



## **THE ENEMY / V 2 Issue 1**

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# **UNCERTAINTY AND LOSTNESS: PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF THE MIDCAREER**

**Barry Schwabsky**

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[theenemyreader.org](http://theenemyreader.org)

I'd like to begin by quoting in its entirety a very short but highly pointed and extremely prescient review, written by the then-twenty-five or twenty-six-year-old artist Mel Bochner in 1966 and published in *Arts Magazine* in its May 1966 issue. It's a response to Frank Stella's show that year at the Castelli Gallery:

*In an era of intense pressure on the artist to adopt a "corporate image," this past year has witnessed a number of attempts on the part of established (imaged) artists to recast their positions. But the changes seem to have been culturally motivated rather than aesthetically inspired. A persistent residue of nineteenth-century Romanticism demands that an artist's maturation be directly proportioned to his change. (This implies that although the moment makes the man, the man makes the style.) The logic and stringency of Frank Stella's earlier work directly opposed growth. The completeness was his insistency. In his latest pictures, since the possibilities of sequential development were excluded, he had to choose to be "somewhere else." The choice appears unfortunate. He counters all his previous virtues: symmetry with awkwardness, refinement with raucousness, strictness with arbitrariness. By trying to "do something with Stella" he appears to have joined his imitators and variationists.<sup>1</sup>*

For every discourse there is a problem with how to begin—how the silence that surrounds us is to be broken or fulfilled by the word that frames and is framed by it. This is undoubtedly why, as Edward Said once remarked, "Literature is full of the lore of beginnings despite the tyranny of starting a work *in media res*, a convention that burdens the beginning with a pretense that it is not one."<sup>2</sup> I've opted to begin, as you'll have noticed, by giving Bochner the first word, in order to maintain my own pretense of merely entering my response to an already ongoing discourse.

As a critic who explicitly thematized questions of

of temporality, Said is an exemplary precursor for my inquiry here. His career as a major figure in American intellectual life began, it might be argued, with a book programmatically titled *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Said's subject in that book was not the beginning of an artistic or, in his case, intellectual career, but the beginning of a work or project—the same methodological subject that Roland Barthes had treated five years before in a famous essay titled "Where to Begin?": "an operative uneasiness, a simple difficulty, which is that of any initiation: *where to begin?*"<sup>3</sup> But a life or career is a work of a sort and there are many parallels. Perhaps one will never find a way to begin. And yet, on the other hand, the work may have already begun. And if so, having begun, how to go on? For Said, Barthes' structuralism mutes the true force of the beginning—Said speaks of the structuralists' recourse to merely "token beginnings," since their attachment to systems and synchronicity ensures that they must see the historicity of beginnings as "an embarrassment for systematic thought." Though in those days, as Said put, "The structuralists themselves speak like men who stand at the beginning of a new era and at the twilight...of an old one,"<sup>4</sup> structuralist thought is always stranded in *media res*, in midcareer.

**One would expect that the best and easiest period for artists would be during the prime of life, when one is still vigorous yet already experienced. But it seems that for the artist mere maturity does not count for as much as one might have thought or**

Beginning, one comes to realize that the beginning has already taken place. Tellingly, I think, Said's book, which was published in 1975, was not his first but his second, following on from a book on the "afflicted existence"<sup>5</sup> and artistic travails of Joseph Conrad, a book published in 1966 that was derived from his Harvard University dissertation: There is always a beginning before the

beginning. This means that while for any endeavor a beginning is necessary, it is always also a kind of fiction. What counts as the beginning is something the artist would like to subject to his own will, though the extent to which this will can really be imposed is questionable.

Said quotes a story told by Conrad's wife Jessie: "On one of his naughty days he said that the *Black Mate* was his first work, and when I said 'No, *Almayer's Folly* was the first thing you ever did,' he burst out: 'If I like to say *The Black Mate* was my first work, I shall say so.'"<sup>6</sup>

If beginnings are one species of necessary fiction, endings, conclusions are another. It might seem that, in comparison with the beginnings of their careers, artists and writers have less opportunity to shape their ends, for most often it is the only imprecisely foreseeable full stop of death that determines where and with what work one ends. Even a suicide is often as unforeseeable and almost arbitrary or random an occurrence as any accident. A more deliberate conclusion may be identified when an artist or author lives on after bidding an early and explicit farewell to art, when there is a determined renunciation, as in the cases of the poets Arthur Rimbaud or Laura Riding; in the plastic arts one immediately thinks of Marcel Duchamp, who first abandoned what he liked to call "retinal art" and then, after declaring his *Large Glass* "definitively unfinished" in 1923 and becoming convinced, or so he claimed, that "chess is much purer than art in its social position,"<sup>7</sup> abandoned art altogether. Of course now we know that this abandonment of art was a fiction—perhaps the kind I've referred to as a necessary one—and that for twenty years he was secretly working on his final opus, presumably his testament, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage* or *Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*.

As for Said, having begun his career with a meditation on beginnings, he also showed how its ending may be consciously prepared and fashioned and indirectly articulated. Said lived the last twelve years of his life with leukemia and therefore had all too much opportunity to

meditate on last things. He could not know when his disease would end his life but we can hardly read his last collection of essays, left unfinished at his death in 2003 and posthumously published three years later, without considering how its subject was overdetermined by the author's illness—and this despite the fact that *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* grows out of ideas that had been brewing much earlier, while he was still well. In her Foreword to the book his widow Miriam Said recalls "that this idea—writers', musicians', and other artists' 'late work,' 'late style,' 'Adorno and lateness,' etc.—became part of Edward's conversation sometime at the end of the 1980s" and that he thereupon

*began to include examples of late works in many of his articles on music and literature. He even wrote specific essays on the late works of some writers and composers. He also gave a series of lectures on "late style," first at Columbia and then elsewhere, and in the early 1990s he taught a class on the topic. Finally he decided to write a book and had a contract in hand.*<sup>8</sup>

Although Said was therefore only in middle age when he began working on the topic of lateness and indeed when he was struck by the illness that would eventually kill him, the topic can only have taken on added weight as he began to consider that this could well be his last work. "The body, its health, its care, composition, functioning, and flourishing, its illnesses and demise, belong to the order of nature," as he lucidly summarized, but

*what we understand of that nature, however, how we see it and live it in our consciousness, how we create a sense of our life individually and collectively, subjectively as well as socially, how we divide into periods, belongs roughly to speaking to the order of*

Again, I want to underline Said's emphasis on the self-conscious shaping of what might appear to be a naturally given process or experience. In an artistic career, "lateness" is not so much a product of age or of ill health as of a reflective awareness of these conditions. Some artists take on an encounter with age and with the sense of lateness at a surprisingly early age and maintain it and work with it for a very long time. T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote "Gerontion" in 1920, the year he turned thirty-two; this is the poem that begins, "Here I am, an old man in a dry month," and warns

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives us with whispering ambitions,  
Guided by vanities.*

It might be said that Eliot spent the next forty-five years of his life as a literary elder.

But if Said began his career as a writer on beginnings and ended it as a writer on lateness, he did not occupy his middle years with reflections on—on what? While we easily turn the adjective "early" into the substantive "earliness" and transmute "late" into "lateness," our language has apparently never found a need to identify a quality of "middleness." What happens in the middle of an artistic career really has never been given much specific consideration. F. Scott Fitzgerald is supposed to have said that there are no second acts in American lives, meaning, I suppose, that they have beginnings and endings but no middles; and as far as artistic careers have been examined as such one might imagine the same to be true. And yet most artists do, for better or worse, live through what's come to be known as their midcareer. It's just that they don't often do so with ease. Dante Alighieri might have been speaking for all with the famous opening lines of his Comedy:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.*

*(In the middle of the journey we call life  
I found myself in a dark forest  
Where the right path was lost.)*

Here I only want to point out the curious paradox that it was when the right way was lost that the poet found himself. One who never loses his way may never really find it.

The middle of the journey sometimes seems to be all about losing the way. In what as far as I can tell is Said's only sustained discussion of middle age or the midcareer as a phenomenon—a 1987 music review from *The Nation* headed "Middle Age and Performers," subsequently reprinted in the collection *Music at the Limits*—he begins with the distinctly dour observation that "middle age, like everything that stands between more clearly defined times or things, is not an especially rewarding period." (Keep in mind that Said himself was fifty-one years old at the time.) "One is no longer a promising young person and not yet a venerable old one," Said continues. "Middle age is uncertainty and some lostness, physical failings and hypochondria, anxiety and nostalgia; or most people it is also the time that afford the first substantial look at death."<sup>10</sup> This view, which may sound a bit exaggerated but also somehow realistic, is miles away from what a purely biological view of the human career would call for, which Rudolf Arnheim, in an important essay "On the Late Style," pictured as "an arch rising from the weakness of the child to the unfolded powers of the mature person and then descending toward the infirmity of old age."<sup>11</sup>

If this commonsense viewpoint captured the reality of artists' careers, one would expect that the best and easiest period for artists would be during the prime of life, what the French call *la force de l'âge*, when one is still vigorous yet already experienced. But it seems that for the artist mere maturity does not count for as much as one might have thought or hoped. It even seems that maturity might be the problem, and only when that is transcended does

one become free of the problem. As Arnheim says, “The curiosity of our modern theorists and historians about the particular character of late works is often coupled with the expectation of finding the highest achievements, the purest examples, the deepest insights in the final products of a life of search and labor,”<sup>12</sup> which seems to imply that the late works are really in some sense the works that come *too* late, and that they are valued for just this reason—that they somehow become as raw and full of questioning as the energetic and risky works of the very young, of the emerging artist who has not yet found his or her formula. Arnheim cites the example of Titian, whose late works such as the *Flaying of Marsyas* are so revered today, though Vasari considered that he should never have dared to present such paintings to the public, as they could only harm the great reputation he had gained with the works of his maturity, that is, of his midcareer. And thus as Said says this phase of life calls for “finding your way again...adjusting your failing animal energies to the new realities...learning from your past without repeating or (alas, more likely) betraying it”—without, as Bochner put it, becoming one’s own imitator or mere variationist. “As with all clichés,” Said continues, “there is some truth to the boring or frumpy or faded quality that one associates with middle age.”<sup>13</sup>

**Artists, perhaps to their dismay, know that there is no way to avoid a midcareer short of early death or just giving up. “Youth wants to burn the museums,” they write. “We are in them—now what?”**

No wonder theoretically oriented critics have been so much more fascinated by late works and late styles, knowing that the owl of wisdom takes wing at dusk, while market-oriented collectors are so beguiled by emerging art, with its seemingly unlimited potential and promise for future development. Artists, perhaps to their dismay, know that there is no way to avoid a midcareer short of early death or just giving up. The problem is always—as

the title of a very funny 1961 essay by Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers would have it—“How to Proceed in the Arts.” “Youth wants to burn the museums,” they write. “We are in them—now what?”<sup>14</sup> Good question. In his review, Said goes on to examine the performances of a number of middle-aged classical pianists, noting Maurizio Pollini’s tendency to overreach in contrast to Alfred Brendel’s illusion that he can merely consolidate his past accomplishments, lacking imagination and with “too much dutiful or fussy exposition and precious emphasis.”<sup>15</sup> But it is Vladimir Ashkenazy who, according to Said, “now seems to embody the quandary of middle age in its rawest, least successfully resolved form,” exhibiting “inexperience and insecurity”<sup>16</sup> in attempting new things, a boring professionalism in what’s familiar. Even just “to go on doing what you’ve always done, and to do it as well as before”<sup>17</sup> will not avail, since the artist’s public is already familiar with all that and must necessarily draw diminishing returns from more of the same. The only solution for the midcareer artist, Said concludes, is somehow to take the very conditions that make middle age so artistically perilous, “its groundless effort and its groping for definition,” and make of them a vivid “statement about the process of interpretation itself, which is what all performance is finally about”<sup>18</sup> —or as we can amend Said’s phrasing to take into account not only interpretive artists such as classical pianists but artists in general: a statement about the process of artmaking itself, which is what all art is finally about.

To say that art is about the process of artmaking, which is to say about the relation between artist and materials and audience, and not merely at a given moment but across a lifetime of effort, means to assume a view of art that only became possible in the early nineteenth century, in the wake of Romanticism. Before this, as Svetlana Boym says, what was valued in an author (or an artist) was “their ability to reveal universal laws of human and divine nature rather than personal and

and idiosyncratic ones.”<sup>19</sup> Said speaks of “that dialectic between self and other, between performer and work, whose purpose is to reveal something about both as they undergo change in time.”<sup>20</sup> Insofar as the plastic arts go, the onset of the midcareer is no less problematic than in music or another art. I recently read an interview with Eric Fischl, an artist who after very interesting beginnings has followed a much more questionable path, in my view, through a midcareer that he is presumably now starting to see beginning to metamorphose into old age as he moves into his late sixties. Asked what advice he would pass on to younger artists, his thought was precisely that they should prepare to face up to the rigors of their midcareer. Speaking in terms of first and second acts à la Fitzgerald, he suggested that while

*they shouldn't abandon their first thing until they are tired of it...they must know that their life is not going to just be that first act. There is a second act coming and they should prepare for it. That's where the real test is. It's not as big a leap in terms of finding your voice, finding a gallery, getting people interested in what you do. That's all huge. The second act is subtler, but it can erase you or land you as a major artist.*<sup>21</sup>

That's a pretty scary dichotomy—either the dustbin of history or the walls of the Met. How do you deal with that? Said bluntly asserts that “at its worst, middle-aged performing is scarcely to be endured,”<sup>22</sup> and one can only wonder at his willingness to put up with so much of it. The reason must lie in the never-ending hope that the “rare grace”<sup>23</sup> of an unexpectedly remarkable and revealing negotiation of those perils will provide an inspiration that redeems the time and thought and feeling wasted on all the rest. Likewise, we have probably all felt that another show by this or that once-promising artist would be unendurable. And yet we should endure them, since even an artist's most unproductive wallowing in the quandaries of the

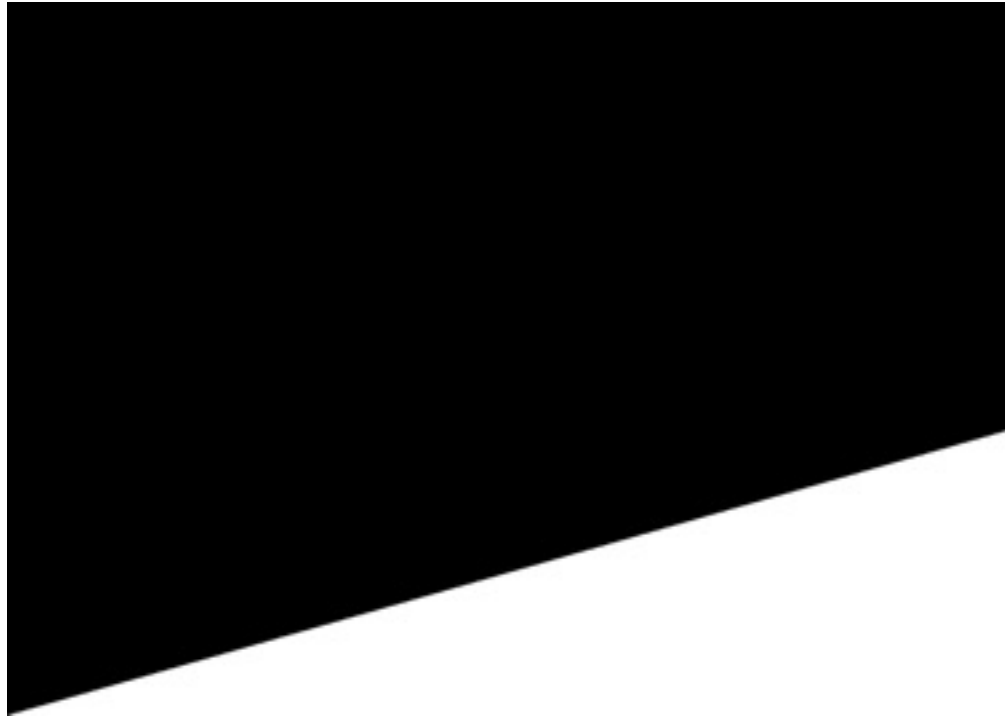
midcareer represents a wager on the redemptive potential of art with which it best to keep faith.

Since I've already mentioned him, I can use Fischl as an example. He has not simply indulged in repetition of his first successes, but has tried to develop his work and keep challenging himself. Yet I can't help feeling that the developments are always in the wrong direction—I mean wrong for him, for his talents and sensibility, not for some grand march of history. To put it in terms of an amateur psychoanalysis: His early paintings, the ones I like best, suggest that he must be someone who early in his life became very aware of, very sensitive to the perversities of everyday middle class life. And out of that awareness he made a “dirty realism”<sup>24</sup> that was surprising and felt true. Aware, perhaps, that if he kept on in this way he would become his own imitator, gradually substituting shock effects for the surprising truth, he changed course. The alternative he chose, was to become a sort of cleaner realist, a “good painter” in a way that to me seems rather banal and academic. I can't help feeling that he did so because he wanted to put more distance between himself and that sense of perversity that had threatened to envelope him. It's not that he wanted to get away from it as subject matter, but he wanted to find a style that would insulate him from it. And he succeeded, thereby making his paintings rather boring. And yet, like Said sweating out yet another recital by Ashkenazy, I keep on going to his midcareer shows despite everything. Because the middle is not necessarily the conclusion, and you can never predict when or where or how or why an artist might undergo a startling renewal—just as we should admit that we can never predict in advance when he or she might hit a dead end. The name of this uncertainty is “midcareer.”



## Endnotes

- 1 M.B. [Mel Bochner], "Reviews: In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* XL 7 (May 1966), p. 61.
- 2 Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 43.
- 3 Roland Barthes, *New Critical Essays*, tr. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 80.
- 4 Said, *Beginnings*, p. 320.
- 5 Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3.
- 6 Said, *Conrad*, p. 11.
- 7 Duchamp in *Time* magazine, March 10, 1952, quoted in Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 135.
- 8 Miriam Said, Foreword to Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), p. vii-viii.
- 9 Said, *Late Style*, p. 3.
- 10 Edward W. Said, *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 52.
- 11 Rudolf Arnheim, *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 285.
- 12 Arnheim, *New Essays*, p. 286.
- 13 Said, *Limits*, p. 52.
- 14 Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975) p. 94.
- 15 Said, *Limits*, p. 54.
- 16 Said, *Limits*, p. 55.
- 17 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 18 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 19 Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.
- 20 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 21 Noelle Bodick, "'80s Art Star Eric Fischl on How Artists Can Find Their Second Act," *Artspace*, July 5, 2014, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/eric-fischl-interview](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/eric-fischl-interview).
- 22 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 23 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 24 *Granta 8: Dirty Realism* (Summer 1983), <http://www.granta.com/Archive/8>; but see also Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).



# **THE DARK ARTS**

**Noah Fischer**

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## Prologue

**I** imagine that you are in your studio, or at the desk of the office where you work, or in the classroom where you study. You are temporarily lost in thought about your creative process, thinking about what you will work on next, trying to make something of value. But how do you settle on a system that constitutes quality? How do you reconcile your own vision with the jury of institutional gatekeepers who curate artistic quality and keep score on your art practice?

Further, underlying this tug-of-war between vision and being viewed are the details and anxieties of your own condition as an economic self. Your time is limited due to work, or the process of looking for it, while the pressure to achieve the kind of production that will produce results fills every remaining free moment. Finally, if you are like the great majority in this situation, debt trails you, adding to your urgency, and translating into real-world pressure.

You're trying to navigate the waters of success and freedom while managing the anxiety of your economic reality, shaping the way your artwork looks and operates in order to ensure that it fits into a perceived class context which can financially support your practice and pay off the very education that taught you to question authorities and experiment at will. It's a creative narrowing based on a gamble that pulls you ever deeper into systems of extraction. What's needed to break this cycle is to rethink the dynamics of artistic success.

## Art as Extraction

There is a trap hiding behind today's prevailing idea of success in art, and the only way to evade it is to begin visualizing it. In order to do this, we must take a step away from the figure of the artist, and a step closer to this

thing that we now call a "market," so that we can look deeper into the mechanics of support. The contemporary art market is one of the largest deregulated transaction platforms in the world—a space where Russian oligarchs launder money, real estate tycoons decorate private museums for tax benefits, and celebrities of fashion, screen, and music trade cash for credibility. It is a domain in which pyramid schemes are dressed up in the highest cultural trappings, and a speculative concoction of inflated valuation and hedge-fund impatience feeds an elite a sliver of art's current practitioners—the upper tier of which embodies the luxury end of today's gaping economic divide.

**If treating a museum like a Fendi store is not problem enough, then planning it to be built on the backs of indentured workers whose passports will be confiscated on their arrival ought to be.**

It might at first seem that this art-and-money party is just a festival of excess feeding on nothing but hot air and hyperbole. However, value in the art world is not built up from nothing, as many might argue. Rather, it is built from the captured labor of a nearly invisible lower class that is either meagerly paid by, or pays into, the very same myth that feeds the highest tier transactions. The relationship between the profiting minority and the perpetually subsistent majority of cultural producers is therefore tightly knit, because value, on all levels of the art world, is dependent on various forms of extraction. Perhaps the best overview of this model can be found in Gregory Sholette's book *Dark Matter*, in which the shadow-work of artists working as museum guards or café workers, adjunct professors, blog writers, artist assistants, gallery staff, and unpaid interns at publications and institutions collectively create the *actual* value in the art world. Sholette conceives this community as the base of a pyramid with high value assets at the top.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, any market that is without this level of value-added involvement will lack the excess

cultural production required to support a market concept such as “early blue chip” artists—an oxymoron of stupefying proportion.

Beyond labor, these artists in the shadows add essential meaning and context to the whole affair. As Sholette points out, artists make up the core audience when going to see exhibits and fairs, buying books, attending talks, and then processing and sharing their cultural—not monetary—investments widely. Further, this brings an air of hipness and intellectual relevance to contemporary art, which is ripe for extraction by all sorts of corporations, investors, and speculators. In short, the global art world is now equivalent to a luxury lifestyle brand, attracting celebrities, politicians, and royalty.

Perversely, although most critical thinkers are likely skeptical of advertisements, understanding that a “corporation” is simply programming one to “consume” their product and associate one’s own values with that of their branding, most participants in the art world blindly maintain brand loyalty to major museums and artists who help to form their image of artistic quality. What is it that allows individuals to be resistant to corporate branding, protecting the “self” from entanglement in “product,” yet not to consider the authoritative process of value creation in the arts in relation to the extraction of value from themselves—either as student, art worker, gallery-goer, or teacher? The answer to this rests in the locations of the greatest authority: the museums.

## **Museum as Ratings Agency**

Today, museums function like a governmental ratings agency in their relationship to the art market. Unlike art fairs and auctions and art schools, museums and related art institutions have a charge to exhibit art for the broadest public through collection, exhibition, and publication, and in doing so they perform the clerical function of interpreting meaning and ultimately forming a canon. Top museums therefore hold the symbolic power

of appointing or “making” art’s value. So, if we think of art as a currency—albeit a fiat currency—then the museums are essential at guaranteeing its credibility, much like a government might back the value of its currency. This process puts museum board members (many of whom are collectors themselves, and in some cases, board members of auction houses, representatives of corporate collections, or stakeholders in their own private museums) in positions of tremendous power to influence art value. This type of financial leverage runs parallel to the revolving door between the US government and Wall Street—the fulcrum on which America’s economic disparity is tipping toward a new aristocracy. However, whereas White House/Wall Street unscrupulousness is nearly universally reviled, the financial misconduct within major museums has been widely overlooked.

Why, then, do art world citizens tend to look the other way from such corruption? One likely answer is that few to none feel they can afford to insult the deities of cultural capital within such an intensely networked sphere. Another answer is that the museum is so central to the definition of art that it cannot be wrong, any more than art as a whole could be wrong. But what if, instead of seeing the museum as “art,” we viewed it as its “board,” its “funders” or all of the executives behind the scenes who control its operations? Some of us love the museum, some of us hate the museum, and many of us maintain a love-hate relationship to the museum—but few dare to question whether its transition into a luxury branding enterprise might actually be doing serious harm to the artist community which supports it.

Not since the Art Workers Coalition (1969–71), and only after the financial crash of 2008, has a substantial avalanche of voices emerged to overtly politicize the conflicts of interests woven into museums, their politics, and the people who control them.<sup>2</sup> However, unlike the effective and dramatic gestures of a then-insulated art

world, the current financialization of museums is getting worse in the face of contest, not better. For example, with the Guggenheim expansion to Abu Dhabi, we are witnessing a transaction in which the museum has converted its prestige directly into liquid capital. If treating a museum like a Fendi store is not problem enough, then planning it to be built on the backs of indentured workers whose passports will be confiscated on their arrival<sup>3</sup> ought to be. Apparently when Guggenheim signed this contract, the thought that social responsibility might be a necessary dimension of their brand—whose real value has been built up by generations of artists and curators, writers, and, of course, audiences—did not cross their mind.

**A museum exhibition’s targeted programming, educational outreach, and liberal-minded sponsorships are often made to burnish the left credentials of the brand without interrupting free market funding relationships, which usually directly contradict the window dressing.**

The issue of value extraction by museums can be parsed out by measuring actual rather than feigned sincerity to serve a wide public. Consider the recent sprouting of private museums built largely to take advantage of tax loopholes in which museum donations are fully tax deductible. Often these museums, with supposed missions to serve the public, sit on remote properties adjacent to their benefactors’ estates.<sup>4</sup> This trend furthers a culture of institutional bad behavior, muddying the process by which cultural relevance can be transparently achieved, and creating a deeply cynical psychology in the artist as she or he tries to make their way in society. Within this dynamic, the individual artist risks being perceived as a paranoid defeatist if they challenge the system rather than surrendering to it—or worse, the artists perform a copycat corruption in their practice, a tactic seen and rewarded in leading figures of the financialized era.

Such circumstances present a classic Neoliberal dialectic that makes a further left resistance to leading institutions nearly impossible, as museums are deeply involved in politically progressive positioning. This is invoked through an exhibition’s targeted programming, educational outreach, and liberal-minded sponsorships made to burnish the left credentials of the brand without interrupting free market funding relationships, which usually directly contradict the window dressing. This is not to discredit any of these efforts when they are for the good, but to remove a mirror that doubles those good deeds, exposing the diametrically opposed relation of the handout and the handcuff. As example, PS1 trumpets “Zero Tolerance,” a worldwide show on art-activism of recent years from China to Palestine, while conspicuously omitting the NYC artist-activists who have demonstrated against economic and racial inequality. Yet the riddle is revealed when it is understood that these banks, gentrification moguls, and Wall Street-billionaires-turned-mayors make up the museum’s funders. The result is that instead of presenting a tool to contemplate the political present situation, a guided tour through political Disneyland is offered. Or consider the double functioning of Kara Walker’s Creative Time-commissioned sugar sphinx, a sculptural and conceptual masterpiece. It called on an unusually broad audience for site specific work to contemplate racial symbols on an undeniable scale, yet was also set up as a buffer against protest over the giant luxury condominiums soon to be erected on that exact site, bringing the developers, Two Trees—who also happen to be the funders of the work—greater security for their investment, which itself marks a final end to that neighborhood’s association with bohemia.

The further one goes down this rabbit hole, the more figures emerge into view that seem to embody the entire process of extraction. For example, consider how a percentage of collectors and museum board members are major players in the real estate market. These figures enjoy asset value growth from Sholette’s “dark matter”:

the young and indebted artists willing to get on the ground floor of pioneering ventures on one hand, while simultaneously creating the support system for the top of the market on the other.

Facilitating a microcosm in which the artists they purchase are likely to employ studio assistants who were just evicted from the very properties in which they are stakeholders, thus allowing a far more philistine “luxury” consumer to enter and complete a multi-phased gentrification cycle that whitewashes any remnant of diversity, dissent, or digression from the region.

## Debt as Crime

The most extractive and disempowering mechanism of all, and one that truly threatens to poison the roots of the artistic ecosystem, is debt, with student debt leading the charge. The cost of art schools, which unlike many universities depend almost wholly on tuition, is soaring and unmoored to any potential to pay it off. This kind of debt—the art kind—is among the worst to take on in relation to projected earnings; however, to well-buffered investors, it’s a perfectly fine SLAB (Securities Lending and Borrowing) to be packaged and short-sold.<sup>5</sup> In a climate in which it is common for young artists to graduate with nearly \$100,000 of debt for their BFA, followed by costs of an MFA upwards of \$41,300–\$108,900, entering the art world has become an existential, unpayable gamble with real-world effects immediately upon graduation, and in some cases before the student has earned a degree.<sup>6</sup>

Easy loan money has been sold as an American middle class privilege, opening the doors to higher education. But loans become debt and debt is years of working hours; debt is attention *away* from making artwork; debt is the loss of time, agency, and choice. In a speculative art world, debt’s ultimate effect is to tie (as in bond) the artist directly into the market. The fact that artists need to take

this burden on in order to make their entry into the official art world means that repayment by way of sales—think sellers of units not collectors that covet—becomes the necessary goal. Those not chosen by the market to see a period of return on their investment, and those without families who can foot the loan bill, will start their careers in a mode of indenture. To add irony to this loss of agency, many of these artists have been educated on a diet of Marxism and anti-capitalist rhetoric, and are then set out to survive within in the very belly of the beast of capitalism they were taught to critique.

**Easy loan money has been sold as an American middle class privilege, opening the doors to higher education, but this debt is attention away from making artwork; debt is the loss of time, agency, and choice.**

This puts said group squarely to work, adding value to individuals and institutions who are better placed to capitalize. Examples of those who profit from the cheap artist-workforce are the established artists who can easily get away with paying highly educated and skilled assistants minimum wage without benefits; art fairs who hire non-unionized labor to create temporary markets; institutions needing in-the-know labor for performances, activities, and other venues requiring part-time support; and galleries who frame their interns and gofers as the lucky few. Of course, this is a bleak summary of the labor landscape, and it does not reflect the circumstances of fairly paid or well-supported studio staff and institutional employees, but it is inarguable that the lesser paid and unpaid far outnumber the well compensated, mostly because the extractive culture allows such treatment, supports it, and helps it to proliferate through growth and expansion without planning for an infrastructure to support and fund it.

So before you sign that paper, consider all of these

extractive dimensions of the art market as a whole, and take in the larger picture of its current culture and relation to class dynamics. Not only do impractical levels of debt make an autonomous art practice a perpetually unreachable aspiration, but it has the double effect of making art into such a bad deal that it repels entire classes, races, and cultural groups of people from the art world—a cycle that further homogenizes art’s culture of money, class, and tokenism. To many who are less privileged and limited to viewing their prospects through a practical financial lens, such extractive mechanisms are quite obvious, sending up red flags from the get-go. However, these flags are rarely visible to those lured to dream by the vision—and pedagogical propaganda—of artistic stardom, cultural coolness, and, most ironically of all, individual freedom in the form of creative expression.

## Epilogue

I have tried to describe how all sorts of art institutions and individuals are tied together into a process that subtracts value from some as a means of generating exponential value-multiplication for a very few. From museums, to real estate projects, to public art, to art schools, this machine is still ramping up. So what can be done? The first level is recognition; if we allow ourselves to see things clearly, we will see that they will likely get much worse before they get better. As example, student enrollment in higher education art programs continues to rise, while programs continue to proliferate in the form of specified MFAs, curatorial programs, programs in public arts, performance, and more, an increase in overall debt that can only escalate the conundrum described above. On the other end of the spectrum rests the booming museum luxury complex and its hyper-financialized global expansion. Diluting the power of the public sphere as they harvest common value and feed it into luxury assets, these museums are not the inclusive structures of the past, but exclusive

enclaves of the ultra-wealthy.

Yet, we can say that although these educational and institutional exploits have been the dominant economic direction over the last few years, the Neoliberal myths that are essential to their continuation are no longer universally accepted. No longer are dissenters silent. The recent efforts of Occupy, 15M, Cassarole, Indignados and others have touched the arts deeply, exposing the parallels between the moral failure of the banks, and the cultural failure of institutions. As a result, multiple art-focused groups were spun out of these larger movements—Occupy Museums, Arts and Labor, Teatro Valle Occupato, StrikeDebt, Artleaks, Hauben un Brauchen, Gulf Labor, Global Ultra Luxury Faction, and Liberate Tate, to name only a few. Each is a petri dish for developing tactics to challenge an extractive system; each is an incubator of the value of collectivity.

This value pushes back against the primacy of the individualistic picture of success: the non-allied artist-turned-brand whose only mission is to climb an extractive ladder toward branded museums, stepping on the bodies of “dark matter” to become one of those who can enjoy the fruits of speculation. This does not mean that solo practice is not a means to arrive at richly meaningful territory: it always will be. Therefore, a reformulation of artistic value is needed; one that takes every single person involved in the art world into account as visible partners in common value creation. This is a long-term project and art’s major challenge for the foreseeable future. Much better art will come out of it.

## Endnotes

1 *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* by Gregory Sholette, Pluto Press, 2011

2 In a now-famous case of conflict of interest, the New Museum's Skin Fruit, (2008) exhibited works from boardmember Dakis Jouannou's collection, curated by Jeff Koons who is also heavily collected by Jouannou. Many major board members have private museums while also heavily playing the market from Eli Broad, trustee at MoMA and MOCA and the Broad Museum to Robert S Taubman, member of Sotheby's board with the Taubman Museum of Art etc. From a 2008 *ArtsJournal* article, here are some excerpts from "Museum Trusteeship" by Alan and Patricia Ullberg, published in 1981 by the American Association of Museums.

The trustee's own acquisitions must not compete with his museum's; he is obligated to put the collecting ambitions of his institution before his own. The collections management policy should itemize in detail the collecting interests of the museum so that trustees who collect are put on notice that certain activities related to their personal collecting must be circumscribed while they serve on the board....

The ethical standards that the board adopts for managing potential conflicts of interest for trustees are, in some museums, the same as those applied to the staff. The rules for staff with respect to collecting generally aim to prevent situations in which staff members compete with the museum or profit from their positions or official duties....

The trustee who collects could be liable to the museum for profits he makes as a provable consequence of actions taken by the museum if his participation was a major influence in the institution's decision to take those actions. Such a case might occur, for example, if he persuaded the museum to hold an exhibition of objects represented in his personal collection and then was able to sell those objects at a profit. Whether his objects were exhibited or not, there is a conflict of interest and potential liability to the museum in this situation.

3 Some caveats are needed for this statement. First, I'm speaking only to arts in the United States, and do not mean to ignore the important work carried out by the many individual artists and groups working loosely under the institutional critique mode, from Hans Haacke in the 1960's (a member of AWC) to artists of the 80's and 90's such as Coco Fusco, Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser, and many others. However, I am pointing out that these artists did not enjoy the support of large social movements in their critical examining of museums and also, it could be said that without a movement, the work functioned first as artworks and only secondly as political campaign, which is probably the reverse of AWC and OWS-related practices.

4 The Kafala (Sponsorship) System is used in a number of Gulf states and required immigrant workers to have a sponsor while working, thus forfeiting a number of individual rights such as retaining their own passports, and relating to payments for their journey. During Gulf Labor's 2014 trip to Saadiyat island, members were able independently monitor the situation and found that no worker they interviewed was in possession of their passport and that workers carried heavy debts, although UAE development corporation said much the opposite. For more information, please see Gulf Labor's recent report: <http://gulflabor.org/saadiyatreport2014/>

5 "The Warhol Next Door" by Patricia Cohen NY Times Jan 10, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art-collectors-gain-tax-benefits-from-private-museums.html?](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art-collectors-gain-tax-benefits-from-private-museums.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region&_r=0)

[hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art-collectors-gain-tax-benefits-from-private-museums.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region&_r=0)

6 Although the SLAB market has since cooled somewhat, as recently as 2013, the Wall Street Journal reported that "Student Loan Securities Stay Hot" March 3, 2013 by Ruth Simon, Rachel Louise Ensign and Al Yoon: "SLM Corp. the largest U.S. student lender, last week sold \$1.1 billion of securities backed by private student loans. Demand

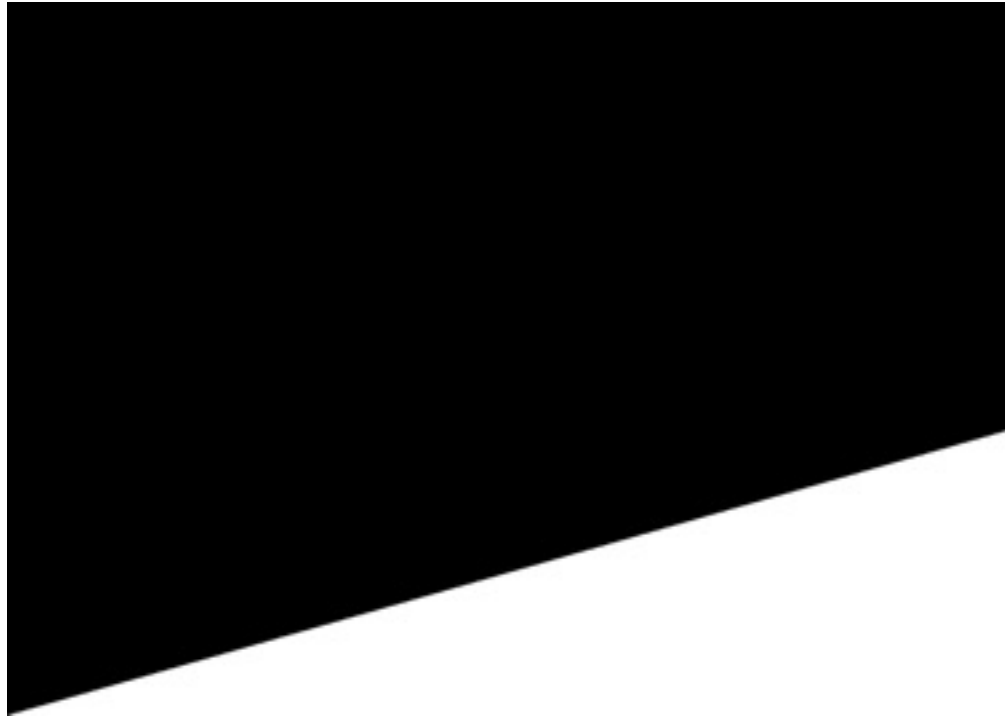


for the riskiest bunch—those that will lose money first if the loans go bad—was 15 times greater than the supply, people familiar with the deal said.” To learn more about these securities, I recommend reading *Creditocracy and the Case for Debt Refusal* by Andrew Ross, Or Books, 2015.

- 7 A 2013 Report in *Education Sector* called “In Debt and In the Dark: It’s Time for Better Information on Student Loan Defaults” begins: Student college loan default rates have nearly doubled in recent years. The three-year default rate exceeds 13 percent nationally. Read report here: <http://www.educationsector.org/publications/debt-and-dark-it%E2%80%99s-time-better-information-student-loan-defaults>

Additionally, in a recent study by Citizens Financial, 49% of students reported considering dropping out because of debt. “Debt Has Some College Students Thinking About Dropping Out.” By Katie Lobosco, October 9, 2014, CNN Money. Here is the report: <https://www.citizensbank.com/pdf/student-loan-debt.pdf>

- 8 See BFAMFAPhD’s report on the economic reality of artists: <http://censusreport.bfamfaphd.com/poverty>



# **THE LONG FEELING**

**Katy Lederer**

THE ENEMY / V 2 Issue 1  
[theenemyreader.org](http://theenemyreader.org)

1.

For a very long time, I had wanted to talk about feelings—subtle, painful, complicated, difficult to render. By feelings, I was thinking of the physical sensations at the juncture of not only the body and mind, but also of time and its duration. The question of not only how I felt, but why I felt and for how long. I wanted to talk about feelings and time.

Dread is a long feeling, as are boredom and frustration. Erotic love is short, but then religious love—*agape* or awe of God—is long. Happiness is for the most part short. Contentment can be long and therefore boring. Fear can be both short and long, depending on how physically it's felt and its duration. It is exhausting to sustain somatic feelings for any length of time, which is why, when asked to describe their feelings about climate change, many people will describe a mental state—"disengaged" or "hopeless" for example—instead of a feeling *per se*.

2.

The other day, at a nearby café with a friend, watching her tear up at the memory of her husband, who had recently passed. The way her sadness came in waves, a duration here, a duration there, all through the two-egg breakfast—each wave part of an oceanic grief.

3.

The way the expression is actually not "passed," but "passed away." We put our dead there, in the past, before we take them out of place and take them out of time. I put long feelings in the past because most people that I know seem to prefer them in the past and not the present.

When I try to talk to people about climate change—relatives or colleagues, friends—they say things like, "But you just can't think about that. You have to enjoy your life!" Of course, they are speaking not to me, but to themselves.

4.

What if I spoke in the language of the distant past? Millions upon millions of years ago, "eons," "epochs." The image in my mind of a hot world, dripping off its sides. A kind of tropical fecundity, palm trees on the top of things as if this dripping globe were a sweet drink that one could sip from through a straw.

The world as a cool coconut, the dinosaurs are walking there, on top. I cannot fail to notice that the dinosaurs are from the past. They have "passed away," and yet here they are now, where future climate is a fantasy. How they will amble by the drinking straw and eat the scrumptious fanning leaves.

5.

Will all the ghosts be of this world? Will there be others who have passed away? The future world—*imaginarium*—that timeless and that dripping wet, and pleasant. *The world evades us because it becomes itself again.* (Albert Camus)

6.

There is, of course, another version—it exists here, side by side: the time continues, it is durable. Many billions "pass away," but others live. Rustling around in the trees (always tropical, these fantasies), hiding, hunting prey in tattered button-downs and jeans, still modern humans. (And with big guns.) This is the much harder vision of the future to bear, and creates a shorter feeling. Fight or flight. But of course there is always the question: flight to where? It can feel better to believe the world will end than to believe it will continue.

My friend said when she heard that her husband had died, it was like "a meteor colliding with [her] life... It just hit [she made a gesture with her palm, pressing it into her other palm, hard]—*like this.*"

7.

At the entrance to the Path train down by Wall Street and the Freedom Tower, I flied for the climate march.

I looked out at the thoroughfare, the throngs and throngs of businessmen, their hair thickly pomaded, their dress shirts buttoned tightly at the chin, and thought: *this is a stampede*.

8.

The received wisdom about why people don't do more about climate change is that they are scared, but maybe they're just bored. It could be climate change is boring.

Grief, and isolation, fear, acceptance, rumination, patience, honesty, avoidance, love, and gratitude, frustration, perseverance, dread, and patience, worry, hope—these are long feelings, and can be very hard to take.

Susan Sontag said frustration is another kind of boredom. She also said (citing Pavese) that love is a mistake.

9.

Sitting in the Hayden Planetarium with my friend Josh and his two children, four and six. The rumbling of the dome as it creates the illusion we are traveling in light years through the stars. Darkness and then points of light sweep over the curved ceiling. The four-year-old is shaking. He has his hands over his head. "Get me out of here," he whimpers. But between the German tourists on the one side, and the bald man on the other, we are trapped for the duration. *All that "for nothing," in order to repeat and mark time. (Camus)*

10.

A march is an un-useful act that symbolizes time and therefore progress. Advancing on foot along a predetermined route, the people marching carry signs. *Here, from this duration, we are sending you our*

*message, our demand.*

Unhappy with the past, the people marching toward the future. Like an army off to battle or a movement [bodies literally *moving*] "being born."

11.

My friend could get her head around the concept of a line of souls, each one waiting patiently in the ether to enter a body, whatever body made available. I believe she liked the randomness—the randomness and fairness—of this vision.

My friend said that it bothered her, his death. She just couldn't imagine the end. "Some people say," she said, putting her fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ears, "that you don't miss those years—all those centuries and centuries before you were born—so why would you miss all those years that will unfold when you are dead?"

She believed you could be born into a lizard or a pig. "It's all just life."

12.

"Passed away" or "passed on." "He passed on." Into the future...

13.

It is a truism in our culture that it is the journey that gives our lives meaning and not the destination. But what if the destination is the future?

When asked why they aren't doing more to combat climate change, a lot of people use the excuse that "we are out of time." But this could be a reason to take action.

14.

The climate march: a funeral procession. *How we mourned.*

15.

I wanted to be bored and not to feel things in my body. At first, this wasn't possible. Reading *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, imagining my young children dying of plague in 2092, or starving. Imagining my young children toting guns.

*What have we done to this world.*

Crying at the ceiling, praying to the broken light fixture.

Regretting things.

*My children.*

My husband walking in, and the embarrassment. *We had had them together, and here I was crying. Was this love, then, a mistake?*

"I don't want them to suffer."

16.

I examine this now, this long feeling (literally a *longing*), and feel sad.

Someone says all mothers feel this way.

17.

Experts and pundits speak of "alarm fatigue," or "compassion fatigue," or "empathy fatigue." Fatigue in this case is a form of a relief, and evidence of a mistake: to feel short feelings about climate change—terror, rage, or panic, for example—is to ask of our bodies a physical exertion that is simply not sustainable. The fatigue is a forced rest, a compulsory respite. To speak of alarm fatigue is therefore to produce a false dichotomy: a choice between whether to feel the short feelings and to experience an intermittent and, ultimately, apathy-producing fatigue, or to ignore and (by implication) "live to fight another day." This dichotomy is false because we know there is another way: to paraphrase Camus, we have

to keep our faces at the stone until they turn to stone. We have to keep our faces at the stone and push it up the hill.

*Those motherfuckers.*

18.

In one of my mentor's poetry books, the phrase—several times repeated—"I wanted to go back from whence I came." To put the dead there, in the past, as far away from anything as anyone can get.

When I was finished with the march, the sidewalks buckled and the fruit decayed. Why had I never noticed this before?

19.

To imagine that my children will be starving or will die of plague is a way of having feelings that are possible to process. Life or death thus fight or flight. It is harder to imagine them as "fine," living in a house or an apartment, eating something—soup, cakes... "fine" but that they live in a new world that has been made by us and breaks the way the things we make will break. There is a loneliness to it, this man-made-ness, and a sadness that is long as an eternity.

It is easier to imagine bodies suffering than to imagine people suffering in their hearts and in their minds.

20.

That I would give my life for their lives doesn't matter.

21.

Therapists dislike despair. They also dislike dread, depression, worry, and anxiety. These are long feelings that the therapists break down, and we break down. We like to take our feelings piece-meal, broken down, and we will pay for this.

When I tell my father I am concerned about climate change, he responds, “But you have two young children.

You can’t think about that!”

How we are “running out of time.”

22.

Is crying a way to break everything down?

Are talking and thinking a way to break down? *Of course they are.*

And we will pay for this.

23.

Speaking with my father after dinner. I describe my brother as a “nihilist,” which I pronounce with a strong emphasis on “nigh.” My father, a linguist, corrects me. His preferred pronunciation starts with something more like “knee”—*knee-il-ist*. We find the audio Mirriam-Webster online, which confirms that I am right. *Nigh-il-ist* it says, over and over. Soon I tire of *nigh-il-ist* and click to the words “fuck” and “cunt.” We laugh.

24.

When my children were implanted—we put in two—the acupuncturist who was with us in the operating room massaged my shins and told the babies they should come into my body, that my body was a good one, that my body was a body they would like to live and grow in, and enjoy.

When pregnancies fail, does this mean the souls refused to come into the body? This is a cruel vision.

25.

I suppose I enjoy my own body, although now it has been ravaged by the birth of these two children that are living in a world that has been ravaged. Perhaps this is the state of things—ravagement. Perhaps God put the world here for our use, and we should ravage it.

Yes, we *should* ravage it! Of course!

26.

We had twelve eggs and put in two.

Is our aversion to long feelings an aversion to an utter inability to use?

27.

The problem of long feelings: how to describe what one imagines—what I imagine—at the end of time, which destroys my sense of time. And to imagine the beginning.

*The bolide arrived from the southeast, traveling at a low angle relative to the earth, so that it came in not so much from above as from the side, like a plane losing altitude... “Basically, if you were a triceratops in Alberta, you had about two minutes before you got vaporized” is how one geologist put it to me. (Elizabeth Kolbert.)*

I can imagine this.

28.

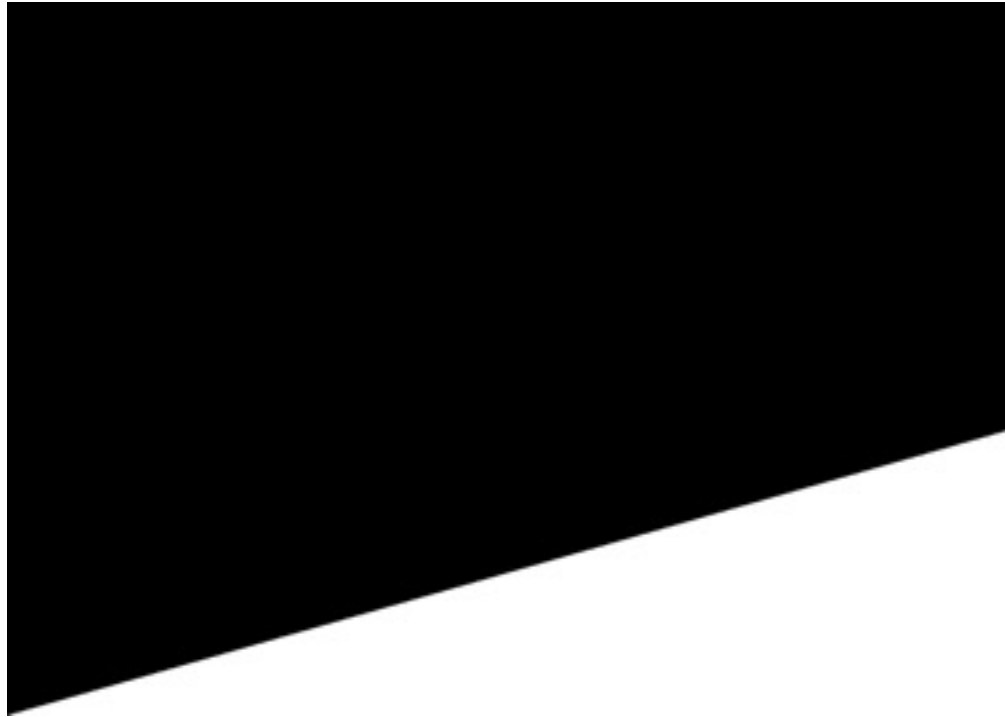
Does everything return then to the past, to our prehistory? Or to the future, to our post-apocalyptic?

29.

With the duration of our dread extending out through all the years, the story broke. We could no longer feel, but then all we could do was feel, and this was ultimately uncomfortable and painful. In our anguish and our dread, the time broke down, so we *deceased* it. We put the time there, in the past, where we could then imagine it. We put it in the future, we ran out.

30.

But of course there is another way: to keep our faces at the stone until they turn to stone. To put our faces at the stone and push it up the fucking hill, again and again.



# **TRICKS, POLITICS, AND THE “MAGIC NEGRO”**

**Graham Jones**

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[theenemyreader.org](http://theenemyreader.org)

Is politics nothing but trickery? Are political leaders nothing but tricksters? Certainly many of us believe so, and not without reason. In this essay, however, I want to step slightly back from these self-evident suspicions to look more closely at how their self-evidence takes shape through the work of an analogy between the domains of democratic politics and entertainment magic—the realm of deception par excellence. Usually, analogy is used as a tool for making sense of something difficult to understand through a comparison with something more commonplace. Yet I argue that the ubiquity of the analogy likening politics to a kind of conjuring act, like a form of legerdemain itself, can be used to conceal as much as it reveals—such as injuries of class and race.

Journalists brand politicians as ‘magicians’ all the time. Consider the following examples, culled willy-nilly from around the world. On Obama’s energy policies:

*This conjuror’s trick has gone wrong; Mr. Obama is actually cutting the beautiful young lady in half as he cripples the energy sector.<sup>1</sup>*

On South Africa’s budget:

*Like a magician whipping a rabbit out of a hat, President Jacob Zuma wowed us with impressive figures for dramatically enhanced infrastructure spending in his state of the nation speech.<sup>2</sup>*

On Israel’s new unity government:

*Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is known as the Magician for his ability to pull off political tricks that challenge the [election] genie. Magic tricks, as we all know, rely on timing, creating the right atmosphere and behind-the-scenes preparation. Political tricks, it seems, require the same basic elements.<sup>3</sup>*

Political barbs like these or editorial cartoons depicting

politicians as magicians go back to the 19th century (at least). But what’s so bad about being called a magician anyway? Most people enjoy being baffled by a magician’s feats, right? To appreciate the incisiveness of this comparison requires that we reflect more carefully on the disparate domains of politics and magic, and how analogy functions to connect them.

Analogy is a key part of the way we make sense of the world, a strategy for plotting patterns of resemblance between things known and things less familiar. Some analogies prove so useful that they crop up again and again, or seep into the conceptual background of conventional wisdom—precisely like the conventionalized analogy between magic and politics.

Analogies work by mapping features from a “source” or “base” domain onto a “target” domain.<sup>4</sup> They call attention to resemblances between the analogized domains, and also reinforce underlying cultural attitudes that make certain resemblances particularly salient. The mapping of magic onto democracy through the analogical metaphor<sup>5</sup> “politics is magic” or “politicians are magicians” has several important entailments. It implies that democratic politics produces a professional class of expert deceivers, who manipulate the truth and hide secrets. It suggests that politicians traffic in pleasing artifice rather than potentially unpleasant substance. This analogy frames members of the voting public as spectators at a magic show who enjoy being deceived, while situating the journalists, cartoonists, and satirists who mobilize the magical comparison outside of (and above) the performer-audience dyad as exposers of a sordid truth.

The attitude underlying the analogization of magic and politics, I argue, goes back to ancient critiques of Athenian democracy most closely associated with the work of Plato.<sup>6</sup> Entertainment magicians were well known in antiquity, and there are some tantalizing cultural parallels between the cups-and-balls magicians who played tricks



with little pebbles and the rhetoricians who manipulated a public that voted by casting similar little pebbles.<sup>7</sup> Plato, however, does not compare politics to that kind of magic. He compares it to something more sinister: sorcery.

Plato's anti-rhetorical stance links the figure of the sophist, an expert in the skill of rhetorical persuasion, with the figure of the sorcerer, who can cloud people's judgment, bend their will, and distort their perception through supernatural means.<sup>8</sup> For Plato, the sophists were sinister because they could argue "pro" or "contra" and win arguments, without even having substantive knowledge of the topic at hand.<sup>9</sup> Plato considered this this deception of the highest sort, and spurned democracy because of the influence it gives to experts in rhetoric rather than experts in statecraft. In the *Republic*, he advocates instead for a kind of philosophical technocracy, in which experts in statecraft (philosophers) reign without appeal to popular opinion (though with occasional recourse to manipulating opinion).

From Plato, we inherit the cynical idea that democratic politics gives the upper hand to expert deceivers who pander to the *hoi polloi*'s susceptibility to pleasing illusion. Journalists (and others) who deploy magical analogies to the target domain of politics align themselves with this Platonic critique, bolstering its continuing relevance in an era when sophists have been replaced by "spin doctors" working around the clock to control political "messaging" in 24/7 news cycles.

The difference between Plato's source domain—the instrumental magic of sorcery—and the source domain I'm interested in—the entertainment magic of illusionism—may not seem that significant at first blush. You might say magic is magic, allowances made for shifting cultural sensibilities. But I'd like to take a slightly closer look at what it means to analogize democratic politics with this kind of magic at the present historical moment. In the rest of this essay, I look in greater detail at two particular

cases, one French, the other American, in which this analogy is systematically applied. I show that the seeming uniformity of the analogy between magic and politics belies contextual differences and, indeed, that uniformity itself can allow for the insinuation—through analogical sleight-of-hand—of otherwise objectionable messages under the veil of convention.

The first case I consider comes from my anthropological field research on French entertainment magic.<sup>10</sup> In 1989, France's charismatic minister of culture, Jack Lang, was elected mayor of, Blois, a small provincial capital in the Loire river valley. (French politicians can acquire multiple posts simultaneously, through a practice called the "accumulation of mandates.") Lang was a flamboyant figure, who had already radically reshaped French cultural politics. Under his stewardship, the Ministry of Culture ceased to be only a custodian of France's cultural heritage in the fine arts, reimagining its role as a patron of cultural producers in popular genres like graffiti, breakdance, and hip hop. Blois, a sleepy town of 50,000, seemed an unlikely fit for this larger than life figure.

Among its few claims to fame, Blois was the birthplace of the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871). Known among magicians as the "Father of Modern Magic," Robert-Houdin revolutionized entertainment magic, elevating it (according to magicians' catechism) "from the street to the stage." He took an oftentimes coarse and technically crude form of entertainment associated with carnivals or marketplaces and their lower-class denizens (Robert-Houdin called them "gawkers") and moved it into the culturally safer space of a fashionable Parisian theatre. He dressed in elegant evening attire, and used his skills as a clockmaker to pioneer tricks of unprecedented technical sophistication. A young American, Ehrich Weiss, was so impressed by the achievements Robert-Houdin described in his 1858 memoir that he chose the stage name "Houdini" (in typical Oedipal fashion, he later wrote a book-length

smear, *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*).<sup>11</sup>

Magicians had been making pilgrimages to Blois for generations, but few outside of their narrow coterie had heard of Robert-Houdin or, for that matter, considered magic worthy of serious cultural consideration. The shrewd Lang sensed an opportunity. He allocated 46 million Francs (probably something on the magnitude of 20 million U.S dollars in 2015 terms) from the Ministry of Culture to create a National Center of the Arts of Magic and Illusion, and used municipal funds to purchase a gargantuan mansion to house it. The Center's objective was to establish a respectable position for magic among the kinds of fine arts—music, literature, painting, etc.—that the Ministry had traditionally championed.

As these things generally do, the project eventually spiraled over budget (the mansion needed to be ratcheted skywards so that an underground magic theatre could be excavated beneath it). At some point, it became national news. On March 12, 1993, *Le Monde*, France's paper of record, ran a story called "A House of Illusion for Mr. Lang." The story started out nicely enough, but ended with a nasty dagger-like flourish.

*Construction, which began last fall, is proceeding well.... The initial investment ... is entirely covered by the Ministry of Culture , ... which is thus extending (an important first!) its prerogative to the celebration of ectoplasm. This generosity will certainly be appreciated by the Ministry's traditional beneficiaries at a time when the budget is facing drastic reductions.... Even Mr. Lang's worshipers and the proponents of his brand of cultural pluralism think the magician of the rue de Valois [the location of the Ministry of Culture] has finally overdone it, especially on the eve of legislative elections.*<sup>12</sup>

Someone intimately involved in planning the National Magic Center told me in an interview years later, "When

*Le Monde* called Lang the 'magician of the rue de Valois', that brought an end to the project. Lang saw that and he wanted out. He dropped us like a hot potato." While Lang distanced himself from the project, ignominy followed. Several years later, *Le Monde* described him as "a *prince of illusion*, criticized in the corridors of his very ministry for... making public bids for rabbits hidden in bottomless hats."<sup>13</sup>

In both instances, Lang himself is the target of the analogy with magic, but magic itself also falls victim to the pejorative tone of comparison. Clearly, an analogy with magic is never meant to make politicians look good. But as a form a perjuror, I argue that the analogy does not only concern the mechanics of prestidigitation (making things—like money—appear to be where they are not or appear not to be where they are), but also the cultural status of prestidigitation as a signifying practice. In Western culture, Simon During writes, entertainment magic today carries "little cultural weight. It is apparently trivial."<sup>14</sup> The depictions of Lang as a magician presuppose such triviality and use it to rhetorical effect: for instance, an anachronistic reference to "ectoplasm," the yucky stuff 19th century spirit mediums purported to secrete, denies any connection between magic and the arts, linking it instead to charlatanism and the discredited occult.

More broadly, the hackneyed references to rabbits-in-hats and ladies-in-boxes, unavoidable in this kind of parodization, summon up the most clichéd cultural associations, projecting magic outside the historical present and back into the vaudevillian past. Such intentional trivialization makes another kind of argument: politicians are like magicians not only because they are tricksters, but also because their coat-and-tail gravitas, their oversized sense of self-importance, is disproportionate to the value and content of what they actually do. And when their gimmicks fail them (say, when Obama can't put the lady back together again), they are helpless. Magicians themselves wage constant battle



against these clichés,<sup>15</sup> but political satirists, at least, aren’t apt to give them up any time soon.

These tacit imputations of triviality carry particular weight in France. Pierre Bourdieu has written that “the persistence... of the aristocratic model of ‘court society’” in contemporary France, through which “a Parisian *haute bourgeoisie*” combines “all forms of prestige and all the titles of economic and cultural nobility, has no counterpart elsewhere, at least for the arrogance of its cultural judgments.”<sup>16</sup> According to the model Bourdieu sketches, taste maps onto social class, and cultural choices emblemize social hierarchies. Magic in this system (at least until only very recently) has been eminently *déclassé*. Labeling Lang a magician, in this setting, isn’t just a way to discredit him as a political charlatan. It also damns him for failing to uphold an elite—and elitist—vision of culture as a switchboard of social distinction.

The second case I consider suggested itself after I anecdotally observed an uptick in the analogization of magic and U.S. politics with the entry of Barack Obama into the 2008 presidential election. A nonsystematic comparison of political cartoons satirizing Obama and his predecessors suggests a dramatic increase in the frequency of prestidigitatory portrayals. While George W. Bush was sometimes depicted as a magician, he was much more often represented as a fool or a dunce—a hapless victim rather than a crafty manipulator of circumstance. Obama’s early flashes of charisma and rhetorical brilliance would seem to have made him an “easy” target for magical analogies.

For instance, in the lead-up to the 2008 election, a *Wall Street Journal* editorialist wrote: “And now, America, we introduce the Great Obama! The world’s most gifted political magician! A thing of wonder. A thing of awe. Just watch him defy politics, economics, even gravity!”

(And hold your applause until the end, please.)”<sup>17</sup> The accompanying editorial cartoon showed a tuxedoed Obama nonchalantly pulling a bewildered bunny from a hat. Scores of other images elaborated on “The Great Obama” conceit. A particularly troubling image (to me) was a 2009 cartoon in which a ghoulishly smiling Obama produces his own miniature doppelganger (with the same ghoulish smile) from a top hat. In an astonishing feat of self-referential showmanship, this political magician’s greatest illusion is his own self-manufacture as a savior figure, replete with feel-good flag-waving and cash giveaways.

Clearly, the resonance of the magical metaphor had much to do with Obama’s astonishing populist appeal and perhaps some wariness surrounding his savvy use of social media to mobilize young voters. As Lempert and Silverstein note:

*In the Democratic presidential primaries of 2007 and 2008, once Senator Obama was identified as a “rock star” by virtue of huge, screaming crowds at almost every campaign venue, including his statesmanlike speeches in Europe, the campaign of Senator Clinton contrasted this with the subdued seriousness of its own political occasions, wishing to render Senator Obama a mere celebrity lightweight, a political entertainer of the young in essence. In the lead-up to the general election, the McCain campaign took up this line of attack with abandon...*<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, magic is just a convenient stand-in for showbiz writ-large. And let’s not forget that Plato too drew damning comparisons between sophists and the showbiz celebrities of his day: poets.

But the analogy between Obama and not just showbiz in general but the genre of magic specifically turns out to have more troubling connotations. Alim and Smitherman remind us that, starting in 2007,

*Rush Limbaugh...popularized the use of magic to describe Barack Obama among Republicans. He broadcast the song “Barack the Magic Negro” (based on “Puff the Magic Dragon”) on his radio show, and it was later sent out to members of the Republican National Committee. Barack Obama, depicted as the “Magic Negro” by White Republicans is beyond offensive for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the purposeful use of the word Negro to describe Obama. With its usage here, we also see yet another way that Barack Obama has been framed as the “exceptional Negro,” standing on call, ready to alleviate White fears and enlighten them on issues of race.*<sup>19</sup>

The lyrics of the “Magic Dragon” parody emphasized the magical thinking of “guilty” Whites who “feel good” about themselves by supporting a candidate who’s “Black but not authentically” so—unlike “real Black men” such as “Snoop Dogg,” “Farrakhan,” or Al Sharpton, the character who ostensibly “sings” the song.<sup>20</sup> The “magic” of the “Magic Negro” is the expiation of white guilt—the production of the illusion of White innocence—in spite of his own lack of political experience (or expertise, in the Platonic sense).<sup>21</sup> Emphasizing the complicit credulity of Obama’s White voters, the song provides a conceptual grounding for the public-as-dupe component of the magical analogy.

While there may be deep historical roots in the metaphor “politics is magic,” in the case of Barack Obama, the activation of this conventionalized comparison carried strong racialized undertones. How else to explain the meteoric rise of a Black presidential candidate, the trope of the “magic Negro” implied, if not for the kind of perfidious demagoguery that magic has come conventionally to analogize?

Reconsider the some of the examples above with this in mind. The *Wall Street Journal* calls Obama “A thing of wonder. A thing of awe.” A *thing*. On the surface, this

phraseology has a formal resemblance with what you might expect to hear from a nineteenth century carnival barker or vaudeville impresario. But let us not forget that era's ugly history of exhibiting Black bodies as objects of spectacle; P.T. Barnum, for instance, exhibited an African-American man as the evolutionary missing link under the banner "What Is It?"<sup>22</sup> And does not the magician's exaggerated smile and servile stoop in the Obama-pulls-Obama-from-a-hat cartoon suggest a repellent allusion to the body language of minstrelsy? In both cases, the verbal rhetoric and visual iconography of old-time magic allow for the sneaking in of a racially denigrating subtext.

But here too, magic itself has not stood still. In the tenacious image of Robert-Houdin, the genre has been historically dominated by White men, while relegating women and racialized others to fetishized or exoticized positions. Nevertheless, pioneering African-American performers like Richard Potter, William Carl, and Black Herman resourcefully worked within and around the racial strictures of Euro-American show business to forge successful careers as entertainment magicians.<sup>23</sup> In 2014, the 5,000 member-strong Society of American magicians made history, electing its first African-American president, the formidable showman Kenrick "Ice" McDonald.<sup>24</sup>

When an analogy becomes as conventional as "politics is magic," it acquires a kind of intuitive obviousness that makes it easily available to lampoonists. But that obviousness itself hinges on the simulacrum of continuity, the illusion of similarity. While politics is a recurrent target for magical analogies, it is a moving one. In the two cases I have discussed, magical analogies do different kinds of conceptual work. Calling Jack Lang a "magician," French editorialists activated an invidious

comparison between magic (as a metonym for low culture) and fine arts—reasserting class-based hierarchies of taste. Calling Barack Obama a magician, American editorialists and satirists activated racist anxieties about the nature of Black political agency. Thus these magical analogies do different kinds of conceptual work at different times and places, even if there is an underlying anti-political logic that unites them.

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## Endnotes

1. Sanders 2011.
2. Cohen 2012.
3. Collins 2012.
4. Gentner (1983), Lakoff (1993).
5. In what follows, I treat metaphor as a sub-category of analogy.
6. For the broader context, see Hesk (2000), Tell (2007).
7. Taillefer (2009).
8. See, for instance, Gellrich (1994), Rhodes (1992: 10-12).
9. I thank Richard A. Jones for this insight.
10. For a more detailed account, see Jones (2011: 215-221).
11. See Houdini (1908).
12. Roux (1993).
13. Bugier (1998).
14. During (2002: 2).
15. See for instance Jones (2011: 225-231). For a discussion of the way an avant-garde artist reworks the classic iconography of magic, see my essay on Jamie Isenstein (Jones 2013).
16. Bourdieu (1984: xi).
17. Strassel (2008).
18. Lempert and Silverstein (2012: 10-11).
19. Alim and Smitherman (2012: 38).
20. Shanklin (2007).
21. I thank Richard A. Jones for his commentary on these lyrics.
22. See Cook (2001), Chapter 3.
23. See for instance Chireau (2007).
24. See <http://www.npr.org/2014/08/04/334884989/magician-kenrick-ice-mcdonald-sees-the-light-in-the-dark-arts>, accessed January 12, 2015.



# **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

**Suzanne Hudson**

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**M**y son is into vehicles. Being two, and being impractical (redundant as well as causal, I realize as I type), he recently asked me why cars don't fly. I'm not sure if he has been pondering this would-be pragmatic solution to Los Angeles traffic as I circumnavigate the city, silently praying to a god I don't believe in but am superstitious enough to invoke. As it happened, he posed the question while lying on the rainbow checkerboard of his playroom floor, while his hand drew infinity signs in the air with a fire engine the size of an eraser. I nostalgically pondered my own childhood, and more specifically, the future-oriented Jetsons—those picture phones *exist!*—whose world of far-away galaxies and jerry-rigged machines seemed improbably fun. And then I couldn't stop thinking about *Back to the Future*. The movie stayed with me until that night. What was it about? I couldn't really remember the finer points of the story, just the primary element of time-travel and the protagonist's desperation in trying to return to the right place along the endless sweep.

Wikipedia was helpful, mostly in revealing the wildly literal Oedipal plot point that I clearly had repressed. More interesting though was what maybe everyone knows, yet I didn't: The writers, Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale, drafted the script after Gale speculated whether he and his father would have been friends had they gone to school together as boys. I cannot say as regards to my own parents how this might have played out. I like to imagine we would have been close, though this is anyone's guess. It is an impossible heuristic to which perhaps only recourse to sci-fi might do.

Just the other night, as she was falling asleep, my daughter wondered aloud whether she or I would die first. The thought is unbearable and I set it aside. I would also like to believe that we would have been friends, as we are now, back then, or that we could have been in her future, still to come. Time is unforgiving in its rigidity and incompatibility but also capacious enough to put such

otherwise incommensurate worlds into proximity. It is difficult for both of my kids to conceive of why my son will in all likelihood grow to be taller than my daughter, despite her always—F.O.R.E.V.E.R., as she is given to saying, emphatically, as a wondrous temporal cognate to numeric infinity—being almost three years older.

**Time is unforgiving in its rigidity and incompatibility but also capacious enough to put such otherwise incommensurate worlds into proximity.**

Like flying cars, time travel is ostensibly the stuff of childhood, of comparatively pre-cognitive ideation unchecked by the very real exigencies of the world suffered so unceremoniously by grown-ups. These themes are mainstays in children's literature alongside stories of little-people's alter-egos traveling to foreign lands or meeting fantastic creatures who are as actual, as sensibly tangible, as the ground on which they stand (unless they, too, are lucky enough to alight by wing or be spirited by supernatural power through kingdoms and clouds and dreamscapes). Yet the adage that childhood is wasted on the young applies here, for they have no conception of why this is so miraculous, so requiring of the willful suspensions of disbelief that prove their greatest seductions. And when uttered by an adult, the notion of time travel, much less encountering aliens—imaginary friends, of a sort—in one's own moment, is sheer lunacy. This despite the fact that appeals to other impossible possibilities admit a more common desire, whether for introspection or escape.

A classic Cold War instance of the latter is *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), a study of cognitive dissonance authored by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter.<sup>1</sup> They take as a case study a voluble housewife, Mrs. Marian Keech, who roused a group of sympathetic believers to make high-stakes changes of occupations,

relationships, and lifestyles in preparation for an end that she understood to be imminent based on passages of automatic writing channeled from extra-terrestrials. She maintained that she had received communication from the planet “Clarion” portending the world’s destruction. It goes without saying that neither the flood nor the wished-for flying saucer ever visited her Chicago suburb. There was no one-way ticket just yet. But the consequences for Keech were real enough. It matters that she believed in this scenario and was willing to act on this belief—irrespective of the fact that her conviction persisted in the face of evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, such magical thinking necessarily remains a symptom not its cure.

We move forward with an exhausting relentlessness, grateful that this inviolable condition still obtains. It is better than the alternative, flying-saucer scenarios notwithstanding. Parallax might become a theoretical proposition, unmaking a linear rigidity. Humanists go back to the future from research subjects as a matter of course. Is this compensatory?

John McCracken famously described his iconic vertical planks leaning against the supporting architecture as vehicles to the beyond. This was laughable, reducible on the part of so many critics, especially after his death in 2011, to his being a new-agey-Californian.<sup>2</sup> His studio epiphany betrays nothing of the sort: He saw a piece of wood resting casually against the wall while awaiting deployment, poised between the floor-bound prop of sculpture and the wall-oriented portal of painting. He coated a slender stick of plywood with layers of fiberglass and resin and, presto, a colored plank that mirrored the room on its glossy surface. Had McCracken kept the narrative there, instead of frequently and increasingly insistently talking about ghosts, UFO and spacecraft, and the pliable nature of time—one exemplary piece remains a *Frieze* feature replete with iterative sketches of Martians<sup>3</sup> —he might not have been separated out from

his peers. As it happens, he was held apart from the New York cohort whom he imagined as his interlocutors, but also his fellow Southlanders, who more benignly could be understood to reflect the here and now. Their sun-drenched surroundings appeared in bright, shiny offerings that suggested the glint of hot-rods peacocking along the Pacific. McCracken first conceived of his planks in 1966, the same year that *Star Trek* debuted as an intergalactic Western, but already the year before, McCracken was writing in his notebooks of life forms from elsewhere. He was imagining them communicating, moving through him to generate composition. Then he started talking.

**“I often think in metaphorical terms of making sculptures that appear to have been left here by an UFO, by beings from another and more developed dimension or world or place in time.”**

In the catalog attending his 1969 solo show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, McCracken was quoted from 1968, admitting: “I have what amounts to a psychic ability; the critical point in my conceiving process is when I do direct mental visualization in search of the forms or things which are simply and obviously right. And like the psychic’s ‘gift,’ it resists intellectual dissection, and goes away when the attempt is made to gain that kind of control over it.”<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Frances Colpitt three decades on, he asked: “Do you remember the first Superman movie, when Superman takes his girlfriend’s hand and they go flying? She stays in the air as long as they’re touching—as long as she’s in contact with the idea. In a similar way, if I can make a sculpture that presents a sort of transcendent possibility, it may make it easier for someone who sees it to achieve it.”<sup>5</sup>

McCracken in some instances left process behind to more directly address extra-terrestrial life. Peter Clothier published two articles on McCracken’s interest in UFOs and his experiences with those driving them, and his

belief in intelligence out beyond the nearest stars. In an *Art Monthly* piece dubbed “UFO Technology” he said: “I often think in metaphorical terms of making sculptures that appear to have been left here by an UFO, by beings from another and more developed dimension or world or place in time.”<sup>6</sup> This was something of a leitmotif, the notion of producing work that would appear as if returned from the future, or had been deposited in its current site by the proverbial little green men. Given all of this, it is little wonder that it was commonly assumed that McCracken had designed the black-slab monolith featured in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 movie 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, although he did not.

McCracken held forth that he saw his grandfather’s ghost at 7 or 8, and time-traveled at 17 when gazing in the sky near Mt. Shasta. “As I looked toward the sunset over the western mountains, a feeling came over me. I felt I was being watched by someone or something behind me, in the sky. . . .Then about fifteen years later, in 1966-67, in my studio in Venice, California, I was thinking and musing one evening and happened to remember my earlier experience of being watched. . . .And then like a brick it hit me: I was seeing that scene *from the same point in the sky where I had earlier felt I was being watched*. . . .There had been someone watching me then, and it was *me, from the future!*”<sup>7</sup>

Thus did McCracken paradoxically arrive at the basic tenets of the minimalist creed as Michael Fried characterized them. For Fried, minimal sculptures exert a “silent presence” that importantly struck him as being akin to the crowding of one’s perimeter by “another person.” In a near paranoiac turn, he goes so far as to compare his experience of these artworks to coming across something — someone — in a darkened room, where it has been lying in wait, underscoring his charge of anthropomorphism latent in the cubes and lattices so contingent on the perceiving subject to constitute them through the reciprocity of address.<sup>8</sup> Still, McCracken’s formulation differs in one fundamental regard: his sculptures are not

surrogate people but aliens, or the equally remote version of himself, coming forward, coming back, across the chasm of decades. He finally eschewed metaphors for realism. No representation this, but functional abstraction.

McCracken’s mid-career show at P.S. 1 in New York in 1986 was titled “Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965-1986.” It installed McCracken at the center of a universe, maybe only of his own making, but it chafes anyhow. If he at some moments felt himself to be an intermediary, he was never a steward, but a transitory, mortal vessel for a precarious achievement. His works, for all their superficial optimism, admit the smallness of this one man and presage a world in which his works will be, already have become, pre-lapsarian relics.

He never lived to witness a project that Creative Time sponsored in 2012, Trevor Paglen’s *The Last Pictures*. It is a high-tech message in a bottle for which Paglen selected emblematic images of cultural patrimony and set them into space amidst satellites in geosynchronous orbit. Paglen worked with materials scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop an archival disc, micro-etched with one hundred photographs and encased in a gold-plated shell. In Fall 2012, the communications satellite EchoStar XVI launched with the disc mounted to its anti-earth deck. As the press release frames: “While the satellite’s broadcast images are as fleeting as the light-speed radio waves they travel on, *The Last Pictures* will remain in outer space slowly circling the Earth until the Earth itself is no more.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Last Pictures* assumes not human but geological time — it could exist for billions of years — and interpolates a posterity that may well never receive it. In this, it is situated against the sanguinity of Carl Sagan’s *Golden Record*, 1977, in which Sagan sent information of our species into space aboard the Voyager spacecraft.<sup>10</sup> (On September 12, 2013, NASA announced that Voyager 1 left our Solar System and entered interstellar space.) Paglen’s images of nuclear bombs and internment camps convey

a very different sentiment about our prospects than did Sagan's natural sounds and greetings in dozens of ancient and modern languages. In his curatorial statement, Nato Thompson characterizes it as "courageous, optimistic, humane, and lacking in noticeable doubt. *The Last Pictures*, on the other hand, is a voyage into space tinged with the kind of doubt reserved for a society unaware of just how tenuous it truly is."<sup>11</sup> He furthers, documenting a stunning reversal: "In the tradition of astronomy, Paglen makes a basic shift. While we used to look into the heavens for evidence of the gods, now we see the forensics of ourselves."<sup>12</sup>

**Time travel, by which I mean an awareness of life that has come before—an awareness that life has come before—is meaningful at the moment of its articulation.**

Maybe we have for too long seen McCracken as a Sagan when he is in fact a Paglen. Or better, maybe he was a Paglen wishing to be a Sagan, against his better judgment. Failure is equally, if differently, inscribed into the prophetic moment of each. Time travel, by which I mean an awareness of life that has come before—an awareness *that* life has come before—is meaningful at the moment of its articulation. What happens next is beyond us. It belongs to someone else, or to no one. I write this with the image of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere's 1795 time capsule firmly in mind. Anointed symbols of patriotism, they offered a promissory note to the new American republic in the form of already-historic coins and the seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; I witnessed these trinkets being exhumed while at the gym, bobbing on a treadmill.

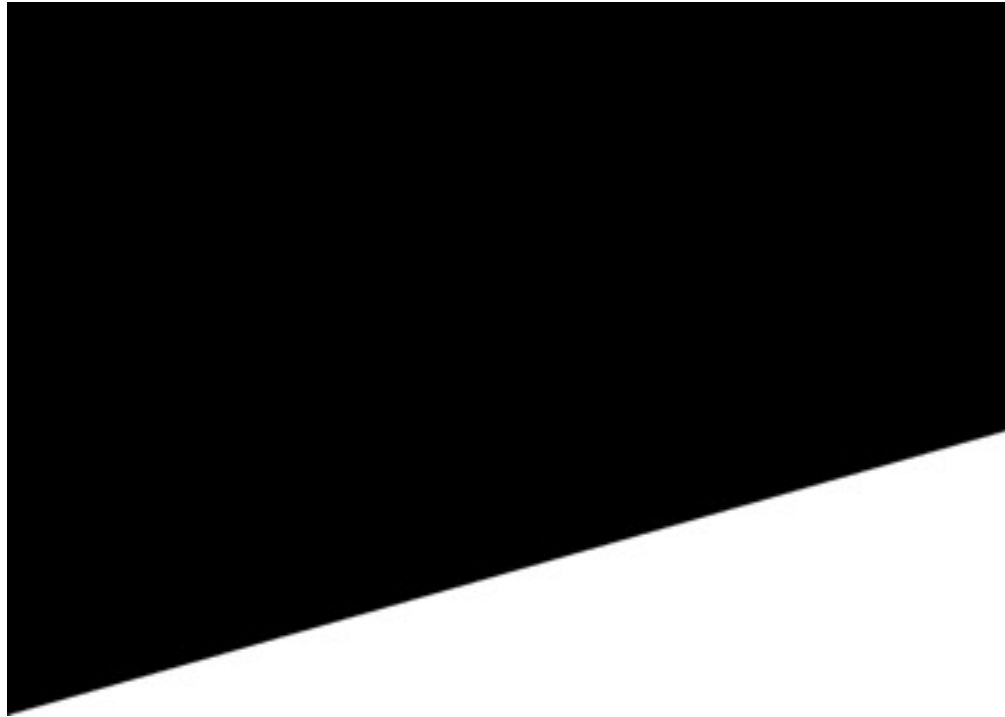
My mother wrote a diary chronicling my life from the day I was born until I left for college. I always marveled at the dedication, the love hours that could never be repaid, as Mike Kelley put it in describing a mode of sentimentality that is really a gaping maw of pain. Each August, I would

get to shop for a new journal for the coming year and it was my task to illustrate the family portrait that now adorns its frontispiece. Everything else was left to my mother. I have fond memories of her scrawling in the little books. All 18 sit in a closet in her guest room, neatly stacked like bars of soap anticipating use. They contain anecdotes that might verify or disprove family lore. I know I devoured broccoli spears, holding them like lollipops; at an unlikely age I was strong enough to move furniture into more favorable dispositions; I christened a favorite brown-haired doll after a friend named Nicole. Then came the divorce, new houses, a dog, another dog, a wonky, well-attended marriage ceremony for the dogs, another house, new friends, classes in jewelry making and landscape painting, and the usual stuff of adolescence. I suppose I imagine the writings to chronicle the global banalities of childhood and the idiosyncrasies that were my and my family's own.

While I intend to read the entries, beginning to end, I have not and cannot bring myself to do so. I long thought that this owed to some kind of preemptive sadness about the losses it confirms, as well as those it portends. For the texts no doubt achieve a portrait of my mother as much as they fashion one of me. What interested, frustrated, or pleased her? What did she deem worthy of mention on days when no event worth remembering happened? What minutia did she record? How did she fill pages or confine an excess of meaning to the same allotted margins? I will have in this something of her, shared with me alone. Only now do I acknowledge that she has been an alibi. I know that she liked me, that she loved me, that she dutifully recorded this longing so that I could keep it close. One day, maybe soon, I will follow these stories of a life I think I recognize and come to discover whether I would have liked myself.

## Endnotes

1. Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
2. To cite just one: Roberta Smith began her coverage for the New York Times by placing McCracken as “a West Coast artist who brought a New Age openness to Minimalist sculpture, along with a vocabulary of bright, sleek slabs, blocks and columns that balanced teasingly between painting and sculpture.” She further described him as “a tall, lanky man who in photographs resembled a cross between Clint Eastwood and Jack Palance [who] approached Minimalism—known for its literal-mindedness, industrial fabrication and resistance to interpretation—with a sense of play, craft and spirituality that was distinctly his own while also reflecting his California roots.” See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/arts/design/john-mccracken-sculptor-of-geometric-forms-dies-at-76.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/arts/design/john-mccracken-sculptor-of-geometric-forms-dies-at-76.html?_r=0)
3. John McCracken, “Remote Viewing/Psychic Traveling; March-April 1997,” *Frieze* (June-August 1997): 60-63.
4. John McCracken in James Monte, *John McCracken: Sculpture 1965-69* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1969) np.
5. John McCracken in Frances Colpitt, “Between Two Worlds,” *Art in America* (April 1998): 90.
6. John McCracken in Patricia Bickers, “UFO Technology,” *Art Monthly* (March 1997): 4
7. John McCracken in “Interview: John McCracken and Matthew Higgs,” *Early Sculpture/JohnMcCracken* (New York: Zwirner & Wirth, 2005): 4-5. He continues: “As to frontiers, that experience hints at one: inner reality. Physical reality is big, but inner reality, though slippery, is bigger—and it permits time travel, as does the mind.”
8. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 148–72.
9. <http://creativetime.org/projects/the-last-pictures/>
10. Trevor Paglen, “Friends of Space, How Are You All? Have You Eaten Yet? Or, Why Talk to Aliens Even if We Can’t,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* (Spring 2013): 8-19.
11. <http://creativetime.org/projects/the-last-pictures/curatorial-statement/>
12. Ibid.



# **THE CLASSROOM AND THE PRECINCT**

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**I**t's been twenty years since Mobb Deep released the album *The Infamous*, featuring street anthems like "Shook Ones Pt. II" and "Give Up The Goods." The most prophetic of rapper Prodigy's lines on the album came in the song "Survival of the Fittest," where he says,

*There's a war going on outside, no man is safe from  
You could run but you can't hide forever  
From these, streets, that we done took  
You walking with your head down scared to look  
You shook, cause ain't no such things as halfway crooks  
They never around when the beef cooks in my part of town  
It's similar to Vietnam  
Now we all grown up and old, and beyond the cops'  
control  
They better have the riot gear ready ...*

1995 in New York City meant the elevation of the executive branch of government on a local and federal level. It was then-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's first year enforcing the Broken Windows Theory, a theory formed by social scientists who believed that if the government cut down on even the smallest crimes, society would see a decrease in crime overall. Critics immediately saw this as a means to throw thousands of men, women, and children, predominantly of color, into prison as a means of social conditioning and in turn making way for wealthier investors to gentrify the most solid blocks of poor and blue-collar neighborhoods. Just the year prior, President Bill Clinton had signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law, which on its face sounds positive, except that it guaranteed that the government could build more prisons, creating a domino effect that made non-violent crimes punishable by long prison sentences, as was already the case in New York State. (We won't even delve into Clinton's clandestine missions all across the world, bombing a Chinese embassy and throwing down economic sanctions in the Middle East.)

That compounded with the proliferation of crack cocaine and its after-effects in Queensbridge, the pernicious conditions of low-income projects, and the ever-growing financial gap between the rich and the poor might have led a young Prodigy to say one of the most quotable lyrics written in the 20th century. Mobb Deep and many other rappers (think Nas, NWA, The Notorious BIG) at the time began to reflect the menacing figures that adults thought they were. For too many of our youth, then as now, they see themselves less as equal members of society and more as prisoners awaiting sentencing, caught in the crosshairs of an environment that doesn't want them to prosper.

These same themes that emerged in the early 90s are still relevant to today's youth. In and out of classrooms, our students may have had some optimism with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, but that quickly came to a halt with non-indictment after painful non-indictment of police officers who murder young men and women of color. Concurrently, and despite the best intentions, teachers have often sided ostensibly with the police officers and the (lack of) justice system, solidifying themselves and the rest of America's K-12 educators as agents of the state for them, not necessarily a separate entity that helps assure a modicum of equity for our students.

Frank Serpico, former NYPD cop turned whistleblower, said in a recent interview,

*Many white Americans, indoctrinated by the ridiculous number of buddy-cop films and police-themed TV shows that Hollywood has cranked out over the decades—almost all of them portraying police as heroes—may be surprised by the continuing outbursts of anger, the protests in the street against the police that they see in inner-city environments like Ferguson. But they often don't understand that these minority communities, in many cases, view the police as the enemy. We want to believe that cops are good guys, but let's face it, any kid in the ghetto knows different. The poor and the disenfranchised*

*in society don't believe those movies; they see themselves as the victims, and they often are.*

Replace the reference of police officers with teachers and it still holds true for many of my colleagues, too. Movies like *Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds* perpetuate the myth of the one-white-person hero teacher trying to save urban youth from their destitution and uncivilized thinking, an ethos captured in alternative certification programs, most notably Teach for America (full disclosure: I'm an alternative certification program graduate as well). Teaching these days can often feel like a crapshoot, with 50% of a new teacher's peers leaving the classroom within the first three years of their time. The ones who stay cling onto many of the ideals, but they still feel generally unprepared for the task at hand. People never tell new teachers that inspiration and vigor only go as far as their pedagogy and understanding of the students in front of them goes.

That's where the crux of "good" policing and "good" teaching comes in. Demands for rules, routines, and discipline ought to have a specific purpose. But, if not executed well, we no longer serve the public, but ourselves.

The politics of being a teacher and being a police officer are far more complex and different than we could give credit for here. The president of the United States, for instance, would never make sorting out good and bad police officers a major point of his state of the union address, but so this goes with teachers. And even though police officers in many metropolitan areas have quotas for making arrests or tickets, they're not subjected to the sort of numerical legerdemain currently vaunted by policymakers around teacher evaluation. Experiences with having a bad teacher slip easily off the tongue, whereas even whispering an experience with a bad police officer is second-degree treason for some.

The most telling difference these days is the way

governing bodies react when any one of these public servants rebels in any fashion. In 2012, for example, Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis led the most significant teacher rebellion in the last four decades when the CTU galvanized parents, students, and other concerned citizens in a strike demanding a better contract for the teachers of Chicago's public schools. After an intense battle with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, all parties agreed on a better contract mid-September of 2012. In May of 2013, Emanuel, almost in a bitter retaliation, decides to close 50 public schools (and secretly invites charter school corporations to fill in those spaces shortly thereafter). With that sort of decimation, he simultaneously decreases the number of long-term teachers, many of whom walked the picket lines that fateful September, and tried to diminish the power of the reinvigorated CTU.

On the other hand, NYC Patrolman's Benevolent Association president Pat Lynch, representative for NYPD's 35 thousand police officers, has rebelled unabashedly against NYC Mayor Bill deBlasio, accusing him of having "blood on his hands" for the murders of officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu for helping to create conditions that are sympathetic to #BlackLivesMatter protestors in New York City and across the nation. With relations so intense in the city already after the non-indictment of Eric Garner, police officers from all over the United States used both Officer Ramos' and Officer Liu's funerals as protests of Mayor deBlasio, turning their backs simultaneously as he spoke about police and community relations. Not one job threatened as of yet. Only more calls for unity in the face of trying times.

As police across the nation get more emboldened to murder young men and women of color with impunity, with little rebuttal from the judicial system, some factions of the teaching force have called for their unions to protect them as vociferously. When word got out that United Federation of Teachers president Michael



Mulgrew and American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten would march with civil rights groups in Staten Island to demand justice for Eric Garner, a group of rebellious teachers galvanized against their own union and started to wear NYPD t-shirts in school, a kind of solidarity unseen in our city for the teaching profession.

To the eyes of the American public, it might seem like none of these are connected, but, to many people of color, the school-to-prison pipeline has been lifted out of the underground and become part of the mainstream understanding of how this country works. When teachers continue to reinforce their allegiance with the darker elements of police brutality, we signal to disenfranchised communities that in fact, their lives don't matter, from the time they step into the classroom to the time they've been pushed – not dropped – out.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union,

*“Zero-tolerance” policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in school lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school. Students of color are especially vulnerable to push-out trends and the discriminatory application of discipline.*

As early as five years old, students of color start seeing a education of a different type than that of mainstream America. Suspensions of pre-K students of color get served at three times the rate of white pre-kindergarteners. These zero-tolerance policies are more prevalent in public and charter schools that are predominantly comprised of students of color, so a student getting arrested for wearing the wrong uniform or insubordination becomes commonplace for many of them. Police officers patrol schools in the name of keeping them safe, but, with metal detectors and cell-phone vans serving as the gatekeepers for these schools, does the heightened focus on safety keep students out of school as well?

Many of these zero-tolerance schools laud their high test scores and perfectly uniformed students, but, akin to decreasing crime rates, do the numbers tell the whole story? Do the inhabitants of this system feel more or less safe than they once did? Do they have to behave differently than others in order to make it in their systems? Do they have to negate some parts of their culture just to bypass becoming another statistic?

Police and teachers have the power to humanize or dehumanize, depending on the elements at play. Centering police efforts on accountability has bipartisan support. The White House's latest recommendations include body cameras for police officers, re-training and support, reviews of special prosecutors in civil rights cases, and re-assessing community needs. Teachers, on the other hand, continue to feel under the thumb of federal and state mandates like Race to the Top, which overhauled teacher evaluation with a critical element of student test scores. On both of these ends, as teachers have noticed, these policies can be well-intentioned (or not), but, if they don't help either party serve their communities, most of this is hot air.

That goes for any person working at the behest of the people. People who work in these public services can't turn their backs on the people we serve. We can't use words like “war-time” to describe the work we do. We can't depreciate our communities by dehumanizing them, shooting at them at will, kicking them out of our rooms for not understanding a problem. We have to provide safe environments for everyone to feel welcome, and act accordingly. We can't blame the people for their given condition more than the people who perpetuate these conditions.

In many ways, we are complicit in the very systems we seek to change. If we don't actively work towards the change, we aren't just helping this amorphous menace. We are the menace.