



Zoë Marni Robertson

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Ekphrasis // Ekphrasis

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The Early Modernism of Art, Post-Internet

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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Sydney

2026

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor/Master of Philosophy (or other higher degree by research).

This research reported in this thesis was supported by the award of a Research Training Program scholarship to the PhD Candidate.

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.
This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signed:

Zoë Marni Robertson

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

This exegesis would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of Alex Gawronski, my supervisor, editor, mentor and friend. He has run artists' spaces for over 17 years, creating room for critical enquiry in a city in which it is sorely lacking, and making incredible work for its own sake and on his own terms. He has also always stood up for what is right, the only permanent Academic from Sydney College of the Arts at the rally and on the picket line. I have no means to repay, and no words to sufficiently thank Gawronski for what he has taught me, or for the last minute edits that he assisted me with whilst on holiday with his partner on the New Years eve of 2023. I dedicate this work to him.

I would also like to thank my incredible friends, colleagues and co-conspirators, who have taught me so much along the way, with particular reference to research support from: Ulrike Brinkmann, Mitch Cairns, Mitchel Cumming, Marina Diaz Molina, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Sarah Rodigari, Onrie Radovich, Maria Smit, Ella Sutherland, Alex Tanazefi and Coen Young. I would also like to thank my mother, Pamela Mahoney, for countless meals and emotional support.

Additional support:

Kelly Azizi, Ella Barclay, Hank Bhatia, Brian Fuata, Aurelia Guo, Philippa Hagon, Mike Hewson, Alison Hodder, Sean Kerr, Reginald Lord, Nisa Mackie, Hilarie Mais, Michael Moran and Julie Rrap.

Arthur Macquarie Travelling Scholarship

Cellar Door Gallery

Fauvette Loreiro Travelling Scholarship (SCA Travel)

George Fraser Gallery and ELAM Project Space

Knulp Gallery

LIA (Leipzig International Artist Residency)

Mais Wright Gallery

Minerva Gallery

Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA)

Abstract

Abstract

The thesis is an initial attempt toward recontextualisation of contemporary art according to its historiological, theological and ideological underpinnings, taking a longer view of history than is currently countenanced in institutions tied to the global capitalist imperative. The enforced secularisation of art began during the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Saxony, where initial protests against the corruption of the church gave way to a new proto-capitalist hierarchy. What has been called the “Dutch Golden Age” (of the 17th Century) is historically renowned for its painting (as well as colonialism), which coincided with the formation of both the stock market and what we understand as the art market. The way in which we understand art today was further influenced by post-revolutionary France, where debates between Romanticism and Realism finally established art as a secular and avant-garde production. This thesis, in essentially explaining a series of paintings that nevertheless remain oblique, also acts as a broader critique of the model of research wherein the written word is privileged over other visual forms of communication, prevalent as a result of the aniconism of Protestant theology (thus the painting is an “ekphrasis” of its own “ekphrasis”). The link between these periods can be described as the lens of the Early Modern, the period of great change in Europe between the 16th and 18th Centuries. The Early Modern therefore refers to a longer history of artistic modernity than that simply ascribed to work of the first part of the 20th Century.



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Introduction:

Introduction:

This “practice-led” exegesis is comparatively short in relation to the breadth of material covered and will therefore only offer a brief introduction into the concepts and historical subjects that it pursues. Its main aim is to recontextualise what we know as “Contemporary Art” as pertains to its historiological, ideological and theological underpinnings. These can be traced much further back in history than art institutions will tend to allude to after the end of the Cold War. The related effect has been to entrench the illusion that capitalism is the only possible system, to the extent that “Contemporary Art” would be trapped in the perpetual present of the market, negating the work, but also its relation to the struggles of its past. This is not to state that there is necessarily a dearth of art historical education (though such a thing may be anecdotally true of various Schools of Contemporary Art, and it is certainly true that the humanities are constantly under threat within the university system). The contention, repeated through rather disparate analyses, is rather that the disciplines related to art history and theory, especially in the Neoliberal era, have tended to align with interests that they would have the majority of people believe are external to the production of art but, which in every way determine the “art world’s” own “Overton window”¹ of acceptable discourse.

Despite the apparent certainty of bad-faith readings on the part of the liberal academy (for which I am indebted to my examiners), I am of the mind that the frame of “Contemporary Art”, which is largely positioned as a marketing term for institutions and the art market they serve, can be readily understood as works made contemporaneously that ascribe to that moniker for the sake of their proliferation and sale. The globalised art of the present is the combined product of hundreds of years of European and North American Imperialism, such that a more appropriate title for much of the work presented today in the circuit of Biennales, Museums, Institutions and Commercial Galleries would be “Late Capitalist Art”. There is art adjacent to these mechanisms that doesn’t strictly conform to the objectives of propaganda and insider trading that we have come to expect from “blue chip” art, but, for the most part, this is not the interest of this body of work.

Each of the six chapters in this thesis is an ekphrasis of a painting linked to some aspect of the theological and literal revolutions that brought about a changed understanding of the role of art in the West, with figures and

¹ The range of arguments judged to be politically acceptable at any given time, named after the American policy analyst, Joseph Overton, who proposed that rather than the preferences of politicians using any concept, the political viability of an idea depends mainly on whether it falls within an acceptability range.

phenomena from today that are analogous. “Ekphrasis” is a word used predominately for pieces of text that describe images, and particularly paintings. However, the accompanying paintings equally describe the text of this exegesis in ways impossible to communicate wholly through language. The subject matter of the paintings as material and conceptual loci, overall presents a Historical Materialist² reading. In particular, they allude to the history of class dynamics as they pertain to the art of the market, with specific reference to the modern era, that includes a now where tech monopolies concentrate resources into the hands of the few. Nonetheless, neither the political project represented by this exegesis, nor its academic work, is rendered absolutely redundant, as pedantically constructed arguments give it credence, just as its unconventional formal characteristics prove themselves an argument for means of communication which are more generative than didactic.

This exegesis begins by establishing parallels between art produced since the advent of the internet and perhaps the only comparable recorded historical period, that arising after the invention of the printing press. There are strange resonances between the eras that are both formal, where what we today describe as “memes” employ very similar strategies to early modern pamphlets, and ideological, where what Max Weber called “The Protestant Ethic”³ within capitalism (in the sense that the new Protestant religion would call for the complete sublimation of the life of the adherent), underpins much of how we understand Contemporary Art, in which every aspect of the artist’s life and public persona becomes part of their “brand”. The influence of Protestant theology is evident even to the extent of the henceforth divorcement of art from official religion. This thesis, in essentially explaining a series of paintings that nevertheless remain oblique, also acts as a broader critique of the model of research wherein the written word is privileged over visual and gestural forms of communication, prevalent as a result of the aniconism of Protestant theology. Only artworks directly referenced in the paintings are reproduced within the document to increase the sense of a claustrophobic interiority and self-referentiality between painting and text. It is also a gesture to the absurdity of the hierarchy of word over image still presumed by the academy.

The paintings themselves trace this development to the irreducibility of monotheistic religion to “the word”, especially after what is called the “Dutch Golden Age” (of the 17th Century). This period is historically renowned for its painting (as well as colonialism), which coincided with the formation of both the stock market and what we understand as the art market. The way in which we understand art today was further influenced by post-revolutionary France, where debates between Romanticism and Realism finally established art as a secular and avant-garde production. The link between these periods can be described as the lens of the Early Modern, the period of great change in Europe between the 16th and 18th Centuries. Early Modernism came about at

² Historical materialism is Karl Marx’s theory of history that posits that economic forces are the primary drivers of social change.

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2001) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995808>

this period, sometimes contemporaneously to, but also after, their upheavals. Early Modern therefore refers to a longer history of artistic modernity than that simply ascribed to work of the first part of the 20th Century. Late Capitalism is a term related to the longer appreciation of this period, with perhaps Utopian dreams of an emergent system within the near-certainty of societal, economic and environmental collapse of the period in which we live.

The First Chapter details the inspiration behind my painting, “Atropos, the Countess of Lupfen”, which includes a rough copy of Francisco Goya’s “Atropos, the Fates” (1819-1823) and a scene from *Bauernkrieg* or German Peasant War of 1525. The inspiration for this comes from what is probably an apocryphal story from the lead-up to the *Bauernkrieg*, in which a particularly callous countess was said to have had her peasants put aside their subsistence farming to collect snail shells that she could use as spools for her thread.⁴ The chapter centres around revolutionary moments and conspiracy, as inspired by strange coincidences surrounding a book about the *Bauernkrieg*, written by an anonymous Italian art collective in the year 2000, and titled simply *Q*.⁵ The novel *Q* is likely to have been the original inspiration for the actions of the person or persons behind the conspiracy theory known as “Qanon”. It has been variously suggested that Qanon, in providing an ecosystem in which its adherents could create their own narratives, became a kind of mass literature project. This represented a form of community participation famously lacking in contemporary society, which is after all most probably exasperated by the elitism of what is known as “the art world”. In burgeoning alt-right⁶ forums such ‘magical’ thinking was espoused via the phrase, “Do Your Own Research”. This, I argue, is quite similar to how much of what passes as “art as research” is produced, writing that is rarely rigorous, where artists are examined by artists who have been examined by artists, whose expertise may be simply limited to their capacities for networking and a kind of window-dressing for the elite. Relatedly, the notion of auto-history is markedly sillier than autofiction. “Atropos, the Countess of Lupfen” is in itself a weaving together of disparate threads or an exercise in apophenia, albeit one that strangely laid the foundations for the work and historical focus that was to form the rest of this research project.

The Second Chapter opens with a work that is predominately a copy of a painting that hangs on prominent, permanent display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), “The Sons of Clovis II” (1880) by Évariste Vital Luminais, with the addition of a figure-portrait of Aotearoan Post-Internet Artist, Simon Denny, who sits now atop the raft carrying the eponymous sons. Luminais was a “History Painter” or “Academic Artist”, terminology popularised around a similar period for artists painting either historical scenes or those

4 Tom Scott, “The Peasants’ War”, in *A Companion to the Reformation World*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006)

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996737.ch4>

5 Luther Blissett Trans. Shaun Whiteside, *Q*, (William Heinemann, 2003)

6 The encyclopedia Britannica defines the Alt-right as a: “far-right white supremacist political and social movement active in the United States in the 2010s. The alt-right was a loose association of relatively young white nationalists, extreme libertarians, and neo-Nazis. Mostly active online, members employed websites and social media to effectively spread their message and harass their opponents, particularly from 2014 into 2017. After an alt-right protest turned deadly in the summer of 2017, the movement fractured and dissipated.”

from Classical Mythology, which is characterised by a certain didacticism. It is a school of art largely maligned both in its time and subsequently, similar to what has been termed “Post-Internet Art” (which is supposed to describe art since the invention of the internet rather than some speculative time after it). Post-Internet Art is often similarly didactic, and ten years from its heyday, appears widely disparaged and disliked. Academic Art of the 19th Century described large realistic painting works, while the Academic Art of today is similarly descriptive, presenting ‘information’ as reality. The work refers to the meticulous work of Denny in presenting the ideology of tech billionaire Peter Thiel such as to suggest dystopian ends against a single alternative that would have been fairly ideologically conservative in the mid-20th century. It is my contention that such thoroughly researched and intelligent works that yet lack nuance can equally well be deployed in service to those who they claim to criticise, resembling the efforts of the two-party political systems that we associate with anglophone democracy. To be successful in this field is to present at least a veneer of political neutrality, such that critique becomes little more than a performative art object. Easy solutions are presented as to art’s role in society rather than deploying art tactically to raise more questions.

Chapter Three is dedicated to the painting, “The Suicide of Lucretius”, based on a work produced by Lucas Cranach the elder and his studio, “The Suicide of Lucretia,” as well as the work of 1st Century Roman poet Lucretius whose sole known work “*De Rerum Natura*” coined the phrase *ex nihilo nihil fit*, or “nothing comes from nothing”. It is a rumination on the history of complex mathematics largely inspired by the book *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* by mathematician and philosopher Brian Rotman.⁷ The chapter details the relationship between art, business and religion through the influence of the Cranach studio in promoting Martin Luther and the Reformation as a business-friendly new form of religion. It is a fairly obscure area of art history for an ostensibly Contemporary Artist to research, and literature reviews reveal a bias presented as objectivity in works of scholarship in the area presented after the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), in a way interesting to the broader contentions of the thesis, where East German scholars are disparaged for their perceived ideological ties by latterly neoliberal art historians who would claim an absurd neutrality.

The painting described in the Fourth Chapter depicts the artist sometimes described as an ‘internet anthropologist’ Joshua Citarella alongside Professor and Theologian of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, as well as a lot of meat. Citarella has been one of the more vocal opponents of the liberal establishment, working toward socialist ends and interviewing subjects such as Catherine Liu, whose 2021 book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*⁸ provided one of the most convincing critiques of

⁷ Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, (St. Martin’s Press, 1987)

⁸ Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1fkbgjx>. 26-28

liberal orthodoxy within the academy, mirrored within art institutions, where the authors of more stringent materialist critiques are quite often vilified and driven from employment opportunities. Citarella and Luther are staged in their intimate relationship to the “revolutionary” technology of their respective times, namely the printing press and the internet. Theoretically both figures seek, or sought, to educate their publics towards the development of a new moral order while proliferating their own image in service to these causes. However, the relatively straight forward machinery of the printing press is a vastly different means than the internet. Where Luther’s eventual betrayal of his earlier anti-corruption ethics can be easily traced to his later association with the princes, the methodology employed by anyone seeking mass engagement via the internet is inherently more insidious and requires constant vigilance lest any apparently revolutionary ideology be subsumed by the metrics of the attention economy.

The fifth painting revisits the figure of Peter Thiel, this time juxtaposed against the figure of Louis XIV of France, as imagined in post-revolutionary France by epic novelist Alexandre Dumas. The strange confluences between the Romantic and Realist movements of the time would come to influence the history of art in ways that have been largely forgotten. It leads to a discussion of the unlikely contemporary turn towards the embodiment of a new monarchism within the North American alt right, which would seem to stem from a perception that, given the current system in which monopolisation seems inevitable and insurmountable, one might as well defer to the authority of a King. Thiel is an avowed libertarian and former boss of J.D. Vance, the Vice President of the United States of America, whose populist politics are both linked and opposed to the tech monopolies from which he derived his initial success. . The nostalgia of romanticism was from the beginning, mocked for its often mawkish and sensationalised popularism. At the same moment, “realist” subjects were created to advance the importance of and equality of the ‘common man’.

The sixth and final painting to which Chapter Six refers, differs from the others in so far as it is a reproduction of an existing still life painting and a photograph of words, rather than a figurative work. The two images in this painting were conjoined as a reflection on photographic technologies and their influence on culture more broadly, from the *camera obscura*, widely used as a painting tool in the 17th Century Dutch Republic, and the now all but obsolete analogue photography whose heyday immediately preceded the internet and the digitisation of material. The chapter discusses particularly the relationship between the aniconism of the Protestant-inflected Calvinism of the Dutch Republic and its impact on the colonial exploits of that regime as well as how these twin applications came to produce the world’s first art market. The photographic aspect of this last painting is derived from part of a series by Young British Artist (or YBA) Tacita Dean from her series “Lord Byron Dies” (2000). Discussing capitalist value in relation to art, this chapter identifies Kalf’s odd juxtapositions of objects of provenance and more bourgeois Dutch taste to exemplify the interests of a new

mercantile class. Their relationship to the art market reaches its final extreme in the art championed after the end of the Cold War when the market practically becomes the art itself in the work of the YBAs.

For the purposes of this thesis, alternative possibilities are rarely alluded to, as the critique it expounds largely focuses on the instrumentalisation of art, and absurd claims of such instrumentalisation's inherent virtue. Conversely, art's greatest political possibility may be located in the fact of its utter uselessness, the fact that it produces a value that is ultimately unquantifiable. While by no means 'new' – and this also key to my argument – leanings of this type, aim to directly contradict the excesses of the capitalist art market which evermore frequently acts as its own currency while arguably rarely producing anything that could be properly described as 'art'. This exegesis intends to achieve a broader critical analysis around the production of artwork against the seeming necessity to enhance the relationship between secularism and "Capitalist Realism". The alternative path is ever toward artistic self-determination.

Chapter One:

Chapter One:



The Art of Conspiracy

The Art of Conspiracy



Zoë Marni Robertson, "Atropos, The Countess of Lupfen", 2022. Acrylic on (found) canvas banner, 400cm x 200cm. Installation view: "Modernity Slop Trauma Studies" 2024 PhD exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Project Space. Photo: Jessica Maurer



Francisco Goya, "Atropos, /The Fates (Átropos / Las Parcas)", 1819-1823. Oil mural transferred to canvas, 123 x 226 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Francisco Goya's "Atropos, the Fates", depicts the fates with a man spinning the story of his life (Atropos ends it by cutting the thread). In my own version of this work, beneath "Atropos, The Fates" are the serfs of the Countess of Lupfen, collecting snail shells to use as spools for thread, before they revolted, an allegory for the origins of the German Peasant War (*Bauernkrieg*) of 1525. The *Bauernkrieg* was immediately preceded by the Reformation (1517), through which Martin Luther argued against the corruption of the church, translating the bible into the common tongue so that everyone could read the teachings of Christ. Preacher and theologian Thomas Müntzer was a central figure in the *Bauernkrieg*, his catch cry was *Omnia Sunt Communia* or "Everything Belongs to Everyone." Müntzer strove towards an end-of-the-world in which all people would be equal. Contrastingly, Luther spoke out against the peasants who were brutally executed, including Müntzer. This general scenario was the subject of the book *Q* (2000), written (as Marxist propaganda) by Italian Art Collective "Luther Blisset".⁹ The character "Q" is a shadowy figure in the papacy who thwarts the efforts of the peasants. In the later QAnon conspiracy theory, the figure "Q" functioned in a similar way, authoring "Q drops", very basic and oblique statements designed to encourage confusion and shared through 4chan/8chan(8kun). YouTubers and bloggers set about deciphering and disseminating the perceived "messages", with followers around the world creating and spreading misinformation. The word "apophenia" is used in game design to describe the compulsion of users find to locate unintentional or covert patterns/clues ultimately leading them off course. The term "guided apophenia",¹⁰ describes QAnon as a mass-writing project, in which some of society's most alienated and vulnerable can also engage with culture (and find friends). This need is otherwise denied so many and in art too, as far as it has become excessively institutionalised and/or exclusionary, distributed from the top down, often appearing self-congratulatory in its apparent meaninglessness. In this realm, the real conspiracy may be a dangerous equivalency within art theory, where similarly 'unreason' fails to be celebrated as farce, and is instead mistaken for absolute truth.



New Conspiracies (Old Arguments) New Conspiracies (Old Arguments)

In 2016 I was included in an exhibition called "New World Order" at Casula Powerhouse, curated by Ella Barclay, and featuring works by Hany Armanious, Simon Denny, Beau Emmett, Eva and Franco Mattes, Soda_Jerk, Jess Johnson, Alexis Mailles and Yujun Ye, Ryan Presley, Suzanne Treister and Pope Alice

⁹ Luther Blissett, Trans. Shaun Whiteside, *Q*, (William Heinemann, 2003)

¹⁰ Reed Berkowitz, "A Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon: Playing with Reality" on *Medium*, October 1, 2020. <https://medium.com/curiuserinstitute/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon-580972548be5> accessed 27/05/2022.

Xorporation.¹¹ Apparently, the institution had wanted an exhibition about conspiracy theories but was subtly dissuaded by Barclay. In 2020 I contacted Barclay upon reading an article, “QAnon: the Italian artists who may have inspired America’s most dangerous conspiracy theory”, as it would turn out, one of many, linking the conspiracy theory, QAnon, with a large anonymous Italian art collective from the 1990s, Luther Blissett¹² whose members included Eva and Franco Mattes. The work of Eva and Franco Mattes in “New World Order” (and since) has largely focused on documenting the experience of the human moderators charged with taking down explicit content from YouTube and Facebook. Recently, actors playing young Berliner moderators doing makeup tutorials, have described their experiences of the worst things that they had seen moderating Facebook - the homophobia and the violence, the “bad things” only “bad people” would say among themselves.¹³ Luther Blissett began their work, interrupting society through art, by demonstrating how easy it is to manipulate the media via the “Satanic Panic” enveloping Italy in the 1990s, (something also taking place in the United States at the same time, and arguably since). They staged fake Satanist human sacrifices on VHS which were then sent to Italian TV stations and aired, apparently without investigation.¹⁴ Four artists involved in Luther Blissett would go on to write the book *Q*, which, it has been suggested is the basic playbook for QAnon conspiracy movement.



The type of sabotage employed by QAnon was achieved via so-called “Q drops”, essentially obscure statements posted on internet message boards, the ‘deep web’ of 4chan (then 8chan, then 8kun), allegedly by someone high-up in the United States Government. This person had fictional High Security “Q Clearance”, and spoke out against all kinds of Satanic practices supposed to be commonplace among US “elites”, consisting generally of Liberals and especially politicians and influential figures tied to the Democratic Party.¹⁵ It has since been near-proven, through linguistic forensics, that those behind QAnon were the subjects of the documentary “Q: Into

11 “New World Order” curated by Ella Barclay, featuring Hany Armanious, Simon Denny, Beau Emmett, Eva and Franco Mattes, Soda_Jerk, Jess Johnson, Alexis Mailles and Yujun Ye, Ryan Presley, Suzanne Treister and Pope Alice_Xorporation at Casula Pow-erhouse Art Centre (CPAC), New South Wales, 9 December 2016 – 12 February 2017. The gallery seems to have been renamed and the already limited archive of the exhibition cannot be found except in Bec Gallow “Ella Barclay on conspiracy theories and the New World Order” in *Art Guide*, 9 December 2016. <https://artguide.com.au/ella-barclay-on-conspiracy-theories-and-the-new-world-order/>

12 Eddy Frankel, “QAnon: the Italian artists who may have inspired America’s most dangerous conspiracy theory” in *The Art Newspaper*, 19th January 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/19/qanon-the-italian-artists-who-may-have-inspired-americas-most-dangerous-conspiracy-theory> last accessed: 30/05/22.

13 Eva and Franco Mattes, “The Bots”, 2020. 7-episode video installation series, DIS <https://dis.art/series/the-bots>

14 *Q: Into The Storm*, a six-part documentary series, Director Cullen Hoback, executive producer Adam McKay, HBO, March 21, 2021.

15 Ibid.

The Storm”, (2021).¹⁶ “Q” was non-other than 4chan/8chan/8kun owner Ron Watkins.¹⁷ In the documentary, Watkins is asked if he knows of the aforementioned novel, which he denies, while being surprised by the question in a way that strongly suggests that he has read it and employed its sense-subverting strategies.

Several commentators, including those of the “QAnon Anonymous” podcast and online cultural critic Brad Troemel have suggested that QAnon was (and still is) a mass-writing project. Through it, oblique cues are published in order to generate wild theories, usually based on a mixture of fantasy and coincidence.¹⁸ Elsewhere QAnon is described as: “obsession that resembles demented literary criticism: every current event encoded with hidden meanings, global criminals desperate to signal their crimes through symbols, millions of messages waiting for the right close reader to unpack them.”¹⁹ Here, I will not comment on individual theories or the “Q drops” that however spuriously suggested them, or even the quality of what they produced but rather on QAnon’s likely antecedent in literature. Instead, I will approach it from stated aims of the ‘radical left’ as potential source material of a phenomenon markedly more effective or “impactful” than mere “critique”.

Game designer, Reed Berkowitz has proposed QAnon as “guided apophenia”, apophenia being a term often used in the gaming industry to describe the phenomenon of users finding patterns in the digital matrix that were not designed or planned and which are ultimately meaningless, something designers basically aim to eliminate. Reed argues that instead of trying to dissuade wild theories, QAnon employed them as a key feature, allowing for a great deal of creative scope for its adherents,²⁰ a mass-movement encouraging the most spurious connections to be made according to the, by now, oft-invoked mantra, “Do Your Own Research”. Certain narratives are ultimately affirmed through “Q” either via likes/shares or in subsequent online disseminated ‘drops’, apparently to perpetuate the notion that adherents are able to actively contribute to the growing narrative. Such adherents believe they are participating in politics, culture and society in ways many of the more marginalised among them, would otherwise be unable to in ‘real’ society. This sensation is heightened when contemporary culture belongs to monopolies and therefore few of us can participate in it, either through popular culture or its elitist turn as contemporary/visual art.²¹

16 *Q: Into The Storm*, directed by Cullen Hoback (2021; New York: HBO, 2021), Accessed on Binge.

17 The suspicions apparently confirmed by forensic linguistics employing machine learning techniques. David D. Kirkpatrick “Who Is Behind QAnon? Linguistic Detectives Find Fingerprints” in *The New York Times*, Published Feb. 19, 2022 Updated Feb. 24, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/technology/qanon-messages-authors.html>

18 Brad Troemel (with Julian Feeld, Travis View, and Jake Rockatansky) “YBF Podcast #4: Qanon Anonymous hosts Julian Feeld, Travis View, and Jake Rockatansky” Your Biggest Fan Podcast, S1E4, via Brad Troemel on Patreon, accessed 27/05/2022.

19 “How QAnon Became Obsessed With ‘Adrenochrome,’ an Imaginary Drug Hollywood Is ‘Harvesting’ from Kids.” *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company LLC, 2020.

20 Berkowitz, *ibid*.

21 See, for example, the dire state of mid-tier galleries (once breeding grounds for new artists) since the 2008 market crash, what is left of the art market is investments in already bankable (overinflated) “greats”. Christian Viveros-Fauné, “The Middle Market Squeeze, Part II: Galleries Get a Reality Check”, *Artnet*, October 17, 2016 <https://news.artnet.com/market/the-middle-market-squeeze-part-2-an-art-gallery-reality-check-703043> accessed 27/05/2022.

Troemel further explains that guided apophenia: “conditions you to find whatever evidence you can to prove the conclusion you’ve already determined to be true. It’s the opposite of the scientific method, which is why QAnon has the creative freedom to bring in literally anything it wants as proof.”²² These descriptions could just as easily be applied to so much of what self-identifies as “art as research”. However, what is happening is not so much a conflict between rational/scientific methodology and what is blatant and basically silly conspiracy about children being harvested for a substance dubbed “adrenochrome”²³, as it is indicative of a rejection of the equally unscientific propaganda that has more and more effectively convinced the marginalised to act against their own interests. In his posthumously published book of essays, *Taking the Risk out of Democracy* (1995)²⁴ social psychologist, academic and sociologist, Alex Carey charted the progression of campaigns of disinformation from the first decade of the 20th Century, citing myriad well-funded campaigns by big business interests looking to scuttle especially unionised opposition to poor working conditions and pay, even suggesting that, “the success of business propaganda in persuading us, for so long, that we are free from propaganda is one of the most significant propaganda achievements of the twentieth century.”²⁵ Further to this, it also a rejection of the monopolistic world view of the same oligarchic corporations that pretend that everything can be known and quantified, in the same way that a conspiracy theory might operate (as a shadow of that model of certainty).



Black and White Paintings Black and White Paintings

Of course, Satanic conspiracy theories are hardly a new phenomenon and do not seem to be any more or less effective whether they are shared by the mainstream media (in the case of the culture referred to and intervened in by Luther Blisset), the internet (as with QAnon), or even via the printing press. Indeed, artists responding to fear-mongering and superstition are nothing new: one of the most famous art historical examples is Francisco Goya’s “Los Caprichos” (1797-1798),²⁶ a book of prints produced at the end of the Spanish Inquisition. Related scholarship on this series is divided into two camps, one which sees the depictions of witchcraft etc. as an enlightened critique of superstition and the ideological role of the Catholic Church, and the other that sees the depictions as expressing Goya’s own superstitions and disdain for the darkness of humanity.²⁷ The two schools seem to operate as though there had to be a simple, didactic unitary answer, like trying to empty poetry

²² Troemel *ibid.*

²³ The Daily Beast, *Ibid.*

²⁴ Alex Carey, and Andrew Lohrey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997, p.21

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.21

²⁶ Francisco Goya “Los Caprichos (The Caprices)”, 1797-1798. 80 prints in aquatint and etching. I have generally used the English translation for foreign titles, but in this case the work is more commonly known by its original title.

²⁷ Vance Holloway, “Goya’s Caprichos, the church, the inquisition, witchcraft, and abjection.” *Dieciocho* 35, no. 1 (2012):21–

of its nuance. Arguably what makes the ‘Caprichos’ so compelling is that they both rail against the ignorance of such persecutions while simultaneously dooming humanity to its worst excesses. Goya would go on to execute paintings of horror on the walls of his own house, which would henceforth be known as the ‘house of the deaf man’, Goya showing no signs of having developed a more positive outlook on human nature. One of these so-called ‘black paintings’, “Atropos the Fates” (1819-23), depicts the fates alongside a man as they spin the story of his life (Atropos ending it by cutting the thread). Goya, at the end of his life, painted those pitiless fates weaving life’s final hours.

Speaking to the pre-eminence of the notion of logic, the word ‘text’ comes from the Latin ‘textus’: “thing woven”,²⁸ where storytelling traditions have always been conflated with tales by the hearth. A certain kind of power has always been bound up in these usually feminine practices, which according to feminist scholar Silvia Federici, were among the first labours to be devalued under the primitive accumulation of women’s labour.²⁹ This process began following the Black Plague of the mid 14th Century, but was properly institutionalised following the Reformation in Germany with its subsequent witch trials, which claimed the lives of at least 20,000 women from 1560-1660, a full quarter of all of those slaughtered as witches in Europe.³⁰



Bauernkrieg/Revoluting Discussed Bauernkrieg/Revoluting Discussed

The novel *Q*³¹ is a retelling of the events of the German Peasant War (or *Bauernkrieg*) of 1525, which came to a head shortly after the Protestant Reformation. Friedrich Engels’ *The German Peasant War of 1525* details various peasant uprisings in the lead-up to the Reformation, as well as the “Peasant War” of the book’s title, in an attempt to provide a consistent narrative of the emergence of a proto-socialism.³² Engels’ work centres on the teachings of theologian Thomas Müntzer (whose radical ideas were largely blamed for the uprising), and describes Müntzer’s “doctrine” thus:

28 See the (typically) poetic entry in the Online Etymology Dictionary on the subject: “text (n.) late 14c., “wording of anything written,” from Old French *texte*, Old North French *tixte* “text, book; Gospels” (12c.), from Medieval Latin *textus* “the Scriptures, text, treatise,” in Late Latin “written account, content, characters used in a document,” from Latin *textus* “style or texture of a work,” literally “thing woven,” from past participle stem of *texere* “to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build” (from PIE root **teks-* “to weave, to fabricate, to make; make wicker or wattle framework”).

An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns — but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After long practice, their work took on such an even, flexible texture that they called the written page a *textus*, which means cloth. [Robert Bringhurst, “The Elements of Typographic Style”]

To Socrates, a word (the name of a thing) is “an instrument of teaching and of separating reality, as a shuttle is an instrument of separating the web.” The meaning “a digital text message” is by 2005.” Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=text> Accessed 30/05/22.

29 See *Sylvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the body and Primitive Accumulation*, (Autonomedia, 2004) p.97

30 Bengt Ankerloo, William Monter, & Stuart Clark, “Three-quarters German? European Witch Trials 1560—1660”. In *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, Volume 4, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001).

31 Blissett *ibid.*

32 Engels, *ibid.*

“His theologic-philosophic doctrine attacked all the main points not only of Catholicism but of Christianity as such. Under the cloak of Christian forms, he preached a kind of pantheism, which curiously resembles the modern speculative mode of contemplation, and at times even taught open atheism. He repudiated the assertion that the Bible was the only infallible revelation. The only living revelation, he said, was reason, a revelation which existed among all peoples at all times. To contrast the Bible with reason, he maintained, was to kill the spirit by the letter, for the Holy Spirit of which the Bible spoke was not a thing outside of us; the Holy Spirit was our reason. Faith, he said, was nothing else but reason become alive in man, therefore, he said, pagans could also have faith. Through this faith, through reason come to life, man became godlike and blessed, he said. Heaven was to be sought in this life, not beyond, and it was, according to Muenzer, the task of the believers to establish Heaven, the kingdom of God, here on earth. As there is no Heaven in the beyond, he asserted, so there is no Hell in the beyond, and no damnation, and there are no devils but the evil desires and cravings of man.”³³

As Engel’s demonstrates, the underlying problems with nascent capitalism were causing rebellions years before its full emergence and domination, and in different iterations due to the varying conditions of the peasantry throughout Germany. He also writes of Martin Luther’s apparent surprise at the overwhelming response to his “95 Theses” (articles against the corruption of the Roman church), suggesting that it was a reflection of public will, as opposed to a work of singular genius. Engel’s measured work contrasts Luther’s reflective gesture with Müntzer’s radical political program which, however, offered few firm foundations for a new society.

However Müntzer may have inspired the movement, the peasants were by no means an organised force focused on a singular leader, but rather, that the people were driven to revolt by changing economic circumstances including the introduction of new forms of credit. Where rather than an inevitable force of history, the various revolts were the result of the terrestrial concerns of different groups of peasants. What fails to be successfully relayed in Engels’ text is that the peasants, however apparently linked by class issues, were very much divided in terms of their aims and aspirations, a situation that appeared to be permanent. For the miners, their revolt was largely against monopolies of credit overseen by new banking concerns, chiefly the Fuggers.³⁴ The loss of common lands both due to the actions of the nobility and simple population growth, was a common related complaint. Textile manufacturers seeking “outworkers” within villages, where the labour was not so heavily controlled, additionally created incompatible grievances between textile workers in the villages and cities.³⁵

33 Ibid, 66-67.

34 A powerful banking dynasty that arose out of Augsburg in the 15th and 16th century, taking over from the Medici of Florence.

35 Scott, Tom. “The Peasants’ War.” In *A Companion to the Reformation World*, 56–69. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996737.ch4>.

Of course, it would be disingenuous to fail to attribute the apparently disparate issues of the peasantry to the concentration of wealth at the time, (which is apparently what one can expect from a lot of contemporary scholarship). And while the peasants did not necessarily align under one leader, most of their issues could be traced to the efforts of one man, Jakob Fugger, also known as *Jakob the rich* (who is said to have been richer than any man in history until Elon Musk). In fact, preceding the Peasant War, one of the founding arguments for Reformation was the protestation against the sale of Indulgences, where one could purchase absolution from the church for one's sins. This had long been a controversial practice within the church but in 16th century Germany was wildly exasperated by what had essentially become a double payment between a church that was raising money for Saint Paul's Basilica (and the many brilliant works of Renaissance Art), and a repayment of a loan to Jakob Fugger. Said loan was secured so that Albrecht of Brandenburg could pay the Curia to become the Elector to the Church in Saxony, along with an additional fee paid to Pope Leo X, so that he could administer the Indulgences and pay back the loan.³⁶

Nonetheless, independent of doctrine of any kind, different groups of peasants organised, and in some cases drew up lists of practical demands to improve their lot. The "Twelve Articles of the Swabian League" for example, called for an end to serfdom, as well as for the restoration of the right to harvest firewood for personal use (against the recent introduction of having to pay the nobility for it). These articles were drafted by the journeyman furrier and lay preacher Sebastian Lotzer and are considered the first charter of Human Rights and Civil Liberties in Europe after the Roman Empire.³⁷ Regarding issues of inequality, there are many contemporary resonances within these lists of conflicting Early Modern issues (and many interconnected with those most vulnerable to conspiracy theories).

Ultimately, Müntzer's doctrine was apocalyptic, actually calling for the end of the world through the lens of a presumed Christian eschatology where there would be heaven on earth in a vision closely resembling Utopian socialism. This doctrine, like that of his contemporary Luther, coincided with a period of rapid change in no small part brought about by the technology of the printing press, and with it, the conceptual and material tools facilitating the emergence of early capitalism. Even by the 16th Century, capitalism seemed like the end of the world, though clearly not the one Müntzer had hoped for. Luther, on the other hand, betrayed his early radicalism in favour of siding with the princes and aristocracy, those noblemen holding power in German regions prior to unification. In doing so, Luther cemented his new religion in opposition to the Catholic clergy, while denouncing the peasant uprising even as far as calling for its violent suppression. When Müntzer was 28,

36 Angus Cameron, "The man who gave us the Reformation – and it wasn't Martin Luther", *The Conversation*, October 24, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/the-man-who-gave-us-the-reformation-and-it-wasnt-martin-luther-85196>

37 German History in Documents and Images: Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years' War, 1500-1648 Grievances and Demands – The Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants (February 27-March 1, 1525) https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Doc.52-ENG-12%20Articles_en.pdf

he was finally captured, put on the rack, and decapitated; but the war continued elsewhere until all emergent leaders were brutally quelled. Müntzer's catchphrase *Omnia Sunt Communia*, "everything belongs to everyone", argued that a true Christianity would share resources among the people. While history seems to remember the 'great men' of those times, Engels urged an appreciation of the timeliness of each intervention, each revolt in a world made up of individual interests that coalesced in the midst of worsening conditions for everyday people. Engel's a historical materialist reading of the Reformation, which, while certainly thorough and mostly convincing, also betrays an eschatology not dissimilar to the principles and orientation of Müntzer.³⁸

ackwards Spiral, the Snail Again, in Medieval Marginal Warfare And eyond Backwards Spiral, the Snail Again, in Medieval Marginal Warfare³⁹ And Beyond

"All agreed that the inception of rebellion occurred in the landgraviate of Stuhlingen, a territory largely (though not exclusively) under the rule of the counts of Lupfen, at midsummer 1524, and several saw its trigger in the unconscionable insistence of the countess that the peasants during harvest-time should gather snail shells for her maidservants to wind yarn upon. This may be no more than a fairy tale, but the Stuhlingers themselves subsequently set forth grievances of an equally bizarre nature: that they had been forced to gather roots, morels, juniper berries, and even barberries so that their lords could make barberry compote. The sting, of course, lay in the very triviality of the task: how humiliating to have to perform such superfluous work to satisfy the self-indulgent whim of their overlords."

- Tom Scott, "The Peasants' War."⁴⁰

Bizarre revolts tend to erupt from similarly bizarre circumstances. The 'German Peasant War of 1525' as mentioned bears a likely apocryphal alternative moniker: "The Snail War".⁴¹ All these material realities related via this anecdote brought to the fore the reams of thread hand-stitched into clothing and homewares for example: it seemed unfathomable how much longer the production of life once took. Yet today we do not seem

38 The "monism" of Historical Materialism is most famously conveyed by Walter Benjamin in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" In *Critical Theory and Society A Reader*, 1st ed., 255–63 (Routledge, 1989) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003059509-26.>

39 Lilian M. C. Randall's "The Snail in Gothic Marginal Warfare." *Speculum* 37, no. 3 (1962): 358–367., (which I appreciate for the unintended pun "marginal warfare" ...)

40 Tom Scott, "The Peasants' War", In *A Companion to the Reformation World*, 56–69. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996737.ch4>. P.56

41 Richard Anderton "The War of Snails – 10 Curious Facts About the German Peasants' Revolt" *Military History Now*, 15 February 2017. <https://militaryhistorynow.com/2017/02/15/the-war-of-snails-10-curious-facts-about-the-german-peasants-revolt/> Accessed, 30/05/22.

now to work less, and one must wonder at what all this work is.⁴² This appreciation of the strange relationship of the snail to work related in reference to the story of the Countess of Lupfen, is what brought me to reconsider the parallel relationship between labour and credit, evident in the painstaking, labour intensive work of embroidery.

A painting and embroidery work I produced in 2020, “Slowly”/Revolting”,⁴³ referred to early forms of credit, and incidentally featured medieval representations of snails. It was accompanied by a feature-length video work, “Pasiphaë”. In said video, “Slowly/Revolting is explained by voice-over, transposed over “found”/appropriated open-source video of two snails copulating. My written explanation follows:

“Where all unreason begins in reason, rationalisation reigns... my PhD supervisor cautioned against taking things back to amoeba. I replied that I had just been reading about amoeba, as our last common ancestor with the octopus.⁴⁴ Common ancestor or no, contemporary relations were to be answered for, everywhere to be found in the Dark Ages, enough to ask how they had come to be so dark. It was true that any creature could come to be symbolic of anything, sexualisation notwithstanding. But it was funny to think in this single unusually limited continuous history, of European thought (and thoughtlessness) that I could cast my glance on the same invertebrate as my peasant ancestors and feel real affection where once there was real animosity. The massive improvement issued by a chemical warfare with the earth had it that snails were contemporaneously generally thought of as cute, where once they caused no end of trouble in vineyards, to the end that they came to be symbolic of, marginally associated with the Lombards (in the margins of medieval manuscripts), then passively terrorising Europe through the practise of usury,⁴⁵ otherwise known as moneylending, otherwise known as capitalism. In graffitied margins of manuscripts snails often appeared to be formidable foes of knights and peasants alike, as slowly the feudal system made way for a more nefarious system of rule. The great triumph of man over nature had subsequently not only rehabilitated the image of the snail but put all insect life at the risk of extinction, a situation that would certainly precipitate the end of all life on earth. This odd medieval conception came to be quite prophetic, the untold pestilential consequences of the widespread practise of making money only off of money... the basis of capitalism as pestilential.”⁴⁶

42 David Graeber notably suggests that much of the work that was once done by humans has been taken over by robots/machines, but we seem to work more now at jobs that are essentially unnecessary in *Bullshits Job: a Theory*, London, UK: Allen Lane, 2018.

43 Commissioned for the exhibition “20:20” at the Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), <https://www.mamalbury.com.au/exhibitions/2020>

44 Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: the Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life*, London: William Collins, 2021.

45 Randall, *Ibid.*

46 Zoë Marni Robertson “Pasiphaë” YouTube video, running time 1:21:00, May 13 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LK-DAK92Om6s>. Quote at: 42:00

Snails therefore were a harvest or its ruination and symbolically equally important in the earliest revolts against capitalism, slowly revolting indeed.



Speaking of the Printed Word: Silly Utopian Literature (New Art By

Committee) Speaking of the Printed Word: Silly Utopian Literature (New Art By Committee)

Returning to the contemporary and the novel *Q*, the character “Q” is a shadowy figure loyal to the papacy who sets about sabotaging the efforts of the peasants led by the heroic figure of Müntzer. Repetition is utilised throughout to promote the propagandistic dimensions of this work. This device was subsequently used widely by QAnon. *Q* is simply written to the end such that it reads like a pitch for a movie script. It has the contemporary quality of many novels of an exhausted culture, doing anything but demanding of the audience. Many recent novels, of a quality adequate to be sold in the “Literature” not “Popular Fiction” section of a bookshop, are easy-to-read in a similar way, novels such as Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest And Relaxation* (2019) which details the exploits of a recent Art History graduate who begins the novel working in an art gallery in New York City.⁴⁷ That the contemporary popular literary novel - like the television program “Girls”⁴⁸ -carefully seeks adjacency with the “world” of Contemporary Art, which provides a similar backdrop to what one might expect of the *beau monde* in the novels of Jane Austen. This would seem to fully attest the current ubiquity of the culture industry⁴⁹ and its tendency towards self-referentiality and self-interest. These cultural products are supposed to exemplify an exchange between “high cultures”, forms of entertainment that could be said to be ‘art’, and popular arts which are now barely extant in as far as they have been decimated by liberal consensus-building. Such consensus usually comes bearing the language of democracy, clarity, and a particularly unthinking brand of morality as representation. The latter is dubious at best in relation to the Military-entertainment Complex⁵⁰ that today is never too far away from commercial distributional methods. The rights for Moshfegh’s work were purchased by Atlas Entertainment and LuckyChap Entertainment even before its publication:⁵¹ the ability to sell film rights seems to have become now a major factor in whether an author can be published.

47 Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Penguin Books: New York, 2019.

48 *Girls*, created by and starring Lena Dunham, executive-produced by Judd Apatow, 2012-2017

49 Theodor W Adorno, and J. M Bernstein. *The Culture Industry : Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London ; Routledge, 2001.

50 A term describing the cooperation between militaries and the entertainment industry.

51 Mike Fleming, “Atlas, LuckyChap Team On Film Deal For ‘My Year Of Rest And Relaxation’ July 9, 2018, in Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2018/07/my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-margot-robbie-charles-roven-atlas-luckychap-movie-ottessa-moshfegh-1202423155/>

Another collectively written artists' novel of the early 2000s *Reena Spauling* by The Bernadette Corporation, a New York City and Paris-based anti-capitalist art and fashion collective, explains in its preface that it is: "using the old Hollywood screenwriting system whereby a studio boss had at his disposal a "stable" of writers working simultaneously to crank out a single blockbuster, each assigned specific functions within the overall scheme."⁵² One of the better critiques of this process appears in the "Postmodern" novel *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, in which an engineer explains why there are no longer any inventors because each engineer is assigned a separate task independent of the whole so that the corporation may retain all "intellectual property" rights:

"Koteks explained how every engineer, in signing the Yoyodyne contract, also signed away the patent rights to any inventions he might come up with.

'This stifles your really creative engineer,' Koteks said, adding bitterly, 'wherever he may be.'

'I didn't think people invented any more, said Oedipa, sensing this would goad him. 'I mean, who's there been, really, since Thomas Edison? Isn't it all teamwork now?' Bloody Chiclitz, in his welcoming address this morning, had stressed teamwork.

'Teamwork,' Koteks snarled, 'is one word for it, yeah. What it really is is a way to avoid responsibility. It's a symptom of the gutlessness of the whole society.'⁵³

In *Q*, the express idea was to create a version of history that would usher in a better political system. By association, for contemporary art to do this it must arguably be populist, simple and didactic, offering little breadth of nuance; it is basically art as propaganda. Carey's definition of propaganda written in the 1980s, is instructive for being oddly anachronistic:

"By 'propaganda' I refer to communications where the form and content is selected with the single-minded purpose of bringing some target audience to adopt attitudes and beliefs chosen in advance by the sponsors of the communications. 'Propaganda' so defined is to be contrasted with education. Here, at least ideally, the purpose is to encourage critical enquiry and to open minds to arguments for and against any particular conclusion, rather than close them to the possibility of any conclusion but one."⁵⁴

The object of *Q* as a kind of negation of a negation and a turn against the relativism of Postmodernism. Its thrust was stated in the essay "The New Italian Epic" by the authors now going by "Wu Ming I" in such

52 Bernadette Corporation, "Preface" in *Reena Spaulings*, New York: Semiotexte, 2004.

53 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, (Picador: 1979), p.59

54 Carey, *Ibid.*

passages as:

“We’re going to have to be the parents, the progenitors, the new founders. We need to reappropriate a sense of the future, as something radically new is taking place under the sun. It’s an unprecedented kind of danger, there’s a BIG problem and disenchantment is not the best solution.”⁵⁵

This is certainly an admirable sentiment, albeit one that would tend to confuse Postmodern ambivalence with the societal conditions which it described, a fact especially evident in the wider essay. Collective literature projects, such as these would seem to assert the value of anonymity, tellingly the four central members of Luther Blissett responsible for the novel “Q” have rebranded as Wu Ming, the Chinese term for anonymous. This move is especially telling in a culture defined by individualism and the “main character syndrome” imposed by social media, while being equally appealing as a result. However, there is something not quite right about this homogenisation, that is, after all, not so different to the outcomes of today’s social media and of all media written and produced by committee. This could be described as the “science” of the writing of least resistance, of least offence. It is as though in conflating individualism with individuality “the left” has effectively given up on humanity and the humanities in favour of the same attention-seeking goals of late capitalist industry.

Post-Paper Digital Conspiracy Post-Paper Digital Conspiracy

The ‘attention economy’ is familiar to all of us living under what is described by Shoshanna Zuboff as ‘Surveillance Capitalism’⁵⁶, where everything that we do online is tracked to be sold as data. There are myriad terms to describe this current cognitive-capitalist regime. As though naming the unnamable, it is as if the forces that have so obviously chosen to allow so many to die globally as a result of digital intervention would, by some magic, some power of the word, now reverse this scenario. In the context of “surveillance capital”, the mobilization of social sciences to measure the impact of propaganda campaigns, has been streamlined to the point where data collection is almost perfect and absolute. It leaves all content to itself as it is, nuance disproven by the parameters of attention.

Free internet applications make their money out of your time. ‘The Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain Mosque on 15 March 2019,’⁵⁷ found that the

⁵⁵ Wu Ming 1, “NEW ITALIAN EPIC: WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO BE THE PARENTS, The London Speech”. Opening talk at the conference, “The Italian Perspective on Metahistorical Fiction: The New Italian Epic”, Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London, UK, October 2nd, 2008.

⁵⁶ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, First Trade Digital Edition, New York: PublicAffairs, 2020.

⁵⁷ Report: Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019 <https://christ->

shooter was not radicalised by extremist groups on uncensored sites such as 8chan (the then-hosting site of QAnon) but rather through the algorithms of YouTube and Facebook.⁵⁸ These platforms have been argued to lead to evermore extreme content to hold viewer attention. By similar means, publishers can decide what needs changing in a novel by “eye-tracking”, pinpointing exactly where the audience puts the PDF down.⁵⁹ At the same time, Neo-Fascist videos provide the natural algorithmic ends, *reducto ad absurdum*, for the disenfranchised who find themselves unable to buy-in to what they regard as economies of virtue. Platforms ‘improve’ upon their models by inciting hatred, which always accrues more attention, which after all is the main objective;⁶⁰ simultaneously offering a simplistic enemy while offering those who do not fit into the Liberal consensus a sense of inclusion. Arguably, art used to provide room for all the darkness of the human soul, something evident in the work of Francisco Goya, often considered a pioneer in the modernisation of art.⁶¹

But today, demonstrations of ‘superior’ liberal progressive values bear all the hallmarks of recycling programs. They exist to instill in the individual a sense of personal responsibility for all the problems caused by industry to keep attention away from the real moral and material polluters.⁶² At the same time, this absolves the art market and many of its core institutions, of myriad nefarious connections. There are countless examples of this, but notable local major public works might include Lindy Lee’s \$14million “Ouroboros”, 2021–2024,⁶³ and the smaller \$10million maquette of the work “Abundance”, 2024,⁶⁴ the first work funded by the Pallion Arts Program. This is funded by the precious metals company Pallion, long embroiled in scandals over a General Sales Tax (GST) “scam that had run rampant in the gold industry and involved an estimated \$1 billion, criminal gangs and links to terrorism”⁶⁵. *The Australian Financial Review* would explain the artist’s strong

churchattack.royalcommission.nz/

58 Ibid.

59 First brought to my attention in a Television program about Literary publishing: *Love and Anarchy (Kärlek och anarki*, season one, episode one, “How It All Began,” directed by Lisa Langseth, aired 4 November 2020, on Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81172822?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C0%2C40815f87-0880-41f8-ad45-e8371501941a-15890327%2C40815f87-0880-41f8-ad45-e8371501941a-15890327%7C2%2CUnknown%2C%2C%2CtitlesResults%2C81069541%2CVideo%3A81172822%2CdetailsPageEpisodePlayButton>

I, for one, often find myself putting down a text when I am inspired by something I have read, these technologies are far from capable of reading minds, and it is important to remember how little we actually know about the mind in order to reject such puerile attempts at control.

60 Parker Molloy, “New study highlights the virality of hate: And why “dunking” on our political opponents only fuels the problem”, *The Present Age*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.readthepresentage.com/p/out-group-hostility?s=r> accessed 10/06/22.

61 The opening line for the blurb of the first search result for Goya via the University of Sydney Library reads “The first major English-language biography of Francisco Goya y Lucientes, who ushered in the modern era” (Janis Tomlinson, *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist*, 1st ed. United States: Princeton University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691209845>.)

62 Courtney Lindwall, “Spare Yourself the Guilt Trip This Earth Day—It’s Companies That Need to Clean Up Their Acts”, *The Natural Resources Defence Council*, April 16, 2021. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/spare-yourself-guilt-trip-earth-day-its-companies-need-clean-their-act>

63 Lindy Lee, “Ouroboros”, 2021–2024. Recycled stainless steel. 42.0 h x 88.84 w x 76.9 d cm 13000 kg National Gallery of Australia (NGA).

64 Lindy Lee “Abundance”, 2024. Pure ABC bullion gold (more than 50kg), 45cm wide (bizarrely the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) does not have the material or size listing on their website).

65 Adele Ferguson, “Police raids, criminal gangs and \$1 billion: Inside the gold scam that made a fortune off a GST loophole”, *ABC News*, Monday 11 December, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-11/inside-the-gold-scam-that-made-a-fortune-off-a-gst-loophole/103206526>

connection to the metal with an opening paragraph reading: “Few people can say that they owe their life to gold but, for Byron Bay-based artist Lindy Lee, it’s a basic truth. Her mother, with Lee’s two older brothers in tow, cycled across Communist China to Hong Kong with a false-bottomed suitcase lined with gold, a lifeline for the young family to begin a new life.”⁶⁶ Lee is quoted as explaining: “Abundance is the opposite of greed. It’s the opposite of desire. When you have desire you feel incomplete - you want. But in abundance everything is complete and therefore everything can be generated in this generosity.”⁶⁷ Indeed, for what could artists such as Lee possibly want for (amongst a growing homelessness crisis)? The work is on permanent loan to the *National Gallery of Australia*, and a line of gold and jade jewellery available through the artist’s gallery *Sullivan and Strumpf*. No connection is made between the formal properties of either sculpture and the events of the artist’s life. Both works are both formally hackneyed and conceptually weak, and yet broadly hailed as though supposed to go unquestioned given the artist’s biography (and doubtless the kind of money that was poured into them). Such works also heavily rely on the identity of the artist in place of any critical framework. This is the art world’s version of what has come to be understood as “identity politics”, which presents a marked departure from the powerful source material for the expression, the “Statement from the Combahee River Collective” (1977), a group of radical Black lesbian feminists who sought to fight oppression on all fronts through the objectives of socialism. Take for example: “We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough” and “As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic”⁶⁸, as evidence of the liberal debasement of the original objectives of that group. What we have in place of a legitimate politics of identity can best be described as Liberal Eugenics.

Q was a bestseller and *Omnia Sunt Communia* became a short-lived rallying cry for the radical left.⁶⁹ There is however little competition between it and the much more resounding success of the QAnon, phenomenon. Embedded in the digital and interactive, QAnon is effectually much more participatory and inclusive. It may be that such propagandistic forms of culture are inherently susceptible to being co-opted by fascist movements because they too assert a central truth, a simplistic and didactic authority. Finally, they quash the possibility of debate that is central to any functioning political or cultural system. While the argument against relativism is certainly timely, oversimplification engenders all the same issues as obfuscation. What is being lost is not grounds for a perfect ‘scientific’ knowledge but the right to reach the limits of one’s understanding, to study and

66 Benjamin Judd, “What does a \$10m golden sculpture look like?” in *The Financial Review, Life and Leisure*, August 16, 2024, <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/what-does-a-10m-golden-sculpture-look-like-20240807-p5k0c6>

67 Ibid.

68 See the first known usage of the term in the 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective: <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>

69 Roland Boer, “‘All things are in common’: theology and politics in Luther Blissett’s *Q*”, *International Socialism*, Issue: 141. Posted on 9th January 2014. Accessed: 30/05/22.

to learn under a set of economic conditions that no longer allow for it. “The commons” we have come to refer to is now primarily digital and information-based. Is it a conspiracy that we are prevented from the study and practice of life by overwork and variety of media designed to ruin our attention spans? The egalitarian dream of decentralised knowledge ala Net 1.0, and of the originally stated goals of The Reformation, are denied us. This is not to suggest that this cultural turn is simply something the ultra-rich are keeping all for themselves, as the ‘socialism of the rich’,⁷⁰ but that forms like “the novel”, and its attendant sense of interiority, appear to be collateral damage.

Conclusion: Beginning of the End – Comedy = Tragedy + Time

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As suggested in the web publication, Daily Beast: “Conspiracists missed some important subtext: the jokes.”⁷¹ I like to think of conspiracy theories, memes, and even the Frankenstein’s monster of the art/theory complicity ‘art as research’ in terms of the carnivalesque of Mikhail Bakhtin: an asinine mass reflecting the world back through its debasement, just as medieval peasants might do during the “Feast of the Ass” supplanting Jesus with his donkey.⁷² These practices of making fun of power obviously had some resonance in the oppressive conditions of Stalinist Russia, but who can say if ambivalence is a political or an apolitical turn? It is ambivalent. Ambivalence is, however, where art rests. What I would call the ‘ambivalent instinct’ is a great casualty of our times, which are not so much classically Totalitarian as totalising, more so than even Max Weber could have predicted in his work on “The Protestant Ethic”.⁷³ Weber traced the dramatic shifts beginning in the Reformation, the time of Luther, Müntzer and the German Peasant’s Revolt, proving that methods of conspiratorial control have been honed over centuries. Ambivalence is also particularly immune to the propaganda of conspiracy.

If only conspiracy theories or ‘art as research’ were self-aware, and perhaps more importantly: funny. Maybe then, we would see some restoration of the centrality of the cultural output of the descendants of the peasantry (of the new peasantry under techno and cognitive feudalism) against all the meaninglessness of underclass division in a world increasingly dominated by a very small minority of billionaires. After all, if there is virtue and not just ambivalence to be ascribed to art, it is in pathos, through which we are reminded of our own common mortality, and the limits of human understanding. We are living through a new moment of enclosure

70 Yanis Varoufakis, “Is This the End of ‘Socialism for the Rich?’” in *The Atlantic*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu/2022/10/10/is-this-the-end-of-socialism-for-the-rich-the-atlantic/>

71 The Daily Beast, *ibid.*

72 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Indiana University Press, 1984)

73 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 2001) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995808>.

not dissimilar to that argued against by the “Swabian League”, brought about by very similar means. Now though, instead of the land we subside on, what is being marked out, through digital technologies that are now all-but-impossible to avoid, is the enclosure of our time and attention. To collectively revolt from below, like peasants, is to take back the right to our own time, to our own participation.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two

On Academic Art

On Academic Art



Zoë Marni Robertson, “Pure Colonial Backwaters/Academic Art (Don’t Cross Daddy)”, 2023. Acrylic and (found) enamel on (found) board, 40cm x 55cm. Installation view: “Retrosynthesis(Ekphrasis): The Cognitive Elite” 2023 at Blenheim House. Photo: Jessica Maurer.



Évariste Vital Luminais, “Sons of Clovis II (Les énérvés de Jumièges)”, 1880. Oil on canvas, 190.7 x 275.8 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Post-internet artist Simon Denny sits atop the tomb-like raft of the “Sons of Clovis II”, a 19th century “History Painting” owned by, and on apparently permanent, prominent display in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. 19th Century History Painting also known more generically as “Academic Art”, is a much-maligned movement (or term that straddles a few movements)⁷⁴ that basically refers to paintings presenting very literal and ‘realistic’ interpretations of historical events and/or myths. This painting, by Évariste Vital Luminais, depicts sons who have risen up against their father only to be “hamstrung” by their mother, Saint Bathilde, in retaliation. The story is misattributed or cobbled-together from others of the Merovingian or Frankish dynasty which began around the 5th Century in France, after the fall of the Roman Empire. Regardless of any stated affiliations, most of the art produced in the current moment actually conforms to the tenets of Academic Art in quite literally depicting its historical subjects.



The Merovignians II (The French Are Not Franks)

The Merovignians II (The French Are Not Franks)

Luminais was referred to variously as the painter of the Franks and the Gauls; in “The Sons of Clovis II” (1880) and its sister-work “*Les Enervés Jumieges*” (also 1880) (Luminais’ two most successful and celebrated of works, apparently for being so arrestingly macabre), the Frankish Merovingian dynasty is depicted to impress a sense of the particular brutality of that lineage. This subject was popular in 19th Century France, after the French Revolution and in the following period of instability, for its perceived justification of the “Reign of Terror”. It was widely held that the Gauls had simply been restored to their rightful position as rulers of France after centuries of Frankish rule. The Franks were of Germanic origin unlike the Gauls whom the French public widely identified as being descendants of. Take, for example, this passage written by Anacharsis Cloots in 1793, “The French have emigrated or been guillotined. The Gauls have become men by crushing their conquerors under the ruins of the Bastille.”⁷⁵ In an article entitled “The Merovingians from the French Revolution to the Third Republic” historian Edward James writes of the extent of the efforts to characterise the former ruling dynasty as ethnically violent.

⁷⁴ Consider also an article on the legacy of Gustave Moreau: “Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and histories of art associate Gustave Moreau with fin de siècle Symbolism or Decadence. While this categorization has undoubtedly helped to save Moreau’s oeuvre from the oblivion in which despised nineteenth century “academic” art lay for so long, it has also distorted our understanding of his achievement. Art historians are now beginning to recognize an essential fact that was self-evident to Moreau himself, as well as to his contemporaries: the author of Oedipus and the Sphinx and Salome was, above all, a history painter.¹ Indeed, not only did Moreau proudly describe himself as “peintre d’histoire” on his visiting cards but also, to the end of his life, both as a practitioner and as a teacher, he maintained an unshakable loyalty to the ideals traditionally associated with the genre that he preferred to call “le grand art.”” Cooke, Peter. “Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting.” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 3 (2008): 394–416. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20619619>.

⁷⁵ Quoted in James, Edward. “The Merovingians from the French Revolution to the Third Republic.” *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 4 (2012): 450–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emed.12004>. Also: “Citizen Ducall asked for the abandonment of the word ‘French’ – ‘we are pure blood Gauls’ – while that.”

He explained that much to the annoyance of many of his contemporaries, François Guizot “the leading figure among the liberal historians of the Restoration period,” introduced his own spelling of Frankish personal names,

“The familiar ‘Clovis’, for instance, disappears in favour of ‘Hlodewig’. The purpose of this was clear: by going back to what he imagined the original Frankish form of the words was, he persuaded his readers, to think of the Franks as foreign conquerors, rather than as comfortably assimilated Frenchmen.”⁷⁶

James also offers that the express purpose of teaching history at school, according to eighty percent of candidates for the *baccalauréat moderne* in 1897, was to instill a sense of patriotism.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, in the 19th Century, “Gallic” France was nevertheless brutally suppressing colonised populations across the globe (one might say a comfortable precursor to the Liberal Eugenics of our own time).

History Painting existed long before the 19th Century, but takes shape as a self-conscious form at the same time as the invention of photography. Exposure to art from the rest of the world seemed to have caused some general self-reflexivity regarding both the subjectivity and formal aspects of art within Europe.⁷⁸ Pre-19th Century European art was, of course, dictated by financial and social limitations. Similarly, today art centred roughly around the same themes appears as the subject of major prizes at the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW): The Archibald, entails representative images of the social elite; The Wynne is a prize for landscape; and the Sulman a prize for images of religious themes and/or European history from antiquity onwards. To have the history of European art laid bare so cleanly and laconically, has long been an annoyance to Australian artists trying to function in awareness of a global continuum.⁷⁹

Post-Internet Artist Simon Denny’s “The Founders Paradox” (2017)⁸⁰ surrounds the “doomsday” property of tech billionaire Peter Thiel in Denny’s native Aotearoa/New Zealand.⁸¹ Thiel was famously the only person in Silicon Valley to donate to the Trump Campaign in 2016.⁸² He is a believer in some strange theories concerning the kind of doomsday prepping that would allow billionaires to basically carry on business-as-usual

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 As the 20th century would see Western artists diverge from tradition by appropriating themes from “other” cultures, particularly from African art and Eastern Philosophy

79 It is slightly mortifying... and yet also very funny when one considers how much North American and European Art of the 20th century aimed to present itself as universal and “new” while stemming from exactly this narrow European tradition. If this is quite a nihilistic perspective it is perhaps fitting in the context of the feeling of cultural stagnation, which I believe to stem from material shortcomings, i.e., the unequal distribution of wealth, rather than any inherent lack on the part of artists of the present.

80 Simon Denny, “The Founders Paradox”, 2017. Michael Lett Gallery, Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa.

81 Actual exhibition texts written by Anthony Byrt are hard to come by outside the “Founders Paradox Compendium” sold by Denny’s Auckland-based gallery, Michael Lett; so the story, and subsequent appearances by antagonist Peter Thiel would seem to now be archived solely in this “long read” by Mark O’Connell, “Why Silicon Valley billionaires are prepping for the apocalypse in New Zealand”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/15/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-prepping-for-the-apocalypse-in-new-zealand>

82 James Duesterberg, “Among the Reality Entrepreneurs: Urbit goes downtown”, *The Point Magazine*, September 9, 2022, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/among-the-reality-entrepreneurs/>

after the apocalypse.⁸³ As sometime backer of internet-alternative “Urbit”, Thiel concurs with its stated aims toward a transparently feudal system of online governance.⁸⁴ Thiel’s static view of the “pristine” environment of New Zealand, the pure, clean waters of Lake Wānaka, around which a number of such individuals have purchased property, would seem to suggest that it will always be stay that way. It was as though the world was not alive, there always being somewhere far enough away you could practically wait-out the end of humanity without being affected by it.

In the aforementioned exhibition by Denny,⁸⁵ two separate spaces contained two representations of possible political alternatives; pitting the game-like competitive futures favoured by Silicon Valley, against an alternative as postulated in an Aotearoan best-seller “The New Zealand Project” by Max Harris, apparently “a blend of old Keynesian economics and modern millennial values”.⁸⁶ The “binary opposition” of these views is largely summed up by hostility to, or belief in, broader state control, Libertarianism versus the Welfare State of the mid-20th Century in parts of Europe, North America and the Antipodes.⁸⁷ The apparent acceptance that these two options represent polar opposites remains somewhat troubling: John Maynard Keynes, was considered a conservative after all,⁸⁸ before the current era (from roughly after the 1980s) of generalised acceptance of free-market economics. By presenting an alternative future whose “left” politics are what would traditionally be considered conservative, we have a reflection of the current situation where “the Centre” is seen as the happy medium, and yet it is somewhere much further “right” than the policies of conservative governments during the 1970s. But then, perhaps the point is that in these “doomsday” projections “the right” provides no real alternatives, not so much a future but violent ends. Thiel was said to find the “black mirror” reflection of his values quite unsettling.⁸⁹

One might compare the not dissimilar artistic stratagems of another Aotearoan artist, Michael Stevenson as illustrative of the comparative didacticism of Denny. In “Disproof Does Not Equal Disbelief”⁹⁰, Stevenson conflates a practical course in faith healing and exorcism taught at Fuller Theological Seminary entitled “MC51”, and another course in “start-up” taught by Peter Thiel at Stanford called “How to Build the Future”. Both courses changed the future of the industries they referred to, and were, importantly described by Stevenson as “courses that are engaged with industry rather than academia”.⁹¹ The work is contemplative and

83 O’Connell *ibid.*

84 Duesterberg *ibid.*

85 Denny, *ibid.*

86 Thomas Coughlan, “Thomas Coughlan: The brilliance of The NZ Project,” Newsroom, April 26th 2017, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2017/04/25/20680/thomas-coughlan-the-brilliance-of-the-nz-project> last accessed: 17/08/2023

87 O’Connell *ibid.*

88 Brue Bartlett, “Keynes Was Really A Conservative”, in *Forbes Magazine*, August 14 2009, <https://www.forbes.com/2009/08/13/john-maynard-keynes-conservative-opinions-columnists-bruce-bartlett.html?sh=60148e837605>

89 O’Connell *ibid.*

90 Michael Stevenson “Disproof Does Not Equal Disbelief, 2021. KW, Berlin, Germany.

91 Michael Stevenson in conversation with Anna Gritz, “Exhibition walkthrough with Michael Stevenson and Anna Gritz” on the website of the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin, <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/michael-stevenson/> quote at 1:28

gently mocking of the contemporary university without offering alternatives. “MC51” was focused on the air as the realm of the spirit world, where the central concern was around airspace, alluded to by Stevenson through the stretched blankets of commercial airlines. The course would discuss the coexistence of airspace and the “spiritual realm” – Stevenson’s wry response was that it was ultimately an air traffic control problem.

The binary presented by Denny is made legible through a series of text-based images and sculpture. Denny’s art objects are essentially modeled on tools of “Visual Communication” reproducing the clean professionalism of toy companies or museums directed at the education of minors. What is offered is a kind of suite of merchandise surrounding the, as Peter Thiel himself coined it, “meticulous”⁹² research. And, though the work does not necessarily speak to any inherent acceptance that “Small Government” and “Big Government” are the only considerations for political futures, the formal aspect engenders the kind of trust that is built into the design of educational materials, as we are taught to accept them.⁹³ Denny’s obvious intelligence and success within the framework of the “artworld” also serves to enshrine this discourse. Educational materials have become a more prevalent feature of exhibitions for some time, but do not necessarily add up to a political landscape that perfectly represents the agenda of the pseudo-progressive, monied political class that typically engage with the arts.

Perusing the volumes attached to Denny’s numerous major exhibitions, one thing that stands out in relation to these exhibitions, which necessitate thorough research, is that the essays are generally written by people other than Denny himself. It is as though Denny functions not so much as an academic, but as a one-man Arts Faculty. “The Founders Paradox: A Compendium” was written by art critic and writer Anthony Byrt, who, begins by explaining that he was widely quoted after the publication of his 2011 book “This Model World”, after writing that: “I have never been able to entirely figure out whether (Denny) is a critic of the corporate neoliberalism that provides him with so much of his subject matter, or an artist deeply embedded within, and beholden to, that system.”⁹⁴ One might say, cynically, that coming to work with and even employ one’s own critic is in itself a classic neoliberal strategy. Byrt further writes that it is rare for Denny to make a declarative judgement regarding the material that he presents, explaining that his position is “honest” in “(highlighting) the status of the artist in late capitalist culture: the contradictory desire to be a freelancer and entrepreneur on the one hand and a voice for resistance and progressive change on the other”.⁹⁵ Denny, for his part, identifies as a sculptor,⁹⁶ marking these works out as something static, the archive evoked not for its informational

92 Ibid.

93 This is (likely intentionally) reminiscent of the popularity of the game “Monopoly” which was, of course, designed as a tool for demonstrating inherent ills of capitalism only to become uncritically accepted as a fun pastime.

94 Anthony Byrt and Simon Denny, “The Founder’s Paradox: A Compendium”, Michael Lett Gallery Publications, 2017, 9. Quote in: Byrt, Anthony. *This Model World: Travels to the Edge of Contemporary Art*, Auckland University Press, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=4689774>.

95 Byrt, Denny Ibid. p.10.

96 Ibid.

properties but as ultimately aesthetic: *meaning* itself as “Sculpture”.

ademic Art Through the Ages

Academic Art Through the Ages

In the 19th Century, History Painting/Academic Art functioned similarly to the way Academic/Post-Internet art does today, prosaically and proficiently illustrating didactic ends. It could be conceded though that the patriotism of the original movement is in diametric opposition to the motives of contemporary academia with its (at least generally stated) anti-imperial and postcolonial ideals.⁹⁷ Of course, extremes of “Post-Colonial” discourse have been repeatedly instrumentalised in justifying university cuts everywhere. In her 2021 polemic “Virtue Hoarders: The Rise of the Professional Managerial Class”, academic Catherine Liu writes of a kind of conspiracy within North American universities to create ahistorical counter-narratives that promote relativism over working-class consensus, concluding that:

“Liberals have abandoned history, because they have to believe they are superior to elites of the past and the contemporary working class at the same time. Members of the PMC (Professional Managerial Class) believe themselves to be virtuous vanguardists, floating above historical forms and conditions, transgressing boundaries and inventing new ways of being and seeing”.⁹⁸

Denny’s ambivalent position, even lack of a position, enables him to work within the contemporary art market and broader neoliberal framework in a way that has demonstratively been revoked from increasingly threatened disciplines within the Humanities. Overtly antagonistic positions within the Humanities have regularly been cited by the Australian Liberal National Party (LNP) as a threat from within, a rather more banalised Australian version of “the culture wars”.⁹⁹ In the end, it is difficult to overlook that Denny’s research sits comfortably beside its object.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ History Painting of the same kind practised in the 19th century, of course, still exists, its trajectory from Ancient Greece to Modern Europe and North America make it the kind of art favoured by American Conservative to this day. It is also the major theme of Australian art prizes; aside from the Archibald there is the Portia Geach, The Dobell, etc. There will always be people working within outmoded continuums, but these are not of interest to us here.

⁹⁸ Catherine Liu, ““Transgressing” the Boundaries of Professionalism” in *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*. University of Minnesota Press. 2021 <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1fkbgjxp.34>.

⁹⁹ See, for example, discussions between former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and late businessman Paul Ramsey which resulted in the founding of “The Ramsey Centre for Western Civilisation”, which was supposed to infiltrate the Australian National University, but has ended up at the University of Wollongong. As claimed by Abbott: “every element of the curriculum was supposed to be pervaded by Asian, indigenous and sustainability perspectives. Almost entirely absent from the contemporary educational mindset was any sense that cultures might not all be equal and that truth might not be entirely relative.” As quoted by Mike Secombe, in “Howard, Abbott and the Ramsay Centre” in *The Saturday Paper*, June 16-22 2018, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2018/06/16/howard-abbott-and-the-ramsay-centre/15290712006378>

¹⁰⁰ As written by (former academic) philosopher, literary theorist, and political theorist, Armen Avanessian: “(Criticality) criticises within the system, but it does so without assenting to the system as such, aware that an absolute position outside the system is impossible, and that even the most radical criticism has a legitimate legitimising affect. The “smuggling” of embedded criticism thus

There is perhaps something lost in the slippage between intent and actualisation that may be what makes the work of both eras of “Academic Art” so widely disliked.¹⁰¹ The technical prowess of history painters such as Luminais never made up for how bland and somehow bad the paintings are, just as the computer-generated technical proficiency and sound logic of much Post-Internet Art does not always quite add-up to intellectually or emotionally satisfying work.

In this regard I would refer to two articles published by Melbourne-based art publication MeMO about very different exhibitions. Lecturer in art history and theory at Monash University, Luke Smythe¹⁰² writes admiringly of John Martin’s History Painting “The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum,” (1822)¹⁰³, which was a work that people once paid a fee to see and experience, a kind of 19th Century equivalent of watching the popular apocalyptic Netflix series “Stranger Things.”¹⁰⁴ Of course, Martin was both exceptionally popular and widely derided in his own time. Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray called Martin’s work: “huge, queer and tawdry.”¹⁰⁵ A Martin retrospective in Newcastle in 2011 (in the United Kingdom) caused these historical debates to be raised anew. In Melbourne alternatively, Smythe wrote that Martin’s work was simply taken at face value, appreciated for its grandeur and spectacle (not that there is anything wrong with that). It is the changing expectations of painting that are interesting here, and perhaps the fashion of the moment is, such that many of these 19th Century works will be assessed entirely differently.

In another review for MeMO, Gemma Topliss wrote about Petra Cortright’s recent Post-Internet Art exhibition,¹⁰⁶ “haunted lemon hunted spirit” at 1301SW, Melbourne/Naarm,¹⁰⁷ describing it as belonging to a nostalgia for such things as, “American Apparel tennis skirts, Lana Del Rey, washed-out digital images à la Terry Richardson, and blogging”,¹⁰⁸ as though it goes without saying that art in general is necessarily subject to the whims of fashion. Cortright’s “paintings” made in Photoshop and printed on aluminium, embrace newness and technology above all else, reducing the long painting tradition of contextualising one’s practice within the

names the strategy of sidestepping or going behind an order and of hollowing out legitimacy from the inside. Imminent criticality takes pleasure in the self-reflexive paradox of holding on to a subversive behaviour it knows to be unsustainable.” Armen Avanessian, *Overwrite: Ethics of Knowledge—Poetics of Existence*, London: Sternberg Press, 2017. P.38.

101 In a podcast hosted by Joshua Citarella, curator of KW Institut in Berlin, Nadim Samman discusses his new book on Post-Internet Art making reference to a time “Before Post-Internet Art was a dirty word.” Joshua Citarella with guest Nadim Samman on Substack “[Cryptids and Conspiracy in the Technocene w/ Nadim Samman](#)”

102 Luke Smythe, “Light: Works from Tate’s Collection” MeMO Review, 6th August 2022. <https://memoreview.net/reviews/light-works-from-tate-s-collection-at-australian-centre-for-the-moving-image-acmi-by-luke-smythe>

103 John Martin, “The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum”, 1822. Oil on canvas. 253 x 161.6 cm. Tate Britain, London, England.

104 John Gayford, “John Martin: the Laing Gallery, Newcastle” March 15, 2011. The tagline for the article is: “John Martin, the subject of a new exhibition, was a painter whose apocalyptic visions prefigured Hollywood.” *Stranger Things*, created by the Duffer Brothers, 2016-, Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=stranger&jbv=80057281>.

105 Mark Brown “Derided painter John Martin makes a dramatic comeback” in The Guardian, March 4, 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/04/artist-john-martin-comeback>

106 The room sheet for the exhibition begins by explaining that Petra Cortright is “(o)ften referred to as a leading figure in the “Post-Internet Art” movement”, <https://www.1301sw.com/exhibition/petra-cortright/>

107 Petra Cortright, “haunted lemon hunted spirit”, 2023. 1301SW, Naarm, Australia.

108 Gemma Topliss, “Petra Cortright, haunted lemon hunted spirit” MeMO Review

continuum of the medium, to absurdity. Topliss states that: “The aluminium is reflective and the paintings glow like dull screens, catching the light at certain angles to produce a luminous flash. They float, impossibly thin, like mounted flat-screen TVs.”¹⁰⁹ Much of the article refers to the artist’s desire to represent “beauty” in such a way as would be perfectly in keeping with the motivations of the most backwards painters or critics, those that would take such prizes as the Archibald with the utmost seriousness.

There are, however, outliers in any movement and History Painting can be highly effective when it calls history into question (for purposes other than to rally Patriotism and incite awe in spectacle). Théodore Géricault’s critique of ultra-royalism, his major work “The Raft of the Medusa” (1818-19)¹¹⁰, which, importantly, also refers to themes of abolitionism, immediately comes to mind. Post-Internet Art can also be highly effective, when it *actually* interrogates the present. Certainly, there is merit to works that allow for investment in research. There is, however, something missing when a work of art is *only* an argument. In the absence of a nuanced approach, we return to these problems: art as didactic panel, again without any vestige of what originally animated a thing as art. It is at that is point that human understanding arguably fails.

Conclusion: History is Written by the Vector

Conclusion: History is Written by the Vector

The study and appreciation of history used to be seen as a social and political necessity, but the closure of “under-performing” departments in universities that fail on the grounds of their potential for “vocational training” means that we end trapped in a perpetual present. Many contemporary artists have come to work almost like investigative journalists, able at least to appeal to the “use value” of the art object, that can also still be consumed as a luxury good. These are luxury goods with “progressive credentials” that we might produce for those that can afford to consume “ethically”. The market has come to demand easy answers in place of wider, less-stable questions about the human condition.

So much work produced today conforms to the ideals of 19th Century History Painting/Academic Art, although formally more divergent. It almost seems as though the sons of Clovis are not the more hamstrung but the contemporary artist who is supposed to create “subversive” work that will incidentally appeal to the market. Academic Art may demonstrate some value in encouraging and visualising forms of closer reading

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Théodore Géricault “The Raft of the Medusa/Le Radeau de la Méduse”, 1818-1819. Oil on canvas, 490 cm × 716 cm The Louvre, Paris.

that are now considered an indulgence, but in our hyper “information age” more knowledge is being lost than can ever be replaced as a result of prevailing economic conditions. The failure to learn to appreciate and critique the trajectory of Western art history (and the history of Western thought in general) has led it would seem, to a stagnation in mainstream culture further exasperated by income massive and growing inequality and the ongoing corporatisation of universities (both public and private). It is from within this historical myopia, weirdly productive of new forms of academicism, that we may discover why the present can seem so insurmountable.

Chapter Three:

Chapter Three:

Nothing Comes from Nothing



Nothing Comes from Nothing



Zoë Marni Robertson, "The Suicide of Lucretius", 2023. Oil on canvas, 200cm x 110cm. Installation view: "Retrosynthesis(Ekphrasis): The Cognitive Elite" 2023 at Blenheim House. Photo: Jessica Maurer.



Lucas Cranach the elder, "The Suicide of Lucretia", 1529. Oil on panel, 74.9 × 54cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius wrote *De Rerum Natura* in the 1st Century, taking up the argument of Greek philosopher Democritus, that the world is made up of atoms. *De Rerum Natura* reads as remarkably modern. Its most famous line, however, *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit* (“Nothing Comes from Nothing”)¹¹¹ is quite out of step with complex mathematics today, as thoroughly explained by mathematician and philosopher Brian Rotman in *Signifying Nothing*. The introduction of the value of “zero” via the Arab world in the 13th Century, made everything we have possible, but especially trade. From this perspective we could argue that we live in a world founded on nothing.

In my work, Lucretius is painted in Northern European colouring following the tradition of Lucas Cranach the elder’s interpretation of biblical and Roman stories. For Cranach, working to promote the Reformation alongside Martin Luther’s vernacular translations of the bible, demystifying and recontextualising bible stories was supposed to be an aid to democratising religion. Of course, Cranach was also a canny businessman, his studio (continued after his death by his son Lucas Cranach the younger), churned out some four works a day. The women in Cranach paintings are often dressed in the finest contemporary fashions, just as Lucretius in this painting sports “the Pope’s puffer jacket”, a “viral” online image that turned out to be an early internet deepfake.¹¹²

Creatio Ex Nihilo is the theological proposition common to the Abrahamic religions, (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), that God created the universe out of nothing. As the European scientific tradition was largely inherited from the ancient world, Christianity in particular, resisted the idea that anything could be created from nothing, which, was the provenance only of God.¹¹³ In the 1st Century didactic poem, *De Rerum Natura*

111 This is later echoed in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Act One Scene One line 92 “Nothing will come of nothing,” significantly written at the beginning of the modern period at the transition into mercantile capitalism. Shakespeare, William, Harold Bloom, and Burton Raffel. *King Lear*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300134704>. P.9

112 Simon Ellery, “Fake photos of Pope Francis in a puffer jacket go viral, highlighting the power and peril of AI” CBS News, March 28, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pope-francis-puffer-jacket-fake-photos-deepfake-power-peril-of-ai/>

113 Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987. “Ex nihilo nihil (nothing will come from nothing) was a classical maxim that acted as a starting point for a great deal of rhetorical and metaphysical speculation that had ultimately very little to do with Christianity. Nowhere is this more dramatically the case than in Shakespeare’s profoundly non-Christian play, *King Lear*. A work which not only explicitly and obviously concerns itself with a certain sort of horror that comes from nothing, but which less obviously, although as I shall demonstrate equally explicitly, locates the origin of this horror in the secular effect and mercantile purport of the sign zero. The assertion that zero and zero-like signs permeate several, very different, signifying codes and artefacts of the Renaissance is not unexpected if one thinks of changes in these codes in historically materialist terms: the historical emergence of mercantile capitalism rode on the vector of trade, business, commerce, finance, money. And money required a system of writing, which included book-keeping and calculation, to enable it to function as an international medium of exchange. It was precisely to meet this need that double-entry book-keeping and Hindu numerals, both written in terms of zero, were introduced in Italy at the beginning of the Renaissance in the thirteenth century. Zero then was a principal element of Renaissance, that is to say mercantile capitalism’s, systems of writing from the beginning.” P.5

Also: “The disruption and moral disintegration inherent in capitalism’s threat to commoditise social reality, its capacity to nihilise fellow feeling and reduce human beings to acquisitive wolves fixated on money and power, is the central theme of two plays, Jonson’s *Volpone* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, written a year of each other in London around 1605.

Both playwrights would have learned about numbers at school some thirty years earlier, and were in the first generation of children in England to have learned about zero from Robert Recorde’s *Arithmetic*, which bases itself on a strange pedagogical mixture of the new decimal notation and the old abacus manipulations. And they wrote their plays at the historical point of transition between two methods of writing down monetary accounts: when the new Hindu numerals based on zero and the traditional abacus-based Roman ones about to be ousted by them existed, briefly, side by side, until the eclipse of Roman numerals signalled the death of a feudal

the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius writes of a world consisting of atoms which was thought by early Christians to be irreligious. Its anachronism was perhaps one of the reasons that this work disappeared for over a millennium until it was rediscovered in a German monastery in the 15th Century.

As mentioned, this work seems remarkably modern in its scientific, material explanations for the world, with the possible exception, as also noted, of its most famous line *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit* or “nothing comes from nothing”. The argument here is that in order to create something of substance, some pre-existing substance is required, a maxim which Lucretius adapted from the earlier writings of the Greek philosopher Parmenides (the idea of the atom itself was developed by the philosopher Democritus from the writings of Parmenides). Now, and since the value of “zero” was first assimilated into the Christian European world primarily to support mercantilism, everything has come/comes from nothing. That includes everything from the abstracted electronic capital that is used to finance all production, to the computer-driven engineering required of most modern infrastructures.¹¹⁴ Today everything (nothing) is represented in binary code, ‘ones and zeros’, the basic foundation for even the most labyrinthine abstract constructions. Abstractions have reshaped the world, and yet abstractions have a very real environmental and imperial “footprint” (again, nothing comes from nothing).



Loss and Lossiness

Loss and Lossiness

The source image for the painting of “Lucretius,” is the result of an internet search and appears to be an engraving of a bust devoid of referent or attribution. The way that new media gives rise to these forms of loss as decontextualization, runs parallel to wider discussions about the ‘lossiness’ of material structures. Being blindly reliant on notions of the immaterial, we give up more of our memory to computer memory, and ultimately to corporate tech monopolies. In, “In Defense of the Poor Image”, artist/theorist Hito Steyerl writes that:

“Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production.”¹¹⁵

The images that we see, and “share” go through processes of compression and the ultimate outcomes are, generally, and almost perfectly, predicted and reconstituted by computers. This would seem to occur in a similar

classical order and the arrival of the accounting.” P.78

114 Ibid. 5.

115 Steyerl, Hito, and Franco Berardi, “In Defence of the Poor Image” in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg Press, 2012), available: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

way to how our minds generate images as much according to previous knowledge as directly from empirical observation. We understand human beings as fallible and bound by experiences that bias our conditioning and prejudices but imagine that machine learning is something technical and therefore, perfect. We certainly don't tend to imagine it as part of the vast unconscious of some of humanity's most nefarious actors. The hierarchy of images, of the copies generated today by computer approximation, is essentially demonstrated by the whims of tech platforms all subject to the (occasionally generative) lossiness of the internet's flattening method of proliferation. The word "algorithm" itself derives from the phrase 'a copy of a copy' as a garbled, Latin-educated European mispronunciation ("Algorithmus") of "al-Khwarizmi" ("native of Khwarazm" - modern Khiva in Uzbekistan), the surname of the mathematician whose works introduced sophisticated mathematics to the West. Al-Khwarizmi's work influenced the perspectival theory of Renaissance architect and polymath Filippo Brunelleschi, whose foundational principles came to dominate Western painting until the invention of photographic technologies in the 19th Century.

In the book *Orality and Literacy*, Jesuit historian Walter J. Ong writes of the impact of Latin on European thought, where, for hundreds of years across Europe boys were taught to read and write in an essentially "dead" language, different to their "mother tongues". For all those years, European science, theology and history was shaped through an abstract language that had a place outside the world and the lives of those who used it. Ong writes:

"Devoid of baby-talk, insulated from the earliest life of childhood where language has its deepest psychic roots, a first language to none of its users, pronounced across Europe in often mutually that unintelligible ways but always written the same way, Learned Latin was a striking exemplification of the power of writing for isolating discourse and of the unparalleled productivity of such isolation. Writing, as has earlier been seen, serves to separate and distance the knower and the known and thus to establish objectivity. It has been suggested (Ong 1977, pp. 24– 9) that Learned Latin effects even greater objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium insulated from the emotion-charged depths of one's mother tongue, thus reducing interference from the human lifeworld and making possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism and of the new mathematical modern science which followed on the scholastic experience."¹¹⁶

What formed the foundations of modern science also lead to the idea of science as existing somehow outside the world. In the recent past the conflation of the idea of an immaterial spiritual plane and the construction of a not-so-immaterial world through the internet has lead to some very strange thinking, and importantly, some equally strange economic theory, in which the natural world is essentially left behind altogether.

¹¹⁶ Walter J. Ong. (2013). *Orality and Literacy*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426258> 110-111

In the documentary artwork “Szygy” (February, 2023)¹¹⁷, filmmaker Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman traces the eventual development of “the metaverse” as an alternative to reality, Facebook founder/CEO Mark Zuckerberg was so convinced of the efficacy of this new world within a world as to rename formerly known as Facebook/Instagram *Meta*.¹¹⁸ Hurwitz-Goodman presents the metaverse as being posited by Zuckerberg as an almost necessary distraction from the worsening living conditions of the majority of people as a result of the kinds of social and environmental destruction these applications create the conditions for. The documentary traces the rapacious activities of contemporary market deregulation, and the practice of “leveraged buyouts” in particular.

Almost two years after the publication of the documentary, Zuckerberg’s plans have proven markedly ineffectual, where the Virtual Reality or VR branch of Meta, Reality Labs, as of September of 2023, had already lost \$21 billion.¹¹⁹ While the attempts of Billionaire tech CEOs to augment reality have proven effectual in both business dealings and propaganda, these virtual world building attempts have proven largely to be laughable. And yet it could be argued that it is their world that we are living in, as we are increasingly reliant on technology, as it becomes more likely that the future holds environmental catastrophe such that increasingly more of our lives may be spent in front of these technologies. The failure of the metaverse is perhaps only in a blindness to how much such a world has already been realised.¹²⁰

In “Szygy”, a clip of Ronald Reagan ties the abstract, immaterial world of the market economy and “computer chips”, to a Christian teleology:

“Think of that little computer chip. Its value isn’t the sand from which it is made but in the microscopic architecture designed into it by ingenious human minds. In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We’re breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny. Even as we explore the most advanced reaches of science, we’re returning to the age-old wisdom of our culture, a wisdom contained in the book of Genesis in the Bible: In the beginning was the spirit, and it was from this spirit that the material abundance of creation issued forth.”¹²¹

117 *Szygy*, directed by Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman (2023; New York: DIS Art, 2023), duration: 29:39 <https://jacobhg.com/szygy/>

118 James Clayton, “Metaverse: What happened to Mark Zuckerberg’s next big thing?” BBC News, 25 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-66913551>

119 Ibid.

120 A comparably dystopian example might be in the game ROBLOX in which users may build their own video games to be played by others, which has proven to exploit what is essentially a child labour force, grooming young users towards the labour conditions of the gig economy, even as the gaming industry has been one of the latest to face corporate takeovers and mass layoffs. See: Simon Parkin, “The trouble with Roblox, the video game empire built on child labour: Young developers on the platform used by many millions of children claim they have been financially exploited, threatened with dismissal and sexually harassed,” *The Guardian*, Sun 9 Jan 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/jan/09/the-trouble-with-roblox-the-video-game-empire-built-on-child-labour> AND Kenzie Gordon, Jennifer R. Whitson, Johanna Weststar and Sean Goulas, “The video game industry is booming. Why are there so many layoffs?” *The Conversation*, February 11, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/the-video-game-industry-is-booming-why-are-there-so-many-layoffs-222685>

121 Hurwitz-Goodman, *Szygy*, *ibid.* 14; 52.

One might associate this with the equally material/immaterial teleology of the medieval period:

“The gleaming tops of portable altars have been singled out as potent sites for the study of emptiness (...) The ontology of emptiness/absence encoded in the stone surface not only suggests the unrepresentable presence of the divine but also provides space for another species of this presence, bread and wine. Its very material indexes Christ, “the stone which the builders rejected . . . made the head of the corner” (Mark 12:1, cf. Matthew 21:42, Luke 20:17). Simultaneously, the empty stone alludes to the empty tomb, recalling Christ’s absence in the sepulchre as a theological keystone of salvation. Its nature as an enduring mineral, too, conveys what Cohen has termed “a thickness of time,” which “triggers the vertigo of inhuman scale” and puts our anthropocentric scopic regimes to shame...”¹²²



Ikea Minimalism and the White Cube

Ikea Minimalism and the White Cube

In “The Suicide of Lucretius”, the dark room in the background of Cranach’s original is replaced in mine by the ubiquitous petrochemical white of the modern era, the walls painted in acrylic are effectively liquid plastic. 20th Century innovations in pigment and binders (the building-blocks of paint technology) render the sealing of walls “cleaner”, and considerably more permanent than the limewash (rabbit skin glue, natural pigment and chalk) used throughout most of European history. The dark Gothic interior has been replaced by this modernist turn, illustrating blankness, effacing its own mundanity with substances created to be “permanent”, that have also become synonymous with environmental destruction and death. In galleries across the globe, the “white cube” retains its dominance, walls patched and painted over, applying liquid white plastic, sanding-off liquid white plastic, drilling into it, and beginning again; a ritualistic fervour dedicated to an art that still pretends to exist outside the world.

Working in the 15th Century at the beginning of the Renaissance, the author of *De pictura* (“on painting”), artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher, and cryptographer, Leon Battista Alberti, rejected the gold of medieval imagery “in favour of white as the appropriate sign for holiness.” Rotman writes that:

“White, by being at the same time a possible colour on a par with any other colour and a meta-colour, a sign indicating the absence of colour, reflects the systematic ambiguity of the vanishing point (...) This rejection of gold - concrete, iconically precious, ‘natural’, intrinsically valuable

¹²² Elina Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, (Penn State University Press, 2021) p.28. Also note, 169.

- in favour of abstract, semiotically neutral white finds a reflection (...) in the signs of money, where the possession of palpable gold is displaced by the intangible assurance on a promissory note.”¹²³

While certain modernisms that favoured minimalist interiors promised to move away from decoration in the name of democracy.¹²⁴ Today the world has been painted over in petrochemical white, democracy replaced with the promise of enormous profits generated by minimalist furniture mass-produced with an in-built “use by” date (planned obsolescence). The standard model of the art gallery as we know it, is thought deviant when it does not conform to the standard of whiteness, a “non-colour” performing erasures. The unbelievable material sums attained by “great” contemporary artists, is made possible in these “white cubes” conjuring infinity as nothing, blankness. Somehow, even in art, this “nothing” has made everything possible, including the exponential inflation of value via the addition of evermore zeros.



Total Work of Life

Total Work of Life

“The Reformation of the sixteenth century not only involved the elimination of the Catholic Church’s domination (*Herrschaft*) over the believer’s life in its entirety but also the substitution of one form of control by another. A highly agreeable domination that had become a mere formality, one that was scarcely felt in a practical manner, was replaced by an infinitely burdensome and severe regimentation of the entire organization of the believer’s life (*Lebensführung*). Religion now penetrated all private and public spheres in the most comprehensive sense.”

-Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic*¹²⁵

In the book referenced above, Weber makes a convincing case for the connection between the new religion proposed by the Reformation, Protestantism, and the ways our lives are increasingly regimented by those in power (ever more resoundingly since the emergence of ubiquitous, though somehow “invisible”, tech monopolies). A trajectory beginning in those times, the parallel between decisive technological innovations (the printing press and the internet as communicational devices) makes the socio-political situation surrounding the Reformation strangely similar with our situation. This fact is exemplified in the false dualism promoted by popular history,

¹²³ Rotman, *ibid*, p.22

¹²⁴ Stark white “minimalist” interiors were, in fact, pioneered in the Dutch Calvinist churches of the 16th century, as will be further elaborated in the final chapter.

¹²⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. 1st ed. United Kingdom: Routledge, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995808> .4

the Papacy vs. the Princes, via which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Martin Luther initially challenged the papacy only to side later with the princes. Luther's stance against the demands and wishes of the peasantry and any material reshaping of the society that resulted, is strongly reminiscent of the apparently oppositional two-party system dominant in anglophone societies. Luther and his new enlightened and "democratic" religion, spread via the similarly novel mass technology of the printing press, spoke now in the common tongue, though not really on behalf of the commoners. Protestants were essentially the Democrats to the essentially Republican illiberal *stuckists*¹²⁶ of the Papacy.

Aside from Luther's ideological pragmatism, contrasting with his radical early writings, was the propaganda he encouraged through his close relationship with one of the most prominent painters of the German Renaissance/Reformation, Lucas Cranach the elder. Cranach portrayed Luther and various other figures of the Reformation repeatedly, as well as carving polemical woodblock prints showing, for example, the Pope as the Antichrist, as the negative inversion of "true" Christianity (as shown above). Following in the tradition, his son Lucas Cranach the younger would go on to repeatedly insinuate famous Reformers in biblical scenes, such as in his very memorable altarpiece of Luther and Cranach the elder with John the Baptist beside Christ on the cross, his blood spurting onto Cranach.¹²⁷



Liberalism and Luther

Liberalism and Luther

In *The Serpent and The Lamb*, Harvard professor of early modern and modern German history, Steven Ozment both praises (for their thorough treatment of history) and derides (for their apparently contemporary ideological undertones) East German art historians' writings on Cranach, and particularly the work of contextual art historian Heinz Lüdecke. Ozment vaguely disputes Lüdecke's proposition that Luther and Cranach "sold out" the peasants, during the German Peasant war of 1524-6, preferring instead Luther's own argument against the claims of the peasants after "they drew first blood"¹²⁸ (history strangely repeating in the bizarre set of justifications constantly repeated for the genocide of the Palestinian people). The brutal murders of 1500 peasants, as well as the increasing impoverishment and literal serfdom experienced by the peasants is essentially dismissed by Ozment's reading. Nonetheless, Lüdecke's apparent views on Luther were not the product of a

126 A play on the art movement (?) founded in London in 1999 by Billy Childish and Charles Thomson to promote figurative painting as opposed to conceptual art.

127 Lucas Cranach the Younger, "Christ on the Cross", 1555. Oil on lime, 370 x 309cm. Central panel of the altarpiece in the Weimar Parish church St. Peter and Paul.

128 Steven Ozment, *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300178388>. Pp.15-22

uniform orthodoxy, as can be seen in a later commission bestowed upon the “Leipzig School” painter Werner Tübke, who was actually forced by the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands/ Socialist Unity Party of Germany)¹²⁹ to include both Luther and Cranach in his epic painting “Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany” (also known as the Peasants’ War Panorama) (1976-1987).¹³⁰ As recounted by Art Historian Eckhart Gillen, “(R)ather than the anarchic Müntzer (...) ultimately the SED preferred Luther as a politically useful model of their own Prussian, Protestant ethics of control.”¹³¹

It is worth considering the positions of artists of the time, noting that several of the Reformist artists actually took up the cause of the peasants during the Bauernkrieg, and were apparently brutally repressed for doing so. Some accounts credit Albrecht Dürer as having criticised Luther’s position, pointing to his *Unterweisung der Messung* (Treatise on Measurement), of 1525,¹³² which includes a monument to the vanquished peasants, featuring all the accoutrements of the peasantry, topped with a peasant with a sword through his chest. Art Historian Erwin Panofsky, however, claims that “Dürer never wavered for a moment in his loyalty to Luther”¹³³ such that the monument was intended to mock the peasants. This assertion is made more plausible upon considering his work the “Treatise on Fortification”¹³⁴ which Panofsky suggests was: “possibly connected with one of the earliest “slum-clearing projects” in history,¹³⁵ the Augsburg “Fuggerei” of 1519/2.”¹³⁶ Dürer’s reputation as one of the great artists of his time seems secure. Said Fuggerei was of course the work of one Jakob “the rich” Fugger, who is said to have paid minimal taxes but introduced this philanthropic enterprise for the sake of those poor people he deemed worthy. Dürer was a friend of the Fuggers, and apparently quite horrified by the hoardes of peasants in revolt, ultimately leading to his design of fortifications for the city of Nuremberg, which were executed some ten years after his death.¹³⁷ He may as well have been a “public artist” of today, with the already anticipated increase in property values these great works of genius would seem to entail. And of the artists surrounding the German Renaissance, the most famous names are of course that of Cranach and Dürer, such that one might be warned of taking up the cause of the disenfranchised both in terms

129 The ruling party of the DDR/GDR Deutsche Demokratische Republik/German Democratic Republic, the East German Communist government, 1949-1989.

130 The Peasants’ War Panorama(Bauernkriegspanorama) houses Werner Tübke’s monumental painting “Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany (Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland)” 1976-1987. Oil on canvas, 1400cm x 12300 cm. Peasants’ War Panorama(Bauernkriegspanorama) Museum, Bad Frankenhausen, Thuringia, Germany.

131 Eckhart Gillen, “One Can and Should Present an Artistic Vision... of the End of the World’: Werner Tübke’s Apocalyptic Panorama in Bad Frankenhausen and the End of the German Democratic Republic,” *Getty Research Journal* 3, no. 3 (2011): 99-116. <https://doi.org/10.1086/grj.3.23005390>. P.106

132 Albrecht Dürer, “Design for a Memorial to the Peasants’ War”, in: *Albrecht Dürer, Unterweisung der Messung: mit dem Zirkel und der Richtscheit in Linien, Ebenen und gantzen Corporen*, Nürnberg 1525. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Germany.

133 Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, (Princeton University Press, 1955), p.233

134 Albrecht Dürer, “Treatise on fortification (Etliche underricht zu befestigung der Stett Schlosz und flecken)”, 1527.

135 Panofsky’s reference to the Fuggerei as a “slum-clearing project” is the only one I can find via searches on Google, Google Scholar, Duck Duck Go (my preferred search engine), and through the University of Sydney Library website, all of which present me solely with puff pieces about the world’s oldest social housing project. The Fugger family are wealthy even to this day.

136 Ibid, p.257

137 Tessa Morrison, “Albrecht Dürer and the Ideal City.” *Parergon* 31, no. 1 (2014): 137-60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2014.0050>.

of immediate prospects and that of one's legacy.

The pleasantries of Renaissance Protestant art with their assertions of everyday morality are perfectly aligned with the art of the Neoliberal era, in being produced to extol a similar form of virtue through remaining blind to the plight of the oppressed, something which almost characterises the art of the establishment in Australia today, as we have seen in the aforementioned work of Lindy Lee.¹³⁸ The rather more vital Late Gothic art preceding the Peasant War was to slip out of favour, and while Cranach was occasionally a good painter and Dürer's technical prowess little in doubt, other artists of the time have ultimately passed out of the collective memory seemingly not for a lack of merit but rather their political views. The sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider (1460-1531) allied himself with the lower classes against the Prince-Bishop, Conrad von Thüngen, and was tortured and had his hands broken, never to receive another commission thereafter (though he commanded a large studio). Worse was painter Jörg Ratgeb, who was elected councilor and chancellor by the peasants and became part of the military contingent of the revolt, such that he was charged with treason, and was drawn and quartered in 1526.¹³⁹

By contrast, in 1532-33 Cranach painted an image of John the Constant the elector as the "Savior of Germany". This was the same John the Constant who was, "by this time best known to his contemporaries as the prince who had slaughtered more peasants on the battlefields of Saxony than any other."¹⁴⁰ It is the advance of this kind of whiteness/neutrality, the selective "disappearing" of evidence of real historical material conditions, that belies another politic; that of the contemporary academic of the Western neoliberal world as objective expert whose ideological position is somehow presented as un-ideological. This critical tendency strangely inflects many works written between the end of the Cold War and the present. Ideals that promoted the free market were put forth as neutral and unencumbered, essentially free, while all others were supposed to be hopelessly saddled with a flawed ideological agenda (like communism/socialism).

The most prominent of the aforementioned basically doomed 'minor artists' is probably painter Matthias Grünewald, who is believed to have sided with the peasants when leaving his position as court painter. He subsequently died in poverty in 1528. This narrative is questioned by American art historian, Tamara Golan, with particular reference to the work of DDR art historian W. K. Zülch and his apparent efforts to ingratiate himself with the socialist establishment,¹⁴¹ though Grünewald's sympathies were widely believed to have been with the peasantry long before, as demonstrated in Paul Hindemith's 1938 Opera "Mathis der Maler

¹³⁸ Lee, *ibid.*

¹³⁹ For more on this topic and the excellent artists mentioned see my Substack "Fuggerei II (The Dissolution of the Academy)", August 15, 2025. <https://robertsonz.substack.com/p/the-dissolution-of-the-academy>

¹⁴⁰ Ozment *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴¹ Tamara Golan, "Mit Dem Kreidestift Und Farben: Revolutionizing Grünewald in the German Democratic Republic." *Art History* 46, no. 2 (2023): 310-43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12714>. 310-343

(Matthias the Painter)". Grünewald certainly belonged to a late Gothic tradition sometimes effected by the artists of the German Renaissance, though the clarity of the horror in his work was simultaneously to align it with the Gothic and arguably with works that would come to be emblematic of modernity (the work of Goya coming again to mind). It is perhaps most notably written about by W.G. Sebald in his first novel *After Nature* and 1996 novel *Emigrants*, where it is described (by the fictional painter Max Ferber), thus:

"The extreme vision of that strange man, which was lodged in every detail, distorted every limb, and infected the colours like an illness, was one I had always felt in tune with, and now I found myself feeling confirmed by the direct encounter. The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, black pain blocks out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this."¹⁴²

Proto Koons?

Proto Koons?

In retrospect, Cranach's working methods and business savvy seem remarkably contemporary. Cranach's salary as court painter to the electors of Saxony also allowed him to purchase real estate, the first printing press in Wittenberg (which was to issue Luther's German New Testament in 1522)¹⁴³ and even an apothecary, which enabled him to buy pigments wholesale. Even his tendency to produce vast quantities of work, to overproduce, seems more in keeping with what one would expect of a major artist of our own time. As described by Ozment, "Between 1506 and 1510, the [Cranach's] workshop hired as many as ten assistants, both apprentices (*Lehrlinge*, young men in training) and journeymen (*Gesellen*, advanced artists). With the increased demand for Cranach art came the hiring of ancillary gold-platers, illuminators, cabinetmakers, glaziers, goldsmiths, silk sewers, cloth weavers, and tailors."¹⁴⁴ Cranach's promotion of Luther's work via his paintings and studio, meant that Luther's

142 Matthias Grünewald, and especially his "Isenheim Altarpiece" (c. 1509–15), nonetheless have remained a source of inspiration and wonder, being amongst the most dark and horrific depictions of the crucifixion scene ever represented, forming an important of both in W.G. Sebald, trans. Michael Hulse, "Max Ferber" in *The Emigrants*, London: Vintage Books, 2002, p.170

143 Eamon Duffy, "Review: Spiritual surrender: As Martin Luther's PR man, Lucas Cranach was crucial to the success of the Reformation, yet he also produced many great works for the Catholic church. Ideology was all very well - but for this artist, business was business." *The Guardian*, March 1 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/01/art.art>

144 Ozment, *Ibid.* 89

visage was reproduced at least 203 times.¹⁴⁵ Add to this further promotion in wood block prints, and we could view Cranach's as the first truly modern propaganda art. Functioning as a business, Cranach's assistants essentially filled in the sketches of their master. X-rays have even revealed beneath the paint instructions as to what colour they were to paint different areas of each painting. Otherwise, Cranach supplied tracing outlines of his popular works and portraits in order that they could be easily reproduced. Many paintings of Luther would seem to have only around ten related source images.

In these images, Cranach simultaneously renders biblical and classical symbolism quotidian, as a kind of painted equivalent of Luther's translation of the bible. At the same time, he also establishes a new hierarchy tied to new dimensions of wealth. Thus, the democratising intent of the Reformation is laid bare in its hypocrisy in this early modern aspiration to surmount the Imperial past. Instead, a new hierarchy was established, albeit one at least supposed to represent a beacon of virtue. The public may have been newly educated to imagine they might better themselves, but as became evident during and after the German Peasant War, Protestantism's new order would set about dominating poorer subjects through the erection of an insurmountable "meritocracy." Cranach and those in his employ were, in fact, of common enough heritage that their recent good fortune was widely resented by Wittenburg's university population (which consisted of men from wealthy noble families). The meritocracy announced by the advent of the Protestant Reformation is also of the contemporary kind: that which is bestowed upon those deemed worthy by those in power in order to at least appear to offer opportunities for advancement. In Cranach's time, and arguably, though to a lesser extent, still, such opportunities were definitely not for women, or for what was then the peasant/farmer class, now the working classes.

Cranach's Women"

"Cranach's Women"¹⁴⁶

Aside from images of Reformers and biblical scenes, Cranach was also well-known for his erotic nudes. The women in Cranach's paintings are representative of the women of his contemporary Saxony, noticeably pallid in comparison to the likely colouring of the original subjects. While European depictions of Jesus may have always erred almost comically to the Northern, in Cranach works there is an awareness and purposiveness involved in this historical revisionism. As is often stated, unlike the proportions of Renaissance nudes, "Cranach women" are generally slim and blonde ("willowy"), depicted with contemporaneous accessories and fashions that speak to their high status. Cranach's promotion of thoroughly German erotic nudes as ideal erotic subject emptied

¹⁴⁵ http://cranach.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/wiki/index.php/CorpusCranach:Martin_Luther

¹⁴⁶ An actual title chapter in Ozment, *ibid.*

of all agency, as status symbol, is curiously modern in that it continues today. Women's physical characteristics are still supposed to embody their meaning and subjectivity, as though some are more inherently animal and sexual than others, some inherently more aspirational and "professional" as partners.

In true form, Ozment anachronistically insists on the power held by women over men. Cranach's favoured choice of subject reads like the affirmation of all of those Ozment berates for finding Cranach "sexist", where women's power is apparently limited to being able to tempt men. Take his ekphrasis for Cranach's "Adam and Eve": "As she savours her sin, Eve's eyes are beady and alert like those of the Serpent, while Adam's eyes remain languid and unfocused, a Cranach commentary on which really is the weaker sex."¹⁴⁷ Other related subjects chosen by Cranach include Judith slaying Holofernes and David being tempted by Batsheba, there is no trace of irony in this extended dehumanisation of the erotic subject. The "sexism" exemplified by Cranach's work was in fact so consequential in terms of its subsequent impact, that it seems incredible that there are those who argue against it. Take, for example, Ozment's own description of Cranach's exploits as Wittenburg's *Bürgermeister*: in June of 1537 Cranach "ordered a fifty-year-old woman, her two sons, and a compliant servant to be executed at the stake for the alleged crimes of sex with the devil (*Teufelbühlschaft*), poisoning of fertile fields, and invoking violent storms. Again, in October, he sent an accused witch to the stake on similar charges."¹⁴⁸

The painting copied in my work is another of Cranach's erotic nudes, "The Suicide of Lucretia", (1529)¹⁴⁹ - "Lucretia, the Roman woman raped by the Roman prince Tarquinius and thus dishonored, ends her life with a stab in the heart. According to legend, this act triggered the fall of the Roman kings and the beginning of the Roman Republic."¹⁵⁰ The *Corpus Cranach - Digital catalogue raisonné of the Cranach painting workshops and their epigones* (*Corpus Cranach Digitales Werkverzeichnis der Malerwerkstätten Cranach und ihrer Epigonen*) lists the number of Cranach works of "Lucretia" as 95, with "The Suicide of Lucretius" copied for the purposes of my own work perhaps being the first.

Directly following the Reformation, Lucretia, viewed as a martyr to "unchecked power", was a subject of plays by the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger (in 1526) and the German poet Hans Sachs (in 1527).¹⁵¹ In two examples of Cranach paintings, through the window behind Lucretia the viewer can see a hill with buildings on top of it that looks almost impossibly precarious. The hall that cantilevers off the very edge is particularly precarious and alludes to the instability of Europe's existing regime. This in turn appears to have been further not-so-subtle propaganda targeted against the papacy in favour of the Reformation.¹⁵² Art historian John

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 189

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 35.

¹⁴⁹ This particular iteration is held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

¹⁵⁰ <https://cranach.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/wiki/index.php/CorpusCranach:Lucretia>

¹⁵¹ John. Gagné, "Cranach's Lucretia in the Balance." Source (New York, N.Y.) 37, no. 2 (2018): 108–18. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697231>.p.114.

¹⁵² Ibid. "The hanging hall in Cranach's panels echoes this rhetoric over embattled authority through a figuration of groundlessness.

Gagné writes that both the widely performed dramas mentioned above and immediately preceding this suite of Cranach works, depict the death of Lucretia “as a change of state, when the political balance shifts from the privilege of the few to the rights of the many, as a tyrannical regime meets its end.” He further writes that “(i)n marshalling a landscape element to comment upon the subject’s meaning, Cranach signals some of the principal thematic of Lucretia’s story: suspension, instability, the threat of the fall, and the potential of better groundings. At the same time, he models the ambitions of painting to perform its own exegesis.”¹⁵³

There is certainly a lot of misogyny bound up with the early Protestant church with its “family values”. Celibacy came to be seen as a sin against the state, and women’s bodies became political objects as all behaviour was suddenly policed and judged for its ethic in relation to net productivity. The Reformation was to be directly responsible for the German Witch Trials. In “Caliban and the Witch” Silvia Federici¹⁵⁴ wrote about the role of the witch trials in terms of what Marx termed “primitive accumulation” (in this case, of women’s bodies), which she saw as a blind spot in Marxist literature. Her contention is that division between the sexes was encouraged as a way of breaking working-class solidarity. She gives some striking examples regarding the new policing of women’s sexuality:

“The repulsion that non-procreative sexuality was beginning to inspire is well captured by the myth of the old witch flying on her broom, which, like the animals she also rode upon (goats, mares, dogs), the projection of an extended penis, symbol of an unbridled lust. This imagery betrays a new sexual discipline that denied the “old and ugly” woman, no longer fertile, the right to a sexual life.”¹⁵⁵



(De)Construction

The soon-to-be-built Atlassian tower, is presented in on the Built Australia website in digital renderings resting on what appears to be, like Cranach’s background folly, an impossibly precarious a cantilever, the sky

Seen in terms of attacks on the papacy, the structure acts as an anti-model of Christian architecture, a literal imagining of a house without foundations, built not—as the Gospel according to Matthew (7:24; 16:18) urges— upon rock, but upon the wind (fig. 3). Luther, whom Cranach knew well, had preached on the difference between secure and insecure foundations in 1519, warning that Christ alone was the rock upon which the church was built. “Christ is the foundation upon which the church must stand, against which no force will prevail,” the reformer argued. “Likewise, a house or fortress built upon a rock trusts in good footing for its foundation, as if it could say: I have a good grounding, I entrust myself to it.” 113-114.

153 Gagné *ibid.*, p. 115

154 Silvia Federici, “Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation”, Autonomedia: Williamsburg, Brooklyn, USA www.autonomedia.org info@autonomedia.org, 2004.

155 *Ibid.* 192.

shining through the foundations.¹⁵⁶ At the time of writing, the tower is under construction in Sydney, Australia. It is a hybrid timber building, apparently built also to the most environmentally friendly specifications, if building entirely new architecture can ever be seen as the truly “green” option. A headline from the Sydney Morning Herald from 2018 announced: “Atlassian: the \$30 billion tech giant nobody understands”¹⁵⁷, which seems a typical story in the obfuscated landscape of our “invisible” but ever-present tech monopolies. The world translated into the vernacular as championed by Luther and Cranach through accompanying images, today seems almost impossible while the limits of our lives are defined literally by virtual “code”. The phallic tower referencing a Greek god, is built-up in defiance of the digital nothing that undergirds it. It is a kind of subterfuge embedded in descriptive terminology.



Everything Returns to Nothing: The Word Made Flesh/The Flesh Made

Word

Everything Returns to Nothing: The Word Made Flesh/The Flesh Made Word

Proceeding from a “blank canvas”, we have come to accept two dimensional renderings as essentially separate from the world. The erasure of the physicality of word and image, of thought even, is something not often imagined as a modern construct. However, before the printing press and widespread proliferation of paper (as opposed to vellum) it was quite normal to refer to the materiality of the substrate of the text/image. Manuscripts written on vellum referred to the animal skins that contained the knowledge, quite often in bawdy wordplay. In *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, medieval art historian Elina Gertsman details the meaning impregnated in medieval manuscripts through the device of blankness, often described elsewhere as *horror vacui*. She writes:

“The exposed parchment stands in for the exposed body, ready to be inscribed; as Camille pointed out, “The traditional association between the act of copulating and the act of writing . . . was taught to every schoolboy in his first Latin lessons about conjugations and the gender of nouns.” Blank vellum is the elision of color and matter: it can represent skin, and it is skin. Just as female flesh was imprinted and implanted with seed during coitus, so was the matter—*materia*, *mater*—of the page imprinted and marked with a pen or a brush. Both the page and the female body were the tablets of Nature, ripe for insemination, and the generation—of a child, of a text,

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.built.com.au/projects/atlassian-central/>

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

of an image.”¹⁵⁸

Less penetrative insights perhaps were penned as a result of this shift in technology (the word pencil derives from the Latin for “little penis”).¹⁵⁹



Conclusion: Common Ground/Common Tongue

Conclusion: Common Ground/Common Tongue

The less legible lines of text that appear in my “The Suicide of Lucretius”, the work that introduced this chapter, are derived from the earliest piece of Saxon writing from the 9th Century held in the Albertina Library in Leipzig. It is a poetic work detailing the emptiness of Jesus’ tomb. Blank spaces on altar stones are said to have likewise represented the empty tomb. They are invitation to contemplate this religion, Christianity, founded on the miracle of emptiness,¹⁶⁰ which perhaps, after all, assimilated the foundation of “nothing” well enough to perpetuate it into the current world order dominated by capital.

The “(Anglo-)Saxon Triptych” to which the Lucretius work belongs, is one of the few I have painted using raw materials, in oil on canvas in direct reference to this tradition of sublimating the substrate. In the production and consumption of two-dimensional arts, especially against today’s digital backdrop, mediums are seen to be expressive independent of their materiality. Meanwhile, the technologies that we use are manipulative and extractive, and apparently independent of the world, synthetic, created from “nothing”. In the regime of ruthless financial extraction predicated on obscuring physical forms of resource theft, it has become unclear what the products we use are even made of. The world is apparently altered from without, as the empty repletion of standardisation takes the place of material and spiritual equality.

158 Elina Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, Penn State University Press, 28.

159 Ibid, 60.

160 Ibid.

Chapter four:

Chapter Four:

Smart Casual Academic

Smart Casual Academic



Zoë Marni Robertson, "Another Reformation Meat Diet (of Worms): The Princes (Looks/Trade-off)", 2023. Acrylic and (found) enamel on (found) board, 30cm x 40cm. Installation view: "Retrosynthesis(Ekphrasis): The Cognitive Elite" 2023 at Blenheim House. Photo: Jessica Maurer.



Lucas Cranach the elder, "Portrait of Martin Luther", 1528. Oil on beech wood, 37.3 cm x 23.5 cm. Landesmuseum, Hannover.

Passional Christi vnd



Christus.

So ich ewre fusze habe gewaschen d ich ewre heren vñ meyster bin/vill mehr solt yr einander vnter euch die fusze waschen. Giet mit habe ich euch ein anzeigung vñ beyspiel geben/ wie ich ym than habe / also solt yr hinfur auch thun. Warlich warlich sage ich euch/d knecht ist nicht mehr dan seyn herre/ so ist auch nicht d geschickte boete mehr dā d yn aelandt hat. Wilt yr das!

Antichristi.



Antichristus.

Der Babst mast sich an iglichen Tyrannen vnd heydnischen fursten/ so yre fusz den leuten zu kussen dar gereicht / nach zu volgen/damit es waer werde das geschriben ist. Welcher dieser besten bilde nicht anbetet/ soll getodt werden. Apocalip. 13. Die kussens darff sich der Bapst yn seyne decretalen vnuot/ schembt rümen. c. cū oli de vi. de. Si summus pon. de sen. apoc.

Lucas Cranach the Elder with text by Phillip Melancthon, woodcut from the "Antithesis figurata vitae Christi et Antichristi (Passional Christi and Antichrist)," 1521.

evolutionary (Bowel) Movements

Revolutionary (Bowel) Movements

Martin Luther, progenitor of the German Reformation, discussed variously in previous chapters, was famously preoccupied with faeces, to an extent that still makes historians and theologians uncomfortable. He also wrote about his own bowel movements such that the relatively recent discovery of his toilet was historically exciting. He told his wife shortly before his death: “I am like a ripe stool, and the world is a gigantic anus, and so we are about to let go of each other.”¹⁶¹ This kind of conversation, even writing, was not actually that unusual in early modern Europe, populations had dramatically increased, literal *shit* was everywhere and people were quite open to talking about it, and making lots of fantastically puerile jokes about it.¹⁶²

The painting of mine above stemmed from something I may have misremembered; a lecturer I had when studying undergraduate Early Modern History, explained that Luther’s epochal “95 theses” that ushered in the Reformation, literally “posted” in 1517,¹⁶³ were written almost entirely on the aforementioned famous toilet due to Luther’s constipation. I could only find mention of his constipation from 1521, but Luther’s health problems (and related fecal obsession) and writings on the subject were well-documented, and he wrote also of his love of food.¹⁶⁴ In the Early Modern period, quite in contrast to the health-obsessed gerontocracy of our times, gaining weight was a sign of prosperity, and the diets of the wealthy were high in meat and low in fibre, infamously causing constipation. Peasants on the other hand suffered from a lack of nutrition, the combined outcome of high-fibre diets, that also made them notorious for the loudness and fluidity of their bowel movements. Said bowel movements even became a common theme in various denouncements of the new (Protestant) and old (Catholic) religion by the proponents of the Reformers and Papacy alike during the time of the Reformation.¹⁶⁵ One woodcut by Cranach depicts peasants defying a papal bull by farting at the Pope’s feet.¹⁶⁶ The associated pamphlets are very reminiscent of what we now refer to as memes. The new ideas

161 Quoted in J.C. Farrell, (2018). Luther and the Devil’s World. In *Paranoia and Modernity* (pp. 57–80). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501732423-006>

162 It is probably best observed for counter-cultural pungency in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984)

163 The gesture of “posting the theses to the church door”, has served as an image of the force of the rebellion (though this is apparently contested), the reality of the alleged door was pointed out to me when art historian (and local) Ulrike Brinkmann gave me a tour of Wittenberg, explaining that this side door (if I understood correctly) was simply a church door/noticeboard. The posting was well-timed on the feast day of all Hallows.

164 Julian Herlitz, Anne-Charlott Trepp, A.-C., Xenia von Tippelskirch, & Elizabeth Fischer. (2021). “God be Praised that I did not Sweat to Death.” The power of the body and Martin Luther’s concept of melancholy. In *Bodies in Early Modern Religious Dissent* (1st ed., pp. 45–63). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003081395-5> p.48

165 Quoted in J. C. Farrell, (2018), “Luther and the Devil’s World” in *Paranoia and Modernity* (pp. 57–80). Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501732423-006>

166 Woodcuts (1545) known as the Papstspottbilder or Depictions of the Papacy in English, by Lucas Cranach, commissioned by

proffered by Luther and other Reformers, were proliferated in concert with the then-recent invention of the printing press as mentioned earlier. Cranach's pamphlet of 1521, "The Passional of Christ and Antichrist", (an example of which is shown above) on which he collaborated Luther's lieutenant, Philipp Melancthon, placed his woodblock prints with Melancthon's accompanying prose, and was particularly devastating for the papal cause. In it Christ's humble actions are paired with papal corruption, including: "Christ and his followers humbly trudging the roads while the Pope is carried in a litter; Christ washing his disciples' feet while the Pope's foot is kissed by kings and emperors; Christ crowned with thorns while the Pope is crowned with the triple tiara."¹⁶⁷ As few people were literate, such woodblock prints were an essential political tool for communicating disdain for the existing order represented by the papacy, and subsequently for the new order of the Reformers.

It was not simply that the Reformers were dependent on these artistic endeavours to convey their message, a message that changed the course of art and society, because an opposition to art was also integral to the new faith. Art of the medieval period had been something typically commissioned by church leaders whose magnificent monuments and cathedrals impressed on the peasantry the righteousness of their religion. Cathedrals employed hundreds of workers usually over decades, and were more broadly speaking, great social enterprises. And yet, at least since the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, the monopolistic dealings of the Catholic Church had meant that money from churchgoers from all over Europe, was going straight back to Italy to further these great architectural and artistic ventures. Alternatively, local populations were excluded from access to such splendour and inspiration. Before their public posting, Luther's theses were originally included in a letter to the clergy, protesting the sale of indulgences that were used to help fund St Peter's Basilica in Rome, home of the Sistine Chapel, whose magnificent ceiling painted by Michaelangelo, was completed in 1512.¹⁶⁸ Thus, "iconoclasm" is an essential tenet of the Reformation, where in place of fantastic palaces and paintings, the faith would be passed down through text, the Word of God as rightfully intended in what was to be understood as a "democratic" form.

Paradoxically, Luther was instrumental in assuring the continuation of the German Renaissance, and, as we have seen, securing Cranach's position as state painter. Despite the new promises of wealth attendant with the new religion, the iconoclastic impulses of many Reformers posed a marked threat toward artists of the time.

At one stage, Cranach pleaded for Luther to return to Wittenberg, which he did at some personal risk during

Martin Luther. Title: Kissing the Pope's Feet. German peasants respond to a papal bull of Pope Paul III. Caption reads: "Don't frighten us Pope, with your ban, and don't be such a furious man. Otherwise we shall turn around and show you our rears." 1545 engraving by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

¹⁶⁷ Eamon Duffy, "Review: Spiritual surrender: As Martin Luther's PR man, Lucas Cranach was crucial to the success of the Reformation, yet he also produced many great works for the Catholic church. Ideology was all very well - but for this artist, business was business." *The Guardian*, March 1 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/01/art.art>

¹⁶⁸ Though his "Last Judgement", also in the Sistine Chapel, was not finished until 1541.

his early exile to Wartburg castle, where he was in hiding after his (infamous) speech at the Diet of Worms, where he further denounced the papacy, to argue that religious art was perfectly in keeping with the new theology.¹⁶⁹ This is likely because Luther's close relationship with the artist, had conveniently also allowed for the politicised proliferation of his image and ideology. Nonetheless, unlike other Reformers, Luther believed art to have a part to play in Protestantism. And alongside his relationship with Cranach, the violent removal of religious imagery prompted Luther to:

“...deal with the iconoclasm instigated there by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. In eight sermons against Karlstadt in 1522, Luther designated images as *adiaphora*, stating that “we are free to have them or not to have them.” Already in 1518, he had expressed opposition to images displayed in churches only if they encouraged idolatry. He firmly condemned the improper use of images customary in Catholic practice, such as their veneration in hope of gaining specific favors from God. Luther's theology also eliminated private donations of paintings or entire altarpieces to churches. In 1529, he clearly distinguished artworks used in superstitious practices, which he condemned, from didactically useful pictures of biblical narratives, which he called *Merkbilder*. Luther welcomed such narrative images as effective reminders of Christ's actions as recorded in the Bible, including pictures of Christ on the cross and of the Virgin Mary.”¹⁷⁰

Cranach's position was privileged and by no means an indicator of the condition of the artists of the German Reformation, where artists and artisans surplus to the propaganda requirements of Reformers found themselves without commission, some even failing to be paid for commissions that were half-finished.¹⁷¹ Art therefore had to be accommodated by this fundamentally business-friendly form of new faith. Nonetheless, Luther's defence of art as somehow absolved from perceived corruption, was a decisive intervention in the conception of art: in the Protestant world art would be removed from the realm of decoration in service to religious propaganda while ethics would be properly internalised through texts.

In this new religion, art had to be instrumentalised to prove its service to a regime of spiritual perfection. While proponents of art and philosophy/theology had a long history of antagonism (Plato argued that all poets be banished from his ideal Republic, as art was mimesis or copying, the word from which “meme” is derived), it seems this new imposition on art - which could no longer simply claim moral superiority in representing biblical stories - is probably the origin of our contemporary predicament, having lost sight of what art is

169 Ozment, *ibid* “Chapter Five - Marketing Luther”

170 Christiane Andersson, Sarah Covington, and Kathryn Reklis, “Protestant Paintings: Artworks by Lucas Cranach and His Workshop.” In *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts*, 1st ed., 41–56. Routledge, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429001222-3>. P.41

171 Notably, the artists who sided with peasantry, mentioned in the previous chapter, were not among those similarly disenfranchised. On the other hand, for the widespread disenchantment among artists see: Andreas Tacke, “Business First: Lucas Cranach and the Art Market in the Reformation.” *Getty Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (2018): 61–82. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697384>.

supposed to be for (if it is not to immediately create value on the open market) embracing utterly didactic and instrumentalised artworks,¹⁷² as art-washing for the museums and the donor class. This can take place either through the aforementioned liberal eugenics or through such examples as Olafur Eliasson's "Ice Watch", 2014-2018,¹⁷³ in which the artist brought 30 icebergs from a Greenland fjord to three different European cities to melt in order to "invit(e) the public to contemplate the devastating impact of climate change"¹⁷⁴, via a work that is, in itself, environmentally destructive for no apparent reason, funded through the same system of galleries and billionaire donors that play an active role in environmental destruction, all while offering no viable solution to this predicament aside from "educating" an already aware and largely impotent public.

Crudity for the Peasantry, Human Awnings for the Princes

Crudity for the Peasantry, Human Awnings for the Princes

In terms of works produced as pure propaganda, there is a Cranach studio version of the Temptation of the Christ, unusually originally commissioned for a Protestant church now in the Grunewald Hunting Lodge in Berlin. (Cranach would take commissions both from Catholic and Protestant churches and patrons, even his close friend Luther's arch enemy, Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg.) This work represents an excellent demonstration of the sometimes-shoddier work produced by Cranach's studio for the purposes of simple public consumption (in one of the paintings there is even an extra leg in the crowd)¹⁷⁵. Such work stands in especial contrast to the much more skilled works painted by Cranach the elder for the private viewing of patrons. His "The Judgment of Kambyes (Elector Joachim II's exemplum panels)" (about 1540-5)¹⁷⁶, which is also in the collection of the Grunewald Hunting Lodge, is a superlative example of such work. It was specifically commissioned for the building completed in 1541, for Joachim II Hector, Elector of Brandenburg, one of Cranach's patrons. The subject matter is explained in the *Corpus Cranach*:

The Greek historiographer Herodotus (Histories V, 25) passed down the story of the judgement of the Persian King Kambyes to us. He convicted the judge Sisamnes of corruption and had

172 And that which claims to be apolitical is the most instrumentalised of all.

173 Olafur Eliasson, "Ice Watch", 2014-2018. Icebergs, dimensions variable.

174 There were three iterations of this environmentally costly work, in Copenhagen in 2014, in Paris in 2015 and at the Tate Modern in London in 2018. Naomi Rea, "Olafur Eliasson Hauls 30 Icebergs to London, Inviting the Public to Contemplate the Devastating Effects of Climate Change", Artnet News, December 11, 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/olafur-elias-son-ice-watch-london-1416811>

175 Lucas Cranach the elder and studio, "Christ in Limbo", 1538. Painting on limewood, 151.2 x 116.2 cm. Grunewald Hunting Lodge.

176 Lucas Cranach the elder, "The Judgment of Kambyes (Elector Joachim II's exemplum panels)" (about 1540-5). Painting on limewood, 209.4 x 107.1 cm. Grunewald Hunting Lodge.

him flayed alive as punishment. He then stretched the skin over the judge's chair and ordered Sisamnes' son Otanes to take his place on the chair as the new judge".¹⁷⁷

Despite the quite gruesome subject matter, painting is quite beautiful and the skill undeniable. By contrast Cranach's aforementioned "Passion of Christ for the Berlin Stiftskirche (Collegiate Church)"(1537) is more crudely rendered and also strange in that it is most probably the only in the history of art to have depicted Jesus being kicked in the balls by the Romans.¹⁷⁸ Cranach's paintings as well as pamphlets, particularly those painted for public consumption, functioned in their directness like memes. The importance of images in conveying meaning to a largely illiterate public meant that the purified austerity aspired to in early Reformist thought, would not be fully achieved until several hundred years later, arguably via the new democratic movement of the Bauhaus, which also began in Saxony (though, as we shall see later, there was more success regarding aniconism in the 17th Century Dutch Republic). The Reformists were essentially the first Liberals, and the art these new rulers patronised, appealed to their sense of moral superiority. The underlying message of meritocracy, where an artist such as Cranach would rise above all others also fit perfectly with this new capitalist religion, where those who did not rise to prominence could be seen to be lacking in moral fibre (if you will forgive the pun).



Working Conditions/Academic Art/Qualification

Working Conditions/Academic Art/Qualification

"The framing of such economic strife obscured its material conditions by overemphasizing culture over political economy. Fredric Jameson and other Marxists identified a "cultural turn" in our understanding of social antagonism, eclipsing economic conditions for apparatuses of divining tastes and affects. By the 1990s, the cultural rebels who had gotten PhDs in the 1970s stormed the university and secured tenured positions. They did not pay attention to budgets and administration as much as they were obsessed with their own commitments to cultural transgression, some of which involved wearing jeans to class, smoking pot, sleeping with students, and listening to John Cale, but also enjoying Madonna's MTV videos. Jean Baudrillard

¹⁷⁷ The Corpus Cranach website (dedicated to his work) goes on to explain: "By employing simultaneous depiction in this painting Cranach linked the flaying of Sisamnes, which is illustrated in the background, with a scene in the foreground showing the judge Otanes sitting on his throne covered by a baldachin made of his father's hide. The judge alone wears a turban, distinguishing him as an historical figure, whereas the other men and women present in the courtroom are in contemporary dress. A man gestures angrily and attempts to justify himself in front of the judge who points a critical finger. Two bearded elderly men each explain the judgement of the court to a group of women." [see Elke A. Werner, Exhib. Cat. Berlin 2009, 203, no. III.23] https://lucascranach.org/en/DE_SPSG_GKI1188

¹⁷⁸ Lucas Cranach the elder, "The Scourging of Christ", 1537. Painting on limewood, 149 x 112.6 cm. Grunewald Hunting Lodge.

had taught us that everything was simulacra, and it did seem as if style had become the most important part of substance, and words become signifiers were permanently untethered from their referents. In the evolution of PMC, antagonism against mainstream culture and ordinary people were mixed up with its smug sense of subcultural superiority.”

-Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Rise of the Professional Managerial Class*.¹⁷⁹

Before joining the church, Luther studied Philosophy, though he was ambivalent about the idea of reason being above god. Upon taking vows he came to teach Theology at Wittenberg University from 1508. Wittenberg was a “University Town” much as we would understand it today where a large portion of the townspeople were employed in service to the university.¹⁸⁰ Universities then, and for hundreds of years functioned with people simply convening with those proclaimed the “great thinkers” of their time. Now they seem to be an altogether different beast than even what they were in the mid-20th Century, meeting places that then produced a “counter-culture”. According to the annals of the 20th Century, art and the university set the stage for radical political change. However, this radical change was facilitated in a manner not dissimilar to the changes wrought in Wittenberg in the early 16th Century.

Now both art and the university have been crippled by the mantra and functioning of “management”. Since the 1970s, the contemporary corporate university has privileged shareholders and senior management over academics and genuine educational outcomes, lately threatening the survival of an increasingly casualised staff-base. One of the proposed changes to University of Sydney academic operations fought against by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at The University of Sydney (USYD) in 2023, was the move to remove the paid research component from the contracts of permanent academics. Of course, research is that which enables the production of the knowledge that is then relayed to students. Knowledge tends to become obsolete where it is not constantly sought and augmented. The proposed change therefore posed a very big problem for basically all university disciplines.

Additionally, more than half the academic workforce of USYD in 2023 were employed casually. Workers in this workforce would necessarily have studied for upwards of five years to attain their roles and would be presumed to be experts in their field. At the same time, and across the globe, roles in administration have skyrocketed. At Yale University, for example, there has been a 44.7% rise in the number of administrative staff since 2003.¹⁸¹ This is something maligned on “both sides” of politics, from an article for example in

179 *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*. University of Minnesota Press. 2021 <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1fkgbjx> P.16

180 (It was also the University where the Danish Prince that was to be the model for Hamlet was said to have studied).

181 Philip Mousavizadeh, “A “proliferation of administrators”: faculty reflect on two decades of rapid expansion: Yale’s administration has grown rapidly, which some professors say negatively impacts faculty and students.” Yale News, Nov 10, 2021, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2021/11/10/reluctance-on-the-part-of-its-leadership-to-lead-yales-administration-increases-by-nearly->

Forbes magazine to the work of the “anarchist” anthropologist David Graeber.¹⁸² In terms of the teaching of contemporary art, any kind of emphasis on historical awareness was long ago jettisoned for failing to be “radical” or “relevant” enough to comport itself as generative liberal propaganda.

In a strange “debate” between Graeber and Peter Thiel, the two, diametrically opposed politically, generally agree on there is a cultural and scientific stagnation that defines our present. Graeber, speaking to his experience in Anthropology departments in the U.S.A. and London, gives a breakdown (mostly endorsed by Thiel), which could equally describe the working conditions of artists within contemporary art institutions:

“...in social theory, basically what we’re doing is writing these endless annotations on French theory of the 1970s, sometimes the 1960s or ‘80s. I call it the “Classic Rock Phenomenon” (...) if you want to have maximized possibility of unexpected breakthroughs it’s pretty obvious what the best policy is, get a bunch of creative people, give them the resources they need for a certain amount of time (...) basically you leave them alone. Most of them will probably not come up with anything but a few of them will come up with something that will even surprise themselves. If you want to minimize the possibility of unexpected breakthroughs take those same people and then tell them they’re not going to get any resources at all unless they spend the majority of their time competing with one another to prove to you they already know what they’re going to create...”¹⁸³

Many art schools similarly function in the continuum of (predominately) French theory from around the 1970s, as well as referring almost exclusively to artworks from the same period, mostly from North America.

The work of “Academic artists” diverges from traditional academia due to the allegedly “subjective” nature of their/our work, meaning they/we are able to speak to more broad political issues. Best practice within academia is after all offering the complexities of a specific subject, even becoming expert by narrowing the field,¹⁸⁴ whereas artists will behave like bowerbirds taking ideas from everywhere and repurposing them. In practice though artists too, tend to focus on very narrow fields often as a means of self-marketing. Strangely, it could be argued that it is the incremental dearth of education in art history, that leads to these academic historic concepts being uncritically perpetuated to propel an inescapably European continuum.

50-percent/

182 This has been written about across the political spectrum (in such bastions of radical left thought) as Forbes Magazine, as well as by David Graeber. Caroline Simon, “Bureaucrats and Buildings: The Case for Why College Is So Expensive,” *Forbes Magazine*, September 5, 2017: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinesimon/2017/09/05/bureaucrats-and-buildings-the-case-for-why-college-is-so-expensive/?sh=2c648050456a>. David Graeber, “Are You in a BS Job? In Academe, You’re Hardly Alone,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 64, no. 34 (2018): B12–

183 David Graeber and Peter Thiel, “David Graeber vs Peter Thiel: Where Did the Future Go” *The Baffler*, September 19 2014, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/graeber-thiel>

184 As pointed out by Umberto Eco: “Finally, remember this fundamental principle: the more you narrow the field, the better and more safely you will work. Always prefer a monograph to a survey. It is better for your thesis to resemble an essay than a complete history or an encyclopedia.” Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis*, MIT Press, 2015. ProQuest eBook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=3339948>. Created from USYD on 2022-05-18 01:59:57, 13.

We have already seen neoliberal ideology embedded in examples of art historical writing perpetuated mostly in the field of humanities, but also in more traditionalist art schools. Alternatively, art schools which have positioned themselves as more “contemporary” may have been among the first in the university to jettison tradition for the sake of “relevance”, where, in some, the focus has become near chronophobic, favouring mainly iconoclastic works of the 20th Century that purport to exist outside the economic system, and national boundaries, while belonging very much to the Capitalist system. Tellingly, such works were almost invariably produced within dominant cultural/economic centres such as New York City and Berlin. This kind of art, by now practically a genre, commands immense profit in “opaque” (corrupt) markets that encourage insider-trading. As it is, art has become an alternative economy,¹⁸⁵ further exasperating the unequal distribution of wealth everywhere else. Now every university department is encouraged to demonstrate that it can be similarly instrumentalised.

Today, artist/academics are bound by performance indicators and must seek public engagement like any other academic, though facing the added constraints of the art market, which would famously call for artists to simply reproduce the same works for sale. At the same time, there is a financial and social inevitability to the prevalence of “Academic Art” with so many artists becoming academics out of necessity, as more humble work rarely guarantees an income high enough to meet the rapidly increasing cost of living.¹⁸⁶ Within the university, increasing qualification requisites require PhDs of lecturers and demand particular forms of work and engagement, justifying this shift via “research” paradigms (originally designed for the sciences). Highly casualised and poorly compensated academic work is nevertheless highly, endlessly, sought after.

ntrepreneurs of the Self

Entrepreneurs of the Self

Joshua Citarella is a sometime casual academic, artist and internet theorist who, like his friend and collaborator artist/theorist Brad Troemel, has sought to leave behind poorly remunerated and insecure casual university tutoring work in order to deliver “content” via the “platforms” of tech monopolies. While Troemel appears to make something of a living uploading video lectures, Citarella hosts video interviews via YouTube and publishes writing, as well as presenting content through the shared Discord server/blog “Do Not Research”, which he also founded. Citarella has spent much of his recent career mapping political trends via the internet, which

¹⁸⁵ Hito Steyerl, “If You Don’t Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms” in e-flux journal, issue #76, October 2016, <https://e-flux.com/journal/76/69732/if-you-don-t-have-bread-eat-art-contemporary-art-and-derivative-fascisms/>

¹⁸⁶ See Liu, *ibid.*

he has dubbed “e-deologies”. He faithfully tracks internet trends and memes, patiently speaking with younger people who are politically active, as representatives of a new reality lived online, where young interviewees describe their political standpoints through niche vectors that are almost absurdist in their specificity, such as “Archeo-Futurist Irish Nationalism.”¹⁸⁷ In the case of Citarella’s research, attempts to “deradicalise” right-wing youth seemed to lead to the adoption of methods taken straight from *InCel* or *Involuntary Celibate* culture as advice on how to become one of the handsome and privileged men that women allegedly exclusively desire, and whom the incels opine against: that is, those dubbed the “Chads”. Performatively speaking to these discoveries, Citarella pursued his own parallel transformation. He began by following the “all meat diet” recommended by figures of the far right, such as psychology lecturer Jordan Peterson, famous for telling young men to clean their bedrooms as well as his diet of only meat, salt and water (recommended to him by his daughter).¹⁸⁸ He has since moved on to a more measured approach to the performance of health and fitness. Nonetheless, he appears to still endorse the idea of taking some control over one’s diet and environment as belonging to a political program, this time, as a counterpoint to the ‘version of masculinity’ promoted by the right. Citarella’s success in following diets and related physical augmentation have even led to his promotion of a \$5 USD “diet plan”, in addition to the aforementioned cultural theory: a fitness regimen supplemented with politico-theoretical readings.¹⁸⁹ However, it would seem that Citarella’s interesting experiment facilitated via an unlocated art school came to prominence via social media platforms. His self-aware gesture almost necessarily depended on online promotional content to “feed” the online algorithms. These contemporaneously algorithms automatically preferred aesthetic was the ubiquitous strong jawline and “shredded” physique (obtained by dedicated working-out and extreme calorie limitation to obtain an “optimised” physique).

Citarella had initially emerged to speak out about concern many in Academia had raised, about the challenges of working inside a university system in decline due to years of corporate induced cutbacks. With studio press shots as well as (stupid) candid group photos becoming standard currency for (self-) promotion in the arts, the willingness to conform to the same standards as those mentioned above in order to promote an “alternative” seemed at best dubious. It reflects a broader phenomenon best described as “capitalist realism”, originally by Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Konrad Lueg,¹⁹⁰ but best known through theorist Mark Fisher, one of Citarella’s favourites. The Capitalist Realism of Fisher was, however, an advancement from the dark comedy

187 Joshua Citarella, “Archeo-Futurist Irish Nationalism: automation, immigration and overall violence” Joshua Citarella’s Newsletter on Substack, April 25, 2023, <https://joshuacitarella.substack.com/p/archeo-futurist-irish-nationalism>

188 Lindsay Beyerstein, “What Happened to Jordan Peterson? A philosopher, a medical crisis, and a mystery” The New Republic, March 10 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/156829/happened-jordan-peterson>

189 Joshua Citarella, “Fitness Program and Syllabus: Summer 2024”, Joshua Citarella’s Newsletter on Substack, July 9, 2024. <https://joshuacitarella.substack.com/p/fitness-program-and-syllabus-summer-27e>

190 See the exhibition: “Living with Pop. A Demonstration of Capitalist Realism (Leben mit Pop. Eine Demonstration für den kapitalistischen Realismus)”, 1963, featuring Gerhard Richter, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke, in an empty butcher’s shop Kaiserstraße 31a in Düsseldorf

of the original, of artists living across the divide between West Germany and the DDR, pointing with obvious irony to the hypocrisy of the disdain for Soviet Realism where the Capitalist art of the time, as of now, could so easily be demonstrated to be a product tailored specifically for a set of equally myopic ideologies. Fisher's efforts are summed up eloquently by music journalist Simon Reynolds in his Obituary in *The Guardian*:

“Fisher argued that the pandemic of mental anguish that afflicts our time cannot be properly understood, or healed, if viewed as a private problem suffered by damaged individuals. Rather, it was the symptom of a heartless and hopeless politics: precarious employment and flexible work patterns, the erosion of class solidarity and its institutions such as unions, and the relentless message from mainstream political parties and media alike that “there is no alternative” to managerial capitalism. That this is as good as it gets – so deal with it.”¹⁹¹

A more contemporary core aspect of that “realism” is dominant ideologies proliferated through cloud-based “platforms” operated by billionaires, feeding into a narrative of the “entrepreneur-of-the-self”.¹⁹² The latter is proposed as a viable alternative to traditional media and educational models. In an “attention economy”¹⁹³ the most viable means of self-promotion was the “selfie”, as self-portraits were much more likely to be shared by algorithms than images of artworks, or even images of food (“food selfies”). Clearly there is really nothing new in promoting the work of thinkers with “reformist” tendencies through the wide dissemination of their image except now they apparently have to be “sexy”. The same tendency would seem to permeate academic institutions and the rather amorphous Fine Arts “discipline”, particularly where “Art by Research” is concerned, which would seem to generally be presumed an effort at another form of self-promotion in contextualising an artist's work inside the continuum or indeed “canon”, with results bordering on the bizarre.¹⁹⁴

Much is made of the advent of the “selfie”, which is essentially only the proliferation of a trend in art made possible by digital cameras. As we have seen, this trend began as the propaganda images of Luther made by the Cranach studio, which became a trope for artists selling works to the market via their inflation of their own

191 [Simon Reynolds, Mark Fisher's K-punk blogs were required reading for a generation, The Guardian](#)

192 Svetlana Alpers, *Rembrandt's enterprise: the studio and the market*, (University of Chicago Press, 1998). “Entrepreneur of himself” is a term first coined by Michel Foucault in his lectures at the College de France. Michel Foucault, Michel Senellart, College de France., and College de France. “Nine: 14th March 1979” in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*. 1st ed. 2008. Basingstoke [England] ; Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230594180>. P.226

193 A phrase coined by Shoshanna Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, First Trade Digital Edition, (PublicAffairs, 2020)

194 As such, I have been asked to clarify the relationship of my work, whose inspirations are largely irrelevant to this document, to the work of Fisher and Polke. Indeed, there is a synchronicity within this paper and accompanying works between the forms of Capitalist Realism proposed by both Polke and Fisher. This is explored materially by Polke in his embedded critique of high art materials, his use of domestic textiles for example (the painting that heads this chapter is on found board, but I have often used found textiles), though I can't say that Polke is a particular touchstone. My own blogging practice and academic work follows a similar postmodern logic to that of Fisher's, whose multilayered references form a critique of what he also perceived as a cultural stagnation, beginning particularly in the neoliberal era following the end of the Cold War. The tendency to jump through historical periods and genres could also be said to have been influenced by such theorists as Franco “Bifo” Berardi, whose writings Fisher referenced.

images and reputations. At the end of 2023, it even became evident that Alphabet had altered their “Google” algorithm so that when looking up an artist, an image of their person appears before that of their work. While self-portraiture had always existed, advances in the technology of mirrors meant that artists began to portray themselves more self-consciously both individually and occasionally as participants in larger scenes, from about the Renaissance. The great innovator, Jan Van Eyck’s portrait “Man in a Turban” of 1433¹⁹⁵ (perhaps the first self-portrait painted on panel) is a good example. Also active in promoting the Reformation (as well as his own image and self-acknowledged “genius”) was painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer, whose last self-portrait, usually referred to as “Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight” (1500)¹⁹⁶ is noted for bearing a remarkable resemblance to then-contemporary depictions of Christ, with hands seemingly in the act of blessing.

But it was only through the advanced efforts of self-promotion encapsulated by the activities of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), to whom nearly 80 self-portraits are attributed (paintings, drawings and prints), that the “self-portrait” or “selfie” became so central. Art historian Svetlana Alpers borrowed Michel Foucault’s term to call Rembrandt an “entrepreneur of the self”.¹⁹⁷ Rembrandt also, quite famously, went bankrupt, largely from buying a lot of art, often paying far above market value. Alpers suggests that this was intentional, meaning that Rembrandt both utilised the widespread proliferation of his own image as a means of self-promotion, and intervened in the valuation of art on the market in a deliberate effort to inflate prices.¹⁹⁸ In the long term, despite his bankruptcy, these acts of “playing the market” meant that he was able to secure many commissions in the latter part of his life. And if the continued valuations of his work are anything to go by, it was a very successful strategy.

Of course, the difference between the “selfie” as adopted for self-promotion by countless contemporary figures (as well as Rembrandt), and by figures such as Luther and Citarella is that the latter two, despite their cultural and temporal distance, both explicitly proliferate their own image in service to a broader movement. Luther’s theology was admirably democratic (at least initially), and yet is hard to reconcile with the man who abandoned the peasantry. Citarella’s podcasts/servers/blogs provide a welcome antidote to the impoverishment of “left” discourses evident in universities, traditional media and the art market. Combined these forces work to uphold a liberal consensus that in no way examines the reality of growing income inequality, un/under-employment and widespread precarity. At the same time, in Citarella’s case, and others like him, it is hard to shake the feeling of a more direct complicity with platform capitalism when it comes to issues of methodology, and it is important to contextualise these efforts within the continuum of Capitalist art.

¹⁹⁵ Jan Van Eyck, “Man in a Turban (Man met de rode tulband)”, 1433. Oil on panel, 19 x 15.5 cm. The National Gallery, London.

¹⁹⁶ Albrecht Dürer, “Selbstbildnis im Pelzrock (Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe)”, 1500. Oil on lime panel, 67.1 x 48.9cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

¹⁹⁷ Alpers, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid* “Chapter IV. Freedom, Art and Money” pp.88-121



Theory as Performance/Performance as Theory

Theory as Performance/Performance as Theory

Citarella appears as a spokesmodel for critique in an almost overproduced series of videos for DIS art¹⁹⁹ made with aforementioned filmmaker Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman, entitled “When Guys Turn 20”.²⁰⁰ In the series of short videos, Citarella’s rugged good looks are put to use as he explains the effects of the tech giants on artistic production. He speaks of possible cooperative models for alternative societies, simultaneously memorably deploying makeup and lighting references to “Blade Runner 2046”.²⁰¹ The video basically intuits the performativity of the white male intellectual, or indeed any public intellectual, while making a lot of salient points about the deleterious effects of platform capitalism. The rarefication of the white male “genius” still plagues an industry, that is after all reliant on the wealth of the few, who would tend to prefer to be reflected through the artists that they patronise. White men invented so-called “identity politics” long before the term was in usage as an antidote to the platforming of the singular needs of upper and occasionally middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant men, and it is oddly satisfying to see those now cast as “white men” reduced to performing it, as “others” have so long been forced to, and not as the bearers of objective reason.

Ironically, the identity politics that have become synonymous with the museum are opined in “When Guys Turn 20”, undoubtedly as “new media” works are particularly dependent on representation in public institutions. In one particular video, Citarella (and presumably Hurtwitz-Goodman) make the point that for all the “social justice movements” that have sprung up on the internet it would seem that “the house always wins”, referring to how museums have recently begun to explicitly promote artworks specifically under the guise of “diversity”. I mostly agree with these works, and with Citarella’s broader contention that institutions, that is – both the museum and the university, are superior modes of distribution when compared to flagrantly monopolistic tech platforms. However, one need only walk around the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, observe priceless treasures, whole structures, imported from Egypt and elsewhere, and regard the names of museum donors on the wall: those benefactors constituting the capitalist old guard were unlikely to have hoarded their enormous wealth through projects related to sustainable development (for example). As art becomes increasingly privatised and subject to the will of individual collectors (even as the class of those that can afford

¹⁹⁹ dis.art is an online edutainment channel, which streams video pieces for a limited run of 30 days. It is an offshoot of DIS, which is a collaborative project based in New York City, which also runs lifestyle magazine DIS Magazine as well as several other projects.

²⁰⁰ Jacob Hurtwitz-Goodman and Joshua Citarella, “When Guys Turn 20” March 2022, <https://dis.art/series/when-guys-turn-20>

²⁰¹ Denis Villeneuve, Ryan Gosling, and Harrison Ford. *Blade Runner 2049*. Sydney, N.S.W: Distributed by Universal Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Australia, 2017.

such indulgence shrinks), the institutions no longer seem a viable alternative.²⁰² In fact, it seems as though we have reached a limit where the ‘art world’ can no longer exist outside the world and our lot as artists is again inextricably bound to the people. This is nowhere more obvious than in watching those who already hail from the upper classes essentially commandeer the majority of opportunities in the arts.²⁰³ It is as though the class war has already been won while the artists were busy ingratiating themselves.

Institutions have tended to weaponise the rage rightfully initially directed against them, into otherwise shallow means of dividing and conquering. This, if anything, calls for greater solidarity and self-awareness regarding institutional operations and intentions. It is a particularly important point when the formerly privileged, once with all the influence and money, find themselves increasingly “demoted” even to the status of those that were dubbed “white trash” in the early part of the 20th Century. This accelerated fall into precarity is shocking enough that we too can fall into misdirected anger against the “stupid” art that can seem to take up most of the space of museums which is inevitable while the institutions cling to the paradigm of Neoliberalism.



Internet Experts

Internet Experts

In an Instagram reel entitled “Instagram Fatigue and the Rise of Resentment Reels”²⁰⁴ tech journalist, and associate of Citarella, Taylor Lorenz examines the phenomenon of those disgruntled that their “hustle” has not led them to the financial independence promised through following the prescriptions of the algorithm. Instagram has recently changed its algorithm yet again to reward video content over static images. The switch to “reels” would appear to have something to do with what economist Yanis Varoufakis calls “The New Cold War”, with China, wherein the threat of China’s recent predominance in the tech arena is even seen to pose a threat to the dominance of the American Dollar.²⁰⁵ Recent hostility to TikTok is apparently part of this phenomenon, where a blanket ban on the app seemed to have already been on the cards before the added

202 Recently commented upon by Beniamino Foschini in “Maurizio Cattelan and the Re-Privatization of Art” in Spike Art Daily, 11 December, 2025. <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/comment-maurizio-cattelan-preis-der-nationalgalerie>

203 I famously lost most if not all opportunities of working in the arts in Sydney or having my work platformed in major institutions when pointing out that the parents of a winner of the aforementioned Archibald Prize had donated at least \$100,000 to the associated Art Gallery of New South Wales in that year on my instagram and more thoroughly, my substack in “Con/Text Part I: The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune” and “Con/Text Part II: The Thousand Natural Shocks that Flesh is Heir To” <https://robertsonz.substack.com/p/the-slings-and-arrows-of-outrageous> and <https://robertsonz.substack.com/p/context-part-ii>. There are also seemingly endless op-eds on this topic, see: Anna Louie Sussman “Can Only Rich Kids Afford to Work in the Art-world” in Artsy, February 15 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-rich-kids-afford-work-art-world>

204 Taylor Lorenz, “Instagram Fatigue and the Rise of Resentment Reels” YouTube Video, March 5, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlqOLehArVw>

205 Yanis Varoufakis, “The New Cold War”, in *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, London: Penguin, 2024.

pressure of Palestinian genocide which has been voraciously filmed and uploaded by those experiencing it via the app.

According to Varoufakis, the American government's efforts to freeze foreign bank accounts as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, may threaten the overall dominance of the American Dollar, as it has spooked foreign regimes into investing in China's new finance infrastructure. This effectively eliminates banks as intermediaries in transactions made through the "everything app" called WeChat.²⁰⁶ Out of this background, the move towards forcing the Chinese government to divestment from TikTok, considered against the originally posited US ban, looks suspicious. This seemed even truer when people like avowed Zionist, investment banker and former Treasurer for the Trump Administration, Steve Mnuchin attempted to buy the platform. Lorenz claimed that the divestment narrative is a way of cloaking the ban but that forced divestment actually seems a lot more sinister.²⁰⁷ And so the recent sale to a consortium of famed right-wing media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, and ultra-Zionist billionaires Michael Dell and Larry Ellison makes plain the intentions of silencing critique.

Lorenz's 2023 book "Extremely Online" is a study in developments around platform capitalism, particularly as it pertains specifically to monetisation. Lorenz offers a plain and readable assessment of user-led augmentations to each platform performed over time. If one were to attempt a reading of the subtext of Lorenz's work, the history of internet applications veers inevitably towards better times when the owners of tech companies acknowledge the labour of those who (generally by accident) "go viral". Acknowledgement of the profitability of these individuals to advertisers contributes to the general betterment of the media landscape.²⁰⁸ What is even more interesting in Lorenz's deep investment in the tech-scape, is the way these "viral" subjects' function against the seemingly utter randomness of how platforms develop. YouTube started out as an internet dating site which failed spectacularly in its original intentions as very few women uploaded videos of themselves.²⁰⁹

Many instances of online invention began as dating applications initiated and developed by lonely "nerds" self-identifying as superior and/or "nice" and meant to provide a level playing field against "Chads". The latter apparently typically monopolise the attention of women (who are assumed unable to exercise judgement). It is, of course, amazing that those who have been attempting to reduce every aspect of human, natural and cultural life to monetary value to then privately hoard, were not immediately viewed as sympathetic romantic partners (in the end we have always been subjected, not so much to a politic, but an *economics*, of envy). It's important to remember that the advertising revenue that used to sustain hundreds of local publications as well as the major

206 Ibid.

207 Taylor Lorenz, "TikTok creators say House ban threatens lives and livelihoods: Small-business owners, community advocates and educators spoke out Wednesday after the House overwhelmingly approved a measure to ban the popular app", The Washington Post, March 13, 2024 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/03/13/tik-tok-ban-react-creators/>

208 I know that I, for one, am greatly relieved that the owners of "grumpy cat" will never have to work again.

209 "The Rise of YouTube" in Lorenz, *Extremely Online*, ibid. pp.59-84

“legacy” publications, representing millions of livelihoods, did not disappear but was rather reoriented towards the owners of tech platforms. Similarly, while book sales still thrive, authors struggle to make ends meet.²¹⁰

But these almost endearing histories and utopianism regarding technologies, the Post-Internet era of asserting the value of memes as the true democratic artform suppresses the darker truth of engagement with these applications, which we know are damaging to our mental health and social relations and environmentally devastating. Yasha Levine’s *Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet*²¹¹ traces the origin of the internet, between the necessity of systematisation of the meticulous cultural data during the Vietnam War in a ground war that America ultimately lost. Levine’s argument is that, contrary to the commonly repeated narrative of a latter day enclosure of the internet, where the internet is presumed to have begun as a free and liberated space; data mining and surveillance were always the goal of these technologies.²¹²

Conclusion: Meat Diet of Worms

Conclusion: Meat Diet of Worms

“At this point, I am fully convinced that Deleuze is just poetry for art students. In the history of organized labor, there is no shop steward who ever said the word “rhizome” or talked about “bodies without organs”. Simply put, this stuff has no relevance to organized political life.”

-Joshua Citarella.²¹³

There has always been some resistance to the so-called “avant-garde” that we might prefer to read, within an establishment that is, after all, set up to proliferate knowledge and advance it. Material conditions today however have made unsafe to the point of risking utter penury, to exist on the margins of the academy. Reading the preface to the English edition of Pierre Bourdieu’s “Homo Academicus” I found myself laughing at Bourdieu’s self-described Derridean pun. Bourdieu relates how he explained to an American student that all the French theorists said student so admired (and who configure so much of the academic discipline of Fine

210 Danuta Kean, “Publishers are paying writers a pittance, say bestselling authors: Philip Pullman, Antony Beevor and Sally Gardner call for fairer share of profits, as survey shows full-time writers earn below minimum wage”, *The Guardian*, 27th June 2018.

211

212 I was surprised by this reading but immediately more convinced of the stated motivations of the developers of Google than the narrative put forward by Shoshana Zuboff in her aforementioned summer blockbuster hit (endorsed by war criminal, Barack Obama <https://thelavinagency.com/barack-obama-names-shoshana-zuboffs-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-to-his-favorite-books-of-2019/>) who makes it sound as though they rather innocently realised that they simply couldn’t make money except through data extraction. Apparently Google’s initial manta “don’t be evil” was a statement issued in earnestness and in no way a red flag.

213 Joshua Citarella, “Cyber Nihilism: a hyperreal realm charged by technocapital” Joshua Citarella’s Newsletter, March 7 2024, <https://joshuacitarella.substack.com/p/cyber-nihilism>

Art), were all quite marginal within the academy at the time, basically academia's marginalia.²¹⁴ Marginalia from medieval manuscripts have become fashionable both in the world of memes and contemporary fashion making Bourdieu's pun seem even more appropriate. Those French academics referred to by Bourdieu (the "classics" - Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) whose works are constantly referenced within the Fine Arts, most likely would not have found a way to practise had they been working and writing today. As much as those involved in the "art world" would prefer to deny it, it is just the same where artists are concerned. Artists like Vincent Van Gogh are so often evoked as being overlooked, and yet Van Gogh was given a modest stipend by his gallerist brother and able to live without a "day job", a luxury barely imaginable to working class artists of today.²¹⁵ The consolation is supposed to be that we are currently so enlightened that someone exhibiting the "genius" of a Van Gogh would be instantly recognised. I take little stock in the idea of "genius" but one imagines what is best expressed as such is a capacity to see beyond the present moment, and creating works that express this prescience, something that all-but impossible when one's livelihood depends on creating works to fit institutional briefs and/or endlessly applying for funding from bureaucratic cultural institutions.

I would tend to agree with Catherine Liu and Citarella when they suggest that what we describe as "French Theory" has been instrumentalised almost as a "psyop"²¹⁶ to convince an academicised left that politics amounts to little more than semiotic theory. This, of course, thwarts and diffuses a Materialist analysis. Clearly and concisely written political statements are certainly more useful for proliferating knowledge around issues affecting the majority. This practice nonetheless should not be mutually exclusive of advocating for texts that aren't immediately useful or studying histories that might not immediately seem relevant. This is a problem lurking within any attempt to look at history as a monolith, either advancing or destroying the work of "great men": ultimately it is just a form of censorship.

Obscurantist takes on the history of knowledge hardly provide immediate benefits in vocational job-training, or the practical instrumentalisation of an overarching politic, and yet underpin some nascent strategy, or possibility, of communication as liberated from capitalist metrics. Clarity of communication is important, and political communications can and should be simplified to appeal ideally to everyone as they relate to their lives and material circumstances, but the world is complicated, and time should equally be devoted to forms of knowledge that aren't immediately either political or profitable. I can write clearly and concisely to serve my ends, but I can't help feeling that something of the richness is lost when that becomes the only way one

214 Pierre Bourdieu, "Preface to the English Edition" in *Homo Academicus*, Stanford University: California, 1998. viii-xix

215 <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/brotherly-love>

216 Psyop, short for psychological operations, is a military tactic that aims to influence the behavior, emotions, and decision-making of individuals, organizations, and governments.

can communicate. If, buried and yet recognisable in the vagrant ideologies of agreeableness, the Christian Protestant turn can so clearly be read, then under the auspices of consensus, criticality has become improbable to a degree that would have previously been disappointing even on a theological level. At the Diet of Worms (1521) Luther defended his Protestant doctrine of a consensual commons,

“I rejoice exceedingly to see the Gospel this day, as of old, a cause of disturbance and disagreement; for such is the character and destiny of God’s word. “I came not to send peace unto the earth, but a sword,” said Jesus Christ. “For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes shall be those of his own household.” (Matthew x:34-36).

God is wonderful and terrible in His counsels. Let us have a care, lest in our endeavors to arrest discords, we be bound to fight against the holy word of God and bring down upon our heads a frightful deluge of inextricable dangers, present disaster, and everlasting desolations.”²¹⁷

217 “Martin Luther’s “Here I stand” speech” David Bahn – Reflections (website), October 31, 2017, <https://davidbahn-reflections.com/2017/10/31/martin-luthers-here-i-stand-speech/>

Chapter Five:
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Gothic Romance Producing Reality as
Ethic

(Gothic Romance) Producing Reality as
Ethic



Zoë Marni Robertson, "Cultural Capital/Sun King (Hipster Fascism)", 2023. Acrylic and (found) enamel on (found) board, 40cm x 55cm. Installation view: "Retrosynthesis(Ekphrasis): The Cognitive Elite" 2023 at Blenheim House. Photo: Jessica Maurer.



Anonymous, "Portrait of Louis XIV of France", 1670. Oil on canvas, 196 x 155 cm. Palace of Versailles.

Consider two famously petty tyrants separated by centuries: tech mogul Peter Thiel and Louis XIV of France, the infamous “Sun King”. Thiel, amongst other actions, was notable for bankrupting the website “Gawker” for revealing that he is gay. As we have considered, Thiel is involved in the establishment of a new pseudo-monarchism while being involved in a range of causes described generally as “libertarian”.²¹⁸ Louis XIV, France’s absolute monarch, deposed then executed as a result of the French Revolution, once gaoled a nobleman for “extravagance” (having a better house than him). He then deployed his architect, Louis Le Vau, the painter, Charles le Brun, and the landscape architect, André Le Nôtre, to build Versailles. This story is famously recounted in Alexandre Dumas’ novel *The Man in the Iron Mask*,²¹⁹ part of a larger work and the final installment of the author’s adventures of the Musketeers. It is a lamentation for a bygone era of supposed honour and chivalry enacted in the name of the King. The text was serialised in 1840s post-Revolutionary France by Dumas the grandson of an Afro-Caribbean slave. Louis XIV is known for consolidating the Divine Right of Kings, sweeping away vestiges of the feudal system, fomenting numerous wars... and majorly contributing to the arts.

The painting of mine that introduces this chapter was originally inspired by reading a “viral” article “Among the Reality Entrepreneurs” by James Duesterberg, which details the apparently seamless transition of the hip, art-adjacent New York scene known as “Dimes Square”, into an expression of reactionary right-wing politics at the launch of Peter Thiel’s apparent internet alternative “Urbit”. Thiel’s bizarre initiative actually advocates for a more literal form of “Technofeudalism”²²⁰ with the deliberate establishment of literal digital fiefdoms. Duesterberg’s article details the weirdness of the convergence of the art scene with the alt- “nerds” of Urbit. The new “Dimes Square” was ultimately rejected by the cultural capital of the wider art scene. Still, there remains a strange synergy and shared agenda between these otherwise differentiated scenes. Both are organised by hierarchies that largely privilege the ultrawealthy. The narratives associated with this corporate-induced pseudo-monarchism are, fittingly, colonialist and traumatising, as well as propagandistic. They project both the heroism and self-identified “injury” of the privileged while continuing to absorb leftist language.

Romances

Romances

Dumas’ famous Musketeers saga begins during the reign of Louis XIII, roughly coinciding with the beginnings of French colonialism. Overall, the work evinces themes of nostalgia for a world on the brink of modernisation,

218 (including sea steading, in which a bunch of white men hope to live in cities that float atop the ocean and sail between different versions of political utopias to try them all out – I recommend Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman’s documentary on the subject: <https://jacobhg.com/seasteaders-trailer/>)

219 Alexandre Dumas, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2012).

220 A term coined by economist Yanis Varoufakis to describe the rise in inequality.

a sentiment common enough in post-Revolutionary France. In a review of yet another adaptation of the Three Musketeers as well as a recent biography of Dumas' father by Tom Reiss entitled *The Black Count*, Boyd Tonkin explains that another common theme in Dumas' oeuvre, as dramatized by characters such as D'Artagnan who is hellbent on it, is avenging a wronged father. Dumas' father, Alex Dumas, had been subjected to racialised abuse for accompanying a white woman to the opera in Paris. Furthermore, he rejected his aristocratic lineage, took the name of his formerly enslaved mother, and become a general in the French Revolutionary armies. This was at a time "when it looked as if the upheavals of 1789 would usher in a golden era of racial equality."²²¹ Described as a 6 foot 2 "Hercules", Alex Dumas was even at one point mistaken by the Egyptians as the leader of the French Revolutionary Army, standing beside the famously less imposing Napoleon. It is suggested that it was the rivalry between Dumas and Napoleon that led to Alex Dumas' being abandoned in an Egyptian prison for two years after his capture, which ultimately broke his health. In any event, by the time Dumas returned to France, all black officers had been expelled from the army by Napoleon. He died shortly after his return, when Dumas the author was just a child.

Romances such as those written by Dumas were hugely popularly successful while being somewhat derided by the intellectual class of the time who were heavily invested in the "realist" novel. Both literatures however essentially turned against modernisation as it was being constructed at that historical juncture. It is easy to forget that the word "romance" is literally derived from the word "Roman", evidencing a nostalgia perhaps for the stories of the past embedded in the "romance languages". The word for a novel in French is, "un roman". The conceit of "realism" is actually born from what we would call "the Gothic", a tendency altogether bleaker and more northern than the southern "romance". The Gothic embodied remnants of the feudal system that came to be associated with democracy as a counternarrative to the empires of the past. Romances can take all kinds of forms, but the weirdest among them might be the ones that look to a glorious, imagined past of aristocratic chivalry. This is even the case where, throughout Dumas' oeuvre, royalty and politicians are looked upon with ambivalence, the disappointing mortal components of an ideal of France that could never exist. It is position perhaps more resigned and relatable than is immediately obvious in the heightened tales of adventure and heroic overcoming. In fact, the only nobleman who really comes off quite well within the Musketeers saga, is the handsome Duke of Buckingham. In real life, Buckingham, famously almost certainly gay, had an affair with King James VI of Scotland (later King James I of England).

221 Boyd Tonkin, "The role of race in the life and literature of Alexandre Dumas: The episode that inspired the man behind the Musketeers: A new adaptation of Dumas' classic tale is set to screen on the BBC", *The Independent* (UK), Thursday 16 January 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/the-role-of-race-in-the-life-and-literature-of-alexandre-dumas-the-episode-that-inspired-the-man-behind-the-musketeers-9065506.html>

Popular Rule

Popular Rule

The first part of a video series on DIS art by Paul Lemaire and Vincent Burger entitled “The Television Will Not be Terrorized,”²²² introduces a television spectacle in 1988 in which actors, journalists and lawyers staged a “trial” of Louis XIV. Its purpose was to enable the “French people” to decide, via phone poll as well as an early French version of the internet, whether he should (have) be(en) guillotined. The people voted overwhelmingly, and fairly astoundingly, toward his acquittal. This inclination basically concurs with the recent revival of monarchistic trends within North American extreme right and/or conservative thought. It should be mentioned that the extraordinary figure of the defence council in the French televised display was an actual lawyer. Jacques Vergès was famous for defending “terrorists”, from the FLN (Algeria’s National Liberation Front independence movement fighting French colonialism) to Nazi War criminal Klaus Barbie,²²³ may have played a significant role in their convincing. “The Television will not be Terrorized” begins with a quote from Mencius Moldbug, the *nom de plume* of American blogger Curtis Yarvin, co-founder (along with philosopher Nick Land) of the anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic philosophical movement known as the “Dark Enlightenment”. This neo-reactionary movement has close ties to Thiel. Moldbug writes:

“As for the Charismatic leader and would-be king, he must combine the two most important ingredients of hypermodern political communication: irony and sincerity. This entire project of 21st-century monarchism (on the blockchain!) is both utterly ironic, and completely sincere. Every part of making it happen will feel like a joke. The result, however, will be completely real – both sincere, and irreversible.”²²⁴

A fascination with figures such as Yarvin is almost a key feature of so-called Post-Internet Art much of which seems to concern itself almost primarily with right-wing reactionaries on the internet (perhaps as a result

222 Paul Lemaire and Vincent Burger, “The Television Will Not be Terrorized”, on dis.art, October 23, 2024, duration: 21:48, <https://dis.art/the-television-will-not-be-terrorised>

223 Vergès defended both those he essentially agreed with in his famously anti-imperialist stance as well as others that could be described as “indefensible,” basically utilising the high-profile cases as a way of critiquing the French legal system. As regards Barbie, for example, in a 2008 interview with The Guardian he explains: “I said to Barbie: ‘What I want is for you to take on a human dimension. You’re not a monster. You’re not innocent, but neither are you a monster. You’re an officer ... of an occupying army in a country that resists. You’re no better and no worse than a French officer in Algeria, an American officer in Vietnam, a Russian officer in Kabul.’”

“When you treat the accused as a monster, you give up trying to understand what happened. And if you don’t try to understand what happened, you deprive yourself of any reflection on how to stop that thing happening elsewhere. If the Americans had reflected on the moral defeat that torture represented for the French army in Algeria, what has gone on at Abu Ghraib would certainly never have happened.”

Angelique Chrisafis, “I said to Klaus Barbie: I want people to see your human side’: French lawyer Jacques Vergès has represented some of the 20th century’s most notorious criminals. Now, as his own mysterious past comes under scrutiny in a new documentary, he explains to Angelique Chrisafis why he defended them” The Guardian, May 15, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/15/france.internationalcrime>

224 Ibid, 00:00

of “the left” allegedly not being able to meme). In searching for a link for Brad Troemel’s “The Left Can’t Meme Report”²²⁵ I came across an article of the same title from a “right” perspective in UnHerd magazine. UnHerd is one of the bastions of “free speech” owned and championed by the founder of a hedge fund, though the magazine quite unusually countenances alternative viewpoints.²²⁶ “Free speech” today has almost solely become a concern of the right wing as censorship became normalised across university departments and other institutions. The hyperbolically described “culture wars” emerged from this situation. They have made sure, as much as possible, that all essentially unpleasant “critical” thought has been popularly banned. An article on left vs. right memes by Ed West, begins by stating:

“Humour has long been a magic ingredient in unlocking political change. In the medieval court, jesters had an almost unique privilege in being able to tell the monarch what he didn’t want to hear and were often tasked with presenting bad news. In totalitarian regimes humour was a daily act of undermining the regime, to the extent that on Stalin’s death 200,000 of the Gulag’s 2.5m population were there for telling jokes.”²²⁷

There is some merit to this argument, though the privilege wasn’t entirely unique, as medieval social relations tended to be a bit more complex than we are usually led to believe. Making fun of those in power was not unusual, and in no way threatened the greater hierarchy. Arguably, the function of comedy, like art, is generally ambivalent, fortifying, certainly, maybe even providing a reason to go on, but still, ultimately, ambivalent.

This is of course, the argument made by Mikail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*²²⁸ the publication of which was delayed for 30 years having been written as a doctoral thesis in Stalinist Russia. Bakhtin’s book has been mentioned by Catherine Liu in the video series “Doomscroll”²²⁹ with Joshua Citarella. During this series, Citarella raises the prevalence of North American alt-right monarchists to Liu’s obvious bemusement (and amusement), a sentiment not shared by Citarella who is more familiar with this contemporary critical territory. Later in the interview, Citarella discusses the way academia is funded by the monopolies that even it reproduces (for example, in the kinds of subject matter, the privileging of representation over ever talking about issues of class). Liu reflects that perhaps because there is already essentially a selection of kings in charge, people just don’t see another way to exist or behave. Citarella retorts that this is indeed the argument of the new North American monarchists, a strange echo of the imaginary France of “the musketeers”. Liu refers to the

²²⁵ Brad Troemel, “the left can’t meme report,” on Patreon, January 15, 2023, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/left-cant-meme-77324335>

²²⁶ Simon Earle, “Loud and uncowed: how UnHerd owner Paul Marshall became Britain’s newest media mogul” The Guardian, 28 October, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/oct/28/loud-and-uncowed-how-unherd-owner-paul-marshall-became-britains-newest-media-mogul> .

²²⁷ Ed West, “Why the Left can’t meme ‘Woke comedy’ will never compete with the despair of the online Right”, Unherd Magazine, August 14, 2021, <https://unherd.com/2021/08/why-the-left-cant-meme/>

²²⁸ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1984.

²²⁹ Joshua Citarella, Doomscroll Podcast, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIDH0-Vy0wJ7K78EMjVPLNrpKzUk2s0mr>

carnavalesque as championed by Bakhtin, and how the humour of the peasantry in every way resembles the memes that Citarella is so fond of. She debates that laughing in such a way ultimately affirms existing power structures (Citarella is momentarily taken aback).

Angela Nagle, in her book, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*, writes extensively about the weaponisation of discourse imported from very often well-meaning fields of psychology. She argues that these have resulted in the bizarre effect that on the left there now seems little room for critical thought or debate.²³⁰ Nagle writes that:

“The problem with the contemporary style of Tumblr-liberalism and a purely identitarian self-oriented progressivism that fomented in online subcultures and moved on to college campuses is that the very idea of winning people over through ideas now seems to anguish, offend and enrage this tragically stupefied shadow of the great movements of the left (...)”²³¹

Typically the art establishment, which as many of those labeled “Post Internet Artists” like to lament, is always grindingly slow to adapt to contemporary cultural discourse.²³² It is really only recently that this phenomenon has become evident within institutional museums and galleries, where it would seem to have found its natural home (where the superior moral appeal to amiability far outweighs uncomfortable attempts at conversations about sponsorship and complicity). Further examined by Nagle, “subversiveness” is a value that has now been claimed by the alt-right. In Nagle’s analysis, subversiveness is entirely arbitrary, and could belong equally to either side of politics, which is certainly true when it comes to the spread and alternate prioritising of progressive versus conservative standpoints.

While I understand Nagle’s derision regarding the gatekeeping typical of those that *play on* subversion, subversion’s moral ambivalence has been inherent to the production of European art of the modern period. It is hard to imagine a time when “subversion” will not be important to culture (as in providing direct access to dissent in privileged spaces that garner the attention of the ever-smaller percentage of people in control of the world’s wealth). However, when “subversion” becomes orthodoxy, as tautological as such a situation appears, it can be doubly detrimental in platforming behaviour that is abhorrent whilst stymieing debate. Nagle herself was to lose teaching opportunities, whilst working precariously between casual contracts and freelance roles, due to the backlash against *Kill All Normies* from those most aligned to “subversive” principles. In her book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*, Liu writes about how following the publication

230 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*. Alresford, Hants: Zero Books is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd, 2017.

231 Ibid, 120.

232 For a discussion of critique and the contemporary media landscape: Bundeskunsthalle with Carolina Busta and Lil Internet, “Keynote from New Models (Caroline Busta and Lil Internet) – The Future of Critique”, YouTube Video, 18.11.22, duration: 58:00, https://youtu.be/DCYqtuUPOQ0?si=e08bzc3Xy2bu_Q_d

of *Kill All Normies*, Nagle was systematically hounded out of the academy by fellow academic, and holder of the Wolf Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy at McGill University, Gabriella Coleman. Nagle had criticised Coleman for championing “subversiveness” in her 2014 book *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, to the extent of Coleman basically overlooking the patently antisemitic rantings of one of the subjects of her book (internet provocateur, weev). As explained by Liu “Coleman is unfazed by the fact that /weev/ turned out to be an anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi webmaster of the far right website Daily Stormer. In contrast to Coleman, Nagle argued that the Left should be embracing the normative forces of class struggle, not the subcultural transgressions and exploits of people like Aurenheimer” (another questionable “subversive” figure).²³³ One might argue that Nagle’s position was the truly one that ended up being truly “subversive”.²³⁴



Servant Wars

Servant Wars

Admittedly, Nagle’s analysis can be occasionally sweeping. Particular offhand remarks of Nagle’s could come across as glib to the point being unhelpful (while I wouldn’t entirely disagree). For example, referencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and institutional culture, “Trigger warnings had to be issued in order to avoid the unexpectedly high number of women who had not gone to war claiming to have post-traumatic stress disorder”.²³⁵ Such a statement is more understandable contextually when one is aware that PTSD is likely often over diagnosed, that people are essentially encouraged towards institutionally mediated suffering over the self-awareness of resilience.²³⁶ Frustration around these diagnoses being appropriated by privileged university students is understandable, but also could be construed as a reaction to the lack of opportunities that many young people are faced with. If anger is occasionally misdirected it is also understandable.

What Nagle refers to is also simply the historical diagnosis of PTSD as confined to returned servicemen. Aside from a few earlier interpretations by Sigmund Freud, the experience of war was necessarily gleaned by the psychiatric profession from an American perspective after Vietnam (and Iraq, after that). These represented the experiences of those whose governments had sent them to “liberate” other nations, which is to say in practice, oppress external populations via asymmetric warfare. The soldiers studied were largely the perpetrators of their

²³³ Liu, *Ibid*, 27.

²³⁴ I have personally experienced the loss of work and exhibiting opportunities as a result of writing about corrupt practices within Sydney art institutions and was recently rejected from a role as Painting Lecturer at the National Art School citing the “strategic and leadership requirements of the role”.

²³⁵ Nagle, p.78

²³⁶ Dana Becker, *One Nation under Stress: The Trouble with Stress as an Idea*, (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013) *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=4703241>.

own horror. Trauma is as trauma does. Though, obviously many soldiers hailed from disadvantage, with few options but to discover what “fighting for their country” truly meant.

As highlighted by psychotherapist Dana Becker in her book “One Nation Under Stress” during the Vietnam war “literary critic Leslie Fiedler commented acerbically that Vietnam was “a war fought for us by our servants”.²³⁷ The relatively new diagnosis of PTSD, of course, arose at the same time as the Women’s Movement and thus was roundly criticised for its gendered focus which was augmented to include the experience of sexual violence. In fact, women are much more likely to experience symptoms of PTSD, which, according to Becker, has been attributed to a whole host of distasteful studies attempting to enculturate a form of biological determinism. Nonetheless, PTSD has been quite clearly demonstrated also to result from the increased likelihood of poverty and disenfranchisement among women.²³⁸ In Becker’s analysis, a vague set of symptoms set out in newer versions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) allows for a culture of overdiagnosis where PTSD is concerned, where it almost searched for in populations. Fortunately, in many cases, PTSD is unlikely to manifest even in those who have been through objectively traumatic experiences, and most sufferers recover over time. Becker speaks to much lower-than-expected reporting as a result of the “9/11” attacks in New York:

“In one 9/11 study, women, Hispanics, and African Americans were found to be at greatest risk, and survivors of the terrorist attacks with incomes under \$25,000 were eight times likelier to have PTSD than survivors earning over \$100,000. In that study, poverty was the most potent of all risk factors for mental health problems following the events of 9/11.”²³⁹

Becker gives an example of how, for a person in dire financial straits, even the breakdown of a washing machine can constitute an existential threat. The experience of trauma then becomes compounded by politically/economically entrenched material disadvantage. It goes without saying that while everyone goes through a certain amount of negative life experiences, the ongoing effects of those experiences are disproportionately experienced by marginalised groups. More than simply being frustrating, the co-option of the language of PTSD by the privileged, has done a great deal of harm in individualising what should be part of a collective struggle to improve the living conditions of the majority of the world’s population.

In the essay, “A Posthumous Shock: How Everything Became Trauma”, writer and novelist Will Self explores the relationship between our contemporary language and understanding of trauma and its relationship to literary theory. Self begins:

²³⁷ Becker, *ibid*, 181.

²³⁸ Becker, *ibid*.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

“part of what gives modern trauma theory its appeal is precisely its covert importation of Judeo-Christian redemptive eschatology: a grand narrative of human moral progress in which suffering is an essential motivation for all the principal actors. For literary theorists, psychic trauma is an exclusive sort of stigmata, a wound at once invisible and sacred, the bearers of which become sanctified and thereby able to convey the singular Truth that shines through the miasma of contemporary moral relativism: that of their own suffering. This suffering is elicited by the intercession of qualified (or ordained) critics and psychotherapists, who join in this communion of pain and distress, and share it with the laity via books and monographs.”²⁴⁰

Self presents a convincing case against the colonising (in all senses) triumphs of “trauma studies” in appropriating works of literature. Ancient literature would interpret the word “trauma” very differently as narratives of individual over collective, in this case, institutionally abetted, struggle. Self argues that after the crisis of the authorial voice announced by post-structuralism, the deconstruction of Derrida, certain theorists decided to apply themselves to defining the most irreconcilable experiences in order to claim them. Doing so they could appear unimpeachable, virtuous where they could no longer claim any other kind of authority/superiority. This is mirrored within Institutions of Contemporary Art where works framed solely by individual experience is promoted as above criticism where related to any kind of hardship. Where once we had the consolations of literature as a means of effecting our shared experience, we now have literary theory bound up with industrial psychology of the “get them back to work” mentality.²⁴¹ This casts the blame of disadvantage on those already suffering. Meanwhile, the “social” media we use limits our ability to concentrate on anything more than “funny” ten second videos referencing the shortcomings of our disparate neuropathologies (thus exacerbating them).²⁴²

In *The New Wounded* philosopher Catherine Malabou writes between the disciplines of psychology, neurology and philosophy to attempt a greater understanding of increasingly prevalent forms of brain injury, from physical trauma to Dementia and Autism. These share common expression with the observable effects of PTSD. She states that from the perspective of contemporary neurology there is an “impossibility of separating the effects of political trauma from the effects of organic trauma”.²⁴³ The details of the trauma that Malabou undertakes to elaborate, refer to the utter dissolution of identity as a common thread of a set of neurobiological conditions of which PTSD is one. Malabou writes that:

240 Will Self, “A Posthumous Shock: How everything became trauma”, Harper’s Magazine, December 2012

<https://harpers.org/archive/2021/12/a-posthumous-shock-trauma-studies-modernity-how-everything-became-trauma/>

241 See also the aforementioned book by Alex Carey, and Andrew Lohrey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

242 (This is not to denigrate the important work of the mental healthcare profession but to question the idea of it operating in a vacuum, or in a world without literature).

243 Malabou, Catherine. *The New Wounded : From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, Fordham University Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=3239638>. Created from usyd on 2023-11-09 01:56:18.

“The accidents of cerebrality are wounds that cut the thread of history, place history outside itself, suspend its course, and remain hermeneutically “irrecoverable” even though the psyche remains alive. *The cerebral accident thus reveals the ability of the subject to survive the senselessness of its own accidents*”.²⁴⁴

For Malabou, the literature of trauma, when written as experienced, most closely resembles the work of author Samuel Beckett in evoking subjects who have lost their sense of self.²⁴⁵ This is quite a different phenomenon to those privileged actors, new “kings” of our time, that describe their “trauma” as part of their heroic narrative. Such is the cynicism of “trauma culture”, pitching trauma as a heroic ideal, that it centralises the individual selfhood of the allegedly traumatised over their socio-political agency. Here, it is in suffering that redemption is found, not through the cultivation of resilience. Now virtue is in the experience “itself” and not in the unrelated skills that might otherwise, say, distinguish a person a worthy artist. It seems that no one will be judged “by the content of their character”, only their experience. Many identities formed and reified by their own self-romanticising heroic positioning, begin in privilege. They are confronted by the unromantic realism of absolute dissolution bred of poverty, war and assault.



Left Right Left

Left Right Left

At the same time, the consensus-enforcing labours of the Professional Managerial Class (PMC) have effectively appropriated the platform of the “left”, in lockstep with the interests of monopolistic capital. The PMC mock the perceived stupidity and immorality of the right even while the majority of the world’s population seem to get poorer by the day. What is being promoted today by a strange revisionist right, is from a progressive point of view, completely understandable, sympathetic and even desirable; the basic needs of ordinary people, from which they seem ever further away, finally met. An article in *Vanity Fair* written by James Pogue,²⁴⁶ details a conservative conference featuring J.D. Vance in 2022, before Vance was appointed as Donald Trump’s Vice President in 2024. What is quite surprising about the concerns of those present is that they strongly mirror what might traditionally have been described as “left-wing” interests. One of the principles they are dedicated to discussing is that a family should be able to raise children on a single income, something possible throughout

²⁴⁴ Ibid

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p.56

²⁴⁶ James Pogue, “Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets: They’re not MAGA. They’re not QAnon. Curtis Yarvin and the rising right are crafting a different strain of conservative politics.” April 20, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>

most of the mid 20th Century in the West.²⁴⁷

Many of the figures in this neo-conservative movement have also defected from the liberal media. This is apparently largely because right-wing media is much better funded and offers reasonable-to-excellent pay and job security in relation to its most viewed liberal proponents. Prospects for material self-betterment seem to be vanishing for the left. Pogue writes about Curtis Yarvin's new partner, formerly a liberal writer, who replied to his advertisement, looking for a smart woman to settle down with. She wanted children, stability, things basically unavailable now to those in the Professional Managerial Class, within which we have casual academia, the gig economy and "fukbois".²⁴⁸ (At least my own personal sympathy was undone when she cited the reason for her right-ward turn as the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) movement.)

J.D. Vance is a constant figure of fun, sometimes for good reason. The excess of Vance's widely mediated story about Haitian immigrants eating people's pets, which Vance knew to be false before promoting the narrative, is a good case in point.²⁴⁹ Of course, there is nothing new in blaming immigrants for class problems created by very wealthy people like Vance's supportive former boss Peter Thiel. It has been identified Vance's lies about Haitian immigrants have been largely unsuccessful as a sensationalist political strategy, compared to similar right-wing goading in previous election cycles. This could be explained either because the media have figured out that such idiocy is best ignored or there is not much "old" media left.²⁵⁰ It could be argued that anyone objecting to immigration should probably begin with protesting against the various wars and destabilising initiatives the West involves itself in. Another option might be, trying to pressure major corporations to mitigate climate change seeing as most people do not actually want to have to leave their homelands, homes, friends and family. Curiously, Vance is married to an Indian immigrant and practising lawyer, despite all his calls for a "traditional" (meaning white, conservative, and where the woman is "homemaker") family, apparently hearkening back to an imagined past that never quite existed. Feminism is derided by alt and traditional right for all kinds of reasons. The alt right brand particularly takes issue with women in positions of power and even in the workforce. Certain forms of "feminism" however are certainly in some part, culpable for the work culture we find ourselves trapped in. There exists a kind of "have it all" feminism that, in a coded way, basically denigrates the labour of housework and childrearing. In many ways it contributes to the primitive accumulation of women's labour. It was certainly a win for the capitalist class when the workforce doubled, and our leisure time began to shrink

247 Ibid.

248 Common, contemporary parlance for a promiscuous male.

249 Edward Helmore, "JD Vance admits he is willing to 'create stories' to get media attention: Republican vice-presidential candidate defends spreading false, racist claims demonizing Haitian immigrants" *The Guardian*, 16 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/15/jd-vance-lies-haitian-immigrants>

250 Ryan Broderick, "America's various horrible uncles", *Garbage Day* on Substack, October 16, 2024, https://www.garbageaday.email/p/america-s-various-horrible-uncles?_bhlid=9bc6f8a0d3765fd092a3a2178552b457c75851cb&utm_campaign=america-s-various-horrible-uncles&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_source=www.garbageaday.email

such that no one had the time to question the status quo.

Gloria Steinem, for example, is quite open about having worked for North America's National Security Agency (NSA) against the supposed international communist threat in the early part of her career. I am fairly ambivalent about Steinem's role in such initiatives, happy to give her benefit of the doubt regarding what her vision was for liberation, hoping that she might perhaps have agreed that an end-goal of feminism is that men and women should be able to choose their division of labour. Perhaps each could work three days a week in an office, supermarket or factory, looking after their homes and each other the rest of the time, in a universe of comfortable homes resembling what was available to the Western middle class of the mid-20th century. In the lead up to the 2016 selection for the Democratic Presidential Candidate, Steinem however contradicted claims for the support of gendered labour equality by suggesting that young women were promoting Bernie Sanders and not Hillary Clinton simply because they wanted to be closer to the boys.²⁵¹ Of course, there were always feminists working towards better ends for the working classes. While Steinem was working for the CIA, Silvia Federici was working for an organisation called "Wages for Housework".

Looking into these histories, Liu pinpoints a total convergence between the decline of the American working class, in 1972,²⁵² when the manufacturing sector was largely "offshored", and the end of a certain type of CIA covert operation. The latter occurred when CIA fronts, distributing funds to all kinds of cultural and political groups, were exposed, including operations like the one Steinem participated in. When those in power couldn't win hearts and minds through arts and state-sponsored grassroots politics, there was a new move against the working classes. This was to destabilise their livelihoods under the apparently innocent benefactory guise of creating cheaper products for the betterment of American society. This *political* move further immiserated and impoverished populations around the globe. Within the West, this arising situation and despite cheaper goods and services, almost immediately resulted in stagnant wages, mass unemployment and much more expensive housing. On this note, I would also argue, an obvious generalised decline in the quality of cultural output.

251 Adam Gabbatt, "Gloria Steinem: women are supporting Bernie Sanders 'for the boys': The feminist icon suggested female millennial voters prefer Sanders to Hillary Clinton because of his popularity among young men: 'The boys are with Bernie'", *The Guardian*, 7 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/06/bernie-sanders-gloria-steinem-women-voters-men-hillary-clinton>

252 Doomscroll Podcast, Joshua Citarella, Catherine Liu, "Chapter 9: Economic decline" (at 59:40) in "Catherine Liu: Trauma, Virtue and Liberal Elites" YouTube Video, duration 1:36:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ia6m3pIIS2k&t=4s>

In an article entitled “I’m Running Out of Ways to Explain How Bad This Is” staff writer for *The Atlantic*, Charlie Warzel, laments the growing surge of conspiracy and mistrust in (necessarily) internet-based news. It was written against the fallout from Hurricane Milton in Florida in October of 2024. Crazy conspiracies resulted in attacks against disaster responders were widely reported mainly via social media. The generalised lack of news reported via traditional media was a result such medias’ abandonment by Mark Zuckerberg’s Meta group, and because so many newsrooms had purged their staff. Warzel’s piece is mostly interesting for the way it exposes the role “old media” such as *The Atlantic*, have played skewing narratives. The horror stories described by Warzel are entirely relatable to any of us who have stepped outside the orthodox expectations of the Professional Managerial Class (that is, the narratives driven by “experts”, journalists, academics, all of those who define culture):

“What is clear is that a new framework is needed to describe this fracturing. Misinformation is too technical, too freighted, and, after almost a decade of Trump, too political. Nor does it explain what is really happening, which is nothing less than a cultural assault on any person or institution that operates in reality. If you are a weatherperson, you’re a target. The same goes for journalists, election workers, scientists, doctors, and first responders. These jobs are different, but the thing they share is that they all must attend to and describe the world as it is. This makes them dangerous to people who cannot abide by the agonizing constraints of reality, as well as those who have financial and political interests in keeping up the charade.”²⁵³

There are many articles from such “traditional” media outlets opining a kind of mass-hysteria via rampant conspiracy as a diametric opposition to their “realistic” perspective. What does not make sense in these analyses is why, if the society and structures they describe are so representative of truth and justice, are so many people paranoid enough to abandon what might be described as “civil society”? Hurricane Katrina, occurring in August 2005, seems to have lingered in the collective imagination as a time when the people, particularly poorer racialised populations, were abandoned by their government. Fewer and fewer people seem to believe that politicians operate for any other reason than self-interest. This means that those “who cannot abide by the agonizing constraints of reality” is a term that increasingly describes the vast majority. The constraints of this reality tend to involve corporate domination, forcing more and more people to work several jobs for little

253 Charlie Warzel, “I’m Running Out of Ways to Explain How Bad This Is: What’s happening in America today is something darker than a misinformation crisis.” *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2024. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/10/hurricane-milton-conspiracies-misinformation/680221/>

money while resulting in homelessness, lack of access to food and healthcare. However, populations in the US all the while were being told that any behaviour or expressions that contradicted believing in the operations of the Democratic party was evidence of their immorality. The Democratic “consensus” ends mimicking the new monarchic impulse.

Place this mediascape against Edward Said’s description of Gustav Flaubert’s last (unfinished) novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), as a mocking of a very Christian world view parsed as secular by the Enlightenment:

“But it was not just any science he (Flaubert) mocked: it was enthusiastic, even messianic European science, whose victories included failed revolutions, wars, oppression, and an unteachable appetite for putting grand, bookish ideas quixotically to work immediately. What such science or knowledge never reckoned with was its own deeply ingrained and unself-conscious bad innocence and the resistance to it of reality. When Bouvard plays the scientist he naively assumes that science merely is, that reality is as the scientist says it is, that it does not matter whether the scientist is a fool or a visionary; he (or anyone who thinks like him) cannot see that the Orient may not wish to regenerate Europe, or that Europe was not about to fuse itself democratically with yellow or brown Asians. In short, such a scientist does not recognize in his science the egoistic willpower that feeds his endeavours and corrupts his ambitions.”²⁵⁴

Since October 2023, in the wake of the latest incarnation of the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, trauma has become routinely weaponised against the indigenous population as justification for the razing the entire land. In October 2024, a year after being investigated for “bias” after privately sharing a meme in which President Biden was labeled a “war criminal” on her private social media, tech journalist Taylor Lorenz left the *Washington Post* to go independent. An article in the *New Yorker* by Kyle Chayka suggested that Lorenz didn’t aspire to be a writer but an “internet personality”, in a way that reads disparagingly. He also concluded that her new platform looked a lot like “ordinary journalism”.²⁵⁵

I somewhat share Chayka’s reservations about the prevalence of “raw copy” in this turn towards a “creators’ economy”, where journalists churn out stories that would have been much improved by editors. However, the efficacy of someone like Lorenz is quite probably precisely in her acting as “personality”, a sort of aggregator of trends that already exist, as opposed to an opinion writer. This is, after all, is hardly distinct from being a broadcast journalist, and Lorenz has proved a very worthy interviewer. One example was Lorenz’s interview

254 Edward Said, “Redrawn Frontiers, Redefined Issues, Secularized Religion” in *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p.116.

255 Kyle Chayka, “Taylor Lorenz’s Plan to Dance on Legacy Media’s Grave: A reporter known for chronicling the “extremely online” is making the leap to the creator economy. The most surprising thing is that she waited this long.”, *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/taylor-lorenzs-plan-to-dance-on-legacy-medias-grave>

with far-right “creator” Chaiya Raichik of @LibsofTikTok who before this (ultimately disastrous) interview, had been wreaking havoc inflaming tensions over LGBTQI content in school libraries. Raichik also showed up to the interview in a t-shirt with Lorenz’s crying face on it.²⁵⁶ The hysteria promoted by someone like the right-winger Raichik, after all, simply sensationalises real issues inherent to the increasingly authoritarian trajectory of traditional media (as well as universities given over to corporatisation).

After Lorenz’s Biden “war criminal” meme The Washington Post (WaPo) investigated bias in Lorenz’s journalism but ultimately reached no conclusions. Nonetheless, she never wrote for them again. (Lorenz explains that the comment was made after she knew that she was going to quit WaPo.) There is no suggestion that WaPo similarly investigated the veracity of her claim that America’s president, Joe Biden, was in fact a war criminal. This could have been quite easily established through Biden’s infamously massive and unobscured funding of Israel’s disproportionate military exploits in Palestine. Besides, in July 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that “Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory, encompassing the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, is unlawful under international law” and that Israel’s actions amount to “annexation”.²⁵⁷ Apparently, the word “bias” is now routinely applied to inconvenient truths. A Substack arrives in my inbox with the heading “Impossible Dream Realized: Media Falls Below Congress in Trust Survey (Gallup’s annual confidence survey shows 68% of Americans will not relieve themselves on a journalist in flames)”.²⁵⁸ It is perhaps encouraging that the “mixed-truths” of contemporary media propaganda, as blatant in their way as the most outrageous claims made for Louis XIV’s “divinity” or Peter Thiel’s “genius”, has become obvious to the wider population.



Overwritten: Real Erasure

Overwritten: Real Erasure

“This sense of intimacy is deepened by that worshipful respect for the particular which makes the picture a little world inexhaustibly rich, complete in itself and irreplaceably unique. It is a truism that northern Late Gothic tends to individualize where the Italian Renaissance strives for that which is exemplary or, as the phrase goes, for “the ideal,” that it accepts the things

²⁵⁶ Tom Jones, “OPINION: Behind Taylor Lorenz’s ‘painful, agonizing’ interview of the Libs of TikTok activist Lorenz did a superb job in her 53-minute interview with Chaya Raichik, who clearly had trouble keeping up with Lorenz’s questions” Poynter, 26 February 2024, <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2024/taylor-lorenz-chaya-raichik-libs-tiktok-interview/>

²⁵⁷ International Court of Justice, “Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024”, 19 July, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176>

²⁵⁸ https://www.racket.news/p/impossible-dream-realized-media-falls?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=email-restack-comment&r=dqyak&triedRedirect=true

created by God or produced by man as they present themselves to the eye instead of searching for a universal law or principle to which they more or less successfully endeavour to conform. But it is perhaps more than an accident that the *via moderna* of the North — that nominalistic philosophy which claimed that the quality of reality belongs exclusively to the particular things directly perceived by the senses and to the particular psychological states directly known through inner experience — does not seem to have borne fruit in Italy outside a limited circle of natural scientists...”

-Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*.²⁵⁹

Speaking of realism, the preceding quoted passage is largely about the work of Jan Van Eyck, the 15th Century Flemish painter who was a major innovator in the field of oil painting. His skill and proficiency was so compelling that Van Eyck was even wrongly credited by 16th Century art historian (painter/architect) Giorgio Vasari as having invented it.²⁶⁰ Northern Europeans from fairly early in the second millennia, had quite a different “perspective” from the Italians, in that painters such as Van Eyck would illusionistically extend the picture plane, late Gothic works quite often folding into surrounding architecture. Van Eyck would paint marble frames around some of his works, creating paintings that demonstrably existed in the world both as “views” as much as objects. Gothic artists like Van Eyck are the progenitors of what would come to be understood as “realism”. This term is often mistaken for the simple depiction of reality.

Before becoming aware of Italian Renaissance artist/architect and theorist Filippo Brunelleschi’s advances in oddly mathematical renderings of two-dimensional space that proposed a “correct” perspective (which Panofsky pointed out is basically redundant considering the human eye is round)²⁶¹, Van Eyck painted his Arnolfini Portrait (1434). Rather than a single vanishing point, Van Eyck’s painting has four. His vision of the world seems to carry beyond the frame. Northern painters were already forming their own perspective before it was formalised in the Renaissance with reference to mathematics. Van Eyck though after becoming aware of the singular “vanishing point”, which is to say that all things radiate from the perspective of a single individual, fell in line with this model. The pervasive difference between the two traditions, North and South, nevertheless persisted. The southern Renaissance vision of the Romanesque presented a romantic ideal that even came to be viewed as silly or, at least, counterrevolutionary by post-Revolution art historians like Théophile Thoré (also known as Thoré-Bürger) in 19th Century France. The dark versions of reality innovated in northern Europe was conscripted to the cause of the working classes, with appropriate Protestant modesty.

259 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting. Volume 1 : its origins and character*. Harvard University Press, 1996. P.8

260 Panofsky, p.180

261 Ibid. Also mentioned in Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form* (1st ed.). Zone Books:1991.

From this realist tradition, and the first that appears under the Wikipedia entry “Dutch Golden Age Painting” is Jan Vermeer’s “The Milkmaid”, (1658-1661).²⁶² This is quite odd when one thinks of the many great painters of that era, perhaps especially Rembrandt Van Rijn, whose work has been consistently popular since its own time. This is not to diminish the Vermeer’s achievements but rather to allude to how comparatively recent this attraction to a painter who lived and worked more than 350 years ago is. Vermeer’s work was not popularised or even really known, until the mid-to-late 19th Century from when his popularity has grown.

The Frick Museum in Manhattan was the former home of an American industrialist after whom the museum is named, that housed his impressive art collection. During his lifetime he was commonly described as a “robber baron”.²⁶³ The museum is home to four Vermeer paintings of which there are few (34-35 can be comfortably attributed to the artist). When Vermeer’s work is discussed today, it seems to offer a purely formalist readings that uniformly speak to “skill” and “beauty”. Rarely are distinct references to the subject matter made. Vermeer’s favoured subjects were common people. Through what amounts effectively to a second revisionist art historical campaign, the original reason for the renewed interest in Vermeer has been largely undermined by institutions and private collectors that owe their “good taste” to his art. That reason being his work having been plucked from two centuries of total obscurity and the implicit reasons why; explicit focus on “the common”. Ironically, Thoré as the modern “discoverer” of Vermeer has been practically removed from the annals of art history but only since the beginning of the neoliberal era. Thoré was instrumental in ensuring that several of Vermeer’s work from various collections were shown at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867.²⁶⁴ A collector like Frick, as well as a critic, Thoré was cut from very different cloth. In 1849, Thoré joined an “abortive insurrection”,²⁶⁵ in 1849 and was hence forced to live in exile in Brussels as William Bürger. An amnesty in 1860 allowed him to return to Paris.

In an article by French diplomat, Phillipe Rebeyrol 1952 series on art critics Thoré is credited as having founded the modern “scientific” form of art history, what could be understood as a materialist reading in which the wider context is examined. Thoré was among the first to bemoan the essentially connoisseurial pursuit of notions beauty lacking substance. In this same article Rebeyrol explains that:

262 “Dutch Golden Age Painting”, Wikipedia, last accessed December 28, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_Golden_Age_painting

263 Frances Suzman Jowell, “Thoré-Bürger’s Art Collection: ‘A Rather Unusual Gallery of Bric-à-Brac.’” *Simiolus* 30, no. 1/2 (2003): 54–119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3780951>. P. 55

Allusion to the British inspiration in Jowell’s “Vermeer and Thoré-Bürger: Recoveries of Reputation.” *Studies in the History of Art*, no. 55 (1999): p.51

264 Frances Suzman Jowell, “Thoré-Bürger’s Art Collection: ‘A Rather Unusual Gallery of Bric-à-Brac.’” *Simiolus* 30, no. 1/2 (2003): 54–119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3780951>. P. 55

I am doing my best to refrain from doing further research into the history of “Old Masters” exhibitions for the sake of my sanity. Allusion to the British inspiration in Jowell’s “Vermeer and Thoré-Bürger: Recoveries of Reputation.” *Studies in the History of Art*, no. 55 (1999): p.51

265 Jakob Rosenberg, “The Nineteenth Century: Theophile Thoré (W. Bürger) [1807–1869].” In, *On Quality in Art*, 67-. Princeton University Press, 2023, 69.

“Before even attempting this historical work, a complete, exact, and methodical inventory had to be drawn up of the artistic inheritance of Europe. It was to this preliminary task that Thoré set himself. If it had not been for the interruption in his political activity, for the misfortunes and leisure of exile, he would never have discovered Vermeer. In such ways, disappointed romanticism gives birth to modern scholarship.”²⁶⁶

Fifteen years later, highly esteemed Harvard art historian and curator, Jakob Rosenberg, in a book entitled *On Quality in Art* divides his study into chapters dedicated to exploring centuries from the 16th to the early 20th writing about presumably the most prominent art historians/critics of each²⁶⁷: the 16th Century, for example is dedicated to the still widely famous Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* still adorns the book tables of all the Italian Museums; the 19th Century is given to Thoré.²⁶⁸ It was after this period that analysis of the production of art history fell out of general favour among schools of contemporary art. A 1998 article by Frances Suzman Jowell, a historian of the work of Thoré and Théodore Géricault, basically acts as a response to the catalogue of a then-recent exhibition of Vermeer’s works. The curator of this exhibition seemed to have actively sidelined Thoré’s work going so far as to suggest that Vermeer was not in fact rediscovered by Thoré. They claim instead it was rather William II, King of the Netherlands and Grand Duke of Luxembourg from 1815-1840, on the basis that he owned one Vermeer painting.²⁶⁹ This re- or un-writing of Thoré’s influence represents a telling politic, essentially restoring Vermeer to an aristocracy that completely ignored his achievements for over two hundred years. Jowell writes:

“I have been prompted to return to Thoré’s much celebrated “rediscovery” of Vermeer in response to the unexpectedly dismissive treatment of the French critic in the catalogue of the 1995-1996 Vermeer exhibition, in Ben Broos’ otherwise scholarly catalogue essay, *Un celebre Peinjntrre nomme Verme[e]r*, as well as some of the scattered references to Thoré concerning the provenances of particular paintings. This attitude would have astonished Thoré’s contemporaries, for by 1866 he was unequivocally acknowledged as the unrivalled expert on Vermeer on account of both his art-historical publications and his efforts to interest collectors in Vermeer’s works. Several critics paid tribute to his “rediscovery” of Vermeer in reviews of the 1866 exhibition.”²⁷⁰

This is not to necessarily suggest that there has been a wilful sidelining of Thoré’s work because of his politics, especially as, when properly contextualised, his “socialist” politics seem rather less radical than at first appearance.

266 Philippe Rebeyrol, “Art Historians and Art Critics-1 Théophile Thoré.” *The Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 592 (1952): 196–200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/871064>. 197.

267 Or at least the most interesting to Rosenberg.

268 Jakob Rosenberg. “The Nineteenth Century: Théophile Thoré (W. Bürger) [1807–1869].” In, *On Quality in Art*, 67-. Princeton University Press, 2023.

269 Frances Suzman Jowell, “Vermeer and Thoré-Bürger: Recoveries of Reputation” in, *Studies in the History of Art*, no. 55 (1999), 48.

270 Jowell, Recoveries of rep 39-40.

The overall message gleaned from Thore's effective disappearance from history is the dangers of the disjuncture between art history and theory, and indeed of history, theory and practise.

Thore was a follower of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon, better known as Henri de Saint-Simon. Saint-Simon certainly contributed to the movement towards democratic ideals, but his politics were elsewhere described, namely by Karl Marx, as supporting "a new industrial feudalism."²⁷¹ In fact, followers of Saint-Simon would go on to found the merchant banks responsible for building the Suez Canal and rebuilding Algiers (after the French destroyed much of it quelling the Algerian resistance).²⁷² Nonetheless Saint-Simon did harbour some remarkably progressive views, especially concerning women's rights, and the rights of working people, which were even found instructive by Marx and Engels. The French Revolutionaries and related thinkers, were, after all, broad and vociferous champions of the working classes. Still, Saint-Simon's "hierarchical socialism" sought to promote a rational society led by certain members of the middle-class, like industrialists (as opposed to the idle wealthy such as landlords). The second group Saint-Simon elevated to a position of importance were scientists and the last, and perhaps most reassuringly for Thore, was artists. Industrialist, scientists and artists were presented as the three pillars of the vanguard of social advance.²⁷³ In 2009 economist Riccardo Soliani concluded somewhat ironically that Saint-Simon's vision for the future would be realised some one hundred years after his death in "managerial and monopolistic capitalism."²⁷⁴

The weird silence surrounding particular historical figures and ideals is an extension of wide-ranging processes of secularisation. Thought is robbed of its religiosity or often of any socio-political imperative. Today's neoliberalism is of course a close relative of the Protestant ethic; it is "not political" and certainly not religious. In its time, Thore's criticism was highly influential. He had special access to museums and private collections where he researched historically forgotten artists such as Vermeer. Thore also bought what art he could afford himself, broadly encouraging the collection of "new", even if re-discovered, works. He championed the social realism of Dutch Golden Age art both as a 19th Century Romantic and concurring with the democratic, anti-monarchic, of contemporary realist novels in France. Thore also felt that the world was on the cusp of a whole new way of making art. Shortly before his death he was the among first to recognise the importance of a new generation of artists such as Monet and Renoir. Rosenberg's description is particularly instructive:

"In his analysis of Rembrandt in particular, and elsewhere, he stressed that great art requires more than mere description of life and nature, that individuality and originality come into play,

²⁷¹ Soliani, Riccardo. "Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon: Hierarchical Socialism?" in, *History of Economic Ideas* 17, no. 2 (2009): 21–39. 21.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ It is almost as if Thore fell victim to the same empty flattery that fills galleries with incredible statements about how representative nepotism is ending racism and climate change.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.38.

that the great artist sees nature according to his inner imagination and inserts poetical feeling and even a sense of mystery. It is true that in the Salon of 1861 Thoré called Millet and Courbet the two master painters of the show and predicted for them a secure place in the future, but he also said that neither of them would ever reach the greatest heights; obviously he felt that their work lacked something essential for the highest level of art. On the other hand, it might be held against Thoré's critical faculty that he failed to recognize the genius of the young Manet, whose works he saw and reviewed. Here was a case in which he seemed handicapped by his "humanitarianism" which resulted in his opposition to the principle of *l'art pour l'art*. Thoré's great slogan was "Art for man" and he found Manet's content too neutral. He demanded deeper participation in life and nature, not "pure painting" alone. Shall we really blame him for this attitude, or say that it inhibited his critical faculty? It all depends."²⁷⁵

The phrase "handicapped by his "humanitarianism"" is, at best, anachronistic, yet Jakobson's text still acknowledges the importance of thinkers such as Thoré. This feels very unlike the much art criticism of the present, which along with the art itself, tends to do little more than sycophantically promote the artist. It turns out that Thoré's partial championing of Manet, encouraged by Manet's friend the poet Charles Baudelaire, is mentioned in a reproachful tone similar to Jakobson's, by Rebeyrol.²⁷⁶ Thoré was to also defend Manet when the artist's "Olympia" (1863)²⁷⁷ initially scandalised the art establishment. Subsequent readings would have it that in gazing directly at the viewer, "Olympia" demonstrates a distinctly modern, even feminist, agency, which I would argue is not merely problematised but undermined by the receding figure of her black servant, who continued to be treated as a prop for feminist readings of desire well into the 1990s.²⁷⁸ Interestingly, Thoré's support was somewhat half-hearted as he felt the faces of the humans in the painting were treated in much the same way as elements in a still life.²⁷⁹ One might say, in other words, that Thoré recognised that the subjects of Olympia and her African maid had been dehumanised. Thoré's guiding principle was, after all, *l'art pour l'humanité*. The contemporary prescience of Thoré's writing is strongly reflected as what he found "wrong" in Manet's "Olympia".

275 Rosenberg *ibid*, 93.

276 Rebeyrol, *ibid*, 200.

277 Édouard Manet "Olympia", 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 cm × 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

278 Lisa Moore, "Sexual Agency in Manet's Olympia." In *Textual Practice*, 1st ed., 3:219–29, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203990605-6>.

279 Rebeyrol, *Ibid*.

Conclusion: The Unromanticism of the Real

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The modern sense of art history, in which what could be called a materialist application of art history, removed from a central fixation on classical aesthetics and the singular search for beauty, progressed in France throughout the 19th Century. It responded in measure to post-Revolutionary democratic ideals, as well as new theories pursuing revolutionary objectives towards a socialism specifically antagonistic to the capitalist order. This development suggests the underpinnings of how we understand the at least ostensibly “inaesthetic” art of late capitalism. We have been losing ground however since the practise of art history was more or less abandoned as the close study of subjects, for a new universalism privileging “aesthetics”. This trend begins with a mania for “the new” highly evident from the beginning of the 20th Century but concluded by the Cold War. The spell of the new is broken by reading how things came to be. The antecedents for the contemporary art market, also the major subject of Thore’s investigation of Vermeer and his proto-realist contemporaries, was history as experienced by everybody, not just the privileged. To understand the trauma of the coded racism of neo-colonialism, and the classism of the new monarchic drive within the art system and elsewhere, it is imperative we ignore the attendant media propaganda of the Professional Managerial Class. The PMC claims that we in the West pursue a uniquely global, secular focus, a claim that in fact obscures the continuity between it and the persisting imperialist order. Perhaps the convenient omission of this narrative relating to the production of modern, then contemporary, art is not so hard to understand. We live, after all, in times that do not centre humanity, and certainly not common or impoverished humanity, but quite often their opposite, the new kings and savvy self-invented overlords. From this perspective it is not difficult to understand how an art historian so attuned to what would become the operations of the late 20th Century and looked upon as a vital contributor to mid-20th Century art history, is now all but forgotten. It may well be that we have reached the point, in and of art, of something worse than simple “managerial and monopolistic capitalism.”²⁸⁰

280 Soliani, *ibid.*

Chapter Six:
Chapter Six:

Is This Still Life?

Is This Still Life?



Zoë Marni Robertson, "Pronk: Print Screen (Cast-Light Horology)", 2023. Oil on (discarded) glass, 40cm x 55cm. Installation view: "Retrosynthesis(Ekphrasis): The Cognitive Elite" 2023 at Blenheim House. Photo: Jessica Maurer.



Zoë Marni Robertson, “Kalf vs. Dean (Cast-Light Horology)”, 2022. Digital image.

Mashup of Tacita Dean’s “Lord Byron Died”, 2003, silver gelatin print, with Willem Kalf’s “Pronk Still Life with Holbein Bowl, Nautilus Cup, Glass Goblet and Fruit Dish”, 1878. Oil on canvas, 68 x 56cm.

The two images conflated in the above painting are Tacita Dean's silver gelatin photo "Lord Byron Died" of 2003 which has been wrapped onto the "Holbein Bowl"²⁸¹ in Willem Kalf's "Pronk Still Life with Holbein Bowl, Nautilus Cup, Glass Goblet and Fruit Dish" of 1678. I have written of socio-cultural antecedents at the beginnings of the Reformation in the 16th Century, but I have only touched on the conflation of art with the market. The henceforth seemingly irredeemable enmeshing of these terrains happened very rapidly after the Stock Market was invented in the 17th Century in the Dutch Republic. The Stock Market was initially "designed" to service the Dutch East India company, the origins of the corporation as we know it, as well as a pragmatic, globally spreading, industrial colonialism.

Kalf's paintings, most probably produced with the aid of a *camera obscura*, look almost "more real" than reality. The particular liberties he takes, something about the intensity of light and the contrasting darkness, only emphasises this sensation. Kalf's work has been said to be a challenge to the beautiful objects that they portray, their representational skill regarded as somehow even greater than the skill of the craftsmen who produced the original objects he shows. As paintings, they are also practically impossible to reproduce to a quality that comes anywhere near seeing them in person. Paintings from what has been known for some time as the "Dutch Golden Age", were the first European works made expressly for a market, rather than commissioned by a patron or church. Kalf's objects were drawn from all over the then burgeoning trade Empire of the Dutch Republic.

Dean's recording of 19th Century graffiti, which resulted after a failed attempt to follow in the footsteps of exiled poet George Gordon, known as Lord Byron, in Greece. This work arises at the point of digital photography's takeover of the photographic field. Dean's piece simultaneously demonstrates her love affair with the film stocks that have so rapidly become all but obsolete. It also testifies to the notion of visual art as a medium secondary to the written word, as properly exercised in its description. Dean's fixation with the material of photography (especially in the form of film stocks) becomes in the end a lament for the tangible expression of ideas. Where it has been said that Dutch society achieved an astounding amount of its epistemological discovery through pictures, Dean's process fixates on the possibilities of the chemical process rather than its representative qualities. Her's is a faith in the alchemy of the mechanical world that surely can only be nostalgic.

Both references alluded to my work are strange largely for what they leave out. They are impregnated with their own colonial circumstances and simultaneously mournful of them, of the Empires that made the whole world their material. Kalf's works, *Pronkstilleven*, or luxury still lifes, are always somehow hollow, and more so than the more prosaically Calvinist works of better-known Vanitas artists of the era. The latter's moralising is

281 A rock-crystal bowl, now in the Munich Schatzkammer, designed by Hans Holbein the Younger for Henry VIII.

contained to individual responsibility. Dean may lament the now unstoppable process of encoding, where the artisanal process of discovery is frustrated by the nature of command (both in the sense of computation and in the limitations imposed by the private ownership of the artistic means of production). The history, alluded to through these two works, whose “realisms” are so perfect as to be mostly inarguable, are at the same time visions of an always limited perspective. They tell the story of European capitalist art that was to be comprehensively digitised into recognisable forms, forms that somehow became referents for art only, never its embodiment.



Freedom

The “Freedom of the Seas” or *Mare Liberum* was produced as an anonymous pamphlet in 1608. It was written by Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius (Hugo de Groot) at the behest of the world’s first corporation, a truly multinational enterprise, the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC (The United East India Company), and commonly known as the Dutch East India Company. Importantly, the *Mare Liberum* was one of the first charters to recognise universal human rights. While an important document it could also, arguably, be construed as the immediate origin of an “international law” being codified and demonstrated on the behalf of imperialist powers evoking morality as justification for violent oppression. Where Dutch colonial rule differed somewhat to that of the other imperial powers then terrorising the native populations of Africa, Asia and the Americas: it was undertaken on behalf of the aforementioned corporation, and, on occasions, even acted against, express instruction from the government of the Dutch Republic.²⁸²

The Dutch Republic was founded when seven provinces of what was then the Spanish Netherlands, revolted against Spanish rule in 1579. In the lead up to what is (somewhat contentiously) known today as “The Dutch Golden Age”, roughly lasting from the beginning of the 17th Century to the mid-18th, the spoils of sea trade were divided up roughly between Spain and Portugal. Philosopher and historian of law and politics, Johannes Thumfart explains:

“In his *bull Inter caetera* of 1493, Pope Alexander VI divided the world’s oceans, donating half to the Spanish and half to the Portuguese. Such political-theological intertwining of papal power and Portuguese-Spanish claims can be traced back to, among other sources, those treaties which the Iberian kings and the papacy had concluded during the process of the reconquista of the

²⁸² This was in relation to dealings with its Protestant ally, the British Empire. At one stage the government of the Dutch Republic attempted to chasten the VOC on behalf of the English only to find themselves ignored, as corporations, even the first, have always operated outside the Law.

Iberian Peninsula. Within the context of the reconquista and the conduct of a 'just war' against the Muslims, the validity of the papal grants had been based upon the concept of a theological and political supremacy of the pope over non-Christian territories."²⁸³

The Netherlands under Spanish rule was the site of the largest number of religious executions of that era of the Inquisition. This history is said to have haunted the republic long after independence.²⁸⁴ The official religion of the newly formed Dutch Republic was Calvinism, but only about twenty percent of people were Calvinist. The government and citizenry were notably tolerant of various faiths, of other Protestant Christian religions such as the Lutherans and Mennonites, but also of Catholics and Jews. In fact, during the Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal, many of those of the Jewish faith fled to the Dutch Republic. It was from this background that one of the great progenitors of modern Enlightenment thought, Baruch Spinoza emerged. Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community for his radical atheism, which was also broadly tolerated in the Dutch Republic. This same tolerance even seems to have been extended universally, where Grotius wrote:

“It is heretical to hold that infidels are not the owners of the property that belongs to them. And the act of snatching from them, on the sole ground of their lack of faith ... is an act of thievery and rapine no less than it would be if perpetrated against Christians.”²⁸⁵

The often-evoked tolerance, of course, did not mean that all were on equal footing within the Republic. For example, Catholics, although tolerated, were considered of lower status. Jewish citizens were limited to hold certain jobs, and Jewish men were not allowed to marry Christian women. “Tolerance” also never extended outside the republic: Dutch legal jurisdiction would immediately lay claim to the property of those in the Islamic world, as the Pope had also ruled on behalf the exploits of the Catholic powers. Those peoples and all other “infidels” could hardly expect to hold on to their generously recognised property in the face of the Dutch military machine. The ruling was rather that they were free to trade with whomsoever they chose (presumably before their property, territories and persons were taken from them by force). From the time the various shipping interests of different parts of the Dutch Republic were consolidated into the VOC, the goal was the monopolisation of the global spice trade. This novel idea of “universal human rights” was very much founded as a justification for “privateering” (state/company supported piracy), a fairly common practise that already targeted the Spanish and Portuguese. Instructively, Grotius would also basically invent the notion of the “justness” of the pre-emptive strike, an imperial practice popular to this day.

283 Johannes Thumfart, (2009). On Grotius's Mare Liberum and Vitoria's De Indis, Following Agamben and Schmitt. *Grotiana* (1980), 30(1), 65–87. <https://doi.org/10.1163/016738309X12537002674286> p.72

284 Mia Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish image after iconoclasm, 1566–1672: material religion in the Dutch golden age*. (Ashgate, 2008) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315085739>

285 Liberum Mare as quoted in Thumfart, *ibid.* 6 p.73



On the surface, through the employment of these new “rights” the VOC was remarkably successful. A comparative article from our own time by founder of “GeniusWorks”, formerly the head of the world’s largest Marketing agency, Peter Fisk relates:

“The peak value of the Dutch East India Company was so high, that it puts modern economies to shame. In fact, at its height, the Dutch East India Company was worth roughly the same amount as the GDPs of modern-day Japan (\$4.8T) and Germany (\$3.4T) added together. Even further, in today’s chart, we added the market caps of 20 of the world’s largest companies, such as Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, ExxonMobil, Berkshire Hathaway, Tencent, and Wells Fargo. All of them combined gets us to \$7.9 trillion. At the same time, the world’s most valuable company (Apple) only makes it to 11% of the peak value of the Dutch East India Company by itself.”²⁸⁶

What Fisk failed to account for is that investment bank Blackrock, whose fortunes only rose after Covid pandemic, “manage” assets well in the range of the VOC: as of October 2024, it boasted of assets totaling \$11.48 trillion dollars,²⁸⁷ (Blackrock’s wealth has even been compared to the combined wealth of the GDP of Germany and Japan). The bank’s CEO, Larry Fink, told investors that the outcome of the United States of America’s General Election doesn’t matter.²⁸⁸ It is becoming less and less controversial an idea that “success” is regarded as total dominance/monopolisation, and it is deeply disturbing (a recent study also suggested that more Americans trust Amazon and Google to “do what is right” than they trust the police, teachers and the news media).²⁸⁹

In the four years of Biden’s administration, the wealth of U.S. billionaires grew by a staggering 88%.²⁹⁰ Nonetheless,

²⁸⁶ Peter Fisk, “Dutch East India Company ... the world’s most valuable company of all time, worth \$7.9 trillion in today’s money,” on peterfisk.com, 10 December, 2017. <https://www.peterfisk.com/2017/12/dutch-east-india-company-the-worlds-most-valuable-company-of-all-time-worth-7-9-trillion-in-todays-money/#:~:text=During%20this%20frothy%20time%2C%20the,%247.9%20trillion%20in%20modern%20dollars.>

²⁸⁷ Arasu Kannagi Basil and Davide Barbuscia, “BlackRock’s assets hit record \$11.5 trillion amid private market push”, Reuters, October 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/blackrock-hits-record-high-115-trillion-assets-market-rally-etf-boost-2024-10-11/>

²⁸⁸ This was widely reported. Ben Norton, “Billionaire BlackRock CEO: ‘Doesn’t matter’ who wins US election; Trump & Kamala Harris benefit Wall Street: Billionaire BlackRock CEO Larry Fink said it “really doesn’t matter” who wins the US presidential election, because both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris will be good for Wall Street. Academic studies show the USA is not a democracy but an oligarchy”, *Geopolitical Economy Report*, 5 November 2024, <https://geopoliticaleconomy.com/2024/11/05/blackrock-doesnt-matter-us-election-trump-kamala-harris/>

²⁸⁹ Nicole Lyn Pesce “Americans trust Amazon and Google more than the police or the government: These are the most trusted brands, public figures and institutions in the U.S”, Market Watch, January 18, 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/people-trust-amazon-and-google-more-than-the-police-or-the-government-2020-01-14>

²⁹⁰ Chuck Collins and Omar Ocampo, “Total U.S. Billionaire Wealth: Up 88 Percent over Four Years: Four years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the United States has 737 billionaires with a combined wealth of more than \$5.5 trillion,” inequality.org, March 18, 2024, <https://inequality.org/article/billionaire-wealth-up-88-percent-over-four-years/> -an article based on data from

even the Biden administration made some positive changes in addressing what had become an almost inevitable trend towards unchecked “mergers” and the inevitable price gouging, appointing the legal scholar Lina Khan to chair of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Khan was responsible for example, for a lawsuit which challenged the patent on inhalers such that the price of life-saving asthma medication (doubly crucial during the Covid pandemic) dropped from around \$500 to \$35. Khan became a target of all those who would see wealth and power ever more concentrated in the hands of the few.²⁹¹

Khan (and Biden’s) gesture certainly represents a nightmare for major tech companies that thrive on monopolisation. During the 2024 American election Elon Musk boasted that Khan would be sacked under a Trump administration.²⁹² Khan in any case was equally unlikely to retain her role under Kamala Harris, many of whose donors directly oppose the lawyer’s monopoly-busting agenda. Somewhat bizarrely J.D. Vance is an admirer of much of Khan’s work, along with a group of MAGA (“Make America Great Again”) conservatives sometimes referred to as “Khan-servatives” as many on the right become more interested in anti-trust legislation.²⁹³ Of course, Vance is still good friends with his former employer, Peter Thiel who we have met already and who, as a famed Libertarian, directly opposes government intervention.

With regards contemporary global monopolisation consider for example, the somewhat contradictory politics of Vance’s stance on Bitcoin. Vance’s contemporary, Thiel, is a sometimes-cautious supporter of Bitcoin because he says it “exists outside the purview of central banks” and “is a store of value like gold and a hedge against central banks’ monetary policy”.²⁹⁴ Meanwhile Vance, although suggesting support for ‘anti-trust’ legislation, also possesses something like \$500,000 worth of Bitcoin. Bitcoin is famously volatile in terms of its valuation while the material resources its data centres consume, cause massive environmental destruction.²⁹⁵ This is all for the sake of a speculative economy tailored to those concerned about government regulation.

A “market bubble” traditionally describes the overvaluation of a product in relation to its intrinsic value. For example, in his article on the VOC, Fisk further alludes to the famous Dutch “Tulip Mania” of 1635 as “the first market bubble”, where, due to rampant speculation, asset prices of tulips in the Dutch Republic far exceeded the intrinsic value of tulip bulbs. The collapse of the tulip market however caused no significant impact on the Dutch economy as one would expect of a market bubble today. Bitcoin, of course, does not seem

Forbes’ [Real Time Billionaire Data](#).

291 60 Minutes, “Federal Trade Commission Chair Lina Khan: The 60 Minutes Interview” YouTube Video, September 23, 2024, duration: 13:14, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=lina+khan+asthma+medication#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:a836e3e4,vid:ebQtWZH3TW4,st:0>

292 Posted on Elon Musk’s X Thread, November 1, 2024, <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1851985438933668337?lang=en>

293 60 Minutes, Ibid.

294 Anna Tong and Krystal Hu, “Exclusive: Peter Thiel’s Founders Fund made \$200 million crypto investment before bull run,” Reuters, February 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/peter-thiels-founders-fund-made-200-million-crypto-investment-before-bull-run-2024-02-13/>

295 “Digital boom could well be a bust for the environment, warns UN trade agency”, United Nations News, 10 July 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/07/1151931>

to have any intrinsic value either, it is an ideological object, a Libertarian holy grail. In a 2016 article for online art publication e-flux, “If You Don’t Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms”, Hito Steyerl wrote similarly of the art market:

“...as alternative currency, art seems to fulfil what Ethereum and Bitcoin have hitherto only promised. Rather than money issued by a nation and administrated by central banks, art is a networked, decentralized, widespread system of value. It gains stability because it calibrates credit or disgrace across competing institutions or cliques.”²⁹⁶

A recent targeted advertisement on Instagram provides a view into an alleged environmental solution to tech-related energy over-consumption: the heat from data centres built for mining bitcoin is being used to grow hothouse tulips in the Netherlands. This is obviously a deeply ironic “solution” to two problems that do not really need to exist in the first place yet which are touted as “environmentalism” under late capitalism.



Lack of Limited Government

“A Lack of Limited Government”

With regards historical precedents it is Fisk’s quite incredible explanation of the VOC that is of most interest to us here, (that is, the legacy of the company from the perspective of someone who seems to believe that monopolisation at any cost is an inherent good):

“Companies like (...) the VOC (...) were granted monopolies on trade, and they engaged in daring voyages to mysterious and foreign places. They could acquire exotic goods, establish colonies, create military forces, and even initiate wars or conflicts around the world. Of course, the very nature of these risky ventures made getting any accurate indication of intrinsic value nearly impossible, which meant there were no real benchmarks for what companies like this *should* be worth.”²⁹⁷

The description of military exploits, which were quite literally the exploitation, enslavement and genocide of non-European populations, seems callous to say the least. The same forms of exploitation continue today, now at an industrial scale. An interesting aspect of the Dutch Golden Age was the general public’s seeming lack of interest in the negative effects of its global exploits. It provides a telling model, as a view into the future, of how we might assess the way “Westerners” today live “normally” while watching the catastrophic effects of our

²⁹⁶ Steyerl, 2016, *ibid.*

²⁹⁷ Fisk, *Ibid.*

Military Industrial Complex play out around the globe in real time.

Art historians continuously search for evidence of such socio-cultural ambivalence through the lens of the many impressive paintings of the era. What they are more likely to find though is Calvinist moralising over the possession of wealth or sugar, rather than over the source of that wealth.²⁹⁸ One of the more particularly horrific examples of the actions of the VOC arose from the securing of the nutmeg trade in the Banda Islands in Indonesia. In the process, 15,000 people were displaced, enslaved or killed, literally a genocide for the sake of monopolising a single spice, which at the time was only found on those islands. Shortly after, technology was developed so that nutmeg could be grown anywhere. A respected historian, Anthony Reid, “squarely implicates the aggressive policies of Dutch commerce as key among “The Origins of Southeast Asian Poverty.”²⁹⁹

In 1608, the same year as the publication of the *Mare Liberum* at the behest of the VOC, the Amsterdam Exchange was also founded. This was the world’s first Stock Market³⁰⁰ initiated to manage the affairs of the VOC (founded in 1602).³⁰¹ It was the world’s first Stock-issuing company. The VOC’s innovation was to spread the risk of ships sinking, etc., across multiple investors (foreign investment was encouraged), so that losses would be shared among all shareholders. Profits from the fleet, as a whole, were divided up.³⁰² During the same period the English East India Company (EIC) was also operating, though it was not until the 1650s that it adopted such Dutch innovations as “transferable shares, a permanent capital, and limited liability for owners and managers”. Economists Oscar Gelderblom, Abe de Jong, and Joost Jonker attribute this to a “lack of limited government”, in an article entitled “The Formative Years of the Modern Corporation...”³⁰³

Accounts from the period after 1608 reveal that internally the Dutch were annoyed that the EIC exploited the trade opened up by Dutch military operations. As far as they were concerned, the EIC were “freeriding on Dutch power” at the expense of the enormous initial cost the Dutch incurred in securing supplies by force. This meant, at the beginning at least, the VOC essentially made little profit.³⁰⁴ After 1650, it made little or no profit a fact that was largely obscured via convoluted accounting practices.³⁰⁵ When the VOC finally folded in 1799, it was 120 million guilders in debt. If one extrapolates from Fisk’s original sum (and if my maths is correct) this would equal something like 12.2 trillion dollars in today’s currency. Somehow the shareholders

298 Hochstrasser, Ibid, 203.

299 Ibid, 107.

300 Marsely L. Kehoe, “The Gilded Cage: Dutch Global Aspirations.” In, *Trade, Globalization, and Dutch Art and Architecture*, 39-. Amsterdam University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3610955.5>. 48.

301 Oscar Gelderblom, Abe de Jong, and Joost Jonker. “The Formative Years of the Modern Corporation: The Dutch East India Company VOC, 1602–1623.” *The Journal of Economic History* 73, no. 4 (2013): 1050–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24551011>. 1050.

302 Kehoe, Ibid, 47.

303 Gelderblom et al. ibid, 1051.

304 Gelderblom et al. ibid, 1065.

305 Hochstrasser, J. (2007). *Still life and trade in the Dutch golden age*. Yale University Press. 107; 337; 376.

still managed to get paid.³⁰⁶

Austerity for All

Austerity for All

In what is perhaps the first comprehensive work on the origins of objects placed in still life paintings, *Dutch Still Life and Trade*, professor of Early Modern Northern European Art, Julie Berger Hochstrasser, rigorously details the relationship between these paintings and the imports of the VOC. She relates issues of trade with the interests of potential art buyers. In one particularly convincing aside, Hochstrasser advances the correlation between paintings containing wraps of pepper painted by Pieter Claes and years in which pepper was trading at a particularly high price. She also traces specific evidence that the buyers of these paintings were very often personally involved in that speculative venture.³⁰⁷ Pepper was the chief cargo of the VOC,³⁰⁸ and though it may seem a relatively humble and quotidian substance to the contemporary viewer, in the 17th Century it was a luxury good imported from Indonesia.

The contemporary view of the modern-day Netherlands as a prosperous nation belies the foundation of how the business interests of the 17th Century came into being. In some ways, the move towards sea trade was inevitable as the Netherlands were reliant on trade for survival. They were unable even to grow enough food to support their population. Trade in grain was referred to as, “the mother trade”, as it was a fundamental part of any Dutch diet while almost no grain could be grown within the Republic (it was mostly imported from the Balkans). The extent of scarcity of such staples in the Netherlands meant that more recently historians came to reassess the bulk of VOC trade as “luxury goods”.³⁰⁹ Herring was a major export and yet the salt needed for its preservation had become almost impossible to produce: the traditional practice of burning salt-rich earth led ultimately to the flooding of the sea dikes.³¹⁰ The extent of such scarcity seemed to have encouraged a world view essentially envious of pleasure and abundance, one that arguably carries through to our own day. This view is echoed in Hochstrasser’s reference to the apparent surprise of Calvinist preacher Godfried Udemans, at the bounty discovered in Indonesia among the “heathens”. Udemans’ supplies bizarre, naturally racist, justifications for the plunder and exploitation of the VOC:

“Troubled by the contradiction that heathen lands should be so blessed with material riches,

306 Hochstrasser, *Ibid*, .337.

307 Hochstrasser, *Ibid*, 120-121.

308 Hochstrasser, J. B. (2020). Forbidden fruit? Protestant aesthetics in seventeenth-century Dutch still life. In *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts* (1st ed., pp. 77–98). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429001222-5>

309 Hochstrasser, *Still Life*, *ibid*, p.64

310 *Ibid*, p.9

Udemans resolves this with the reassurance for all poor but pious Christians that their spiritual wealth is the true treasure. “We must be hardly moved by the blindness of the Indians,” writes Udemans, and do our best to keep them in the light of Christian salvation. There are several reasons for this, but the most interesting is a sort of reciprocal agreement Udemans fabricates between Indian riches and Dutch religion: because these Indians are so liberal in sharing of their material goods, such as silver and gold, diamonds, precious stones, pearls, spices, sugar, and so on, so we are then obliged to make our spiritual wealth available to them.” The construction of such a convenient myth in this singular economy allows Udemans to propose that the Dutch gift of spiritual “goods” somehow repays the “Heathens” for their earthly ones. The reasons go on, ranging towards the bizarre.”³¹¹

Udemans also wrote quite simply that, “All pious men are free, and all godless men are slaves,”³¹² to justify the slave trade which was also central to the Dutch republic’s imported bounty. Whenever one looks to the origins of “civilisation” there tends to be some kind of surplus enabling greater leisure and therefore greater thought, from the floodplains of the Nile to the outrageous bounty of the Mediterranean. What can we say then of this “modern” “civilisation” built on envy and suspicion? Here was a society and culture that punitively targeted in outrageous measure, those elsewhere bestowed natural gifts and generosity. What is civilisational prosperity almost wholly dependent on theft?

Protestant Aesthetics

Protestant Aesthetics

All Abrahamic religions, founded in the written word, take issue with the “graven image”. We may associate Protestant art most notably with the *Vanitas* movement (art whose primary religious purpose was as a facilitator for the contemplation of mortality). Nonetheless, Dutch “realism” in general, in the Calvinist Dutch Republic, had almost certainly the most long-lasting impact. These works were not strictly religiously affiliated. The Protestant doctrine of John Calvin disallowed all illustration and decoration inside churches. As a result, it effectively created the modern art market, as artists of secular art were now cast from the temples. Calvinist churches had limited ornamentation, with texts replacing visual depictions on altars. These churches were also predominately painted white, which, as referenced in Chapter 3, had by this time become the “proper” colour of the heavens as Europe had finally come to grasp the value of “zero” in complex mathematics for the sake of

311 Ibid, 117.

312 Ibid, 119.

trade.

The extent of the minimalism of Dutch churches is sometimes overplayed, given that literal whitewashing had been practiced for two hundred years before the Reformation; and pulpits, for example, could also be intricately carved. There was always some leniency in the theology of images that were unlikely to provoke false religious sentiment.³¹³ Hochstrasser explains that:

“Although Calvin rejected the worship of the Eucharistic bread and wine, he did endorse these visible signs offered to the eye to represent “invisible things.” In fact, contrary to popular opinion, neither did he condemn the visual “signs” of figural artwork outright: while he maintained that “all human attempts to give a visible shape to God are vanity and lies,” and thus that it was “not expedient that churches should contain representations of any kind, whether of events or human forms,” he also stated, “I am not, however, so superstitious as to think that all visible representations of every kind are unlawful.”³¹⁴

Despite Calvin’s apparent ‘leniency’ in these matters, the effect of this imposition of whitewashed austerity was to leave artists essentially without work. As far as churches went, new text panels devoid of pictorial devices, encouraged by Calvin himself, came to adorn most altars, in the fanciest of early modern typography.³¹⁵ The particular biblical subjects that were chosen by Protestants, expressly rejected Catholic values. This was propaganda for the new religion bearing all the hallmarks of what we would understand today as advertising. In *The Netherlandish image after Iconoclasm* Mia Mochizuki explains:

“In their pictorial language and choice of words text paintings indicate it was the doctrines of incarnation and transubstantiation that were under attack. The image debate was not simply a dispute on how to decorate a church, it addressed core values of the Catholic Church. And this goes a long way toward explaining why religious images fundamentally *mattered* so much in sixteenth-century Netherlandish society and why people staked their lives on this position.”³¹⁶

There is, in fact, a strange synchronicity between 17th Century Dutch decoration and the more prevalent interior decoration of our own age, the rustic whitewashed walls and austerity of what is sometimes referred to as the “International Airbnb Style”. This could include the accompaniment of the famous “LIVE LAUGH LOVE” sign,³¹⁷ in not dissimilar cursive font.

313 As stated in Mochizuki, *ibid.*,: “Two of our most cherished assumptions of the impact of iconoclasm on church decoration – the removal of all imagery and the whitewashing of walls – are in fact untenable.”, 1.

314 Hochstrasser, *Still Life*, 79-80.

315 Calvin instigated a new kind of textual art. Mochizuki, M. (2008), 137-8.

316 Mochizuki *Ibid*, 139.

317 The origin, according to Wikipedia: “‘Live, Laugh, Love’ is a motivational three-word phrase that became a popular slogan on motivational posters and home decor in the late 2000s and early 2010s. By extension, the saying has also become pejoratively associated with a style of “basic” Generation X decor and with what *Vice* described as speaking-to-the-manager shallowness».

Compared with earlier church design, 17th Century Dutch Calvinist churches, some forcibly re-appropriated from Catholic worship and renovated accordingly, are strikingly austere. During Calvinist renovations, artworks were ripped from churches (though often preserved for posterity) and replaced with the written word. Wooden reliefs depicting biblical figures thought to inspire idolatry, were often literally defaced: slashing, especially to the eyes and face of figures, strongly suggested efforts to make the figures unrecognisable. This destructive, iconoclastic impulse can be explained by the fact that statuary and relief works in particular, had come to form such an integral part of Catholic mass and processions. Reformers like Calvin believed that such statues actually substituted the real figure of Jesus, particularly when such art came even to include life-sized renditions with movable arms that could be interacted with. Calvin was in every way critical of material substitutes for spiritual subjects.³¹⁸

In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (whose stated aim is to examine Still Life as an area of art largely ignored by the academy),³¹⁹ Norman Bryson writes of Calvin's disdain for literal or materialist interpretations of the Bible:

“For Calvin, visualisation is the mark of a failed reading of the text: those who take literally the words depart from me... into everlasting fire, and proceed to visualise the fires of hell, are missing the inner meaning of the text: that the punishments of hell are terrible beyond sensual comprehension; fire is only a metaphorical representation. Ignatius would have the subject of devotion hear the roar, smell the brimstone, taste the tears, touch the flames. Calvin insists that the subject read the text; Understanding takes place not through visuality but rather through discourse in Calvin's careful juxtaposition of text from Matthew and Isaiah. Calvin's loyalty is to the word, not to the image, and so far from providing a direct connection between the subject and eschatological truth, the image of fire indicates only how such truth cannot be apprehended

The phrase is an abridged form of the 1904 poem “Success” by Bessie Anderson Stanley which begins:

He achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much” Wikipedia “Live, Laugh, Love”, last accessed November 28, 2010, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live,_Laugh,_Love See also: Amelia Tait, “‘Live, Laugh, Love’ Mums Defend the Much-Maligned Decor Trend” Vice Magazine, June 9, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/live-laugh-love-mums-defend-decor-trend/> 318 Mochizuki *ibid*.

319 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Reaktion Books: 1990. Bryson lays this out in the introduction in a way that is quite lovely: “I conceived an odd project: to investigate still life as a response to the slowest, most entropic level of material existence. What is curious about this level is that it is inescapable. Access to the major events of history as far more open to chance. The novels of Jane Austen managed almost completely to ignore the Napoleonic wars, operation away from Paris might miss the July revolution, the audience at the winter's tale might or might not have followed the detail of its debate about nature and nurture: involvement with the higher levels of culture is comparatively optional but no one can escape the conditions of ‘creaturality’ of eating and drinking and domestic life, with which still life is concerned. I put inverted commas around major and higher because these terms exactly beg the question of how this level of material culture is judged and evaluated historically, from the viewpoint of other cultural spheres. Whether to see it as trivial, basin unworthy of serious intention or other to see it otherwise, it's very much a matter of history and ideology it is also, I argue in the final essay, a matter of ideology of gender. To the question why what is the coherence of the term still life? One can respond by invoking still life as a category and criticism and as a category in painting production *khan*. But in fact, the essays offered here are far more concerned with the third answer: that still life exists as a coherent category through being inextricably caught up in the process of evaluating, in visual representations and through the most complex symbolism the place of what might be called low plane reality, as this appears within the higher discourses of culture.”, 13-14.

in terms of the body, experience or vision.”³²⁰

(This is quite in contrast with the rather more mundane, even visceral religion of Luther.)³²¹ The late medieval period had been awash with rather gruesome imagery to inspire both fear and devotion in the supplicant. Now that art was deemed to be only secondary in places of worship, it would take on a new role. In a forcibly secularised society, art, as a form of knowledge, tended evermore towards celebration of scientific development, a triumphant mastery of craft and nature. It was often heavily symbolic, and had increasingly little to do with faith, belief or the unknown. Shells were a frequent theme, for example, for they were considered to encapsulate nature at its closest to human artistry.³²² One need only look at the passion for the (polished mother-of-pearl) Nautilus cup, such as the one in the Kalf painting referenced in my painting and opening this chapter. As eluded by art historian Marsley Kehoe, these prized shells were also viewed as evidence of the anti-aristocratic turn in Dutch taste. These large shells were of no great monetary or trade value, found on an Indonesian island by the Portuguese, they were favoured as an object of humble beauty. Before the establishment of the VOC, though, and somewhat counterintuitive to this reading, these shells were often presented adorned in the finest of gold and silver metal work. They really only turned up in Still Life paintings once the fortunes of the VOC faltered (around the 1650s). Gone were the palaces of the elite of the Catholic/feudal era. These were replaced with quaint bourgeoisie opulence.

In the chapter “Forbidden fruit? Protestant aesthetics in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life,” (from the book, *Protestant Aesthetics and The Arts*), Hochstrasser explains the effect of the turn against pictorial depictions of biblical scenes of the then new Protestant religions. For those craftspeople traditionally employed by the church: “This was the major schism iconoclasm had wrought in the art world of the Dutch Republic: without ecclesiastical patronage, painters sold their wares generally at town fairs, giving rise to the overtly secular subjects of still life, landscape, and genre scenes of daily life, on the first art market in the Western world.”³²³

Thus “secular” art is something that from its inception was central to the new Protestant order, operating in tandem with the very origins of capitalism. Bryson further explains that “The art market effectively appeared at the same time as the Stock Market and has always worked in direct service to the tastes of a speculative class”.³²⁴ Actually, while more prosaic readings of “Protestant vs. Catholic” themes within Dutch paintings of the era tend to prove the opposite of what one might expect of the output of those of either faith, the secular

320 Ibid, p.118

321 “Luther showed that the body not only serves as the “symptom carrier” of spiritual insufficiency but also takes an active part in the creation of religious meaning and reality.” Julian Herlitze, Anne-Charlott Trepp, A.-C., Xenia von Tippelskirch, & Elizabeth Fischer. (2021). “God be Praised that I did not Sweat to Death.” The power of the body and Martin Luther’s concept of melancholy. In *Bodies in Early Modern Religious Dissent* (1st ed., pp. 45–63). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003081395-5> p.48p.47

322 Norman Bryson, (1990), *Looking at the overlooked : four essays on still life painting*, p.109

323Hochstrasser, J. B. (2020). Forbidden fruit? Protestant aesthetics in seventeenth-century Dutch still life. In *Protestant Aesthetics and the Arts* (1st ed., pp. 77–98). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429001222-5>, 80.

324 Bryson, “Introduction” ibid.

turn is a direct result of Protestant intervention. For example, take the understated and rather humble still life works of the Catholic Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz Heda. Despite the occasional wrap of pepper these are more likely to feature proud homegrown staples like Dutch beer and local cheese. In “monochromes” by artists such as Claesz and Heda, the frugality of the Dutch household is emulated even to the extent of the choice of pigments. Such colours as blue for example, were avoided altogether as at the time, they were produced through the expensive process of grinding the semi-precious stone, lapis lazuli. These paintings and trends can be read as conforming to the ideals of the wider society as well as being secularised. They provide an especially apparent foil to the “pronk” or luxury³²⁵ still lifes (*Pronkstillieven*) of Kalf Willem Kalf, whose celebration of Dutch trade is nonetheless equally in keeping with the contemporary Dutch self-image.

Pronkstillieven were popular for representing the conspicuous efforts of the mercantile class. However, there is something quite particular to the work of Kalf, it is strangely enervating when compared even to contemporary work of similar execution and subject matter. There remains something seemingly mysterious even to those who dedicatedly write about his work. The reason for this strangeness might also have something to do with the mercantile psychology of the era. While Kalf became relatively well-off, the idea that the wealth he depicted in his still lifes also “belonged” to the Dutch people, is very far from the material truth. Karl Marx wrote about the Dutch Republic as the “Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in Capital Volume 1:

“...by 1648 the people of Holland were more over-worked, poorer and more brutally oppressed than those of all the rest of Europe put together.

Today, industrial supremacy brings with it commercial supremacy. In the period of manufacture it is the reverse: commercial supremacy produces industrial predominance. Hence the preponderant role played by the old colonial system at that time. It was the ‘strange god’ who perched himself side by side with the old divinities of Europe on the altar, and one day threw them all overboard with a shove and a kick. It proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and sole purpose of mankind.

The system of public credit, *i.e.*, of national debts, whose origin we discover in Genoa and Venice as early as the Middle Ages, took possession of Europe generally during the manufacturing period. The colonial system with its maritime trade and commercial wars served as a forcing-house for it. Thus, it first took root in Holland. National debts, *i.e.*, the alienation of the state

325 Kehoe explains “pronk” thus: “Pronk” comes from the Dutch verb *pronken*, to show off, so a Dutch burgher might display a high quality pronk still life in the home, either to show off his wealth and taste in the painting itself, or alternately, because the painting depicts *pronkstukken* (pronk pieces).⁹ A *pronkstuck* is a decorative object, like a nautilus cup, that is an expensive and lavish testament to the wealth and discernment of the owner. The term “pronk” sometimes has a slight negative connotation, such as to show off with something that does not actually belong to one, or something that was acquired in a questionable way. This simultaneous celebration of and discomfort with ostentation is also evident in the modesty of the Dutch townhouse...”, 90.

– whether despotic, constitutional or republican – marked with its stamp the capitalistic era. The only part of the so-called national wealth that actually enters into the collective possessions of modern peoples is their national debt.

Hence, as a necessary consequence, the modern doctrine that a nation becomes the richer the more deeply it is in debt. Public credit becomes the *credo* of capital. And with the rise of national debt-making, want of faith in the national debt takes the place of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which may not be forgiven.”³²⁶

Still, as recounted by Hochstrasser, the Dutch Republic, in marked contrast to a country like France of the time, actually invested in (the imported) grain to be distributed among the poor regardless of the cost. This provision continued throughout what remained of the cycles of famine, the result of crop failures, until the end of the early-modern period in Europe.³²⁷ The very lack of provision for the needs of common people in countries like France was, naturally, a major cause of the French Revolution. Europe would continue to intermittently starve causing a decline in productivity as well as birth rates that would have dire consequences for early modern economies. In the Dutch Republic everyone was fed. Nevertheless, over the course of a hundred years or so, the years of the “Golden Age”, the Dutch population too stagnated or declined. Such metrics remain the most illustrative of ultimate effect on the common people.

This drift towards the stagnation of the population was in the end, largely the result of an over dependence on maritime trade. This was supposed to have created untold wealth for the nation and yet so few would ultimately benefit from this new wealth. This also meant that it was still easy enough to find young Dutch men (and most world sailors of the time were Dutch) to work in service of the VOC under conditions that are said to have been only marginally better than those of chattel slavery. Typically, the Dutch were quite proud of their comparably “humanitarian” attitudes towards their chattel. Translated into the attitudes of the time, this meant they pragmatically did their best to prolong the lives of their slave/dependents as long as they could make money off them. The often-spoiled provisions on board VOC ships, along with rampant disease, not to mention the many wars fought, meant that it was only one in two, or perhaps even one in three, young sailors who would return from any given journey, a major cause of the population decline.

Kalf’s paintings on the surface triumphantly juxtapose treasures from throughout the globe that he bought and sold as an antique dealer, and yet their mood is also unutterably dark. Hochstrasser writes that:

“If one was looking for psychic content here, then much closer to home, for example, was Kalf’s own experience: in January 1642, when Willem was only 23, his younger brother Govert died

³²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, “Chapter 31: Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist”, (Pelican, 1976), pp.918-919.

³²⁷ Hochstrasser, *Still Life*, 256.

on board the *Amsterdam* on a trip to the East Indies. Perhaps Willem's collections of treasures from the East – Chinese porcelain, Turkish carpets, Nautilus goblets, silently mourn this loss, now indeed “the very loss that haunts the subject”.³²⁸

Gounter-Reformation

Counter-Reformation

Overall, the Protestant aesthetics of the “Golden Age” were immensely varied and often contradictory. They could be humble, austere, decadent, simple, complicated, brief and overworked; but they were always bourgeois and thus rarely “unpleasant”.

It appears the counter-reformation was to provide the direct antidote for this overriding sense of bourgeois comfort. Take as an example, the spectacular counter-Reformist church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome.³²⁹ Inside this church wall paintings depict, in gruesome detail, the means of the martyrdom of each saint. These are perhaps not subjects best optimised for selling to people as interior décor. Visceral, ultra descriptive work of this nature mostly fell out of fashion within the trajectory of European painting including the present moment. Still, similar themes have been lurking in the background ever since.³³⁰ In fact, there is something of a revival of counter-Reformation aesthetics that seems to transcend both theological and political allegiances. Strange, though is that these old binaries, of the Protestant ascetic and Catholic garishness, broadly speaking, seem almost insurmountable. Much Western aesthetics still seem hopelessly mired in concealed Christian theological preoccupations, while few today seem to have any idea what these zombie, dead-but-alive, forms actually “mean” in relation to their original contexts. Arguably this is due to a dearth of theological or even (art) historical education. Considering the recent rise of American Evangelical conservative movements, the alleged neo-conservative move towards Catholic conversion today does also bare considering.

The right wing turn against liberal “elites” may well make sense of this reinvigorated trend, where famed WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) of the upper echelons of North American society are rejected (if, ultimately, only for other WASPs). As I have contended, the reworked moralisms of our era, of representation over action and of the moral superiority claimed by warmongers, has its origins in the Reformation. Marked Protestant resistance to narrative mundanity in religion and bodily representation, may be said to underpin

³²⁸ Hochstrasser, *Still Life*, *ibid.*, p.256

³²⁹ Niccolò Circignani (Niccolò Pomarancio) and Antonio Tempesta, “34 scenes of martyrdom”, 1580-1582. Frescos. Santo Stefano Rotondo/Basilica of St. Stephen in the Round on the Caelian Hill, Rome Italy.

³³⁰ Notable ‘counter-reformists’ of the 20th Century might include Hermann Nitsch and Paul Thek, the weird Catholic antecedents of the restoration of medieval body horror.

the aspirations of the current technocratic regime. On this topic Mochizuki has said: “Iconoclasm was always the story of the problems of bodies – human and divine bodies, living and inanimate bodies, governing bodies and the pushing and shoving bodies of the market square.”³³¹ Thus, counter-Reformist aesthetics are a means of rejecting false moralism as well as the emphatic emphasis on immaterialism imposed via socio-economic structures today. Ironically, considering the trajectory of Reformist thought, we are now supposed to believe that our representations are greater and more valuable than our lived experience. It is as if we have now created the world beyond the world that Calvin argued was the sole provenance of religion. My painting of Mark Zuckerberg (exhibited in the accompanying exhibition to this text “Modernity Slop (Trauma Studies)³³², for example, was both a joke about all the memes where people have found medieval monks that look just like him, as well as how he thinks putting a headset on will be as good as actually going to a concert (which was his sales pitch for the metaverse).³³³

One might argue that this general scenario stems from problems arising from the rejection of visual and sensual experience as a legitimate realm of knowledge (both spiritual and intellectual). It also arises the strange notion that the written word is somehow absolutely separate from the mundane presence of very counterpart and somehow the arbiter of objective truth. Norman Bryson explains Calvinist discourse surrounding the written word in relation to 17th Century Dutch painting:

“For Calvin the experience of devotion is necessarily aniconic; images get in the way of the contact between reading subject and sacred word. Vision is under suspicion; Figuration must be subdued and directed by figures of speech. Vanitas painting of the 17th Century grows out of the deep internalisation of this priority of the word over image; Instead of word and image fusing the white heat of indigenous imagination, they are divided, the better the word may rule. As the branch of painting devoted to eschatological truth, the Vanitas accordingly installs the greatest possible distance between visibility and legibility.”³³⁴

This prioritisation of course carries through to today’s university-led art programs wherein visual representation is codified as of secondary importance. The same could be said for some of the more basic works of 1960s Conceptual artists, Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs” (1965),³³⁵ being a classic case in point. In the work a chair is placed beside a photo chair and a description of a chair, wherein the neutral font and tone of the

331 Mochizuki, *ibid*, 105.

332 Documentation in the back of the paper.

333 James Clayton, “Metaverse: What happened to Mark Zuckerberg’s next big thing?” BBC News, 25 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-66913551>

334 Bryson *Ibid*, 118-119.

335 Joseph Kosuth, “One and Three Chairs”, 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of “chair”, Chair 82 x 37.8 x 53 cm, photographic panel 91.5 x 61.1 cm, text panel 61 x 76.2 cm. Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) New York, United States of America.

writing is supposed to convey an objectivity that denies its own visual reception. Its cleverness belies its rather shallow philosophical position regarding the relationship between meaning, referent and object. Meanwhile, Protestant church altar typography, the religious origins of then word's prioritisation, while often excellent in itself, functions almost solely to decorate the word. It was as though words in this context were not meant to communicate anything other than the centrality of the disembodied concept of the word's domination. This odd divorcement renders Western thought strange. The somewhat clumsy formatting of this exegesis, these crimes against graphic design, are meant to be evocative of the visuality of the text. Today, our visual culture is largely subordinate to ideas being communicated through text as though what the text describes does not actually exist in the world, as though the text itself does not exist in the world. This is our version of the "secular", which is in fact the result of a theological position and therefore one not likely held by the majority of Contemporary Art practitioners.



Bryson writes of the conception of labour in Dutch still life as something quite independent of earlier still life works. In Ancient Greece or Rome, these works might have been seen to allude to *xenia/philoxenia*, "hospitality" and "hospitality towards strangers", depictions of abundance as provided amply by nature. The Dutch though had a very different experience of nature, which required hard labour and thorough organisation to attain anything like the mastery necessary for base survival. Bryson therefore describes Dutch Still Life as "georgic" rather than "pastoral". He also makes the point that quite the opposite of flower paintings from, for example, Pompeii, which present flowers freshly cut from local natives in pastoral scenes, Dutch flower painting is "georgic" in its display of flowers that have been brought back from all over the world. Common flowers become monuments to enterprise over the simple enjoyment of nature.³³⁶

The very fastidiousness of the paintings of the era allude to the importance and value placed on labour above all else. Certain painters were even paid for their time, and yet, of course, many don't seem to have been paid much at all. It was against the backdrop of very laboured, one might say, overlaboured art, that Rembrandt van Rijn's apparent brevity of brushstroke posited a new way of painting. Rembrandt broke from the prevailing expectations of art, deploying heavy impasto to render and break the surface of the painting, a means of referencing its materiality. Such directly observable innovations are the most likely to attract notice in the

³³⁶ Bryson, pp.104-109.

modern period (that is, from the 17th Century until now). Such noticeable difference would be argued to account for Rembrandt's continuing popularity, the further cultivation of the artist's "brand".

Guild systems once provided union and solidarity for practitioners of the visual arts that today has been decisively undone: if you are not doing well, then your lack of success is supposed to be your own fault. Endless stories persist though about those "geniuses" who were overlooked. When artists who had traditionally worked in religious subject matter especially in churches, were forced to ply their trade on the new open market, paintings in turn became relatively affordable and widely owned. When subject matter was liberated from religious concerns, the type of subject matter became a centrally important question for artists. The choice could mean the difference between starving and being a darling of patrons.

Kalf's (or Rembrandt's) success during his lifetime was not guaranteed even within the materialist culture of the Dutch Republic. Other artists like Abraham van Beijeren for example, lived lives of penury. Van Beijeren was only "singled out" long after his death, in this case by 20th Century scholars. In retrospect van Beijeren was regarded as one of the most important Dutch still life painters of the period.³³⁷ Regardless of its importance as a one of the predominant trade goods produced by the Dutch Republic, fish was not one of the more popular subjects of contemporary still life painting. Van Beijeren's many fish paintings were vivid and mildly gory. Other painters also took on fish as subject matter. And of course, lobster and oysters which were a common theme even of *Pronkstilleven*, such as those painted by Kalf but also Jan de Heem, Willem van Aelst and more. Other sometimes fish painters chose a humbler approach such as Claesz and Claesz Heda. Both also assumed the perspective and view of the consumer.

Suffice to say that in selling to an open market the remuneration of painters, even of those painting still life, was far from uniform. The unevenness of pay has been proven to have had little or nothing to do with skill. The prioritising of technique one might argue has come to be accepted as objective truth within the market system to the point of utter romanticisation. Nonetheless, it is something hard to imagine under any other kind of system, where contributing to the decoration of major cathedrals, for example, a skilled painter might almost be guaranteed work (though, of course, Caravaggio's many trespasses against the dignity of his religious subject were quite often rejected by his patrons).

Hochstrasser contends that there was likely a close association between those employed in the fishing trade and artists like van Beijeren. In fact, artists like him would have had more class interests in common with fishmongers and fisherman than those he painted for (van Beijeren did attempt upward mobility via his, apparently unsuccessful, attempts at *Pronkstilleven*). Hochstrasser even points to a commission van Beijeren

337 Hochstrasser, *Ibid*, 40.

received directly from the fisherman's guild.³³⁸ Where van Beijeren is basically unique as a painter is in the literal and metaphoric rawness of the fish he depicted, his understanding of the relationship between fisherman and their yield, and the intimacy of his scenes featuring fishmongers.³³⁹ Take, for example, his painting of a fishwife, "The Fishmonger" (1666)³⁴⁰, who looks to be in her forties, her finger hooked through a suggestively-shaped opening in the pink flesh of a fillet of fish. The fishwife's glistening wet wares are laid out bare before her as she stares intimately straight into the viewer's eyes. The sea and fisherman are visible through the window behind her.

It is unusual to see such a painting, weighted in equilibrium with its subject, where the fishwife returns van Beijeren's gaze without pretence or coquetry, a decidedly more convincing avatar for female agency than Manet's much later "Olympia" (1863)³⁴¹. As a handsome older woman at work, she is neither amused nor embarrassed by the nakedness of the seductive gesture she makes. As I have written earlier in relation to the work of Lucas Cranach, elder and younger, it was the Reformation that ushered in an era in which the sexuality of older women was otherwise rendered absurd. Sex was reduced to pure reproductive form, a moral duty.



The Art of Exchange

The Art of Exchange

The art market of the 17th Century Dutch Republic would essentially form the model for all capitalist aligned art to follow. While "artistic merit" is continuously proffered as the answer for the popularity of particular work, in reality what is judged as "success" or "failure" is largely an artist's ability to manipulate and/or appeal to the prevailing market. In the 17th Century, the difference between artists in terms of output and even skill, was relatively less pronounced than what is apparent within the contemporary art world. However, precisely the same model of marketability determined which works fetched a higher price. Rembrandt was the first to promote himself self-consciously as a "Contemporary Artist", the first to mass-proliferate his own image and the first to really deviate from accepted forms in such a way as to fit the contemporary notion of "art star". Nonetheless, as we have seen regarding Vermeer's example other historiological forces can and have come into play to similarly elevate more obscure artists in subsequent years.

Seemingly, the focus of much mid to late 20th Century art was (and is) to liberate art from the obviousness of its material production: an effort to create a generation of Rembrandts without the *prima-materia* of paint.

338 Hochstrasser, Ibid, 34-50.

339 Ibid 40-44.

340 Abraham van Beijeren, "The Fishmonger", 1666. Tempera on canvas, 121 x 146cm. Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, Austria.

341 Édouard Manet "Olympia", 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 cm x 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The manipulation of the market was becoming the purest form of art. Contrastingly, the more fertile eras of the 1960s and '80s, which I have alluded to as that still being mainly taught in art schools, were variously preoccupied with an art liberated *from* the market. Few would argue that Marina Abramovic's later foray into skincare would undermine her early performance work, even though this trajectory says so much about recent historical shifts. It was really only in the latter part of the 20th Century, importantly after the end of the Cold War, that widespread critique of capitalism was disentangled from art that proceeded to specifically manipulate the market. We arrive here at that other Protestant Empire (long past its peak), Great Britain. Historically Britain conformed to aniconism to such a degree as to have produced no (Northern) "renaissance" or "Golden Age".³⁴² The particular era I refer to now, was also in part produced by a rapacious advertising executive, Charles Saatchi. His associated firm, Saatchi and Saatchi were, tellingly, even the first to advertise in former East Berlin, producing a poster that bragged, "Saatchi & Saatchi: First Over the Wall".³⁴³

The group of artists to emerge from this place and post-Cold War era, came to be known as the Young British Artists or YBAs. YBA art came to be predominately known for its shock and sensationalist value. Key examples include, the taxidermy shark of Damien Hirst's "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" (1991)³⁴⁴; Tracey Emin's "My Bed" (1998)³⁴⁵, the exhibition of the artist's bed after four days of drinking replete with related detritus and evidence of various secretions (subsequently bought by Saatchi for £150,000)³⁴⁶; or Mark Quinn's "Self" (1991),³⁴⁷ the artists own blood frozen into the shape of his head. The self-evident shock value *is* the value of these works. Hirst would even go on to manipulate the art market into buying a diamond and platinum skull sculpture of his for £50 million, presumably to prop up the valuation of his existing work. Like the rapidly deteriorating dead shark (already by some accounts "stinking" in 2000),³⁴⁸ none of the controversies surrounding Hirst and his "genius" have weathered at all well.³⁴⁹

342 I caused a minor scandal in Germany by quite blithely declaring that the English cannot make (visual) art, but one need only look to the masterworks of the Tate Collection, which, with the obvious and excellent exception of JMW Turner were made by Northern European immigrants. There are excellent British film and video makers and a long history of excellent literature, but all of that only proves my point about aniconism.

343 This was suggested to me long ago in a lecture about Contemporary Art given by David McNeill

344 Damien Hirst, "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", 1991. Tiger shark, glass, steel, 5% formaldehyde solution, 213 cm x 518 cm x 213 cm

345 Tracey Emin, "My Bed", 1998. Mattress, linens, pillows, rope, various memorabilia. 79 x 211 x 234 cm

346 R. J. Preece, "[Tracey Emin. My bed, \(1998\)](#)" in [varied publications, exhibitions. *artdesigncafe*](#), 12 September 2021, Retrieved 29 October 2021.

347 Marc Quinn, "Self", 2001. blood (artist's), liquid silicone, stainless steel, glass, perspex and refrigeration equipment, 2050 mm x 650 mm x 650mm

348 Jonathan Jones, "Going, Going, Gone" in, *The Guardian*, 20th June 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2000/jun/20/features11,2>.

349 "These Catholic pictures (barely represented in the Royal Academy show) are disconcerting to anyone who sees inner conviction as essential to the integrity of great art. It is as if Saatchi & Saatchi had hired David Hockney to design PR portfolios for both Margaret Thatcher and Arthur Scargill at the same time. It is true that divisions between Catholic and Protestant had not yet hardened irrevocably - Cardinal Albrecht had even sent Luther's bride a wedding gift. Yet the mood and devotional purpose of these pictures were deeply alien to the new doctrines to which Cranach subscribed. A tradesman, of course, cannot afford to be too choosy about his customers, but the power and tenderness that he and his assistants infused into many of these Catholic pictures speaks of art's ability to transcend ideology, however much Cranach's more conscientiously didactic works might seek to deny it." Eamon Duffy, "Review: Spiritual surrender: As Martin Luther's PR man, Lucas Cranach was crucial to the success of the Reformation, yet he also produced many great works for the Catholic church. Ideology was all very well - but for this artist, business was business."

The response of renowned feminist (and unnotable art critic) Germaine Greer to art critic Robert Hughes' disdain for Hirst, is transparently descriptive enough to be worth reproducing in full:

“Hirst is quite frank about what he doesn't do. He doesn't paint his triumphantly vacuous spot paintings - the best spot paintings by Damien Hirst are those painted by Rachel Howard. His undeniable genius consists in getting people to buy them. Damien Hirst is a brand, because the art form of the 21st century is marketing. To develop so strong a brand on so conspicuously threadbare a rationale is hugely creative - revolutionary even. The whole stupendous gallimaufrey is a *Vanitas*, a reminder of futility and entropy. Hughes still believes that great art can be guaranteed to survive the ravages of time, because of its intrinsic merit. Hirst knows better. The prices his work fetches are verifications of his main point; they are not the point. No one knows better than Hirst that consumers of his work are incapable of getting that point. His dead cow is a lineal descendant of the Golden Calf. Hughes is sensitive enough to pick up the resonance. “One might as well be in Forest Lawn [the famous LA cemetery] contemplating a loved one,” he shouts at Hirst's calf with the golden hooves - auctioned for £9.2m - but does not realise it is Hirst who has put that idea into his head. Instead, he asserts that there is no resonance in Hirst's work. Bob dear, the Sotheby's auction was the work.”³⁵⁰

There has now been almost 35 years of this kind of art produced almost wholly as speculative monetary value. The most salient point made by Greer in her critique is such art's proximity to the *Vanitas*, the original moralising movement whose scope was restricted to vacuously obvious reminders of mortality. Expressly Calvinist works like these *Vanitas* works, would of course also allude to the immorality of having too much money (and/or sugar), though without posing any suggestions about how to mitigate greed. *Vanitas* paintings also fetched relatively high prices and were understood as even at the time, as commodities. As discussed, what none of these works, or “moralisms” ever considered, was the contemporary slave trade the Dutch were intimately involved in.³⁵¹ *Vanitas* paintings are today most closely mirrored in what I would call “pseudo-political” art. The latter is almost purely constituted by liberal eugenics masquerading as identity politics while simultaneously making insane claims to be actively improving the world. These works present a shallow vision of morality as something completely divorced from its own material circumstance, while being utterly reliant on horrific exploitation. Hughes, in the article so objected to by Greer, asserts that “Hirst is basically a pirate” and this is where we come full circle with the VOC: the obvious and traceable trajectory of forms of rapacious accumulation perfectly mirrored by contemporary artists engaged in all out plunder.

The Guardian, March 1 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/01/art.art>

350 Germaine Greer, “Germaine Greer Note to Robert Hughes: Bob, dear, Damien Hirst is just one of many artists you don't get” in The Guardian, September 22, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/sep/22/1>

351 Hochstrasser, Still Life, 203

ord Byron Died

Lord Byron Died

Luckily there is a great variation in the quality of YBA art. In fact YBA artist, Tacita Dean is generally simultaneously referred to as a key name of the group and distanced from the output of its more prominent figures, such as Hirst and Emin. In Dean's work "Lord Byron Died", evidence of ancient monuments defaced by British tourists is presented. The work reflects on the extension of the Grand Tour, originating in the 18th Century but still clearly apparent in the 19th. By that time, it seemed all Europe had already been reduced to a tourist circuit (of course some of the writing Tacita Dean depicts is also Greek: modern tourists could be locals as well). The beautiful copperplate gothic font of the 19th Century graffiti alludes to better times for the Empire. Dean said of the work:

"Some years ago, I went to Sounion in Greece to look for Lord Byron's signature, famously carved into one of the columns in the temple there. I couldn't find it. Instead, I photographed these other names, carved into the marble in the copperplate writing style of the vandals of that time. They are evidence of an era of Romantic wanderings, sea voyages and a new affinity with the Classical Age. Somehow it seems fitting that those carved works and numbers should now read as end dates for such a period of incomparable literary brilliance."³⁵²

Dean's work both resists the more literal interpretations, while suggesting an infatuation with the written word proportionate to a contemporary culture singularly aniconic. Byron was nothing if not the world's first "rock star", with his ludicrous wealth, his new outfit every day, his sex scandals. Of course, in a purely qualitative sense, his work is so highly regarded as to be the butt of a joke in that great literary television series, "Bridgerton".³⁵³ Saatchi courted the same kind of Byronic controversy for his own generation of "cultural ambassadors". Dean's work is alternatively more studied and quieter. Dean, the Romantic, has also devoted a lot of energy preserving film stocks that will inevitably eventually disappear due to the simple econometric logic of supply and demand. In today's spectacularised cultural climate, it seems strangely noble, this gesture towards the preservation of this mechanical means of reproduction, some kind of reminder of the materiality of vision.

Dean's work has also been eloquently described in an oddly optimistic survey of the possibilities and future of photography, *Vitamin Ph*, (published two years before the 2008 financial collapse):

"The inscriptions date back to the mid-19th century, the moment of the birth of analogue

³⁵² Tacita Dean "Lord Byron Died", quoted on the Schellman Art website: https://schellmannart.com/en/works/104/Lord_Byron_died

³⁵³ Julia Quinn, 2021. *Bridgerton*. Bridgerton Family Series 02.

photography, and its death provides the context for these images. As analogue photographs they are indexical signs- the record of light on light-sensitive paper. They show two more indexes: scratched letters and shadows falling off them. At the moment of digitization, Dean provides indexicality in triplicate.”³⁵⁴

The work references the very material processes indicated within it in a way that was so quickly undone by processes of digital transfer. There is also a weird prescience to the quote referenced below, listed in an article in the New Yorker and referring to Dean’s homage to the analogue in a show at the Tate Modern Turbine Hall. The work was simply titled, “Film”:

“Jean-Luc Godard, following his usual practice, faxed a handwritten note: “The so-called ‘digital’ is not a mere technical medium, but a medium of thought. And when modern democracies turn technical thought into a separate domain, those modern democracies incline toward totalitarianism.””³⁵⁵

onclusion: Life Stilled?

Conclusion: Life Stilled?

The digital era is one of unprecedented control. The mask of “progress” has incrementally dropped as we see that “human rights” were historically fought for as the rights of corporation over “the people”. In this sense, it is important to understand the role of visual culture within wider Empire. The “Dutch Golden Age” can present as an oddly disjointed narrative of the domination of trade, but it also birthed the first truly contemporary equivalent art market. Echoing the material conditions of art today, the wealth of the 17th Century and some of its artists, was utterly divorced from evidence of the horrors of the slavery it staged as necessity. Early capitalist monopolies were presented as bearers of freedom. The antipathy of the eternal Still Life is the fact it can only be properly understood as fabricated from violent global plunder. Northern Realism of this sort made art polite while making a horror of life for so many. It was an imposition on global life, dynamically derived, as all capitalism is, but constricting and ending lives everywhere.

³⁵⁴ *Vitamin Pb: New Perspectives in Photography*. London: Phaidon Press, 2006.

³⁵⁵ Emily Eakin, “Celluloid Hero”, *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2011.

Conclusion

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Defying the Gods of the Market

Defying the Gods of the Market

The recontextualisation of contemporary art according to its historiological, theological and ideological underpinnings, is a task beyond any one person or this humble exegesis. Nonetheless, it is a task I believe is essential. The system in which we work as artists and workers today, is in many senses so wilfully obfuscated as to be almost impossible to comprehend. This exegesis therefore is a brief introduction to a much larger historicised project disentangling art from the market, particularly regarding uses of subjectivity. As we have seen, the enforced secularisation of art, which has everything to do historically with a Protestant, Northern European world view, is in practise not at all as secular as it first appears. This ontological trend has reduced art largely to a productivism, where it cannot possibly hope to find a “purpose”, certainly not enough to rationally justify its existence. One might also look to the historical parallels to find that art today is primarily sold as an indulgence in every sense of the word, as a luxury good, an unregulated commodity for money laundering operations, and a means of absolution for the sins of some of the world’s (and history’s) most nefarious actors. The cracks in the surface have long since begun to appear, the institutions can no longer suppress their obvious hypocrisy or offer either artists or the public a viable narrative of as to what art is and can be in service to the billionaire class. What they promote is simply bad. This in turn prompts the obvious truth that art possesses an intrinsic value that cannot be fully reconciled or indeed instrumentalised through the lens of economic rationalism, just as the notion of a “homo economicus” has always proved a shallow rendering of human motivation and experience. Converging around critical art with like-minded peers has always been a response to Western hegemony, but only insofar as artists are prepared to fight and to lose in the name of free expression. Such solidarity is sadly rare, but can only become more prevalent as material circumstances become worse for the ordinary person.

Parallel to this scenario is the predominant view of the written word's legible superiority over understandings received through gesture and the wider visual realm (where visibility is frequently reduced to its descriptive, narrowly communicational, "function"). These secularised tendencies common to a very specific theology, lead also to what we understand today as "Human Rights" law and its relationship to the same worldview. Again, reiteration of legibility brings us to a new form of dominance via economic means. It seems the aesthetic dimension of "Late Capitalist Art" has only lately expanded to include the "rest of the world". Still, Western contemporary art trends, remain almost secretly, and yet irrevocably, tied to the Northern European elevation of austerity, visually and conceptually.

In Chapter 1, I detailed the strange coincidences surrounding the creation of artwork as demonstrated by the participatory constructions of conspiracy theory, referencing the attendant appropriation of left-wing strategies by an enlarged conservative movement. The "Do Your Own Research" catchcry of the alt-right encapsulates almost perfectly, the thinking of Fine Arts departments increasingly professionalised and aimed at shallow self-justifications bound by the search for job security in increasingly precarious job markets. The *bauernkrieg* was initially a historical symbol of a left collective aiming to spark socialist revolution through art that was participatory. Instead, the outcome of the "Peasant War", via figures like Luther, came ultimately to suggest strategies that further confused a disenfranchised public into acting against their own interests. The strange parallels between the *bauernkrieg* and the class-orientated political situation of today's post-internet world also bears serious reflection.

In Chapter 2, I examined, as a prescient example, the work of Post-Internet artist Simon Denny, as well as the contemporary habit of producing propaganda in art as an educational device. This trend is strangely analogous with the new patriotism widely evident in 19th Century France, a hotbed of the movement that came to be known as "Academic Art" or "History Painting". This historical tendency similarly produced visual work that was in the end, utterly didactic and propagandistic.

Chapter 3 expanded on the history of the Reformation and its relationship to the German Renaissance, particularly through the work of the painter Lucas Cranach the elder, and his son also Lucas Cranach, known as "the younger". Individually and together, they ran the large and profitable Cranach studio. Northern Reformist, Martin Luther, introduced a business-friendly new faith, Protestantism. Cranach served Luther as his main propagandist to speak for the new religion, built on solid, rational, foundations. The clarity of this new religion also conveniently meant that all aspects of life could be controlled by the Church. Of course, a faith that was so preoccupied with absence (the restriction of representation for example) also lent itself quite perfectly to the abstractions of contemporary economics. We see then that aesthetic principles and designs, even colour choice,

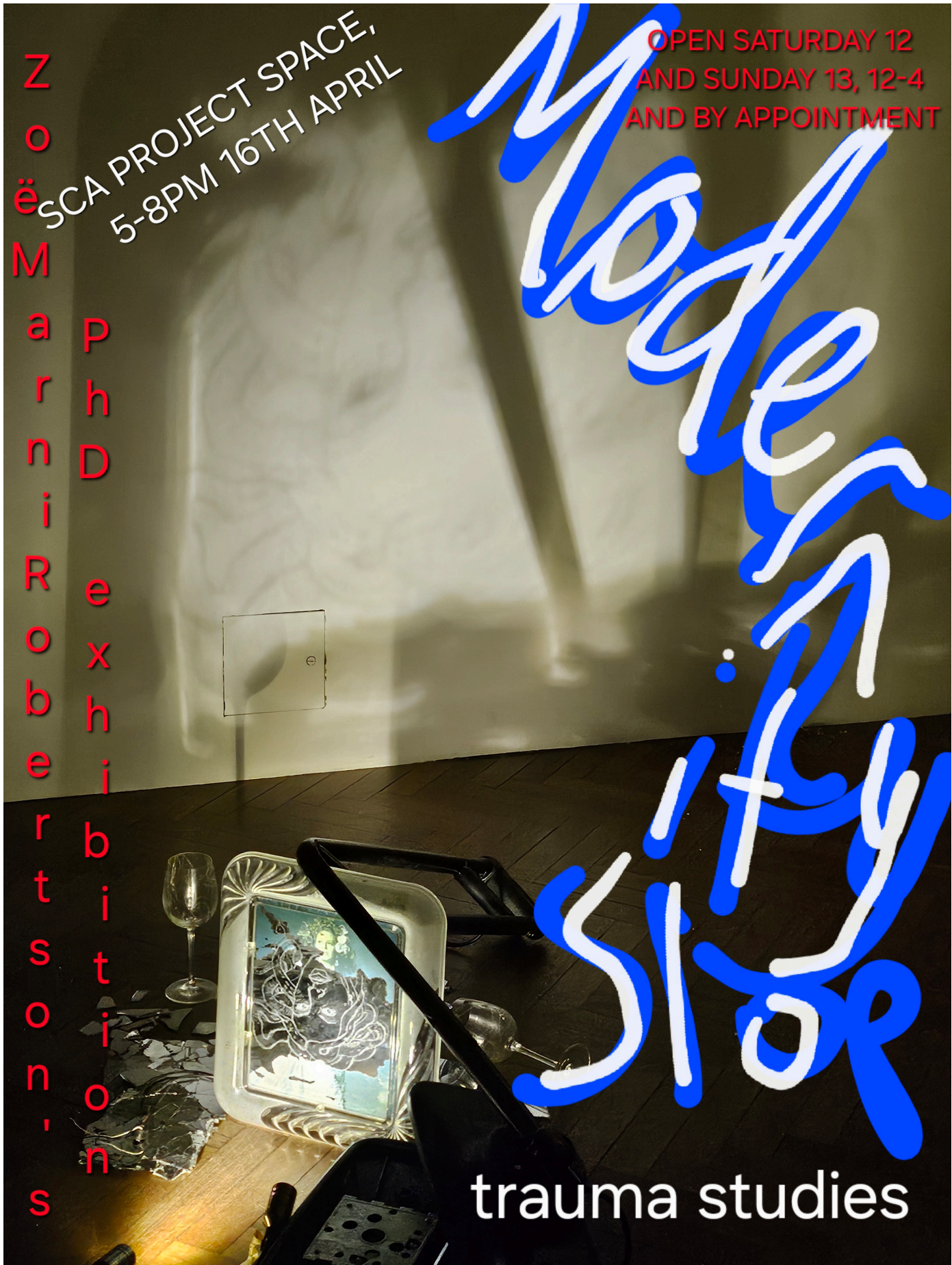
have always provided an armature for ideology. Our changing relationship with mathematics, and accounts, and particularly the “number” zero in this instance, has mirrored the advance of inequality within the system. One can still only marvel at the paradox that the more zeros, or “nothings”, appended to a number, the more value it invokes.

In Chapter 4, commencing again with a painted ekphrasis of my own, Luther is portrayed alongside contemporary artist and media theorist Joshua Citarella. The abundance of meat in this image references the promotion of ideology via the visage of a figurehead: on the one hand, Luther’s earthbound interpretation of the Spirit, and on the other, Citarella’s protein-enhanced self-performance as the ideal alt-right male. The links between applications of new media, from the printing press (Luther) to the internet (Citarella), have repeatedly been proven popular in the service of propaganda art, from the religious pamphlets of the Reformation to the memes of today.

The penultimate Chapter focused on the contemporary desire for a new kind of secular monarch, with billionaire Peter Thiel portrayed alongside King Louis XIV of France in the painting that opens this chapter. The historical drift decisively away from the at least stated, democratic and socialist underpinnings of aspects of Western society of the mid-20th Century has become evident in increasing contemporary revisionism. With regards the history of Western art, and as a telling example, Vermeer, forgotten for centuries, is recast as “a Master”. This time however it is expressly without reference to his humble subject matter, the common people, the very reason for his original elevation.

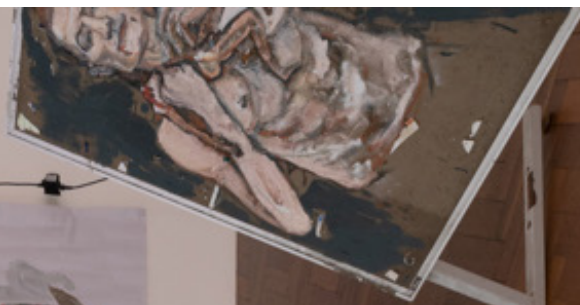
The final Chapter examined the relationship between art and the market through the two movements most arguably most expressive of the inflation of sheer market value, the YBAs of Great Britain, emerging after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the “Dutch Golden Age”, inseparable from Dutch colonialism and the attendant rise of secular art brought about by Calvinist theology. The paintings of the 17th Century Dutch Republic remain excellent examples of the ends of Northern “realism”. At the same time though, they increasingly functioned as commodities facilitating the irrepressible expansion of the bourgeoisie. In our time, YBAs artists embraced and leveraged unignorable economic disparities as means of proving their “genius”.

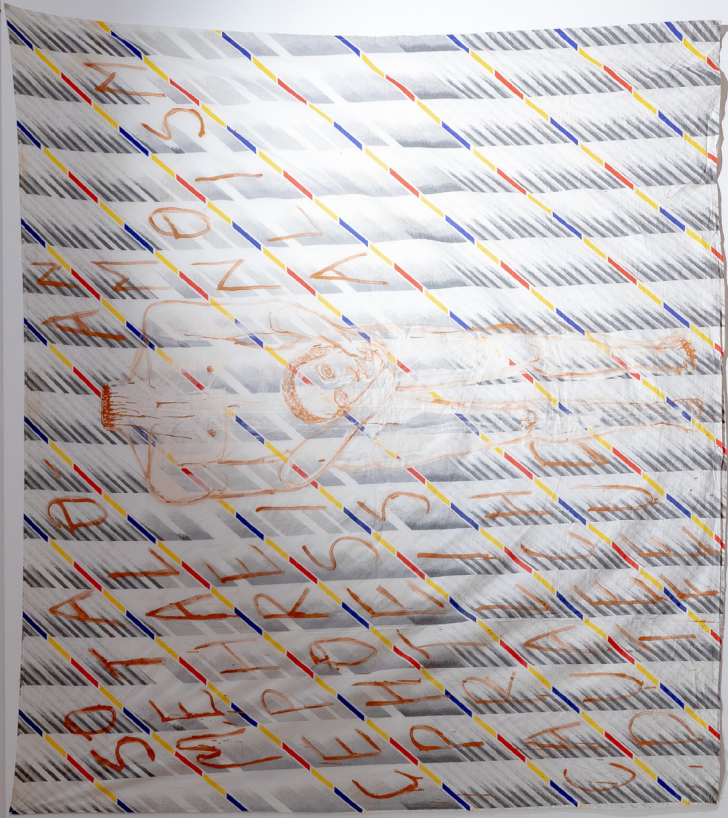
The paintings I have produced in relation to this thesis as ekphrases bring together many disparate references in such a way that makes the task of writing about them hypothetically inexhaustible. The work, and the equally, and intentionally, digressive writing, is aimed at highlighting an exquisite incapacity, the critical reluctance to reduce art only to “itself”. This also an attempt to elude assigning art arbitrary, ahistorical, values. The overall political and artistic agenda of this combined work is resistance to its own limited boundaries.



Zoë Marni Robertson, Poster for “Modernity Slop Trauma Studies)” 2024 PhD exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Project Space.

Following pages, Zoë Marni Robertson, Installation views, “Modernity Slop Trauma Studies)” 2024 PhD exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts Project Space. All photos: Jessica Maurer



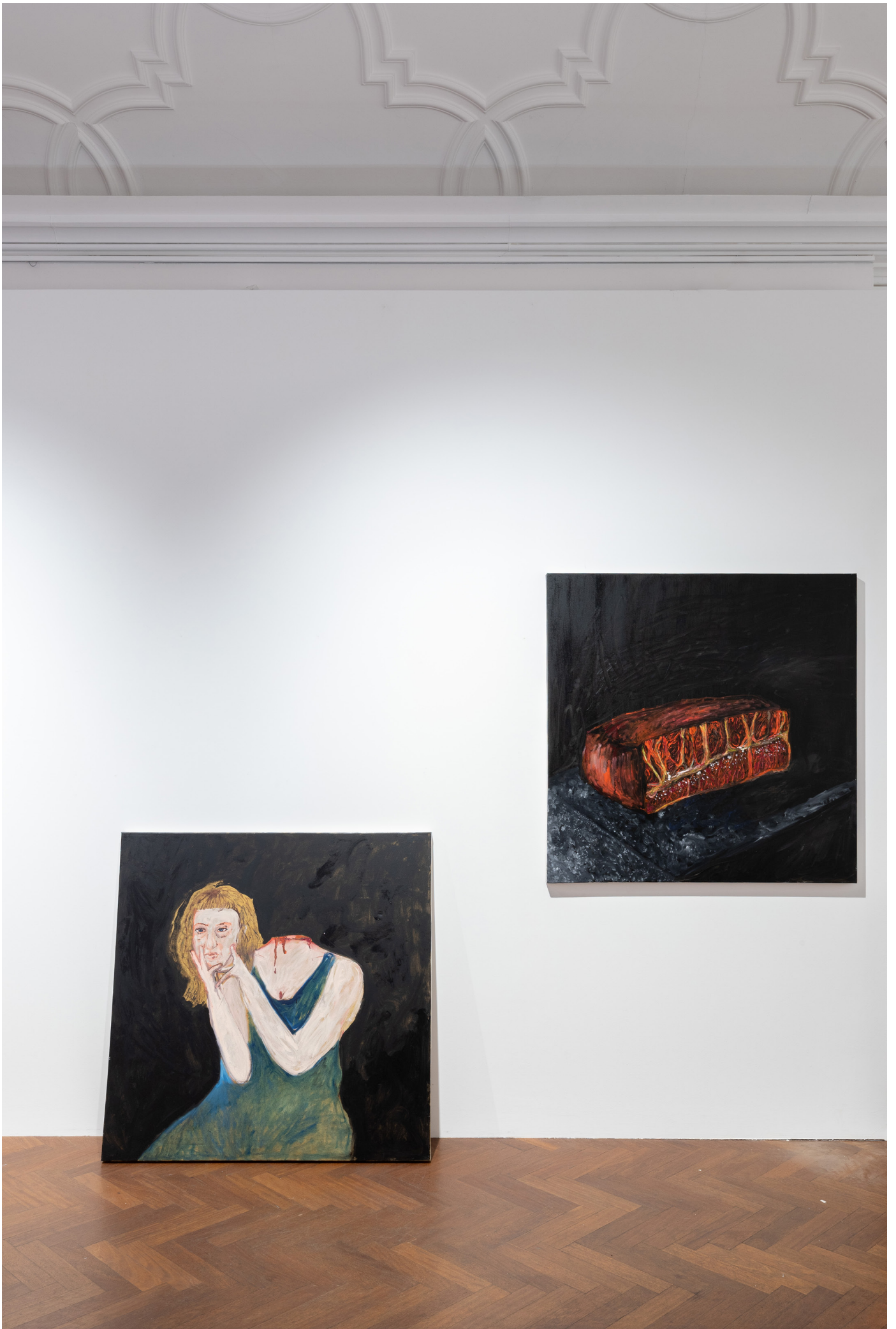




LUNGER
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AGGRESSORS
TERTIARY CLASS



















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