlehem of the 1970s and ’80s when I grew up. In a sense, the city has undergone and is still experiencing an apocalypse of sorts, starting with a direct Israeli military occupation, and finally being suffocated with the completion of the Israeli separation wall. For *In Vitro*, I wanted the setting to be close to my own experience in order to cultivate the emotional aspect of the otherwise cold rational argument between the film’s two protagonists. Everyone knows Bethlehem, and for many, it is a mythical or Biblical place very far removed from the politically-marred Bethlehem I know. This contrast is also accentuated in my work via the interplay between fact and fiction.

**KP:** The element of archaeology seems to play a key role in your practice. What are the mechanisms that inspire you or trigger your creative thinking when it comes to negotiating with notions of the present and the future?

**LS:** Archaeology is interesting, as it appears to offer the kind of indisputable evidence of belonging necessary to confirm nationalist narratives—if you can demonstrate an ancestral presence, this validates your sense of territorial entitlement. In the Middle East, archaeology has been part of nationalist projects for a long time, with the instrumentalization of the discipline at risk of rendering it scientifically dubious. If your interest in unearthing artifacts is driven by a desire to confirm rather than to understand, then you are in effect politicizing an inherently neutral scientific method. I used the notion of archaeology as warfare as the basis for a short film, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), in which the protagonist decides to play the archaeological game to her own advantage. By planting artifacts for future archaeologists to excavate, she hopes to confirm a politically advantageous narrative and alter the foundations for future political dialogue.

**KP:** How do you envisage *Heirloom* will speak to such diverse audiences in Venice, and what kind of reactions have you received so far?



**LS:** I am hoping that the themes explored in *Heirloom* will resonate with people on many levels and beyond any regional context. The first indications are that they do. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. While the narratives may unfold within a local framework, the exhibition is about memory, nostalgia, inherited trauma, and generational conflict—all of which are concepts of universal validity. The film’s ambition is to challenge understandings of authenticity and question the constructs of national identity, heritage, and belonging. At a time where nationalism is on the rise around the world, these concepts are staples in political debates reaching far beyond the Middle East.

**KP:** What are your plans post-*Heirloom*? Will this narrative evolve further, or will you be working on something completely diverse?

**LS:** I am currently working on two new projects, both of them further developing ideas already present in *Heirloom*. One project is a feature film based on the short I did for Venice. This film will focus on collective and personal memories and their role in shaping our historical narrative. It is my first feature-length project, and I am looking forward to this challenge. My other project is a short film dealing with genetics, history, and identity, exploring among other things the relation between genetics and inherited trauma.

—  
*Larissa Sansour: Heirloom* runs through November 24, 2019.  
—  
Larissa Sansour (b. 1973) studied Fine Arts in Copenhagen, London, and New York. Her visual lexicon embraces film, photography, installation and sculpture. Sansour has presented her work in several solo shows internationally—most recently at Dar El-Nimer in Beirut. Her works have been shown in Cardiff, Copenhagen, Dubai Jerusalem, Liverpool, Paris, and Rome, among other places, and are part of various collections including the Wolverhampton Gallery, UK; the Imperial War Museum, UK; Fondation Louis Vuitton, France; the Carlsberg Foundation, Denmark; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark; N.B.K., Germany; Nadour, Germany; Salsali Private Museum, UAE; and the Barjeel Foundation, UAE.

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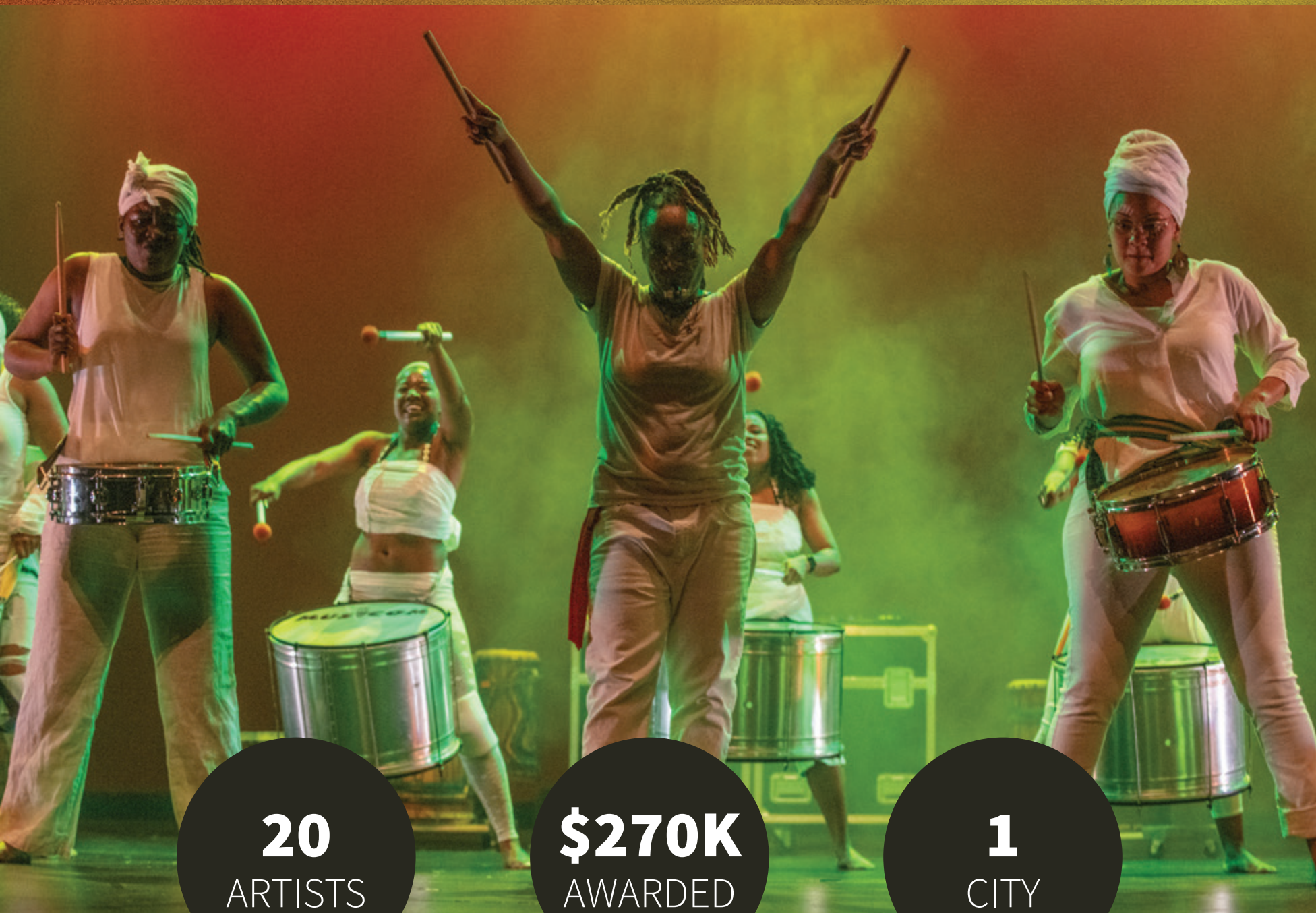
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## Interviews

# Trace Inhabitant

## RACHEL ROSSIN // IN CONVERSATION

By Caleb Mathern



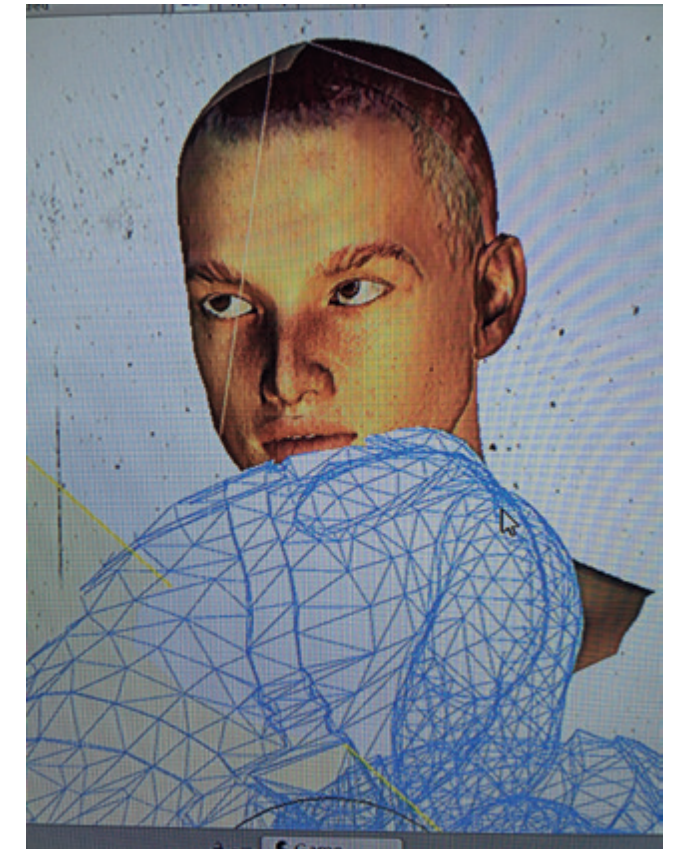
Rachel Rossin is a New York-based artist whose exhibitions incorporate quite the media diaspora—from blowtorches and canaries, to deepfakes, holograms, virtual reality, and honest-to-God oil painting. Her practice is uniquely indescribable, in that it fixates so firmly on the experiential. An early adopter of VR (she received a prototype kit from Oculus Rift), an assembler of Tesla spirit radios, a programmer, and a painter, among other monikers, Rossin will end 2019 with shows reaching from an interactive projection at the Zabłudowicz collection in London, to a newly commissioned headset piece for the Akron Museum of Art in Ohio.

—The artist’s name resembles that of Rachael Rosen, the character from Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) portrayed by Sean Young in *Blade Runner*. But the Sci-fi IP Rossin most resembles is Neo from the *Matrix* (1999-2003) sequels, who could fudge the lines between dual realities. In the following conversation, the artist sheds light on what goes on behind the scenes and screens, putting a bit of distance behind the spooky actions in her practice.

**Caleb Mathern:** You were not initially convinced you could affect the residual ghosting artifacts of a zoetrope phenomenon on a gallery-sized scale to complement the six-channel video show *Stalking the Trace*, at the Zabłudowicz Collection earlier this year. But it worked. How?

**Rachel Rossin:** Have you ever looked at a video of a zoetrope? You know how when it is slowing down, it starts to look like there is an afterimage? In the installation, one would pass it like, “Whoa, what did I just see?” That is it. It is just a ghost for a second. It works like an optical illusion, similar to *moiré* patterns. The viewer keeps walking, expecting to see the next frame, but it will never be there.

—When I was mocking up *Stalking the Trace* in VR, I kept getting this effect. I did not expect it to happen in real life, but it did—while I was on site, I tried to see if I could amplify the effect with a lighting sequence



when viewers move through the room past the apertures. I am rarely surprised by my own work, but this piece was really fun. It would start to feel like people were floating, a sort of repeating *déjà vu* experience.

—It really is simpler than it sounds. The gimmick within the work reveals something true about how simple we are. I mean, that is ultimately what a gimmick is—one can say, “Oh that is so cool,” but also, “Oh, the way I see reality is so frail and simple.” A lot of the delight I have with questions surrounding AI involves that.

**CM:** In your video for Phillips x DAATA, entitled *Recursive Truth* (2019), is it true that you worked with neural networks that are heavily utilized in deep surveillance artificial intelligence? This repurposing of questionable tech appears to surface across your works; for example, how you use raycasting as a navigational tool in your VR piece *I Came and Went as a Ghost Hand* (2015), which informs bullet physics in video games. Do these grander applications linger in your practice?

**RR:** The libraries and programs I am attracted to are symbolic. With surveillance libraries, which are what was used in *Recursive Truth*, I was trying to find new ways to express a reoccurring theme that I cannot seem to escape: *uncanniness*. On a programming level, I see libraries almost like AbEx painters looked to oil painting as material symbolism.

—I am mainly using programming libraries that are ubiquitous—the first is called OPENCV; the bulk of our deep learning surveillance, image mapping, image tracking, and all facial recognition apps are built on this library.

It is built into all of our phones. It is a meta-infrastructure. That is one reason why I chose to use it. It is really beautiful, but there is a materiality to it that is expressing something insidious. —

—The other is called a GAN (Generative Adversarial Network), a type of neural network used for AI that is more advanced, and mainly used at the moment for counterfeiting images—this is how I put my face on Steve Jobs’ and Marco Rubio’s bodies. It has what is called a ‘discriminator.’ With deepfakes and deep voice—these really advanced technological counterfeits—humans cannot tell the difference, since the computer basically treats itself as a human when judging it. There is a little node off to the end result that asks, “If I was a human would this pass?” for, say, George Bush talking.

—Raycasting is used for many things, but the main application is for bullets in games. It is basically talking about trajectory points. On the VR headset, there is a raycast out from wherever your attention points to. In *Ghost Hand* it is slowly prioritizing an entropy script. It is actually eating parts of the image away depending on what you are looking at. That is what I am attracted to. Perhaps because I grew up playing First Person Shooter games, I make a lot of interventions—I am troubled by much of the simulacrum of violence. I like using and exploiting that. —

I find that the materialism of things that feel ephemeral or invisible is what drives a lot of my work. There is something nice about whitewashing the ethics of what most of this code is used for. I pick programming languages and libraries that have a specific type of materialism and salience to where digital technology places us.

**CM: What does uncanny (not just in reference to the uncanny valley) mean to you and your practice? How does this relate to the *Proteus effect*, the phenomenon where people’s behavior shifts in accordance with their digital representation, and your commissioned piece examining the effect? Your view appears to reorient the term back to its**



**Freudian connotation; of an incomplete familiar feeling rather than a visual metric for believability.**

RR: Masahiro Mori coined that. The idea of the uncanny valley is the fall-off that happens through human representation in media, but ‘uncanny’ was first spoken about by [Ernst] Jentsch. Freud popularized “the uncanny,” defining it as locating the unfamiliar in the familiar—the sense of being displaced, or not feeling there is a home. Jacques Lacan later expanded on that; the evolution of where the eerie meets the familiar. I felt this once before. I had seen the Hudson River Valley in paintings before I had seen the Hudson River Valley. —

—The *Proteus effect* is more personal, psychological—it is the way we fill in the gaps when we see a representation of ourselves. I think this is really apt for how I experience reality, and how most people experience reality today. Whenever there is a digital representation of a person, especially in VR, your brain projects onto the avatar. You take on the characteristics of how you perceive you are embodied. These characteristics are integrated and then folded into your personality. I see this effect so often in these virtual spaces—so much of the research I was doing took place in VR Chat.

I started to find the name for it; the way I would regard myself would change every time I changed an avatar’s body. It is all about body-hopping. There is an eeriness that is felt when you see a representation of yourself, when instead you are expect to see your own body. Most of my work is seated from the perspective of embodiment. —

—The commission for the Akron Art Museum is headset-based, where viewers are moving in and out of these bodies that I present them. They shed avatars like skins or husks, and when the new avatar comes, it dislocates and explodes the previous, based on how fast the viewer is moving and where their arms are. I have a library of basically all the avatars that exist in the world. It is almost an infinite generative simulation. Raphael from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is in there.

**CM: How does your practice evolve in the face of current forecasting in VR gaming? VR is experiencing a downturn because investors are turning to cybersecurity and AI. Think-pieces declaring VR Death are here, though they have been for years. If virtual reality is not the endgame for you, what is?**

“We are driving these entire systems with our thumbs. It is an insane concept, especially when one could be using their entire body to move things.”

—RACHEL ROSSIN

RR: It is always hard for me to make these types of speculative forecasts on technology. People are asking, “Where is VR going? Is it a thing?” The answer is, of course it is. It is just too goddamned practical—unless there is some mass shift in the way commerce and our culture runs. At this moment, we are running on a hyper-acceleration boom. We are in an attention-based economy. It gets scary because our productivity—Elon Musk talks about this too—is all in our thumbs. We are driving these entire systems with our thumbs. It is an insane concept, especially when one could be using their entire body to move things. —

—For my paintings I use a VR sketch-up program to mock them up. I treat them like *plein air* paintings, but instead by moving through digital landscapes. I am not using a screen and a mouse. VR is practical for education, for engineers, for medicine. It is *really* practical for therapy. The military alone will keep using it. I have a friend who has a whole school that is in VR. They can have these kids in a room with really cheap cell phones and really high quality classes. It is amazing. Honestly, we are probably moving more into biotechnology. That is the most practical because DNA data storage is really a hell-of-a-lot more reliable than digital storage. —

—I can build all of this stuff. I know the land really well, and I can subsist off of it. I can build my own equipment if it ceases to exist commercially. We are edging the bounds of something that is constantly shifting.

**CM: Is it true that you taught canaries dubstep?**

RR: Yes—it is a project I did for my first show, *N=7* at Signal in 2015. This canary would burst out into dubstep. I was first inspired after reading about a study about songbirds’ waveforms being related to electronic noises. —  
—I love dubstep. I think it is fantastic for a lot of reasons—the build-up and release is very appropriate for how we are feeling right now, and what is happening to us on a biological scale. There are many people who have talked about this in a better way than I will. The same thing happens to our brains when we listen to dubstep as say, an orgasm, like a release of an insane amount of tension. That is why people like a drop, which is really funny. I do not care about the orgasm part of it, but I do care that it is mimicking something that is natural.

—You can be hypnotized through sound, by subconscious signifiers that are present in a lot of electronic music. The megahertz that is in EDM or trance music actually massages your brain into similar rhythms. Heartbeats, the lymphatic system, all have frequencies that are familiar to our brain, but are not perceived by us. These are all of the patterns that electronic music finds its natural groove in. Birds also have these patterns; they are built from the same meat as us. Their brains are very similar, the way they move through reality is the same.

—The colloquial mythology around canaries is interesting. We once used canaries in the coal mines—horses for travel, dogs to hunt

food—as extensions of our body. There were peripherals for the human experience that we evolved biologically. We now see peripherals in cell phones as extensions of our cognitive function and memory. Navigation used to be something that was completely human, inside of us, extended by using a bird or the stars to navigate. —

Rachel Rossin (b. 1987, Florida / lives and works in New York) selected solo exhibitions include *Peak Performance*, Signal Gallery, New York, 2017; *My Little Green Leaf*, Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2016; and *Lossy*, Zieher Smith & Horton, New York, 2015. Selected group exhibitions include *Chaos and Awe: Painting for the 21st Century*, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, 2018; *After Us*, K11 Art Museum, Shanghai, 2017; ARS17, Kiasma Museum, Helsinki, 2017; and *First Look*, co-presented by Rhizome, The New Museum, New York, 2017. Rossin received a Fellowship in Virtual Reality Research and Development, from New Museum’s NEW INC in 2015. In 2019, she will have solo shows at 14a, Hamburg, Germany and a new commission for the Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH.

**TITLE PAGE:** Rachel Rossin, *Peak Performance*, 2017. Signal Gallery, Brooklyn, New York.

**PAGE 131:** Rachel Rossin, *Man Mask*, In-Progress. Image courtesy of the artist.

**OPPOSITE:** Rachel Rossin, *My Little Green Leaf*, 2016. Art in General Commission by Anne Barlow Kim, Riga, Latvia. Photograph by Ansis Starks.

# Reshaping the Nuclear Family

ROSALIND NASHASHIBI: DEEP REDDER // SECESSION

By Fanny Hauser

The visual language of Rosalind Nashashibi's film works evades easy categorization, shifting between observational documentary and poetic subjectivity. Oftentimes elusive and eerily slow-paced, her films inquire into familial, societal, and systemic relationships between people, alongside the secret life of objects, the mechanisms of kinship, and everyday rituals performed within various social groups. Rather than documenting reality in an anthropological manner, Nashashibi's 16mm films blur reality and fiction, exploring the passage of time and the ways humans organize themselves into communities or are organized by institutional structures. Coinciding with her solo exhibition *DEEP REDDER* at the Secession in Vienna, Staff Writer Fanny Hauser spoke to the artist about her most recent artistic collaborations as means to question and reshape the concept of the nuclear family.



Fanny Hauser: In your current exhibition at Secession, you are presenting a new film in two parts, which explores forms of communal life and the affective potential of relations in today’s society. The writing of Ursula K. Le Guin is an inspiration for your film, in which a multigenerational group of people are brought together to test a novel form of space travel that shuns the idea of linear time. Do you see a relation between nonlinear time and a new concept of family, beyond the traditional nuclear model?

Rosalind Nashashibi: Yes—Le Guin was a Sci-fi and fantasy writer, but she used those genres to look at what could become potential new models for society and family life, almost as an anthropologist of the future would. I was drawn to her treatment of a space crew in *The Shobies’ Story* (1990), because she explores the becoming of a functioning group, where strangers who are singles or in small families are brought together from diverse backgrounds and ages to spend a month building a crew mentality, before becoming test subjects of the new technology. The question the film asks is, how do we become a group to rebuild after a crisis? And what, therefore, are the productive or destructive moments ones in community?

FH: What is the crisis that you are referring to?

RN: In the film on view, entitled *Part One: Where there is a joyous Mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine*, and *Part Two: The moon is nearly at the full. The team horse goes astray*. (2019), the crisis is non-linearity—of time no longer obeying to the before, during, and after. Relationships may be built on two people’s history and they may be built on the notion of possession. In a way, these are very linear structures; there is a history to love, and there could be an end point. The end is expected in all but parental and some nuclear family relations. Love in a community is less finite and less linear, it does not necessarily move on, or attach to only one individual: a wider love. You could say it is an idealistic idea, but basically, the work discusses the potential difference between linear and non-linear relationships.

FH: How did you come up with the titles of the films?

RN: I consulted the I Ching, which is an ancient Chinese oracle. I threw coins while asking about this film and the beginning of the first shoot. These lines came from the response from Hexagram 61, *Chung Fu–Inner Truth*. I used these lines as principles from which to make the two parts. Part one is about being together and enjoying the group, part two is about the group fragmenting and then coming back together by means of storytelling.

FH: Fusing observational footage with staged scenes, your work is often characterized by documentary restraint and close observation of mundane events and nascent relations. Most of the time, you remain behind the camera as an observer. Knowing your earlier work, I was surprised by how constructed many of the scenes in the new work seem and, especially, to see you as one of the main protagonists of the film. Could you elaborate on this shift in your work?



RN: After the experience of making *Vivian’s Garden* (2017), particularly seeing how Vivian Suter and Elisabeth Wild manage family life alongside making their work, I decided to take down some of the boundaries between my life and my work—to let them feed one another directly. I felt I had to do so as a working, single mother, and I was ready to investigate how single parenting led to other relationships becoming more important to me. I do not believe in the sustainability of the nuclear family structure anymore—I am more interested in what happens when you open up to the participation of other people of all ages in family life. As for the constructed scenes, I have done that before, but they may have seemed ‘observed.’ In this case I wanted to ask more direct questions by using a sci-fi story line.

FH: Suter and Wild have also inspired you to start painting again—a medium very much opposed to the time-based medium of film, if we see these genres through a much older distinction between painting and poetry. How does the medium of your painterly work enter the subject matter of your film, or vice versa? And what comes first: the film or the paintings?

RN: They have definitely been an inspiration, but not to start painting. I started painting again in 2014, something I had wanted to do for some time, but put into action thanks to a Paul Hamlyn Award that gave me both the courage and funds to get a good studio and buy materials. In 2015, Adam Szymczyk introduced me to Suter, asking me to visit them in Panajachel and to see if I could make something there for Documenta 14.

— There is no linear relationship between the paintings and film—they are two aspects of what I can make. In Part One, a painting of mine is held up by Elena Narbutaite, but the scene says more about my relationship with her and my painting than it does to relate painting to the medium of film.

FH: Can you say more about the soundtrack in the new films? Which song do we hear in Part II and how does it connect to the work?

RN: You hear *Tu Virginum Corona* from *Exsultate Jubilate* (1773) by Mozart. It is a song praising the Virgin Mary; I use it after Elena’s character is lost. When Pauline Manacorda and Liudvikas Buklys have given up on her returning to the lander, they stand facing, but are unable to look at one another. This song really captures their mutual feeling of loss and yearning, but also works as a metaphor for the huge emptiness of space itself. This scene is accompanied by the only representation of outer space in my film.

FH: You have often worked with other artists, but you have also used the life and work of artists as a point of departure of your films. Together with the artist Lucy Skaer, you have investigated the works of Paul Gauguin and Paul Nash. In your individual practice, the filmmaker Chantal Akerman has been a point of reference, but you have also filmed the artist Renée Levi in her studio and portrayed the life and relationship of Vivian Suter and her mother, Elisabeth Wild, themselves both artists. For your new film, you have been collaborating with the Lithuanian artist Elena Narbutaite, who also appears in your film. Some of her paintings are equally included in the book published in the context of the exhibition, juxtaposed on equal with your works. I feel this envisions an entirely different notion of collaboration, or even kinship. Could you elaborate a bit more on the notion of expanded authorship, the one based on such elective affinities?

RN: This refers again to my decision to open up my practice to various influences in my life—that includes both my family and friends. I find Elena to be a particular influence that inspires and catalyzes things to happen. She helps me to allow stuff to happen, or just be, if it needs to. We have worked together a few times and keep up a regular conversation. Her way of thinking and living is integral to the film; she is at the heart of it. So, like *Vivian’s Garden* in a way, the film is also led by a character.



— I love collaborating as an extension of friendship and conversation, and an admission of the huge influence certain people can have on me, which is also how Lucy Skaer and I have been working as Nashashibi/Skaer sporadically for the last fifteen years.

FH: Can we expect a third part of the film?

RN: It is possible!

— Rosalind Nashashibi (b. 1973 Croydon, UK) is a London-based artist working in film and painting. She studied at Sheffield Hallam University and Glasgow School of Art. Her films convey inner experiences of moments and events, often considering the politics of relations in the community and the extended family; while merging everyday observations with fictional or mythological elements. Like her films, her paintings move between impressions or “thought shapes” (to borrow the title of Nashashibi’s 2004 series of screen prints) and more concrete depiction of forms or figures, while the figuration may be an imported element from another linguistic order. Nashashibi was a *Turner Prize* nominee in 2017, represented Scotland in the *52nd Venice Biennale*, and her work has been included in *Documenta 14* (Athens and Kassel, 2017), *10th Sharjah Biennial–Universes in Universe* (2010), and *Manifesta 7* (Trentino–Alto Adige, 2008), and *MOMENTUM10–The Nordic Triennial of Contemporary Art–The Emotional Exhibition* (Moss, Norway, 2019). She was the first woman to win the Beck’s Futures prize in 2003 and was recipient of Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award in 2014. She is a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths University.

— *Rosalind Nashashibi: DEEP REDDER* at Secession ran from June 27–September 1, 2019.

TITLE PAGE:  
Rosalind Nashashibi, *Vivian’s Garden*, 2017. Video still, digital transfer from 16mm film, color and sound. 29 minutes and 50 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

PAGE 137:  
Rosalind Nashashibi, *Part One: Where there is a joyous mood, there a comrade will appear to share a glass of wine.*, 2018. Video still, digital transfer from 16mm film, color with sound. 22 minutes and 5 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE:  
Rosalind Nashashibi, *Strong Girl*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 23.625 x 29.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

CURRENT PAGE:  
Rosalind Nashashibi, *Vivian’s Garden*, 2017. Video still, digital transfer from 16mm film, color and sound. 29 minutes and 50 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

# Sonics and Politics

SAMSON YOUNG // SMART MUSEUM OF ART

By Elliot Albrecht

This summer has been a difficult one in Hong Kong. Sweltering, as summers always are in China, and fraught with rising political tensions. On June 16, more than two million people marched across Hong Kong island to protest a controversial anti-extradition bill that threatens to jeopardize the basic judicial rights and safety of citizens, and what is seen by many including the United Nations as excessive police violence against civilians. The afternoon prior, a man fell to his death from a luxury shopping mall roof while protesting the hated bill—one of six such protest-related fatalities as of mid-August. While the colossal crowd chanted slogans in Cantonese (“*chit wui*,” or “withdraw the bill; and “*gai yau*,” a colloquial term of encouragement translating literally to “add oil”), performers stationed under a bridge sang John Lennon songs in stirring harmonies. As demonstrators walking west neared the site of the fallen man’s death in Admiralty—by mid-day, heaped with hundreds of thousands of white flowers—a heavy hush fell over the masses. A silence that trapped air in millions of lungs, a silence that drew tears.

Hong Kong artist Samson Young’s practice is often situated at this loaded intersection between sonics and politics. Working with performance, drawings, animations, installation and (increasingly 3D-printed) sculptures, his works examine sound as a social and politically charged entity.



ELLIAT ALBRECHT: Your recent solo exhibition at Centre A in Vancouver, *It’s a Heaven Over There*—which included animation, historical documents, audio recordings and a neon-lit sculpture of a smoking fountain—drew on the history of Won Alexander Cumyow, the first person of Chinese descent born in Canada. How did this focus come about?

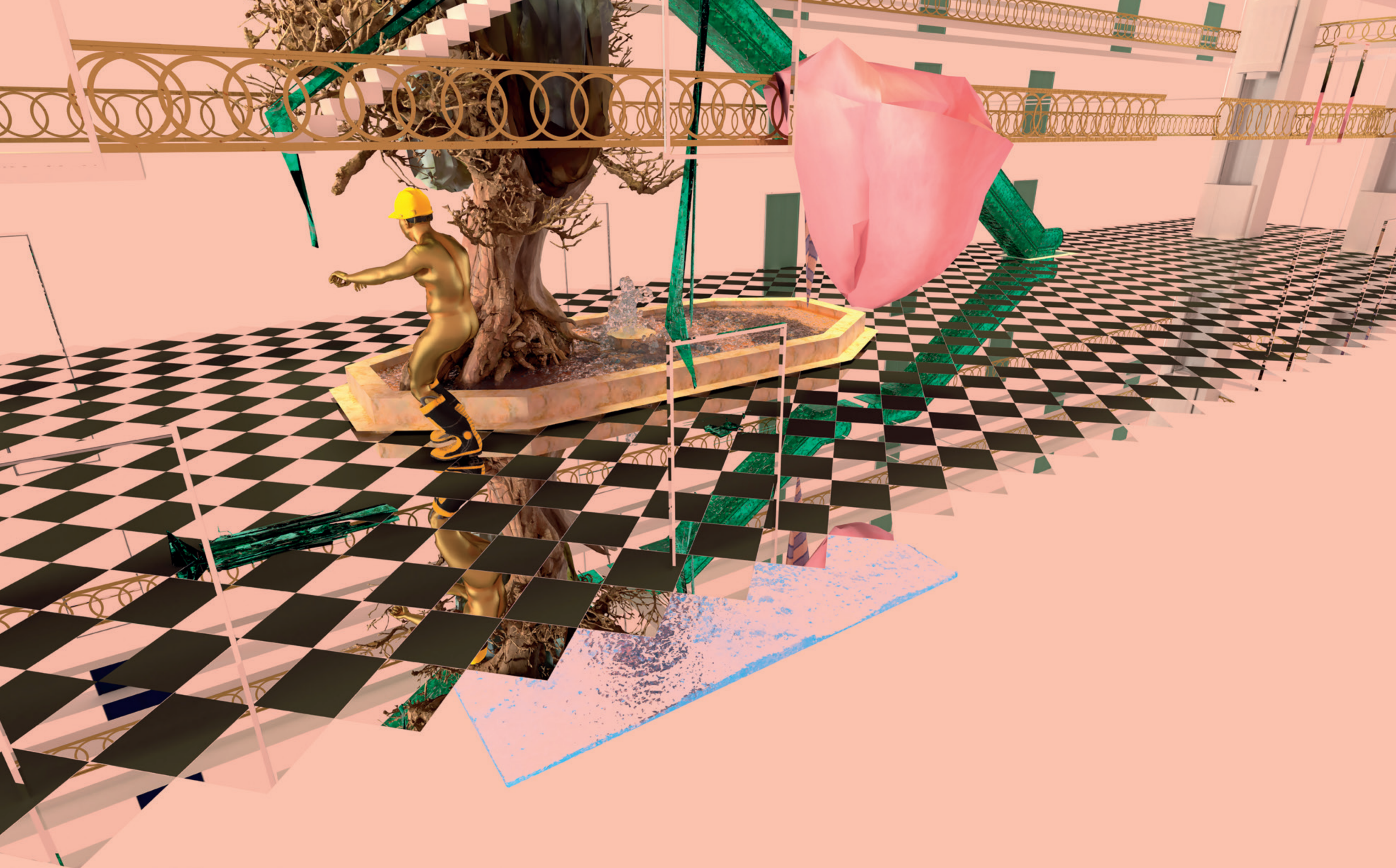
SAMSON YOUNG: Tyler Russell, the former director at Centre A, took me around Vancouver’s Chinatown on our first research trip. We stumbled upon an object in the military history museum there that belonged to Won Alexander Cumyow, a key member of the Chinese Empire Reform Association, community leader, and claimed to be the first Chinese-Canadian born in Canada. We were surprised that anybody could actually make such a claim and wondered about whether the assertion could actually be verified. That was the beginning of a journey that took all sorts of turns and ended up somewhere else.

—The exhibition took place in a former shopping mall in Chinatown—a neighborhood that has been continually threatened by outside interests since its establishment a century ago—and “stage[d] a double vision of global retrotopianism.”

—The works that were featured in this exhibition were underpinned by three lines of thinking that started as being entirely separate, but then came together. It is probably more accurate to say that I forged a connection between these otherwise very separate things, and then tried to make sense out this juxtaposition. The first is the history of Cumyow. I was thinking about his relationship to the Chinese nation as a kind of “observer” from afar, and somebody who was able to maintain a somewhat romanticized image of the Chinese nation precisely because he did not live in China.

—The second line of thinking is much broader and has to do with utopia as a political force. This is a part of a longer-term research project, which started when I visited Chicago in early 2018 and chanced upon some materials at the University of Chicago on the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair.

—The third line of thinking has to do with the context of the exhibition, Centre A’s new space at the Sun Wah Mall, which to me



looks very much like the kind of small neighborhood mall that I grew up with in Hong Kong in the 1980s. There was one right next to my parents’ old place in the North Point area of the city called “City Garden,” which was the former location for one of the most successful local department store in history: “Da Da Company” [Big Big Company.] Da Da Company went bankrupt in 1986, and the City Garden mall has since been taken over by several churches, where they co-exist with empty storefronts and barely-surviving small businesses. If you look hard enough, there are still traces of Da Da Company’s architecture in the City Garden mall today. So the exhibition mixed all these different threads and attempted to twist them together like a composition exercise—like in a song. —

At the core of this show is an animated music video, *Big Big Company* (2019), which features the 3D model of Cumyow as a character who danced his way through a series of strange images and environments, to a sound track that is my version of *My Favorite Things* from *The Sound of Music*. The second component is a collection of drawings about notions of utopia, which were displayed alongside a set of photographs that were taken at the City Garden mall. The third and last component is the recording and documentation of interviews that I conducted inside of a truck, in the form of a mobile-marathon live broadcast in Hong Kong in December 2018. Entitled *It’s a Heaven Over There* (2019), the work is a 12-hour-long marathon of conversation on notions of utopia through the lenses of history, art, literature, cinema, politics, education, social activism, music, and international relations.

**EA: You have said that you develop ideas through mental mind-maps. Though the various and divergent nodes connect for you, perhaps the viewer cannot draw every link in an exhibition. This reminds me of your description of the way the mind “fills in the gap” to imagine the totality of sounds one cannot comprehend—**

SY: Yes, I would agree with that. When I make a show, often I am saying ‘here is absolutely everything that is going on in my head when I am in contact with these materials.’ I do not worry about how much of that gets through to the audience, or whether or not they connect.

**EA: What can viewers expect at your upcoming solo exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago? Is the show related to other recent projects?**

SY: The show at the Smart will feature a trilogy of animated music videos, all of which are related to utopia in some ways. In 2018, I started a conversation with the institution about a solo exhibition that would be in conversation with the University of Chicago library’s collection. I was drawn to the materials on the 1933 World’s Fair, which also took place in Chicago. At that point, I already had two other shows lined up—both at Edouard Malingue in Shanghai, and Centre A—so I decided to digest this rather large topic in smaller bites over three shows. In these three animations, the last of which will debut at the Smart, I am looking at aspirational thinking from different angles. —

The 1933 World’s Fair carried the subtitle “A Century



of Progress.” It was an interesting time for such an event. The Great Depression was well underway, and shit was about to hit the fan with the Second World War. It was also an era when all the different ideologies—from fascism, to communism, to capitalism—were still very much in play. Compare that with now, when nothing is in play anymore. We have truly reached the end of history, not in the sense that Francis Fukuyama had defined it, where capitalism is the end game, but with a failure of the imagination to envision a future that is better than now. —

The third animation, which will be shown for the first time in Chicago, focuses on the World’s Fair. Part of the music video was shot at the ‘Houses of Tomorrow,’ which were built and shown for the first time at the 1933 fair, and have subsequently been preserved. The five houses are now part of the Indiana Dunes National Park.

**EA: You use color abundantly—I am thinking of your sound drawings, neons, and brightly-painted walls in exhibitions like *The Highway is like a Lion’s Mouth* in Shanghai and *One Hand Clapping* (both 2018). Do you associate particular colors with sounds?**

SY: In my installations and room settings, I like to use saturated colors and their playful child-like quality. But the matching of sound to color and shapes in my drawing is a whole other bag of things. The relationship there is more precise. I do not have synesthesia, but I do have a very strong and somewhat consistent sound to color imagination. C major is always a like transparent yellowish color to my ears.

**EA: When working with choirs and bells, does the connotation of holiness appeal to you? How do you consider the effect of sounds while you are working?**

SY: In some works, yes. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (2015) makes reference to this history, and years ago I made a musical theater piece specifically about that too.

“Sound and music are dangerous precisely because they are a very potent tool of resistance.”

—SAMSON YOUNG

**EA: You have said that composers are at the forefront of responding to technology. Do you consider forthcoming developments in surveillance, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence?**

SY: Yes, I think that is true. There are all kinds of interesting projects floating around in the area of AI and music that are too numerous to mention, but I do think that the history of music is very much a history of technological development.

**EA: I thought of you during the unfolding of the Jamal Khashoggi incident, particularly when Turkish officials announced they had audio evidence of his murder. Do you think of sound as dangerous or as a tool of resistance?**

SY: Sound and music are dangerous precisely because they are a very potent tool of resistance. Music cuts right through the intellect and appeal to the emotions. But it plays both ways, right? For example, authoritarian governments frequently use the power of music in propaganda and in rituals.

**EA: The use of 3D-printing has become more prevalent in your practice of late. How do you consider the relationship between these objects to the rest of the work? Do you consider them as sculptures?**

SY: Sometimes they are sculptures, sometimes they are sets to a theatrical environment that I am trying to create, and not like super precious objects on their own. I like using 3D-printing because I am not a sculptor, but I know how to model stuff in a 3D programs. The process gives me a level of control, because there is only a small gap between my mouse sculpting the thing in the computer, and the actual physical printed object.

**EA: You have called composing the tool you use to organize yourself. Does this extend to aspects of your life, outside of art-making?**

SY: I wish. I have come to realize as I grow older that my art is really the only place where I can achieve a satisfactory level of control of form. And art is a safe space to let my OCD self go crazy—nobody is going to die of a terrible accident if I played around with imposing new forms in my art. —

I have always thought that the negotiation between form and content in art mirrors the struggle between idealism and realism in life. In a musical composition, form is what keeps everything together, a temporal structure that is beautiful on its own: the ideal vision of the thing, the blueprint of the thing. But the form itself does not make the work. Content is what you fill the form with, and also all the whimsical craziness that happens in the moment of composing, which sometimes wants to defy the form—you then have to make decisions about whether the form or the content is going to win in any specific musical moment. Then there is also the kind of form that is emergent, and that comes into being organically through acts of improvisation. These organic musical forms are a bit hit and miss—but, when they



do work, it is usually something that is so out of this world and so complicated that it is impossible to plot in advance.

**EA:** What makes a system of notation attractive or interesting to you?

**SY:** I like order, but I also like seeing what people do to defy that sense of order, or use that structure to propose their own alternate system within a system.

**EA:** I am sure you also read about how US diplomats in Cuba became suddenly sick (with symptoms mimicking brain injuries) after hearing persistent buzzing noises. While American officials once thought it was sonic warfare, experts now think the sound was simply “lovelorn crickets.” Your work suggests that you appreciate the absurd.

**SY:** The world is absurd. But sonic weapons are a real thing, and always have been.

**EA:** If you were not an artist—or a composer—what would you be?

**SY:** Probably a writer.

—  
Samson Young (b. 1979) was trained formally as a composer before he became one of Hong Kong’s most internationally exhibited artists. His multimedia presentation *Songs for Disaster Relief* at the 2017 Venice Biennale was entered around the trope of 1980s “charity singles” and their often tone-deaf implications. Earlier works, such as the video *Muted Situation #1: Muted String Quartet* (2014), saw the artist direct musicians to play through the entirety of a composition without applying full pressure to their instruments, leaving only the sounds of the performers’ breath and fingers along the finger boards. A culmination of a year-long residency, Young’s first US solo museum exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago and is centered around the idea of utopia.

*Silver Moon or Golden Star, Which Will you Buy of Me?* at the Smart Museum of Art runs through December 29, 2019.



*A note from the writer:*

*Since June 16, 2019, protesters have taken to the streets dozens more times with increasing vigor and desperation. Now, the sounds to be expected by nightfall are shots of teargas, the pounding of riot police shields against pavement, and rubber bullets fired at close range. In late July, the noises were of the wooden sticks used by white-clad gangsters to brutally beat the flesh of civilians—including a pregnant woman—passing through a train station after a demonstration. There is a long and studied history of muted collaboration between governments and triads in Greater China, and footage quickly emerged suggesting a close relationship between police, officials, and the gangs. That night, the most disturbing sound of all was the slam when the neighborhood police station shut its doors and refused to answer the people begging for help outside.*

**TITLE PAGE, PAGE 141:**  
Samson Young, *Photograph from the production of Houses of Tomorrow*, 2019. Video and sound installation, 20 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jonathan Loïc Rogers.

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**PAGE 142–143:**  
Samson Young, *Da Da Company* (animation still), 2019. Video and sound installation, 11 minutes and 55 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist.

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**PAGE 144–147:**  
Samson Young, *Houses of Tomorrow* (animation still), 2019. Video and sound installation, 20 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

# Utopian Blind Spots

ASSAF EVRON // MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

By MK Meador



[ THE SEEN ]

We all know we live in the legacy of modernism, whether it be the label of the ‘post-modern’ age, or the normalized sight of Frank Lloyd Wright’s homes in and outside of Chicago. In tracking the aesthetic legacies of the modernist project and effects, within the context of the United States and his native Israel, Chicago-based artist Assaf Evron reimagines imposed architecture and the natural environment within his photographic and sculptural installations. In alignment with the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial, Evron has undertaken several projects: a self-titled solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago as a part of the *Chicago Works* series, and a public work that imposes the image of an Israeli mountain range upon the windows of the Esplanade Apartments (at 900 N Lake Shore Drive), a Mies van der Rohe designed residential complex—further marking the artist’s interest in the relationship between the natural and the constructed.

MK Meador: I would like to start by asking about how your work as a photographer either intersects with or challenges the architectural—can you speak about your connection to the Chicago Architecture Biennial this fall?

Assaf Evron: Yes—I was part of the first Architecture Biennial in 2015, with an exhibition entitled *Athens & Oraibi*, at the Historic Water Tower, which followed landscapes and [decorative] ornaments. The project was a part of this big experiment—a type of magic that you could never imagine would happen. Architecture has always been present in my practice, because photography is prescient subject matter for me; it structures our lives in such an intimate and direct way that we do not necessarily stop and reflect on it.

MKM: How has this structuring affected your work?

AE: We think about modernism now as a movement, but where I grew up [in Israel], there is nothing besides modernism. You live modernism without knowing the name ‘modernism,’ because so many things had been built within the last hundred years. Of course, there are many historic buildings as well, which I am very engaged and involved with in different projects. But the state of Israel is one of those experiments in modernism. It is part of an experiment that was done in many places around

the world (in each site, it was slightly different, under the wider umbrella of modernism), to create a new man and a new environment for them to live within a utopian vision. ——— In Europe during the second wave of the modernist project, the goal was for these cities and locales to rebuild themselves after the war. For me, it is really interesting that this idea, as an idea, is embedded within different contexts, for example in Eastern Europe, the Middle East at large, South America, and parts of Western Europe. In my work, there is always a conflict and the tension that this idea of a modern utopia has failed.

MKM: Do you think that modernism is always defined by failure?

AE: Actually, by necessity it has to fail [laughs]. Utopia means *not place*—that is the Greek root of the word. Once it exists, it means it is not a utopia anymore. It has to fail by default. Yet, the exercise of imagining a future is very valuable at the same time—I think although many utopian ideas have failed, we might still be able to learn something from those attempts. When we talk about this failure within a global context, we can talk about democracy, which is not in particularly good shape. Democracy did not have a very glamorous century.

MKM: How did the work for the *Chicago Works* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art come about?

AE: Charlotte Ikes, the curator for the exhibition, had reached out—we had been thinking about what would be interesting to do for an artist project that deals with architecture. We both have a distinct interest in architectural ornaments, both formal and informal, and the ways in which the form of certain decorative elements convey meaning that can sometimes be conflicting for different cultures. The idea for this exhibition was to follow the idea of the meander, a Greek architectural decorative border. I like the idea, because meander (the word) comes from the name of the river Meander in Turkey. Because of this origin, the pattern has an inherent layer of meaning—the way that culture and nature interact—and points to the ways that projection can affect our surroundings without us even knowing. ——— For example, few people know that when they say *meander* they mean the river, and that the root of the word originated from the site before it disappeared: the

river changed its name. Those types of historical narratives are really interesting to me, because they put things within a wider cultural context. Both in modernism, but also within the proto-modernism of Chicago, the ornament of the meander had been appropriated for different reasons.

MKM: How has meander made its way into your installation for *Chicago Works*?

AE: As I started to follow the meander ornament throughout Chicago, my work was to turn the building back into a vase. Moving from the work I had done in Israel, I went and photographed the three buildings in Chicago that incorporated the pattern. It has become an Atlas of images, like that of Aby Warburg—of objects moving through culture—and how these images are affecting other images. I found the images of vases, which are rare, at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Others are from the Met and their open source archive. For this exhibition, I am making a sourcebook that includes these visual materials that are related to the work, but are not the work itself.

“... my work was to turn the building back into a vase.”

—ASSAF EVRON

[ UTOPIAN BLIND SPOTS | 149 ]



**MKM:** Can you tell us about the reference images you selected to include in your Sourcebook? Especially your references to the tile works installed in Israel?

**AE:** Yes—the tile works, which I pull from in the MCA installation, are a very common practice in Israel. They look like trees, but are an artistic tiling installed on buildings throughout various cities that have no authors—they are clearly elaborate and intentional, but they have no attributed architects. I had taken the building plans from the city archives, for buildings that were done in the 1960s, but now the architects are all gone. It is very distinctive, but also very defaulted.

**MKM:** How do you mean defaulted?

**AE:** I suppose like the modernist approach to have a resource, such as these prefabricated tiles, at our disposal, and the desire to use them in a way that creates an aesthetic living environment by just reorganizing them.

**MKM:** Which buildings did you choose to photograph in Chicago? What unites them for this exhibition?

**AE:** Each of the buildings I am using have the Greek key. They are the Marquette, the Monadnock, and the Sharp Building—all by the same architects, and each very important in their own right. As I was looking for the Greek knot, or the same pattern on different buildings in Chicago, I was also looking at burial vases from the third-century BC. The same pattern is on the Marquette

building as the ropes on the geometric vase. And then there are those stair-like, snake-like patterns here and there, that then were appropriated to this city square in Tel Aviv. One of the main sculptures for the exhibition is based on this pattern, which is part of the city square in Tel Aviv, that was meant to represent democracy. I took the form and turned it into a screen, one that is now an obstacle within the exhibition.

**MKM:** Is there any material significance to the tile works?

**AE:** Yes, the tile works employ an extensive and laborious process; they are all handmade tiles and are coated in an expensive, complicated enamel called *American Accent*. So, you have American Accents [laughs], which is the name of the product but also the name of the piece—*Untitled, (Kikar Rabin Square American Accents)* (2019). Kikar Rabin is the name of the square in Tel Aviv.

**MKM:** So the work literally and figuratively interrelates Chicago and Israel—

**AE:** Very much so. In Israel, the idea was about democracy, but in Chicago the idea was about empire. Of wanting to be as great as Ancient Rome. I was looking at the original plan of the Kikar Rabin square from 1965, and only after Rabin was assassinated in 1995, did they recognize his name in the site. Kikar Rabin is now an icon, where we go and protest. The idea of the public in Israel is very different than in the United States.

**MKM:** How so?

**AE:** That is a slippery slope—

but, for example, the idea of social democracy and the way you own space is very different. In the US, everybody ‘owns’ the space, and because everybody owns it, no one uses it. It is all very political, because public space is then saturated with the politics of the place, but also the motivation, the reality, or even the aspirational.

**MKM:** There are such subtle details in your work, which point to an irony that when you create a shared space, that the details have to be very quiet.

**AE:** I like the subtle and the overlooked in that way. For example, once I lift a detail from the floor and instead make it into a vertical barrier, you have to confront it and understand that it is no longer just a floor that you are stepping on.

**MKM:** What other elements will be included in this show that may have been reworked or updated?

**AE:** Well, there is the cave. It is interesting that we are speaking about resources, because the source of the cave work that comprises the wall installations and two-dimensional works had been historically used as a quarry, dating back to the tenth-century BC. When I photographed the site, I wanted to use the images of the cave the same way one would use a quarry—digging for materials. Throughout this series of works, I used the photographs as building blocks for collage.

**MKM:** Have you done much still-life work—based on your images of the vase?

**AE:** For me, photography is a tool. I started my career as a

self-taught photographer, but I am not married to any genre or one way to understand photography. I use it to present a visual proposition. In this way, the sculptures also operate as photographs. I can take a photograph of something and then relocate it, or take a photograph of this visual instance and then relocate it in space, the space of the gallery. Sculpture is no different.

**MKM:** So much of your work attempts to make the viewer face something that is not immediately apparent or completely obvious—

**AE:** Yes, in a way, the ornamentation in the exhibition is like anti-architecture. My architecture and history friends are talking about how there are these gaps in planning—all these things that are not architecture but are interacting with architecture. That there is not proper architectural research about these things, like blind spots. That is where this work becomes relevant, because it is doing this archival and visual research into something that is otherwise totally forgotten or overlooked.

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*Chicago Works: Assaf Evron* runs at the Museum of Contemporary Art through January 6, 2020.

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Sodom and Gomorrah)*, 2018.

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**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Assaf Evron, *Untitled (Zedekiah's Cave)*, 2018. Installation view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago as part of *Chicago Works*. Image courtesy of the artist.



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# All the World is a Stage

SARA RAMO // PROFILE OF THE ARTIST

By Ionit Behar



Spanish-born, Brazil-based artist Sara Ramo appropriates everyday elements and scenes, displacing them from their original context and rearranging them across her videos, photographs, collages, sculptures, and installations. The following conversation took place during the last weeks of her installation, *lindalocaviejabruja*, at The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. Ramo and I spoke of her recent works concerning feminist ideas, her passion for theater, and the current political situation in Brazil.

**Ionit Behar:** You are currently installing your upcoming show at the Reina Sofía—tell me a bit about the exhibition. I am curious about the title choice, *lindalocaviejabruja* or in English, *beautifulcrazyoldwitch*. What will you be showing there? What does the title refer to? And what was your process like for working on this project?

**Sara Ramo:** Absolutely—in this project, I used the museum as a studio, meaning I recorded the videos within the site, and made the installations inside the museum itself. It is an exhibition that relates to the space, but is also very open to the unconscious; I explored certain convictions about women and the feminine. In the end, I think the exhibition is a sort of fragmented story, or a fragmentation of bodies. This is something I have thought about in previous works as well, yet what is different here is that this museum has a very big emotional load for me—it was the first place in which I had contact with art, where I took refuge, where I went to the library. A place that made me feel welcome. This museum is not neutral for me—it is a place where, in a way, I found myself and left my condition of being a woman.

— When I was thinking about *lindalocaviejabruja*, I imagined a sort of route or path that ran through all of

the stigmas women face. For me, it was a difficult process, as I had to go through the work of understanding all the stigmas inside *lindalocaviejabruja* itself. I spent a whole year reading feminist books and texts, and although it was something that I had already done, this time I really submerged myself in the subject. It was like I started to see the world from another perspective, and it revealed a very painful reality.

**IB:** What books and texts have you been reading?

**SR:** I really liked the *El Calibán y la Bruja* (*Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*) (2004) by Silvia Federici and also *Brujas* (*Witches*) by Mona Cholette (2019). I reread Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), both of which I had read when I was very young. I have also been reading *Quem tem medo do feminismo negro?* (2018) by Djamila Tais Ribeiro dos Santos, who writes on Black feminism in Brazil. It was a process of study that I did to survive, to sort of understand the things that happened and have happened to me.

**IB:** When you say ‘fragmented bodies,’ what are you referring to?

**SR:** For example, I am using one of the rooms in the museum—generally used for meetings—that is packed with closets and cabinets, where the audience can walk into. At first glance, it appears there is not much to see but then one can find strange and hidden things inside the closets.

— There is also one video that shows a theater stage where the curtain covers the upper body of a woman and only her legs are visible. In another room there is a wallpaper with images of arms, legs, feet, and other body fragments. It is hard to explain because the idea of the fragments is more conceptual than illustrative. For example, the interior of one of the closets looks like the interior of a mouth or a vagina. There is a feminine presence being uncovered in the exhibition at different times that is sort of monstrous and unknown. Nothing is completely

revealed, but rather everything is fragmented. I believe we, women, have not had the right space to express ourselves. So, in the show I make a non-existent woman made of fragments. The exhibition is a sort of sublimation from woman-object to woman-monster.

**IB:** Can you tell me about your installation *Para Marcela e as Outras* [*For Marcela and the Others*] at the Capela do Morumbi in San Pablo in 2017?

**SR:** They call this place a “chapel” but it is not really a chapel. It was a place where slaves lived and is now used for contemporary art exhibitions. You can see the construction technique of that time throughout the space—where walls were made with excrement, animal drool, blood, bugs, straw, earthworms, snails, etc. The walls were made in layers and held together with sticks that would eventually be taken out, leaving small holes in the walled foundation. This construction system is very common in Brazil, but in this Chapel, the walls were left unfinished and you are able to see the holes on the walls without the white cover. When I was invited to have a show here, I thought about this space as a body. The holes reminded me of death.

— The neighborhood where I live is home to many transwomen who do sex work, and I began getting very involved with them, having conversations with them about our identities. I started to listen to their stories about living under extreme violence, and in many ways, began to understand my feminine condition through them. They suffer a double form of a violence: a violence that a woman lives for the mere fact of being a woman, but they also suffer a violence for not being “womanly” enough. Cismen are very violent towards them. Often, they are attracted to them, they like having sex with them, but at the same time this generates a lot of violence towards them.

— *The Para Marcela e as Outras* exhibition opened a sort of psychoanalytic abyss for me. I began to question my own identity and understand that what you identify with, or what you think your sexuality is, is a completely imposed





abstraction. This exhibition was the beginning for my work for *lindalocaviejabruja* at the Reina Sofía. It was also a very important exhibition for me because I had to detach myself from my own aesthetic and take on the energy of the space.

**IB:** As someone with both Brazilian and Spanish citizenship, how do you feel about having these two identities? I would also like to hear how has it been for you living in Brazil under the dictatorship of Bolsonaro.

SR: I have to admit that even though I have been very lucky to be in Europe and enjoy the things that the government does and offers, such as education or access to museums like the Reina Sofía, I have always felt like an immigrant there. There is a certain humiliation and prejudice against immigrants in Spain—at least that is what I felt when I arrived. On the other hand, in Brazil, my Spanish identity is always more celebrated. My Spanish and Brazilian identities have always been a problem for me. I wish I belonged to just one place, because in the end I am neither Spanish nor Brazilian. Besides, now I have an accent in both languages! —

—In the arts, it is a bit complicated to have two identities, especially being a Latin American artist. The West looks for a certain type of “Latin American Art,” with Latin American content, made by a Latin American. I admit that I like a difficulty in defining my art as Latin American; I find it interesting because my work is less colonizable as a hybrid thing. —

As for the

question about Bolsonaro. Well, it is a great sadness, what happened to us in Brazil. Thinking about this makes me want to cry. When he won, I was at the Ocupação Nove De Julho, which is an occupation in San Pablo that is part of Movimento Sem Teto do Centro (MSTC), a movement for fair housing. I might have been very naïve, but I did not think he was going to win. It was the most horrible thing that could happen. We now have a government that allows murder, allows chauvinism, allows racism. We have a state that does not protect its people. But during these horrible times, there are also good things—more spaces of community, solidarity, and dialogue. We have a project with a group of artists in Cidade Tiradentes, one of the most violent districts near San Pablo, where we are creating an itinerant school called “Ali Leste” where we offer people access to art in a variety of spaces like cultural centers and museums. We hope that this will help them access the university later on. Bolsonaro generates more segregation, and this is always worse for people without resources. —

—With Bolsonaro, it has also been a terrible time for the arts—we no longer have a Ministry of Culture. This ministry is now called the “Ministry of Citizenship” and includes sports, culture, and social development.

**IB:** The first time I encountered your work in person was during a trip I took to Montevideo in 2011, and I had the opportunity to see your video *A Banda dos Sete [Band of Seven]* (2010) at the Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo (EAC). Since then, your work has been so present for me. In *A Banda dos Sete*, as well as in your other video, *Os Ajudantes [The Helpers]* (2015) there are figures that look half-human, half-creature. How do these characters arise? I feel like these two videos have a lot in common.

SR: In these videos, the human figure gets combined with a sort of mythological figure, an animal, a strange being. I think this has to do with me being a foreigner in my own country. I had this feeling when my family and I arrived in Spain, and there were not many Brazilians living there. It was a time just after the dictatorship, and sometimes we were looked at as if we were bugs. The

Brazilian philosopher César Kiraly said that when the Spaniards arrived in America, they thought that the indigenous people they encountered were not sufficiently human. Part of our hate is not being able to recognize or identify with the differences of another person. These ideas and conflicts are very present in my works. —

*A Banda dos Sete* and *Os Ajudantes* are part of a trilogy, but I have not made the third part yet. They are all very connected. For example, the wall in *A Banda dos Sete* is like the darkness in *Os Ajudantes*. Those elements in the two videos are what create different dimensions, what makes us see and not see.

**IB:** Your installations are like scenographies for an act that happened or is about to happen—as if waiting for someone to put the objects back in their place. Have you studied theater?

SR: I took theater classes from age eight until sixteen. I was actually in a semi-professional theater group, but I had terrible stage-fright. What I liked the most about theater was the simplicity of the scenographies to be able to tell a story—if you needed a door, you would just place a door on stage. Theater and dance have been very important in my life and my imaginary. I read a lot of Ibsen, Beckett, and Artaud. The theater of the absurd is particularly relevant today for me—I think, how can we represent the barbarity under Bolsonaro? In a way, theater helps me materialize and concretize. I have the impression that in contemporary art, “life is a theater.” I like to think that you can play with this.

*This interview was conducted in Spanish and is here translated to English by the author.*

— Sara Ramo was born in Madrid, Spain, in 1975, and lives and works in São Paulo, Brazil. Her recent exhibitions include: *lindalocaviejabruja*, Museu Reina Sofía (2019); *La Caída*, Sala Alcalá 31, Madrid (2019); 13ª Bienal de Havana, Cuba (2019); *Para Marcela e as outras*, Capela do Morumbi, São Paulo (2017); 20ª Bienal de Arte Paiz, Cidade da Guatemala, Guatemala (2016); 9ª Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre (2013); Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah, Emirados Árabes Unidos (2013). The artist participated in the 2018 and 2010 Bienal de São Paulo and the 2009 Venice Biennale. Her work figures in the collections of Inhotim, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Instituto Cultural Itaú, São Paulo, Brazil; CIFO - Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation, Miami, USA; and the Fundacione Casa di Risparmio di Modena, Italy, among others.

— *Sara Ramo: lindalocaviejabruja* at the Reina Sofía in Madrid runs through March 2020.

**TITLE PAGE:**  
Sara Ramo, *uma e outra vez*, 2019. HD video, audio, 10 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

— **PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
Sara Ramo, *A Banda Dos Sete [Band of Seven]*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

— **PAGE 158, BOTH IMAGES:**  
Installation View of Sara Ramo: *lindalocaviejabruja*, July 2019. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Photograph by Joaquín Cortés and Román Loes. Archival Photograph of the Museo Reina Sofía.

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