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**FROM AN EDITOR:**

## THE GHOST HOUSE

**SAM KORMAN**

*An azure vapour rose into Felicity's room. She distended her nostrils, scenting it with a mystic sensuality: then she shut her eyes. Her lips smiled. The beats of her heart slowed one by one, more unsteady each time, more gentle like a fountain that is exhausted, like an echo that disappears; and when she breathed her last breath she thought she saw in the heavens as they opened, a gigantic parrot, flying above her head.* —Gustave Flaubert in *A Simple Heart*

Last December, I was struck with an idea to start an art journal. This idea rode on the coattails of my previous project, Car Hole Gallery, which I was closing after its year long run in my garage. I was so thoroughly inundated by the project that I felt like Wile E. Coyote running off a cliff, about to fall to the bottom of a vast canyon only when I looked down. I wished to hold onto those things that helped me remain suspended and, with an idea for another project, one whose duration would last much longer than Car Hole, I sat down with my collaborators, Gary Robbins and David Knowles. The idea for the magazine was so provisional that all I could say about it was that I wanted to start a printed magazine and I wanted to write and that I would approach writers as I had done with the artists who presented at Car Hole: I want them to write what they are most excited to write, because that will be what I am most excited to read, and, hopefully, the thing which most people will be excited to look at, read, etc. I needed to start something before I could answer the questions of *why* and *how*—this, I imagined, would come later, something we decided while we were doing it. It was the chase that kept the Coyote from falling.

Car Hole was a gritty garage that opened onto the street and presented artwork primarily from local artists, though I had the fortune to show a couple people from New York. It was a project that grew from yet another anxiety, another feeling of inaction and boredom: I was failing to retain an interest in my studies, I was producing no artwork, I wrote nothing. Amidst this frustrating position, I decided to start a space in my garage, a relatively low-stakes venture that allowed me the luxury to offer my friends and other interesting people the opportunity to do exactly what they wanted, because, as I often explained, I had framed the garage as a serious venue to display art, to extend the conversation with artists beyond their studios. But, in the end, it was a dirty, unkempt garage—a quality that would temper any failures and harsh criticisms. It was a space for play: between artists' work, between viewers and the work, between artists and

viewers, between the catalogs I produced and everything else, between everyone and beer—a multifaceted discourse. And, as I have said elsewhere, it took little more than some black paint, clamp lights, an institutional sounding email address, a monthly schedule, and a quick sweep to make everything look official.

But why start a magazine with the same ethos? This text is my second attempt at writing an introduction. The previous text attempted to answer the question, “Why print?” the answer to which I feel largely ill equipped to explain at this moment. Car Hole was a project that largely came out of my experience of hanging out with amazing people and a desire to not only talk a lot of talk, but also to do something about it, to say, quite emphatically, “Yes!” There was a very practical reality to mounting an art show, an astounding possibility to test ideas in an exhibition, rather than the reality wherein artists only display work on their websites and tumblr pages. We could translate our conversations from the ethereal realm of ideas into the physical realm of production and that opened the window upon the question of *how*? But contemplating production only came from the process of the *who, what, where* and *when*, the operations of creating the

work, of having a space for the work to live, of the space of conversation, and when these questions conspired as a physical instantiation, we could begin to answer and incorporate some kind of editorializing, we could

evaluate the *how*. The play of ideas took the physical realm, one in which there was a tremendous amount of freedom while retaining some of the officialdom of objects, products and events; these were the textures of the experience that quickly became both the *what* and the *how* of the project and I attempted to articulate them in the catalogs I wrote and distributed for free with each exhibition.

This personal history does not necessarily answer the question of *how*, instead, preferring to defer yet again with a new introduction that grounds this question in my experience. The previous introduction attempted an answer to the question of print through a variety of means, but never arrived at a coherent response. What I am substituting for a formal answer is an anecdotal response, to offer some of the driving force behind this project, which will attempt to position itself in an intelligent manner as a necessary document and something, literally, worth picking up. One of the exciting aspects of this project is that I will have something to show, an object, something that translates ideas out of my head and into a physical product designed for contemplation. And this is a very exciting opportunity to extend both my internal dialog and external relationships with other people and ideas onto the printed page, a piece



that people will have to search for, stumble upon, solicit, or borrow. They will not have to steal it, however, because when they find it, it is free, available and without advertisement. But they must enter a social space to read it.

Recently, I spoke with my friend Chase Biado about the difficulty of writing. As opposed to building something out of wood in the studio, I stated, I could not walk away from language. While working on a text, it becomes extremely difficult to separate my tone, diction, or method as a writer from the daily machinations of common speech. In a native tongue the words provide a tool, the practical basis wherein objects and ideas are made familiar at a certain time, in a certain place. In this way, language is extremely opaque. Conversely, when I use language as a tool for analysis, I am constantly tweaking, rearticulating, appropriating these terms for a specific intent, reorienting them to their original connotation in light of a particular idea. Language is made strange through a diagnostic system; I cannot suspend my disbelief. Chase disabused me of some of my anxiety, as writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco wrote in their second language to relieve themselves of the deadening impact of their own experience, providing alternative rhetorical devices to locate the strange within the familiar.

The act of translating ideas between languages creates an outside perspective from which to reevaluate an idea and this process makes readership immensely productive. Ideas and ethos are the target and language becomes the medium through which a reader may have a dialog with the text, as reading and interpretation generate something new altogether. Another manner by which ideas can be translated out of language in an equally productive gesture is to make reading a social activity, to have people read and respond to the work, to publish and to collect. Recognizing a conversation amongst texts occurs in many ways and here, upon this page, we've collected these articles around the very simple basis of physical publishing, giving them the space to mingle, to talk, the paper functioning like a social lubricant, the booze that fuels the party, offering the freedom to converse, an invitation to connect, an informed suspension of disbelief.

One metaphor I have used to explain YA5 is the ghost house. Ghosts find an eternity in the familiar, forever grounded to the site that produced some unresolved event. They are suspended, attached to the house, but only as a cold presence, a haunting voice, a spooky mirage. Ghosts are the ideas that linger. Entire social groups coalesce around ghosts to prove their existence and live close with them; meager documents and hazy photographs provide the empirical evidence for a collective informed by their seeing, feeling, experiencing the presence of ghosts. Mirroring the ghost house, YA5 seeks to explain the question, "Why print?" with an appropriated obituary, a literary form that translates private experience into public remembrance.

An obit attempts to make sense of death and loss, an attempt to define the spirit that may linger still among us, still in the realm of the social, the site that produced his or her life. It is a suspension of disbelief informed equally by the life of that person as by the experience of his family and loved ones, utilizing multiple forms—quotes, family histories, personal accomplishments (and sometimes failures), geographies, chronologies—to translate the life of the deceased into a living picture. YA5, as a predominantly literary publication, likewise approaches culture to construct a living picture under the vault of the printed word. It is a haunted house, a family plot whose tombstones read: art, music, food, TV, cinema and design. When the season is right or the moon is full, YA5 is the mist where these spirits mingle, the solemn page upon which the words appear, where a picture may emerge. And, like the ghost enthusiasts, we must trace their histories, allow them to pass through us—in short, to answer the question, "Why print?" we must spend a night in the ghost house.

## FROM AN EDITOR:

# WHY A MEDIUM?

DAVID KNOWLES

While searching for material to publish in facsimile for the first issue of YA5 I came across a document from a former art history professor: a roundtable discussion—to the best of my knowledge still unpublished—among the editorial board of *October* magazine which took place at some point in the mid 1990s. The topic of the discussion by these predictably verbose titans of art criticism is the usefulness of the concept of the medium as a category of aesthetic evaluation. I was struck, first of all, by how far we've come since then in our understanding of the difference between a medium and media—a great deal of the discussion revolves around this question—but also by how useful some of the ideas could be in charting a course for what is an admittedly scattered and polyglot publication. If we are going to insist on hopping from medium to medium with every issue and communicating these ideas through the newly problematic printed word, then the least we can do is try to be clear about what is driving this thing. The entire transcript of the conversation is too lengthy to publish here, and in extracting, editing (heavily) and annotating a number of exchanges that seem particularly relevant to the work featured in this first issue of YA5, I've necessarily played fast and loose with the words and ideas of the authors. At the very least I hope that this edit may be able to provide a sense of the questions to come.

*Hal Foster: What counts as a medium today is not at all certain. This is so, within art, because of decades of transgressions (expansions, evasions) of traditional categories like painting and sculpture, but also, within the culture at large because of technological developments that render media not only multiple and metaphoric but somehow meta-static (witness the soon-to-be-mundane crossings of televisions and computers). On both fronts we are, for all intents and purposes, in a post-medium age. But as this 'post' becomes a given of art and culture alike, it is hardly critical, let alone liberatory (which prompts the question: How much was it ever?).*

*Rosalind Krauss: You've talked about two ways in which the*

*idea of the medium and its specificity are currently under pressure. One stems from the various deconstructive moves which have questioned the logical coherence of that which is proper to the medium. And the second is that technology somehow confirms this position through a rendering of the medium as meta-static. I think that to collapse the technological term "media" with the notion of a "medium" is to make a grave error. I think that medium and media are different terms and to allow the slippage from one to the other, and to see the destiny of the one in the other, is to make an error.*

*HF: I'm interested in the ambiguity in the word medium—in whether it pertains to the specificity of the material or the particularity of the object that is somehow connected to the particularity of the subject. So that seems to be in crisis, this connection between the object and the subject and if we still desire to affirm simulation there.*

The immediate impulse of these two thinkers to separate the terms medium (proper to the more rarefied field of artistic production) and media (proper to technological production and—let's be real, this is really what they're saying—the mass media) is completely understandable given their education and critical lineage. It's also a productive distinction; a medium is aesthetic and asks to be looked at, whereas media are already beyond aesthetics, asking to be looked through and always defining what really is. However, Krauss's refusal to explore how the destiny of each can be found in the other immediately forecloses any possibility of dialogue between the two. The work featured in the coming issues of YA5, drawn from a multitude of cultural fields, will need to be examined via these terms and the grey spaces between them. The question of simulation between the subject and object of art is equally important and is mobilized in this issue by Sanela Jahić's fire painter, who strives to create a perfect work in order to affirm herself as a perfect being. In her quest to push painting to it's highest ideal, the barrier between the work and the human is consumed by flames; the medium—the self-aware aesthetic category of modernism—is destroyed and media—the post-human man-machine—rises from its ashes. Jahić's fire painting is not so much concerned with its own internal construction, with reflexively locating the essential qualities of itself as a painting, as it is with locating the transcendent ethereal sensations supplied by the greatest painting in the multiple and meta-static technological configurations described above.

*Silvia Kilbowski: I'm coming to this from the point of view of somebody with an aesthetic practice. I started to notice that in the late eighties art objects and practices had become a kind of empty signifier, the value of which could be bated around. I also saw a lot of colleagues moving methodologically closer and closer to a lot of other practices; sociology, journalism, different kinds of scholarly work etc. and making out of that their aesthetic practice. It started to become apparent that a lot of the work that picked up on the methodologies of these other fields was becoming subsumed into them and was, in a sense, also trivial to them. I then became interested in the notion of specificity, not in the sense of medium, but more in terms of how an aesthetic practice could establish some kind of difference from the other fields to which it was looking. In other words, how a practice could define itself as aesthetic, culturally speaking, through some kind of differentiation.*

We take the diversity of aesthetic practice today for granted. Artist as documentarian, artist as corporation; we expect these approaches and they no longer surprise us. We undertake the editorial process of YA5 with an *a priori* understanding of the distinct activities and objects that compose these fields of practice. That's why they get their own issues—music, film, design etc. Yet, as an art journal, we are implicated in the aesthetic legitimization of the diverse practices we feature. This first issue, the Art Issue, operates by a somewhat backwards logic. Rather than seeking aesthetic practices in neighboring disciplines, several stories in this issue show individuals without proper art practices trying to understand the relevance of aesthetics to their own fields. HG Masters is, first and foremost, a stranger in a strange land, a tour guide reading a nation through its monuments and monoliths. Frederick Deknatel, as a journalist and UN worker in Damascus, watches his friends negotiate their identities as artists and refugees through a haze of chickpeas and whiskey.

*KK: I think all mediums are internally differentiated. This is my interest in the way Greenberg slips in the idea of flatness as a convention that is set on top of the materiality of the canvas support. The other example is that within a medium—lets say drama—there is the genre. Which is to say the instinct that all mediums immediately divide themselves into different expressive possibilities. These then attach themselves differently to the support of the embodied voices which speak the dialogue, or however one would want to talk of the physical support of drama...This attitude changes when the support becomes something that we need to revisit in order to develop, think through, and be concerned with the conventional operations that belong to it—that's when the support becomes cathected. This cathecting of a medium is an act of expecting pleasure from it and it also does the work of differentiation that Silvia is talking about.*

*HF: I'm interested in this idea of aesthetic pleasure but I'm also interested in what guises it appears. You seem to describe it as reclamation or a re-opening of the body that was somehow deprived or overwhelmed in other arenas. So it's almost like aesthetic pleasure in the old culinary sense...*

*KK: I think all these mediums have to be obsolete in order to serve the medium in the sense that their technological promise has to have been exhausted...Benjamin was heavily invested in this notion that there was a creative aspect that we have as children to media. The energies of the outmoded have these childlike possibilities locked in them.*

It's much easier for us today to accept this idea of the medium as a convention, as expressive possibilities restrained by a social code, than it was at the time this dialogue took place. We can collectively accept the medium of the digest or journal as having a variety of material supports held together by a

common understanding of the expressive possibilities and the content that it offers. We read journals online and in print, and sometimes we can listen to them or watch them. The differentiation and cathecting of VAS's medium happens at the level of the material support because print is something that we cannot resist thinking through and developing, a support whose conventional operations have become increasingly unclear. Unclear but not outmoded. Why print then? Because we want to figure out to what extent print is still capable of generating a horizontal, secular community occupying a transverse time as it did at its birth. Now in a slow process of transformation from media to medium, the journal form is a work of eremitic self-sufficiency, falling somewhere between the book and the newspaper, relevant for more than 24 hours, but caught in a drift towards obsolescence. No promises of liberation or the release of locked up revolutionary potential, only the hope that this thing in your hands can become one object among others, that the optical reception of this journal will slowly give way to more tactile understanding, that it may become just one point in a constellation of practical memory.

## THE WEALTH OF POINTLESSNESS, PART I

BRAD TROEMEL

I really started skateboarding in sixth grade. My mom's boyfriend's son Brian introduced me to it in fifth grade and on the weekends when I would go to his house we would skateboard in his garage during the winter cold. I'm sure my pubescent bonding with Brian had a lot to do with taking up skateboarding but I also remember sixth grade was the year recess stopped, leaving the enforced plans of a middle school gym teacher in its place. The school joke, "What's your favorite class?" to which the student responds "Recess," is actually true for most kids. I don't think this is because they love what they're not doing (formalized learning) so much as they appreciate what they are allowed to be doing during that time (informal exploration and activity). Recess—more than art or music classes—is the pinnacle of creative and social opportunity an elementary student has all day and it was gone before I could even appreciate it. Damn.

'Playing' infers an action where the results of doing so are not entirely known in advance, where the objective of engaging in such an action is often found in the process of doing so or never firmly settled on at all. Children are usually the only people brave enough to play. Even the possibility of pointlessness drives adults crazy. Religions function to remove the burden of believing that life is not infinite, circumventing the 'pointlessness of living' if you can't do it forever. Nationalities are inexplicably driven by a sense of collective purpose, as though each citizen of a given country was born there intentionally. Economic ideologies from capitalism to Marxism are ordered by how to best regiment productivity in labor. The idea of wasting time deathly scares people so we have produced an increasingly intricate network of rituals, governments, cultures, laws, jobs, spiritual beliefs, and more to make our progress as a species clearly apparent to us while we participate in it. According to our ability to fulfill, repeat, and expand on the network of activities and thoughts that keep us so expectedly busy, we are able to safely say what we all long to believe: things are getting better. The technological prowess of the great man-made wonders of the ancient world baffle us not for their results alone, but for the threat those results pose to the linear chronology of human progress. How is it possible that thousands of years ago we could have been smarter than we are now? In a world of outlawed pointlessness, artifacts like the



Mayan ruins stand as a rip in the fabric of time itself.

How a person plays says a lot about her and sports are a convenient thing to do at recess. Sports provide firm objectives for success and a clear organization of time. Points compared, courts and fields, first quarter, half time, game over. Though sports are not as productive in a utilitarian sense as, say, building a house, they serve as a contained example of how the real world works in that some combination of talent, effort, and luck often determine one's ability to succeed in a marketplace. The most interesting moments in sports history arise from athletes who operate at the boundaries of rule making or athletic possibility. The NBA changed its policy on slam-dunking due to the vertical dominance of Kareem Abdul-Jabar. Since re-admitting the slam dunk in 1976 as a legitimate way to score points, time after time backboards have been shattered by this seemingly positive, point-scoring act. Baseball has been thrown into the spotlight the past ten years due to rampant steroid use among players who want to hit more home runs and win more games. The machine rages against itself.

Tim Berners Lee, upon inventing the HTML structure that came to define the internet once remarked, "We knew we had invented a solution, now it was a matter of finding the problems it could solve." Play operates on a similarly reversed paradigm; the solution (free time) has been found, now it is a matter of figuring out what to do with it. In capitalism, the hope for free time is a kind of Ponzi scheme.

You work so that you may eventually not work. Though if you continue to work through your own free time, there is a belief that you may be able to cease working even sooner in life than you anticipated. This continual substitution of free time for labor leads many to working their entire lives. Having spent some 50 years in a non-stop state of labor, some people even refuse available free time and go back to their previous job. The tiring, though steady, reinforcement of compensation, ordained responsibility, and known social interactions proves more desirable to those who, for the first time since high school or earlier, are presented with the bewildering freedom of formulating how to play late in life. Throughout this process free time becomes a paradox: it is both the enemy and the objective of marketplace productivity.

This is an unfortunate position for something so important as play to be in. The adult world's adversarial relationship with play, and the corresponding loss of chance encounter, non-linear thought, and creative discovery threaten to strip humanity of the traits that have provided our cultural, technological, and social histories with happiness and depth. Our notions of progress have led to lives more like the machines that were supposed to free us—we are shooting ourselves in the foot. Then again, maybe shooting yourself in the foot would be a good idea. Pain, joy, and an ability to learn from mistakes are a few of the features that have separated us from the machines we employ.

Street skateboarding is a product of free time, it is a way adults and children play. Even the most utilitarian aspect of skateboards, their ability to serve as transportation, is ultimately not so utilitarian. Skateboards can usually only be ridden on paved planes while feet can travel across many different surfaces. Bikes can go faster than skateboards and cars even faster yet. Street skateboarding doesn't inherently operate according to teams, points, or seasons. It is an activity that has very few answers but offers many questions. The first question posed is to every publicly accessible surface, obstacle, object, and environment of the outside world: How can I use you in harmony with my body and board? 'Use' is the operative word here, as the practice of street skateboarding shares far more

in common with Guy Debord's *détournement* than Marcel Duchamp's readymade. The street skateboarder does not point, collect, or contextualize but instead uses, re-patterns, and adapts.

There is little that is materially precious to the street skateboarder. To break one's own board is viewed as a kind of sacrifice to the joyful history that board previously brought or held as future potential. Countless waxed ledges and curbs have crumbled under the weight of human bodies hurling themselves down them time and again. The spots a street skateboarder visits come and go;



some are materially altered to be uninhabitable by property owners and others become monitored by security forces. The street skateboarder lives in public, owning none of the architecture she inhabits. Nothing public is permanent, further enforcing the necessity of street skateboarders to find increasingly imaginative uses for their bodies and boards. A machine that never came with instructions cannot rage against itself, it can only find new ways to be built in the first place.

What is punk about street skateboarding is what is Situationist about punk. Basking in the decay of architecture and infrastructure, street skateboarding proposes no monument should exist forever anyway. For this reason, half pipe vert skateboarding (unlike the backyard pools California radicals of the 1970's snuck into and shredded) was always the antithesis of street skateboarding. Half pipes necessitated property ownership, granted access and/or the timely construction of ramps that would compel a body's ongoing motion. When the whole world is viewed as a skatepark, the monotony and insularity of a single uniform ramp structure seems like an inhibition on the freedom skateboarding allows.

Vert is not the only enemy of street skateboarding's punk ethic of do it yourself use and discovery. Landing tricks should not be seen as the sole objective of skateboarding, even though landing a trick stands as a hyperbolic example of just how 'successful' an alternate use of a given object may be. Instead, the act of taking on an increasingly diverse array of public objects for the purpose of re-patterning their use is the logical ideal of an activity born from play. This means to foster a culture of what-can-I-try instead of what-can-I-land. The binary of success versus failure suggests there was a point in the first place. I am for a practice of skateboarding where tricks are routinely not landed, where momentum is jerky and discontinuous, where objects are grinded for the sake of being touched. Punks weren't perfectionists.

This orthodoxy of filming and landing tricks threatens what is beautiful about skateboarding. Perhaps street skateboarding's most advanced re-patterning was to become a sport. Maybe this incarnation of time and space is its most absurd realization possible; by becoming its own functional opposite skateboarding has investigated the conceptual terrain of all that it can be. Embracing pointlessness, error, and chance are the only ways to retake skateboarding from its grossly competitive state. If fun can't be had without rules we might as well call it game over.

# LAUGHTER TURNS A PRAYER WHEEL

DEREK FRANKLIN

*I'm looking for some-thing  
To believe in* —The Ramones, 1986

*I believe that we are all looking for this thing to believe in. However it is not necessarily the actual thing that helps us find this thing to believe in but the apparatus or medium that delivers the message.*

Well, I think we have all been having thoughts about revolution lately considering the recent events in the Middle East and Africa; as I sit in my proletariat subway seat the sign reads "If You See Something Say Something." What I see may just be the bouncing smile of a Cheshire cat but there seems to be something at the end of the microscopic swirling tunnel of vision that is lodged in American humor. Why does one need to be a revolutionary philosopher to help us consider politics and art? Why does one need a prophet to come in and speak of the future in dialects of the historical past? If it is to speak compellingly about our place in history, so it is. But I think the presumption that certain texts produce the perfect mixture for radical thought is absurd. Perhaps this may be an exaggeration, but if it is a writer's job to explain why the time we live in is unique, why the processes we see forming around us are unprecedented, different in large amounts from anything that has come before, then why are we still using the arguments of Post-Modernism?

Constant revivals of narrowly developed ideas of the way things used to be—derived from some classic text and treating it like the most concise and comprehensive treatment of reality with a capital 'R' and then contrasting this to the complexities of the way things work today or the way just one thing works—is producing fruitless results. This looming archeological uncovering of every inch of radical ideas has placed us in a position to plan the progress of our future through the plight and analysis of our past and it has created a hangover of loathing in the United States to be specific. Collective futility is the emblematic specter that appears to be running through our place in history. This hopelessness and ineffectiveness becomes sweepingly apparent in the wake of the current revolutions. Isolated from the power beholden in our own radical politics and art, we have become complacent in our frustration, detached from revolution because, quite frankly, it has been struck from our witness.

Stephen Parrino said this of his painting practice:

*When I started making paintings word on the street about painting was PAINTING IS DEAD. I saw this as an interesting place for painting...death can be refreshing, so I started engaging in necrophilia...approaching history in the same way Dr. Frankenstein approaches body parts.*

So how can the fat teenager of revolutionary thought get laid other than through the seduction of charm and humor?

Revolution, relational aesthetics, and institutional critique are interesting models to examine in the West. In the structure of these models, populist centered assemblies often use a language of transparency and generally all the power is held by a small group of individuals in a tight knit network. In this case transparency is the perceived distribution of positions, knowledge, rhetoric, and discriminations, which place the proper frame or condition around the movement, to have a result or action occur. This structure is apparent, but what is the amount of information not being passed through these movements' linguistic transparency?

Confined behind the opacity of these ideologies is the fact that we are no longer being critical of schools of thought, art movements, or political parties, but rather their entire institutional frameworks. This is why the antagonist figures opposed to an institution—whether it is artistic, political, or socio-economic—approach the organization and incorporate, co-opt, commodify, and misappropriate its once-radical uninstitutionalized practices. Unfortunately there is a historical specificity to any critical/political intervention and the effectiveness will always be limited to that time. These historical sites of intervention all develop a discourse around their effectiveness and that discourse is always rooted in the rhetoric of the very institution it opposes. It is here that a movement becomes a highly ideological form of escapism, renouncing its role in the perpetuation of any said institution. It is not about being inside or outside of the apparatus or the production, distribution, and presentation of apparatus, but a self-censorship to maintain the institution that have caused the radicals to become the establishment once rejected. The radicals have assumed their role within a tautology of the enemy, forgetting the proletariat. It is this epoch that plagues our place in history, perpetuates a feeling of futility in citizens, and expands the rhetoric of power. In this gloomy painting, where can one locate the position that the owl of Minerva will fly at dusk through the window of historical materialism but in satire and irony? In an analogy from Northrop Frye, depicting a scene from Dante's Hell, we begin to see the possibilities for necrophilia:

*At the bottom of Dante's hell which is also the center Of the spherical earth, Dante sees Satan standing Upright in a circle of ice and as he cautiously follows Virgil over the hip and thigh of the evil giant, letting himself down by the tufts of hair on his skin, he passes the center and finds himself no longer going down but going up, climbing out on the other side of the world to see the stars again. From this point of view the devil is no longer upright, but standing on his head in the same attitude he was hurled downward from heaven upon the other side of earth. Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of*

*all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no further but if we persevere with the mythos of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up.*

It is not a *tabula rasa* that I am prescribing here but a change in tactics. One lesson we can take from satire and irony is the foil which the satirist must employ. Walter Benjamin said that an author whom teaches a writer nothing teaches nobody anything; that it was the exemplary character of production that could lead other producers to a better apparatus. He believed this apparatus would lead consumers to become producers, co-workers, and collaborators, rising out of readership and spectatorship. He used Brecht's Epic Theatre as his model and this becomes what we know of the basic politics of

participation, the same sense of participation that appears and reappears in 1917, 1968, and 1989. The apparatus that seems the most likely to form the most viewers or readers into collaborators that get to creatively determine its content today appears in satire, and we must look literally to what Benjamin calls the exemplary character of production. This seems almost too simple and boring to represent in language. But take into consideration the only connection between satyr and satire, which is the subversive nature of the satyrs themselves, as forces in opposition to urbanity. The satirist wears a foil or facade of coercion distinguishing him or herself from the author. This often manifests as rustic, with pastoral affinities, and can also form as an idiot. This produces an *Eiron* type character that usually succeeds in bringing his blowhard opponent down by making himself seem like less than he actually is. When adapted into a preacher or even an intellectual, it becomes a sort of *a fortiori* argument: If people cannot reach even ordinary common sense or church porch virtue then there is little point in comparing them to any higher standards. I am not naïve enough to believe that this too will not ultimately be absorbed into the complex of ideology, but it appears to be one of the most effective channels for progress today.

*Breaking Through to the Other Side* of the suspicious spectators bombarded by media deterrence. Contemporary masters of this include Sarah Palin, Stephen Colbert, and the GOP funded Tea Party. Colbert, the American political satirist that portrays a caricatured version of a conservative political

pundit, plays the role of a well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-powered media idiot that embraces conservative views. There is romanticism in the way his persona oversimplifies ideals by imposing them on experience—letting the viewer piece together the difficulty of communication through the fragmentary, unfinished, and autonomous portrayal; inventing a sympathetic collaborator out of the viewer, who slowly weaves a tapestry of fragments back into logical ideas, attempting to bring out the heroic aspects instead of making fun of the humanity his character possesses; breaking down customary associations by changing the hero into an ass and showing us how humanness looks from an ass' point of view. This type of fantasy brings out a tentative *als ob* basis in all our thinking. This provisional basis proposes a willingness to accept the fictions of the world in order to live peacefully among the irrational. It stresses the humanity of its heroes, minimizes some of the ritualistic inevitability of tragedy, supplies reasoning for catastrophe and makes as much human misery as possible seem unnecessary. This is perhaps only a regional codex sympathetic to the disenfranchisement of many Americans, a model that will also fall victim to historical specificity. But it appears to be a model with slight traction.

## HERE FROM WAR

FREDERICK DEKNATEL

"2004, I was still in Iraq. I trusted in change, but I didn't find what I hoped. Step by step life stopped." Omar was sitting in a park at the bottom of his neighborhood in Mezze, a suburb west of central Damascus. It was mid-summer and extraordinarily hot. We had just strolled through a sports club at the edge of the park that had a swimming pool; we should go swim soon, Omar said, and then afterward we could play ping-pong because the club has that too.

Mezze is mostly the embassies and villas of foreigners and wealthy Syrians, while on the hill above, in a neighborhood called Mezze Jebel, hasty buildings rise in cheap concrete, exposed telephone wires hanging over narrow, steep streets. Mezze Jebel is home to Alawites, an esoteric offshoot of Shi'ism to which the ruling Assad family



belongs, but has more recently hosted Iraqi refugees, among them Omar and a few other Iraqi painters I knew two years ago in Damascus.

"I wanted to live like everybody can live on earth," Omar said. "I thought of travel and by chance met with a painter friend who went to and from Jordan selling paintings." He was telling the brief story of how he got to Syria. Omar was a popular interview subject who opened his studio-like apartment to journalists and visitors from the UNHCR. I met him on one of these more formal visits, first going to his apartment with my boss at the UNHCR in the winter, when Mezze Jebel was thrashed with cold wind off the desert plain. I had just started working in the Public Information Unit, the United Nations' name for a communications office, assisting on a project supporting Iraqi refugee artists in Syria. We talked to Omar and took photos of his paintings, and talked about plans for a website and exhibition to promote his and others' work.

Not long after I was going to Omar's almost once a week, but not for work. He invited me, my roommate, and a few other Americans—all of us Arabic students, some also part-time UN employees and journalists—for evenings of whiskey with his friends. These were sustained celebrations; we would drink until the early hours of the morning. We drank whiskey straight, with ice, and mixed with Bison, a kind of knock-off Red Bull. Everyone was a chain-smoker.

The formalities of hospitality were practiced in always offering new cigarettes. Omar traveled occasionally to Baghdad, returning with higher-grade American Marlboros. Fueled by whiskey and the rhythm of cigarettes, the evenings progressed from memories of Baghdad to talk of the art markets in the Middle East and America and how much they should sell their paintings for in Damascus. My roommate, a student of classical Arabic poetry, would interrupt to recite some lurid Abbasid line about wine and women (or boys), and the conversation would veer somewhere else, invariably to a raunchy joke.

Not everyone drank, among them Omar's Iraqi artist friends who preferred tea or soda. One of them was Alaa, who was also an interior designer. He had been in Damascus for five years. The American invasion ended his design office in Baghdad. He lost customers first to checkpoints. Freedom of movement was the first loss of war. Then in 2004 extremists broke in, burning what they didn't steal. "They killed everyone, not only artists," Alaa told me in his cramped studio, which was one room in his packed family apartment down the hill from Omar. His large, lively canvases, more abstract than Omar's work, were rolled-up, unsold. "Jihadis would threaten us, calling us *kafirs* (unbelievers) because of our art, because of the style or subject of our work." Alaa said he was never threatened directly, yet "threats were all around. When you see everyone getting killed, you wait your turn."

Another of Omar's friends was Waleed, a measured, soft-spoken painter who left Iraq in 2008 after threats from militants who disapproved of his representation of the human form in his work. Waleed's paintings, like many of the Iraqi artists in Syria, reflected Baghdad University's College of Fine Arts' obsession with post-Impressionism, although Omar's paintings owed more to Chagall. One painting, with the yellow and brown of the desert, was the countryside south of Baghdad where in 2003, Waleed said, "I went with my family, to wait for the war to stop." Another was the historic quarter of Baghdad, now mostly lost: two willowy figures, stretched out and swaying in the dust, in a market. Waleed said only of this painting: "Baghdad's Old City does not exist as it once did."

Sitting in the park in the summer, with my own notebook in hand for once, I listened to Omar's stories in the bright daylight – no longer late at night, nursing a glass of Johnny Walker Red and trading cigarettes for a spoonful of hummus, the preferred Iraqi way to eat mashed chickpeas.

As Baghdad became blackouts, checkpoints, and bombings, Omar said, "I started taking pictures to Amman. And all the pictures are selling." The travel got expensive, and dangerous, "so I decided to stay in Amman. But it was my first time away from home. I cried my first night there." Omar's English was always expressive. He said honest, personal things without hesitation. A second language can do that, when unfamiliarity with tone and pace actually allows words to come more easily. You think about what you're trying to say, simply, never hesitant because of how it may sound. "I cried because of the Jordanians."

The Jordanian government opened their borders to wealthy Iraqis. A residency permit could only be acquired with \$100,000 in the bank. If you couldn't settle permanently in Amman, Omar said, the Jordanians didn't accept you. You were stereotyped, blamed for rising prices, for crime, for any changes in society. Syria was more welcoming—the government designated its peak of some million and a half Iraqi refugees as "Arab guests as visitors," code for their eventual return to Iraq. But it was also common in Damascus to explain spikes in food prices and apartment rent on all the Iraqi refugees who had flooded the city. From 2006 to 2007, when Iraq's civil war raged, the UN said two to four thousand Iraqis entered Syria daily.

"Step by step I made contact with Iraqi artists. I stayed in Amman for a year until the hotel bombings"—the coordinated attacks on three hotels in Jordan in late 2005. "Iraqis did that, sent by Zarqawi," Omar said. "The Jordanians turned on the Iraqis so I went back. I went back to Baghdad for three



months. It was the beginning of 2006."

Soon after, in February, the thousand-year-old al-Askari shrine, one of Shi'ism's holiest sites, was bombed in Samarra, its golden dome destroyed. Iraq fell into civil war: a thousand people were killed in a single day in reprisals that followed the bombing. Many of the Iraqis I met in Syria had fled in 2006 and 2007, "when the war started between the Shia and the Sunni."

"I had no other way, no other choice, just Syria, so I went," Omar said. "I start from zero, have little money, and it's hard to sell pictures—ten dollars, fifteen, twenty dollars in the best situation. The war in Iraq between

the Shia and Sunni goes on. I'm thinking of my family and trying to take them to Syria, but they don't trust in traveling."

Omar went back to Iraq for his family and convinced them to leave for Syria: "We see everybody being killed in the street and the people who kill in the street. Many times we found bodies near our house or at our door, and we can only think, we are next."

A friend of Omar's, another painter, said he came to Syria with his art supplies strapped to the roof of a car, the picture of an artist in exile. Omar's flight was more drawn out, and often he traveled in coach buses across the hard, brownish desert. After more than two years in Damascus, his family began to return to Baghdad. His father went first, to find a new house. After a month he settled on a place in Dora, once a diverse southern suburb home to a majority of Christians that became an epicenter of Iraq's sectarian strife. Sunni extremists took it over after the American invasion, targeting Christians and Shia. When extremists were driven out and violence subdued, the salvaged neighborhood, like so many in Baghdad, was ethnically cleansed. "All Sunnis," Omar said. "Al Qaeda killed many, many Shia there." This is a fact of the new Iraq—Sunnis and Shias living in separate neighborhoods that were once mixed, separated by blast walls.

Omar stayed in Damascus after the rest of his family returned to Iraq. He maintains it is his choice, that he is not a refugee, but an artist, and so, in another way, he has no other choice. The cultural life he knew in Baghdad is gone, and there is a version of it in Damascus. "There was movement in Baghdad," Alaa said of their city before the war, "galleries, art schools, exhibitions."

Omar makes more money off his art now, selling paintings to diplomats, emerging galleries, and even the new Four Seasons hotel, visible in the distance from Omar's apartment in Mezze Jebel, a postmodern ziggurat pierced with giant, green panes of glass.

I was always wary of the dealer around the corner from my apartment in the Old City, who bought paintings from Omar in bundles and marked them up individually for the French and Belgian tourists. I told Omar and he felt he didn't have a choice. Competing with Syrian artists was necessarily uneven. "A Syrian artist is here in his own country, where everything is in his or her own place. We are here from war."

## IN LIEU OF HG MASTERS

Since you did not visit me in Tel Aviv this winter—I understand your reasons—allow me to imagine showing you around Tel Aviv as I puzzle over why the city is home to so many public artworks.

We are standing outside the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, looking at Zadok Ben-David's tableau *Troubles in the Square* (2006), steel cutouts of half-sized human figures festooned with

life-sized crows. Perhaps we would put aside, for the moment, how to read the invasion of these menacing, black birds into the routines of 'White City' residents and instead look across King Saul Avenue. There, above a barbed-wire-topped concrete wall rises the Matcal Tower of the Camp Rabin complex, the Israeli Defense



Forces' headquarters. The 17-story cube, completed in 2003, is framed in white-painted steel girders. I would note that it resembles a Sol LeWitt sculpture, except for its blue windows

and the funnel-shaped helicopter pad rammed through the building's center. Beyond the Matcal Tower are the three towers of the Azrieli Center and shopping mall: one with a circular footprint (completed in 1999), the others with a triangular (1999) and a square base (2007), respectively. All three share a uniform, white grid of external supporting columns and blue-tinted windows. Taken together, the four geometric buildings—a cube, a box, a cylinder and a triangular prism—are visually harmonized with one another, camouflaged even.

You wouldn't need to be reminded that white and 'dark sky-blue' are the colors of the Israeli flag, which is itself based on the *Tallit*, the Jewish prayer shawl. I would then remark that just as most Israelis (both men and women, but excluding citizens of Palestinian heritage and *Haredim*, ultra-orthodox Jews) are also soldiers, civilian and security complexes here are architecturally integrated. If you seemed skeptical about my claim, I would mention Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal's research on the architecture of the 'civilian occupation' of the Palestinian Territories. And though I would concede that Tel Aviv is far from being a West Bank settlement (it was founded on the sand dunes north of Jaffa by extremists of a different religious order, the German-Lutheran millennialists known as the Templers), the White City is the nexus of this imperialist logic, in which there is no clear demarcation between a military agenda of conquest and civil society. And then I might observe that in the same manner, Tel Aviv's many public artworks often double as monuments, war memorials or propaganda, fulfilling nationalistic as well as aesthetic functions.

To lighten the mood, I would then wager—knowing full well there is no easy way to verify this claim—that Tel Aviv is home to more modernist public sculptures per capita than any other city in the world. As we bike along the tree-covered boulevards or stroll along the three-mile-long beachfront promenade, I would point out that we are almost always within eye-sight of a metal, concrete or stone object that—in most cases, I regrettably concede—is immediately recognizable as an artwork. At some point on the historic Rothschild Boulevard, I would stop to wonder aloud why in Tel Aviv, located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, a place of near-perfect climate and lush foliage, and filled with some of the most elegant Bauhaus-inspired architecture in the world, did city planners, municipal functionaries, artists and residents decide again and again over the last half-century that these attributes were not enough. There seems to be an anxious subtext to all this decision-making—*A world-class metropolis must have public artwork*—as well as traces of concern about establishing the permanence, moral legitimacy and secure future for Tel Aviv, or indeed any Israeli city.

Many of Tel Aviv's in-situ sculptures—I've counted more than 100 in my explorations during my first few weeks here and many are indexed by the US-photographer Richard Margolis on [israelpublicart.com](http://israelpublicart.com)—serve as monuments or memorials, though their function isn't always immediately evident. On a walk to the old port area in the city's north, I would take you to see Benjamin Tammuz's geometric rendering of a bird mid-flight, *Pilots Memorial* (1952). What I first assumed to be a simple, handsome sculpture of a bird is in fact a tribute to Eddie Cohen, the first Israeli Air Force pilot to die in the War of Independence, during an assault on Egyptian troops advancing from Ashdod toward Tel Aviv on May 29, 1948. Rising on a concrete column above the bluffs of Independence Park overlooking the sea, the sculpture poignantly evokes the pilot's airborne solitude, heroism, and idealism.

As in every modern city—and Tel Aviv, incorporated in 1909, is a true 20th-century creation—there are plenty of groan-inducing behemoths, and Independence Park has several. There is Dov Feigin's red-painted steel cubist-style deconstruction of a guitar from 1982, and Boaz Vaadia's very unlovely, lumpy pair of figures with their arms folded *Asa & Yehoshafat* (2000), carved from stacks of bluestone. If I were feeling cynical on that day, I might grumble about how as rulers of the ninth century BCE Kingdom of Judah, the father and son dynasty of Asa and Yehoshafat controlled the area that today includes the occupied cities of Bethlehem and Hebron, and that 'Judea' is the name used by settlers to make specious historical claims on Palestinian land in the West Bank south of Jerusalem. But to those who don't recognize the ancient names, *Asa & Yehoshafat* might simply resemble any of the elderly couples in the park watching the sunset.

We could then discuss why in the recent past—the 1970s and 1980s were the heyday—societies collectively believed that positioning large-scale artworks outdoors in urban and natural environments provided some universal social good, beautifying space while educating the public. Or is public sculpture merely supposed fill in where landscape architecture could not, occupying space with little or no required maintenance?

If public artworks no longer make sense to us as beautification, edification or architectural embellishment, that doesn't mean there aren't interesting or affecting objects from public art's golden years. I would certainly take you to see German-born Yigal Tumarkin's *Holocaust and Revival* (1974), a six-meter-tall pyramid resting on its point and dominating the southern end of Rabin Square. Even on the most carefree and sunny Tel Aviv afternoon, the precarious, inverted position of the giant pyramid evokes a culture decimated by the murder of six million European Jews. Its 20-meter-long form reaches over the square like the prow of a ship, echoing the voyages across the Mediterranean of *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim* refugees to Mandate Palestine and post-independence Israel.



With vertical steel beams that let the sunlight filter through its imposing minimalist form, Tumarkin's *Holocaust and Revival* is appropriately weighty and iconic, and as such it is a landmark. A friend once referred to it solely by making a triangle with the thumb and index fingers of her two hands, as in: *Meet you at the triangle*.

Most public artworks cannot be said to possess the same purposefulness, and here is where my incredulity about their necessity takes over. I

would be compelled to show you several puzzling examples in the handsome Yarkon Park, which borders the city to the north and is dotted with monumental-scale objects. Among them is a whitewashed, sinuous concrete wall by Yitzhak Danziger, entitled *Serpentine* (1975). As it curves, the height of the sculpture rises and falls, creating small enclosures reminiscent of a Richard Serra form. But sadly, though Danziger's wall was built now more than 35 years ago, today the concrete structure immediately recalls the snaking path and enclosures of the Separation Wall, the eight-meter-tall monolithic form that, just 11 miles to the east, insidiously winds across the landscape. I would then tell you about stumbling across a picture of another public art project, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence* (1976) in Sonoma and Marin counties in California, and for a horrifying split-second mistaking their temporary, five-meter-high fabric wall for the Israeli barrier.

On your visit we wouldn't, and couldn't, avoid seeing this dismal icon of contemporary Israel-Palestine, in Bethlehem, from Jerusalem and on the way to Ramallah. On that latter journey, taking the #18 service (shared taxi) north from the East Jerusalem bus station, but before the Qalandia checkpoint, we would pass another public sculpture, one that marks conquered territory in perhaps the most overt manner of any artwork in Israel. Just as we pass Eshkol Avenue Junction on Nablus Road, the white-painted concrete forms of Kiev-born, longtime Condé Nast art director and editor Alexander Lieberman's *Faith* (1987) come into view. A jumble of sliced cylinders, large curving planks and ring shapes piled on top of one another surrounded by a field of manicured grass, *Faith* announces itself as the marker of Israeli establishment in East Jerusalem on the contested Mount Scopus. It is the last public sculpture we would see until we arrived at the four stone lions in Ramallah's central al-Manara Square. When exactly the sculptures arrived (sometime in the 1990s), why there are four (possibly representing the number of original Ramallah family clans), who made them (they might have been imported from China), and why one of them is wearing a watch on its paw—are all topics of speculation. But there we could see whether Palestinian teenagers had returned to their hunger strike to promote a Fatah-Hamas unity government. Over tea from a red-suited, fez-wearing vendor, we could speculate

about what it would mean to make public art and architecture in a post-occupation-era Israel, Palestine, or whatever unified nation comes next—one where, to everyone's relief, beauty and conquest would be distinctly and definitively at odds.



## THE BEST MUSEUM IMAGINABLE WOULD HAVE:

LARRY RINDER

- All-ages interactive art appreciation classes
- A piano
- A gallery lit only by natural light
- A gallery lit by a candle
- All the paintings of Vermeer
- Floors with radiant heat (no shoes allowed)
- No digital education kiosks
- The Dieter Roth archives
- Anything Justin Bond thinks it should have
- A restaurant serving Lithuanian food and beer
- Bathrooms designed by Joe Holtzman
- Occasional hip hop music
- Something meaningful for the melancholy
- Annual meetings of the G8
- A theater with thrift-store couches instead of chairs
- No need to distinguish between trained and untrained artists
- A daily YouTube video
- All the money it needs
- Hand calligraphed object labels
- Predominantly teenage visitors
- Sunday morning gospel concerts
- A curator of lace
- At least 20% of its annual contributions from professional poets
- At least 20% of its annual contributions from venture capital firms
- Free admission
- Cats

# FIRE PAINTING

SANELA JAHIĆ

This is a story of a perfectionist who is an artist and decides to make an apparatus by playing with fire. Faced with the real-unreal distinction, the pursuit of perfect is conspicuous in the quack-quack of common sense. The Perfectionist's life is a rat race. You, a rat with perfectionist tendencies, are stranded on a treadmill, stretching and straining yourself compulsively and unremittingly towards the flawless, faultless, ideal vision you are after: a perfected digital image rather than flesh and blood. That is before your humanity, your imperfection, slaps you in the face and knocks you right off the treadmill.

Tal Ben-Shahar writes, "your world is ostensibly simple: things are right or wrong, good or bad, the best or the worst. These are the only categories that exist. No grey areas, no nuances or complexities, no middle ground to dare to lose one's footing momentarily—solely the extremes of the continuum. All or nothing. And a true Perfectionist takes the existence of extremes to the extreme." In a perfectionist fantasy world, nothing is impossible. You have taken to humming Eminem's new song—"I'm going to be what I set out to be without a doubt undoubtedly, and all those who look down on me I'm tearing down your balcony"—absurd and pathetic as it sounds. You have zero intention of reading the five minute guide to quitting the rat race or, for that matter, changing your all-or-nothing approach and adopting the 80/20 Pareto Principle rule.

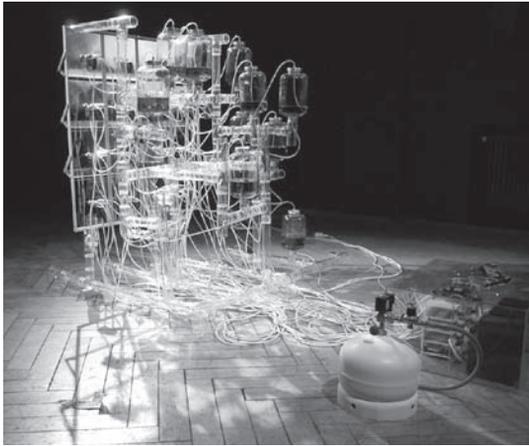
With an unyielding and rigidly mechanical mind-set ill-suited for modern fluidity, you are an emotional and cognitive dogmatist plagued by closed-heartedness and closed-mindedness. Dogmatic and not wanting to be a slacker, you take the mantra 'No pain, no gain' in the wrong direction and set yourself to repeating the quote made famous by one California governor when he was still the Terminator: "I am a machine."

This done, imagine yourself as a perfectionist. Now make yourself into an artist. What corpus would your artwork elicit and what would it illustrate, advocate or testify to? The work you create might as well be a machine of some sort since you have already declared yourself as one, your approach and your qualities being very much machinelike—A machine which proves your theory and upholds your practice—in short, it embodies you and your doctrine. You put yourself on par with it, positioning yourself to see through it. Better still, you resemble a slug inserted into a slot machine.

Because the Perfectionist perpetually swings between, on one hand, high hope and great expectations and, on the other, disillusionment and frustration—from affirmation to negation and back, and forth, and back...until the motor of contradiction

ated by your reverie—created and limited by your reverie—for it is the reverie which delineates the furthest limits of your mind." Such a mind is conducive both to the acquisition of a neurosis and to the writing of manifestos: "one can find paradise in fire's movement or in its repose, in the flame or in the ashes."<sup>4</sup> Fire transforms into light through a process of idealization, which is the principle of transcendence. Look at the

eternal flames: there is one burning in Sarajevo in memory of the military and civilian victims of the Second World War, one in Moscow to honor the dead of the Great Patriotic War, one in Budapest commemorating the revolutionaries of the 1956 uprising against control by the Soviet Union.



Many of these very real annihilations happened at the hands of False Marias.<sup>5</sup>

But why do you insist on calling your bloody machine a painting? The tube of paint, the canvas, the brush, the flat surface covered with colors—this is what others usually associate with this name. Why does your work deserve to be called a painting? And where then should you look for the missing link?

You ponder the *Fire Painting* in relation to Wajcman's writing on Duchamp and Malevich. Malevich is set in a certain collective with Duchamp: a club of Terminators. But why do you feel so presumptuous as to set yourself in a collective with these two? First immediate connection: It is indeed a funny and strange coincidence that "Duchamp first conceived his *Bicycle Wheel* as a flame in the fireplace, which one contemplates with absorbed eyes, as a mutable, unsettled and pleasant object that is almost absent from itself and is instead inhabited by one's captured yet vagabond thoughts: a meditative spinning wheel for long winter nights. Some sort of an altar for gazes." Second immediate connection: Wajcman sees Malevich's *Black Square* as a huge black square of dynamite.<sup>6</sup> Third immediate connection (which brings the first two together to make itself the first immediate abstract): in *Fire Painting* that square of dynamite goes off—exploding, setting up a nice fireplace as an altar for gazes.

You don't call the *Fire Painting* a painting in the way you would call a chestnut a chestnut. You baptize it a painting out of aesthetic conviction; you approach painting as an idea, a *cosa mentale*. Regarding the issue of specificity attached to the word "painting," it was Greenberg who said: "The

limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into the arbitrary object." *Fire Painting* transgresses the essential norms of painting and its limiting conditions by the abandonment, destruction, or deconstruction of pictorial conventions.

In Wajcman's investigation, which is concerned with the integrity of a picture plane, many clues show that a painting is a liar. Painting shows that illusion is nothing more than a little paint on the surface. That makes you cringe. Determined to shame the lying illusionism, you ignite your own painting, the *Fire Painting*, with a shout: "Burn, baby, burn!" Here is a violent imperative: against the painting-that-gives-to-perceive in the form of illusion, and for the painting as action-interruption-rift. In such trailblazing action the flames of

combustion swallow the canvas, the surface, and the picture plane. The flatness of the stretched canvas is annihilated, the bearer of illusion stripped bare, the picture plane replaced by a different surface—a surface made out of flames, a fiery surface that is fired up by an iconoclastic rage only to fall like the curtain over illusion.

Such a fire curtain is at once the surface and the image. Now this is the crux of the matter. "Fire surpasses every image and every word. It is the principle of the essential ambiguity which is not without charm. This charm is so well defined that it has become banal to say, 'We love to see a log fire burning in the fireplace.' It has the power to warp the minds of the clearest thinkers and to keep bringing them back to the poetic fold in which dreams replace thoughts and poems conceal theorems." You can give in to its seductive maneuvering appeal, close your eyes, and trade the weight of reality for the good of I-don't-know-what-kind-of elevating feelings, imagination or dreams, illusions or utopias. Such is the affective power of fire, that it "creates images out of desire; it is a source of reveries. Yet reveries represent futility; they are as unsubstantial as flames." Finally, fire is pure. "At the extreme limit, at the point of flame, where color gives way to an almost invisible vibration. Then fire is dematerialized; it loses its reality; it becomes pure spirit."<sup>6</sup> At the end of this chain you consider the bids and summarize them with the following baptism: *Fire Painting* is the perfect, ultimate, pure painting.

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is exhausted—an element is engaged in the machine to properly mirror the existence between extremes with no midpoints. Among all phenomena it is the ultra-living element of fire in which you may lay claim to the opposing states that shake you. Prometheus stole fire from the gods (idealism) and gave it to humans (realism). "Fire rises from the depths of the substance and it plunges back down into the substance and hides there, pent-up, like hate or vengeance, it shines in Paradise and it burns in Hell, it is cookery and it is apocalypse, thus it can carry the ridiculous into the sublime, a phenomenon both monotonous and brilliant, a really total phenomenon that contradicts itself; 'the intensity of fire cannot be measured by the egg timer—the egg is done when a drop of water, a drop of saliva, evaporates on the shell'—yet fire can link the small to the great, oscillate between destruction and renewal."<sup>2</sup> Fire passes the irony of a joke: art means anything and everything (whatever), as does fire.

You choose to make much of the construction of the fire-staging device out of transparent material—glass—which keeps up with the marching clarity of an illusion, at once absurd and transparent. The glass construction disappears, yet here it is, paradoxically belied with fragility, prone to breakage at any given moment of carelessness, accident or mistake. Your machine is to be a paradox-object that simultaneously embodies thesis and antithesis, a self-contradiction really. After all, you are a perfectionist who is an artist and the life of such is rich with absurd contradictions. Take some comfort in this: "To be a paradox-object seems to be the normative requirement for any contemporary work or artwork. Fill the artwork with a potentially infinite plurality of interpretations, that are open in their meaning, that do not impose on the spectator any specific ideology, or theory, or faith. And make sure that this appearance of infinite plurality is, of course, only an illusion."<sup>3</sup> You are also in luck here because you are dealing with fire, the ultimate self-contradicting phenomenon and a complete paradoxical element.

"Fire feeds itself like a living creature, and for a modern mind to feed a fire has become a commonplace synonym for keeping it going with all the charge of the original naïveté." You subscribe to Bachelard's view: "Psychically, you are cre-

**BOOTLEG OBIT:**  
**DIETER ROTH,**  
**RECLUSIVE ARTIST**  
**AND TIRELESS**  
**PROVOCATEUR, 68**

**BY MICHAEL KIMMELMAN**  
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Dieter Roth, a prolific, notoriously irascible, reclusive and eccentric German-born artist-provocateur who built a formidable reputation in Europe but remained something of a mystery in America, in part because he permitted his work to be exhibited here even more rarely than there, died on Saturday in Basel, Switzerland, where he had a home. He was 68.

He had heart problems, Carol Eckman, his New York dealer, said.

Mr. Roth was a sculptor, performer, book designer, poet, graphic artist, publisher and musician, sort of. Born Karl-Dietrich Roth in Germany in 1930, the son of a sugar beet farmer, he and a brother were sent for safekeeping in 1943 to Switzerland, a country that has always seemed to attract and cultivate people of nomadic and unusual temperament like him. He settled at a hostel for refugees in Zurich, where he stayed for four years and studied Greek, Latin and French at the local secondary school.

He began to exhibit in 1958. With fellow artists Hermann Nitsch and Gunter Brus, he did improvisatory concerts of cacophonous music. He staged a concert of howling dogs. Once he collaborated with Richard Hamilton, the English artist, on an exhibition for dogs (the pictures, of sausages and other images he thought would be of special interest to them, were hung at dog-eye level).

In 1975, he founded the *Zeitschrift fur Alles*, a journal that published anything submitted to it. In Los Angeles, he conceived an installation of 40 suitcases filled with different types of cheese. He often made sculptures out of fugitive materials like baked dough, chocolate, mayonnaise and rabbit droppings (fortunately, not all at the same time). Their natural deterioration, which he equated with his own death, became an integral part of his art.

All of this situated Mr. Roth within a post-war European scene that included Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and others who experimented with unorthodox techniques and who generally tried to blur the boundaries between performance and sculpture, theater and visual art, high culture and low.

He was perhaps best known as a maker of multifarious artist-books, hundreds of them. (One was as small as the eraser on a pencil; another, "Literaturwurst," consisted of various periodicals chopped up, mixed with lard and spices and stuffed into a sausage casing.)

He was famously reclusive and difficult, notwithstanding his friendships with artists. It was through Daniel Spoerri, for instance, that he met various members of the irreverent movement called Fluxus. Mr. Roth's link to Fluxus involved, among other things, his interest in music and sound, in ephemeral materials and in an anarchic kind of pranksterish humor.

But the dark undertone and furious, obsessive energy of his work ultimately separated him from many of the more lighthearted Fluxus artists. Perhaps despite himself, he was a fluent draftsman and expert printmaker, and his drawings and prints contained his wild energy within peculiarly virtuosic forms. Compared to the innumerable self-described artists of the last several decades who faked their way through his sort of work, Mr. Roth was the genuine item.

By nature he was tireless to the point of neurosis, and, among other things, this led him to experiment with numerous untested materials and techniques. "When I was young I wanted to become a real artist," Mr. Roth once reflected. "Then I started doing something I felt wasn't real art, and it was through this that I became a well-known artist."

For his only American retrospective, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1984, he agreed to attend the opening because much of what was on view belonged to a friend. But otherwise he was prickly about exhibitions. For his last show in New York, at the Nolan/Eckman Gallery earlier this year, he declined to cooperate. Throughout his life he refused to play the role of the eager artist responding to a gallery or museum. It was, to him, a matter of pride and independence.

In later years he moved between Basel and Iceland, where he lived in a remote house on a lake and also in Reykjavik. He is survived by two sons, Karl and Bjorn, and a daughter, Vera, and nine grandchildren.

Asked how he would like to be remembered after his death, Mr. Roth said, "Here lies the carcass of a man who didn't know who he was and where he was heading."