THE ENEMY / Issue Three

Thaddeus Howze
Alison Gerber
Kateryna Panova
Louis-Georges Schwartz
Becket Flannery
Laura Raicovich

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A LATE RADICALIZATION

Thaddeus Howze

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My father was a truck driver. He hauled food for a supermarket chain in New York in the early seventies. One of my earliest memories of work, which I am sure my father wanted to impress upon me, was of getting up at five in the morning, after he had already spent two hours getting his truck loaded with produce, and heading out with him for deliveries. On these mornings my mother would wake me, make me a bowl of oatmeal, ensure I was properly dressed, and when his truck pulled up I would run downstairs from our tenth floor apartment in the projects. I then had to climb up to the truck’s door. I was maybe thirteen years old, a time when everything still seemed so big.

Only now, four decades later, am I beginning to realize what a powerful effect those trips had on me. The work was fabulously difficult. Even though my father rarely spoke, I learned more about him in the first outing than I’d ever known before. My father was a simple man with a sixth-grade education whose strengths were those of a laborer. He knew the city; all of it. New York was his route and he could fit his tractor-trailer in places I would have never thought possible. I spent half of every trip cringing as he turned corners. He never had an accident, he was never late, he was never unprofessional. He was a machine.

A powerfully built man, he unloaded his eighteen-wheelers by hand. Each wooden tray of milk held eight gallons and he moved them as if they barely had any weight at all. I couldn’t lift even one. Instead, I moved the fruits and vegetable pallets, offering very little in the way of help. However, these trips were not about the help I could provide; they were my father’s transference of a work ethic: a man labors, provides, and does whatever it takes for his family to survive; no matter the weather, no matter how he feels.

My father began to turn gray in his early thirties, an advanced aging I attributed to the stress of his job; the self-medication of his smoking, drinking, and gambling; and the fact that he had four kids he could barely afford to feed. By his early forties he walked with a limp from an earlier work injury. He would die of cancer before he reached fifty.

In boot camp I was forced to discard my ideas of right, wrong, race, and religion. The anti-intellectualism of my upbringing was replaced with a new education, new languages, and new cultures.

Ours was a painful and complex relationship. There was nearly no room for love in our dynamic, particularly once I learned that he was my father by effort but not by blood. I didn’t resent him for this, but I did naïvely maintain some belief that my biological father might in fact be better than the man who took part in raising me. In time, though, I would learn that the man who left me was worse in person than the effects his absence had caused.

BLACK DESTRUCTION, BLACK DESTROYER

By sixteen I was failing at school, angry all of the time, and had been kicked out of my home. The foolish confidence provided by youth told me I was better off. I slept on other people’s floors and couches for nearly a year; after a few run-ins with the police, I went into a boarding home. It was here that I had an epiphany: no one cares what happens to you as an individual, especially as a black individual. I was placed in this facility because it was expedient to put me there, and for me it was better...
than sleeping on the street.

Nine months later, I joined the military and asked how far away from New York they could send me. “That depends on your test score,” explained the recruiter. My Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (better known as the ASVAB) scores were very high, and I had my choice of career and almost any duty station I wanted. As six long years passed I grew out of my old mind, and into a new one filled with concepts I never truly dealt with. One of the most important of these was the false concept of race. The expression, “You can’t go home again” has nothing to do with the place where you lived; it has to do with the person you were.

In boot camp I was forced to discard my ideas of right, wrong, race, and religion. The anti-intellectualism of my upbringing was replaced with a new education, new languages, and new cultures. My ingrained belief in the inferiority of my Blackness was removed. All that I would become was seeded by those critical, contained months. I was hardened, fashioned for military use, divorced from my previous life, and remade. I believed in order and structure, and I fought against entropy in all its forms.

While I was in the military, my brother ended his life at the age of twenty-five. Back home, I saw that my father was extremely sick; his cancer resulted in the removal of one organ at a time until he died. During that visit, with my brother gone and my father going, I experienced the effects of despair, the frailties of being human, and the suffering of both mind and body. I vowed to never let that happen to me.

When I left the military, I was in my mid-twenties but felt vastly older. I attempted to go home to New York to live with my mother; we could not live together, so I headed to California. I do not talk much about my mother in this essay, but it is important to note that although I left, she was the single most influential person in my life. It was her drive, her ambition to overcome her past, and her ability to bear witness to the pain, loss, and struggle of being a black woman in America that would be the lodestar of my entire life.

As the bottom fell out of the workplace, service jobs replaced blue and white collar jobs for people of color, and the corporate workforce whitened.

While I struggled to find my way, alone and without family, I began to notice how much the civilian world differed from the military world I had become accustomed to. Race was suddenly a factor. Well-spoken, highly trained, and familiar with technology, I found myself unable to find work. Unlike my time in the Deep South, there were no cutting remarks—no “Hey, boy,” no “Don’t let the sun go down on your ass in this town.” Instead, the west coast—much like the mid-western states and the cities up and down the eastern corridor—had a similar message with less animus: “No work, not here. Not for you.”

BLACK LABOR, BLACK LOSS

I couldn’t be less Black, but I could outwork my competition, so I did what I was trained to do: I doubled down and eventually, defying discomfort, humiliation, and frustration, found myself in the computer industry as a PC technician. I put in fourteen hours a day. I became a systems administrator, staff IT trainer, digital designer, publisher, grant writer, teacher, administrator
and more. Driven by my unerring will, I advanced in the field. As the years progressed, and my reach extended, I noted greater resistance to the idea that I should be in command of company resources. No one ever said I shouldn’t; they just gradually became more resistant. Invisible remarks such as, “Are you sure this is a good idea?” subtly undermined me, even when there wasn’t anyone else in the room with my level of experience or capability. As the scope of my duties increased, so did the complexities of my blackness in a dominantly white workplace.

This is where the bodies are buried when you look at the institution of racism: never say no; just never say yes. In this period, I became aware of the hegemony of corporatization. I was able to look back over my career and note my singularity. I was the only person of color everywhere I had ever worked. It had never occurred to me in the moment, because the military had tailored my expectations about race consciousness. So I pushed on, determined to prove my worth. However, the era of my work having value had come to an end; as my rank outpaced my race, I became the enemy: capable of leadership, but not fit to lead.

This would become the stage of my life when I embraced my radicalism, not out of desperation, but from life’s experiences and the painful awakening of my limitations. Until then, I had always believed in merit. However, meritocracy, as I was taught by the systems I worked within, was in fact the natural order of things. Around this same period, I watched—as so many Black Americans did—the indignant South Carolina congressman Joe Wilson yell, “You liar!” at the President of the United States. This was not a political outburst; it was a racial attack, a shattering of codes that has infused government and undone the habit of common decency within the halls of democracy.

From a personal theater of labor, to our most public political stages, blackness was being challenged for having arrived, much like it had been some fifty years earlier, at the soda fountain of Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina. Success had revealed itself to be a grand sit-in.

This is cultural gentrification, and blacks are not invited to the table. However, if blacks are not in fact the truest Americans, then America does not in fact exist.

With the economy still reeling, and blacks having been among the most affected across the job market, the hard lessons my mother tried to teach me had become vividly clear. Black Americans had to work twice as hard to be considered half as often as any White person with my same skill set. This was my mother’s—and many of her generation’s—belief system, and arguably their lived reality. These were rules, rules of blackness, and they had come back to me, unbidden. As the bottom fell out of the workplace, service jobs replaced blue and white collar jobs for people of color, and the corporate workforce whitened.

I stopped trying to find work in 2009.

In this same timeframe, relationships between the races began to deteriorate, quietly, discreetly, with a police shooting of an unarmed man here, an assaulted academic there, a precinct beating, a porch-front shooting, an unarmed teenager killed, a father choked, another dead teenager. Before we knew it, these travesties had become
commonplace. As Black economic wealth collapsed to what it was in 1960—a fraction of white wealth overall—an ominous return to violence and brutality followed.

**BLACK RATIONAL, BLACK RADICAL**

I am writing my truth, as I see it, in the hope of igniting others from a sense of despair to an acknowledgement of the problems we must all face and surmount if any change is to take place in our lifetimes. In my radicalized state, I find myself speaking words I heard as a child but did not understand. Blacks in America are a Scarlet Letter upon the alabaster linens of what appears to be a prosperous and significant nation. A narrative dependent on a lie, in which hard work leads to prosperity and a nation’s prosperity results from its citizenry working hard. However, when white America sees blackness, it is reminded that the wealth of this nation—its invisible labor forces—are what made this country rich. Certainly America was not the only receiver in the global slave trade, but it was the most prosperous, and the most lethal. America churned human lives into exorbitant wealth that millions of whites—not just the Southern elite or the sons of settlers—profited from for more than four hundred years. This is fact: in an America where civic spaces restricted black presence, and banking systems limited black credit lines, everyone—from those arriving on the Mayflower to those fleeing mainland China—has had more to benefit from than the very people whose labor funded the common wealth and infused its economic structure.

Once again, states are petitioning their school boards to revise history, to erase anything that mentions the slave trade, to rewrite the causes of the Civil War, to remove slavery from the American history books. These powers-that-be want to reframe history to disguise tales of previous misconduct—not because of a sense of guilt or concern with their past, but because of a desire for a more controlled future, one where all issues of supposed injustice can be monetized, socialized, and improved-upon, at a profit.

This is cultural gentrification, and blacks are not invited to the table. However, if Blacks are not in fact the truest Americans, then America does not in fact exist.

*This is cultural gentrification, and blacks are not invited to the table. However, if blacks are not in fact the truest Americans, then America does not in fact exist.*

This has led me to a question: what will it take to fight back against those who oppress us with the rhetoric of “too big to fail,” and who use our last dollars, our retirement funds, to power their own wasteful legacies? I have become a radical in my late life because, as I see it, the future is unsustainable. The absorption of resources, the plundering of the Commons, and the oppression of masses that suffer unaware point to the voracity of a class capable of usurping all power—natural, material, and technological—to maintain its position and to further concretize its reign. This is the true and unbiased interpretation of “too big to fail”: it was never indexing corporations; it was indexing whiteness and white notions of normality and stability.

We went wrong. We allowed this. I took you on this tour of my life’s arc to show how a Black man with limited power lives. I have done what I could with what I had. I may be the villain in the story that is White America, but I am not the enemy.
BAD ART IS GOOD FOR US ALL

Alison Gerber

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For years I ignored artwork that I didn’t like. Artwork that no one liked. I don’t mean that I didn’t see it; bad art is everywhere. I mean, rather, that I didn’t imagine it to be something worth engaging with. I didn’t see bad art as relevant to social worlds, to my world. I imagined that bad art made sense as a sort of hobby, and one that, as hobbies went, was relatively innocuous. Bad art was, in my imaginings, a sort of basement train set of human activity. Bad artmaking requires finite resources—time, space, money, materials—but seems relatively unlikely to end in drug-addicted squalor, destroy a marriage or a childhood, reopen the hole in the ozone layer. There are worse things you could do with your time. And, clearly, the making of bad art has meaning and value for the maker. Artists follow their muse; they express themselves; they work out intellectual, aesthetic, and psychic problems. Not least, they enjoy making art.

Over the last few years I have done research for a project on value in the arts. I crisscrossed the country visiting and speaking with artists in big cities and small towns. I spent time in art communities I hadn’t known existed, drank bad wine at openings, gossiped, and looked at a lot of art. Some of it—not much, but some—was really bad.

When I spoke with the artists who made that bad art, I was often surprised: they told me their art wasn’t any good. They didn’t care. They made it for themselves, and they loved it. Sometimes they would tell me the story behind a particular work hanging in their living room—a poorly printed, badly composed photograph of a train yard, or a huge canvas with Pollockish splatters that somehow never quite came together into anything more—and then laugh: It’s pretty terrible, right? And we would laugh together. These artists told me stories just like all the others did: of the resources they committed to their work, the long years of practice, the lonely hours in the studio and the thrill of exhibition. They talked about negotiations with family and friends over time and space and money to do the work they wanted to do, the early morning hours before the kids woke up set aside for painting, the coursework and crit groups and gallerists. But unlike most of the artists that I spoke with, these “bad” artists were careful to claim only that their artwork mattered to them. Maybe to their families and close friends—maybe. But they didn’t claim that their work should be selling, didn’t talk prices with me. They never told me that viewers would be transformed through engagement with their work, or that it would outlast them. They didn’t talk about the skills they developed through their practices or about maybe teaching one day. They didn’t even talk much about the relationships they built through their work, whether with other artists or with viewers. When they talked about value, they talked only about personal, individual, private value, and I think that’s all that they saw.

When no one else thinks your work is any good, you’re left with only one justification for the time, the energy, the money, the commitment: you love it.

I spent time with and spoke with so many other people over the past years, too; artists who maybe made better art, people who didn’t make art at all. When they talked about bad art, drawings almost without qualities and junk sculptures that seemed destined for the trash heap, that private value of self-actualization and self-expression was all they could see. If they even saw it. If they were feeling generous. The stories that bad artists told me, and the confirmations offered by their peers, made me think I had been right. Bad art made sense as a hobby, nothing more.
But because I was bound by methodological commitments, I kept speaking with artists good and bad, in all kinds of places, kept going to openings and dinners and studios and schools. Over time, I began to see patterns not just in what artists told me they thought and felt—this widespread justification, a single gesture towards self-actualization—but also, and quite distinctly, in what they told me they did in and outside the studio, in what I saw them do with their art and their lives.

Unlike most of the artists that I spoke with, these “bad” artists were careful to claim only that their artwork mattered to them.

In a world of “what do you do?” at first meeting (the greeting colored by the demanding cash economies in which the “do what you love” ideology really means, always, “do what you love as a job, for money, or you’re not really doing it”\(^3\)), a strong commitment to something that isn’t your job doesn’t make much sense, especially if it consumes scarce, finite resources. When no one else thinks your work is any good, you’re left with only one justification for the time, the energy, the money, the commitment: you love it. You love it! And isn’t that enough? Don’t we all deserve something for ourselves?

It is enough. That old labor slogan still rings true despite its utopian sheen: eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.\(^4\) Play, leisure, love: these are reason enough, and I don’t aim to argue otherwise. But when I looked at bad artists in the aggregate, I saw that there was something more. And I saw that it mattered to me, to us. I thought that bad art had only individual, private value, but no social value. I was wrong.

When I looked at the lives of those who made what they called, and what their peers derided as, bad art, two widespread patterns became clear. The first was that, almost without exception, those who make bad art don’t aim to make art their job. It wasn’t because they couldn’t make good art: some had even made what they and others viewed as “good art” at some earlier time, and now pursued a different practice. It wasn’t that they didn’t have the training or the networks; many had BFAs and MFAs, some from very good programs. And their lack of interest in a career wasn’t just a squeeze of sour grapes; some had abandoned successful sales careers or positions as art professors for other kinds of work, or had happened upon a pile of money and ended up without a need to support themselves, moving over time from “good” to “bad” work in the process. What these artists had in common was an almost total lack of occupational commitment to the arts. They didn’t keep their CVs up to date, didn’t use openings to schmooze, didn’t implicitly or explicitly say that they one day hoped to be recognized as professionals, as “real” artists, as working artists. They didn’t spend much time trying to sell work, get grants, or find opportunities, and only occasionally dipped a toe into the occupationalized art world for specific purposes and quickly retreated back to shore—back to the world of bad art and self-actualization, of justification that points only to the self.

Except: When I looked to the lives of these artists, I saw another pattern. These artists sometimes put down their brushes and cameras, stopped making art with an ease that I never saw among occupationally committed artists, but only in favor of things they viewed as equally meaningful commitments, and only temporarily. It so happened that, in each case, these activities were of great value (economic and otherwise) but were unpaid or deeply underpaid. Artists stopped making bad art to care for a
dying friend, to volunteer full-time for a cause they believed in. Afterward, they went right back to their own work as though nothing had happened. On the other hand, artists who made “good art”—much more likely to have some level of occupational commitment to the arts, regardless of their training, experience, income, or employment—put what they often called their careers on hold as well, but only for matters sufficiently pressing (care of one’s own children topped the list), only problematically (all tried to fit a bit of artmaking in here and there, often reporting that they did so to the detriment of both activities), and with a great gnashing of teeth. I met some who never bounced back—who, forced to downscale their practices by small children or a serious illness, spoke bitterly of their careers, interrupted—while the bad artists I met picked up their tools and got back to work as though nothing had happened.

In today’s higher art worlds, anything resembling serious participation or a hope that one might contribute to “the conversation” tends to require the performance of occupational commitment and economic activity. Artists regularly de-emphasize their day jobs and stretch the truth of art world finances in mixed company. The notion of the “professional” artist is disaggregated from both jobs and dollars and is defined variously but always emphatically—a pose required for participation in the international art-historical and critical conversation that people like me see as marking the boundaries of “good” art. Very occasionally, someone slips in without evidence of such professionalism, but it’s rare.

Over time I came to see how serious, committed artists without occupational visions—those who made up a small proportion of the artists I interviewed but who comprised an overwhelming majority of those who made what we agreed was “bad art”—had, along with their artworks, created lives that allowed them to dedicate all manner of resources to the making of such artworks—energies that could just as well be channeled to something else, if that something else were sufficiently worthy. For the most part, over a lifetime, these artists remained committed to the studio, often daily: art was important to them, and it took precedence. But occasionally, these artists would apply themselves with just as much dedication to something else.

In today’s higher art worlds, anything resembling serious participation or a hope that one might contribute to “the conversation” tends to require the performance of occupational commitment and economic activity.

Artists who make bad art create space in their lives for commitment to something other than occupational careers, and in doing so they learn to dedicate resources (time, money, space, energy) to something that they care about but which will never pay off in instrumental, externally sanctioned ways. They devote a room in their house or a corner of the bedroom; they commit hours of their day or week to their artistic practice. They work less than they otherwise might in order to have time to make their art, earn less than they otherwise could. They spend precious disposable income on art supplies, art services, museum memberships, courses, artworks. In all this, bad artists create and protect spaces of possibility.

In my encounters with these artists, what I saw was that unlike those with occupational commitments to the arts, when something came up that they saw as unambiguously meaningful, bad artists granted themselves the space to commit themselves wholeheartedly to care work, political work, community work, religious work—all of those...
things that the rest of us are so often “too busy” for, by which we mean that, whatever our ideals, we feel ourselves to be constrained by our careers, our lives, our choices, our goals. All artists fashion particular spaces in their lives; any artistic practice requires ongoing commitments of finite resources. Bad artists, though, build particular spaces of possibility, swing spaces that can be put to various uses without devaluation or profanation.

Look through an economic lens, and you’ll see problems of finite resources as issues of costs and benefits, and conversations about value as rational discussions where an ideal outcome not only exists, but can be attained. There is a clarity of purpose to that economic lens and its measures of quality and success. But if you use a political lens for that same discussion, it can no longer be quite as rational, and there is clearly no ideal outcome; all outcomes have winners and losers, and the nonquantitative, the nonmonetary, the communicative, the affective, and the personal hold at least as much sway as does the rational.

Making bad art is calisthenics for a kind of social engagement that was once the norm but that is now minimized, implausible, odd and ill-advised under capitalism and the dictates of higher art worlds. It’s training for a sort of resistance: resistance to the dollar as the best and only measure of worth, to the precedence of occupation in the construction of identity. I might not want to look at it, but I’ve learned to be glad to live in a world of bad art.

The committed bad artist has the emotional, moral, ethical, and practical experience of commitment to something irrational, non-instrumental, non-occupational, suspect. Bad art has no immediate payoff. Its benefits are intangible and unpredictable; it pays you back in love rather than money. It might never amount to anything. And in a society where commitment to achievement is paramount, and where such achievement is most often gauged by occupational and economic attainment, being trained in the practice of time-wasting is of incredible value for anyone who hopes for social and political participation. Because for only a very few—a largely privileged few—are social and political goals the stuff of jobs and dollars; for the rest, they detract from our need for jobs and dollars, and they tend to get short shrift.

Bad Art Is Good For Us All, Alison Gerber
End Notes

This essay benefited from conversations with Helena Keeffe, Joseph del Pesco, and Joshua Smith, and I am grateful for their time and thoughts.

1. Throughout this essay I will use terms like “bad art” and “good art.” All scare quotes and lack of same are intentional. I hope that by the end the reasons for my use of such loaded terms will be clear.

2. This essay draws on a study using in-depth interviews with visual artists in the United States—as well as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and work with archival and secondary sources—to investigate valuation in the arts. I also used to work as an artist, and artmaking was my primary employment from about 2002 through 2008, which has obviously influenced my research questions and analysis. Though I am now engaged with inquiries and practices similar to those that structured my life then, I no longer introduce myself as an artist in any context.

3. For another perspective on this see, for example, Miya Tokumitsu, “In the Name of Love”, Jacobin 13, 2014.

4. See James Green, Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America (New York: Anchor, 2007) for some context on rest and recreation under capitalism.

5. As should be clear by now, I draw on Becker in my conceptualization of art worlds (Howard Becker, Art Worlds (University of California Press, 1984))


7. As Sholette points out (Gregory Sholette, Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture (Pluto Press, 2010), these artists—part of the vast dark matter

8. Not all of the bad artists I interviewed took this “time off.” The few who did not were all older. Was this swing-space appropriation of resources plausible only to the young, the energetic, those who could envision a return to the arts before it was too late? No, plenty of older artists I spoke with told me of their time off to organize a march on the capitol, to undertake missionary work. The common feature of those who never had taken such “time off” from their artwork was simple: they had undertaken art as a hobby, as a sideline, often late in life, most often in retirement. Thinking of art as a hobby, as leisure, as release turned out to be just as destructive to artists’ capacities to temporarily redirect their passions and resources as thinking of artmaking as a profession was. Bad art turns out to be, as I will argue, a sort of calisthenics for public engagement—but only if you take the making of that bad art very, very seriously.

9. The bad artists I spoke with were not usually engaged in the sorts of conversations that I spend much of my time in, where notions of an expanded practice are widely held, where artists cleaning up their neighborhood and organizing political debates and caring for their families and others and running for office regularly speak of those activities as “performances” or “sculptures”, put them on their CV, promote documentation of their activities in gallery and museum exhibitions They simply did these things, and then got back to the lifelong hard work of making art. Bad artists don’t call their activism social practice; they call it what it is, and commit to it with all that they have. In contrast, see for example Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford Wash, 1973; WochenKlausur, Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women, 1994; Steve Lambert, Public Forum, 2014; Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document, 1973-79; and Ben Kinmont, Sometimes a Nicer Sculpture Is to Be Able to Provide a Living for Your Family, 1998-present. Antanas Mockus served as two-term mayor of Bogotá,
Colombia. Some of his projects while in office, including the heart-shaped hole he cut into the bulletproof vest he was required to wear, are documented in a catalog from the Walker Art Center (Doryun Chong and Yasmil Raymond, *Brave New Worlds*, 1st ed (Minneapolis, Minn.: New York: Walker Art Center, 2007)). More recently, Jón Gnarr served as mayor of Reykjavík; see for example his contribution to the catalogue for the 7th Berlin Biennale (Jón Gnarr, “The Courage to Be a Lipstick,” in *Forget Fear: 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, ed. Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza (Köln: König, 2012)).

10. The bad artists I spoke with regularly applied themselves to meaningful, finite tasks of great value. My argument, that these activities are of significant economic and social value and that bad artmaking structures artists’ lives in particular ways that enable such engagements, is intended to be quite different from the one most economists might make. I am interested in value in all of its forms, and would not advocate for the application of cost-benefit analysis to artists’ activities or argue that we should aim to include such activities to show that an art education is “worth it” in terms of future economic productivity. My perspective on value is a growth-agnostic one, and personally I lean towards more sustainability-oriented low- and no-growth paradigms (see for example Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth* (Penguin, 2010)). I describe a sort of value in bad art beyond the personal and aesthetic, and it’s one that we could make commensurate with monetary value, but I would argue that in this case the dollar is a particularly poor metric not because the activities I speak of are priceless (see, for example, Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) for a contemporary sociological view on this issue, one to which I subscribe) or because the dollar can’t work (it can), but because the dollar bullies other measures of value so quickly and efficiently that it silences the vast majority of political, ethical, and moral discussion. My own research, on social processes of commensuration, envisions resistance to commensuration as political, and I would argue that it is often a political lens that should be brought to conversations about value rather than an economic one.

NOTES FROM A WAR

Kateryna Panova

THE ENEMY / Issue Three
theenemyreader.org
“Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an Eurasian empire.”
- Zbigniew Brzezinski

When a missile, launched by the terrorists in Eastern Ukraine, downed Malaysian Flight MH17, killing 298 passengers, the world looked on with shock and confusion, but not the Ukrainians. By the time this atrocity had occurred, we had endured five months of death that left the entire nation crippled by fear, unrest, and rage.

At that moment, the world was pushed closer to a new cold war. Europe had already started to shift its borders; there was a violent and deadly war between Ukrainians and Russians unfolding in Eastern Ukraine. However, most of the world, and especially Europe, did not seek clarity on what exactly brought down a passenger jet with nearly 300 innocent people on board; nor did they want to acknowledge war. Instead, they preferred to define the fighting as “riots” and to identify the Russian troops as “pro-Russian Ukrainian rebels.”

I’ve been to Eastern Ukraine dozens of times. The men there—the ones who are supposedly rebelling—are a kind of Eastern European redneck: hard workers and heavier drinkers, most have lived there since birth and never traveled even as far as Kiev. They work in coal mines and steel factories, and when work slowed in Ukraine, they would go to Russia to do random construction jobs. However, these men would always come home to their land and small domestic farms.

These are not pro-Russian thinkers; these are Ukrainians, and they have neither the rationale nor the capacity to fire missile launchers at their fellow citizens. This contortion of the truth, this insanity, is where the world’s ignorance has let us down.

I witnessed the moment everything shifted. They say that people witnessing history do not fully understand what is happening, but that is bullshit. I and everybody else around me very clearly understood what was happening and realized that nothing would ever be the same again. It was Sunday, January 19th, 2014, a big church holiday known as the Ice Baptism. I had taken my camera to document the events—people jumping into the freezing cold water, believing the ritual washes away troubles and brings peace.
What happened next was exactly the opposite of such sentiment. I followed the ice divers to the main square, Maidan Nezhalezhnosti, where protesters had been gathering every Sunday to oppose the government’s resistance to join the European Union. Then, from nowhere, the police attacked and began to beat the protesters. The protesters did not fight back; instead, outraged by the violence, many more people went to the streets to ask for justice. People wore masquerade masks and colanders on their heads to mock the new anti-democratic laws—a James Ensor unfolding in real time. It was still peaceful, almost colorful. Then the protesters headed to the parliament and met the police, and in a blink of an eye the bloodshed started. I remember looking on, thinking, “This cannot be happening, I will wake up, we are civilized.” What became eminently clear at that moment was how fragile peace is, and how no nation can consider itself so civilized or so protected that it could avoid such violence.

I came to Maidan Square for the next several days. I walked inside the protester’s encampments. People from all over the country arrived to support the activists, bringing food, warm clothes, and medicine. They helped to cook and built barricades. I walked to the frontline. “No girls in here, it’s too dangerous, please go back,” the guards said, trying to convince me to go back. I found my press card and they had to let me go. But I felt incredibly grateful that those tired men were still gentlemen and still cared.

On the frontline, ashes and snow kept falling from the sky. The activists defended the encampments from the police, throwing firecrackers, stones, and Molotov cocktails. The government forces struck back with bullets and put snipers on the roofs. A young man, standing so close to me that his shoulder touched mine, fell to the ground, shot. The police were targeting journalists and doctors—I saw fire and death on the streets of my peaceful city.

At least one hundred more protestors would be killed the following month. But I wasn’t witnessing this anymore.
Away from home, studying in the States, I could hardly talk to people; the petty issues of those around me clashed too sharply with the suffering of others that filled my soul. I wasn’t there when the Ukrainian ex-president fled to Russia and protestors seized his palace. I regret this a lot, as I had been trying to get inside that palace for many years.

By spring Ukraine had become extremely fragile, caught in the struggle to recover from the rule of a dictator and the efforts to build a new country. The economy was crashing and order was diminishing. It was at that moment, while Ukraine was crippled and crawling toward democracy, that the Russians attacked and the war started—a war strategy that amounts to little more than sneaky blackheartedness, much like knowing that your neighbor has the flu and breaking into his house because he can’t fight back.

At first no bullets were shot. The Russians faked a referendum in Crimea, an invaluable peninsula in southern Ukraine. Then they invaded it, saying that the people there wanted to reunite with Russia. Ukrainians didn’t fight; they did not shoot a single bullet; they just stared on in dismay as foreign soldiers stormed Ukrainian military bases. A nation, shocked after the hundreds of deaths in Maidan Square and still reeling from the internal violence of its own revolution, stood dormant as its large and formidable neighbor Russia claimed ownership as if twenty-two years of independence had never transpired. Within several months, the Russians began to play the same game in Eastern Ukraine, sending their intelligence officers and establishing covert operations that would result in weirdly suspicious separatist movements—the groups that the Western world blindly called “pro-Russian separatists” and in fact “terrorists” or, more specifically, “Russians.”

This time, however, Ukrainians fought back, first with several volunteer battalions driving into Eastern Ukraine. Then, with a newly elected President seated, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians began to raise money, buy weapons, acquire uniforms, and build a larger, stronger group of soldiers. In most cases it was the women of Ukraine raising the money, making sure that the families of the thousands of soldiers were getting support, overseeing the wounded, and making sure that life at home went on as normally as possible. This may sound like a turn toward more traditional gender roles in a time of crisis. However, there are women among the volunteers, and within the army, and they also die, like men do, though they are more often held captive like Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko.
who was kidnapped and is now under a court trial in Russia, accused of killing Russian journalists.

In its own right, Ukraine is a progressive and feminist country where women have better access to both abortion clinics and senior management positions than in the United States. Its political movements have helped global left-wing causes; for example, Ukraine gave the world the radical movement Femen, which aims to fight patriarchy in its three manifestations: sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship, and religion. But in the haze and horror of war, as if a switch had been pulled making all of us brothers and sisters in the face of threat and loss, most of the feminists I was in touch with had shifted roles to those of supporting, caring for, and comforting the waves of returning soldiers.

My friend Julia from Kiev was one of these women, she is very well educated, was well employed, giving money regularly to her parents—a kind of familial support rarely seen in the states. Now her salary is diminishing along with Ukrainian currency, which is almost half of its value since the beginning of the crisis, while the war has cause the prices of nearly every need to have doubled.

Julia, like my father, and like nearly everyone else in Kiev, hasn’t had hot water in her apartment for months. But she doesn’t complain because she knows that those in Eastern Ukraine have it much worse. “We don’t have to live in basements and survive shelling,” explained Julia. Soon after the war began and the first thousand soldiers had died, Julia started to volunteer at the hospital for soldiers in downtown Kiev. She cooks food, buys cigarettes, acquires personal toiletries, and tries to keep things as normal as possible through the madness of invasion. Throughout her volunteering Julia has kept a diary. Below is a selection of passages that I feel go much further than my own words could in offering a sense of humanity maintained against the pressures of geopolitical insanity:

Protestors burned tires to create a curtain of smoke. Covered by it, a man approaches the barricade and throws a stone at the police.

A field hospital, made in the hallways of the Trade Union building in Kiev and headed by a woman, opened to treat protestors.

I come to the farmer’s market and ask to put the fruits in small separate bags. The salesgirl asks is this is for a sick person in a hospital. “Yes, for many, but I don’t know them yet.” Once the salesgirl learns that this is for the wounded soldiers, she adds more peaches. Her assistant brings some grapes, saying, “For the boys. Tell them to feel better.”
I and the other girls come to the hospital and try to figure out which soldiers have no relatives and friends in the city. We will be their friends. Both we and the boys are very shy. We are hesitant to approach and give them the bags with our homemade food. The guys are even more shy. They blush and chain smoke.

One eye is missing, however the remaining one looks optimistic. His name is Valera. He is 47. “Please, just come and visit us,” he says, “and we will fight for you even blind.” Valera and others show us some photos from Eastern Ukraine. I look at the images of armored trucks. Another one is of an RPG missile. Somebody wrote on its gray side with a black marker, “From Russia with love.”

What the soldiers say is very different from the media coverage in Ukrainian and Russian media. “Tell me, who are we fighting? Are they Ukrainians or Russians? Is it a civil war?” The soldiers are careful with words. They say that the rioters are sometimes fellow Ukrainians, but all the bosses, officers, arms, and weapons are Russian. I hold my tears. I can’t cry while I am here.

Surprisingly, there is no hatred. “Don’t assume all the Russians are like that”, tell the soldiers. Why, oh, God, why, are they killing each other? The Ukrainian guys are fighting for us, and I understand why they are dying. But what for are the Russian guys dying for? I really don’t understand what idea or emotion or intention makes a Russian soldiers do this to their neighbor.

I leave the hospital into a beautiful summer night. I listen to the cars and passers by, and the music from the street cafes. I walk home and cry with big tears. These are the tears of a person in a peaceful city. It’s really difficult to control myself. The war is the best test. It shows what is inside our soles. And everything starts and ends inside each individual.

It’s better not to talk about war a lot. What can I do? Just remember that I’m a woman and my hands should bring cure, comfort and support. That’s why I started cooking for strangers, who risk their lives for me. There’s a lot of aggression around. There’s confusion. There’s evil and hatred. And here I am, cooking pies. I won’t stop the war. I won’t change anything for the country. But I may change something for these soldiers, maybe not their lives – but their souls.

Nothing unites a nation better than an imposing evil, and a war never fails to out the best and the worst in people. Too bad that it happened with my people. I wouldn’t ask anybody to understand what Ukrainians are going through. Nobody will, until they experience it themselves. If there’s ever a moment when you realize how fragile peace is and how fortunate you were to live in its midst, you’re done: your world will never be the same again. I sincerely hope this won’t happen to you.
THREE IMAGES OF AFFECT

Louis-Georges Schwartz
A Primer

Three films:

1. *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936)
2. *Europa '51* (Rossellini, 1952)
3. *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera, 2008)

Three periods of the labor capital relation:

1. *Formal subsumption of labor*: in which capital buys abstract labor times, encloses workers in factories and struggles with them over the length of the working day. Ending with WW II.
2. *Real subsumption of labor*: in which capital controls every aspect of the labor process and workers seek to become autonomous from capital. Collapsing at the turn of the 21st century.
3. *Full subsumption*: In which the decline of the wage relation makes the difference between labor and being available for labor increasingly indiscernible, with every aspect of social reproduction included in capitals circuits of exchange, as the working class struggles to abolish itself. Ongoing.

Three regimes of cinema:

1. *The Movement Image*: subordinates time to movement. Narrates subjects responding to movements coming towards them from the horizon – a world’s horizon. 1895-World War II
2. *The Time-Image*: subordinates movement to time. Subtracts spiritual automata from situations floating on their determinations. 1945-2000
3. *Cinema Hostis*: subordinates both movement and time to hostility. Presents a world in which each is the enemy of each and the camera is the enemy of all. Ongoing.

Three forms of affect:

1. Intimate
2. Commodified
3. Separated

Three Passions:

1. Anxiety
2. Boredom
3. Hostility
Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) exemplifies affection-image compositions in the movement-image regime. Chaplin’s Tramp character goes from factory to prison to home, mechanically stumbling from one enclosed space after another. Chaplin’s comedy comes from responding to situations with inappropriate movements, including the micro movements of his face, thus transforming the situation in unexpected ways. Despite the relatively low number of close ups in *Modern Times*, the tramp’s face remains disconnected from the space around it, separated by its different make up and the abnormal connection between his expression and the actions. By crystallizing the “wrong affect,” the Tramp’s face makes the determinations of other characters’ expressions intelligible. He makes the audience wait to see how he will escape the difficulties each situation presents to him, suspending the laughter in the passionate element of anxiety.

The Tramp’s face moves inappropriately. When the lunch signal sounds while he tries to rescue a fellow worker trapped in the gears of a huge machine, the Tramp gets his colleague’s food, and then eats and feeds the other worker with a calm and beatific expression of enjoyment rather than the expected resolved or panicked look. When the Tramp accidentally inhales some cocaine hidden in a saltshaker while in jail, his face is a spasm of desire, unlike the faces of the other prisoners and the guards, who do not know the reason for his over-stimulation. Perceiving the factory, the jail, and the home overwhelms the Tramp, and an affect uncorrelated with his situation wells up in him. The Tramp’s irrational affect exposes the process of industrial subjectivization, and eventually forges a way out.

In the film’s conclusion, the Tramp and his lover find themselves excluded from all enclosures, homeless and unemployed, abandoned on the side of the road. In a close medium shot their two faces pass through series of expressions from surrender to determination in an accelerated coda of facial expressions. The lovers’ faces finally become smiling masks, expressing their newly found power to leave the metropolis towards the abstracted horizon of the industrial US’s mythical road.

Movement-Images depict the form of time needed by the working class in order to revolutionize its struggle over the length of the working day. In an essay entitled “Three Temporal Dimensions of Class Struggle,” George Caffentzis elaborates the two forms of time proper to capital: the linear time used to measure production and the circular time used to track the reproduction of capital. Both forms measure movement. When labor appears as part of capital, it too must rely on those forms of temporality. Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nesic’s description of this period as “programmatist” implies that Labor needed forms of time that measured
the movements of production: a circular time to orient itself within the capital’s expanded reproduction, and a linear time with which to articulate its programs. In this period labor needed a temporality capable of linking perception to moving bodies functioning as centers of indetermination and subjectivity, temporality within which the actions of those bodies could meet their objects in the world. If the production process determines the essence of the labor-capital relation it does so by determining the time of social relations.

In the facial close up, affect appears as a mobile impulse on a sensory nerve. The facial close up composes affects from the relations between facial features and distributes those affects along a spectrum between the active pole of desire and the reflective pole of wonder. The tight framing of the close up abstracts the face from its spatiotemporal coordinates, allowing films to express pure qualities independently of situations within which qualities are realized. A face with features that break its outline expresses the extreme of desire while a stilled, plate-like face expresses wonder. Writing about this period of formal subsumption, Capital creates a mode of subjectivity immanent to the abstract labor power that it produces. Individual, “free,” skilled, servile workers and cooperating subjects born of industry were both results of the contradictory movement of capital’s antagonisms, and its distribution of a range of affects between subjects.

Subsumption’s affects emerge from the latent possibilities in the flows and axioms specific to that period of capitalism as opposed to new affects capable of transforming the image regime within which they function. Nonetheless potential for the new emerges in the affection image’s genetic sign.

Europa 51: Whatever Spaces, and the Impersonal Affect of Control

Gilles Deleuze points out that close ups sometimes include a fragment of space to the side of the face, removed from its spatio-temporal coordinates. Any space can be framed as a provisionally closed set of relations, just as the face can. Such abstracted whatever spaces function as the affection-image’s genetic sign, causing semiotic mutations and articulating a different image regime. Subjects disappear in whatever spaces, and affect appears externally as an abstracted set of relations enduring a passage of time. The time-image emerges as the increased use of whatever spaces changes cinematic affect from an expression crystalized within a subject into the time of relations in general, opening it to non-human qualities, and further sublating affect into powers of thought.

In Roberto Rossellini’s Europa 51, Irene perceives the Roman slums as indifferent spaces, the abstraction of the streets and interiors standing in contrast with the cartographic specificity of the bourgeois home. In her family, she works as a redundant housewife with a waged
staff who she manages instead of doing domestic labor directly. The unwaged existence of the poor and destitute women marks *Europa 51*’s Rome as a space of bare life, the mode of human being unable to sustain citizenship: the inform being societies of control must constantly abject. Irene’s mother mentions bare life’s essential figure when she warns her daughter that communists will end up in concentration camps if war breaks out again. Irene sees the factory she visits as the yard for a camp, haunting the edges of the film with the figure. Giorgio Agamben points out that since WWII camps have become the *nomos* of the modern metropolis, figuring the transformation of political space into zones of force. These are variations on camp space, whatever spaces separate themselves from any world. Women enclosed within the forced labor of private reproduction incarnate bare life in societies of control, a status that paradoxically confers on their potential refusal of that labor the power to end the reproduction of capitalism.

Through the banal, bored subjectivity of a stunned housewife, *Europa 51* expresses a revolutionary desire: the desire to see the world just as it is in order to destroy its mediations. Irene’s desire surges within the difference between a zone marked as expressing the actual contradictions of social reproduction in postwar Italy, her home, and a fantastical zone presented as a virtual alternative mode of reproduction, the slums. The film presents both spaces through Irene’s schematic, time-imaged perceptions. Her refusal of her family’s private reproduction of the bourgeoisie and her flight into collectivized proletarian social reproduction function are not simply expressions of a desire to perform women’s work by other means. They are impressions of an impersonal need for systemic change based on a change in her society’s mode of reproduction.

Control and society both come to an end with emergence of full subsumption. Under full subsumption, the organic composition of capital—the ratio of machine work to human labor—has risen to a point where capital cannot extract enough surplus value from labor to keep growing and must start distributing extant value upwards by commodifying every aspect of human existence and subjecting us to universalized exchange as well as accumulating wealth by dispossession through legal or military force, the contemporary form of primitive accumulation. In this phase, capital governs by abandonment. An asocial formation arises between numb bodies governed by a distinuent power and unmediated violence.

The penetration of economy into every aspect of life is more than legible in the HSBC Holdings advertisement reading “in the future, there will be no more markets waiting to emerge.” When living becomes indiscernible from exchange, nothing new will emerge. Various all too familiar features of the contemporary economy have transformed what little time workers could use for their reproduction into time during which they must be available for work. Concretely this means: last-minute scheduling practices in minimum wage jobs, the tendency towards independent contracting in higher waged sectors, the growth of the flat corporation, the use of communications technology to tether us to our bosses, etc. Meanwhile, the “universal market” in services has completely colonized the sphere of reproduction. In the period of empire life is completely subordinated to the economic and movement and time to hostility. For *Tiqqu*, the Hostis names that which has taken the place of social relations at a certain moment of the moving contradiction—the lived economy that reduces us to bare life. The cinematic expression of this contradiction results in films.
in which each is the enemy of each and the camera is the enemy of all.

Sleep Dealer: Rifts, Drones, and Clinamen

Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* (2008) develops the affective signs of the hostis while mapping full subsumption from the perspective of the surplus populations it generates due to high organic composition of capital. Full subsumption separates the proletariat from itself as flows of people increasingly swerve away from flows of money for which they compete.

In Rivera’s film, Memo leaves his native Oaxacan farming village, which is been desiccated by a damn that privatized its water source. He goes to find work in a *maquiadora* in a border city, where the laborers remotely operate construction robots in the US. *Sleep Dealer* develops the Rift while mapping full subsumption from the perspective of the surplus populations generated by the contemporary economy. Full subsumption means a high degree of automation, which means fewer waged worker and larger relative surplus populations. In addition to marginal profit from exchange, capital relies on dispossession as form of accumulation. The current hedge-fund driven land grab in Africa illustrates the point. It is there that populations are driven off land that will be farmed mechanically, but they will never be absorbed into the economy, because industry has also been mechanized. Paradoxically, full subsumption means that as capital integrates labor more completely, separations within the proletariat intensify as capital swerves its monetary flows away from people.

The new restructuring of capitalist flows requires new axioms that produce new types and forms of subjectivity. In Cinema Hostis, affective Rift is the degree zero image from which others differentiate themselves. A Rift sets up an antagonism between characters defined exclusively in terms of their separation from each other, and over the course of a film, the camera takes up all the positions within the antagonism. *Sleep Dealer* doesn’t exactly set up an antagonism between two class subjects. Instead it sets up a complex antagonism among the workers themselves by using commodification to create a separation in the most intimate relationship in the film, that between Memo and his lover. Though they seem in love, she sells her memories of being with him on an internet market. When Memo finds out that she sells her memories of him, their relationship swerves, because a commodity is made for the purposes of selling. Memo can no longer read Luz’s intent in seeing him as a form of affection or attraction. It becomes a form of economy. Though the film establishes the possibility that workers can bond together as workers in the very beginning, the film divides those characters in an extreme way before uniting them in a palpably false manner.
Cinematic Rifts create a field of relations between bodies from a specified position within a totality of asocial relations. The Rift’s signs of composition form a spectrum between pole of Visors and the pole of Drones. Visors render percepts of living bodies from positions in an antagonistic field of economic relations, while Drones render a technical image surveying that field. The part of the spectrum closer to Drones allows commercial films to use another recording device within the diegesis as an alibi for a film’s own enunciative hostility towards its characters. The various hybrid Visor-Drone (hand held) cameras in the Blair Witch Project and Paranormal Activity function as a specification of hostile camera separate from the base level of enunciation. Although a Drone has a palpably technical essence that can be combined with a Visor’s organic character, it does not form part of a neuro-image or an interactive-image. The drone’s image appears on the screens of the devices that keep us available for labor and turn all space and time into a potentially laborious chronotope mediating the economization of the social reflected in the Cinema Hostis.

Luz’s traffic in her memories of being with him allows Riva to develop the Rift in effort to allegorize different levels of the materiality of labor. Luz sells her memory on a network she plugs into through nodes in on her body of the same kind as the nodes through which Memo controls the construction robots in when he sells his labor time. A US military drone pilot who shot Memo’s father buys Luz’s subjective and semi-subjective shots from Luz’s perspective. Memo, Luz, and the pilot structurally belong to decompose class and the interest of each contradict the interests of another. Sleep Dealer brings them together through the very commodity markets separating them. The pilot buys Luz’s memories to find Memo, and eventually helps him to destroy the dam that has privatized the water in Memo’s region, turning the farmers of his village into a surplus population. The film hastens to its close with Memo helping the pilot disappear.

Cinema Hostis’s first image-type, the Rift, has two signs of composition: Visors, shots from the point of view of a human enemy, and Drones or lens genetic sign, a shot from the point of view of a diagnostically displayed camera. Sleep Dealer combines Visors with the Drones by having Luz sell her memories. She becomes both a human enemy and a hostile recording device. The Clinamen is Rift’s genetic sign. A Clinamen combines multiple, antagonistic points of view in a single extended take, establishing each perspective through a reframing, such as the camera movements running through the tense scenes between Luz and Memo.

**Conclusion:**

In Cinema I and Cinema II, Gilles Deleuze describes a passionate art that narrates a consciousness which must either suffer the world or change it. If consciousness cannot recreate the world according to its desires, the world as it is degrades and confuses consciousness while weakening bodies. Under each regime, the labor-capital relation determines labor’s capacity to act. The Movement-Image presents an active consciousness moving rationally through a comprehensible world to solve problems, accomplish goals and execute programs. The Time-Image presents a passional consciousness, stunned by the world situation, and looking for the determinations of its circumstances. Deleuze’s two cinematic regimes irrupt dialectically from the levels of
subsumption before and after World War II, and the third period is determined by the non-relation between surplus populations and surplus capital in our time. Real subsumption was a fact of labor’s life but workers’ victories were in struggles over absolute surplus value – the length of work, rather than its intensity. The prewar movement image developed during an era dominated by struggles in the capitalist core over the formal subsumption of labor: over the length of the working day and the right to vacations and holidays. The Movement-Image lost salience, and the Time-Image replaced it once Taylorization had been completed and introduced even in the semi-peripheral countries such as Italy. It expresses the real subsumption of labor, in which capital controls every aspect of the labor process and workers struggle over hourly wages and working conditions. With the 21st century comes Cinema Hostis and full subsumption, in which the difference between labor and being available for labor become increasingly indiscernible: every aspect of social reproduction has been included in capitals circuits of exchange. The ever-rising organic composition of capital leads to structural unemployment, relative surplus population that cannot be absorbed into the waged labor force, and a working class seeking to abolish itself.
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MASTERS AND SERVANT

Becket Flannery

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theenemyreader.org
f, as Andrea Fraser suggests, art is a discursive production, and “we” are the primary site of its fabrication, distribution, and reception, then it is fairly clear that the institution par excellence is the MFA program. Although only mentioned briefly in her essay, graduate art programs are the only institutions that expressly attempt to articulate what artists think of as art, what artists think about art, and how they think about it. This is their singular function, to produce the “we” to whom Fraser refers. Ultimately the product of a school is the mind of a student; it is the institution actually devoted to producing the institution.

I wanted to start with this somewhat basic idea because I find that a lot of discussions about MFA programs tend to think of them very differently. Whether in chat forums, print and online magazines, or discussions after graduate school info sessions, the question is often framed with the student as the consumer and the school as a very expensive and possibly valueless product. No small amount of ink and bandwidth is devoted to debating the cost of an MFA versus its perceived benefits. Masters programs do cost too much, and student debt is an important question. Every student needs to individually evaluate whether it is worth taking on possibly crushing amounts of debt. Nonetheless, I don’t believe that most students think of it as an economic decision, and I think they’re probably right not to; without considering the role of schools in reproducing the field of art, the “choice” of whether to go or not will have no broader significance.

The choice to go or not is of course always the student’s, but after all the calculations of a program’s value, most retain a lingering feeling that an MFA is something she must have. The necessity of school to the field of art is transferred onto the student as the necessity of the degree. Seen from a wider perspective there is effectively no choice, no matter how much debt students must accept.

Rather than contrasting neoliberal education with a rosy rendering of artistic autonomy, I want to suggest that the student herself is both where institutions exert control and where the invisible institution, the field of art, is reproduced. If institutionality is something to be laid bare it should be exposed in the task it assumes for itself – the intangible formation of a subject able to “recognize” art or identify as an artist. “Control over the body,” as Franco Berardi more recently has written, “is exerted by the modeling of the soul.” The centrality of the soul to the functioning of institutions, to their very reproduction, should indicate that it is subjectivity that registers institutional pressure, and also serves as the site of resistance to it.

The special role that graduate art education fulfills is inseparable from the role of education per se. Despite being born as humans, children need decades of training to become human, to function in a human society. This supplement, this bridge between having a human nature and becoming a human subject, we could call education. As Jean-Francois Lyotard put it,
“If humans are born human, as cats are born cats (within a few hours), it would not be possible, to educate them. That children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not completely led by nature, not programmed. The institutions which constitute culture supplement this native lack.”

Education is the broad term for this process of becoming a human subject. It’s not something that happens exclusively in schools, just as an MFA program isn’t only something that happens in studio crits. Nor are schools the only institutions that perform this function, but that is their actual purpose, unlike museums or galleries.

This puts the mental and emotional state of students very much on the table. The premise of the MFA being a kind of “self-realization,” there is an implicit demand that each student provide faculty, visiting artists, and their fellow students with full access to their psychic resources. At the very least, students must adapt to this by balancing openness and self-preservation, often instinctively. The simple demand to constantly make work, the repeated marshalling of the desire that is necessary to produce and repeatedly discuss each piece, is taxing enough. And yet, resisting this imperative is typically read as pathological. To be unable to desire, or to resist desire, is melancholy; and to keep drawing on one’s mental reserves to the point of exhaustion produces depression. The soul at work, indeed.

Education always has a form of subjection in mind. For the MFA let’s call this subject a swimmer. It’s dangerous to name it like that, to suggest it’s something so concrete, so easy to avoid, but it’s not a question of whether to swim; we’ve already chosen to swim. Resistance seems like the wrong word entirely; it feels more like a delay, to stave it off long enough to let something else happen first, to smuggle something out before letting in the water. There’s some failure inherent in this, a hesitancy regarding development, a footrace in reverse to see how far you can lag behind and still finish.

As an MFA student, I felt the touch of these processes of subjecthood, neither out of my control nor a fully conscious process. I learned a lot about institutions this way, the way you might learn about a dental tool as it scrapes around your mouth, by haptic instruction. Dentists, or university administrators, in the age of creative destruction are not always “institution building,” at least in the traditional sense. Their role can be just as much to burn a program as to build it, for any number of reasons. Perhaps there is a desire to shift funding, or to change personnel to reflect a new ideological orientation. Whatever the nature of these changes, however, students often have their education defined for them as somehow mutually exclusive with the actions of the administration. Education is not about funding cuts, exploited adjunct faculty, or undergraduate curriculum, so it is of no concern to graduate students, who are, it is implied, unqualified to debate the cuts to their funding, the treatment of their professors, and the way the classes they TA are structured. Innumerable wheels and whirigigs are spinning beyond our limited perspective. The job of the dentist is to deal with those things; the patient must hold still or she’ll muck everything up.

“Perspective” is thus what the students are told they lack; and unlike ignorance (the lack that frames them as students to be taught), perspective is not something they are expected or allowed to attain. Universities uphold the
very fallacy that Fraser tried to dispel, that the functioning of power and education lie on opposite sides of administration and never meet, that institution building and soul forming are separated by a firewall of know-betters.

As my classmates and I began to have conflicts with our school, our response reflexively tied these aspects together. Yes, we have no perspective, just our own. No, we don’t care about running an institution, but about the institution running around inside us. We required a subjectivity of our own, a truly institutional soul, and the soul of an institution, which we called Collective Dean.

Created and sustained by the MFA students during her two year lifespan, Collective Dean (CD) began when the actual Dean of the art school abruptly took leave after two years of contentious relations with faculty, students, and staff. Beginning simply as a name, but one with its own amorphous demands, CD didn’t have any specific purpose, except that by being named it somehow needed to exist; and it should live up to this name, which somehow suggested both an ideal Dean and an indictment of the notion of Deanship itself.

One of our first projects as CD was a video extolling her vast resumé. The ten-minute monologue is a compendium of actual work experience, righteous fantasy, and stultifying credentials. The video was shot on green screen, allowing anyone to submit images or footage to play behind her as she talks, including snippets of Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, balloon fetish videos, and promotional clips for the University football team. CD is dressed in a shiny pink blouse with ascot poking out, spectacles slung low on her nose. Interspersed between bullet points on her *curriculum vitae*, she insists she’s “not trying to impress you,” but the scent of insecurity never fades, especially as the litany of accomplishments grinds on. When speaking with authority, she takes on its defining traits, a preening caprice interrupted by patronizing self-seriousness.

Collective Dean never had any pre-established goal nor a defined, ideological purpose. Her statements, videos, artworks, and representations were *ad hoc*. Our structure was loose and suited to each challenge at hand. Her actions were always, therefore, immediately responsive to our actual situation as students. While conflicts between students and art schools were ever thus, the pressure at a neoliberal university to increase enrollment and tuition while cutting budgets tied the identity of the student artist to that of the debtor-entrepreneur. What I did not expect was that, in this situation, many of our conflicts with the university centered around art’s autonomy. In this context, the language of engaged art is used as ideological cover; when “interdisciplinary” becomes a code word for exploring new markets, and “participation” is measured by distribution and consumption, something has gone horribly wrong.

We pursued many projects under the loose heading of Collective Dean. At times conceived of as a bearded lady, at others as a cannibalistically devoured totemic body, it was always assumed that CD never had an official form; she was always transparently an avatar, a shield for collective demands, a label for collaborative wishing. The entire point was the production of avatars, unofficial, bootleg, something you could get behind, and get rid of, part Subcommandante Marcos, and part Ubu Roi.

It felt important that no avatar become permanent, even CD herself, in case she became just another imperative
of art school, another identity to be sustained in addition to your own. Having decided to die, Collective Dean committed seppuku on web-streaming television at the Hammer Museum. Asked to be a contestant on Keith Knittel’s game show “Everything Must Go,” CD eliminated herself from competition during the “talent” portion of the contest, reading a prepared statement and plunging a dagger into her abdomen. Stage blood streamed out of her, staining her tan blazer and the carpeted floor of the makeshift TV studio in the museum lobby. Her suicide complete, Collective Dean rose, undead, to wander the Hammer Museum like a zombie Andrea Fraser. Her blood stained blouse was an awkward impoliteness, but with self-possessed confidence, she strode its halls like a skirt suited colossus. Mere days from finishing her coursework, her tombstone might read, “She failed all her subjects. She was a failed subject.”

The death of Collective Dean was a fitting end to her career, marked not so much by rising up the administrative ladder as a series of opportunistic failures. By failure, I mean she refused to take the “40,000 foot view” of institutional authority, no matter how much she was exhorted to – she was irresponsible, impossible to hold accountable. At the heart of the university is the trap of individuation, the student as consumer, debtor, and entrepreneur, a logic replicated both by those who would ask us to refuse education because of the cost, and those who tell us tales about investing in human capital. Addressed as individuals, we replied together. Asked to see things as a Dean, we invented one instead, one whose “talent,” tellingly, was to self-eliminate from the game, to be the first among failures.

**Endnotes**


2. A question that frequently arises in a lot of writing about MFA programs is whether their value is at all “educational,” meaning the specifics of faculty time, crits, classes, etc, rather than simply a form of gatekeeping, or pedigree. If by education we mean this process of forming subjects with an ingrained sensibility for the field of art then it is true that the curricular aspects are just armatures for this intangible process, which isn’t so much extra-curricular as a spectral curriculum, somehow beside the explicit educational structures. The field of art is structured by this act of recognition, a form of acknowledgement based on an almost instinctual knowledge of what constitutes contemporary art. However, this is not thereby less “educational” in our sense, though it may fall short of pedagogical standards, because it is a sensibility created by the density of an MFA program.


6. Stephano Harney and Fred Moten write that we fail to become proper subjects by “allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjectionhood.” *The Undercommons*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), p. 28.
OF METHYL GROUPS AND MEMORY

Laura Raicovich
I took calculus once, and ever since visualize experiences as points on a curve. Each memory corresponds to a point on this wave, invariably encompassing references and intersections with other lives, other histories, other curves. These associations, no matter how precise or ill-remembered, become additional points that define the curve. It is exquisite that between any two points there is no limit to the number of additional memories or moments that may be added. The space between any two points is infinite. It retains the capacity for the perpetual addition of information, descriptions, histories, ideas. The curve grows without growing, expanding immeasurably, possibly imperceptibly, infinitely.

Memories are experience. The moment events happen is our reality; they only become experience in retrospect. And so, I wonder why stories of our ancestors are important to us – assuming they are. The ways in which we tell those stories are our experiences too. They are points on our sine curve of experience.

This isn’t just a metaphor. It is actually science. Moshe Szyf and Michael Meaney, two scientists working in the field of epigenetics at MacGill University, presented a paper in 2004\(^1\) that opened the possibility that our DNA might carry epigenetic markers that are defined by our life experiences. In other words, they found that molecules that attach themselves to DNA could control whether a gene would be turned on or off. Because these groups of molecules reside on the outside of, but attached to, the gene, the field is called epigenetics from the Greek prefix for outer, \textit{epi}.

The paper grew out of studies earlier in the decade on rats whose mothers were doting or neglectful. Rat pups whose mothers were doting were far better able to cope with life stress. Those whose mothers neglected them had comparatively under-developed coping abilities. While these notions sound like Pop Psych 101, a radical idea resided in Meaney and Szyf’s proposal: not only did the physical attention of the mother rats affect their psychological prospects, they also fundamentally impacted the pups’ heritable genetic makeup. Here is where the epigenetics come in: Meaney and Szyf offered that methyl groups – organic molecules in brain and skin cells that tell each gene how to evolve – actually control the development of that piece of DNA.

What Meaney and Szyf suggested was that life experience could impact the ways these methyl groups work. Not only could a mother’s neglect be a psychological factor in her child, but also such a “genetic scar” could subsequently get passed on to future offspring. While in the realm of science these discoveries set off a revolution of inquiry in behavioral epigenetics and the prospects of new genetic treatments for illnesses like schizophrenia and depression, Meaney and Szyf also proposed that family mythologies are far more than stories, traumas or memories, and are literally grafted to our genetic makeup, part of our biological beings, altering our genetic legacies.

Meaney and Szyf’s work suggests that our experiences and those of our forbears are indelible. \textit{Truly} indelible as they embed into methyl groups piggy-backing on our DNA, nudging the genes in one direction or another. They “become part of us, a molecular residue holding fast to our genetic scaffolding.”\(^2\) While science explores ways to “correct” what may be deficient in these past experiences, I’d like to delve into this space of unknowing. These are stories, from the curve of my personal history, of what I think I know; perhaps these events are encompassed in my methyl groups, inducing the evolution of my DNA.
Nonno’s hands are what I remember most. He had thick fingers and his nails were always clean, sometimes nicked. He was a cook in the Italian Navy and since that is what he knew, he was a cook when he arrived in New York. He was eventually called chef and later had his own restaurant.

He had dark curly hair, deep brown eyes, and a mustache above a broad and ready smile. Happiness. He exuded a calm happiness that made me feel comfortable whenever he was near. He didn’t have to say anything, I just loved his presence. He used to give me $1 for “doing” his hair—an amusing exercise as he was mostly bald, and had a halo of soft hair just above his ears, that ran around the back of his head. If he hadn’t had his hair cut in a while, you could see the curls start to form. I used to comb it, then brush it, and give him a scalp massage. Usually after dinner on Friday nights, before my little sister and I passed out on the plastic-covered couch and then were sent home with shopping bags of massive, ripe tomatoes Nonna had grown in her garden in Astoria. She grew them from seeds tomatoes from the year before.

These tomatoes are part of my genetic code. Their smell and weight and color and texture. In late summer, I know which ones are best. I am fearless in paying extortionist greenmarket prices to slake my hunger for the mystery of their impact on my genetic composition. Late last summer, I bought 28 pounds of heirloom tomatoes from a local farm near my parents’ home on Long Island. They looked like my grandparents’ tomatoes. I made tomato sauce and canned it so we would have it all winter. The ghosts insist that I do things the long way, the slow way, because I know that these tomatoes embody certain perfections because that was their route to existence.

I cannot bear to leave good tomatoes, nor anything else, on my plate. I’m not really hungry anymore, but I’m compelled by a force greater than biology, a voice pleading to leave nothing behind. I’m convinced it is my genes, the impact of my father’s, my grandparents’ experiences. The ghosts of their hardships emerge as I cringe seeing four long-cooked Italian flat beans, or two slices of glorious summer tomato, slide into the garbage. That one last bite of something, the ghosts say, “Eat it, eat it, don’t let it go to waste!” Or, “Save it, you can mix it with ceci and scallions tomorrow. It will still be good. Just don’t throw it away, for goodness sake!”

The meat slicer produced the exquisite sound of a blade moving fast, slicing through the fat and flesh of prosciutto. Cured meat hung from the rafters. In the refrigerator, humming away since the 1960s, small bottles of seltzer and tonic water and Coke, as well as supplies that could be converted into a meal if unexpected guests stopped by. Cases of wine, extra chairs, tools, appliances that needed a little tweaking, all inhabited the cantina. This was Nonno’s space.

Among the most important occupants of this dark, fragrant space was a white ceramic saucer with a burgundy rim, something taken home from the restaurant. It rested on the butcher block. Its contents: a dried watery stain, tinted orangey-red, with yellow seeds that dotted the ceramic. It looked like the ceiling had leaked and left its mark on that small plate.

The grotesquely deformed tomatoes so expertly grown in the garden came from this plate. At the height of each season, the seeds of choice examples were selected and dried for the next year’s bounty. Then they grew, inbred, lumpy and juicy, with scars running from their calyces,
marking longitudinal seams. My grandparents’ own homegrown genetic experiments.

The tomatoes grew in an improbable site; a small patch of ground behind a townhouse in Astoria, an immigrant community in Queens, New York. The soil was enriched by horse manure brought each year at Easter time from upstate farms where we procured freshly slaughtered lamb, and by leftover pasta, eggshells, and other organic refuse. Each year the dried seeds were reconstituted in small pots filled with soil, germinating in the cantina, only to be planted when they could stand outside. Eventually they would be staked, and watered and cared for, and finally would yield fruit.

Some of the early green tomatoes were pickled, and while everyone commented on how delicious they were, we all craved the bursting red beasts that would come starting in July, hitting perfection in August. And when they arrived, they were so abundant that they were given away to everyone who came by. Varying in size and color, most improbably massive, a few petite and delicate, some deep, deep red, nearing purple at the height of ripeness, others orange and bright with specks of ochre. All were heavy for their size.

The skins were thin and delicate, to be handled with care. We took our share home in white plastic bags recycled from the deli or hardware store. In the car home, the vegetal, acid smell of the tomatoes filled air, and as hard as we tried to be gentle, invariably one fruit’s skin would split slightly, leaking inside the bag.

Tomatoes cut open revealed those yellow seeds, plumper than the dried ones on the plate in the cantina, and that vegetal scent emerged more strongly. In the salad they made a dressing of their own, combining intoxicatingly with salt and oil and vinegar. Sometimes just on a plate with salt and basil – almost too fragrant and smelling succinctly of summer.

It was always hot when we ate these, even if it was under the grape arbor in the evening. Mosquito bites were part of the equation, but better than sweating it out indoors, so we were bitten. The tomatoes came out at the end of dinner. They were the most perfect, and as a result I can only eat tomatoes in July and August.

It is as though the sweetness of the tomatoes went straight into my bloodstream, attracting mosquitoes in high numbers. The mosquitoes stalk me all summer, still, today. The tomatoes have marked my blood as a powerful draw to those vampiric insects, and my skin reacts with bold, swollen, rose-colored welts, terribly itchy. It is uncanny that I can sit outside on a picnic bench adjacent with people on either side of me and across, and yet I’m the only one bitten.

And yet, I cannot resist sitting outside to eat. When the weather warms in spring, I push my friends outside as soon as possible, and am endlessly jealous of folks with outdoor space to eat. I offer to cook at their places. When I visit my parents’ in summer, I insist on eating lunch outside, and sometimes dinner too. But then, I am bitten, as I was under the grape arbor each Friday of my childhood summers when sitting in Nonno and Nonna’s backyard, eating their summer tomatoes.

I must enjoy being this kind of magnet for the bugs. Perhaps it satisfies some deeper need. Everyone wants to be wanted, right? The mosquitoes pick on me, and it sounds odd, but their picking me makes me special. In a weird
way I’m proud of it. Why else write about it here? And when your family was once forced from their land, could it make some sense for me to want to be wanted in more eccentric ways than most? Impossible to trace or truly compare, but somehow, in spite of the itch, those mosquitoes are mine.

This memory of my grandparents, Giovanni and Anna, and their life in Queens follows more dramatic events that began in Italy. They, along with my father and his brother, had been refugees from their hometown of Traghetto, Italy – in Istria, a peninsula across the Adriatic Sea from Venice that became Yugoslavia after 1945.

By 1945, my uncle Ezio was one year old, my father Guerino was six, and the young family learned that to remain Italian citizens, they would have to move west – their town was now part of Yugoslavia, a result of the peace agreements and armed partisans. Fortunately, they left before the Yugoslav partisans had begun a campaign, on Tito’s orders, to ethnically cleanse the region surrounding Pola, the closest city to my family’s town. In some reports, over 90% of Pola’s population was ethnically Italian prior to 1945; by 1947, it was less than 10%.3,4

Giovanni, Anna, Guerino and Ezio had a choice. Either stay and become Yugoslav, or leave as Italian refugees. They chose the latter; many of their family, friends, and neighbors chose to stay. Giovanni urged Anna to make the leap to America, but she insisted they stay in Italy. As “displaced persons,” they moved to Genoa, where Anna worked in a cigar factory. It was here, in the dismal living conditions provided to refugees, that Giovanni plotted his way to America. Finally receiving sponsorship by a Catholic-American charitable organization, they gathered the few things they had, and made their way to occupied Germany to meet a “Liberty Ship” that would cross the Atlantic. The story goes that their savings of $200 was sandwiched between the pages of my father’s comic book for safekeeping during the crossing.

Anna was sick the whole way over.

They landed in America, living in a cold-water flat in Hoboken, New Jersey; my grandfather got a job as a cook in a pizza joint in Brooklyn.

Giovanni worked seven days a week, and disappeared from his family’s life for a few years – if he was home, he was asleep; if he was awake, he was working. Guerino tried to teach his mother English; he was in high school, where they called him Jerry.

When Giovanni reemerged from his work-induced absence, they moved into a flat with hot water; this newfound luxury arrived courtesy of a job at Romeo Salta, a new Italian restaurant in Manhattan.

Giovanni now made the transition from cook to chef. He wrote recipes and Salta turned them into a book. The restaurant was among the very first Italian restaurants serving northern Italian food in New York City. The dining room was formal (no candles in Chianti bottles, no red-and-white-checked table cloths) and the waiters were all friends and compatriots. In the time-honored tradition of the New York restaurant business, new immigrants came to restaurants through chains of connections; personal friends, acquaintances, relatives — the notion of cousins stretched beyond any traditional conception of a family tree—to create a web of accountability, and ultimately a sense of family. At
Romeo Salta nothing was different. A crew of Giovanni’s and Anna’s compatriots from the old country joined him at Romeo Salta. Giovanni taught many how to run a restaurant; to arrive early in the morning to be sure the orders came in from the individual purveyors; to inspect the meat, fish and produce; and to prep the stocks, sauces, and braises for the day ahead.

Giovanni’s rigorous organization is in me. I feel it every time I design a new project, each time I embark on a new piece of writing. How do I prepare? Whose help do I need? What tools, books, articles, advice, would expand the effort?

It also works in reverse, perhaps more powerfully. My grandfather’s mentoring emerges within me. I nearly always say yes to students looking for advice and feel incredible guilt when I cannot make myself available. I love helping students, interns, and others see what they need to see about their interests, connect them to other resources and people who can help. How to get from point A to point B. There is a measure of practicality embedded here. I myself have not been very disciplined about my life path. I have followed from one thing to the next instinctually, listening to my gut as my grandfather did when he knew he should convince his wife to move to New York.

But I still hate to get up early. Maybe I didn’t get that methyl group.

After years at Romeo Salta, there were outbursts and arguments between Giovanni and Salta. In the end, frustrated, Giovanni went out on his own and opened a restaurant. His place was called Per Bacco. His former colleagues, most of them relatives, over time, also left Romeo Salta’s and started their own places. Northern Italian cuisine in New York City became all the rage, entering the popular culture, and perhaps attaching its own history and experience to each diner’s methyl groups.

Part of my DNA is indelibly altered and impacted by these stories, and so are my son Giacomo’s. I imagine my methyl groups looking like those tomato seeds, whether dried or plump, coaxing my genetic code into action, my cells into reproduction, my mind into being. The preparation and eating of food is central to my life in a way I cannot fully explain, as is my family and its stories. Now that Meaney and Szyf have done their work, I can imagine that even the fragments of experiences of which I am aware, not only connect me to my past, but are also a part of my cellular composition. They are literally within me.

What do we do with this information? I imagine the fear my grandmother felt in leaving her hometown, crossing the Atlantic to the unknown of New York. That fear is embedded within my cells. Perhaps it is the same fear I feel when I consider major shifts in my own life. Maybe the thrill of the roller coaster rides I love so much also comes from that boat journey? Is my grandfather’s time aboard ships linked to the complete calm I feel when I am near the ocean and the deep peace I experience when floating in the waves? Am I tapping into the past on a cellular, genetic level?

It reassures me that these experiences reside within my DNA, like barnacles on the rocks in the Adriatic Sea. I don’t know their function, and that uncertainty provides a space for my endless re-imagination of their
Influence. I can’t help thinking about the traumas, boredoms, and happiness my ancestors confronted. The memories, experiences in the form of methyl groups, highly specific experiences that impact our DNA, trace the sine curve of personal and collective experience, the ocean waves of identity.

In a larger context, our memories and the experiences of our people, tell us about the curve of who we are; they define us. What Virginia Woolf called the “darkness of the future” which, it turns out, is not only figuratively, but also literally, beholden to the past and certainly related to our present, if not our future. How fortunate I feel to know that these life experiences don’t end with their happening, or with remembering them, they are within me, and now, us.

Endnotes

1. Dan Hurley, Grandma’s Experiences Leave a Mark on Your Genes, Discover
2. Dan Hurley, Grandma’s Experiences…pg 3
3. Jutta Weldes, Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger, pg. 84
4. Wikipedia: Istrian Exodus