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Images of Images: Notes on Anne Collier’s and Kotama Bouabane’s photo practices

By Nora Bronstein

Photography, since its very beginning, has been self-reflexive, with photos and cameras themselves becoming subject matter for further forays into imagemaking. Recent works by Anne Collier (b. Los Angeles, lives in New York) and Kotama Bouabane (b. Pakse, Laos; lives in Toronto) recall this history while making visible the ways in which culture and gender are appropriated and commodified within photography. In particular, Collier and Bouabane make visual inquiries into the dissemination of ubiquitous photographic instruments of marketing, production, and ultimately consumerism. Through the construction, circulation, and recontextualization of photographic advertisements and manuals, both artists challenge the ways in which we see and consume various media. Although they have very different approaches to image production, both photographers “address subjects germane to the world of photography while simultaneously questioning clichés and tropes within that sphere.”

Collier’s series Woman With A Camera (2006–present) depicts, as the title suggests, photographic ephemera in which various women are positioned with an assortment of lens-based apparatuses. Woman With Cameras #1 and #2 (both 2012) introduces a headless, sprawling female nude whose anatomy is peppered by Contax, Olympus, Pentax, and Bronica cameras. Her body stretches over a full magazine spread and is truncated by the fold of the spine with the foregrounded cameras intimately hovering over her reclining figure. This kind of tropic depiction reappears in Zoom, 1978 (printed 2009), which likewise features a headless, lounging female clothed in nothing more than thigh-high stockings and gold high heels. Here, however, the female subject is bionic, as a large camera is propped on top of her neck. With one hand she adjusts her Cyclops-like oculus and with the other she seems at the ready to release the shutter, as if to say she is recording us as much as we are visually consuming her. The same exchange between subject and viewer is rendered by Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto) (2013). A mostly nude female adorned by an assortment of shell and beaded jewelry leans slightly to the right as she points her camera at something or someone out of the viewer’s sightline. Collier has paired the National Geographic-like postcard image with an image of its blank recto. Written across the barrier that demarcates the typical postcard spaces used for addresses and messages is the caption “A. Réal Photograph.” The postcard also tells us that this image, titled Say Cheese before I click. (Turkana Girl), is from the “Edition East Africa, 1312.”

Rather than doctoring, cropping, or altering these images, Collier simply re-documents readily available materials. Shot against stark, white backgrounds, the magazines, postcards, advertisements, and other objects that appear in the Woman With A Camera series are shown as is. This directness should not be confused with neutrality. “In these and others of their type, Collier has mined a rich vein of..."
irony in which women’s bodies and phallic cameras become intertwined in a misogynist system that is as consistent as it is extensive.” While several works in the series might challenge the cliché of passive female subjects as consumable objects, these images still seem to depict deeper photographic tensions. Woman with a Camera (diptych) (2006), for instance, pictures publicity stills from the 1978 thriller Eyes of Laura Mars (directed by Irvin Kershner), in which a fashion photographer, played by Faye Dunaway, develops the ability to see through the eyes of a killer, through the lens of her camera. Despite this bizarre affliction, Dunaway, pictured with her Nikon camera in hand, could be seen, as curator Michael Darling has noted, as an image “of female empowerment and agency or perhaps some kind of reversal of the male gaze.” Celebrities reappear elsewhere in Collier’s series. Woman With A Camera (The Last Sitting, Bert Stern) (2009) documents a photograph of Marilyn Monroe, also posed with her Nikon camera in hand, in what would be her last photo shoot. Monroe is pictured here in the pages of Stern’s popular 1962 monograph, The Last Sitting, surrounded by colorful tabs, presumably marking the artist’s time and investment in pouring over this particular publication. Darling further notes that it is more conceivable to decode images such as these as further examples of male fantasy rising up rhizomatically through popular culture. Collier has found the photo industry itself to be rampantly and (probably) unwittingly sexist, and her photographs skewering its conventions surround the Woman With A Camera series with a halo of critique. . . . In these and others of their type, Collier has mined a rich vein of irony in which women’s bodies and phallic cameras become intertwined in a misogynist system that is as consistent as it is extensive. Those featured in Woman With A Camera are not shown as meeting our gaze. Rather, their bodies and celebrity have been appropriated as tools of marketing, branding, and commodity fetish. Perhaps as a corrective gesture, Collier has developed a series of large-format ocular imagery, using her own eyes and those borrowed from other mass-produced sources. The enlarged, singular eye in both Developing Tray #2 (Grey) (2009) and Cut (Color) (2010) stare directly at the viewer. In the former, a close-up of the artist’s eye sits in a developing tray, while in the latter, it is bisected by a paper-cutting tool. Conjuring all kinds of platitudes about the eyes being the window to the soul, Collier’s images also compel a larger history of photography and the fraught relationship between the eye, the photographer, and the camera. In her contextualization of Collier’s practice, Chrissie Iles posits that during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, photography had played a key role in the construction and dissemination of female sexual and emotional archetypes, as the social mores surrounding psychological problems, sex, and nudity loosened up to a degree that allowed an unprecedentedly eroticized objectification of the female body and the emotions hidden within it in advertising and popular culture, reflecting the double bind of a permissive society that both liberated and stereotyped women.

Iles continues by stating that “the struggle for control of the photographic image reaches further into history, playing out across the entire twentieth century in direct correlation to the increase in women’s social and economic power, and to the threat posed to male authority.” Collier’s isolating of and focus on eyes likens our instrument of seeing to the camera’s mechanisms of observation. This particular kind of portraiture allows Collier to stare back, to set her gaze outward and inward. Outward in the sense that she stares back at those who would typically set their gaze upon her and other female subjects,
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and inward, in that she examines the internal workings of the photograph and advertising industry.

Similarly, Bouabane’s recent project We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow (2016) takes as its starting point a found image of two coconuts from a 1970s Kodak manual on color correction. The seductive image of the coconuts presented as drinking vessels recalls alluring advertisements for exclusive resorts or opulent travel destinations. Bouabane was immediately interested in the image as appearing to conflate the banality of the content found within typical technical photographic manuals and the exoticized use of coconuts to denote tropical and luxurious getaways. This initial interest generated a larger project in which Bouabane experiments with the coconut as material and as subject matter. In doing so, he implicates photography’s complacency in the exoticization and commodification of the animate and inanimate subjects foregrounded by the camera’s expansive reach.

Recalling the earliest of photographic experiments, such as those realized by Henry Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins, Bouabane’s photograms render the coconut as an abstract, graphic object. For Bouabane’s exhibition at Toronto’s Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, curated by Leila Timmins (which ran April 29–May 28, 2016), the photograms were paired with images made with a coconut pinhole camera and images produced by using coconut water in the analog developing process. But what separates this particular work from photography’s earliest outputs appears to be the humorous undertones that inform Bouabane’s series. The negative image produced by the coconut photogram appears anamorphic and somewhat comical. The grid of images contains slight variations in gesture and mood that the coconut faces seem to emote. This kind of playful gesture is also at work in Sulphur Mountain II (2015). Taken in Canada while Bouabane was in residence at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, the artist positions himself amid a group of tourists taking selfie-stick snapshots to document themselves within the surrounding scenery. Bouabane’s prop selfie stick, however, is precariously balancing a coconut on its very tip. This particular image starts to move Bouabane’s project away from a purely obsessive study of the coconut to a commentary on image production and circulation.

Sulphur Mountain II was accompanied by a small shelf on which Bouabane stacked a series of take-away postcards. The postcards picture the artist posing triumphantly with his coconut selfie stick amid the scenic panoramas of the Rocky Mountain range. This gesture seems to evoke all manner of photographic ephemera. Combining the portraiture of the carte-de-visite with the sublime landscape or ubiquitous travel images common in stereoscopic collections, the small stack of images both enacts and critiques the instruments of historic and contemporary image circulation. These kinds of images were initially propelled by a collective urge to collect—and, by extension, a shared impulse to possess a wider world of objects, people, and places. Further, “the carte-de-visite is a particularly distinctive commodity form, because what is being exchanged is pictures of people. The person being photographed is turned into a thing, a picture, and then this thing is sold, exchanged and consumed.”

This kind of picturing of picture-taking offers a self-reflective commentary that, like Collier’s works, evokes the slippery power dynamics between those in front of and those behind the camera. Bouabane’s selfie stick seems to ask us to consider what implications there might be for the mechanisms of image-construction when the photographer and subject are one and the same. Self-portraiture is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but it is certainly one that is increasingly common, and yet ceaselessly complicated. Several scholars have noted that the selfie taker has been codified not just as a psychological type but also as a physical manifestation of certain cultural prejudices. As Bouabane noted in the panel discussion “To keep (something) in position: props in contemporary photography” held in May 2016 at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Sulphur Mountain II problematizes the stereotype of the Asian photo-taking tourist. Folded into this image are the complicated layers in which representation is negotiated between viewer, maker, and subject.

Bouabane’s project borrows its title from the 1988 Beach Boys’ song Kokomo, which alludes to a fictional island off the Florida Keys. As Timmins notes, the exhibition explores the construction of tropical non-places—ones that exist only in the North American middle-class imagination—through numerous familiar tropes in travel photography. Just as Kokomo becomes a stand-in for all things exotic, images featuring palm trees, coconuts, or dewy cocktails conjure ideas of paradise, escape, leisure, and luxury.

Bouabane emphasizes how the coconut has become an abbreviation for any number of “exotic” locales, and that our notions of place are often folded into such objects. His work seems to further point to the ways in which photography flattens our understanding of place by fo-

Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto) (2013) from the series Woman With A Camera (2006—present) by Anne Collier; courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow; Galerie Neu, Berlin
cusing in on objects that homologize “exotic” sites. In other words, the photographic tends to absolve places of their complicated and nuanced realities and histories, such as those related to colonialism and resource extraction, and instead turns these sites into visually and physically consumable versions of paradise readily available to viewers and tourists.

Centered within the exhibition at Gallery 44, Bouabane materializes a floor-to-ceiling installation constructed of found images from a National Geographic magazine special edition on bamboo. Barely visible on the stems of the artificial bamboo forest are scenes of individuals harvesting this lucrative resource. From afar, this labor is subsumed by lush greens and the shiny, reflective plastic tubes that contain the source material. Bouabane notes in an interview with Timmins that:

the magazine almost spans the whole history of photography and so is implicated in the politics of the medium that have spanned its history. When the magazine started in October 1888, it was trying to open up the world to new audiences who were unable to travel and it was trying to share knowledge that no one had. Unfortunately, our way of viewing these images has changed and instead of opening up the world, they have the capability to limit and close down knowledge or exploit the people in the photographs.15

Bamboo and coconuts share a similar trajectory. These natural resources have become lucrative cash crops, but have also been marketed for possessing qualities not purely related to agriculture. Bamboo and coconuts have been adopted by various multinational companies for use in various products due to their eco-friendly and sustainable attributes, while also being marketed as having holistic and mystical health or spiritualistic properties. A case in point is the language used by the photographic paper brand Hahnemühle to describe their bamboo-based paper line. The description used on Hahnemühle’s website states that theirs is the world’s first digital fine art inkjet paper made from bamboo fibres. Bamboo represents spirituality, naturalness and resource-saving paper production. Particularly suitable for warm-toned colour and monochrome prints, Bamboo really highlights the sensuality of images.16

The images featured on the paper’s packaging are of Asian men modeled in stereotypical and arguably derogatory dress and poses and include a young man wearing a bamboo hat (often referred to as the “rice paddy hat”) and two individuals engaging in what appears to be a martial art. The tagline that follows the images reads: “BAMBOO Spiritual Black & White and Colour Photography.”

Bouabane’s compusive use of coconuts speaks to a culture of excessive marketing and branding and the ways in which nature and culture have been commodified and made consumable by these forms of mass communication. But it might also speak to the concept of economies of scale. In economics, “economies of scale” refers to the reduction in cost per unit due to increased production. The quantity offsets the expenses as cost advantages are related to the scale and size of the production line. This might also be a pertinent metaphor for photography. Perhaps the more images we have access to, the more naturalized or neutralized systems of representation become. In the case of National Geographic, for example, the geopolitical is subsumed by the lure of looking and the seductive pull of images of “exotic” places and cultures. Bouabane’s project seems to stress that the scale of exoticized image circulation makes it difficult to move from a passive gaze to critical visualization.

Both Collier and Bouabane present us with photographs of graphs, images within images. While both artists use analog technolo-gies and conceptually attend to the history of photography, their work equally addresses our image-saturated present. Collier’s appropriative use of the same kind of stark, black-and-white backgrounds used in product promotions, the recurring employment of doubling in her practice, and her enlarged images that conjure billboard advertisements invoke contemporary forms of commercialized image production. Correspondingly, Bouabane’s hypervisualization of the coconut reproduces the rapacious circulation of mass-produced images. Borrowing the very techniques that are being critiqued problematizes the ways in which photography and image construction maneuver within systems of economic and social power.

Images now move faster than ever. And while there is more to look at than ever before, we seem to see less and less. Collier and Bouabane reflect on this kind of hypervisibility and the conditions in which images are produced, but their work also asks that we slow our processes of looking. We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow seems an appropriate directive from both artists, as both Collier and Bouabane unsettle established orders of representation and, in the process, enable new modes of viewing and consuming images.

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NOTES
Art, Politics, and Interdisciplinary Collaboration: A Conversation with Jeff Lieberman

By Jacquelyn Davis

Jeff Lieberman is an American interdisciplinary artist based in Boston with four degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT): two Bachelor of Science degrees (in physics and mathematics), and two Master’s degrees (in mechanical engineering and media arts and sciences, with a special interest in robotics). For a brief stint (2008–09), he was the host of the Discovery Channel’s *Time Warp*, which offered slow-motion footage of events that could never be seen with the naked eye, often revealing surprising aspects of reality. Artistically, Lieberman is best known for his kinetic sculptures and mechanical installations—some of which have been funded by the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter. He is also an acoustic/electronic musician and professional photographer with a personal interest in spirituality and meditation as vehicles to alleviate suffering. Lieberman has a history of collaborating with others across the inventive spectrum, and he is a notable public speaker and educator. This conversation took place via email November 1–10, 2016.

**JACQUELYN DAVIS:** You have several science degrees focusing on complementary skill sets. It’s apparent that your educational background influences your practice. How has your practice unfolded in relation to your educational pursuits? Were you an artist before you began your education at MIT, or did you begin to identify as an artist later—and if so, when?

**JEFF LIEBERMAN:** If you are a poet and you grow up in China, then you’re going to use the Chinese language for your poetry. Throughout my life, I’ve learned physics, math, mechanical engineering, and robotics, and studied consciousness and perception. Naturally, those have become the language I use in my work; the “paint” I use is circuitry, knowledge about the human visual system, and math. As I learned more in any discipline, it was added to the background of imagination. But these things all started before I can remember, and I agree with Picasso that we are born artists.

**JD:** Tell me about your first passions in primary and secondary school. How do these initial curiosities connect to the adult that you have grown up to be?

**JL:** The first passion that I remember is Lego. Legos still feel revolutionary in the sense of using a finite number of pieces to construct an infinite number of expressive possibilities—but they have to work mechanically, too. So implicitly, you’re engineering, learning about structures before you even know what learning is.

The second passion I remember is math. I was that kid who would come home at age nine and try to figure out a trick to adding up $1 + 2 + 3 \ldots + 100$. There is a formula that makes it easy to do the calculation, and I loved thinking about problems like that and figuring them out—the hunt was a pleasure. It’s a nice parlor trick, too, because I can get the answer (5,050) almost instantly in my head. The fact that there were ways to distill patterns from an infinitely complex world was fascinating to me.

**JD:** Some of your first projects, such as *The Drip Project* [273-o73A] (2001) and *Dani Eyes* (2002), focused on sensory investigations and the interplay between light and sound; then later, your interest in robotics (as in *Cyberflora* from 2002) and kinetic sculptures (as in *Moore Pattern* from 2007) surfaced. How do your first projects and preliminary sketches while at MIT speak to your more complex projects such as *Absolut Quartet* (2009) and *Sky Wave* (2016) that followed?

**JL:** Many of my early projects were just feeling into the space—into different basic questions. *Drip* and *Dani Eyes* were basic musings into capturing audio and diffracting light; *Moore Pattern* was kinetic, but with only six moving parts. In some sense, it feels like just learning the language—as in music, learning about scales. But here, “scales” are different forms of inquiry—into sensory experience—so as to gain a deeper intuition into those physical aspects. It’s a funny thing about “experience.” When presented with a new situation, you automatically feel into all these intangible qualities. So, although I think I’m still learning with every project, at first, I was just getting ahold of the ropes. I often think I’m still musing about the same basic riddles as I was in 2001, or even as a child.

**JD:** Of your earlier projects, which ones were most significant and rewarding? What lessons have you learned from these scientific and engineering explorations that take on multiple forms?

**JL:** Being tasked with *Cyberflora* in 2002—a project with twenty interactive robotic flowers—when I had never built a robot before, was daunting at the time. It was such a deep learning experience, not only of construction, but of getting an entire system—lighting, algorithmic sound, forty sensors, thirty motors—all speaking to each other properly. That shaped my confidence in building, especially on a timeline (we had eight months). I don’t think of it now as a project most representative of my aesthetic, etc., but the rearview mirror is always dirty. I learned the intensity of complex projects, and how things are always more complex than you imagine (even when you initially take this fact into account).

*Breaking Wave* (2014) has been the most rewarding experience as a project. To me, a piece sets up a certain puzzle that needs to be solved—at once an aesthetic puzzle and an engineering puzzle. The puzzle here was to hang 804 rusted spheres from the ceiling, and move them in a way that went from a flat sheet into a cloud—but if you look at the cloud from two very specific points of view, your perspective reveals a hidden image. That puzzle was so fascinating to work on, to mix the
aesthetics of “what hidden images can work and will look beautiful?” with the engineering of “how do all of these move in the way we’re prescribing, with as simple a mechanism as possible?” We ended up making a mechanical computer that you plug right into an outlet, and it can only do one thing: make this exact animation pattern. But compared to 804 motor assemblies? This puzzle was the perfect level of complexity for an eight-month-long project, where you are deeply engaged the entire time but still on schedule. I learned a great lesson from this piece about clarity and obviousness—the hidden images we created in the piece were too hidden—you could only find them if someone told you they existed, and told you roughly where you needed to be in order to see them. If we explore this kind of work again, we’ll likely make the images more obvious to find. It’s a great example of something you cannot know until you build it and see.

**JD:** How do most of your group projects begin? Who or what is the motivating force behind such collaborations? Are you the initiator, or do others approach you? I am also interested in any beneficial patterns or habits in relation to collaborative tendencies, which have, over time, led to a higher “success” or completion rate.

**JL:** Collaboration is critical in my work. In the last eight years of my work, I’ve only finished two pieces working alone (and even then, there are countless people giving advice and answering questions when something becomes stuck). Most of my work is a collaboration with two studios: Hypersonic, who are masters of engineering structures that are beautiful and actually work; and Sosolimited, masters of data visualization and movement/animation software.

Most projects begin with a client coming to us to ask about their space, whether it be a new building’s atrium or a museum exhibit. Often they’ve seen our previous work and want something similar, and we have a chance to communicate with them to develop something new that fits their tone and budget. The benefit to collaboration is clear; at least when you collaborate with people who have different skill sets than you—you can enter previously inaccessible territories. Also, the simple act of communication through the life of a project gets you out of your own head/perspective and creates mutations of ideas that you wouldn’t have on your own—and especially with projects that require engineering, it catches blind spots in a design before it’s too late.

**JD:** Of the various kinetic sculptures that you have designed and exhibited, which ones were the most challenging and rewarding? What problems have you run into with these larger sculptures? How did you solve them? Troubleshooting tactics for an engineer-scientist-as-artist may be different than an artist who associates with visual arts or a more traditional medium.

**JL:** Absolut Quartet was the most challenging because of the combination of its complexity and the fact that we were given four months to complete it. The project is an interactive robotic musical installation that plays a custom composition based on a chosen input theme. We took one day off in four months—Thanksgiving—and otherwise worked every day for fifteen hours. The first half of the project was simply getting one shooting mechanism accurate enough to hit a marimba key 99.99% of the time; the second half was designing all the percussion and wine glass instruments, and fabricating the entire machine. It was rewarding to have it play its...
(apropos) first song, Lionel Richie’s “All Night Long” (1983), with only a few weeks remaining in the project, and to finally feel like we were going to make the deadline.

It’s impossible to answer which one has felt most rewarding, because as I’ve changed as a person over time, the artwork in general is rewarding in ever-changing ways. I am glad to say we’ve had no complete failures. A specific engineering problem came up with Sky Wave, our piece for a cruise ship. Each petal was foam that was fiberglassed, sanded, primed, painted gold, polyurethanned, painted in red paint and Elmer’s glue for a textured organic finish, and then polyurethanned again. We did this all in an unheated basement in New York, then shipped everything to Germany for installation on the ship, which we thought would be unheated. Well, when the ship set sail, the petals started to develop pimples, where a ten-centimeter section would just pop up off the flat surface. It turns out that the ship was heated once it set sail, so the bottom layer of primer needed a hotter environment to cure before being placed onto the ship. When it finally did, it off-gassed, creating little mini-bubbles in the petals. Over two months, every single petal was covered in pimples. We had to remake the entire set of ninety-nine—almost 250 hours of work.

JD: Who and what are the creative/intellectual/theoretical influences that have pushed you into the directions you have taken? Some of these must stem from your time as a MIT student, but what/who are the others?

JL: Nature is the biggest influence on me, and watching how my mind and perception systems work through processes like meditation and introspection. But if I can use this as a chance to give a shout-out, it would be to the work of Arthur Ganson. He had an exhibit at the MIT Museum that I saw before entering MIT, and it was the first time I felt as though I saw art and engineering happening at the same time. It took another five years for me to even begin implementing that, but it opened up a whole world of possibility for me.

JD: What problems or concerns do you harbor in relation to the art world as it stands? Do you feel that there is ample room for interdisciplinary artists such as yourself? Are you recognized by “the art world” in the way that you would like, or do you feel that there is disconnect or, in some cases, a lack of recognition—considering the fact that your practice is molded by science and technology? One could say that artists who work in more conventional mediums such as painting or drawing are better understood and, in turn, translated, critiqued, and universally marketed.

JL: I once gave a job talk to an arts and technology professor, and the first question after my talk was: “But is it art?” I knew immediately that it wasn’t a place I wanted to work. Those sorts of issues don’t cross my mind. An image of some experience enters my mind, and I want to make it. It’s a straightforward process even if the possibility is constantly evolving.

I am lucky to consider myself an artist who almost never thinks about “the art world.” Most of our commissions come from companies, who want art but for a specific goal of their own, which forms a great constraint so that we never have to think about how our work will affect or work within the art world. I think that influence might still some of our decisions. It makes me curious, though, how our work would be interpreted by the art world. I haven’t thought about that in quite some time. There probably is a disconnect on both sides.

JD: Not only are you interested in engineering, robotics, and technology, but you also possess knowledge revolving around spirituality and well-being. In the 2011 TEDx Cambridge talk “Jeff Lieberman On Science and Spirituality,” in podcasts, and in public lectures, you have discussed your fascination and investigation with energy—how it relates to the cosmos and affects individual consciousness, attitudes, and behavior. How do your interests in religion, spirituality, (and “karma”?) connect to your enthusiasm for the scientific and analytical? These spheres are not easily conjoined.

JL: I think this is a phase in our culture, in which these issues are so separated. Five hundred years ago, it was not so, and I think in the future it will be not so again. Science is merely a tool, a lens, a specific method of questioning, to try to bring the infinite complexity of reality into a set of distilled patterns. And meditation and self-inquiry share elements of scientific experimentation: follow these instructions and see what happens to your perception. Funny enough, I distrust science and the art world” in the way that you would like, or do you feel that there is ample room for practices—a field of study already quite active but still in its infancy.

JL: I think crowdfunding! It’s incredible—no-middle-man simplicity. If people are never going to want what you’re making, you get to find that out before you invest a lot of your time, and if they do, you no longer have to use your own savings (often nonexistent) to bring the project to fruition. After doing commission work, where I created pieces that exist in one place in the world (sometimes private), I became extra interested in the possibility of pieces that could be in the home of every person who desired them. It’s not the kind of thing I would have risked investing two hundred thousand dollars in for production, unless I knew it was going to be desired. So it worked perfectly for me.

JD: Your recent collaboration with the collaborative art and design studio Hypersonic produced the static sculpture Constructive Interference...
(2016), which can be viewed at the Learning Innovation Center at Oregon State University. This sculpture differs from other sculptures in that it appears kinetic, but there are no moving parts. Tell me about your interest in the unreal, distorted, and fantastical, as these traits seem to embody illusion and, to a degree, deception.

**JL:** Our initial proposals for the OSU space were too complex for them to maintain. The idea of a static piece came to mind—one that appeared kinetic as you moved through the space, since your perspective (angle) of the piece would be constantly changing. This was a perfect opportunity to create a moiré pattern, which implicitly changes based on one’s position.

I love illusions; they are such a quick way for someone to recognize that what they perceive is not reality, that their mechanism of perception is responsible for the illusion. For years I’ve seen static illusions and thought of ways to make them kinetic. You could say there is an element of deception, but the most enjoyable part is that it is the person’s faculties of perception themselves that are doing the deception! This has been true for my pieces based on moiré effects, persistence of vision, anamorphism, or even gestalt.

**JD:** What is your opinion on the relationship between art and politics? Do you feel these two spheres are interconnected and influence one another, or do you see them as divided realms that function independently, without consequence of each other?

**JL:** I almost never think about politics, until we’re in a situation like we are in the United States today and the stakes feel so high. So maybe I underestimate the connection between politics and art. But I don’t fully understand the question, unless you’re talking about a political state that flat out condemns artmaking?

**JD:** Certain political states exist that not only condemn artmaking but more subtly hinder creativity by promoting only digestible, socially acceptable forms. In Sweden, for instance, graffiti art is not recognized by the government as a valid art form. Rather, graffiti is seen as a desecration of public space, so Sweden persuades citizens to both refrain from creating it and report new appearances; the country has a “zero tolerance” ban. Do you feel that there is a correlation between one’s (or a nation state’s) political views and the ability to create? Can one’s perspectives on freedom and expression affect one’s ability to actualize ambitions? To an extent, I am also interested in whether or not your decision to vote in the most recent US presidential race—and for what party and candidate—reflects your views on the assumed vs. actual connections between art and politics?

**JL:** Definitely. Different bans and taboos will affect people’s ability to manifest specific art forms, and will likely influence their imaginations as well—imagine being behind the great firewall of China, or living in North Korea, for example. The whole worldview is altered, constrained.

I’d like to think we haven’t reached that kind of limitation in the US—yet. But given that Trump was elected two days before this question surfaced in the conversation throws a lot of new uncertainty and possibility into things—and calls to mind former leaders who silenced dissenting views. I hope we are able to retain our freedom of expression, but I’m not confident it will go unaltered in the next four years. My vote was irrelevant because we still use the Electoral College, and I live in an uncontested Democratic (60.8% according to the *New York Times*) state of Massachusetts. I’m hoping that the insanity of this election cycle helps put the nail in the coffin of some of our outdated systems (the Electoral College and the two-party system in general).

**JD:** Regarding the state of the world today versus the state of today’s artworld: do you have suggestions or observations that individuals, creative or otherwise, should consider when trying to more harmoniously navigate their way through one or both of these worlds?

**JL:** I’m not even an expert at navigating my own world, much less someone else’s view of the world! To me, the heart always points us where we want to go, and the mind usually influences us with possible pitfalls and fears. I try to have as clear a view of my mind as possible, so that it doesn’t block the actions of my heart. This is not easy, as the mind is a constant trickster.

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NOTE 1. For more information about the work of Jeff Lieberman, visit http://bea.st.
No images are visible during the opening sequence of *Bunny Girl* (2016), by California performance/video artist Monet Clark. Instead, Clark provides the most basic of sounds; a steady, syncopated clip-clop and the swish of fabric, sandy and hollow, like a lone Appaloosa trotting up a gulch in a Howard Hawks western. Riding over the black screen are credits, simple and white, and Clark leaves us with these for a beat. Then it’s a hard cut to a bright, sunny exterior, the shoulder of a highway in the High Sierras, and we can finally see who’s been making all the racket: it’s Bunny Girl, teetering down a road, tackled-up in white lingerie, fishnet stockings, pink stiletto heels, the classic bunny drill. But something about Bunny Girl’s context is off. Distinct alterations affect her traditional bunny attire: her black fishnets have a rip; her stiletto heels, one size too large, wobble precariously on the gravel of the emergency lane; her trademark bunny ears aren’t perky and upright—they’re flopped down, clinging close to her face, reminiscent of those lop-eared bunnies at the Benton County Fair. Like Donny Kerabatsos in *The Big Lebowski* (1998, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen), this manifestation of Bunny Girl is distinctly out of her element; we’re more accustomed to watching her serve cocktails and nuts at the Playboy Mansion, flirting with Jack Nicholson and Bill Cosby, vampy but innocent, a brightly colored bauble on Hugh Hefner’s arm, the erotically fabulous but nevertheless submissive girl next door. In this subtle stylistic turn, Clark hijacks the traditional, chauvinist Playboy narrative and alters its setting, hobbling unsteadily down Highway 50 ten miles south of Tahoe, the muscles of her back tightly bunched, cheerfully but anxiously looking over her shoulder as the wheels of semi-trucks and sports cars roar by. Bunny Girl’s trademark ears and tail may comprise a hackneyed symbolic system with which we have long grown familiarly contemptuous, but all the familiar contempt in the world doesn’t debarb her peril, and from the video’s outset we can already sense the moral-ethical imperative of Clark’s narrative set-up: what happens to little bunnies who stray too far from Farmer McHeffner’s Garden and find themselves caught on this high-speed asphalt patch?

In that sense, Bunny Girl has good reason to be anxious, though she never seems truly scared; it’s simply in a bunny’s nature to be fidgety. But her journey’s just begun, and this isn’t the only scene wherein Clark places Bunny Girl (played by the artist herself) in a Californian landscape that seems alternately hostile and sublime. As the video progresses, Bunny Girl clambers over fallen pine tree trunks in the Sierras, crosses a salt slick in Death Valley, whirls in a “superbloom” of primrose and notchleaf phacelia in the Mojave Desert, vamps beside the decommissioned Rancho Seco nuclear power plant, romps with doomed lambs at a Nevada City slaughter farm, trips out beneath a Richard Diebenkorn pastiche of Emeryville cloverleafs, and ultimately finds herself on a series of broken roads that empty into the coves of the Still from *Bunny Girl* (2016) by Monet Clark
Marin Headlands, where she dances to the crashing surf and end credits. As she briefly and delicately occupies each of these dystopian/utopian tableaus, the colorful, opaque quality of Clark's video is overlaid with found footage, sequences of environmental catastrophes and cultural strife: whales dying, crop-dusters spraying pesticides, protesters waving signs. But somehow, in the foothills of the headlands, she's a different bunny girl. Some of the character development takes place in the decomposition of her couture; zig-zagging dizzily toward the coast, her ensemble becomes increasingly frayted, her ears droop more than ever, and the tattered fishnets billow beneath her ankles. Yet dancing beside the surf in her ravaged outfit, there is something heroic about Bunny Girl, and while I can't quite label this video an empowerment piece, there's no doubt that Bunny Girl has reached an affective apex of some sort.

It's one of those performance videos I've watched many times, but still don't know exactly how I feel about—which only makes me want to watch it again, if only to see what I missed. There is something about Clark's rendition of Bunny Girl that reminds me of the lady in the radiator in David Lynch's Eraserhead (1977); her eerie, cheesecake expressions and out-stretched arms pantomiming Marilyn Monroe as stiletto heels crunch into the delicate skulls of fetuses. But the lady in the radiator is vaguely menacing. There's nothing ominous about Bunny Girl, though there is plenty about her that is abject and out of place. Perhaps I'm simply entranced by the ambiguity of the character; caught in a nameless sexual pageant, surrounded by a landscape that is clearly not her home. Is she supposed to be funny? Sexy? Scary? Vulnerable? Powerful? All of the above, twined into rounded by a landscape that is clearly not her home. Is she supposed to be.

Yet there is more to Bunny Girl's story than a surreal character in an arbitrary landscape; namely, her relationship to the dystopic events in the found footage. On the one hand, her countenance seems vaguely affected by these images, as if she can sense them playing out on the edge of her pastoral frame. But Bunny Girl's tears are transient, uncommitted and quick, like the sudden tears of a child—and the next thing I know, she's back to romping in a field of golden flowers and I can't tell whether Bunny Girl and I are playing together, or if I am being played. There's only one thing I know for certain, as Bunny Girl hobbles by: I want to protect her, to keep her pink ears safe, to drape her thin shoulders in my wool trench coat, even conceal her in mossy oak hunting camo, be-
remember clearly: it tasted like strawberries, the sweetness made you cry; it reminded you of your mother, a special day, the metallic scent after a hard rain, or the ringing of bells. But to immerse oneself in *jouissance* is to be encompassed and subsumed by waves of sheer experience, the dissolution of the metonymic order, until all that remains is the Other and its declaration—through its silent insistence that it is not you—that you are still there, even though you’re decorporealizing, empty and full. The human frame can take only so much rapture before everything falls apart.

This blissful rupture of *jouissance* calls me back to Bunny Girl, her meadowlark frolics and over-the-shoulder glances, never quite seeing me but always implying my existence through the facticity of my gaze. Is she a simple bunny, innocent and good, even naive, benignly inferring that all of us live in a confrontational environment, constantly in threat of being devoured by the predators slinking and sneaking at the periphery of our vision? Or is there something deeper at play—not merely *Bunny Girl’s* insistence that we are all bunnies seeking pleasure in an arbitrary landscape, but its repeated emphasis that Bunny Girl is neither pawn nor victim? “We all have weaknesses,” Clark noted in a recent personal interview, explaining that her art often deals with “the juxtaposition of opposites, weakness with strength,” but adding that she does not “see weakness in *Bunny Girl*; [she sees] her struggling with the status quo and having a reawakening when she gets affected physically, emotionally, mentally by the [toxicity] of the planet. That could be literal, like she gets sick from it . . . so physically taxed and compromised and the weight of the tragedy of it hits her.”

But more importantly, Clark asserts, *Bunny Girl* alludes to “this idea of the surface we present as humans and the deeper truth beneath the surface”:

In the opening of *Bunny Girl*, we come upon her as she is unraveling [but is nevertheless] daring to set out on this kind of vision quest into nature, coming from civilization and her perfect surface. In the process of the film and the journey she finds a deeper well of strength. By the end, the bunny suit is not even what you see as much as her transformation in character. She’s still sexy and utilizing sexuality as a power, but the ditzy vulnerable bunny has given way to a woman who knows her worth, her value and what her role is [in] changing the course of the world, which is headed towards a dead end for humans if she doesn’t.

Can one little bunny actually change the world a nibble at a time? In light of our nation’s recent political upheaval, this question seems apt, as political scavengers like Steve Bannon and Ben Carson prepare to follow Donald Trump into the White House. The political ascension of the alt-right has been heralded by the media as an occurrence that may well initiate the wholesale destruction of the human rights, freedoms, and even livable lives (to borrow a term from Judith Butler) we have come to identify with liberal democracy. Videos like *Bunny Girl* suggest there are numerous ways to resist repressive political forces, a multitude of transsubjective interstices in which power relations are negotiated. Clark regards the figure of Bunny Girl as “heroic,” noting the character “keeps going [and] even though she is wearing this costume and playing the roles expected of her, she is really playing a role versus being it . . . she knows it’s all roles, even being in a human body, if you get esoteric about it . . . She finds where it suits (pun intended) and where it doesn’t.”

In that fashion, *Bunny Girl* suggests there is strength in vulnerability, particularly when “we lay down all of the ego-identified reality and get to the truth, in the meltdown—via broken hearts, or physical deterioration, or mental breakdowns, or the throes of the creative process when it’s not guided by the head.”

Clark quickly adds that she didn’t begin filming *Bunny Girl* with that underlying message in mind: “I literally had no idea what I was making as I was shooting. It became crystal clear what it was by the time I got to filming the end, which was the only planned scene.” Perhaps this artistic method of “unplanned approach” is a prime way to yield a video that embodies revolutionary politics without turning didactic; I have seen a similar approach work for Iraqi installation artist Adel Abidin, for example, whom, as long as I have known him, has never planned a thing but often emerges (at the very last minute, to the consternation of his sponsors) with outcomes that are gracious, humorous, thought-provoking, and wickedly critical in terms of political satire. While Abidin isn’t an artistic *savant* by any extent of the imagination (he is savvy and

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*ESSAY*

**BUNNY GIRL**

Written, Directed and Performed by

**MONET CLARK**

“A minor comedic masterpiece”

~ Dale Heyt, Stretcher Magazine

*Bunny Girl* (2016) by Monet Clark
Our Victims Ready from 1990–91 decided to walk onstage to lick the Karen Finley's naked 1990s chocolate-smearing performances in the head instead of the arm? What if audience members witnessing such as Tony Labat's short-sighted or dumb. Similarly, the work of artists with whom Clark bacon every time—and when it doesn't succeed, his work can appear while providing a discursive venue for their articulation.9

Clearly, much of the appeal and peril of performance art lies in its site-specific volatility, its dependence on artistic receptiveness to unpredictable outcomes. One can never tell what audience members—particularly the unintended audience and ancillary participants in a piece—are going to do as the piece progresses, just as you can never anticipate how they'll react to whatever intersubjective and even trans-subjective discourse a performance plunges them into. What if Chris Burden's studio assistant in Shoot (1971) had accidentally blasted him in the head instead of the arm? What if audience members witnessing Karen Finley's naked 1990s chocolate-smearing performances We Keep Our Victims Ready from 1990–91 decided to walk onstage to lick the confection from her body? What if a viewer of Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964), at Yamaguchi Concert Hall in Kyoto, seized the artist's scissors and sliced her body instead of her garments? Performance art often cultivates risk to draw its audience into collective empathy/concern for the precarious position of its maker, and in this regard Bunny Girl is no exception. What would happen if a meth-addled trucker plowed off the shoulder of Highway 50, reducing Bunny Girl to roadkill? Yet the fascinating thing about Bunny Girl—much like Kos's performance in Gargoyles VIII—is the artist's risky gesture, so quiet, delicate, and gentle, and so different from Labat's macho boxing or Jalbuena's melancholy slapstick. Far from robbing the piece of its conceptual payload, Clark's tacit vulnerability underscores the bunny status of subjectivation in intersubjectivity. The ritualistic aspect of performance art is nothing new, and Clark has trapped the pornographer with the same tacit vulnerability underscores the bunny status of subjectivation in intersubjectivity. The ritualistic aspect of performance art is nothing new, and Clark has trapped the pornographer with the same...
turns been described as (post)modern ritual. It isn’t so much the ritualism, healing, or spirituality that audiences have grown jaded about, then, so long as the healing or spirituality is an implicit part of the work rather than an explicit artistic goal. But if an artist directly claims spiritual status—as healer, shaman, priestess, nature goddess—a “modern” sense of skepticism seems to kick in, and the work is starkly disavowed as overly theatrical or naïve. Clark seems at least nominally aware of this situation when she describes her performative rituals as “standing in contrast to western and patriarchal ideologies, which separate parts from the whole,” arguing that her performances:

challenge the influence these ideologies have on critical theory and contemporary feminist discourse. [These rituals] seek to remedy the separation of the mind from the body; symptoms from their cause; the physical from the psychological; humanity from nature; the masculine from the feminine; individuals from each other, etc. They further function as a portrait of California subculture . . . by . . . satirizing politically correct social etiquettes, as well as . . . spiritual correctness.10

As I have argued, an aesthetic of risk runs high throughout Clark’s oeuvre, and, when combined with acts of spiritualism, her pieces become a sort of spiritual wagers, acts of faith that testify to the potential of unverifiable powers to alter or shift our rational, visible, material order. According to Clark, Dakini is a “water ritual” that juxtaposes “sincerity with irony,” a ritual that:

utilizes technology as a conduit to deliver the energetic and spiritual structure set up in the ritual. It functions to transmute any life condition or ail-ment which the viewers may choose to relinquish into its matrix. The piece stands in contrast to misapprehensions within the western/patriarchal perspective. It points towards the efficacy of indigenous people’s healing practices and shows respect for the feminine. It employs the science of eastern Raja (mind) yogic training. It displays the day to day impact of the mind/body connection, as well as the implications posed by quantum physics on the energetic nature of all matter.11

Naturally, some viewers might be skeptical about whether Clark can actually pull this off, and I sometimes wonder if she has a touch of skepticism herself, inasmuch as her performative rituals seek to “satiriz[e] politically correct social etiquettes.” But that’s a minor point. The element of satire merely indicates significant power arrangements are afoot, inasmuch as satire relies on critiquing entrenched systems of power. This returns me to the discomforting aspects of spiritualistic artistic praxis, and an attendant cultural skepticism from its recviership, a savvy snideness that’s emblematic of our (post)millennial, (post)Marxist malaise. Since the late 1800s, when Sir James George Frazer and Marcel Mauss, following in Emile Durkheim’s structuralist footsteps, began formally excavating the social praxis of magic and religion, scholars have remarked on the apparent “need” for scientists to disavow the roots of their own, honorable family tree in such disreputable branches as poetry and alchemy.12 In this dysfunctional binary relationship, magic and spirituality have long been positioned as the abject “others” of science, disavowed as inferior on many levels: less smart, less rational, less provable, less profitable.

Returning to Kristeva, science vs. spirituality presents another abject binary of sacred vs. profane, wherein lofty scientific brains protect their sacred order by denuding their profane, magical others as throwbacks to a primitive era. As noted Romanian theological scholar Mircea Eliade observes in The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (1959):

[Man] cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.13

By Eliade’s rationale, “man” shouldn’t have been in such a hurry to give his spiritual legacy away. Of course, Eliade’s theory is rather black and white. It’s dangerous to traffic in binaries when referring to abject discourse, as binary oppositions are overly reductive and exclusive—man is clearly not the flip-side or “opposite” of God, just as woman is not the opposite of man, postfeminists are not the opposite of feminists, postmodernists are not the opposite of modernists, and so on. Similarly, the liminal edge of feminist art is not masculine art, but rather an interstices where sexual politics are negotiated alongside the process of sexual subjunctivation in general. Like the dysfunctional paradigm of science vs. magic, feminist critique did not remain locked in binary opposition, wherein second-wave champions engaged in mortal combat with an Evil Patriarchy dominated by Bad Men; instead, feminism continues to offer a deeply emergent and nuanced critical discourse that analyzes force relations in which all are imbricated and imbricating.

Ultimately, there is no separable abject other to any given subject position; rather, there are many abject negotiations at any given time, each with their own entangled interrelationships, simultaneously disavowing and embracing others. That said, health vs. sickness is another reductive binary that seems perilous for artists to engage, all too often resulting in didactic work and hackneyed tropes; paintings that look like wounds, limping bodies, dubious substances in jars, melancholy soundtracks. In that regard, Clark’s performative healing rituals stand in a class of their own, and some of her most riveting early works chronicle her struggles with the neuro-immune illness that devastated her body, yet proved impossible for Western medicine to diagnose. Writing in Hyperallergic, Peter Dobey, in “The Fine Line Between Sexy and Sickness,” characterizes Clark’s photodocumentary series Poisoning/Phoenix, Performance Documents (2001/2006–08) as “documents of her life, both real and projected,” in which the artist pairs images of herself “during bouts of illness with photos that show her in relative health, posed in a sexualized, cliché manner.”14 Suggesting the effectiveness of Poisoning/Phoenix “hinges on [Clark’s] relentless sincerity,” Dobey praises Clark for being willing “to admit her own complicity in the very systems and ideas that she critiques.”15 Unlike Dobey, I’ve never held much stock in sincerity as a category for artistic valuation—it’s an unreliable benchmark, easy to counterfeit, and if a piece doesn’t work, all the sincerity in the world won’t help it. But I do concur with Dobey’s observations on the concept behind Poisoning/Phoenix, wherein:
As is the case with her later works, *Poisoning/Phoenix* features the artist as our gentle guide into the world of abject discourse. It is within this context, at once diffident and intimate, that we seek our impossible healing—impossible because we live each day in the face of our own mortality, and there is no healing ritual in the world that can get us beyond that end-point, unless we intend on healing our relationship to death, accepting its challenge, its dominance, knowing we must eventually open and surrender. No matter how the cards are stacked, during the brief time we are here, we are touched by the liminal edge of an ambiguous, silent “everything else” that encompasses and defines the subjective topographies of ourselves and our others. We are not removed from this everything else, but just past the point where its opaque edge brushes up against us, there is a limitless expanse we will never touch—the expanse on the Other’s side.

What makes Clark’s work so compelling is her ability to bring us into abject discourse by teasing out the nuance and difficulty in subject positions that are commonly taken for granted, and thereby transemed into abjection. Even the most banal subject positions can be difficult and dangerous, no matter how long they’ve been depicted as immutable. Bunnyhood, girlhood, motherhood; each of these subject positions offers a case in point, particularly in light of their critical consideration in women’s studies, of all places, which, until recently, was so restrictive that scholars in girl studies and motherhood studies found it necessary to establish their own epistemological citadels. It seems ironic that institutionalized women’s studies pushed such central figures as the girl and the mother to the fringe of the feminist canon by subjugating them into sub-studies, with girlhood tediously rendered as a mute, unknowable cipher, with her endless tantrums and bad manners, to which the matriarch presents her rock-solid rhetorical reply: *grow the fuck up*. In this binary mode, girlhood and motherhood are positioned as alpha and omega, beginning and end—when in fact they are neither.

If I were forced to situate Clark’s work in any particular genre, it would be Girl Art in the best and most liberal of senses. So much revolutionary, idiosyncratic work has emanated from that camp in recent years, and it would find good company there: among her artistic influences, Clark has cited Mariko Mori, Cindy Sherman, and Karen Fiorito; all of whom have touched on aspects of the girl without pigeonholing themselves under its categorical banner. But Clark has other influences as well: Dale Hoyt, Shalo P. Mary Corse. None of these artists limits their work to Girl Art, because it’s both more and less than that, and none of them care about fitting into the canon, anyway—which is often a question asked by The Girl: what is the revolutionary potential of the canon? Can it be subverted to interesting ends or turned to pleasure? As far as The Girl is concerned, the canon is only useful if it can make something change. Money, power, prestige, the high regard of one’s peers; none of these matter if they cannot be used to do something fun, something crazy, something different that rocks the boat and wakes people up. But if there is no one, singular “type” of woman, as Butler (and many others) have so convincingly argued, then there must also be more than one type of girl. So what type of girl is Bunny Girl, and what type of artist is Monet Clark? Although she identifies as a feminist, Clark’s ideas about the “fit” of her work with feminism are interesting:

I see an evolution in feminism and I definitely lean more towards the later [manifestations] because I’m far more radical in my view of gender and sexuality than the first feminists who too grossly generalized and had some of the puritanical american stuff going on there. I’m still thinking, and btw I’m into some of the ideas of 4th wave [feminism] because technology and spirituality are my allies . . .

Like Clark, I’m still thinking, particularly when it comes to the on-going propagation and revitalization of feminism and feminist art. The fact that feminism is still deeply emergent means it’s rhetorically fresh and spiky, with an ability to account for more subjective possibilities rather than fewer. In these uncertain days before Trump and his alt-right coalition stride into the Oval Office, tails lifted in self-congratulatory pride, we need all the hope we can get—and, like Clark, I remain optimistic about our chances. Not because I have any particularly good reason to be optimistic, but because I have no choice. It isn’t in my character to capitulate, to roll over in the grass and let the wolves sink their chops into my backside. That’s not what wild bunnies do. We’ve got defenses of our own; legs, ears, and thighs; we’re agile and observant; we’re good at evading assault. People who think of bunny girls as small and quiet and cuidly have got it all wrong. Those would be tame rabbits, accustomed to living in cages or hopping across the living room floor. Out here in the wild, we’d never have lasted so many generations if we weren’t good at turning the tables now and then.

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NOTES
black-and-white photograph, about thirty inches square, pinned to the wall near the entrance of Rosalind Fox Solomon’s exhibition *Got to Go* at Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York City (February 25–April 16, 2016), depicts a young boy holding an older woman’s bare breasts. The woman in the image looks down at him with a smile, arms calmly at her side, shoulders back. Six other figures of all ages are also pictured (some faces just barely visible), crowded around the woman and the boy. Their observance of this gentle, lighthearted interaction mirrors that of the unseen photographer, and, ultimately, of the viewer. All of the figures in the image, *Karoo, South Africa, 1990*, are black, wear only a piece of fabric around each of their waists, and stand outside a grass structure.

Pinned in close proximity to this photograph was another photograph of the same size, also depicting a woman with a child, *Neshoba, Mississippi, 2001*. However, the figures pictured in this image are white, blonde, and clothed, and stand on a sidewalk at night. The older woman, casually dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, stands in contrast to the young girl, who is dressed like a Disney princess complete with an updo and makeup. Solomon’s flash illuminates the pair at a nervous moment. A small point-and-shoot camera dangles from the woman’s arm as she prepares to stick a corsage to the girl’s costume. The little girl is fidgeting as she looks away from the adult standing before her.

Solomon placed these images among a gallery filled with dozens of others, so that viewers could not consider one without comparing it to the other. This pairing—unclothed South Africans next to clothed Americans—lead this viewer to a second comparison of equal disparateness: Solomon’s project with Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition and publication *The Family of Man*. Familiar to most people today in book form, the *Family of Man* project was first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.
of Modern Art in New York City and included images made around the world by both known and unknown photographers, primarily of American or European nationality. In the publication, over five hundred pictures are organized by greeting card–like themes such as love, birth, and death, and printed in a range of sizes. Sentimental quotes, taken from a variety of sources, are inserted among the images to enhance the exhibition’s glossy message of sameness across humanity. However, while Steichen’s arrangement of images sings classical, Solomon’s screams hardcore. Through her highly personal approach, Solomon’s photography provides an alternative to Steichen’s notion of what the world looks like, or at least, what photographs of the world look like.

When Steichen and his staff first presented their project, Solomon was not yet making art, but she had begun traveling internationally. In 1951, following her college graduation, she started working with the pioneering, volunteer-abroad group, the Experiment in International Living, whose motto is “People learn to live together, by living together.” Solomon dates the beginning of her photographic practice to a 1968 trip with the Experiment to Japan, where the differences in culture that she was experiencing inspired her to take pictures. At this point, Solomon was married with two children, but looking for an outlet. In 1977, Solomon defined photography as, “An excuse for retreating further into myself and my own world because I couldn’t live in the world I wanted.” That year, Solomon’s husband had taken a job in Washington, DC, as part of President Jimmy Carter’s administration. Years of what she has called “discontent” were fueled, in part, by the feminist movement of the era. In response, she began teaching herself how to shoot and print photographs.

Considering the criticism that Steichen’s project immediately and continuously received, Solomon’s wielding of the camera to depict people we are most curious about was brave in a post-Family of Man world. She made pictures as an “outsider” when the trend was for photographers to be “insiders.” While the camera lends itself to this type of risky use, it is rare to find a contemporary artist who embraces photographing people from other cultures to such profound effect. Solomon’s dedication to international, community-based work and the length of time she waited before making pictures in response to this context lend a maturity and viewpoint to her project. While her work does, at times, appear to be claiming some universality across subjects, her photographs are more concerned with differences, and with the photograph as a tool for discernment. It is precisely Solomon’s sensitivity to difference that makes her photography powerful. In 1979, poet, essayist, and feminist icon Audre Lorde wrote about the function of difference: “Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.” Although not written about photography, these words resonate in relation to Solomon’s visualizations of difference. Both women argue for the collaborative, informative potential in difference rather than difference as subtractive or oppositional.

Solomon’s insistence on placing disparate scenes in close proximity, often without any text to assign minimum specifics of time and place, as well as the care she takes to print all of her work uniformly, prepares the viewer to read her images in relation to each other rather than as freestanding depictions. Her photographs then become the only context for her other photographs. They only exist in the time and space they are presented, despite typically having been made decades and continents apart. Solomon’s intelligent partnering empowers her images with meaning.

Solomon’s generous gift to viewers—besides her incredible confidence to stare at strangers and let them stare back—is the order she gives to her photographs, her repetition of images, her pairings, and her sequencing. Solomon credits the pioneering curator Jane Livingston, with whom she worked on her 1980 exhibition Rosalind Solomon: Washington at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (May 15–June 29, 1980), for first recognizing how juxtapositions of Solomon’s imagery would generate meaning. Livingston suggested that Solomon include photographs she had made in Guatemala in the same exhibition as the Washington portraits, although ultimately this did not happen. The year prior to making the photographs in Washington, where her husband was working, and Guatemala, where she chose to travel, she engaged in a similar cross-cultural approach by photographing at hospitals in her home state of Tennessee and also in Sicily. Eventually, presentations of her work embraced her practice of regularly photographing both locally and internationally. This strategy, for instance, is evident in her 1996 exhibition catalog Peru and Other Places, which included work from 1974 onward. Despite the title of the project including “Other Places,” it is still a surprise that the first image following the title pages and curators’ statement is not an image.

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Mrs. Ova Heggi and Her Mannequin, Chattanooga, Tennessee (1974)
by Rosalind Fox Solomon; © Rosalind Fox Solomon; courtesy Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

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ESSAY

from Peru, but an image titled *Cheerleader, Pennsylvania, 1987*. In this image, an adolescent dressed in her “Cats” cheerleading uniform is depicted sitting for her portrait on a quilt-covered bed with her legs crossed under her and hands in her lap. She looks out of the frame but does not smile. Cabbage Patch Dolls, teddy bears, and Care Bears carefully arranged on the pillows refer to the fact that this young woman was very recently a child, while a megaphone and letter jacket next to the bed complement the uniform of teenage femininity she has come to wear. The cheerleader’s hair and makeup appear carefully done, but her fingernail polish is chipped. Incongruity and contradiction abound, exacerbated by this image being the first in a book seemingly about Peru. What are we doing in an American, suburban bedroom and how does this image prepare a viewer to subsequently read a photograph made in Peru?

Solomon structures her photographs to great effect. Her presentations have taken form as pictures on a wall, artist’s books, and multimedia installations involving several screens, timed slideshows, and sound. Each iteration of a group of images acknowledges the strong grasp Solomon has on how meaning is constructed, what types of photographs she makes, and why. Her photographic worlds fully engross as atemporal archives organized by a nonverbal spirit, fervently trying to convey their unsettled soul through a select cast of characters. An attempt to describe her subjects produces a list that seems to include everything: adult women, adult men, the elderly, children, animals, landscapes, masks, statues, dolls, ceremonies, couples, adults and children together, people outdoors, people indoors, physically deformed people, the rich, the poor, the noble, the unknown.

Looking through her work also prompts the question: at whom are we inclined to stare, and why? What exactly do we think about when we look closely at other people? How do we experience bodies around us? Who do we notice? Is it those with less power? Those with more power? Those we desire? Those too loud to be ignored? Those who are broken? Those who look like us? Moving among Solomon’s collection of images, the process by which one recognizes and forms identity through, and in opposition to, photographic representations begins to reveal itself as a driving force of her project. The images play on the experience of walking through a jumbled world and noticing difference, but also noticing oneself.

Solomon’s consistent portrayal of human subjects in square black-and-white images has been linked to one of her mentors, Lisette Model. Mostly self-taught, Solomon came to study with Model after having already compiled a large portfolio of photographs. Model became Solomon’s “mother in art,” encouraging Solomon to take risks and confidently pursue her practice. Model taught hundreds of other photographers, many who remain unknown, but is most often recognized in this Diane Arbus-obsessed moment as the teacher of her most famous pupil. [Ed. note: See the review of *Diane Arbus: In the Beginning* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in this issue.]. Although Solomon had only just begun her long-standing project at the peak of Arbus’s relatively short-lived career, it seems unlikely Solomon will ever shake the Arbus shadow. Arbus’s name is repeatedly, misleadingly used to describe Solomon’s work in one, easy word, and at this point, Solomon deserves to be defined by the subjects and style specific to her. In Solomon’s own words, as documented in a 2016 interview by Blake Andrews provided by her gallery: “I am sick of bearing the cross of Arbus on my back and being tucked away in a basket with her remains. She was an early influence. Our similarities as photographers are gender, teacher, square format, and portraits.” And, “Everyone’s work evolves from various sources. As an artist matures, the sources are incidental to her important bodies of work.”

Now in her eighties, Solomon continues to produce resonant works. It is a gift to see photographs made by a woman of her age and a perspective that we do not see enough. Solomon’s publication in conjunction with her 2016 exhibition at Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York, both titled *Got to Go*, is an emotional, poetic, and dream-like journey. It is inhabited by a variety of self-possessed characters, all presented to viewers for close study. The Sylvia Plath-like prose woven throughout the sequence of images, most of which comes from Solomon’s memory, poetry, and journals, narrates as a subconscious murmur. An anger that is particular to family life in general is expressed in painful quotes recalled from the author’s childhood. When Solomon places the text “you are a naughty naughty girl” next to the image of the woman and child on the sidewalk described earlier in this essay, *Neshoba, Mississippi, 2001*, she may be pulling from a personal experience, but the anonymity of the image distracts from that narrative. By providing both references, Solomon acknowledges how we typically find meaning in images through the filter of personal experience, but also how those images only exist because of those experiences being shared.
Solomon’s positions as a white woman and a mother have defined her photographic gaze. An early exhibition of her work included about forty untitled photographs of vintage broken dolls, children, women holding children, and a photo essay about a seamstress who independently operated a business. Solomon claims to have been drawn to the dolls because she thought they were not being noticed, left in a pile on a flea market table. The images she made of them are mostly close-ups of their worn, expressive faces, printed at a larger-than-life scale. They are surprisingly dynamic and emotive, and in many ways different from photographs of dolls by Hans Bellmer, Morton Bartlett, or even Laurie Simmons, since Solomon seems more interested in the dolls’ faces than their figures. Solomon’s photographs benefit from her inclination to look closely at surfaces for character.

Looking closely is an important theme in Solomon’s work and also in a mother’s work. Indeed, the close, often downward view she takes of her subjects can read like the intrusion of a mother, or even a child, in one’s face. Solomon’s depictions of older women, in particular, convey a fascination with the bodies of aged beings. They are powerful despite their worn surfaces, similar to the broken dolls. Her unabashed curiosity and celebration of this subject resonates with contemporary photographs of older maternal figures by artists such as Talia Chetrit and Leigh Ledare, as well as Cindy Sherman’s most recent portraits. The wrinkled skin in many of Solomon’s images, like that on the fantastically aged hands in Sherman’s, pokes through as the most exotic of Solomon’s subjects, as that which is desired because it is rarely pictured. This is meaningful in a project that includes people from remote locations typically described as “exotic” themselves.

Since her “emotionally overwhelming” project, Portraits in the Time of AIDS (1987–88), for which she photographed and recorded conversations with people living with HIV and AIDS, Solomon has been interested in exposing her own vulnerabilities alongside that of her subjects. The openness with which Solomon speaks about her upbringing, her experience as a housewife in the 1950s, and her divorce, adds a welcome layer of meaning to her examinations of others. Self-portraits continue to appear regularly among her image groupings, and Solomon has made videos performing for the camera. Such work invariably alters the way one reads her still photography, so that we understand her motivations as rooted in the feminist idea that the personal is political. In one recent video, the artist pushes her face very close to the camera as she performs the voice of her punishing mother. She repeats her mother’s phrase: “You can always tell a woman’s age by looking at her neck.” This seems to both haunt and comfort Solomon. She was taught to notice, and she does.

CHELSEA SPENGEMANN is an independent curator of photography and director of the estate of Stan VanDerBeek.

NOTES

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FEATURE

Art-as-Activism and Public Discourse: A Conversation with Diane Bush

By David LaRocca

Diane Bush is an American photographer who has lived and worked in Buffalo and London, and currently resides in Las Vegas, where she has served as curator of exhibits for Clark County. She is the recipient of awards and grants from institutions such as Kodak, Nikon, Ilford, Polaroid, the Royal Photographic Society, Yorkshire Arts Association, Women in Photography, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, as well as a fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council. In 2008 she was nominated for a USA Artist fellowship. Her work has been published and exhibited internationally, and she is the author of the monoprint (2006). This conversation began in person in Buffalo in June 2016 and continued via email through the fall.

David LaRocca: Your recent project, Dishing It Out 2016, uses items familiar to the kitchen cupboard—mainly dinner plates and coffee mugs—to make a political point. What sorts of imagery are you creating and how is your art being used for political agitation and activism?

Diane Bush: I’ve affixed satirical images of the 2016 Presidential candidates, as well as other images that comment upon our current political state, to ceramic plates and mugs, and then I invite viewer-participants to smash them. The original idea (inspired by a kitschy commemorative Nixon plate) was to make a sequel to my 2008 community performance piece, The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush, by making satirical 2016 Presidential candidate plates that folks could break. I watched a YouTube tutorial on ceramic printing, forked out some cash on a hot press, dye sublimation inks, and a new printer, and after a few stumbles, I was in business! I put out a call to other artists across the country—first, just asking for artwork about the candidates—but few artists took the bait, so I widened the scope to include anything about our current political situation. To make any impact, I decided I would have to do something splashy, every month, leading right up to the election. So, each month starting in January, the newest and best of the previously shown work was exhibited in a different Las Vegas gallery, except during the performance months: May (Inflated Dreams, Broken Promises), September (Hugging the Mice, a poetry contest), and October (Let America BREAK Again). The project launch (Mug Shots), in January, was shown at the Brett Wesley Gallery. Subsequent exhibits (Mug Shots #2, #3, #4, etc.) were held at Dray’s Space, the Left of Center Gallery, Jana’s Room, Wonderland Gallery, the Sahara West Gallery (Vanity Plates), and the Victor Xiu Gallery (The Final Tally). My own images are photo-based with fiber art enhancements. All artists were invited to submit work in any media, in a wide range of genres, from realistic to abstract.

David LaRocca: And to what end?

Diane Bush: The project had four main goals: to amuse the public, to celebrate free speech, to register new voters, and to encourage artists to embrace political satire as a way of getting the public to think critically about who will next lead the country. I had also hoped to gain some positive national press for the visual arts in Las Vegas—something most Americans consider nonexistent, or is only expressed through a bombardment of kitschy glitter.

David LaRocca: Political, especially presidential, satire is becoming something of a defining frame for your work.

Diane Bush: Yes, but mostly during major election cycles. I’m a lifelong fan of satire, from The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers comic books, to Monty Python, to Comedy Central. As in past election-based projects, such as The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush, I wanted the public to be physically involved, so they could experience an emotional and therapeutic release. They were invited to throw (watered-down) bleach at a photograph of George W. Bush in order to visually erase him.

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David LaRocca: I see a conjunction here of de-facing (something, someone) along with a kind of erasure—as if the hope were not just to mock a figure (by means of an

"Can Hillary Sew This Up?" #5 (2016) by Diane Bush; © Diane Bush
effigy), but with more subtlety and political cunning, to tap into the desire to rewrite history. Hence the “emotional and therapeutic release.” Is your art activism, in some measure, designed to make viewers act (and react) by involving them?

DB: Yes, the physical involvement allows the public to be part of the work, and also be involved via YouTube, because the event is being videotaped. Without them, the event would lack community buy-in, and be too controlled, too high-concept. Smashing plates is a large part of the project’s appeal, and it also allows me to become engaged with folks on an individual level.

DL: So your work is reaching beyond the display of photographs to the realm of interactive installation? It’s not enough to offer the public an image—you invite them, as Nietzsche said, “to philosophize with a hammer.”

DB: I hope so. These projects—Dishing It Out 2016, and The ImBALEACHment of George W. Bush, as well as earlier work, such as Warheads—explore the “twilight of the idols.”

DL: But “explore,” in these works, has many resonances.

DB: Yes, of course, I’m aiming for the public to face their leaders (and yes, occasionally deface them), but not for sheer sport or a kind of public shaming. I see the art as activism. Throwing the bleach, for example, is not just about its effects, but the freedom of the gesture. Reveling in the hard-won, and ever-harder-to-keep, freedom to express ourselves. I think of these as public participation projects. Their involvement also makes “art” more approachable on a street theater level, and less mysterious.

DL: These works of art-as-activism, and your description of the “freedom of the gesture,” seem to be nudging us into the territory of conceptual art (e.g., insofar as similar kinds of events could be organized by others after your model), and from this, there is something so compelling about the way you appear to be doing photography without photographs.

DB: I do think I’ve internalized imagemaking to such a degree that the photograph is an ingredient or aspect of my work, and it’s no longer the core of my work. It’s true that the idea is the thing. At this stage, I’m not aiming for a solo exhibition of rarefied photographs behind glass (not that there’s anything wrong with that); it’s just that people, I’ve learned, respond better—that is, more fully, rationally, and emotionally—when they see the stakes, and then understand themselves to be involved and responsible for addressing them. After years of gallery shows, I felt I had fulfilled that kind of expectation from the art world, and had no need to keep doing the same thing (gallery shows) over and over again.

This style of participatory work is a rewarding way to create impact, get the work out there on YouTube (via the video taken at the events), and reach new audiences—obviously, not just art-goers in a local area but a global audience. Plus, watching the participants having a good time, with smiles on their faces, is a very different feeling from seeing the guarded gallery response we are all familiar with. During the October Let America BREAK Again performance/plate-smashing event, the universal public refrain was a smile and the phrase “Great idea!”

DL: One could archive the shattered plate, but the point is to dwell on its breaking.

DB: I encouraged folks to archive or do something creative with the shards, but the point was to activate the viewer. In fact, no one wanted their shards, so I still have them all, in baggies. The plan is to create a community mosaic with them. Nothing gets wasted.

DL: And both are elemental to your conception and practice of citizenship.

DB: I’d say our conception and practice, since even if you disagree with my (personal) idea, there needs to be a vigorous public thinking. The heart of politics, after all, is the proletariat, to use a Marxian term. It’s the people, not their leaders, that matter.

DL: Long before Marx, though, Plato warned about the dangers of democracy—that it was the last stage of government before tyranny.

DB: That’s why an informed, active citizenry is so important. If we all become herd animals, or worse, lemmings, it’s true the tyrant will lead us off the cliff. The satirization of our leaders, I think, is a very effective way of diminishing their (actual or potential) power. And laughter is healthy.

DL: Let’s look back now, and get a sense of how you got to this point. You were born in Buffalo and grew up there during the 1960s. How did this place and time affect your lifelong artistic practice, which continually drew on social commentary, art activism, and political satire?

DB: I’ll have to blame the Vietnam War and my older brother, Jerry Ross, for introducing me to art and politics. Jerry is himself an accomplished activist and artist. While the Vietnam War engulfed our lives, he led the local chapter of the Youth Against War and Fascism party. He was one of the Buffalo Nine [a group of war protestors arrested together in 1968] and he organized the defense committee that fought for the release of Martin Sostre. Sostre was selling Black Panther [Party] and other radical literature in the ghetto, so “the Man” framed Sostre on false drug charges. Jerry moved Martin’s bookstore to the University at Buffalo campus union hall. Our family was harassed by the FBI because of Jerry’s work both on and off the University at Buffalo campus.

DL: Did that harassment precipitate your move to London?

DB: Oh, yeah! I was eager to get away from such a hostile environment. Many people don’t realize that back then, anyone with long hair or hippie clothes was considered good target practice. I feared getting shot in the back by a redneck, à la Easy Rider [1969, directed by Dennis Hopper], while demonstrating against the war. I was also being courted at the time by a fellow who served in the Peace Corps with my other sibling, Ron. After two four-year Peace Corps stints and other draft deferment jobs, my suitor was running out of ways to avoid fighting a war he didn’t believe in; he asked me if I wanted to go to London with him, and I said yes. I was eager to put an ocean between myself and the Nixon administration . . . and my over-protective parents. We wed on a construction site and illegally left the States via Fort Erie, on a ruse that we were crossing the border for Chinese food. My folks followed with all our luggage, and we flew out of Toronto for London. During our courtship my fiancé taught me how to use an SLR [Single Lens Reflex camera], at which point I gave up drawing and painting for the camera.

DL: How did the shift to the camera—to photographs—affect the kind of art you were doing?

DB: I was bored with painting and drawing. I could make an apple look
like an apple, so the challenge was gone. Photography was difficult—there were no automatic settings, and a lot could go wrong at every step of the way. I avidly read *Creative Camera* magazine (UK), and loved *Suburbia* (1973) by Bill Owens and *The Somnambulist* (1970) by Ralph Gibson. My photo heroes were Lewis Hine, Bruce Davidson, Danny Lyon, Duane Michaels, Eugene Richards, Robert Frank, and others who came from the “Concerned Photographer” camp. Their images inspired me, and that’s what I wanted my work to do: inspire.

**DB:** Were you working on your own in London?

**DL:** To begin with, it was just my new husband and me in a kitchen-turned-darkroom. Later, I became a member of Exit, the first photo collective in the UK—under the leadership of Paul Trevor. Our first project was a black-and-white documentary essay about the gentrification of London’s Docklands, called *Down Wapping* (1974). It was exhibited at the Photographers’ Gallery in London, and was published as a small book. I stayed with the group while we worked on the series titled *The City of London* (1975), and by this point Chris Steele-Perkins had joined the group. We worked alongside Josef Koudelka who was in London, shooting some of the same events (the Lord Mayor’s parade), and I also worked with a group of London-based feminist photographers for two exhibits at the Half Moon Gallery in East London.

**DB:** But you moved on soon after, right?

**DL:** After six years in London, I was just hitting my photographic stride, but I was also burnt out on the commuting and the crush of London. I ended up moving to Scotland to give my marriage another try. That failed, and I ended up in Cheshire, then Manchester, and lastly, Yorkshire. In 1976 in Manchester, I met Aileen Farriday, and we formed Reflex—a collective similar in spirit and approach to Exit: working in black and white while trying to create some impact. We were very much the model of those involved in the so-called Concerned Photographer genre. In Yorkshire, I met Martin Parr, who lived in the same small town (Hebden Bridge) as I did, down the road from Sylvia Plath’s grave, in Heptonstall. I met Angela Kelly, who now teaches at Rochester Institute of Technology, through Aileen, and I also started the first photo gallery in Manchester, Grass Roots Gallery. It was just a wall in a bookstore, but it got good reviews in the *Manchester Guardian*.

**DB:** And then you moved back to the US. What prompted the return home?

**DL:** After four years in Manchester/Yorkshire, I had reached a point where nothing special was holding me there, having separated from my husband, with no special love interest. I was also working in a tech college photo department where I was not clicking with anyone or anything. Then I got news that my mother’s health had taken a turn for the worse, and that clinched my return to Buffalo in 1979. Soon after arriving, I was encouraged to apply to the MFA program at SUNY Buffalo, and was offered a teaching assistantship. As luck would have it, on my “first day of school,” I discovered that the professor who liked my work so much—and had encouraged me to enroll—had relocated to California, thereby leaving me in an educational environment that was actually hostile to documentary work.

**DL:** Did you persist with the MFA? And how did your experience with “academic” art inform your thinking and practice?

**DB:** Moving back to the US during the Reagan years was very traumatic in its own right, but the culture shock I endured while working on my MFA thesis project (*Main Street*) at SUNY was a two-year torture. Younger photographers at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo endlessly ridiculed me for “still doing documentary” work. Anything that referred back to ’60s culture actually seemed to be vehemently loathed. Photographers were stacking colorful blocks in their studio, aiming to create images that were totally divorced from reality. We were heading in opposite directions. One or two people (thank you, Alida Fish and Anthony Bannion) were supportive of my efforts, saying that the documentary genre would come back into favor, if I waited long enough. But those supporters were few, and their words, though true, didn’t help my feelings of alienation.

**DB:** Is there a moment when your documentary work shifted from the kind of black-and-white street photography you were doing in England to the kind of work you’ve been producing in recent decades?

**DL:** There was a decisive moment when I abandoned street photography. I needed to gain acceptance in the local art community to survive, and I was tired of being labeled “out of touch.” I needed a subject that was universal, timeless, and cultureless, so I began with a series of self-portraits and nudes—*Parts of Me I See* (1982). I had to play the waiting game until American culture got its head out of the mindset of Reagan’s “ME” generation. I had just begun taking abstract macro images of the TV screen surface when suddenly the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) [January 17–February 28, 1991] broke out. I was immediately jolted out of my complacency.

**DL:** This was our first 24/7 cable news war.

**DB:** There’s that and (in addition to the technological shift) I was in total shock that everyone else seemed to have forgotten what a mess the Vietnam War had been. As a photographer, I thought, “I should go to the front and document the war,” but by then, I was already in my forties with a full-time teaching career, a house, and a husband, so I knew a split-second later that I wasn’t going anywhere. Still, I also knew I had to address my shock and horror through the act of making art.

**DL:** What did you do?

**DB:** I did what we all did. I turned on the TV.

**DL:** And what did you see?

**DB:** One of the peculiarities of CNN’s twenty-four-hour news feed is that all I had to do in order to “cover” the war was photograph the TV screen. I know, for example, that the war lasted forty-three days, because I made sure, like a real war photojournalist, that I photographed the war (as seen on CNN) every day.

**DL:** Still, the war exceeds the screen. And shooting what is already shot by someone else seems a perfect case of manufacturing simulacrum. Moreover, I’m thinking of Frederic Jameson’s “suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable”—how it resists or stands stubbornly beyond our comprehension by means of images, sounds, and other medial forms.

**DB:** First of all, I retain a basic level of faith in the documentary image, and I think the re-presentation of images can be its own form of social and cultural statement.

**DL:** In your case, then, the critique comes on our second viewing of the image. First CNN presents the image, and then you intervene—interfere—and
re-present it to us (as framed, as distorted, as de- or recontextualized, etc.)

DL: You’ve become something of a watchman. You were photographing the TV anchors, the journalists-in-the-field, and the images from the battlefront, and then your meta-coverage became your critique?

DB: Well, in addition to the re-presentation of the image, my critique was also often made for me by the optics I employed. For example, I found that my experimenting with a macro lens, either shooting extremely close, or held at an extreme angle to the curved glass screen (no flat screens then), did a fantastic job of optically skewing and distorting the image. By making sure the aperture was wide open, and shooting at the required fifteenth of a second, I ended up with just a narrow band of focused red, green, and yellow square “pixels,” and the remaining image was a soft blur—but undoubtedly, a face.

DL: All of the distortions and effects were made in-camera? And this work became the book Warheads?

DB: Right, no computer enhancement was used. Just optics and a narrow depth of field. The Desert Storm pictures were first exhibited as a series called Read My Lips or Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable (1991). Then I stressed the same Desert Storm pictures with bleach to create the series Warheads (2005). My later 500 Channels series (including The Teleangels; Global Swarming; Well, I’m Not a Crook; and You Stole My Baby; all 1993–98) had the extra element of color distortion created by manipulating the TV controls, rather than computer controls (even though I had access to Picture Publisher back then).

DL: Still, “covering” a televised war—and here I admit your skepticism is catchy, since I’m now wondering about allusions to covering up a war—is endlessly mediated and also distinctly antiseptic (in addition to being obviously quite safe).

DB: I agree. Unlike the Vietnam War, where cameramen were walking directly behind soldierstreading through dense Vietnam jungles-cum-battlefields, all we saw of Desert Storm on CNN were talking heads in a remote studio—sealed off from the fighting and any mortal danger.

What kind of war is that? Where were the images of war? This sanitized war appeared to be without a front line, without carnage, without consequence . . . or so they would have us believe. In the UK, a picture of a charred body of an Iraqi soldier was published on the front cover of a British publication, but it was not shown here. This may have been when they stopped showing returning American caskets on TV.

DL: A war without a war?

DB: Well, for us—for viewers. But it was a war, right? So what I saw on TV—even for twenty-four hours a day—was not coverage, but as you nicely pick it up on, a covering up. There was indisputably a significant case of visual censorship. And I don’t mean this in a conspiratorial cast—as if the networks were trying to protect the government or its soldiers. No, the news corporations were giving us the war they wanted us to (not) see. “Ratings war” takes on a whole new significance. Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) had come to life. It was the censorship that riled me most, and I was surprised that anyone else my age who had witnessed extreme jungle-sniping gunfire, a nightly occurrence on every evening newscast for ten years straight, said nothing about the lack of real reporting during the short but violent Desert Storm. We saw oil fields burning. We saw little rockets in the air. We saw interviews with generals and experts, but no casualties, no bomb craters, no blood, no damage! We were told the press was not allowed. And no one minded. No one was talking about the censorship! Amazing!

DL: So, your rebellion—your protest against the perceived distortions, lacunae, and the mercenary financial interests of the cable company, etc.—took the form of an artwork?

DB: Precisely. Outraged at the censorship, I mounted Read My Lips or Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable, with various images from the series exhibited in group shows in the US and Europe. When I showed more than one image I hung the images next to each other, touching, so they looked like a bank of TV monitors in a TV control room.

DL: Then history repeated itself?

DB: It seems to be doing so endlessly. Again, I seriously considered leaving the US. But, again, I was even more entrenched, and less able to uproot. There was no choice but to make more anti-war art.

DL: Then came the bleach?

DB: I was so upset that our collective memory had been erased, and the country was so willing to go to war again, that I ended up throwing bleach at the Read My Lips images, and in time that series became the monoprint Warheads. The book begins with an introduction by Anthony Bannon, formerly long-serving director of the George Eastman House [now the George Eastman Museum], and the work was exhibited in New York City, Las Vegas, Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, London, and Rhode Island, among other places.

DL: A common mechanism of nationalist bullying can come in the form of “If you don’t love our country, leave it.” But you, time and again, seem to be saying that loving the country and holding it to task are mutually reinforcing.

DB: This is why political satire is such an important art genre.

DL: Especially important in a democracy.

DB: That’s right. And even in an age of endless polls and popularity ratings, loving or fearing one’s leaders will not affect their poor decision making.

DL: With the bleach still in hand, and thinking of your use of plates, mugs, and blankets, “domestic politics” takes on a whole new meaning in your body of work.

DB: Those connections are coincidental. The use of bleach came from an attempt to stress my photos, to depict the violence of war, to face the faces that were presenting a whitewashed war. I tried tearing, cutting, scratching my photos, and then I remembered using bleach in black-and-white darkroom work, but—up to that point—had never used it with color prints. I had no idea what to expect. The resulting colors, when applied to a C-print, mimicked the colors of fire. Nothing could have been more perfect—an incendiary war now had its “fire-scorched” images. The symbolic content of the photographs was . . .

DL: Profound . . .

DB: Plus I had never seen any other photographer use bleach in this way.

DL: More bleached works followed, right?

DB: Yes— in 2008, The ImBLEACHment of George W. Bush developed in the wake of a failed impeachment attempt by Congressman Mark Kusinich. I “ImBLEAChed” Sharon Angle and Mitt Romney in 2012, this time adding the image to mass-produced blankets. As part of my Blanket of Lies (2011) and The Big Cover Up (2012–13), I gave the blankets away to homeless vets and youth connected to the Occupy Movement. This time I let the public help me with the bleaching process, via a performance piece called Schwarz and Loathing (2010) as an invited artist for the Off the Strip performance festival, created by the Las Vegas Contem-
porary Arts Center (then Collective). Mine was the only overtly political performance piece, and I felt a bit like the black sheep of the festival.

DL: I’m noticing a pattern here—anti-Vietnam, anti-Reagan, anti-Bush I, and anti-Bush II. Does your "artivism" run against the grain of other political registers? I saw some Hillary Clinton faces (as well as those of Donald Trump) in your Dishing It Out 2016 series. But no Bernie Sanders. Is your skepticism of government broad as well as deep?

DB: Bernie was not left out . . . . We had fun with everyone willing to toss their hat into the ring, as well as our entire political system. While I was born into a Democratic household, my brother taught me early on (through exposure to radical papers such as Ramparts, and the Black Panther newspaper) that all kinds of back stories and secret motivations lie beneath the surface. So I’m a skeptical humanist, whatever that means!

DL: You believe in people, you just don’t trust them. So, your attack on the surface—whether it be a photograph or a TV screen—seems fitting. You are calling our attention to the superficial nature of these images?

DB: Actually, I do trust people. I just don’t trust “the Man” or corporations behind “the Man.” With Warheads, I wanted to provide a visual contrast between the safety of a TV studio and the violence of a bomb blast. These sheltered “talking heads” were telling us about a war we were not allowed to see!

DL: Partisanship is a familiar, perhaps necessary, aspect of activism, but the wide sweep of your critique (from say, Vietnam to Trump), suggests that, to a significant degree, you’re not aiming to sway so much as to agitate the politi-
compliant. In this respect, are you more of a Socratic gadfly than a cliché?

DL: Not too long ago, Michael Fried featured as the title of a book the claim Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (2008). I admire Fried’s thesis—and his arful defense of it—but I’m also moved by John Opera’s antotypes and Julian Hibbard’s schematics [Ed. Note: See “A Conversation with John Opera” in Afterimage 42, no. 6 and “A Conversation with Julian Hibbard” in Afterimage 43, no. 6]—that is, by photographers who are not taking photographs (in the way we usually understand the concept of capturing a profilic event). Even someone such as Takashi Homma, who continues to use film cameras, strikes me as part of a tradition of painting (see, for example, his New Waves from 2000–2013). I see your initiatives in similar company, but with the striking difference that your work is intentionally, boldly, unapologetically political. And yet, so often that “work” is not photo-based, or even traceable in a medium (back to the notion that the invitation to a political gesture of free speech is perhaps more important than the resulting “imBLEACHED” image). As a photographer, have you transcended photography? Does photography matter as art as never before?

DB: I still think of myself as a photographer who will use any means possible to solve visual problems. I feel perfectly free to use anything (bleach, embroidery thread, found objects) and enjoy experimenting with new (at least to me) materials, but I still like to pay homage to my technical training as a photographer (four years at the Paddington Technical College in London).

DL: Somewhere in the midst of these projects, you moved from Buffalo to Las Vegas. How has almost twenty years in Nevada informed your politics, your art, etc.? What do you see as your role as an activist in Las Vegas? Are the needs for public thinking through art different there than in Buffalo?

DB: Yeah, I’m a temperature coward. A near accident on black ice one winter clinched the decision to leave Buffalo. My husband and I had a contest to see who could get a job in the Southwest first. He won! I followed, and soon had a job teaching photography at the College of Southern Nevada. Sure, we were concerned about leaving a healthy and thriving art community in Buffalo. The lack of one in Las Vegas—some twenty years ago—allowed me to be a pioneer in helping organizations like the Contemporary Arts Center gain recognition and stability, while I worked as a curator for Clark County. In more recent years, though, I feel that my role has changed from “pioneer” status to a more pronounced, activist status. Few artists here specialize in art that addresses the political. Some artists have admitted to me that they make political art, but they won’t show it—for fear of reprisal, for fear of losing customers. Showing satirical work has become one of my missions, in part, because the expression of political art is another practice of free speech.

DL: Aside from its political uses, how does thinking about art differ in Las Vegas from anywhere else in America, since the place itself seems to be fasci-
nated by (and proud of) its status as—shall we use a trope familiar to the desert—a mirage?

**DB:** Reality has an interesting DB: nated by (and proud of) its status as—shall we use a trope familiar to the desert—a mirage? The city, the arts district, and the arts community here are still very young. We have no independent art museum, though we have a population of over two million. Compare that to cities with robust, long-thriving arts communities serving about half that population. Meanwhile, trying to push in the other direction, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, the College of Southern Nevada, civic entities, and our community of small galleries in the arts district are gallantly promoting and displaying work, and creating events to draw attention to it.

**DL:** A last question, then. Cultural critic David Denby has noted that “the desire to satirize dies hard in an American.”

**DB:** Right now we are seeing signs of life such as new galleries and new programs. For example, the County, like the City, has embraced a percent-for-public-art program: very encouraging for the local arts community! But the Las Vegas arts scene has always seemed to be on a roller coaster, with high points and recurring dips . . . very cyclical. There is always talk of a major museum—so one day it might happen.

**DL:** So the city is getting more involved in supporting the arts?

**DB:** As tempting as the money could be, I don’t have the thick skin needed to run for any office. In between elections I love dabling in large yarn-bombing/word-bombing installations, and our local group, the West Flamingo Yarn Stormers [all seniors!] are helping me wrap the Gene Autry Center in California in yarn, under the leadership of our sister yarn-bombing group, the L.A. Yarn Bombers.

**DL:** This sounds like Christo gone political.

**DB:** Yes, along with a bit of outsider art, American vernacular hobbyism (crochet anyone?), and hippie pranksterism. I’m a big fan of Abbie Hoffman’s 1971 *Steal this Book.*

**DL:** Since your work has taken us from black-and-white street photography (made on Tri-X film) to color stills of television screens, and onward to plates and mugs and blankets, what do you make of the role political satire is finding in the emerging realm of internet-based technologies, principally social media? How does one, say, de-face Facebook? How does an artist/activist “im-bleach” the abuse of political power in the age of the selfie and Instagram?

**DB:** Ask me again in a year or two. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the election results. At times I feel like I have traveled into an alternative reality, as if I’m in an old black-and-white *Twilight Zone* episode. Maybe that’s what really happened—that may be the only explanation that makes sense! Meanwhile, we just have to put everything into perspective. Stay calm, put one foot in front of the other each day, and make art, if that is how you cope. I know that’s how I carry on.

**DL:** Are you at work on another project—either as an artist (an installation, for example) or perhaps something in your capacity as a civic leader?

**DB:** Philip Burke rocks! My concern is that the genre of political satire is an endangered species, and that is why I’m even more passionate about honoring past efforts, and inspiring this generation to give it a try. Philip, and other artists, make a fair enough living (I imagine) specializing in satire. Think of the other Buffaloian (now in DC), Tom Toles, who does cartooning for the papers. The Getty in LA had an incredible show not too long ago on World War I posters, magazines, and other anti-war illustrations that showed (some) famous artists contributing to the effort. Wonderful stuff. Those artists’ careers still flourish, despite their taking up the paintbrush as a sword! They were also talented. For *Dishing It Out 2016*, the gamut ran from outsider street artists, to university faculty, to just plain talented, disciplined, and experienced artists who loved the concept. At the end of it all, I’d like to publish a catalog of all the artwork alongside the *Dishing It Out 2016* installation shots. It could possibly inspire future satirists, and provide that edge of amusement we will all need to get us through to the next election . . . and beyond. Something tells me it’s much better to be laughing about our predicament than crying about it!

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**NOTES**

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Blackness in Abstraction
PACE GALLERY
NEW YORK CITY
JUNE 22–AUGUST 19, 2016

“What is it that a black object does?” asks curator Adrienne Edwards in the catalog for her exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, which investigated this question. At Pace Gallery, Edwards staged “black as a material, a method, a mode, and/or a way of being in the world” with installation, painting, photography, sculpture, and video, dating from the 1940s to the present. Since these predominately black works skirted overt messages and images, discerning how they act was an exercise in patience. To take a swift walk through would have been to miss the show. Instead, abstract expressionist Norman Lewis’s black paintings (1946–77), though not included, provide an enticing comparison. Jorge Daniel Veneciano has linked Lewis’s nonfigurative tableaux to the Greek myth of Orpheus. Orpheus descends into the underworld’s dark depths to rescue his bride Eurydice. The gods there permit Eurydice to follow him home, but caution Orpheus against glancing back at her before reaching the upper world. As the pair pass from the dimness of Hades into daylight, the hero hastily turns his head. In that instant, Eurydice, who was still in partial darkness, vanishes. Blackness reclains her. The analogy connects aesthetic experience of the color black to an absent presence that is all-encompassing and, more specifically, to the experience of the ultimate abstraction: meaning. Meaning, like a shadow or a lost love, constantly follows us, engulfs us, but is never apprehended.

*Blackness in Abstraction* similarly reveled in art objects’ obscurity. Even so, the array of multimedia works on view offered glimpses of related references—for example, artistic genealogies, sociocultural and geopolitical critique, and lively inanimate substances, along with queries about identity—but such moments of recognition flared up and faded as one grouping after the next shifted course. Together the contributions, by an international group of twenty-nine artists, presented blackness as an expansive, abstract concept and accentuated the ways it sticks to, sometimes even saturates, the corporeal. For instance, Jonathas de Andrade’s installation *Constructive Exercise for a Landless Guerrilla* (2016) contains photographs of black and other colored tarps, which the members of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movement variously combined with branches and scraps to assemble shelters. Beside the photographs is a poem that describes how the structures were built. Resembling trash bags, the black coverings symbolize the dispossessed, disposable status of the shelters’ inhabitants. Pictured by de Andrade as protective sheaths, these tarps radically repurpose art history’s black monochrome, particularly that of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915), meant to epitomize painting in its purest, most transcendent form. Likewise, Turiya Magadlela taints and reinterprets this painting’s symbolism with her own black square of dark pantyhose. Stitched, ruffled, and ripped, the mesh pattern of Magadlela’s *I never made Swan Lake 7* (2015) brings to mind not only a ravaged ballet tutu, but also the violence directed toward female and feminized bodies of color, especially in the artist’s country, South Africa. Such objects underscored artists’ formal experimentation with the myriad affects and associations of blackness, while prompting consideration for how differently situated people come to occupy and mobilize them. Yet, rather than reducing the art to a stable factor, the exhibition’s restrained color palette amplified the complexities of works and their shared reverberations.

Edwards’s sensuous and socially engaged approach to abstract art followed decades of critical thought on the politics of identity in this terrain. “Black is a Color,” Raymond Saunders famously proclaimed in 1967. His call to disentangle the naturalized bonds between a chromatic property, black artists’ use of it, and subject matter is echoed in Darby English’s influential 2007 challenge to the racialized readings imposed on African American artists’ output. In the 1990s, Ann Gibson also forcefully interrogated art establishments’ biases by exposing the ways mid-century New York City—based Abstract Expressionists’ culture, race, sex, and sexuality informed the production and reception of a modern art movement paradoxically touted for its universality and nonrepresentational qualities.

Kobena Mercer’s 2006 anthology further moved to dislodge codified understandings of abstraction rooted in Western modern art, by mapping alternative models arising in cross-cultural, non-white, and non-Western practices. Edwards did not suppress the fraught historiography surrounding black abstraction. To the contrary, she created an arena for these messy subtexts by orchestrating tensions between objects. In isolation, Fred Sandback’s minimalist floor-to-ceiling installation of six black pieces of yarn, *Untitled (Sculptural Study, Volumes in Dialogue/ Opposition)* (1982/2005), might lend itself to an exploration of black lines’ physicality, but alongside Carrie Mae Weems’s *String Theory* (2016), the bands connote body and value metrics as well. Weems’s archival print depicts a gallery scene, where black lines on walls generate the illusion of a surreal hanging with empty frames. Viewers familiar with Weems may construe these outlines as placeholders for her gray-scale photographs featuring individuals of darker complexions. By bracketing the artist’s signature implementation of black and invoking string theory, a physics theory that supposedly accounts for the structure of the universe, the print foregrounds institutional tendencies to evacuate blackness and the undervalued social attributes it signifies from our cultural spaces. As if responding to such institutional monopolies over cultural resources, the neighboring text accompanying de Andrade’s tarp exposition, which read “how to redistribute ownership through structures,” cast this problematic of reinventing societal frameworks as an overarching theme.
While *Blackness in Abstraction* built on art historical inquiries about the elusiveness, not to mention inequities, of identity and meaning in art, the show strikes me as a departure. Its emphasis on the hefty opacity of black objects inflects these prior debates with contemporary concerns pertaining to "new materialism." An amalgamation of analytic lenses that decenter the human subject, new materialism entails divergent positions. As demonstrated by the section highlighting stringy constructions, Edwards’s project flirted with those philosophies confronting how humans are ensnared in or constituted through networks and "vital materialism," the vibrancy of nonhuman, material things. Objects that exuded such vitality presided in prominent places. In the center of the main gallery sat a corroded black steel cube. Layers of striated, coppery rust rendered Sui Jianguo’s sculpture a consequence of thick accumulation. Dubbed *One Cubic Metre of Absolute Darkness* (2012), the object’s luminous texture translates a so-called unit of absolute darkness into a throbbing, aging entity. Deconstructed oil paintings on canvas by Oscar Murillo hovered above like phantoms as they traversed the length of the first room. Their titles, such as *I–for the souls of the rotten mighty* from his series *one upon another and the other* (2016), drew attention to the droopy paintings’ lyricism. With a sustained look, the suspended fabrics’ multiple nocturnal hues and their industrial poetics came into view. Yet, without the Pace handout that designated the titles or other background information, Murillo’s gesture could be perceived as a fetishization of the abject. Not coincidently, a fetish effect—one that erases the histories, labor, and human perspectives undergirding material compositions—is an oft-cited liability of new materialism in general. Here, too, lies the general precariousness of the exhibition’s strengths. In parts where the display’s initial inscrutability made the aesthetic intelligence of artists’ manipulated matter difficult to grasp, the work could have been hastily mistaken for dumb matter. That said, descriptions of each participant and their art’s bearing on the show’s “meta-themes” were readily available in Edwards’s catalog. The rich entries there indicated that the pieces, which made an aloof first impression, would be invigorated by curatorial primers if a museum hosted the show.

Correspondingly, without wall text, the highly formal layout at Pace treaded a line between muffled intentions and quiet enchantment. Those in search of a narrative thread may have floundered while walking the aisle created by the two rows of standing walls spanning the first room. Floundering, as I did at the show’s opening, was not without visual pleasures. Nevertheless, during a second visit, when I proceeded with care and eased into the space’s choreography, its symmetrical arrangement no longer felt austere, but revealed the interior logic of a temple, introducing a kind of awe into my encounters with the artwork. Like an altar table, a wide shelf adorned the far end of the main gallery. The shelf contained not relics, but Sergio Camargo’s *Untitled sculptural series* (1980–90). Each of his six sets embodies a geometric shape that incrementally changes scale and configuration. Made of Belgian black marble, the bold permutations appear as art organisms morphing before one’s eyes. The progressions pulsed all the more with Glenn Ligon’s video projection *The Death of Tom* (2008) flickering behind them. The flashes and twinkling piano music emanating from Ligon’s installation tinged the white cube room with a sense of wonder.

At the same time, hints throughout—such as Ligon’s allusion to the stereotype from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—cautioned against an uncritical or exclusively romantic, sensory disposition. From the outset, at the show’s entrance, Adam Pendleton’s *Untitled (code poem Los Angeles black)* (2016), signaled that however somatic the art here might have been, it was also matter to be deciphered. When seen from above, Pendleton’s floor clusters of circular and rectangular black ceramics approximate a secret script, Morse code perhaps. Nearby, Ellen Gallagher’s big mixed-media paintings elaborated on this leitmotif of cryptic abstraction. Her suite of four, *Negros...*
EXHIBITION REVIEW

Battling in a Cave (2016), plays on an unfortunate inscription with those words found under the topcoat of Malevich’s Black Square. Carved into each of Gallagher’s densely collaged canvases were a couple of amorphous figures, facing one another as people might in a fight. These amoeba-looking protagonists recalled. Carved into each of Gallagher’s densely collaged canvases with those words found under the topcoat of Malevich’s Black Battling in a Cave gravitated toward Wangechi Mutu’s soily splatter as strange by eliciting the color’s cosmic aspects. Gallery-goers Ad Reinhardt, and Louise Nevelson, could not be taken for granted. KIM BOBIER is a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who specializes in contemporary and African American art history.

NOTES

Joey Holder: Ophiux
WYSING ARTS CENTRE
CAMBRIDGE, UK
SEPTEMBER 25–NOVEMBER 20, 2016

Likened by the artist in an accompanying interview to a scientific lab/medical room, the installation of Joey Holder’s Ophiux at Wysing Arts Centre welcomed visitors into an uncanny futuristic world.1 The floor was bright white rubber, necessitating blue plastic shoe covers on entrance that muffled the sound of footsteps. Voices were muted, adding an air of hushed reverence to an environment that felt part spaceship, part surgical theater.

I felt as though I was being watched. From the ceiling, a cluster of blue heat lamps hung suspended, all eight lamps positioned to inspect each visitor entering the room. To my right, a larger-than-life C-arm X-ray machine leaned against the wall, next to a light box holding a series of slides. To my left, glass tanks containing the exoskeletal remains of dead crabs and strange, marine sponges sat beneath a video screen showing a reptilian eye opening and closing in repetitive slow motion. And facing me at the far end of the room was a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner, the aperture of its central bore overlaid with a huge human iris, giving the apparatus the appearance of an unblinking eye.

The contemporary manifestation of the medical–industrial gaze is central to Holder’s interest in the ways in which our bodies are seen, mapped, and now digitized through technology. Developing ideas first explored during a residency at Wysing in 2015, Ophiux realizes collaborative encounters set up between Holder and scientists from Cambridge University. Building on the center’s mission to support experimentation, through interdisciplinary dialogue with computational biologist Dr. Marco Galardini (from the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus) and Dr. Katrin Linse (Senior Biodiversity Biologist at the British Antarctic Survey), the development of Ophiux was informed by current research into the sequencing of DNA. In particular, it explores the ways in which digital technology is enabling the extraction and processing of data—and that data’s potential for “mining” (and thus monetization) on an industrial scale.

Hence Ophiux: a fictional firm created by Holder as the vehicle for exploring her theme. Described as a speculative pharmaceutical com-

Installation view of Ophiux (2016) by Joey Holder; photograph by Damian Griffiths
pany of the near future set up to advance human evolution through the gathering of genetic data from human and nonhuman sources, its purpose is partially glimpsed through the objects, text, and video that make up the installation in which its activities take place. But it is the role of this new technology in what is known as the "genetic gold rush" that underpins the film work (also titled Ophiux) on show in the open studio next door. Presented as a kind of business marketing tool for Ophiux's R&D program, the film takes us deep down on a journey to the bottom of the sea—the deepest sea beds representing an unexplored "resource frontier," infinitely rich in genetic material, untouched by human hands—and ripe for exploitation.

That it has echoes of Jules Verne’s early science fiction classic Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870) is no coincidence. Abstracted from websites of already existing biotech firms, the film’s sparse captions create a narrative that is part pseudo-scientific jargon, part inspirational blue-sky thinking. With fragments of sampled internet video and Dr. Linse’s actual research footage, the film confuses fact and fiction, describing cutting-edge technologies through a mixture of digital and analog formats that confuse past, present, and future.

Ophiux’s mission statement remains deliberately unclear. Grainy shots of unknowable sea creatures loom out of the ink-black depths, like monsters of the deep. Arcane alchemical symbols sit side by side with the helixes through which DNA and the codes of life are rendered visible, their own forms echoed in the logo and typeface of the Ophiux brand. Complex digital processes that patch life are rendered visible, their own forms echoed in the logo and side by side with the helixes through which DNA and the codes of life are reduced to a visual language of binary code, its secrets remain obscure to true understanding: it is beyond comprehension.

Taking the language, processes, and visual culture of scientific research as objects of critical investigation, Holder’s engagement with her collaborative partners’ methodologies is central to the work’s realization—through what she describes as an interdisciplinary “pollination.” Her film’s screening as part of Cambridge University’s Festival of Ideas certainly attracted a wide audience, and presentations from the scientists involved in its conceptual development shed light upon its foundation in scientific “fact.” But, as with many art-science conversations, one is left wondering to what extent science, in turn, puts into practice new insights gleaned from the dialogue.

What Holder’s artistic perspective offers is a cultural interpretation of complex speculative propositions—propositions impossible for the layperson to grasp. In so doing, Ophiux captures the very impossibility of a contemporary medical imaginary, rooted as it is in a language so complex and with possibilities too difficult—perhaps sublime—to truly imagine. Perhaps only ever visualized in reductive terms—through the codes and symbols and diagrams that take the place of a reality too esoteric to be seen or known—Holder’s mapping of today’s technological gaze exposes it as both all-seeing and blind at the same time, probing and endlessly seeking as it plunges through life’s rich yet always murky depths.

HARRIET RICHES, PhD, is a writer and lecturer in Cambridge, UK.

This November, a woman from a major political party was on the American presidential ballot for the first time in history, and pundits predicted that the ultimate glass ceiling would finally shatter. In the words of this candidate’s supporters, we would become a “pantsuit nation.” During the several weeks prior to this unprecedented election, two news items featuring female protestors showed up in my Facebook feed. One occurred in Rhode Island, where more than three hundred women marched in solidarity for the right to wear yoga pants. The other culminated in Jerusalem, after more than 3,000 Israeli and Palestinian women marched for two weeks in solidarity for peace in the Middle East. The disparity between these two marches was so extreme I felt like I was being punked. A common slogan of second-wave feminists was “The personal is political!”—a catchphrase meant to underscore how a woman’s daily life is shaped by the institutions that govern her, and I’m sure there must be a clever cultural theorist out there who could argue that wearing yoga pants is a step toward radicalization. But all I could think was first-world privilege, indeed. Is this what American feminism has come to? So invested in the personal that the right to wear athleisure with impunity is one of the few things that gets women mobilized? As far as I can tell, women have been wearing jeans for more than a quarter of a century, but we’re still making three-quarters of a man’s dollar. As patriarchy has proved time and time again, wearing pants does not make one politically enlightened, nor a feminist.

Olga Kopenkina, curator of the thus timely exhibition Feminism is Politics! might argue that this is a perfect illustration of what American feminism has become—or at least the version of feminism that’s visible in the media. As a depoliticized offshoot of the same neoliberalism that exonerates banks and corporations while shifting the blame and burden to the homeowners and the workers, what scholars now term “neoliberal feminism” abandons collective action and the commons for individual responsibility and the marketplace. Not surprisingly, then, this feminism primarily benefits highly educated women who already have surplus capital. These are the women who can afford to “lean in,” because a whole host of invisible and poorly paid laborers serve as the human scaffolding for their UGG and Starbucks-laden lives. Their artworld feminist darling is Cindy Sherman because her work affirms their struggles with fashion as a means to female identity. By contrast, the ten female artists—from ten different countries—in Feminism is Politics! look at the lives of those who are the scaffolding: the politically, economically, and socially dispossessed who are at the mercy of neoliberal global capitalism and its heartless, insidious governance. As Kopenkina states, “new” feminists ask, “What are the conditions within global capitalism that inform and reshape feminist concepts, paradigms, and statements in relation to labor, migration, capital, and democracy?” These artists find their answers in the margins, suggesting that it is the very status of living precariously and being overlooked that may engender new ways of navigating the present and provide novel solutions for a more loving and humane future.

It is clear that this is a feminism based on action, rather than theory, so it is not surprising that a majority of the works shown here are performance-based. As feminist artists of the 1970s demonstrated, the female body is frequently the site upon which a culture writes its laws and metes out its punishments; for that reason, it is the perfect medium to illustrate governmental domination. One of the most potent of these—despite or perhaps on account of its aesthetic paucity—was Liza Morozova’s performance The Mother Russia (2014). As a response to the Russian annexation of the Crimea and invasion of the Ukraine, Morozova strapped a remote-controlled tank to the top of her head and wandered, both blindfolded and naked, through the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. Visitors were able to take turns using the tank’s remote control, which delivered a mild shock to the artist when certain buttons were pressed, and thus turned her body into a living drone. Morozova never knew when she would be shocked, a metaphor for those under siege in modern warfare. The disconnection engendered by using a joystick—and the cruelty that may be its end result—was apparent, as the crowd was visibly entertained rather than saddened by Morozova’s sudden jolts, as though they were merely the shudders of their avatar in a game of Call of Duty. Sans clothing and sight, Morozova was doubly defenseless—and her awkward, halting movements as she lurched through the crowd and into walls were an apt representation of the militaristic nation-state shooting blindly at any target available. Finally, so physically bewildered that she could no longer stand, Morozova slumped to the floor. Her form then became analogous to that same militarized mother state’s powerless children, easily battered about by economic forces beyond their control, and ultimately shocked into submission.

The female body as innately vulnerable to the whims of a capitalist nation-state is also a major motif in Berlin-based artist Tanja Ostojić’s series of videos entitled Naked Life (2004–16). The appellation is a direct reference to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life,” which theorizes that under certain “states of exception”—what he defines as situations deemed by the sovereign to transcend the rule of law in the name of public good—people are seen as mere human bodies, rather than political citizens with rights and a voice. In Naked Life 6 (2016), originally a forty-five-minute piece performed in the Society of Advocates Hall in Aberdeen, Scotland, Ostojić climbs atop a table and begins to read a United Nations Human Rights report detailing the horrifically unjust deportations of the Roma across Western Europe. By entering the room in a full, black skirt over brightly mismatched petticoats, and a multitude of ruffled, lacy tops, Ostojić evokes the stereotypical image of a “gypsy” woman. As such, when she narrates the story of fifteen-year-old Johnny Delaney, who was kicked...
to death in 2003 by a gang of boys who called him “Gypsy bastard” and then stomped on his head, Ostojić not only relates the cruelty of state-sanctioned racism, but evinces the compassion of the deceased child’s mother. While reading the atrocities, Ostojić disrobes, each divested layer symbolic of the way in which the state slowly strips away all dignity, revealing a naked—or bare—life. In structural form, the work pays an implicit homage to Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975), but ups the feminist ante by speaking for a voiceless people, no matter what their gender. By expressly focusing on the Roma, arguably the most mistreated ethnic group in Europe, Ostojić illustrates how a people denied political agency become the scapegoat for other precariats, who are also left emotionally bereft by the cruel illogic of neoliberal economic policies.

Global capitalism has an undeniable ability to ravage the soul of a community, leaving a devastating wake of poverty, drug use, and dispassion. It also has an unerring ability to steal the soul of those people still lucky enough to have a job. This is the subject of Protect Your Heart at Work (2012), by Irina Georghe and Alina Pope, two Romanian artists who founded the Bureau of Melodramatic Research. Their twenty-minute video utilizes Martha Rosler’s doll but cutting deconstruction of the cultural status quo as seen in her Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained (1977). Georghe and Pope come across as brainwashed hybrids of Sheryl Sandberg and a Stepford wife, dressed for success in gray suits, glasses, and fire engine red lipstick, and parody the clinical delivery of employee instructional videos, the only point of which is to improve the bottom line. They contradict themselves at every topical turn with platitudes like, “protect your heart at work by improving your performance at work.” They also mimic the monotonous but seemingly well-meaning middle managers who forever spout off about a stress-free workplace, epitomized by a “global orchestra of happy clicks.” Their parody of neoliberal feminism, with its emphasis on individual achievement at work and the erroneous belief that only you are responsible for whether you succeed or fail, is best exemplified by their reminder that, “emotions are positive, it’s only you who make them dangerous.”

Protect Your Heart at Work alone would have made the exhibition worth seeing. But the fact is that Kopenkina has curated the best exhibition of contemporary feminist art I’ve ever viewed. These are the artists I’ve been longing to see for the past decade, creators fully committed to bettering their world, fully cognizant of the fact that while selling on Etsy may pay the bills in the short-term, it won’t substitute for a pension. Over and over again, they remind us of our relative privilege, and, therefore, just how egregious our political ignorance really is. Amazingly, not one artist nor work beats us over the head. Rather, a viewer becomes attuned to their own apathy by virtue of the artist’s command of her medium. A case in point is Victoria Lomasko’s article Slaves of Moscow (2014), in which two generations of enslaved humans in the middle of Moscow are shown to be treated far worse than most caged pets. Originally published in the journal Migrant Labor, Lomasko’s graphic reportage is the form at its finest; it pulls no punches and does not glamorize its protagonists. And this is exactly what makes one sit up and say, “This is real, this is happening.” Likewise, the work of Xicana and Californian activist Melanie Cervantes is exemplary printmaking, exploiting the power of the multiple to spread the message, and underscoring that message by means of vivid color and design. Her poster for ELZN, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, colloquially known as the Zapatistas, lists their ELZN Women’s Revolutionary Law (2010), which sounds like the basic tenets of a universal feminism if there could ever be one. The right to a just salary, to control over one’s reproductive choices, to health and nutrition, to childcare, and to freedom from rape and domestic violence surely sounds like a collective uprising most of us could get behind. Cervantes’s decision to feature a woman breastfeeding a child in a sling instead of holding a rifle also rebukes the stereotype of the violent revolutionary, and instead evokes compassion.

The power of such a simple symbol—a breastfeeding child, a shining star, a grieving mother—used to be one of the ways in which humankind could attempt to speak universally, and this is a theme within Feminism is Politics! that is used to great effect. Here the iconography is a bit more contemporary, but no less potent. Anna Zvyagintseva’s Unities (2012–present) is an actual cooking pot in which she has placed a speaker. As viewers move closer they hear the sounds of revolutionary fervor rumbling within, recalling the revolutionary power of the people in Maxim Gorky’s Mother (1906). In Untitled (2015), a PSA by the Argentinean feminist collective Mujeres Públicas, it is a wheat-pasted poster of knitting needles and booties with the Spanish phrase, “Todo Con La Misma Aguja” (Everything with the same needle). The booties need no explanation, but the knitting needles are analogous to our coat hanger, a reminder of how unsafe women become when abortions are made illegal. The booties problematize the right’s presumption that a woman guiltlessly uses abortion as a means of birth control, and suggests that economic concerns might force her to self-abort a child she would otherwise love to care for.

Patriarchy has no gender, as bell hooks reminds us time and time again, and neither should feminism. It’s peculiar then that Kopenkina did not include any male artists in this exhibition, nor were there any works solely devoted to the ways in which men are exploited in this precarious and uncertain century. These omissions should be forgiven, however, because in all other aspects this is a brilliantly conceived exhibition. I wouldn’t expect anything less from a curator who counts Andrea Fraser and Rosler among her teachers, but it is clear that Kopenkina has a vision all her own. It is one this world desperately needs.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Rineke Dijkstra: Rehearsals
MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM
SEPTEMBER 9, 2016–JANUARY 2, 2017

When Gianfranco Rosi, director of *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*, 2016) explains, “My goal is not to deliver a message or defend a theory. The goal of my film is not to inform. We are not lacking data, but they crush our perception and our emotions concerning the real,” he might be speaking for Rineke Dijkstra. All of Dijkstra’s work to date reveals that she turned from commercial photography toward portraits, in her own words, in order to produce photographs with something more “substantial.” She offers viewers an opportunity to sharpen our perceptions and our emotions with two absorbing videos presented in the exhibition *Rehearsals* (created in 2014 for Manifesta 10: the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in Russia), and shown recently, for the first time in the United States, at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Each of the two videos is shown in a separate room. The three-channel video *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg* (2014, 15 min., 16 sec.) features eleven different girls rehearsing an astonishing and demanding set of contortions: supine with chest on the floor and body bent so that feet touch the floor in front of the head; sitting on the floor with legs extended in opposite directions until they form a 180-degree angle; or in extreme backbends, among many other poses. Each girl is shown from three angles, framed at varying distances. Most of the time the reed-like girls, like many of Dijkstra’s portrait subjects, are shown isolated in the space around them. The photographer pulls in at the end of the last sequences, but only enough to cut off a bit of the performing gymnast’s feet. The photographer is precise—she uses a 4 x 5 camera for still subjects, and that aesthetic carries over into the stable camera and minimal movement in the videos, allowing us to concentrate on the subjects, and calling attention to the edges of the frame. Dijkstra uses only ambient sound, often the sound of the girls’ feet, hips, or thighs thumping on the floor as they perform their movements. Moving from one girl to another, and filming the space in between, she cuts each gymnast out, leaving a momentarily empty frame, and deliberately replacing one gymnast with another. They each wear a neutral expression, or what Martha Graham called the dancer’s smile, which hides any evidence of their physical exertion and does not distract in any way from their technical mastery of the routines.

Throughout her career, Dijkstra has sought the moment when a portrait subject reveals something close to what might be a “true self,” existing beyond layers of social and cultural constructs and performances. Portraits in the West have always been the site of ontological propositions about the individual, a concept subject to endless reconsideration and often, in modern philosophy and theory, inclined to disappear altogether, when consciousness is defined as being a process of cultural production. Representations of women have long been, except for notable exceptions, the province of men; portraits by women implicitly renegotiate the boundaries of the self and other, subject and object. Dijkstra seems to record not just the physical person, but oscillations created by these fluctuating boundaries between the photographer and her subjects. Paradoxically, in the case of these gymnasts, whose poses are strikingly unnatural, she has been “trying to find a natural pose,” by setting up situations that encourage her subjects to drop their feelings about the camera and about how they will be represented. She often photographs children because children are “not pretending to be somebody else,” or in the language of gender theory, they have not yet accepted the social and cultural constructions that will define them. Because they are often young, the subjects of her portraits often convey a quietly liberating sense of potential, as if all the emotions of life, as they appear on the human face, are yet to come. *Rehearsals* is an apt title; these young gymnasts will perform many more roles in their lives.
And viewers are absolutely free to arrive at their own conclusions because Dijkstra shows us what is in front of the camera, but gives no other information about rhythmic gymnastics and the arduous discipline to which these young people must submit to achieve these poses, including any suggestion that there is something grotesque and problematic in training these young girls to twist their bodies into knots.

The single-channel video Marianna (The Fairy Doll) (2014, 19 min., 13 sec.), shown in another room, presents one young girl rehearsing a dance from Josef Bayer’s 1888 ballet Die Puppenfee (The Fairy Doll), which she will use as an audition to the Vaganova Ballet Academy. Although Dijkstra varies the distance between her subjects and the viewer in both sets of videos, Marianna is still alone in the space; she moves over and over again from the back of the rehearsal room to the front, executing a complicated set of steps and performing the traditional theatrical expressions, including an overly charming smile, each time. The room is an unrelenting pink, and she wears pink tights, a pink dance skirt, and a pink leotard. The environment, despite its homey cuteness, seems overwhelming, in a similar way that the sea seems to loom in Dijkstra’s 1992–96 Beaches portraits (not on view in this exhibition).

We know many other young dancers have worked very hard in this room. We hear the perky music and the coach’s demanding voice, correcting every detail in Russian, as Marianna practices the phrase over and over again. The teacher’s insistent directions seem like the commanding messages we receive from our culture. Most of the time we aren’t aware of these relentless instructions—but we obey, even with a mixture of emotions, just as willingly as the young dancer does.

A similar ambiguity exists in Marianna as in the Gysmschool video, between our wonder at the rigor of the dance phrase and the abilities of the dancer, and our simultaneous sense that there is something problematic about such perfection and the training to which she is subjected. In this case, in contrast to the gymnasts who must keep a neutral expression, the girl must practice a range of theatrical facial expressions as she perfects the role of a rather coy doll. The compelling, even subversive, aspect of this video lies in the other more immediate feelings that sweep across Marianna’s face when she is out of character, between repetitions of the phrase she is rehearsing, while she is standing and listening to the teacher. We are amazed not only by her abilities with the rather difficult allegro passage, but by her concentration, patience, and good nature as she works to inhabit and bring the fairy doll to life.

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NOTES
3. “In all of us who perform there is an awareness of the smile which is part of the equipment, or gift, of the acrobat. We have all walked the high wire of circumstance at times. We recognize the gravity pull of the Earth as he does. The smile is there because he is practicing living at that instant of danger. He does not choose to fall.” Martha Graham, Blood Memory (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 4.
5. Ibid.
EXHIBITION REVIEW

A Matter of Memory: Photography as Object in the Digital Age
GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
OCTOBER 22, 2016–JANUARY 29, 2017

Photography is a substantial medium. From the technological apparatuses and chemical processes that produce it to the accumulation of metal, glass, plastic, paper, fabric, leather, and other supports that preserve the photographic trace for posterity, photography has always had a haptic, material presence. Moreover, as an indexical medium, photography also exists to preserve a physical imprint (via reflected light) of the people, places, and things it represents. Despite photography’s embeddedness within the realm of the concrete, the tangible, and the corporeal, however, critics and historians have routinely sidestepped or marginalized the materiality of the photographic image. Perhaps because of photography’s singular ability to offer a window into another time and place, many of the most foundational thinkers on photography do not see the window for the view. When they do address the photograph itself as an object with physical presence, scholars have imagined that physical presence as ephemeral, invisible, or barely there. In the nineteenth century, despite the comparative weightiness of the daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes that were common in his day, Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography as a way to fix in time the “evanescent films” emitted by bodies in space, comparing the image to a reflection in a pool of water.1 In the twentieth century, Roland Barthes describes the photograph evocatively as a “weightless, transparent envelope”—the epitome of an object that has no presence in itself and exists only to convey its content.2 If photography’s materiality was effaced in its first 150 years, this repudiation has become all the more dramatic in the digital age. As photography increasingly abandons the indexical and material realm of photosensitive compounds on various kinds of physical supports for the realm of screens, pixels, and data files, the medium has seemed to many to become completely immaterial. It is in this moment that the need to understand the material presence of photography, then and now, becomes most urgent.

The current exhibition at the George Eastman Museum, A Matter of Memory: Photography as Object in the Digital Age, does precisely this, and does so in a thoughtful new way. Many museums over the past twenty years have explored photography’s material history. As professionals and amateurs have increasingly made the jump from analog to digital cameras, venerable institutions like the National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Getty Museum have mounted exhibitions of the remnants of our analog photographic past. Compiling found photographs from a variety of processes, these exhibitions inspire a wealth of nostalgia (not just for vintage processes, but also for the clothes, cars, architectures, and cultures of the past) and an endlessly fascinating series of glimpses into past lives through the artifactual traces of Polaroids, Kodachromes, and old, black-and-white snapshots. It would be easy enough to mount such an exhibition at the Eastman Museum given its vast and impeccable collection of all things photographic, and indeed, there are, elsewhere in the museum, wonderful examples of this bygone image culture.

The current installation in the History of Photography gallery, for example, includes Mexican foto-esculturas, a carefully compiled travel album from the early twentieth century, and a handful of stereoviews displayed with a chunky handheld viewer for visitors to use. A Matter of Memory, however, takes this exploration of photographic substance in a different direction. In its selection and presentation of works, as well as in curator Lisa Hostetler’s thoughtful and philosophical exhibition catalog essay that accompanies it, A Matter of Memory offers a sustained meditation on the persistent materiality of photography in the digital age, as both an artistic and a social medium, and it grounds that meditation in a history of photographic materiality as a conceptual gesture, an expressive formal device, and a practical reality.3 As such, it reframes the concept of lost materiality by suggesting some of the ways that photography has been, and remains, both ephemeral and concrete.

The exhibition begins, appropriately, with a reflection on photographic history. Before one passes into the large main gallery devoted to the photographic object in the digital age,

Untitled from the series My Ghost (1997) by Adam Fuss; © Adam Fuss; courtesy Deborah Ronnen Fine Art
one must first pass through a smaller gallery that “lays the groundwork” by examining artists’ radical engagement with photographic materiality in analog formats. Included in this room are classic examples of photographic experimentation by masters of the medium: photograms by Robert Heinecken and Adam Fuss, scratched negatives and torn prints by Thomas Barrow, and luridly colorful multiple exposures from James Welling’s Hexachromes series (2006). While some of these images are from the recent past, they are all produced by artists who have been working with and exploring the materiality of analog photographic technologies since before the onset of the digital moment. The room is dominated by Ellen Carey’s arresting and absorbing Multichrome Pulls (2007), a work that challenges conventional conceptions of the photographic in both scale and appearance. The hulking forms and muted colors of her 20 x 24-inch Polaroid dye diffusion prints and negatives recall less the indexical photographic image and more an abstract expressionist painting by Robert Motherwell or Mark Rothko. Like many of the works in the “Laying the Groundwork” section, they also evoke themes that will be explored in greater detail in the next rooms: the painterly or sculptural potential of the photograph, experimentation with abstraction in a medium that seems to necessitate representation, the connection between materiality and process, and the photograph as a persistent but often unreliable stand-in for memory.

The second and largest gallery offers a variety of works by emerging and established artists that play on a series of distinct but intersecting themes: “the photograph as sculptural presence,” “material memories,” “a photographic Babylon” (which explores the “overlapping visual languages of analog and digital technologies”), “the life of a photograph,” and “the photograph as talisman of recollection and emotion.” The exhibition catalog, by necessity, divides the works neatly into these four categories, but for me, one of the particular joys of the exhibition’s open layout is the slipperiness between these frameworks and the way the themes often blend together in a single work. At the crux of all of these themes is a tension between photographic form and its content. On one end of the spectrum are the works that engage a purity of formal experimentation, using photographic materials as malleable stuff for making, as opposed to taking, photographs. Marco Breuer’s geometric abstractions fuse drawing and photography, employing tools like X-Acto knives and heat guns to create luminous stripe and grid patterns that seem to smolder deep within the darkness of the photographic paper. On the other end of the spectrum are works that emphasize photography’s documentary relationship to the material world. Taryn Simon’s photographs from the New York Public Library’s picture files evoke both the utility and the absurdity of the photograph’s archival function. Bryan Graf’s deceptively simple trio of seascapes, titled Sea Journal (c. 1826) and its dramatic harnessing of the physical properties of light, quintessentially photographic. And Antony Cairns’s interactive work LDN #1 (2016) offers an instant reminder of the new materialities that digital images inhabit in the form of computers, smartphones, and, in the case of this work, e-readers, which require our physical engagement in different ways. Yet in certain cases, I found that the effect of the work was almost too dependent on an understanding of processes that were not always legible in the image. Visitors who neglect the detailed wall text describing an artist’s process run the risk of seeing certain works as merely interesting or pretty to look at, when in fact, there is much more at stake.

While A Matter of Memory is provocative and insightful all around, the highlights of the exhibition, for me, are the works that fuse malleable photographic forms with the personal and often nostalgic content of the snapshot photograph. The exhibition includes a selection of works by Diane Meyer, who embroiders over portions of snapshots from her childhood. In the process, she lovingly embellishes them (making them more valuable) and at the same time obliterates key details, most notably faces, in a gesture that evokes both the pixelation of the digital image and the fragility of memory. The star of the exhibit, however, is undoubtedly Jason Lazarus, for his ongoing project T.H.T.K. (2010–present), which stands for “too hard to keep.” The idiosyncratic installation features old snapshots (some turned against the wall), albums, slides, and even some unprocessed rolls of film, all of which were donated to the artist by their owners because, for whatever reason, they were too difficult to hold on to. It is impossible to look at these photo-
EXHIBITION REVIEW

graphs without speculating about their backstories, and that speculation leads to narratives both heartbreaking (abandoned baby pictures) and utterly banal (a proliferation of snapshots of young lovers, sometimes defaced—predictable evidence of predictable romances gone sour). This mixture of the exceptional and the ordinary, however, is precisely what makes this work both engaging and important to the history of domestic photography. And with its proliferation of analog photo processes, it is also the perfect ending note to a show about digital images. Like all of the photographs in the exhibit, the snapshots of T.H.T.K. are an insistent and poignant reminder of photography’s material persistence, even in moments when we may wish it otherwise.

CATHERINE ZUROMSKIS, PhD, is the author of Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images (2013) and author and editor of The Factory (2012), the catalog for the exhibition From the Factory to the World: Photography and the Warhol Community, which she curated for PhotoEspaña 2012. Zuromskis is an assistant professor of fine art at Rochester Institute of Technology, where she teaches photography, contemporary art, and twentieth-century American visual culture.

NOTES

Diane Arbus: In the Beginning
MET BREUER, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK CITY
JULY 12–NOVEMBER 27, 2016

A black-and-white photograph of a woman in a pillbox hat and fur coat reflects an unmistakable era: the raised eyebrow, slightly parted dark-glossed lips—an insouciant look my mother and her childhood friends and we baby boomers practiced in our mirrors, imitating mid-twentieth-century movie stars. Yet this photo, one of more than a hundred in a recent exhibition of Diane Arbus’s early work (1956–62) at the Met Breuer, is light–years from the silver screen. The exhibition, curated by Jeff L. Rosenheim, included stunning, previously unknown photographs depicting anguish and audacity. An old woman with gaping mouth and gnarled fingers is bound under sheets in a hospital bed; harsh light bleaches the scene to a cadaverous white. A “female impersonator” defiantly raises her chin at the camera, smooth chest vulnerable in a silk robe. Adults, fatigue or perhaps terror marking their faces, awkwardly carry sleeping children. Arbus eschewed sentimentality or a facile aesthetic: marginalized and ordinary people are rendered extraordinary by complex revealed emotion.

I grew up with the iconic photographs reproduced in Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph (1972), from the first large exhibit of her work at the Venice Biennale in 1972. Some of those photographs, part of a rare folio collection (A Box of Ten Photographs, 1970), were mounted in an adjacent gallery at the Met Breuer’s exhibition, as were works by Garry Winogrand, Helen Levitt, and others who influenced or were contemporary with Arbus. As a child, I was mesmerized by the heavy–faced, towering man (A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970) and the twin girls in dark dresses (Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1967). I also felt guilty because children were not supposed to stare at people who looked sad and odd. Entering adulthood, though, I merely distained the photographs as sensationalist.

I was wrong, both as a child and young adult, and it was the Met exhibition’s design, by Brian Butterfield, that revived and transformed my appreciation of Arbus’s work. The well–known folio photos were large, framed, and conventionally hung on four walls in the separate gallery, with even, bright lighting. By contrast, the early works, the focus of the exhibit, were small prints without glass or frame, warmly lit, and mounted on narrow, free–floating, fabric–covered panels that stretched between the ceiling and floor. The tan–colored panels were hung in long rows within the gallery space itself, taking up the entire room.

Unlike the conventional plan for a retrospective, with photographs arranged chronologically in groups along walls and accompanied by wall text, this exhibit presented photographs individually at eye level, with only the barest labeling and with deliberate disregard for chronology. Except for a brief overview at the entrance, there was no historical or aesthetic commentary.

The rows’ narrowness allowed efficient viewing of the small photographs, but it also forced viewers close to the pictures, as if examining ourselves in a front hall mirror. At most, two or three visitors could view each photograph before passing a slim empty space to the next picture. This design encouraged an encounter...
with each photograph as if in a private viewing stall, provoking both interest and discomfort.

This kinesthetic as well as visual experience helped me reevaluate my assumptions about Arbus. What may appear sensational or morbid is instead an unvarnished reflection of our unique, mundane, transcendent, and absurd masks, and our nakedness. Seeing these images close up, with nothing but Arbus’s characteristically objective titles, I felt her profound compassion.

The systematic arrangement of the panels enhanced the experience of intimacy and pathos. Peering at photographs, viewers were mostly hidden behind the column-like panels. They tended to walk along the parallel rows as if next to solid gallery walls, but the space between panels permitted wandering, too. Moreover, the rows were staggered so that looking at an angle through them, I watched a flow of people appearing and disappearing among the panels, creating a hall-of-mirrors effect, akin to the human carnival of Arbus’s subjects and their settings.

Visitors thus became part of the exhibit in a way that echoed its meaning. The arrangement as a whole created an appealing abstract form, and the people milling about, in patterns choreographed by the exhibition’s layout, were figure and ground in a kinetic sculpture. The warm lighting, designed by Laura Mroczkowski, created an illusion of depth on the thin panels, rendering an architectural quality to the installation and increasing the sense of being inside the exhibit rather than viewing its surface. The flow of people through the gallery also provided a conceptual, in addition to aesthetic and kinesthetic, dimension; hiding and seeking among the photographs, visitors embodied and observed the conflicting wish to be shielded and to be known, as individuals in a wandering stream of humanity. Indeed, without interpretive labels and temporal sequences, some viewers were disoriented, asking aloud if they had already walked a row. Perhaps we were meant to blur the present and the past, the viewer and the viewed. Our faces could be among those in the photographs; these are not zeitgeist snapshots but timeless portraits.

Of course, not all viewers would identify with the exhibit. Some passed quickly, noting a recognizable clothing style (“I remember wearing those gloves!”); others laughed at a child’s expression. I don’t blame anyone for being nervous in the face of all this honesty. Despite body-piercing customs in the United States today, Arbus’s “human pincushion” made me flinch. But who is without the pricks of self-disgust, a scowl, a secret, or loneliness? Despite our unease, these stark reflections may yield a flush of empathy.

The exhibition’s design also magnified Arbus’s artistic choices and involvement with those in front of her lens. She did little to change the light, or a facial expression. Some images contain a crisp, full range of contrast; others show a blurred figure, lending a naturalism to the character. Some settings—a city park, a cluttered roaming house bed, a dressing room mirror—fill the frame, becoming part of the story. Couples lack a warm embrace, but Arbus framed their images in ways that seem to enfold them in acceptance, and potentially grotesque figures are sheltered in her compassionate gaze.

My childhood obsession with the Arbus photos developed, in part, because I probably sensed in them a reflection of my own frailty—a trait that we all possess. Viewing her early work at the Met Breuer, however, I no longer felt morbid fascination (or disdain) but, rather, tenderness. And it was the deceptively simple, yet careful, design that encouraged such an experience. If future exhibitions at the Met Breuer are as thoughtful and profound, we have much to look forward to.¹

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NOTE 1. The exhibition will be at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, January 21–April 30, 2017.
Exhibition Review

John Akomfrah: Vertigo Sea
Design Exchange / Nuit Blanche Toronto
October 1, 2016


Inspiring *Vertigo Sea* was the experience of traumatized African migrants who, in 2007, survived after their boat failed them by clinging to a nearby tuna net. Despite authorities’ awareness of their plight, the travelers endured ten days of cold, high waves, hunger, and dehydration before finally being rescued. In the film’s opening sequence, their distressed voices and images flicker across screen space shared with gorgeous curls of giant, blue waves. The sea’s power is awesome in its majestic beauty and destructive force.

Akomfrah arrived at his signature cine-essay style while producing audiovisual materials for the mixed venues of television, cinema, and the gallery. Eschewing conventional social realism and Aristotelian narrative, Akomfrah adopted a form of dialectical montage introduced by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein for its radical political potential. Rather than plotting a linear course through the film, montage builds meaning internally and allusively through the collision of disparate images. Seeking resonances, Akomfrah, as *bricoleur*, explores “the way that things that are otherwise discrete and self-contained start to suggest things once they are forced into a dialogue with something else.” In *Vertigo Sea*, the hard edges of Eisensteinian montage are softened by a poetic lyricism influenced by a very different filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky. In Akomfrah’s cinema of relationality, imagery and ideas do not so much crash, but cling to each other in sliding embrace. Moving through the film, new motifs pile up like barnacles on ships. *Vertigo Sea* plumbs vertiginously from the sea’s ice and foam surfaces—and the birds, bears, whalers, and slavers that live and travel upon them—deep into its buried graveyards.

The constant shifting and layering of sound and image across three large screens, installed closely beside each other to create a panorama effect, creates an immersive spectacle and affecting experience that compels viewers’ eyes, ears, and emotions. New and archival audiovisual materials are compiled from wide-ranging sources and genres: still and moving imagery from official archives such as the BBC Natural History Unit and the British Film Institute and new footage shot in remote coastal regions of the Isle of Skye, the Faroe Islands, and Norway. Sound is borrowed from tragic opera arias and lighter seafaring strains. Overlaid and intermingling with these are natural sounds and a melancholic ambient score by British composer Tandis Jenudson, which together suggest a funerary requiem. Voices narrate extracts from literature, philosophy, and historical documents. Conjoined, these forms deliver content that is wondrously beautiful and painfully violent, and an affect profoundly melancholic.

Central within this profuse and suggestive swirl is no less than modernity itself and its prime economic driver, represented by two instances of extractive capitalism instrumental to Western industrialization: the African slave trade and the whaling industry are coupled here in their dependence on modern innovations in ship technology and their respective destructions of African populations and sea life. Black-and-white footage shows mammoth whales bloodied by exploding harpoons and Arctic polar bears reeling from the gunshot of white hunters before being flayed for their skin and left as frozen carcasses by native guides.

Installation view of *Vertigo Sea* (2015) by John Akomfrah; © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery
The destruction of humans is presented through audio accounts and reenactments of human transport and trafficking. One scene recreates the 1781 Zong massacre, when 133 slaves were thrown overboard, en route between Africa and Jamaica, for the purpose of claiming insurance money, a scandal that ignited the abolitionist movement. Scenes of beached black bodies recall those earlier slave deaths, but also the recent and ongoing loss of lives today, centuries later, from dangerous migration made under pressures of resource conflict and climate change.

Text fragments woven into the film come from diverse literary, philosophical, and documentary sources, including Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf, and the account by ex-slaver turned Christian abolitionist John Newton, of a shipmate who “tore the child from the mother and threw it into the sea”; descriptions of the Argentine “Dirty War,” when prisoners were taken on death flights and disappeared from helicopters into the ocean; and lines from Heathcote Williams’s lyric, epic tribute poem to endangered whales, “Whale Nation” (1988): “Free from land-based pressures . . . Larger brains evolved, ten times as old as man’s . . . The accumulated knowledge of the past; Rumours of ancestors . . . Memories of loss.”

Herman Melville’s 1851 novel cum philosophical and zoological treatise, Moby Dick, looms large here. Maniacal Ahab desires mastery over sea and self, but is lured instead to his own destruction by the death-driving, blood-drained whale, Moby Dick. That willingness to power of modern, masculine individualism—the Übermensch—is reiterated in the film through Nietzsche’s phrase: “I am a wanderer and mountain-climber . . . in the end one experienceth only oneself.” The camera’s eternal return comes back repeatedly to a scene that suggests the endgame of that impulse—a bound deer strung upside down by its hooves silhouetted before the sea, recalling “after the hunt” genre paintings.

Elsewhere, in similar tableaux vivants that regularly punctuate the film flow, the determined individual admits to greater ambiguity and more fragile subjectivity. Solitary figures in Victorian dress look out to sea from desolate shores surrounded by scattered detritus of human culture—clocks, bits of upturned furniture, and pages of literature. They stand subdued, like Caspar David Friedrich’s Wander Above the Sea of Fog (1818), surveying the sublimity of the sea and our own human wreckage. With subject positions uncertain, the figures’ racial and gender identities fluctuate: sometimes the captain is white, sometimes he is black, and sometimes the figure is a woman. The figures lament a lost sailor, recall tragedies, or gain wealth from sea traffic. Like prodigal offspring, they gaze on the sea as on their estranged mother, yearning to return but finding only separation and loss. Inside our universal wet mother, the cradle of earthly life, is a graveyard, bloodied and bruised by the human creatures that once crawled from her bosom. Vertigo Sea is, as Akomfrah has described, “a series of lamentations or elegies.”

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BOOK REVIEW

Ken: To be destroyed
By Sara Davidmann
130 pp./$60.00 (hb)

Throughout its history, photography has sat at the intersection of truth and fiction. That photographic images are based on reality is inconvertible. That things might not be as they seem to appear is equally true. It is fair to say that the ability of photography to capture the real world helped to shape the twentieth century into one that would become almost obsessed with truth and accuracy, until interrupted by the digital revolution. Ironically, the digital medium, which is able to capture the world with the utmost of fidelity, has also been so easy to alter that it reveals that image manipulation has been present throughout photography’s short history. This ability of photography to show, but somehow not reveal, while emphasizing surface over depth, is instrumental to Sara Davidmann’s project Ken: To be destroyed (2013–15).

In 2011, Davidmann and her siblings moved their mother to a nursing home. While cleaning out her house, they discovered a trove of letters, photographs, and documents in envelopes upon which were written the words, “Ken: To be destroyed.” The materials contained in the envelopes document the attempts by her mother, father, and Aunt Hazel to understand and deal with her Uncle Ken’s transgender identity during an era remarkable for little understanding and no acceptance of the condition. For Davidmann this was an astounding find, as she had previously worked with transgender people as part of her PhD studies. The find, as rich as it is, also presents an incomplete narrative, one that fails to adequately explain or to give voice to Ken. Davidmann has been exploring the material from two directions—through artistic exploration and as an archive. The results are several series, some of which deconstruct the few original images of Hazel and Ken, as well as new photography of the archive material. All of the series to date have been brought together in the text with Davidmann’s own explanatory writing and an essay by writer and curator Val Williams.

Surface takes precedent in each of the groups of images represented in the sections of the book. The Dress (2013–14) repeatedly reworks a single image of Hazel, made by Ken shortly after they were married, with oils, inks, spray paints, magic markers, etc.—essentially destroying it while creating something new. She imagines what Ken might have felt making the image—was it jealousy, desire, frustration? Although the idea comes across sufficiently, the reproduction of the images for the book leaves something to be desired. They feel flattened on the page, the multiple mediums all reduced to printer’s ink. Oddly, the reproduced letters and envelopes from the “Correspondence” section of the book, and those from the archive photographed in collaboration with Graham Goldwater (2015), have a greater sense of presence. These also are meditations of surface, both as an aesthetic pleasure and as barrier to the unseen contents. On a double-page spread, we are shown thirty meticulously photographed envelopes laid out as a grid across the two pages. Each envelope is unique, with handwriting, stamps, postmarks, rips, and tears marring the surfaces. These identifying features don’t serve to instruct us on their contents, however. As much as we stare at them, we will see no more than what is present.

Another section, Closer (2015), takes a single photograph of Ken and Hazel, and reverses it to negative. From this negative, Davidmann peers closer and closer, finding scratches, marks, rips. She blows these up into larger images, which suffice only to make them more confusing. Again, the surface of the photograph can only offer that which is there already. The rips might become metaphor for a relationship torn and challenged, yet they cannot give us the why of the damage. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the attempt to understand the point of view of Hazel and the strain the relationship put on her. So often investigations of a trans experience focus on the individual going through the gender change, whether emotional or physical. Here it is acknowledged that Hazel is also going through change, and that she has little control over what is happening to her. Davidmann writes:

I began reading the letters that Hazel wrote to my mother. They are vivid and powerful, and I found them very moving. They brought to light how little was known about transgender people in the 1950s and ’60s, and the difficulties Hazel had to try to reconcile the fact that Ken was transgender with society’s (and her own) expectations of marriage. (71–72)

Whether due to financial insecurity along with the perceived role of women during that time period or Hazel’s love for Ken despite the challenges, she was trapped in a marriage that she felt unable to leave. The marriage was never consummated, but she stayed with Ken until his death in 1979.

Hazel and Ken had an agreement that he would present as male outside of the home and as a woman inside. Looking for K/Finding K (2014–15) is a group of images Davidmann has made of Ken, or K, as she calls him to refer to his female identity. These are altered images of Hazel with her face replaced by K’s. The images have been hand-colored with Marshall’s oils, which provide a palette that is quite soft and pastel, but lacking realism. With these images, Davidmann allows K to leave the home as a woman, poignantly realizing what s/he was never allowed with these doctored images. This group is followed by the last section of the book, For Ken (2015), which presents this fictional, feminized version of Ken/K emerging from the photographic paper through partial development techniques. Some of the images feel emergent, while others seem to be disintegrating. As with most of the newly created images in each of the series, there is an uncomfortable feeling about the images—they are at once wonderful and awful, certainly unsettled. The images appear almost like film that has been caught by the projector and as a result appears to melt upon the screen. There is something uncanny and sad about the loss of the image. These images feel abused and incomplete, yet some of the poses, especially in For Ken VIII (2015), are delicate and vulnerable.
With Ken. To be destroyed, Davidmann presents a necessary investigation of a subject matter that, unless one has experienced it oneself, is profoundly difficult to understand. Highlighting photography’s preoccupation with surface, she reminds us that we can never pinpoint the emotional depths of such great need; yet her multiple investigations express the complexity contained in our relationships with ourselves and others. Although Ken. To be destroyed is a beautiful text, it leaves the reader wanting to see the work in person and experience these surfaces firsthand rather than mediated by the printed page. Davidmann tells readers that the work is one in progress, and, indeed, we are left with a degree of dissatisfaction appropriate to a compelling story not quite finished.1

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NOTE 1. Sara Davidmann’s digital archive of Ken. To be destroyed can be viewed at http://saradavidmann.com/ken.html.

Precarious Spaces: The Arts, Social and Organizational Change
Edited by Katarzyna Kosmala and Miguel Imas
Intellect, 2016
249 pp./$86.00 (hb)

Precarious Spaces: The Arts, Social and Organizational Change contributes to discussions about the power of art-informed interventions and artistic projects and how these seek to boost social and community transformations on different scales. Editors Katarzyna Kosmala and Miguel Imas focus on examples from socially and economically unstable and marginalized spaces, mainly in South America. This book fills significant gaps in both the arts and social sciences literatures in English concerning art-informed interventions in the Global South.

Each of the twelve chapters of Precarious Spaces discusses case studies and key concepts concerning precariousness, art-informed interventions, and social transformations. Coming from various academic fields ranging from the arts to sociology, the book’s contributors bring diverse perspectives to the conversation, and aim to create an interdisciplinary framework. Excerpting ideas from the writings of theorists such as Claire Bishop, Nicolas Bourriaud, Néstor García Canclini, Heni Lefebvre, and Gayatri Spivak, the contributors articulate the book’s theoretical and conceptual structure. Some of the concepts analyzed together with the examples of art-informed interventions are relational aesthetics, planetary autonomy, and precariousness. The examples included in Precarious Spaces are specific cases of community and social organization, alternative creative spaces, public art works, art exhibitions, photography-based research, publications, and media activism. In each chapter, the contributors provide information about particularities of both the interventions and the specific geopolitical contexts in which these projects take place.

Despite the welcome effort to gather cases from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Mexico, supplemented with comments about examples from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the book lacks variety. The publication mainly focuses on the Brazilian context, specifically on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, camps of indigenous Mbyá-Guarani, Fábricas Recuperadas (occupied factories), and media activism. The lack of variety prevents the editors from entirely accomplishing their intention of portraying socially and community-engaged art practices in South America and contrasting them with similar issues in the Global North.

In the book, the concept of “precarious spaces” refers to territories where physical, spatial, and social manifestations make evident the instability embedded in contemporary life—for instance, the factories occupied by workers in 2000, during Argentina’s financial crisis. This instability primarily caused by the neoliberal economic model is, in turn, what gave birth both to the book and to the art-informed interventions included in it. Based on the privatization of profits and the socialization of economic losses, the neoliberal model obstructs possibilities for the social and personal development of individuals within specific groups. As a result, devising social, cultural, economic, and political alternatives becomes vital to resist and overcome the precarious conditions of contemporary life.

Meanwhile, “art-informed interventions” refers to processes influenced by, but not specifically based in, the arts. Therefore, instead of presenting projects founded on the production of artistic objects, Precarious Spaces focuses on participatory practices applied as research methods and as interventional forms. In both cases, art is used in an effort to generate social and community changes. For instance, the Museum of Photography Lima (FOLi) developed an urban experiment during the First Biennial of Photography in Lima, Peru, in 2012. A public alternative space, FOLi Lab, was created from four shipping containers, and was designed to exhibit projects and to serve as a meeting point for dialogue, analysis, and research concerning photography. After the intervention, FOLi Lab had been visited by more than 45,000 people. Additionally, the museum collected information about attendees’ interests and perceptions about photography. By increasing community participation during the Biennial, FOLi Lab strengthened the relationship between the museum and the public.

Precarious Spaces, rather than being simply a catalog of successful and replicable art-based interventions, is instead an assortment of actions that challenge the logic of the neoliberal economic model. The volume demonstrates that precarity and territories are systems in constant permutation, which cannot, therefore, be approached using predesigned recipes. Each precarious space is particular in its social organization, spatial configuration, and inhabitants’ interests and needs. Beyond emptiness and marginalization, the publication approaches precarious spaces as an arena of possibilities. In other words, this book invites artists, urban designers, social workers, activists, and academics to understand precariousness as a condition under which imagining other ways of living and fighting is both necessary and viable.

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BOOK REVIEW

Vision Anew: The Lens and Screen Arts
Edited by Adam Bell and Charles H. Traub
University of California Press, 2015
292 pp./$34.95 (sb)

Vision Anew: The Lens and Screen Arts was published before the November 8, 2016, United States electoral victory of Donald Trump, itself a media event, but after a profusion of other phenomena—including “post-internet” art; the exponential growth of Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and Google+ (advent of both ever-cheaper digital photo technologies and augmented reality); the increased availability of 3-D printing; the revelation of unprecedented spying and surveillance technologies by the National Security Agency; the widespread use of drones for warfare, information, and entertainment; and major advances in robotics and Artificial Intelligence that also impact media and media platforms. This host of August changes has often paradoxically stimulated a return to the art object, witnessed in Vision Anew by some authors’ probing of traditional values of photography (for instance, Gerry Badger’s 2012 essay “Keep it Simple Stupid, Just Make a Good Picture: The Basics of Photography”). It has led others, such as Lev Manovich, to redefine the terms of the game, as when he writes: “There is no such thing as ‘digital media.’ There is only software—as applied to media data (or ‘content’)” (206).

The most obvious prompt for the essays in the book—which range from the historical (such as the opening mini-manifesto from 1961, “Photography Is,” by Arthur Siegel) to teasing out or proffering new generalizations, if not usually theorectizations, on this rapidly changing visual culture—is the omnipresence of digitally based images, and the nearly equal ubiquity of their use by all sorts of artistic practitioners, professional and nonprofessional alike. The overwhelming acceleration and accompanying “logic of barrage” highlighted through digital culture, at least in countries like the US, intimate issues far beyond this—that the environment has shifted onto a different register technologically, formally, politically, logistically, ontologically, and demographically, in which once sufficient responses, especially in any realm of aesthetics, will no longer do.

Art historian David Joselit had already pointed out years before the Trump debacle in his “Feedback Manifesto” (2010), “As art marches in circles, politicians manipulate images more effectively than the legions of MFA graduates from prestigious schools like Art Center, Cal Arts, Columbia, and Yale” (262). Commending the value of Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Against Interpretation” to avoid interpretation but rather settle on action or the contagion of gesture, Joselit recommended, among other things, “Don’t produce art or art history by making a ‘new’ move in the game of aesthetics you learned in school. Assess the image ecology you live in and respond to it. Learn the system and counter it—make noise. Practice eco–formalism” (262).

Yet Vision Anew is decidedly unprogrammatic, aided in this by the broad range and roles of its forty-plus contributors, whether primarily artists, educators, critics, journalists, or historians—and their points of view, which include the presentation of configurations from the past (Rebecca Solnit on Eadweard Muybridge, excerpts from László Moholy-Nagy’s 1947 Vision in Motion, a 1968 Hollis Frampton lecture), and ones more current (Aaron Schuman’s 2012 interview with Trevor Paglen on “Machine-Seeing” in his work). The reconsideration of medium provides some of the richest content in Vision Anew, whether this is treatment of the “resurgence” of abstraction in photography (by co-editor Adam Bell), or reevaluation of the position of the photo book (Bell with Ofir Wohlbeger and Jason Fulford) or of the changes wrought by HD (the co-editors Bell and Charles H. Traub with Bob Giraldi, Ethan David Kent, and Christopher Walters). As a reader in a rapidly shifting field, it seeks to avoid the more fixed or ideologized positions that have often characterized polarized debates around photography in particular. This is emphasized in Susie Linfield’s contribution, where she decrives the lack in photography criticism of “a fertile dialectic between ideas and emotions” (49). She scores a “fear of sentimentality” (53) as but one motivation at “the heart of photography criticism’s peculiar hostility to its subject” (57). Linfield’s sweeping objections are not only to an especially politicized “postmodernism” in photography and criticism that perhaps reached a peak in the 1980s, but include as well Sontag, John Berger, Roland Barthes, poststructuralism and postmodernism in general, the Frankfurt School, and Bertolt Brecht. Linfield’s advocacy for “emotions” and the connectivity of photographs beg further development whatever the excesses of her adversaries (and her recommendation of critics who both respond and go beyond “postmodern” problematic, including Solnit, David Levi–Stauss, and Geoff Dyer).

Linfield’s essay is in keeping with the tenor of Vision Anew: keeping an openness and attention to medium, slipping past “culture wars,” retaining a supleness of perspective while largely deflecting any overt development of theoretical scaffolding. The strength of this approach by the editors is that the various artistic practices have more room to breathe. This is the case whether one reads Traub’s interview with Alec Soth on the “interspace” of new technical possibilities with digital cameras that make possible the photographic moving image or moving photograph (215), or film critic Amy Taubin’s conversation with Christian Marclay about the process that produced his video The Clock (2010). As this juxtaposition of artists—which includes Ai Weiwei, Pipilotti Rist, Doug Aitken, and film editor Walter Murch—would suggest, the central figure here is what Traub in his 1997 manifesto called the “creative interlocutor” (4, 265–68). Since “art is, in essence, process” (265), “by our intervention in the image, we are made aware of the plasticity of our universe” (266). It follows then for Traub that programmers, gatekeepers, curators, educators, editors, and conductors all have analogous artistic roles in structuring “imagery [that] is the ectoplasm of our existence” (266).

This image ecosystem is in constant motion, with, as Graham Weinbren explores, the human senses actively seeking and structuring the visual information they encounter, an insight he finds already in Erwin Panofsky (116). As perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson wrote, “I will treat the eyes . . . not as a pair of cameras at the ends of a pair of nerves but as an apparatus for detecting the variables of contour, texture, spectral composition, and transformation in light” (qtd. 123). Just as fundamental to Gibson, Weinbren points out, is that perceptual systems are “sensitive primarily to change” (123). Vision Anew focuses upon the extraordinary mobility and change in the mediatic sensorium, one of the reasons
the relations between mediums such as photography and cinema are rendered "perpetually uncertain" (73).

Although in his introduction Traub insists on the necessity of "human intervention for structure" (5), the far-reaching discussion often puts that into question, whether it is Paglen's concern with how drone technology, spy surveillance, and such "machine-seeing apparatuses have political structures built into them, quite literally," that "sculpt society" (197); Barry Salzman's exploration of how social media proliferation impacts photography; Charlie White's "On <img>, " on the use of authored and authorless online images; or Lisa Kereszi's searching questioning of authorship in work taken from Google Street View. Despite its breadth of investigation, with questioning of authorship in work taken from Google Street View. Despite its breadth of investigation, Vision Anew, with few exceptions—one perhaps being philosopher Tom Huhn's declaration that "photography is now the largest impediment to human advancement" (192)—resists long-term prognostication, in favor of the detailed or reframed snapshot. So James Agee's words still resonate, that given the effort of consciousness "to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is . . . the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time" (qtd. 207). As Kereszi adds, "It will always record our world, one way or another, whether we are physically there or not" (211).

**Border Cantos**
Photographs and text by Richard Misrach
Instruments, sound installations, scores, and text by Guillermo Galindo
Introduction and epilogue by Josh Kun
*Aperture, 2016*  
274 pp./$75.00 (hb)

I was born in Guatemala. My mother, who’d gone to work in the US, was deported back home. Later she returned to the US, and sent for me and sister Gaby. We were twelve and ten years old. My uncle sent us off with a group crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo. I had my Bible with me, and I thought, raped. Then one afternoon the coyote took us down into a ravine. We climbed into a pipe, crawling on hands and knees, one person behind the next.

The pipe was only about four feet around, with sewage running at the bottom. It was very dark, and the coyote warned us not to go off to the side or we’d get lost. I was very scared, but I needed to make it across. I prayed to the saints. I arrived in Lumberton, North Carolina, on a Saturday, went to mass and gave thanks to God on Sunday, and went to work in the fields on Monday. With the first money I made I bought a saint and gave him to the church there.

—Guadalupe Marroquin

These women, two of the millions who’ve crossed the border between the United States and Mexico over the past two decades, describe this perilous journey as they lived it. For them, the border is not just geography, or a wall or a river. It is a passage of fire, an ordeal that must be survived in order to send money from work in the US back to a hungry family, to find children and relatives from whom they have been separated by earlier journeys, or to flee an environment that has become too dangerous to bear.

Some do not survive, dying as they try to cross the desert or swim the Rio Bravo, or murdered by gangs in northern Mexico. To them the border region has become a land of death.

But the border is also a land of the living. Over the past half-century the once-small towns of Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana have become cities of millions. A huge part of the industrial workforce of southern California, South Texas, and New Mexico lives and works, not on the US side of the border, but on the Mexican side. These workers are a key part of the production and supply chain that delivers products to US consumers. In Mexico, people build homes out of cardboard and shipping pallets cast off by the factories—the maquiladoras. The dirt streets of their barrios often end at the border wall itself. Many neighborhoods have no sewers and flood when it rains. Electricity is stolen by hooking up to power lines, while drinking water comes in a truck, and people must pay to fill the tank in front of their homes.

**NOTES**
1. As described by the Art Post-Internet exhibition, March 1—May 11, 2014, at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China. 2. For example, the subject of a symposium at the Kennedy Center in Florence, Italy, June 21, 2014, was “Rematerialization of the Art Object: Art, Robotics, and Post-Convergent Labor,” featuring artists working in computer-assisted painting, CAD architectural design, sculpture, and 3D printing. Or more recently, the “Object of Art, Object of Capital” conference at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, December 2–3, 2016, probed, among other things, the finitude of the object versus the apparent infinity of capital. 3. As director and writer Mariana Luna put it in a brief but apt post: www.facebook.com/luna.mariana.luna/posts/10211529324972666. November 23, 2016. 4. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 3–14.


**Against Interpretation**
BOOK REVIEW

The border is the scene of some of Mexico’s sharpest social struggles. In Maclavio Rojas, outside Tijuana, land occupiers fight the police in sight of the border wall for the right to build homes. Workers in Juarez’s factories organize independent unions, and when they’re fired they set up tent encampments, like the Occupuy Movement, at the gates. This upsurge is not new—it’s been going on for more than a hundred years. In 1906, Colonel William Greene, owner of the huge copper mine in Cananea, just a few miles south of Arizona in Sonora, brought the Arizona Rangers across the border to put down a strike now considered the first conflict of the Mexican Revolution. Mexican unions sent organizers north across the border to help Texas farmworkers organize their first unions in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1930s.

The border is a vast area with a vibrant social history. Over the past three decades it has also become a powerful social symbol, especially the wall that’s been built in fits and starts, underlining the separation of our two countries. The border played a big part in electing Trump president—a man whose campaign rallies featured chants of “Build the Wall!” and who promises to deport millions of people. Mexicans angry at the wall’s symbolism—Keep out!—and at their own President Enrique Peña Nieto for not challenging Trump’s campaign insults of Mexicans, may well dump Peña’s political party in the next election.

So people in the US need to understand what goes on at the border. This country needs a reality check about the wall, as one element of coming to terms with the sources of migration and protecting the human rights of migrants and working people generally. Richard Misrach is one of a number of photographers who have sought to present that reality. Over several trips to the border between 2009 and 2015, he took photographs of the wall and its environs. In the course of that work, he developed a collaboration with musician Guillermo Galindo. Together they created a book of photographs, Border Cantos, and a website where people can hear Galindo’s music, bordercantos.com.

Both the book and the website are the products of a great deal of work. Border Cantos is a very large book (approximately 13 x 11 inches). Some 185 of its 274 pages are given to Misrach’s photographs taken along the border. The last part consists of photographs of instruments Galindo has created from objects found in the area near the border wall. The website features twenty-two of his works created on these instruments, from twenty seconds to over four minutes in length.

One of Galindo’s instruments is the Ropófono. “This loom,” he says, “a powerful symbol of home and tradition in Latin America, rotates a loop of discarded clothing. Contact microphones mounted on three arms amplify the sound of the clothing as it rotates” (200). Here Galindo is seeking to connect with the culture of the migrants who are crossing, and to create a sound—that of clothing—they might have heard as they were walking through the desert. It is a way, he believes, to create a voice for people who passed that way—who might have survived the experience, but who might also have perished in the crossing.

This is not the same, however, as listening to the actual voices of migrants themselves, at least those who survived, like Pedroza and Marroquin. It is important to hear those voices also, and to understand the concrete experience of a border crosser. But it is perfectly legitimate for Galindo, as an artist, to use physical pieces of that experience to create what is both a work of art and a tribute to the human beings involved. When one listens to the different instruments on the website, one after another, they create a broad texture, making the listener consider the ways the sounds connect to the experience.

Misrach’s photographs (other than the ones of the instruments) are mostly full-page color plates, with occasional collages of multiple smaller images. They are divided into eight chapters, or “cantos.” The first and largest shows the border wall as it crosses the desert and other remote locations. Two focus on the Border Patrol’s mechanisms of enforcement—the detritus left on shooting ranges and the tires dragged across the sand to reveal the tracks of migrants who later walk through the area. Two sections are images of the remnants of passing migrants—strange sculptural effigies in the vague shapes of people and cast-off and lost articles from backpacks to tennis shoes. One section shows the water containers left by activists who put them in the desert in hopes that migrants suffering thirst and heat prostration will find them. Another “canto” contains photographs of the wall as it passes through urban areas. The last, “The Other Side / El otro lado” has images of Mexico shot through the bars or mesh of the wall itself.

The first section contains the best-known images—the iron bars of the wall as it snakes through the desert, up and down hillsides. They are carefully framed compositions requiring substantial investments of time, repeatedly using perspective to dramatize the relation between the wall and the land. Misrach creates stark landscapes, devoid of people (as are most of his images). In many, the wall seems overwhelmed by its surroundings, a line of bars or obstacles made small in a much larger environment. As it presently exists, the wall is only a few decades old, in its oldest sections. Already even the newer wall of twenty-foot iron bars is rusting. This is not the Great Wall of China—it’s clear this wall is not a work for the ages. Nor is it a great accomplishment of human labor or engineering. Building it clearly didn’t produce many jobs. Skilled construction workers—electricians, pipefitters, and bridge builders—were not needed here.

The images reinforce an understanding that the wall’s main importance is its symbolism—it’s ability to win higher budgets for the Department of Homeland Security and votes for Donald Trump. Given that about 4.5 million Mexican migrants lived in
the US in 1990, and 12.7 million by 2008, the wall had almost no impact on stopping migration across the border, despite its catastrophic human cost.

Some of Misrach’s images, especially the wide panoramas, are reminiscent of those shot by other photographers. Images by Mark Klett, Victoria Sambunaris, and Alec Soth, included in a 2012 San Francisco Museum of Art show titled Photography in Mexico: Selected Works from the Collections of SFMOMA and Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser, all consider the border as landscape [Ed. note: See David Bacon’s discussion of this exhibition in Afterimage 40, no. 6]. In others, Misrach shows the wall’s absurdity and irrationality. Wall, Near Brownsville, Texas (2013) is one of several that show a fragment of wall in the middle of nowhere. Clearly someone could just walk around one end or the other. In another photograph, the wall runs through a Texas golf course, but with openings and missing sections so golfers can play through. Missing from the book, though, are images of those sections of the wall, like those in San Ysidro or El Paso, where the border is like a military installation, with high-intensity lights, multiple barriers, and lots of Border Patrol agents in SUV’s.

The photographs of Border Patrol detritus—spent shells and perforated targets on a shooting range, or chained tires—don’t really convey the reasons why migrants fear the “migra.” In another section, one photograph does show a street in Nogales, Arizona, from which a Border Patrol agent fatally shot José Antonio Elena Rodríguez (who was standing on a street in Nogales, Sonora) from between the bars of the wall. Misrach’s two images of this section of the wall show small posters of Rodríguez pasted onto the bars on the US side, but for some reason neither photograph was taken at the place where the shooting actually occurred, where Mexicans have erected a memorial on the street below.

Nevertheless, Misrach shows, with both target range and Nogales images, that militarization has a terrible human cost. Further, Misrach shows his support for the efforts made by US activists to save migrants, with a section of images of the water containers left in the desert. Some show the hatred motivating those who’ve shot holes into the containers, draining out their precious water.

The section that ties the photographer to the musician contains images documenting the items discarded by migrants. “The stories behind these artifacts—who left each one behind and why—will forever remain a mystery,” Misrach says (145). Some were used by Galindo to make the instruments pictured in the book’s last section. It is an exercise in forensics, trying to see the people in what they leave behind, without seeing the people themselves, hearing their voices only in the instruments made from their discarded possessions. “There are many reasons why I refuse to consider my pieces recycled art objects,” Galindo says. “The instruments for the Cantos project are meant to enable the invisible victims of immigration to speak through their personal belongings” (193). Presumably Misrach takes these photographs for the same reasons. But the people are invisible in this book by the choice of the photographer. He has deliberately decided to take photographs of the land and objects, revealing human presence in most cases only by implication.

The last section of photographs, “The Other Side / El otro lado,” consists of images of Mexico and Mexicans, taken through the bars of the wall. It highlights the two main limitations in Misrach’s approach to the border. This is the only section of the book, with a few exceptions, that contains images of people. And the images are almost all taken (as are almost all the images in the book) on the US side of the border. In this last section we see people through the bars as though they were prisoners in Mexico. They have no personality. Why not go across and talk with them?

Border Cantos does not pretend to be a sociological study of the border, or to document the reasons why people migrate, their living conditions, or social struggles in the border area on the Mexican side. But the reader does come away wondering why Misrach had so few images taken from that side. What does the wall look like to the people living south of it? Even the phrase “el otro lado” is very common in Mexico, but refers to the US side, not, as Misrach uses it, to refer to Mexico. Mexican photographer Leopoldo Peña, who photographs migrant indigenous Mexican communities in Los Angeles, asks, “What separation is the photographer [Misrach] suggesting when he does not allow the other side of the border to emerge?

There is a long history of artists interpreting the border-crossing experience. In San Francisco, Pearl Ubungen developed a public dance performance, Refugee (1995), as a political challenge to the denial of immigrant rights. At one point she dances among wet concrete blocks along a rope pulling her from one place (or one country) to another. In another scenario, a section of the border wall on wheels chases, and is chased by, both migrants and border patrol agents.

The wall itself has been used for some years for art protesting the death of migrants, or highlighting the migrant experience. In the first years of the mass deaths of Operation Gatekeeper, at the end of the 1990s, Tijuana artists made sculptures of the plastic water bottles left in the desert to rescue migrants. They placed them on the wall itself with crosses and the names of people found dead in the wilderness. Other artists, myself included, have used the wall for public exhibitions, mounting large photographic prints on the bars showing the lives of migrants on the US side. This has been done only on the Mexican side, since the US border patrol prohibits such displays, and often even simple access, on their side of the barrier.

Misrach has had several museum exhibitions of the Border Cantos images. The photographs deserve broader venues, however, with diverse audiences, if they are to have a strong social impact. And if, as Galindo desires, his music is to “enable the invisible victims of immigration to speak,” (193) where can they find an audience of listeners willing to act to change social reality? A gallery or museum interested in the commodification of art is not a place those people prepared to act. The need for this is undeniable. The US has a new president who says he is building an even bigger wall on the border, and who threatens to imprison and deport millions of people who have crossed it. It is more important than ever to understand what that wall means to the people who’ve encountered it.

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NOTES
MEDIA NOTED & RECEIVED

Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear
By Paula Bronstein/University of Texas Press/2016/227 pp./$55.00 (hb)

Paula Bronstein’s book Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear is an unflinching look at a country whose grace and tragedy have captured the imaginations of many photographers before her. There seems to be much more fear than hope in this volume, with an essay by journalist Christina Lamb that focuses on the plight of women in Afghanistan. Bronstein’s images contribute a hyperreal and palpable pain to the photographic narrative of this country that has fallen from view in the media. Her photographs of scarred and disfigured women etch themselves into one’s heart, and a powerful photograph of women wearing burkas cowering from the photographer after casting their votes touches on the complexity of our Western ideas of empowerment. Bronstein acknowledges this in her afterward, explaining: “These women can’t be seen, but they are still afraid they will be disclosed. And that for me is Afghanistan: an odd closeness between hope and fear” (225). This is also true of Bronstein herself, who was able to access certain situations because of her gender, but was also restricted from many stories and people because of male relatives who did not want her in their homes. This tension is underscored in the bittersweet ferocity of her selection and sequencing of thousands of photographs made over a decade of work. It is these choices that bring depth and urgency to her work and to this book.

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BOOKS


An Artist’s Life by Eleonora Antinova, by Eleanor Antin. Hirmer Verlag/216 pp./$25.00 (hb).


Photography and Tibet, by Clare Harris. Reaktion Books/173 pp./$29.95 (hb).

Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey, by Zhuang Wubin. NUS Press/522 pp./$40.00 (hb).


Scale, edited by Jennifer L. Roberts. Terra Foundation for American Art/256 pp./$24.95 (sb).


Serious Daring: The Fiction and Photography of Eudora Welty and Rosamond Purcell, by Susan Letzler Cole. University of Arkansas Press/142 pp./$34.95 (hb).

Walter De Maria: Meaningless Work, by Jane McFadden. Reaktion Books/235 pp./$40.00 (hb).

Zooming In: Histories of Photography in China, by Wu Hung. Reaktion Books/398 pp./$37.00 (hb).

MONOGRAPHS


The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America’s Jewish Vacationland, by Marisa Scheinfeld, with texts by Stefan Kanfer and Jenna Weissman Joselit. Cornell University Press/188 pp./$29.95 (hb).

Cowboys of the Americas, by Luis Fabin, with text by Wade Davis. Greystone Books/156 pp./$45.00 (hb).


I Guardiani Del Silenzio (The Guardians of Silence), by Andrea Contrini. Edizioni Osiride/196 pp./$35.00 (hb).

Jeff Wall: Specific Pictures, by Stefan Gronert. Schirmer/Mosel/126 pp./$59.95 (hb).


Mexico, by Mark Cohen. University of Texas Press/unpaginated/$55.00 (hb).

North of Dixie: Civil Rights Photography Beyond the South, by Mark Speltz. J. Paul Getty Museum/148 pp./$35.00 (hb).

Rafael Font Vaillant: Words, Colors, Shapes—and a World That May Be Dying Out, by Rafael Font Vaillant. Editions Vilar/unpaginated/$27.00 (hb).

The Time of the Force Majeure: After 45 Years Counterforce is on the Horizon, by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. Prestel/462 pp./$60.00 (hb).

Western Landscapes, by Lee Friedlander, with texts by Richard Benson and Jock Reynolds. Yale University Art Gallery/189 pp./$75.00 (hb).

PHOTO-BOOKWORKS

Själss, by Sara A. Tremblay, with texts by Véronique La Perrière M. and Anne-Marie Proulx. VU Photo/unpaginated/$40.00 (hb).

EXHIBITION CATALOGS

The Artist’s Museum, edited by Dan Byers. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Nov. 16–March 26, 2017. DeMonico Books/Prestel in association with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston/256 pp./$49.95 (hb).


Julio Le Parc: Form into Action, edited by Estrellita Brodsky. Published in con- junction with the exhibition of the same name at Pérez Art Museum Miami. Nov. 18, 2016–March 19, 2017. DeMonico Books/Prestel in association with Pérez Art Mu- seum Miami/212 pp./$60.00 (hb).


I met Angry Bird during my second stay at Oceti Sakowin camp, located near the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation in Cannonball, North Dakota. The camp, a conglomeration of tents, tipis, yurts, and other ad hoc housing, is home to Natives and non-Natives from all over the world, there to protest construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL).

I was there as a journalist—but also in support of my Native American daughter and grandchildren, and my many Native friends back home in the Pacific Northwest.

I met Jimmy, a.k.a. Angry Bird, when I sat in on a small and quiet meeting held in a green army surplus tent. The meeting became a planning session, powered by the strong desire of Jimmy to build a bridge from Oceti Sakowin camp to Turtle Island, a sacred Sioux burial ground currently owned by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Just days before, police had been observing the camp from the vantage point of the burial grounds, in the process trampling over the more than a dozen graves there. Angry Bird had had words with them, and ever since then had wanted to hold a ceremony where the graves had been disturbed.

Within a couple of hours of the group decision, the project was under way. A small group worked all night, and by the time I rejoined them just before sunrise, they were more than halfway across the river. As the sun rose, Jimmy’s bridge was completed.

Angry Bird’s action is just one of many that have taken place at Standing Rock, North Dakota, since April 2016. Members of 289 tribes, together with non-Native allies, have gathered to block construction of DAPL, which would carry oil from the Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota under Lake Oahe on the Missouri River—the primary source of drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe—and across four states to refineries and shippers in Illinois, crossing numerous bodies of water along the way.

Standing Rock can be understood as a watershed event in the history of Native Americans. As indigenous peoples begin to heal from the effects of five hundred years of oppression, they are emerging as leaders of worldwide efforts to stanch the degradation of the natural world. Adopting Mahatma Gandhi’s and Dr. Martin Luther King’s principles of nonviolent resistance, warriors have become “water protectors.”

But for members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the dispute is also intensely personal, as DAPL plows through ancestral burial sites on Turtle Island—the last remaining stretch of land between the pipeline and Lake Oahe. The corporation behind DAPL, Energy Transfer Partners, together with highly militarized police officers from North Dakota and several neighboring states, barred all others access to the island.

Shortly after sunrise, Angry Bird’s bridge was destroyed by authorities who used a grappling hook to pull it apart. But his determination inspired others, who had quickly gathered from the nearby Oceti Sakowin camp, bringing with them drums and sage, first aid supplies, and a canoe. Over the course of two hours, water protectors swam across to the island, standing in the icy water before the line of police until hypothermia threatened and other protectors took their place. There were a few jeers and insults hurled, but most water protectors told police they loved them and would pray for them.

“Weiter is life,” they said. “We all drink the same water.” They were greeted with mace and rubber bullets.

I wanted to tell Angry Bird how much I admired what he’d done, so I was glad to run into him the next day. He was helping construct winter housing for the camp, but took a break to tell me about building the bridge. Below is Angry Bird’s story in his own words.

The reason for that bridge is that the veterans and the elders got fed up with this disrespecting our ancestors. I live here, and that’s my relatives buried up there, and I don’t think they have the right to build on that hill.

The personal note is that they kind of hurt my heart. It just kind of seems like they kind of control, they push to control with power. To me, it’s a religious thing. There’s innocent people that just wanted to pray, and they got maced. It kind of hurt my heart to see the negativity of the police toward the people just standing in that water. It’s scary that one got rubber-bulleted. People were just standing in the water, and it’s like these other guys got no mercy and we’re just human target practice for them. I think something has to stop before somebody’s life has to give. I don’t like them threatening my life and saying I ain’t gonna see the daylight of day again. But they don’t scare me, it just gives me another reason to be strong in my belief . . .

We never done nothing bad, we just wanted to pray. They enclosed us in a circle with sniper guns and rifles, very hostile people. They don’t understand that these people, all different walks and nationalities, are living in harmony with each other and helping each other. People were kind of feeling that, and seeing that, hey, you don’t have to have weapons and guns to do what you believe in.

It’s not like we’re brilliant, you know. We’re just trying to say, “These are our ancestors. They’ve been here longer than you guys have.”

They don’t care. They’re gonna take all the oil out of Mother Earth, Mother Earth’s gonna fall apart. You take the water, you end life. Without water you don’t got grass; without water, you got nothing. They’ve got to understand that and, hopefully (might), if people keep praying for them and tell them, “Hey, we forgive you for your misguided . . . Open up your eyes once in a while.” Things have got to change in life, before life’s ended.

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