

*Fuck Seth Price*

Also by Seth Price

*Dispersion*, 2002

*Poems*, 2003

*How to Disappear in America*, 2008

# FUCK SETH PRICE

*A Novel*

Leopard, New York

*Fuck Seth Price*  
A novel by Seth Price

Copyright © 2015 by Seth Price

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Designed by Joseph Logan and Seth Price  
with the assistance of Rachel Hudson

Typeset in Caslon

Printed in the U.S.  
Shapco, Minneapolis  
Second Printing 2016

ISBN-13: 978-0-9815468-3-4

Published by Leopard  
167 Bowery, 4<sup>th</sup> floor, New York, NY 10002  
[www.theleopardpress.com](http://www.theleopardpress.com)







HE DRIFTED THROUGH a thick and obscure world, observant but incapable of action. It took him a while to understand that he wasn't dreaming, but moving through the real world and actual life, only it was no longer his life, because his body and all of its doings were no longer under his control. He found himself carrying out strange and horrible acts: murder and abduction, most disturbingly, but also other furtive activities that he couldn't make sense of. Through all of this he was able only to watch, resigned to imprisonment in his physical machinery, his mind turning over slowly like an idle hard disk. This certainly afforded him plenty of time to figure out exactly where things had gone wrong, and he came to blame his obsession with "keeping up"—with technology, with the young, with the

culture—a pursuit that had replaced even artistic production as his chief occupation, filling the vacuum that had opened up when he had more or less stopped making art.

It was easy to locate the moment of inspiration that had rejuvenated his painting career, making him rich but ultimately leading him to reject contemporary art. One day in the early 2000s, he'd been sitting in a new Italian restaurant, considering his supper. For decades now, he remarked to himself as he regarded a bowl of grated pecorino, Americans had possessed a sure idea of what Italian food was: what it tasted like, what it looked like, what it *meant*. For his parents' generation, and even within his own childhood, Italian food meant Italian-American food, an immigrant form, once alien but now ubiquitous, a way of putting dinner on the table, hardly a cuisine. Then the '80s happened, and everyone discovered real Italian food, food from Italy, and defiantly not Italian-American food, which consequently entered a kind of limbo. Spaghetti and meatballs: yes, everyone still liked it and cooked it, it still had its place, but that place was not a trendy restaurant.

Recently, however, which is to say in the early 2000s, shortly before he'd had his revelation, some



notable chef had realized that spaghetti and meatballs was what people had wanted all along, and why shouldn't they have it? This chef understood that you could give diners what they wanted without abandoning culinary invention and the associated high prices. What you did was trundle out lowbrow recipes and thematize them, burnish-ing them for a new audience too young to remember why the recipes had been discarded in the first place. To use a mid-'90s term, the old recipes were upcycled. Originally this had implied the redemption of waste material through canny adaptation and was widely associated with environmentalism and Third World do-gooderism; no one had previously thought to apply the notion to the world of conceptual food service.

It was a runaway success. Customers were excited and relieved to plunge into the frisson of the old/new, and restaurants all over the city, and then internationally, adopted the formula. Soon came high-end tweakings of meat loaf, mac and cheese, donuts, PB&J sandwiches, chicken wings, and even Twinkies: all cherished comfort foods that no one had previously thought to rework as pricey life-style fare. It must have been the times, he mused,

because something similar had happened in the movie industry, which overwhelmingly pursued remakes of best-forgotten films, the crappier the better. We live in an era of expensive fetish food, he thought, but it's also an era in which poor, uneducated parents name their babies DeJohn because it sounds pungent yet sophisticated, unaware that these associations originated in a series of '80s television commercials for a style of mustard. But all this stuff—high and low, classic and contemporary, good and bad—was muddled and slippery, and everyone was equally clueless. When Grey Poupon had actually rolled out a line called DeJawn's no one wanted it, not because it was marketed as "Da Street Mustard," but because it was widely considered too '80s.

As he sat there devouring his *bucatini con le polpette*, he somehow made an associative leap and found himself wondering whether abstract painting wasn't due for a spaghetti-and-meatballs recuperation. After all, it had enjoyed a history similar to that of Italian-American cuisine. Both had appeared early in the twentieth century and were widely received with suspicion and derision (all that garlic!); both enjoyed a midcentury, early-adopter hipster appeal

that inevitably subsided, though not before preparing the ground for a broader mass appeal, which precipitated a fall from grace in the perception of elites, who came to see these phenomena as boring and outmoded. Artists continued to make abstract painting in large numbers, more than ever before, but, as with cooks of spaghetti and meatballs, they were amateur or otherwise removed from the real conversation, not cutting-edge professionals in sophisticated contexts.

Someone, he realized, needed to come along and devise a painterly abstraction that embodied cultural sophistication and “nowness.” It had to look classically tasteful and refer to well-known historical byways, but it also had to be undergirded by utter contemporaneity, either of sensibility or of production method. Upcycling was evolving as an idea and was perhaps itself being upcycled: in the early '90s it had promised to help the developing world redeem its waste, at the turn of the century it grew to encompass the food consumption of a smaller set of First Worlders with extra time and money, and now it would take on an even more rarefied realm of cultural production available to only the wealthy few: fine art. But he knew this was the

way of all culture, all trends: a continuous flow from top to bottom and back again, as in a trick fountain.

He went directly home after dinner and drew up a list of working methods and materials, which he would dutifully follow in the months to come. His new painting would be abstract, he decided; there was a broader audience for that since it matched all decors and lacked uncomfortable associations with real people, events, and political situations. Abstraction in and of itself was uninteresting, of course; the all-important twist here, the redeeming feature, would be the way in which this work was generated, which would expand in importance, endowing the abstraction with meaning. Here there was quite a bit of latitude. Most obviously the painting could be based on chance, which obliterated traditional notions of composition and looked kind of punk: accidental stains on canvas, for example; maybe the oil-pan drippings of a Foxconn machine as it produced iPhones. But then he wondered, did machines drip anymore? Did anything run on oil? Wasn't everything becoming electric? Maybe this avenue was far-fetched. Perhaps the work might play with the medium's material conventions, a "painting" that was in fact composed

of vacuum-formed polystyrene: stretcher bars, canvas, markings, and all. Or it might be apparently abstract but actually full of charged referents that became clear only when you inspected the list of materials, e.g., “Coca-Cola spills on Nigerian mud cloth.” It might also be computer-generated, e.g., it might consist of Photoshop manipulations printed out on canvas. Or you could hit all four possibilities at once: “Foxconn worker’s accidental Coke spills on Nigerian mud cloth, scanned and randomly manipulated in Photoshop, printed on Belgian linen stretched over a vacuum-formed frame.”

In truth, the production method hardly mattered, because whichever he chose, the results would look more or less the same: tepid compositions, hesitant and minimal in appearance, kind of pretty and kind of whatever, loaded with backstory. The main thing to remember, both in executing this work and in appreciating it on the wall, was to be *knowing*, just like the chefs who composed fancy renditions of red-sauce dishes, and the diners who paid top dollar, and the critics who wrote breezy acknowledgments.

The problem this solved was the persistent issue of taste in painting. In no arena of art-making

did taste intrude so assertively and persistently as it did within the practice of painting. Unlike with installation art or conceptual art, where it was difficult to discern or comfortably judge the merits of a work without anxiety, with painting the problem of taste was always right on the surface, in the frame, so to speak. It was okay to point at a painting and assert “That’s good” or “That’s bad” without feeling like a complete idiot. You couldn’t pull that off as easily when faced with a scrappy installation or a conceptual work composed of puns and feints. The problem was, while these artworks got to hover in the grace of doubt and inscrutability, there were far too many observers who were absolutely certain about their judgments as to what constituted good and bad painting, and the history of painting was therefore racked by cyclical surges of interest one way or another, now veering toward “bad” painting that indulged in tastelessness by way of excess, vulgarity, or prurience, now tacking back toward a more graphic, minimal style. Because fashions changed rapidly, a single painting might in twenty years traverse the spectrum of perceived value and then whip back again, and this variability made everyone nervous.

This new style he'd hit on, however, managed to finesse the taste problem by recourse to the old philosophical trick of playing *being* against *seeming*. In preparing the work, any number of methods or styles would do, so long as the result looked "cool," ensuring that the painting would seem classic and minimal while emanating a vague awareness of rich historical struggle. To an observer it would *seem* tasteful, but in its apparent lack of concern for traditional skill or labor, its arguably cynical irreverence toward sincerity or depth, its dismissal of history, and its punk attitude, it would *be* tasteless.

*Or perhaps it was the other way around?* One couldn't really say, or rather one could, but only with a nagging feeling of insecurity. This instability was catnip to critics and journalists, and they wrote a lot about this new painting, bickering and bemoaning and celebrating. Collectors were thankful for those gusts of language in their sails as they blew through the auctions. Young artists and students were relieved to get back to doing what they'd secretly wanted to do all along, under the powerful sign of a new contemporaneity. In short, the entire art system latched on to this revived style, much as

restaurantgoers had fallen for the reenchantment of chicken wings.

The style that gradually developed could be called *post-problem art*. It bore a clear if unacknowledged debt to the wonderful ad slogans of the period, like Staples' "That Was Easy" and Amazon's "... And You're Done." *Done!* An amazing word. Go ahead, have done with all the anguished historical debates over meaning and criticality and politics and taste. In a way, this development recapitulated some of Francis Fukayama's arguments in his essay "The End of History?," which suggested that the postwar phenomenon of Western liberal democracy and the capitalist market system had established a kind of plateau, from which one could survey the bloody slopes below. It certainly was true that the system Fukayama described was responsible for the floods of cash that coursed through the art system in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, a surge that raised all boats high above the oceanic currents of *issues*. For better or for worse, everyone was in agreement that the market was the only indicator that mattered now. This climate, in which artworks would certainly sell, and the fact of selling was sufficient verification of their quality, made it officially



okay simply to “like” a painting. It was no longer necessary to deem a piece interesting, provocative, weird, or complex, and it was almost incomprehensible to hate something because you liked it, or like it because it unsettled you, or any of the other ambivalent and twisted ways that people wrestled with the intersection of feelings and aesthetics. You almost didn’t need words anymore: it was enough to say, “That painting is *awesome*,” just as you’d say, “This spaghetti is *awesome*.” Alternately you could use one of the other all-purpose terms of the era, like “nice,” “crazy,” “perfect,” and “insane.” This was a radical development, forgoing any more complicated relationship with art; it was a tremendous ironing-out process. Before you knew it, you’d spy a Malevich and declare, “That guy’s a total badass.” Or was it Marinetti who was the badass?

On the other hand, wasn’t the goal of art not to sharpen your critical knives but to be a *fan*, to unquestioningly follow your unplumbed desires and inclinations, even if they tended toward things that weren’t unambiguously cool or fun, and in this process begin to untangle yourself, to learn from your relationship with art all about experience and history and emotion?

He later realized, once he was showing his new work and making good money, that the particular genius of a *digitally* generated abstract artwork—and by this time he was applying his methods to sculpture as well as painting—lay not only in leveling aesthetic taste but also in managing to be both abstract and representational, thus neatly resolving another long-standing problem. Such a work was evidently abstract, since it portrayed nothing but an arrangement of computery markings or 3-D-printed excrescences, but at the same time it could be seen as representational: it represented only itself; *it represented the digital process of abstraction*. This was a direct, materialist portrayal of our historical moment, when the alien productions of computers and their apparent meaninglessness threatened to redefine all traditional human values, including expression itself. If you said this work was *merely* abstract, weren't you by extension implying something similar about every other item or lifestyle concocted by digital means? By playing with these questions, his new work was capable of reconciling two opposed art-historical alternatives and synthesizing them into some weird, new, Janus-faced form that was capable of looking both backward and forward.

These new artworks aroused accusations of cynicism, and he admitted that he was inviting that conversation. But what was cynicism? He defined cynicism as proceeding in a way that you knew to be harmful or morally bankrupt, for reasons of greed or cowardice. This definition handily described the activity of most politicians, bureaucrats, and CEOs. The question was, what if you found such compromised behavior complex and compelling? What if you believed that exploring the world of perceived or actual cynicism was a powerful way to understand our contemporary moment? What if you *believed in not believing*? Executives or world leaders entertaining this question would rightly be classified as sociopaths, but in the world of art these questions were okay, because suffering wasn't directly involved and any apparent cynicism was likely to be banal and venal, i.e., cashing in by provoking your audience with facile or puerile gestures. He didn't feel that his work belonged in this category. If his paintings were provocative, it was because they drew out acute and omnipresent cultural toxins: anxieties about cynicism and selling out, feelings that had everything to do with how fucked-up it was to live under neoliberal free-market capitalism. He found

this exhilarating; he *believed* in it. And this tangle of contradictions was the greatest thing about art: it always meant the opposite of what you thought it meant, or wanted it to mean. Abstract versus representational, old versus new, pure versus corrupt, tasteful versus tasteless: all artistic values and categories were inherently unstable and might suddenly swap places.

Recalling his breakthrough into digital art-making a decade earlier, he suspected that the moment he'd grasped the fact that digital art's genius was to reconcile all opposites was the start of his disenchantment with contemporary art, and with the digital more generally, which was a condition predicated on reconciliation, leveling, and synthesis. Representational painting was just as banal and outmoded as its old foe abstraction, so why was it interesting to gesture at both of them at once? Who gave a shit? From the point of view of the machine he'd set in motion, all these oppositions of taste and style were merely marketing factors to be co-opted, the way Whole Foods might absorb a pair of rival local grocers only to preserve them as themed deli counters so as to snare all the old clientele. Either/or was irrelevant, save as a gimmick to

capture market share. It was a deep irony that the mechanisms of digital culture were built on a binary fundament even as that culture sought to eradicate all opposition, contradiction, and friction on an ontological level, steadily reducing human variety to a kind of affirmative mush.

It was not a coincidence that his disenchantment with visual art occurred right around the time when making simplistic, often digitally formulated abstract paintings became suddenly passé, as was discussing them, critiquing them, even satirizing them. These paintings amounted to societal self-portraiture, and an age grows tired of its own face. Casting about for something to do, he found himself newly interested in writing, which, in comparison to art, offered delightfully fresh challenges. He recognized the peculiarity of this step: advanced painting since the Impressionists had jettisoned the aim of re-creating a recognizable, narrativized human world and had plunged into abstraction, whereas writing had remained in thrall to narrative and human psychology. Yes, there had been a modernist rupture in literature, and the achievements of Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett had been followed by generations of worthies, but the majority of serious

literary fiction, and all mass product, went right on pursuing the realistic concerns of “adult literature,” in distinction to the serious art world, where there was really no going back to representational realism. As MoMA’s founding doctrine put it: “Modernism is the art that is essentially abstract.” The field of contemporary art was activated by cataclysm and relentless progress, while contemporary literature remained relatively staid. This was because it was a mass form, he reasoned: Who follows contemporary painting? The few. Who reads contemporary books? Everyone.

At this moment, however, he believed writing culture to be undergoing a tectonic shift and finally detaching itself from traditional narrative. No doubt this development was late in coming, trailing by a century visual art’s own decisive mutations, but then again, for all that radical change, where was art now? Wallowing in hush money, patting itself on the back for having finally solved the evolutionary problem of how to be simultaneously good and bad, abstract and representational, popular and cutting edge, with the result that nothing was at stake but auction prices. Even much of the politically engaged work that positioned itself

in opposition to “market art” was obsessed with finance, aiming its critical guns at Bitcoin, bank logos, credit-default swaps, and the mythical 1 percent. Ultimately, this neurotic relationship to the market was an impoverishment.

Writing, on the other hand, which had little connection to money and power, was only broadening its already considerable mass appeal, thanks to the proliferation of texting, tweeting, blogging, and so on, even as those same forces were emancipating writing from its long-standing narrative conventions. In fact, it was less apposite to say “Who reads? Everyone” than “Who writes? Everyone.” Maybe this explained why writing was becoming at the same time more popular and more abstract. In short, writing was becoming just plain *weirder*.

In this situation, and in distinction to the problems of visual art, *everything* was at stake: “the Novel,” of course, but also “the field of literature,” “the book business,” “the future of the word,” and communication itself. And no one knew what it meant. You could feel the charge of that anxious energy, it was the motor thrumming behind many recent novels and columns and articles and blog posts. He imagined this to be a historical echo of the

introduction of film, with all of that medium's looming ramifications for the image, and how odd that this contemporary upset concerned words!

He himself was not a writer, by any stretch. He'd tried it years ago, had even enjoyed success with some oddball critical essays that circulated in art-world contexts, but ultimately he'd dropped it. The problem with the art world was that you were *expected* to write uneven, eccentric, unresolved texts; it was like being a grad student in an "Experimental Writing" workshop. While many in the art world were wonderfully omnivorous, broad-minded readers, few were any good at writing, including most of the critics and curators, so it was easy to stand out. Most people didn't even bother with critiques of art-world writing, and for good reason: if people criticized you for being lazy or obscurantist, you could assert that you were being "artistic," that what you'd intended was less lucid rhetoric, more Delphic poesy. Writing these texts was like making films where everything was a dream sequence, and therefore immune to charges of illogic and sloppiness. At the same time, of course, nothing was at stake.

In the past couple of years, he'd started following a number of blogs, particularly those written



by kids, “digital natives” whose brains were apparently wired differently. It had started as a meandering habit, a time waster, and had developed into something much more serious, in part because he’d stumbled on the fantastical and disturbing narrative of one boy, a preteen, if he was to be believed, who seemed to have gotten himself involved in something much larger than himself, or the auctions, or the credit crisis, or aesthetic taste, or art, or anything that anyone could have imagined.



HE FOUND HIMSELF idly watching as he snuck into an apartment building through a propped service door, strangled a porter hauling garbage bags through a trash room, and made his way up the emergency stairs to the twelfth floor. As his body went through these motions, prescriptions that he now knew were impossible to countermand, his mind cast itself in wide, slow circles, alert and energetic.

American culture, he mused, rested on a kind of fundamental folklore, which had something to do with infinite mutability and the interchangeability of all things. This manifested in some obvious ways that supported the ideological framework of a free-market democracy, e.g., that a “virgin” territory could be hewn and shaped into a mighty nation through work and discipline; that the citizens of that nation were equal, none better than any other; and that a poor man here might transform himself into a wealthy man. It was apparent also in less obvious ways, for instance in a comic

strip about a man who became a spider, which itself became a TV show, and thence a movie, from which someone made a play and a musical, plus lunch boxes, dolls, and video games; or the fact that Joe Schmoe could become a pop star, and then an actor, and then an entrepreneur with a line of clothes, perfume, or furniture.

But surely art was different? He was walking down the hall toward the door at its end, drawing from his pocket something small and hard, a key perhaps, though his eyes wouldn't oblige him by confirming this. Art was dependent on being *one thing*, he thought, or hoped. An artwork was singular and self-sufficient. It couldn't become something else; it wasn't in transit. As he rang the doorbell, though, he realized that this wasn't quite right. Artworks existed in a complicated web of interdependent relationships, and there were numerous contingent factors, even outside of content or style. Anyone could paint a monochrome, for example, regardless of cultural background. Most healthy and capable humans could theoretically cover a canvas with paint of a single color, say, red. Were everyone who was alive to do so, he thought, those billions of paintings would look similar if not identical.

However, obvious and easy as it might be, the number of people who had actually painted monochromatic canvases was tiny, and smaller still was the subset of artists who did it and actually pulled it off, who made it work within their oeuvres, who walked away having achieved something that people would value and cherish. And there was no way of controlling this: you had to rely on the era in which you did it, the place you showed it, what you'd done just before and what you did after; and then there were all the unknowables, the uncaring forces that take a heralded, "important" painting and render it obsolete within decades. How many abstract painters were there in 1959? Thousands in New York alone, he was sure, and very good ones, with promising futures, painters the likes of whom had starred in Castelli's first-ever New York exhibition. And just a few years later Pop arrived and swept nearly all of them from the table.

There was a shuffling sound on the other side of the door, and his arm came up with a small device that appeared to be some sort of flashlight. He clicked a trigger, and an acid-green beam flooded the peephole. There was an audible commotion, and he turned on his heel and headed toward the

elevator, moving past a double row of doors leading into homes.

When you start out as a young artist, he thought, it's all about open doors. You have nothing, no one knows your name, no one wants you. As your career picks up steam, every new event is a miracle: your first group show, and then your first solo, your first mention in a magazine, your first sale, your first good review, your first bad review, your first show in Europe, your first show at an institution, your first high-profile biennial exhibition, your first cover story. It's a tremendous personal high, all these avenues opening, and moreover it's accompanied by public fanfare, because art-world people get swoony and excited about this early door-opening phase; they act like parents fussing over the parade of birthdays and bar mitzvahs and commencements and first apartments. For many this is simply the blind pursuit of the new, and for some it represents craven calculation. On the other hand, good careers usually begin with a wildly fecund period—brief, just five years or so—during which all the major themes and perversions are proposed in concentrated form, and people find it genuinely exciting to witness new concepts being willed into existence.

All this dies down. You work steadily for a while, say, ten years, and you consider yourself lucky, because you have a career and you show your work, and sometimes you make more money or less money, and people might like your current work more or less than your last efforts, but the great thing is that all the doors continue to stand open, and things are functioning. You are now a part of the machine.

Gradually, however, you become aware of encroaching problems. It's hard to voice these concerns, since you don't want to be an ungrateful ass, but they eat away at you. It's not because people no longer swoon over you, although becoming a part of the scenery hurts. More worrisome is that once all of the doors have been opened, the only thing they can do is close: the collectors and curators lose interest, the quality of your work declines, or you simply run out of ideas. However, even this is not the most difficult thing. The biggest problem is that when the doors are open and you're a part of the machine, you realize *This is it, there's nothing else*.

People generally like to feel that they're working "toward something," and those in a more traditional career enjoy a sense of progress as they work toward a higher place in the hierarchy, more power,

a larger salary, more free time, and better benefits, or maybe they want to go back to school for additional tools and licenses, or they might switch careers altogether. By contrast, no good artist “works toward” a higher salary, or wants to become “the boss.” The goal is simply to make the best work you can for as long as you can. You hope to be an artist for life, and you work only for yourself, and while your world is riddled with power and hierarchy, your role in that structure is not entirely clear. So now you ask yourself, Am I supposed to just be a part of this system that generates taste and money, and go on making things until I die? What are the stakes now in art-making, which once felt like life or death and now has become just a job, albeit a fantastic one? In short, once you’re capable of supporting yourself through sales of your work via a stable of galleries, and you exhibit at the museum level, you have to acknowledge that things won’t change much structurally, and that you must turn inward if you want further meaning or guidance. From now on, any developments will come only from the work itself, and the confusing freedom of figuring out how to manage this subtle mechanism. You come to understand that all those doors opening were just little

throat-clearings that preceded what you really must say; that all the remaining doors to open are *within the artwork itself*.

That was just his view, of course, and he realized that a lot of other artists had different ideas. For many, the doors they wished to open were linked exclusively to money and power, and art was a means to do that.

Why did people make art? The implications of this question were so sprawling as to be stifling. Most artists didn't know or understand their own motivations, even avoiding self-scrutiny for fear of scaring off inspiration. Their desires and intentions were easier to divine from outside, and in his experience it was when artists became successful that their motivations began to emerge, as if picked out in relief by the raking light of a late-afternoon sun. It was precisely when they found themselves lucky enough to stretch out, when they were able to make a living off their work alone, when they were firmly embedded in the machine, that you could suddenly perceive what they'd been after all along. He concluded that there were four main motivations that emerged as artists progressed in their careers.



### 1. *Freedom*

Some people find their way into art because art is essentially about freedom, the ability to do what you want when you want, to work for yourself and set the terms, to ask the questions and seek the answers, to explore whatever challenges your mind can come up with; above all, not to be beholden. He knew it wasn't as simple as that: he understood that everyone was tied down in certain ways, that a successful artist existed not in a vacuum but in a web of relationships and duties, not least the duty to manage a small business, so that, at minimum, you could continue making art. Nevertheless, the main point remained: in distinction to most areas of society, we've established art as an arena with no rules, or perhaps with token rules that you're rewarded for breaking. He placed Marcel Duchamp in this first category.

### 2. *Craft*

Some people were into art mostly because they liked to make things, and explicitly wanted to craft things with their hands (or over the telephone, or on the internet, or by means of all the other extended hands), the more things the better.

Unlike conceptual art and “post-studio” art, this sort of work fulfilled the popular understanding of why one might become an artist: to make cool stuff. The craft motivation might manifest in any type of art practice—was indeed the reason most people got into art in the first place, guided by teachers singing the praises of vine charcoal, the aroma of turps, and the joy of “creativity,” whereas for him it was no less important to hate art and wish to destroy it—but it reached its fullest expression in well-funded and successful artists, usually male, with big studios and lots of toys, guys who might explore ceramics one day, supervise a screenprint the next, then make a run of photocopied zines or cast something in bronze. They *couldn't stop*; they were filled with a manic, gleeful energy that needed to be directed into one project or another. This kind of work needed assistants, machines, warehouses, and structures, and their dealers were happy to assist with the systems and cart off the overflow. These artists weren't in it primarily for the money, but people often assumed they were, because they'd hit the sweet spot of being compulsively prolific, artistically legible to a broad public, and financially successful. He recognized joy in

this working method, and when he saw it in other artists he was envious. The big issue was quality control, because the work emerged from a process that was tremendously fun but inherently unrigorous. If you ran this kind of shop you had to be keenly intuitive and possess a harsh editorial eye, or you'd get carried away by sheer excitement and end up producing more chaff than wheat. Critics didn't necessarily go for this type of work, and history tended to take it lightly, although there were exceptions, like, say, Rauschenberg.

### 3. *Money*

Still others liked the money in art, and this was for them a kind of freedom. Obviously there were artists who cynically produced whatever, who "just wanted to make money," but that wasn't what he was thinking about, he was thinking about artists who actually got off on the art world's bizarre relationship to finance. Art was a commodity like no other, after all. An artwork was unbounded by utility or objective valuation, and therefore its worth was buoyed by desire and greed, and those qualities were by nature limitless. For many artists it was exhilarating just to be a part of this confusing and unregulated field.

They came to resemble the collectors they hung out with at dinners and openings, where together they sounded like professional gamblers comparing tactics and hunches, and if they all got rich off this wild ride, so much the better. Or sometimes, after working for a decade or so and doing fine, artists might realize that their art wasn't likely to rewrite history, and they'd relax a bit, cease to pursue total freedom within the work, and dedicate themselves to the game of money, which flowed freely and independent of artistic quality, and often in inverse correlation to it, happily for them. Here, too, there were exceptions, notably Andy Warhol, who was fascinated by the financial side of the art world but continued making interesting work, for the most part.

#### 4. *Scene*

Then there were people who recognized that the art world was a great party, one that possessed the intellectual heft of the academy, the glamour of the fashion world, and the speculative crackle of Wall Street, all with the apparently open-door policy of a free concert. People from all walks of life found their way to this party, and there was a place for them because the art world demanded no accreditation,

business was largely unregulated, and the beguiling myth that art was about breaking rules translated into a climate tolerant of bullshit, whether intellectual, fashion, or financial. He pictured the art world as a gas giant: at the center was a small core of people who made, sold, and thought about art, and they were surrounded by a vast nimbus of spin-offs, pop-ups, tie-ins, limited editions, soirées, junkets, endorsements, galas, trade rags, and random hustles. The upper atmosphere was streaming with lost, drifting people, confused but excited: suck-ups, burnouts, wannabes, hangers-on, freelance losers. And then he stopped himself, suddenly suspecting that the center/periphery model was all wrong, that it was the supposed “core people” who had no importance or relevance. It was exactly this confusion and uncertainty that were so heady—might it be possible that socializing and scene-making were legitimate and even shrewd artistic activities?—and many artists sought to extend the early, door-opening phase of their career by plunging into buzz and scene. You could tend the embers of a career for decades, keeping the flame just high enough, not making much good art but having a tremendous amount of fun, earning yourself a reputation

as a “downtown figure” or “bad boy,” and getting wealthy in the process.

There was probably a fifth reason for making art lurking in the shadows, which was the desperate, barely acknowledged need to forestall death, but this went equally for all people and was a reason why humans had children, or built buildings, or collected stamps, or did anything at all, and therefore this motivation was everything and nothing, and not worth thinking about, or too painful to think about.

You might assume a successful artist would ideally exercise all four enthusiasms or motivations, and it sometimes happened, and those artists were legendary, Picasso being the prime example. The trickiest one to maintain in this case, however, was factor 1, freedom. In order to get rich, enjoy a social life, and make as much stuff as you wanted, you almost certainly had to forget about freedom. If you took as an example those boys with toys who reveled in the process of making objects, it was clear that they’d signed away a lot of freedoms. They kept expanding their businesses, and this allowed them to make bigger artworks and more of them, and thus to earn even more money and get more

famous, and fame and money attracted scenes and parties, and everything therefore came funneling in at these guys—they themselves were gas giants with strong gravitational forces. But to do all this it was necessary to hire more people, and invest in real estate to house them, and then you reported to work, because you were responsible for a staff, their health care and travel expenses and birthday presents, i.e., you were a manager, and you were obligated to pay your respects to some collector who was throwing a party, and fly to an opening of someone's private museum that featured your work. You were in high society now, you attended benefits and sat on boards and talked biz on yachts, and whether you wore a tux or acted the dirty artist you were playing a role, and all this was exactly what he didn't want. For him, ultimate freedom would mean having just enough money not to have to think about money, and not to have to work all the time. That was still a significant amount of money, and he did need money, and enjoyed it, and also enjoyed making things and going to parties, but he was really in art for the freedom, *period*. Worrying about money and management was an unfreedom. In this he was unusual, because most artists embraced working

more and having less free time. They were no different from the majority of American workers, who in the early years of the postwar period were promised a future of increased leisure, but rejected it in favor of a chance to join the managerial class.

And why? Once again, belief in progress. He noticed that the car he was driving was suddenly slowing dramatically, as if by itself. He assumed it was his own foot depressing the brake pedal. The American idea of progress, simple enough that any grade schooler had already internalized it, was that things got better in direct relation to consumption. He knew that this wasn't just a matter of accumulation, it was that you acquired things in order to solve problems and progress within the parameters of your life. Once you'd passed the hurdles of schooling, first employment, marriage, and parenthood, further progress was measured by means of consumption. This didn't have to mean a sports car or a new face: it was entirely possible to scorn midlife clichés in favor of something supposedly more sensible yet born of the same determination to *make things better*, for instance, a high-end mattress. Far from being conspicuous and crisis-driven, such a purchase could be rationalized as middle-class common



sense. This slow process of betterment was how you *opened doors for yourself within your life*: thanks to my deluxe mattress I sleep better, and that allows me to treat my family better, and I work better. Thanks to this mattress, I “am” better, it’s all very clear.

This phenomenon bore striking similarities to the way an artist progressed, where clearing the initial obstacles to emergence within a professional class also placed you in a state of emptiness, spurring a search for meaning through progress and door-opening and so forth, with one crucial difference: artists progressed by means not of consumption but of production. On the other hand, maybe this difference was of minor consequence, since both cases could be seen as linked components of a single process in which noisome currents of doubt were stanchd by the production and consumption of luxury goods, whether mattresses or sculptures of mattresses.

He looked around and observed that his car had stopped halfway down some sort of highway ramp, with low concrete structures all around and lines of cars slowly inching along. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that it was art’s particular relationship to production that made it

potentially radical. In contrast to other “creative” activities like, say, teaching or dance, art was a materially productive activity: artists aimed to add stuff to the world, and this aligned art-making with a host of supposedly noncreative activities, e.g., construction, farming, and garment manufacturing. But art was different because the production of art material was decoupled from economics: artists did not *primarily* seek to prosper, even if that might be a welcome outcome. Artists simply needed to make things, up to and including the sort of artwork that they didn’t otherwise admire or enjoy, and they often continued to make things even when it proved economically burdensome. This peculiar position—being a laborer who produced theoretically salable commodities but at the same time didn’t necessarily want to prosper from them—defied the logic of the free market, could even be called fundamentally antisocial. Artists were not rational economic actors. Nor were many other occupations, of course, but while many people willingly earned less money than they might otherwise in order to do something they deemed worthy, artists would do their thing for *no money at all*. The art-making impulse, in other words, fell outside

modern capitalist production, and this was why explaining you were an artist provoked bemusement and pity: “artist” made no economic sense as a profession. At the same time, however, the person who judged artists to be naïfs had only to consider the ludicrous amounts of money that some artists were actually making to be convinced of art’s position at the top of the speculative heap and to admire artists’ shrewdness in finding a way to leverage relatively minimal labor into outsize returns. This paradox, which juxtaposed the irrational motivations of art labor with the irrational rewards garnered by the art object, was the insane magnet lodged at the heart of the art world, warping the perceptions and sense of anyone who came near.

Once you got tangled up in how screwy and fascinating the art market was, he thought, you could hardly go on arguing for the radicality of art. As soon as a work entered the market it ceased to be art, was only another commodity, albeit one with the erratic and unpredictable behaviors of a subatomic particle. For clarity it helped to engage in a thought experiment and omit the art *object* from the equation, allowing you to focus solely on the process of art-*making*, which came into focus as the truly radical stage of

art. This was not only because it was economically irrational to begin with but also because those artists whose work did prove lucrative *still* placed some things above profit, namely time and space. Now, in principle, any professional might agree with this, because everyone claimed to want more time and space. After all, that was how you were supposed to enjoy your new car, your new face, your new mattress, and your new mattress-sculpture. In practice, however, taking more time and space for yourself meant a halt to growth, and therefore a pay cut. You could gauge how rare this actually was by considering those news stories that marveled at the hedge funder who left the fast track to pursue organic farming, or the fact that the politician who stepped down in order to “spend more time with his family” was universally understood to be taking the fall over some fuckup. But good artists really *did* value nothing more than their time and space, because these were necessary preconditions to producing more art. That’s why so many successful artists pulled up stakes and moved their studios to remote areas: Chris Ofili, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman; the list was long. This was true of not just the visual arts but all arts, as evidenced by the reclusive if not

outright misanthropic habits of Jean-Luc Godard, Bob Dylan, and Patricia Highsmith.

Once again, art had to be seen as a weird and nonsensical activity, despite its plum position in the contemporary economic order. It wasn't something attained by applying yourself, bringing your A game, and putting your shoulder to the wheel; it wasn't crunching numbers or taking meetings or filling orders. Yes, art was a business, and this was the way common sense dictated you should run a business, but treating art this way was likely to render your product less interesting and less valuable, as might prove to be the case with Damien Hirst. Art was more like a hothouse flower that might grow, but might not, and no one could say why. Sudden intuitive steps and genius lateral moves might come about only and precisely because you were bored and restless, fiddling in the studio, aimlessly wandering, cruising the shows, scanning the magazines, perusing the blogs. And all of this diddling required sufficient time and space.

This was ironic, because the goal of art had always been the abolition of time and space. Like religion, art was a pursuit of immateriality and the infinite, and the aim was transcendence. It was not

only a means of communication but a commitment to life and action, an expression of will, a defiance of the return of the same. Of course, the abolition of time and space was equally the goal of sex, and drugs, and rock 'n' roll, and violence: all the roped-off areas. But in the end only digital culture seemed to have a shot at achieving this goal.

He stepped from the car, entered a thicket of ornamental evergreens by the on-ramp, and wrapped his arms around a skinny boy standing there, brutally wresting him up and away. He banged the kid's head on the edge of the car roof until the small body went pliantly limp and could be bundled inside.

As he sped away he considered what he'd just done. The lowest forms of labor must surely involve the manipulation of inert physical material, he thought, for example ditch digging or other purely physical activities: pushing a cart, loading a truck, operating a machine tool. You could safely say that the act of bodily transporting material from one place to another was the lowest form of labor: the crudest, the hardest, the worst paid. You could also handily invert the proposition: virtually transporting invisible things from one non-place to another was the sweetest, the lightest, and the

best-paid labor. This was manifestly true, at least if you judged activities like derivatives trading to be high and sweet, as many people did. The highest form of labor, then, was all about the immaterial. This distinction seemed iron-clad, because the lowest of laborers would never have the opportunity to manipulate invisible social symbols, and the highest of laborers would exempt themselves from most forms of material work, including ditch digging, naturally, but also more mundane labors such as the drearier aspects of rearing their own children.

When you sought to place art-making within this scheme, however, you were confronted with a problem. Art-making was as much about physical labor as it was about wielding abstract symbols and codes. Art was a context within which you could pursue both ditch digging *and* symbol management, and doubtless somewhere there was an artist hard at work doing just that, since much contemporary art was explicitly concerned with reconciling the two realms. The artist who dug ditches was inevitably doing so in order to *demonstrate* something; the material labor was presented as itself, as human labor, but simultaneously as art, and thus a model for some expression beyond sheer mechanical exertion.

*How to give form to the immaterial?* This was the burning question for many young artists now. How might you take something substantive yet meaningless, the equivalent of a ditch, and invest it with the layers of significance that accrued to the manipulations of Google engineers or high-frequency traders? On one level this had been the grand challenge of all art for all time, because ideas and myths and emotions resisted being turned into so much stuff. In fact, it was not possible: such transformation only occurred through a magic disavowal: “This clay is only a lump, and I appreciate its materiality, I even enjoy the volume and texture, but at the same time I understand that it *is* a human body, and that this body stands in for yet another thing, something greater but invisible: beauty, say, or evil.” This complex maneuver, which ideally happened in an instant, illustrated why art emerged in tandem with religion: they both depended on faith.

Today, the challenge of rectifying immaterial and material had new urgency. Pictures no longer possessed any fixed intrinsic spatial or temporal qualities, and their disconcerting gains in power and ubiquity were yoked to drastic decreases in value. Many human lives were lived partly in a space of



information, or rather in a field of shifting data that lacked qualities of both time and space. When some part of our attention and experience played out in a timeless, spaceless dataplast, when we ourselves were living examples of a magic disavowal that granted power over our bodies to unseen and immaterial forces, what function was left for art? How might we refer to the bewildering interaction of contemporary powers and affects using the shorthand of an interrelation between images and materials?

In response, certain common artistic practices had emerged. The first in hand was the most literal: printing, in both its flat form (e.g., ink-jet on paper) and its volumetric form (e.g., 3-D printing). Flat printing had become a lifeline, a quick and easy way to bridge the gap: you seized circulating data, tamed it, plasticized it, caged it for later observation. In flat printing, image became skin. You didn't have to print on paper, of course; maybe you printed on aluminum composite to signify cold, unyielding, corporate modernity, or on acrylic, which lent the impermanence and vulgarity of packaging and commerce. Maybe you printed your image not on a rigid plane but on a supple material like Mylar, which folded, crumpled, and slumped, thereby

aggressively asserting material presence on the hapless image. But the image was a sly skin, and any apparent haplessness was illusory, because skin always triumphed over skeleton. Wasn't that the lesson of 3-D modeling? The computer-rendered world was only secondarily about wire-frame volumes and chiefly about surfaces, the way virtual light refracted, played across them, broke on their shores, continuously collapsing and reassembling in shivering algorithmic waves. An artist might attempt to grab such a substance only to wind up with a handful of—what? Never *image* itself, only more material: sighing industrial substrates, the lingering aroma of the primeval factories that once blanketed the land, the spew from a neurasthenic ticker-tape machine. Drawn to these paradoxes, many artists abandoned printing in favor of modeling and rendering, yielding haunting new worlds: *the animation depicts a network of digital ditches dug by an unmanned shovel made of human skin, and each new trench corresponds to an incision being made by a top plastic surgeon, right now, in a wealthy enclave somewhere on earth, and the program's cinematography and sequencing are managed by an algorithm originally developed to run theater operations for Gaga ... or maybe the DoD, the torrent wasn't clear ...*

Other artists were understandably skeptical of the image, but because one couldn't avoid it entirely they sought sidelong, elusive modes of address. They might eschew printing and CGI in favor of computer-controlled routing, slicing up physical objects according to the shapes of web-derived JPEGs. They might highlight the support and ground of visual data, the skeleton under the skin: servers, cables, hard drives, piezoelectric sensors, screens, all presented directly or referred to through the use of telltale materials like ceramic, silicon, liquid crystal, laser-sintered polyester, perforated aluminum. They might employ 3-D printing, which reversed the direction of flat printing's immaterial-material transaction: here, physical objects were transformed into numbers and back, only different now, like beams of light that had passed through a prism that flipped them upside down. The allure was clear: didn't most people feel as if they, too, had somehow passed through a magic portal, that as much as they were obviously still composed of flesh and blood, they were also now made of numbers?

You might think that by exploring objecthood, materiality, and manufacturing, these sorts of artworks could escape the dominance of the image.

However, thanks to their embodiment of all the qualities that marked high-tech industrial products, such works tended to make intriguing photographic subjects; ceaselessly posted and reposted, they were overwhelmingly viewed as screen apparitions. The artists were aware of this, of course—the fate of anything cool was to splinter into a million pictures—and it had to be understood as simply another opportunity for performance and play.

It was risky, however, to brazenly chase the contemporary. These artists were gambling that future generations would understand the interplay between their materials and their imagery as signs of general and lasting issues—biopolitics, dematerialization anxiety, networked life—rather than of a soon-to-be-stale *nowness*. Maybe this is why some rejected the whole issue of skin and skeleton, feeling no need to negotiate any tension between immateriality and materiality, instead asserting that the way forward lay in a play with the flow of images and memes as they existed online, as if one could ride information's light-speed trail to a better place. Others looked to *code* itself: invisible, certainly, but with explicit material effects, and found as much in legal frameworks and molecular arrangements

as in programming languages. These artists often believed that the act of redistribution was the art, and there was truth to this, he thought. Context did equal creation.

He stared into the middle distance as his legs bore him down a long hall and into a sort of office. There was no need to watch what he was doing here, or even to focus his vision, and there was something soothing about that: there was a calm to be found in blithely ignoring the idiocies of the physical world. Well, that wasn't quite true, for he was just as involved with the world of objects. But in removing will from his interactions, in letting life inflict itself on him as if he were a stone in a river, a river of numbers, he found great peace. He was a breath of consciousness, pure aspiration liberated from the machine.

## SYNTHETIC PIRACY

HE WAS SEATED at a computer terminal, his fingers moving across the keyboard with admirable coordination and logic, as if manipulating a marionette. “Computer terminal,” he thought, and then, “Why *terminal*?” A vestigial word from an earlier age of computing, from a time when a single mainframe brain served a local network of clients, points of access that possessed no computing power of their own, spokes on a wheel, termini.

The histories of the computer and the network were entwined but not always aligned, he knew, describing a form not dissimilar to the double helix. Early computers were all *about* the network, depended on it, although these networks were fairly limited and specialized. He pictured the engineering department of a British university in 1977, where each computer was indeed a terminus, a nerve ending dependent on a central VAX computer to which it submitted a queue of problems to be solved in turn, and each terminal hosted a shaggy young man engaged in electronic communication with colleagues at CalArts, all jointly coding an

open-source, text-based video game with a strong Dungeons & Dragons flavor. Noncommercial networks, new postwar universities, open-source programming, international cooperation, text-based video games: all conspired to suggest a moment of unsurpassed idealism.

He glanced briefly at his screen and saw lines of code unfurling, then saw his fingers tapping away, and momentarily felt like an absent-minded brick-layer. But what was the thing he was building? Was it possible to step back and survey it as a freestanding structure, or was he building something more like an underground system, impossible to regard from without, maybe a web of irrigation ducts?

The '80s brought personal computers, hundreds of thousands of them, and this ushered in a second stage in the relationship of computer to network. Most of these PCs were sold without any means of connection, and this was fine, because networks remained esoteric, and anyway this was the era of word processing and desktop publishing and desktop *everything*; it was about setting up a self-empowering, self-sufficient digital world: the family computer, the home office, the small business. Networks persisted, of course, but were invisible to the majority of

new PC owners, who didn't even know they existed, and didn't care. Personal computers were originally made so as to be programmable by their owners, but newer users were no longer particularly interested in getting under the hood, so those aspects were hidden. Many are interested in the idiom of a form, he told himself, few in the grammar.

This middle period was just a blip, though, providing cover to people behind the scenes, who struggled to make networks palatable and profitable. The '90s brought the web browser, and soon everyone was hooked in to the network again, and once more it made sense to speak of *terminals*. Then you had the rise of the smartphone, and tablets, and now the latest personal computers resembled the earliest: little computing power of their own, mere clients relying on a centralized brain located in the cloud, overwhelmingly operated by shaggy young men comparing notes on early video games. He pictured a cosmic cat-o'-nine-tails: millions of whip strands of unimaginable length encircling the globe, lashing and flaying and ripping shit up, all joined at a single, sturdy grip. And who held the grip?

As he mulled over these questions, he realized that his fingers had stopped typing. The lines of code



had vanished, replaced by a video that appeared to consist of a single long take without cuts or camera movement, like surveillance footage. He registered what looked like a nest of moist pink rags, a hint of inert reflections, glistening shadows shading into blackness.

It might be useful, he thought, to consider this story of the network and the personal computer, a story that limned and animated our time, against the history of film, the predominant cultural and artistic technology of an earlier age. The history of film, or more accurately the moving image, also performed a three-part arc, veering from individualistic beginnings to a mass middle period before finally returning to individualism with a vengeance.

Early cinema enthusiasts had been briefly excited about a *personal* experience of film, devising zoetropes, phenakistoscopes, and other devices in which the viewer needed to lay hands on the machine physically to set the film in motion. This culminated in the kinescope, a coin-operated booth that ensured a controlled, strictly private experience of the moving image. Before long, however, cinema bloomed as a mass medium, and over the ensuing decades film came to mean the crowd, and

a shared experience that encompassed not only the theatrical audience but the culture at large, even the nation. In exchange for this expanded sphere, the moving image was removed from the physical touch and control of viewers, departing the individual body and entering the social body. This was the middle period. By midcentury, though, things had already started to change due to the proliferation of television, which again allowed a person to touch the machine, to push a button, to manipulate the picture physically. Such a viewing space was bodily and domestic and no longer quite so communal. However, while this new public may have been spatially scattered, they were compelled to watch the same broadcast, and thus they still composed a single audience, albeit one united within the *time* of the image. The introduction of the VCR, however, uncoupled even this temporal link, and by the '80s neither the time nor the space of the image had to be shared with anyone else. The spread of the PC, the internet, and all the ensuing mobile devices only reinforced this situation. By the hundredth anniversary of *The Birth of a Nation* the pivot was complete: now, just as at the beginning of cinema, moving images were consumed largely by individuals, who

once again laid hands on their machines to set private pictures in motion, thereby fully commanding both the time and the space of the image.

Was there any correlation, he wondered, between the story of computers and networks and the story of the moving image? Could you make these histories speak to one another, or was the attempt facile and absurd? He supposed you could interpret the outcome of each story as a triumph for the individual, but then again you could just as well argue that each implied the triumph of the market. What they did share was a beginning, middle, and end: each world-changing cultural and artistic technology started in one place and drifted off to another realm before slowly arcing homeward to achieve something that had been there all along. In both cases it was the middle period that stood out as anomalous. He briefly wondered whether one could go back to the revolution prior to cinema, that of the printed word, and uncover a similar arc, but decided that this was a reach.

So what was it about this middle period? The concept deserved further consideration. Now that networks and moving images were fully integrated into every aspect of society, it was common to hear

people pining for “the era of true cinema,” and “the golden age of personal computing,” because those periods represented a beautifully pure state of complete realization before the boundaries came down and everything merged with everything else. The middle period was like adolescence, in other words, a sowing of wild oats before reentry to the institutional fold, and, as the adult in the relationship, contemporary culture always ended up squashing the middle period’s claims to significance. For example, now that most images passed through CGI, and cinema was an art of digital animation, the history of film was being recast to emphasize the primacy of animation in such a way that the initial period and the contemporary period were united against the middle. Young film scholars argued that film had *always* been about animation, the histories were coeval, it was stop motion at the beginning and CGI now, and while the middle period of narrative standardization may have been romantic, it must ultimately be understood as a misguided experiment in false consciousness.

He was standing now, turning his back on the computer and whatever it was he had wrought there. It was disconcerting to make a thing and

abandon it before understanding it, but the experience was not unfamiliar. An artist's oeuvre was always bequeathed to an anonymous future, like a city left to decay in the jungle. And did the artist persist somehow, a specter among the ruins?

Some people, he knew, believed that the personality of the maker persisted in an artwork, as the image of God was present in all people. It was a commonplace that all artworks were self-portraiture: when a sculpture was smooth, unyielding, and seductive, its maker must be a smooth, unyielding, and seductive person. But people often made art to escape, to obfuscate, to dissemble, to propose new realities, and wouldn't this mean that such aims were futile, since you couldn't escape your own personhood?

He considered the persona of Jeff Koons, who had embraced the role of businessman and CEO, whose quest for perfection was notorious, whose micromanagement was legendary, whose associations with money and capital were not just a life-blood but a poetic aspect of his art. He certainly looked the part, with his haircuts and limos and black-tie attire. This artist-as-businessman image was sometimes seen as quintessentially American,

but so too was the stupid notion—a legacy of beatnik, hippie, and punk culture—that artistic expression belonged in an unruly, anarchic persona. In fact, appearance was a red herring, it meant nothing. You could waste all your energy perfecting an unruly persona, in what was a largely ceremonial straining against the codes of the father. Meanwhile, Marcel Duchamp, Georges Bataille, and William S. Burroughs dressed in suits and ties and were by all reports courteous and mild-mannered, yet had produced some of the twentieth century's most perverse, scabrous, and risk-taking thought.

You had to conclude that regardless of the artist's exterior or persona it was the inner self that manifested in the work. And you could really *feel* it emanating. When you stood before a Koons—a steel rabbit, a wooden Pink Panther, a mound of aluminum Play-Doh as massive as a tank—was it not possible that you always got more or less the same *feeling*? It was complicated to say what that feeling was, exactly, but wasn't it "Koonsy"? The feeling might vary in amplitude according to the size or material or theme, or some subtler interaction of unknowable forces, but in the cold evasions of these lustrous surfaces you could expect seduction

and manipulation, with undercurrents of aggression, and little tugs at the parts of you in charge of eating and fucking and shitting. Excepting some of Koons's early efforts, the works were not light, and they weren't flickering, or unstable, or enigmatic: they were brutally materialist, they were *facts*, and this facticity was so urgent that it was a challenge, an affront, particularly in light of the transcendent symbolic claims made by the artist and his supporters. When you viewed one work after the other, as in a larger survey show, you could come away concluding, "This feeling I have *is* Koons." And when you met him, was his own vibe not a little similar? It was a scary thought, that one could be totally defined by one's art, summed up by it, enclosed in it.

But maybe it was the other way around: art was not an enclosure but a liberation of the inner self, and it was a relief to project your innermost feeling out into the world, a relief of pressure. You frantically pumped out overflowing essence like so much bilge. It was tempting to assume that had Koons not found art, he would still have become a successful if sociopathic manager, one whose bilge would swell until he shat all over his underlings. All people would benefit from a good psychic bilge pumping,

that was certain. And maybe that was all art was good for. Unfortunately, due to a multitude of cultural and environmental factors, most humans didn't have the opportunity to pursue this.

He did believe Joseph Beuys's statement "Everyone is an artist," at least in principle: self-expression was human, and manifest everywhere in lives as they were lived. People were overflowing with expression and creativity and that weird antagonism between thinking and doing that yields art. The problem was that most people never found a form, or were never offered one, or were never even made aware that there *were* forms. In art-making, however, the chief task was finding a form that made expression possible, and this was perhaps the hardest part. How often did he read about great art that had been born of frustration! Artists would be at the end of their ropes, angry and exhausted, having tried this and that and the other, and everything made them sick, nothing worked, they doubted their abilities, they denounced their medium, they hated art, and then they made an unexpected move and put something new into the world. They'd found a form.

Everyone knew such desperation and lack of ability, but not everyone allowed themselves to lash



out, not everyone could find that loophole or escape hatch. A writer might labor for years trying to craft a deeply felt, multigenerational portrait of a family and never find the right form. Maybe the novel would be finished anyway, and published, but it would be a mediocre expression; it wouldn't be true to her inner self; it wouldn't strike readers as unique or arresting. If she could only forget the audience entirely and ditch the traditional forms, along with the idea that a particular genre or style was not just correct but what she "wanted" or "liked," she might be led by her own proclivities, as perverse as they might be, or as hallucinogenically boring, or as incoherent, into something that really *was* stirring and deeply felt. She might not know what she was doing then, or even like it, but the sure sign you were entering new and promising areas was a feeling of uncertainty and unease.

Maybe what made people good artists was a natural, inborn ability to sidestep all that was narrowing and restricting, and make that weird lateral move into uncomfortable territory. It was also what allowed them to remain good artists, for mastery of an approach or technique often produced a mannerism only shattered by bold new moves. The problem

was that you couldn't plan for or teach any of this. You could barely even discuss it. After all, his own musings on the subject amounted to a handful of management clichés: find your voice, think outside the box, leave your comfort zone, and swim against the tide. Even the prescription to follow one's work into areas that one didn't necessarily *like*, which on the face of it was hard to translate into corporate jargon since the reference to aesthetics made it anathema to hierarchical organizations, found easy purchase in creative industries. For instance, he could imagine a young, disruptive ad agency exploring all that was "bad," leading to groundbreaking, influential commercials and websites that transgressed traditional notions of composition, craftsmanship, and taste in a spirit remarkably similar to that of celebrated "anti-painters" like, say, Christopher Wool.

Lines of thinking such as this brought him to a place of unease and discomfort, a place that he didn't "like," because he glimpsed the distinct possibility that there was nothing special about art and there was no exceptionalism for artists, that all of his ideas of purity and rigor were misguided. The artist of the future, he thought, surely wouldn't shy away from complicity, banality, and an association

with commercialism and market strategies. On the other hand, that described Koons, and whatever else he might be, Koons was an artist of the past, or at least an icon of transition, a brilliant apotheosis of postwar art's concerns with pop culture and mass identity, a finger pointing the way to a new art composed of ... Of what? What would the art of the future look like if one could view it, courtesy of a time machine?

He was confident that a future art would at least be recognizable as human expression, since you couldn't take part in the conversation if no one knew you were there. Unless, that is, it were an expression recognizable only to a far-future human, society and sensibility having changed so radically that for us to encounter such future art would be analogous to a third-century Christian being shown a tank-size mound of Play-Doh. With these considerations in mind, it made sense to restrict his thought experiment to art a mere fifty years down the road.

This near-future art would no doubt take full advantage of technology, since technology was our age's only site of new concepts. It would thus exist in a familiar historical continuum that encompassed Warhol's adoption of commercial screenprinting

in the '60s and Koons's twenty-first-century use of medical scanning to seamlessly enlarge cheap trinkets. He paused in his train of thought, realizing that these two examples focused on technologies of reproduction, and wondered whether that was all that technology meant for art: a better means to *re*produce. Reproduction was a hallmark of the technology of his age, clearly, but hadn't anyone in the twentieth century invented a new pen or paintbrush, something that *made* rather than *remade*? The computer, he supposed. Perhaps a future art would escape the whole issue by turning to unmaking and *de*production. Even as the thought occurred to him, he knew it was fruitless, for any gesture of destruction would inevitably be seen as a creative one; it would still be making something, even if it were only making a point. As much as artists had tried there had never been an artwork that truly negated meaning or creation, because for viewers the fundamental role of the art object was to evoke meaning. At least he could take comfort in the fact that this process happened whether artists liked it or not, and that they thus bore little responsibility for the ramifications of their work. Perhaps the goal, then, would be works that made their points in real time

and space, works that eluded reification as readily redistributed images.

It seemed that speculation on the specific technologies of future art was pointless. You could back up, though, and make a broader and more provocative assertion: however the future of art might turn out, the gestating seed of that future was not to be found in painting. Painting was an ancient and noble species, to be sure—in fact, it was perfect, but this perfection made it curiously inert; it was an anachronism, like a shark or a cockroach. It was periodically wrenched by internal debates and reorientations, but always emerged unscathed. The parameters of the medium were wonderfully elastic but ineluctably defined: the work had to exist within the frame, on a flat plane, hung vertically, and it had to consist of mark-making (or the conspicuous absence of mark-making), typically with modulations of color, line, or graphics, situated on a spectrum between representation and abstraction. The ensuing endless possibility was the genius of the medium and the reason artists couldn't stay away, but if you strayed beyond the parameters the smallest bit—e.g., putting the canvas on the floor, or stretching the canvas over a steel arc of a frame that curved off

the wall, or fabricating the entire thing from carbon fiber—it suddenly belonged to a different medium. There was no judgment if you strayed; it wasn't a "failed painting"; it was simply handed off, with a shrug, to the realm of sculpture.

Where painting was stable and well regulated, sculpture was unpoliced, a ragged ecosystem bound up in society's ruck. If you transgressed, you were not only still within the territory, you'd actually managed to enlarge it. This capacity for flux made the field dependent on the newest tools, and the technology of a given era determined the nature of that era's sculpture. Terms like the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and the Information Age were coined because those eras were defined by newly workable materials, and artists and artisans seized on the new methods, took them as far as possible, and dropped them when they were outmoded. How many sculptors today worked in bronze? Those who did usually employed the ancient medium as a self-conscious reference to antiquity, and if the reference wasn't intentional, too bad, because viewers would see it that way anyway. Painters could join a more or less continuous chat room hosting every painter who'd ever exhibited; they could stroll into the Met or the

Louvre for a directly applicable lesson in their craft. Any sculptor would doubtless also benefit from reviewing older sculptures, but the exercise might carry a severe translation problem due to technological development in the intervening years. The future, he thought, belonged to sculpture.

The quality of sculpture relative to the site and the body was rapidly changing, growing in scale and complexity even as it was increasingly consolidated into singular objects. When people talked about today's most significant sculptors they usually meant not some magpie gathering oddments, but an artist like Serra, who employed advanced computer programs and complex industrial engineering to produce huge architectural inventions, or Koons, whose ideas demanded new fields and processes. Such artists' works were big and singular and unified and asserted themselves baldly: "Here I am; deal with it." The public needed this clarity; a work had to be simple and immediately accessible, even if its meanings, motivation, and production methods remained obscure. Artists couldn't hope to become familiar to people outside the art world if their work dealt with fragility, or esoteric mystery, or evanescence, or a grace that unfolded with mystical

slowness. When devising publicly significant artwork, a good rule of thumb was to aspire to the condition of a handgun: *simple, familiar, and loaded*.

This situation was partly due to the institutionalized infrastructure expected by a contemporary art audience. Within these airy, minimalist spaces, a delicate installation looked brave and quixotic at best, and more often lost and confused. A large, self-contained structure, on the other hand—a weathered steel arc or gleaming aluminum bauble—not only “held the space” without having to be “sensitive to the site” but demonstrated an active commitment to the future, for why were we building bigger and better exhibition halls if not to showcase the limits of human potential, dispatches from the zone where unbounded and well-funded creativity met hitherto unknown capacities for technological ingenuity?

He became aware of '90s hip-hop wafting through the air like a wave of lab-engineered oxygen, and saw that he was now sitting in a teeming, cavernous space, a hotel lobby. Well-dressed young men sat all around him hunched over their phones, their gazes occasionally darting around nervously like animals guarding their kills. As he stood and brushed off his pants he wondered for the first time



since he'd entered his fugue state what decade or time period he now occupied. Was it possible that he had somehow been beamed into the late '90s? It was difficult to say, in part because of the digital era's tendency to absorb and confuse all periodizing signifiers. Everyone knew that hip-hop was over, a phenomenon of the three decades preceding the financial crisis; on the other hand, its '90s golden age was now commemorated most lovingly in the playlists of hip bars, bistros, and boutique hotels. He abruptly headed toward the reception desk, a voluptuous swell of concrete decorated with commissioned graffiti.

What was exciting about an encounter with advanced sculptural artworks, he thought, was the feeling that you'd brushed against the future of not just art but society itself. This feeling was not a modern phenomenon: it must also have stirred the hearts of Bronze Age priests as they hefted an artisan's latest creation, for it was a sensation of the paradox implicit in any manifestation of extreme *techné*. These were objects that communicated human experience even as they emanated a baffling inhumanity. This was why we worshiped at the altar of technology, whether in visiting Anish Kapoor's vast

*Cloud Gate* sculpture in Chicago or in simply sharing its photo on our phones: we wished to participate in something at once human and alien. These objects—the Bronze Age figurine, the Kapoor sculpture, the phone, the internet—were delivered by technology, and thus in some sense were *of us*, yet nonetheless stood apart, regarding us coolly from across an unbridgeable gulf. And what was this if not the paradox of the divine? To create something that embodied this promise and paradox was a holy grail, and perhaps explained artists' increasing tendency to take familiar organic materials—human body parts like breasts and hands, or foodstuffs like haunches of beef, sliced bread, and fruit—and, through scanning or printing or rendering, smuggle them into the chilly realm of the synthetic.

This paradoxical quality was not to be found in every art form. It was virtually absent from popular fiction, which tended to avoid alienation in favor of the humanistic. *Humanism*: like *cynicism*, a radioactive term. And what, exactly, were the aspects of this literary humanism he was opposing to *techné*? Whether you were talking about young-adult books or the serious adult literary novel, aka the Novel, works of popular fiction relied on certain interdependent

qualities: a strong moral sense, a warmth arising from a belief in love, an honest reckoning with death, and a political imaginary committed to reshaping our common mortality into a fellowship of empathy. Novels examined how individual desire and morality operated within the mechanisms of family or society, typically by decanting the author's own subjectivity into a vessel whose shape was determined by prevailing trends, and from which a reader could expect to draw an admixture of humor, doubt, hope, neurosis, and compassion. Even as these humanistic narratives might explore or observe alienation and inhumanity, the Novel rarely *embodied* alienation and inhumanity, and when it dared to do so—when it attempted to straddle both sides of the unbridgeable gulf—it was widely perceived to be a failure, with notable exceptions like Beckett.

This was because the Novel was a precarious bead on a string, poised on a continuum that reached from the formally bounded storytelling of folk tales to the technical freedom of poetry, and there was little latitude for play. If it strayed too far in the direction of representation it gained readers but was trivialized by proximity to mass-market genre tales and Young Adult fiction. If it moved too far toward

abstraction, it secured the alienating effects of the latest technology—the technology here being not bleeding-edge material-fabrication processes, but language—at the expense of readership.

The Novel needed to occupy the middle ground, because it aimed to be a popular format. You could say that it played painting to poetry's sculpture: it needed a frame and a nice wall. Most novels were happy to forgo poetry's exploration of consciousness, instead opening all doors within *story*, reflecting on human psychology and society less through language and structure than through pure narrative. A serious adult novel that aimed to evoke contemporary Western life would thus employ resolutely eighteenth-century tools; the structure could always be tossed into the air later and shot through with a hail of contemporary signifiers: Whole Foods and financial products, art galleries and yoga mats, drone strikes and blog posts, machine learning and climate disaster, lengthy IM transcriptions, object-oriented ontology, wearable RFID chips, cisgender phobia.

There did of course exist perennial strains of so-called experimental literature that acknowledged that language and structure were themselves

bleeding-edge material-fabrication processes, and these literatures sought to embody the tantalizingly inhuman without worrying about whether or not they came off as instances of the Novel. More power to them, because the perceived failure rate here was near total. But this went with the territory, and such authors, who included William S. Burroughs and Gertrude Stein, likely would have agreed with Jeff Bezos's dictum: "You have to be willing to be misunderstood if you're going to innovate."

Such experimental approaches were notable in another respect: unlike the traditional Novel, they shared little with one another and resisted unification within a body of literature, particularly from a contemporary vantage with no use for outdated rubrics like modernist and postmodernist. This was because these books depended on manipulating the outer edge of human *techne*, and the edge mutated rapidly. As with the field of sculpture, the contingent structural technologies of 2014 experimental writing were radically different from those of 1914 experimental writing, making it hard for them to talk to one another: a poem composed of fabulous spam names seemed to belong to an altogether new category.

However, while he respected these experimental approaches, he thought they represented an extremely niche product, and one that was overly dependent on its artisanal history. It used to be that the only sure thing about contemporary experimental writing was that it didn't resemble much you'd seen before. Now, however, it was more likely to evoke the experimentations of past generations. A spam poem didn't really establish a new category, but was just another way to produce a random-word poem, something people had been doing at least since Dada, a century earlier. Diligently retyped preexisting material may have offended the sensibilities of a mainstream audience, or even an older generation of poets, but not those of anyone familiar with the canonical appropriative strategies of the visual arts. To his mind, many experimental writers were looking in all the wrong places. He wanted to tell them to stop aping strategies pioneered by long-dead avant-gardists, to forget the pursuit of difference and the scorn of normativity, and instead consider supposedly stable, mainstream areas of "pure" or uncomplicated narrative deemed beneath poetic consideration, areas that, thanks to a market-based dependence on the cutting edge of

language and experience, were actually disintegrating, mutating, and emanating odd ripples: becoming not just weirder but *poetic*.

This was best exemplified by Young Adult product, which had in recent years exceeded its function as a flatly inflected narrative device focused on a narrow demographic segment and was now engaged in some kind of symbiotic death grip with other literatures and medias. The general culture was intrigued by the lucrative territory pioneered by YA narratives, and adult-oriented narratives were accordingly becoming increasingly YA-like, with results that were aesthetically unorthodox and financially unpredictable. For example, adult narratives were becoming less desire-based and more drive-based, resulting in characters without motivations capable of ever being satisfied, characters animated only by a will to repetition, which yielded denouements incapable of satisfying an audience, or at least an audience attuned to twentieth-century codes.

All this ferment and upset opened unusual paths of inquiry. If a digitally produced abstract painting could be seen as representational, since it depicted the alienation we felt when faced with the future, surely an author might produce something similar.

Could one piece together an adult, “experimental” novel out of, say, YA raw material? The inverse—a YA story composed of experimental material—was not only possible but endemic among teen blockbusters, which were critically dismissed with the same terms once leveled at avant-garde art: incoherent, silly, reliant on cheap effects, lacking relatable psychological qualities, cynical, and confused. Not insignificantly, these same words were used to describe young people themselves. Adults found it tiresome that the young were perpetually rediscovering Surrealism, psychedelia, derangement, and formal miscegenation, but these qualities represented the perverting vitality of forms in revolt. Everyone celebrated youth’s natural creativity, but few wanted to admit that this was a violent and bruising creativity that owed its purity not to innocence but to a biological lack of compassion. Compassion was inimical to the creative impulse, which needed to be brutal and defiant. When children matured and developed a sense of compassion, surely something was lost.

*—scattering nettle seeds around a schoolyard*  
*—or crushing a mosquito between your palms and opening them to see a stranger’s blood on your hands*



—*i'm very sorry, ma'am, but there's been an accident*  
—*"aging fleet" ha ha*  
—*itunes purchases awaiting download, associated with*  
*an account belonging to someone whose plane plummeted*  
*into the atlantic*  
—*but any mode of killing you could imagine has at some*  
*point already happened*  
—*stabbed through the back while facedown on the mas-*  
*sage table waiting for the masseuse to return from fresh-*  
*ening up?*  
—*ancient greece*  
—*shackled and fed through a rusty machine that slices the*  
*human body up like cold cuts?*  
—*renaissance italy*

All these gnarly issues were precisely why he'd turned his attention from visual art to literature. Despite the differences between making objects and novels, his shift in vocation yielded interesting parallels; for instance, he found that his own oft-used artistic strategy of "smuggling familiar materials into the realm of the synthetic" made for a good description of the process of fictionalization. To someone interested in placing the Novel's time-tested bourgeois strategies on the shifting

ground of a fucked-up consumer culture, it was all very exciting.

There was, however, another artistic field that did address many of the same issues found in the field of visual art and that reliably produced the same paradox of human/inhuman, and moreover the destinies of the two fields were intertwined. Large-scale, technologically produced art now required the same resources as cutting-edge architecture, even as steps in development and construction allowed buildings to become more and more sculptural. This had been coming for a long time. Already in 1968 the alien monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* resembled a Mies van der Rohe skyscraper as much as it did a minimalist sculpture by John McCracken. Now you had “blob” buildings that approximated Kapoor’s mammoth chrome artwork, and Dubai had built those marvelous residence islands constructed so as to resemble palm trees when seen from the air, as if prepared for alien invasion, or at least drone assessment.

The developers in Dubai were exceptionally forward thinking. They recognized that it was the public who had the occult power to transform Kapoor’s mystical *Cloud Gate* into “The

Bean” and to reduce Rem Koolhaas’s China Central Television Headquarters to “Big Pants.” No artistry could oppose people’s tendency to make light of that which was bigger than themselves, so it was shrewd to go with it and push what was already falling. One could soon expect to see corporate headquarters intentionally constructed in the forms of outsize balloon animals and tchotchkes, and not just the obvious suspects like Disney, but even—why not?—the FDIC. Any corporation would benefit from a public image that managed to be simultaneously awe-inspiring and cute.

Even beyond the material and technological similarities, there was something art could stand to learn from advanced architecture, for it was a creative field deft at navigating imbricated political, theoretical, corporate, cultural, technological, and financial matrices. People complained about how the money sluicing through the art world had ruined the work and warped the public and spoiled the collector pool, but the money and power undergirding the world of architecture made the art world look like a tag sale. The most advanced artists of the age were certainly taking notes: Serra had recently completed several building-size commissions for Qatar’s

ruling family. Meanwhile, marquee architects of recent decades had overwhelmingly turned their attention to the art world, abandoning residential construction in favor of the industry of culture, such that the highest aim for a world-class architect now was erecting a museum, in all likelihood located in one of the newly rich Gulf states.

He felt like he'd finally grasped the essence of art's future. It was architecture, which best understood how to combine technology, scale, visual singularity, and all the necessary financial and political underpinning, that was preparing the way. Vast primary structures impeccably engineered, Euclidean solids riding the breast of the desert, pharaonic monuments built to last a thousand years: this was the future of art.

Reflecting on these questions, he was suddenly aware of his shrill, moralizing tone, as if art were actually in danger, and threatened by what, money? Had it not always been thus? Art had survived, and always would, even as it necessarily adapted and changed. Human creativity was a constant, unruffled by the introduction of high finance into the visual arts, equally unfazed by the subtraction of paying customers from movies, books, and music.

He was reminded of the way people fretted about threats to “nature,” whereas we *were* nature, and cities were nature, and lab-created chemicals were nature, and still the world abided, mutating as it headed into some succeeding incarnation sure to be as different from us as our flourishing Anthropocene epoch was from the meteorite-blasted Paleocene.

He asked himself whether there was really anything wrong with getting into bed with power and wealth if that was what it took to make great art. He then, in turn, had to confront another nagging doubt, something that had been troubling him about his earlier elevation of freedom as a motivation for art-making. According to his hypothesis so far, an artist like Koons—who had pushed the manager model as far as it could go, who traveled the world like a big architect in order to cultivate billionaires who might keep the machine going, who was perpetually in debt to his own dealers—was in some way *unfree*, bound as he was to the maintenance of his machine. But what if an artist like Koons or Serra were as happy as possible? What if such artists had arrived exactly where they wanted to be? They were able to enter the studio and dream up something and have it produced exactly as they

wished: Was this not the desire of every artist? Was this not freedom?

He was forced to refine his position: when he asserted freedom as the most important factor in his being an artist, the freedom in question was not only the freedom to make art but the freedom to cease making art. The reasons didn't matter, it could be in order to become a poet, or start a farm, or travel the world binge drinking with Aussie backpackers. Serra wouldn't do any of those things. Why should he? He'd be crazy to walk away from his accomplishments, because they were predicated on steady forward motion and a ratcheting up of the stakes: bigger, better, more. He was wedded not only to his work but to the idea of progress, with all its drive and ego. By erecting a massive edifice of a career, by strewn the world with objects, by bequeathing humanity a legacy, he was attempting to defy time and space.

If you ignored what might happen after such an artist was gone, however, and considered the consequences for his life *as lived*, you saw that he'd enacted a sort of auto-da-fé—had been consumed by the fires of work and production. You read interviews with people who recalled Koons at an earlier

period and they employed that odd phrase reserved for celebrities: they'd known him "before he was Koons." Such an artist was a case study in how to disappear in America, which in a countercultural past may have implied going off the grid but now increasingly meant being subsumed by one's career.

An artist like this who embraced overproduction, who cranked up the intensity until it swallowed all else, who came to identify life itself with such maniac behavior: surely any substance abuser would recognize the pattern. No two ways about it, art-making was an addiction, and to an addict a calculated course of self-destruction through indulgence offers itself as the only available act of will.

He, however, possessed another conception of will. Artists rightly prized the uncommon ability to burrow deeply into one medium or practice over the course of a career; rarer and more challenging still was the ability to shed the mantle of a well-functioning methodology and gird oneself for unknown new directions. But why stop there? The truly important freedom, he believed, and the most rarely achieved, was the ability—the readiness of will—to jettison an entire artistic *career* precisely when it was going well. This was the nuclear

option. You didn't have to exercise it or publicize it; it was enough to keep the possibility close, like an amulet hanging next to your heart. *As if with a twist of the kaleidoscope all would become clear, splinters join, new scapes heave into view.* He was aware that his feelings on this matter were not normal. They were also logically inconsistent, since he was himself addicted to work, needed it, couldn't live without it. So how was it that he had arrived at such a different way of being in the world?

Maybe it depended on how one felt about structure. As an example, you could think of an elementary school full of students who naturally needed exercise. The traditional approach had been to send kids to the playground at recess and let them behave as they wished within the allotted space and time. Alternately, however, a school could simply sign everyone up for team sports, and this was increasingly popular, with many newly constructed schools omitting gyms and playgrounds, instead busing kids to county-leased playing fields.

This approach, which favored organized social activity, was in keeping with a culture that prized structure, hierarchy, quantifiable results, and risk minimization, and contemporary art reflected this



tendency no less than any other area of society. Artists of past eras had been leery of structures, administration, hierarchy, and the reign of the clock; the cliché was that artists were opposed to the very notion of work. Now, however, all the trappings of the straight world were necessary to take your art career “to the next level.” *Work, progress, administration*: a new slogan, a new institution responsible for building the infrastructure of a successful art career under free-market capitalism. Yet he still wanted the option to cut loose and run around like a third grader in the playground. How could you preserve that?

## NICE INSANE

IN THE ART WORLD, just as in sports or office culture, people adhered to well-structured models because ritualized forms were good at obscuring expressions of negation. It was perhaps a truism that a work seeking mass appeal had to follow certain rules of legibility, and that the Pop work, in adhering to these rules, was essentially affirmative. Of course, once you had people's attention, you could lard your Pop work with all sorts of subversive twists. Strangely, though, he had observed that the most perverse twists often manifested not in the work but in the artist persona, the narrative surrounding the work, the face turned to the public. To take one of the most famous examples, all the darkness and ambiguity in Michael Jackson were as much a part of "Michael Jackson" as were his songs and videos and performances. Or you might consider a figure like Kanye West, who in some ways was similar to Koons: like Koons, West wanted more than anything to be not only lasting but *loved*, and by the broadest possible constituency. Yet these two men fully embodied the addictive principal of control. It

was crucial to their ambitions; their art *was* control, and at times they were lead astray by its temptations. Like Koons, West was so stubbornly idiosyncratic in his pursuit of his vision, so willfully out of step with his peers, and so self-indulgent in his micromanagement that he found himself careering into eccentricities and perversions that threatened the mass appeal he craved.

This cognitive dissonance between the affirmative Pop artwork and the Pop artist's personal life, persona, and statements made for the headiest Pop, and not coincidentally this area of friction was where its most powerful aspects of negation were to be found. Already known for his narcissistic self-promotion, Koons went and married a notorious porn star and portrayed them fucking, in photographs and sculptures that dismayed the art world and put a kink in his career. West, who also couldn't contain his chronically narcissistic behavior, married a TV personality whose fame stemmed in part from a leaked sex tape, and whom he promptly made a costar in his life and videos. It was almost a recipe: take an unbounded talent for Pop affirmation, temper it with excessive control, and you got negation. But this was what made such artists so fascinating,

because with all their own internal contradictions on display they were able to embody their era and its more general contradictions. The cognitive dissonance produced by transgression would only temporarily hurt their careers; over the long term it would bolster the legend. In hindsight their personal and professional tumult would come to represent the warp and woof of history itself.

West and Koons were not just chosen for the role of embodying an age—they seized it and thrived on it. The truly great Pop artist needed to affirm the insane state of affairs that resulted when you danced in the public eye; they had to milk it, and their very hubris was what ultimately redeemed them in the eyes of the public. Koons's stated goal was to be as culturally powerful as the Beatles, who themselves had outraged people with their claim to be more powerful than Jesus, which was itself updated by West's proclamation "I am a god." Of course none of these ambitions could be fulfilled, because none of these powerful and sui generis people would ever escape their assigned box: the Beatles remained a pop-music phenomenon, Koons would forever be an artist whose name was only vaguely recognized by most, Kanye would stay Kanye, and God was God.

In any case, such ambitions were particular. They weren't to be found in other great and at least initially popular artists, for instance, Dylan and Godard. In certain ways Dylan and Godard were like Koons and West: they too had proved that they could craft incandescent narrative works just as beautiful and sentimental as anything going, they too were perversely contrarian micromanagers with self-sabotaging personae, and they too strove to transcend their boxes, making late-in-life art-world forays. Dylan and Godard, however, had rejected popular success upon realizing that it carried the poison badge of generational ambassador and public clown. The fact of the matter was they simply weren't concerned with communicating to the broadest possible audience. They may have been legends, but they were not Pop artists, because they were far too interested in negation.

He paused, troubled. What was this "negation"? It certainly wasn't restricted to reclusive, eighty-year-old, straight men, or to sulky avatars of the '60s. He'd been using the word as if it were the natural inverse of *affirmation*, but it carried ponderous and heady implications; it virtually trailed a wake of German philosophers. And what was affirmation,

for that matter? It was inadequate to claim, as he had, that Pop affirmed the society it examined. Warhol, the consummate Pop artist, was a dark and ambiguous figure whose career—whose very identity and existence—stood as a rebuke to the culture that enthusiastically assimilated his innovations. Moreover, his work, like that of Koons and West, was often vicious, perverse, and fucked-up, and surely that counted as negation, not affirmation.

The thing was, whatever Warhol's work said or did, and however he himself acted, and however his queerness might distinguish him from these other artists, he obviously cared about his audience. Koons, too, spoke repeatedly of the trust that he wished to cultivate in viewers; if you took him at his word, the compact with the viewer was his highest sacrament. And West obviously wished to bring his message to the public in order to inspire, to fill people with uplift or outrage or wonder. Dylan or Godard, on the other hand, probably never cared much about the potential reception of their work, let alone wished to help people. This was evident not only in their personae (and tellingly they had great capacities for humor and irony, qualities conspicuously absent from the likes of West and Koons) but in the work

itself: often brilliant and groundbreaking, deeply important to legions of people, but never Pop. Work that remained this aloof from its own reception was just too unsettling for the mass public.

This situation was only possible within the realm of art, of course. Any mass-produced artifact of consumer culture that clearly disregarded consumers would soon vanish from the marketplace. In an artwork, however, you could plumb this disregard with powerful results: rather than articulating negativity by critiquing cultural phenomena, which was met by the public with the question “Who cares what you think?,” you could reject the whole apparatus, a far more damning critical move. You didn’t care whether people read your work as being “critical” because you made your work for yourself and you didn’t give a shit what they thought, and this was itself a profound criticism of consumers, producers, media, public: the whole apparatus.

Here, then, was a possible definition of negation: a disregard for the compact between artwork and audience. The audience was particularly vexed by this move, because not caring was *their* thing. The public was used to being besieged by sycophantic advertisers and politicians and celebrities,

and not caring was the public's prerogative, practically its civic duty. Moreover, because art was a self-indulgent frivolity only worth savoring if you had extra time and space, an artwork was the ne plus ultra of that which you needn't care about, that thing you could safely disregard, even more than some dipshit with a new show or political campaign. Thus when art disregarded its public, the natural order was turned upside down.

"Who cares what you think?" In 2003 George Bush had asked this exact question of a voter who'd dared offer mild criticisms as they shook hands at a photo op. Many were outraged by Bush's quip, which seemed to violate a tacit but long-standing compact in which politicians sucked up to the public. Every previous president doubtlessly thought what Bush articulated, but they'd held their tongues, because once a president voiced the sentiment it would be neither forgiven nor forgotten. The notion that politicians *cared* was sacred. When Kanye West, angered by bumbling federal assistance after Hurricane Katrina, claimed in one of his controversial outbursts that "George Bush doesn't care about black people," the president was uncharacteristically wounded: artists were entitled



to critique the president, but opprobrium wasn't normally couched in these terms. You weren't supposed to call the office out on the basic issue of not giving a shit. West's comment was an effective act of public protest, perhaps even more effective than the 2003 global antiwar demonstrations: Bush had met the largest march in history with benign indifference, an absence of giving a shit so devastating that protest culture hadn't recovered.

In contrast to the general public, artists had plenty of experience with the question "Who cares what you think?" For as long as art had existed it had probably been faced with indifference, so if artists hadn't quite been inoculated against "So what?" they at least had invaluable experience with it. When the public regarded you and all you stood for as frivolous and unnecessary, you were forced to understand the situation not as some lamentable side effect but as a fundament of your identity.

Amazingly, this situation was equally valuable for the public, who depended on art to unfailingly *let them down*. People's reasons for dissatisfaction with cultural productions—books, movies, songs, exhibitions, spring/summer collections—always boiled down to a sense of *lack*: the work evinced insufficient

beauty, or effort, or sincerity, or meaning, and usually all of the above. This failing, however, was precisely what people expected and needed. This was why Koons was tremendously popular: he desperately tried to serve up beauty, effort, sincerity, and meaning, and probably *did*, in spades, but his art was beloved not *for* these qualities but *despite* them. Thanks to the artist's Bruckheimer-like ability to deliver, the abundance of beauty, etc., only made the work's essential impoverishment more obvious than the hole at the center of everyone else's work. Art, by definition, was the thing that *lacked*; the lack on display here was abyssal; ergo the work was supremely popular.

It was even possible, he supposed, that art was stronger for its occupational exposure to one of the harshest but often veiled facets of human production and labor: *no one's* work means a thing to the public; *no one* cares what you do. Most occupations easily glossed this with sensible platitudes: "My work as a politician helps people in such and such a way"; "This product saves time"; "No one understands what we do, but if they did they'd thank us"; "Everyone hates a lawyer until they need one." Only celebrities could rest assured that what they

did was important to the broad public. Maybe doctors got a pass, too, but that was about it.

Unfortunately for artists, “So what?” was a question that art could never gloss over or ignore, because the aims of the artistic experience were ludicrously ineffable. Beauty? General happiness? A greater understanding of our world? The cultivation of a philosophical outlook? The development of one’s, what—*humanity*? What did any of that mean? There was no artwork so great that its power couldn’t be dispersed with a shrug of the shoulders. Each day the museums were flooded with people who paused in front of Rembrandts and Leonardos, stared blankly for a couple of seconds, and moved on, pondering only what all the fuss was about. Paintings or pop songs or buildings or Shakespeare: more stuff. No matter how critical or affirmative or lovely it was, your work was *just stuff*. You couldn’t escape this, even if you attempted to minimize the material qualities, e.g., pointedly dropped a SIM card in an otherwise empty gallery, or drew up a certificate identifying the gallery’s air as the work, or shuttered the place for the duration of the show, or released the SIM card into a Hollywood storm drain with the intention of “exhibiting” it in the

great Pacific garbage patch: you were still producing things in the world. These ideas and gestures were things because they could be publicized, discussed, bought, sold, deemed lacking (though they probably wouldn't lack quite enough to become truly popular).

Art was actually a kind of magic, he thought. Giving substance to the ineffable was an occult act, as you saw in the new generation of "enchanted" consumer goods that mediated between public data and personal life, like umbrellas that glowed when rain was imminent so you'd remember to take them along when you left the house. The magic effected by all good artists was the act of making something from nothing, a something from nothing that was powerful enough to change lives and thinking. It was all the more powerful for its boundless, ceaseless fragility: as you regarded the work and felt its power, it might suddenly flicker and revert to nothing, and then, just as you were marveling at this trick—*because* you marveled at it—the work might swell with power and meaning, assuming the shape of something important. You needed to suspend disbelief and place your faith in art and yourself, in order to allow yourself to be taken in and lifted up.

At its best, art was a faith without religion, a gnosis without spirituality, a system without need of names.

He found himself lingering on a pedestrian bridge suspended over evening traffic, fingers stuffed into the chain-link, eyes following the procession of taillights and headlamps. All around him was the dusk of a major city, anxiety and melancholy slowly settling to earth after the day's passage, like the powder exhaust of a great engine. For the first time he wondered why he'd been made to linger here, i.e., why *here* in particular. His life, or the life that now happened to him, had recently consisted of nothing but transit and motion, an endless stream of remorseless action. He'd hardly been aware of individual events: meals or shits or periods of sleep. Had they even happened? If so, how many shits? How many meals? There was always a concrete number, but you could never know it. Perhaps in the near future, he thought, when everything would be finally made quantifiable.

A sound behind him possessed apparent significance because his head turned, and then he was stepping closer to an approaching pedestrian. As he received a small item and pocketed it, something occurred to him. When he contemplated its occult

aspects, art seemed like an anachronistic hangover from a time when people believed rocks and trees possessed spirits. But maybe Neolithic peoples had believed this only because stone and wood occupied the outer rim of their technology, standing for tools, building material, sculpture, weapons. These people naturally located spirits in the most advanced *techné* around. If this was true, though, where were the spirits to be found now? You could argue for art, of course, but that was increasingly untenable. The artist's career path remained fairly traditional, despite the recent support of peddlers of avant-garde financial instruments, who weren't sure if these stones had spirits or not, so they hedged. Was that all the new economy was, he wondered, a three-card-monte bet on which particular stone was currently hiding the spirit? He wanted to laugh at himself, then, for he knew next to nothing about economics.

As far as he could tell, the new economy went something like this: you were twenty-two years old when you moved to the West Coast, where you refused to work at a large, successful software company that would guarantee a good salary, because you preferred to strike out on your own in hopes of developing some fierce code. Your idealistic,

individualistic impulses were commendable, and bore superficial similarities to those of the nervy young art-school graduate who skips easy corporate jobs in pursuit of a unique vision. In the new creative economy, however, things were not as they seemed. After you'd pooled your savings and eaten poorly and stayed up all night coding and burned through your cash in a desperate gamble, after all of this, you didn't necessarily seek to maneuver your startup into an IPO with you as CEO. Of course Zuckerberg was the model, but becoming the next Facebook was unlikely; your best hope was that a large company like the one whose offer you'd declined would swoop in and buy your idea. Not, however, so they could launch it under their aegis and bring you glory, but so they could invisibly incorporate your code into their software architecture so that, say, everyone's inbox imperceptibly changed. This slight augmentation to the corporate ziggurat would be due to your labor, and your code would irrigate data in promising directions, and your pockets would swell, but the public wouldn't know or care. And neither would you, in the end, because like most artists, the majority of coders don't want to be managers, they just want to code. Get rich if

possible, but really just code. In hindsight, you *had* been working for that big company all along, only without benefits, job security, or the other enticements of corporate employment.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that art-world careers were also going this way. Young artists fresh out of school labored mightily to build not a deliberate, traditional career but an eye-catching IPO that could be snapped up by the market, meaning not the best, most trustworthy collectors, but the first-in-first-outers, the auction flippers, the bottom-feeding consultants, the fickle trend mongers. In all likelihood these artists' work would be imperceptibly incorporated into the financial system rather than securing a spot in the enduring cultural archive. In exchange, they'd receive a swift and sizable payout, and maybe provoke raised eyebrows, but their future would remain uncertain. They might have just received a one-time lump sum. They might have just received a severance package. *Enjoy, your career's over.*

What kind of fucked-up new world was this? He badly wanted to give these kids the benefit of the doubt and assume they'd developed a sensible response to changing economic and social realities.



It was even possible that the evolutionary pressure of this harsh climate would result in new and hardy forms. He pictured blind sea slugs groping at the foot of the abyss, anglerfish bearing eerie torches against the dark, chemosynthetic bacteria on the fissures' edges, nourished by the incessant spew issuing from the deeper void.

As he paused to savor this hope, for some reason he was able to step back and reflect on the character of his thinking itself, as if he were granted a temporary break in the cloud cover. He realized that anything under contemplation was made to twist first one way and then the other, as if deprived of its internal compass. Why, he asked himself with dismay, should that which was a problem, that which was awful and wrong, always be made to seem as if it pointed the way to something redemptive, and vice versa?

He forced himself to draw a breath, an imaginary mental breath, and tried to corral all of his recent, scattered meditations on aesthetics, culture, and labor. This took quite some time, during which he moved through the American cosmos, sensing structures rising and falling all around him, acutely conscious of the inevitable linear and cubic nature of

the built world, with not a circle in sight. He recalled that one influential practitioner of “chaos magic,” a late-twentieth-century occult form, had advocated an exercise in which one walked through the city resolutely refusing to focus on anything in particular. This seemed to unite Buddhism’s cauterized good faith with the aggressive varieties of negation beginning to boil out of the woodwork now that the golden age of religion was dead and gone, and he knew that it also perfectly described his current existence.

Things were coming into focus. He found that he could trace broad commonalities in his thought patterns, as if he were charting algorithmic curves in an engineering program. The essential characteristic of his thinking was a maddening flexibility, he saw. This was thought capable of folding inward on itself yet somehow also splaying outward, toward the world, seeking every possible angle, locating opposed positions only to swap them, as if any one thing must serve as its own inverse. This, he felt, was not a particularly good thing. In the physical world of sport and exercise, hyperflexibility initially seemed to be an asset, but in practice often meant an inability to maintain proper form, which led to bodily harm. It was equally true, he feared, of critical

flexibility: you couldn't win or lose in such slippery dealings, because the boundaries were always collapsing, yielding no possible resolution, only a circular movement unable to break its own inertia.

With a light-headed feeling, he realized that his own tendency toward dialectical contortion bore similarities to the things he prized about contemporary art: its expansive character, its capacity for ambiguity, its whiplash volte-face moves, its ability to turn failings into virtues. What he liked to think of as his quicksilver mind, in other words, was eminently suited for reflecting on contemporary art; they were made for each other. He understood this parallel and accepted it, although it made him slightly uneasy, because he immediately glimpsed another connection, as if he were passing through successive doorways leading deeper into a haunted house, and the audience was well aware of where this was going. He grasped that the movement or tendency he had identified also described the folklore supporting contemporary American life, the myth that anyone could be anything, that anything could transmute into anything else. This was a world committed to cultural alchemy, an age constantly scouring the trenches for that which

was *bad*—minor, obscure, base, and senseless—in hopes of harnessing that raw force and turning it *good*, i.e., lucrative and ubiquitous (which would of course deplete it and make it *truly* bad, at least until it was again up for redemption). Everything could be turned upside down, and was, and still made sense, and who gave a shit? To take a fittingly obtuse example, what did it mean that so many middle-class gay white men cultivated the speech patterns of lower-class straight black women? What it meant was an entrepreneurial opportunity. This culture knew only uses, not meanings.

Something else occurred to him, and it was as if he were slowly raising his eyes, gazing up from his own navel and out to the art around him, and then into the culture itself, ambiguity and confusion coalescing in a series of ever-wider rings, like the circles of hell. He briefly wondered if there were fresh infernal circles that couldn't have been dreamed of in Dante's time. Now he understood what linked all of these situations or conditions, what united his thinking and art's own present condition and American culture: it was "the digital," the digital way of thinking, that *Weltanschauung* that had seized his mind, his generation, and the world spirit.

According to the digital way of thinking, anything could be transformed into anything else and no one need worry about being cheated because this alchemy relied not on cunning sophistry, economic sleight of hand, or cultural bad faith, but on the bland, automated, everyday magic of numbers. The hope was that everything would be reduced to a common currency, i.e., binary code, which would allow effortless transmission with no value lost on conversion. The dream of the cloud was complete meltdown, such that everything became liquid to be pumped here, injected there, siphoned from me, and redirected to you. The aim of such a frictionless state was that anything, not only virtual but physical, might eventually be exchanged for absolutely anything else. Only not by you! The moment you snapped a photo, some force beyond you would transmogrify it into numbers, money, power; it might become a song, or a law, or a health-care plan, or a disease vector, or a drone strike. The act of creating a thing therefore took on new stakes: producing a TV ad was no longer a matter of executing a short film—it concerned the minting of style and attitude, it meant cultivating a pirate mycelium capable of migrating across platforms: visual

media, social media, and any media that might succeed them. In the material world the constant was entropy; here, the constant was metamorphosis. The message was similar regardless of whether you were talking about advertising or finance or art or digital networks: values rise and fall; you can't count on fixity; all shall be fungible, morphable, and easily synthesized and ported and versioned and pirated; the lowest shall be highest and the highest, lowest, and you'll be a pauper if you can't surf this, play it, game it. *Everything can be recuperated!* It sounded like a Christian idea but was probably the opposite, whatever that was.

Once again, what did it all mean? This was not only the big question—it always had been—it had metastasized into a kind of meta-question: what does that even mean, to ask what it means? The so-called digital age was, first and foremost, a tremendous challenge to the idea of *meaning* as a category. It was not yet clear if this category had been emptied out or filled up or magicked into something new, but there was tremendous anxiety about the shift.

He had developed a slightly off-the-wall theory about this shift to digital. Sometimes people talked about the shift in economic terms, where an

*information economy* had naturally developed from the *service economy*, which had displaced the *manufacturing economy*. We were in the middle of a societal shift, people said, in which you labored to create valuable information to be harvested by big data, and you were in constant communication but were at the same time increasingly alienated by all these transactions. There was some hackneyed truth to this, he supposed, but he thought it missed the bigger point, which was that we were changing from a society trying to understand World War II to a society trying to understand the digital.

Obviously this was a stretch. Normally you equated or analyzed historical factors within a matrix of either political history or socio-economy, but you didn't mix and match. Juxtaposing a historically bounded war and an amorphous technological shift made little sense. However, he understood these two phenomena as similar in that they were both points of noncomprehension, nodes of fluster, walls for a society to bang its head on. Just as the public needed its art to exhibit tremendous lack, societies wanted their central myths to be bottomless pits. Who doesn't love an abyss? Societies were like people: inconsolably fixated on that thing they

didn't understand. For the developed world, World War II had for decades now been that thing. It had come to represent less an actual event that people had lived through than a symbol of un-meaning, an icon for all that could not be comprehended. The period was an addictive substance, he felt, a string of intellectual worry beads to which our fingers compulsively returned. This was true for both high and low culture. Ambitious and experimental novelists with their sights set on the big questions, writers like Bolaño and Knausgaard, would, toward the end of their weighty tomes, turn to long meditations on World War II, passages that drew the entirety of the rest of the book through a moral and ethical looking glass. Meanwhile, no one was surprised when Brad Pitt appeared in yet another movie about the conflict, and these were precisely the films that the studios relied on at Oscar time.

In truth, he disliked using the term *World War II* in his formulation; more accurate to say *evil* or *inhumanity* or *meaninglessness*, but *World War II* was the cultural shorthand for those things, so he followed suit. When people wished to dilate on the lessons of history, World War II was their go-to, lurking behind a statement like "The lesson of the



twentieth century is that man is capable of boundless evil." Nationalism and xenophobia, genocidal savagery and barbarism, the promises and betrayals of ideology, the search for utopia: so much was handily encapsulated in one period spanning maybe sixty years if you were generous, half that if you were honest. These things had doubtlessly occurred before in human history, but never on such a scale or with such savagery, and the scale was part and parcel of the savagery, so you really *could* assert that nothing like it had ever happened.

Certainly if you took the cultural shorthand at face value and examined the name of the war itself, comparing its resonance to that of the names of other popular wars, it became clear that there was no competition. *The Civil War*? The phrase was too distant, and itself now a shorthand for national turmoil over what was either the greatest expropriation of personal property in the history of the world or the first shot in modernity's march against barbarism. *World War I*? This name was a blob of red sealing wax closing off a distinguished but long-mummified chapter in civilization, one best suited to espionage novels and costume dramas that called for a higher ceiling, a longer mustache, a more structured garment.

*The Korean War?* Something to do with tiki culture, he recalled. *Vietnam?* Raw and unresolved, ambiguous to be sure, but also standing in for a specifically American neurotic relationship to an episode that seemed, in hindsight, appallingly *petty*, nothing but a bewildering mess without honor or grandeur. Iraq would probably end the same way, he thought, and anyway our government had become so good at its job that people weren't even aware that "Iraq" named a war, strictly speaking, or had been a war, or whether it was still happening, and who was fighting, and a host of other confusions that were at once narrowly technical and stupefyingly metaphysical, and before you knew it attention was elsewhere.

*World War II* did not signify a war, of course, it expressed the excesses of the twentieth century itself, which was regarded as surpassingly horrible. He supposed you could amend the original formulation to say, more precisely, that our era was unable to get over the digital in exactly the way that a prior era had been unable to get over the twentieth century. *Fascism*, *state socialism*, and *Nazism* were magical words that, once uttered, could not be undone; the echoes would forever inhabit the spaces around us. *Get over it!* Otherwise intelligent people bristled

at some silly comment because it was supposedly a “slippery slope,” and slippery slopes all lead to one place: the gas chamber, nadir of the unhappy twentieth century. “Gas chambers,” he said to himself. He said it again: “Gas chambers,” and then again and again and again, repeating the sounds the way children do to fashion an incantation against sense, and was left with, what, the name of a Waspy bond trader, Preston “Gas” Chambers, something like that. “Nice one, Gas comin’ through with the Laphroaig,” “Yeah, man, instant memories.”

Wasn’t it possible to consider evil and the extremes of ambition, power, and cruelty without recourse to Hitler? One man and his camps, burdened with not just inhumanity but the limit of meaning itself. It was just like the Americans and the Brits, he thought, to reduce World War II to the singular shadow of someone else rather than acknowledge their own collaborations, culpability, and savagery, their own ghastly invention that had shocked the war to a halt, their complicity in speaking the magic words and listening for the echoes. He spoke another two words, just once for the thrill, “atom bomb,” and they rang out as the name of a Space Age, dime-store bonbon.

Now we were fixated on another limit to meaning, a twenty-first-century limit. Young adults might check out the new George Clooney war movie, read literary novels that incorporated meditations on Dr. Josef Mengele, even browse through twentieth-century archives in search of primary sources to illuminate these cultural products, or—who knows?—craft their own syntheses, but all of this would take place in the same non-space and non-time, conjured up from the same pixels. In an earlier age, say, the mid-twentieth century, those looking to understand their stricken circumstance might have scrutinized the late nineteenth century, or the French Revolution, or the Enlightenment. Now, however, contemporary people seeking to understand their world were likely to peer only as far back as the '70s, a moment that many scholars took to represent the birth of contemporary culture, not only in the area of computers but also in finance, economics, politics, and sensibility. According to this view, which was promulgated by celebrities like Thomas Piketty, the twentieth century in the West was a brief middle period, a noble if bloody experiment in egalitarianism that had lasted approximately from the Great War to the Vietnam War, and

the increasingly extreme inequality we'd experienced recently was simply a return to the age-old, natural state of things. In any case, as the last of the Greatest Generation passed from sight we had a new banner to rally around, a new symbol for the transvaluation of all values, the undoing of all fixity, and the unmaking of that which had been known as human: the digital.

The problem was the ambiguity of this new challenge. You could draw plenty of lessons from war, or Nazism, or the Holocaust. You could say that the problem of the twentieth century was the color line, or how people treat one another more generally, or that it was really a question of evil, or inhumanity, or the various other things people mentioned when they talked about the twentieth century. How, on the other hand, could you draw any conclusions about "the digital"? It was a threadbare cloak of a term thrown over the shoulders of a shapeless being on its way to becoming something unimaginably different. People had good reason to be nervous.

Unfortunately, there was a fundamental flaw in his thinking. The notion that "everything was becoming everything else," and his associated

reveries about the dialectical nature of art, the radical synthetic power of the digital, and the devious inescapability of advanced capitalism, all overlooked brute materiality, or, to put it another way, human suffering. Art couldn't touch bodies and the reality of suffering. It might comment on these things, but it depended on standing apart. The digital was also all about immateriality, for it sought to make objects and concepts lighter, less visible, and less present, vanquishing distance and difference. The same applied to advanced finance, which developed tools to distance oneself from stubborn *things*—who used *cash*?—despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that money was intimately connected to the wretchedly persistent bummer of bodies and lives and labor.

In short, it was easy and even commonsensical to believe that everything was melting into everything else in the face of the cloud and its triumph of immateriality, as long as you took into account only art, money, culture, and images. These happened to be his consuming interests, but this only marked him as a typical denizen of the West, which, to the outrage of the non-West, was obsessed with these means of abolishing time and space. These

were all tools for a practice that had been first cultivated by organized religion and later refined by film, television, and the internet: the displacing of violence from a society's bodies into the realm of images. Violence was intolerable to a highly developed society, but at the same time that society somehow needed violence to remain present. How to make something present and absent at the same time? In a highly developed culture, violence was dispersed into images, so that it might be held, passed around, bought and sold. Images typically represented the violence that was now done to others outside our society, whether in the imaginary selves animating our increasingly brutal moving pictures or, as with news and the internet, in the violence occurring in distant parts of the world to people who would never exist to us except as images.

In reality, though, all the same human pain persisted, lurking on the other side of the curtain. It hadn't changed and it wasn't going anywhere. You could pretend otherwise, assisted by the genius of advanced culture and images and finance and art, but when you adjusted your optics you were forced to admit that for most people on the planet

things hadn't changed much, nor were they likely to. And perhaps this was why images were taking over the world: *because* of the tremendous lack they embodied, indeed made impossible to ignore, and thereby transformed into a kind of art.

For some reason he wondered whether he was smiling, and pictured a faint smile, a wan smile, a flicker of a smile: inadequate descriptors for inadequate smiles. He realized that he couldn't remember the last time he'd gazed on his own reflection. It used to be that you really had to seek out mirrors, both literal and metaphoric; mirrors were a technology, and decent reflections were a fairly late development. What did that mean for the development of the self? Certainly most of humanity, the bulk of the people who'd ever lived, had possessed only the vaguest idea of what they looked like. Hair color, of course, and hands and feet, and genitals, all the lower body parts, the parts that obey, the parts that dumbly swing and wiggle without asking why. People may have also had a dimmer sense of another, more elusive self, the face, and perhaps the whole, but this self was glimpsed only occasionally, in pools of water. And then, after nearly all of human history had passed, there was a coda,



a brief modern age ablaze with mirrors of silvered glass and polished steel and extruded acrylic, and a person could live his entire life happily sick of the self that peered back from these ubiquitous surfaces. But that period was already over, soon to be obliterated, as it was with middle periods. We had entered the next age, had passed through a magic circle, never to return. No longer did people see the self that gazed back, not because there were too few mirrors in this new world, but because there were too many. This made him wistful, because he understood living itself to be a process of coming to know one's face over a lifetime, in what mirrors one might find.

*—a thin pipe is inserted into the nostril, a steady stream of tiny air bubbles is forced up into the the brain through the sinuses, which, for an excruciating six minutes before catastrophic failure, serve as champagne flutes*  
*—ancient egypt. high priests, pyramid temple chambers, bird's bone pipes. try making it futuristic*  
*—okay, then invert it. a soft, blind robot possessed of hesitant feelers and a deathly strong grip, restraining you with tender pressure as it extends a tube up your nostril and proceeds to inexorably suck your brains out thru your sinuses*

*—on the breast of the desert, on your knees, hands bound,  
head shaved, reading to the camera from a text praising  
the coming caliphate*

*—suck everything out through the only sense organ that  
cannot feel, the eye*

*—in a deserted room, the computer's camera recording  
light switches on*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For invaluable advice and assistance with the manuscript, I am grateful to Nico Baumbach, Boško Blagojević, Chris Bollen, Joshua Dubler, Peter Eleey, Bettina Funcke, Sam Frank, Kenneth Goldsmith, Wade Guyton, Ed Halter, Achim Hochdörfer, Stefan Kalmár, John Kelsey, Melissa Lerner, Joseph Logan, Alex Mackin Dolan, Warren Niesłuchowski, Nicolai Ouroussoff, Laura Owens, Rachel Price, and Jay Sanders.