

Art|Basel

Isn't it ironic? No, it's Cringe: Dena Yago's defense of rising trends



Over the past decade working as a trend forecaster, I have amassed a collection of archival trend reports. While I don't consider myself a historian of this nebulous profession, I have taken an armchair interest in the tropes that run through it. Trend reports are formulaic: first, the subject's key traits are defined. Then they identify emerging behaviors and attribute those to generationally defining moments (the 2008 recession or COVID-19) or technological advancements (the birth of the Internet or the rise of TikTok). Following this macro view, they subsequently identify cultural phenomena that exemplify these shifts, for instance, popular film franchises (millennials and Harry Potter), emergence of new genres (Gen Z and Hyperpop), or specific artists (Lil Nas X).

Trends are an exercise in pattern recognition. In reports, I've recognized a recurring diagnosis of humor being a primary coping mechanism for dealing with a volatile, ambiguous, and uncertain reality, though the way it is expressed changes between generations. When asked to consider the state of humor and irony today, I retrieved an archival trend report from my shelf – 'GENERATION 2000'. Created in 1993 by the marketing department of the defunct magazine Details, it chronicles the plight of Gen X. The first of its 'six salient characteristics' is 'Absurdity Rules'. The opening sentence: 'Perhaps more than any other characteristic, a sense of humor distinguishes members of GENERATION 2000 from the baby boomers. They share a sense of the absurd and express it through irony.' Gen X's humor is supported by a strong sense of moral values, asking us to remember that 'irony assumes an understanding of how things should be.'

Irony is contingent on a shared cultural narrative, which we've seen dissolve in recent years. Any shared understanding of how things should be is up for debate. In the early 1990s, once the Cold War was ending, American self-definition was undermined. America's Gen X alleviated its despondency through sarcasm and irony with a deeply cynical bent (see the 1994 film Reality Bites). Irony allows for a detached coolness, enabling distance from the hypocritical, jading reality they are critiquing.

In the mid-and late 1990s and early 2000s, slapstick humor, raunch, and physical comedy nearly dethroned irony, as can be seen with cultural phenomena like the TV show Jackass and Rotten.com. An artwork equivalent might be Damien Hirst's *Two Fucking and Two Watching* (1995), a sculpture featuring rotting cow and bull carcasses that New York City public health officials banned because of fears of 'vomiting among the visitors.' Irony returned after 9/11 with the early Vice-era hipster where, under trucker hats, a thinly veiled white class grievance was fomenting. Irony is useful in maintaining plausible deniability and a distancing from destructive ideology, but when ironic speech becomes mainstream, acceptable discourse, the distance collapses, and irony hardens into ideology. Irony is most potently used as a form of critique by people lacking power to bring attention to the hypocrisies and contradictions of those in it. When those in power utilize it, it's a form of punching down, not up.



Asked to examine whether irony is still a legitimate cultural response in art during the culture wars that continue to rage – the prompt for this essay – I contemplated writing ‘no’ to the maximum word count. This would not be an ironic response, though it would be somewhat cynical. Irony will never die, but it exists alongside other on-trend modes of humor. The emergence of one trend does not preclude the extinction of another. In addition to the coexistence of temporal trends, each trend has an equal and opposite countertrend.

A false dichotomy often used in cultural analysis on irony is that its oppositional counterpart is sincerity. One does not rule out the other, because a person can be very, very sincere in the messages they are thinly cloaking as ironic. One of many counterpoints to irony, however, is the recent emergence of Cringe, and the content that has come to represent it across the cultural sphere. Cringe is the awkwardness that occurs when someone sincerely expresses themselves and is largely unaware of how their expression is received. Cringe is not inherently a form of comedy, but humor emerges at the disjuncture between an artwork, video, or performance's intention and reception. It can be seen on social media, where people sing their own songs terribly or over-eagerly show off cosplay outfits and unflattering selfies. I took an informal poll asking artist peers which contemporary artists might be Cringe – responses included Marina Abramović, Kaws, and Yoko Ono. A through-line would be a level of sincerity that creates deep discomfort in the viewer, or a disconnect between an artist's self-perceived coolness and how they are received by a critical audience. I'll be the first to admit that this essay is Cringe.

Dena Yago, Art Basel, August 2021

Embracing Cringe is a coping strategy, allowing for complexity and contradiction in a society that rejects both. As an adjective and a noun Cringe describes art and other content that demonstrates a lack of self-awareness (read: a lack of strategic distancing or plausible deniability provided by irony).

One genre that is by and large Cringe is Fanfiction – works created by fans who use material from a broader canon to widen the narrative universe of a fictional series. Over the past two decades, it's become a way for stories like Harry Potter or The Walking Dead to include otherwise marginalized narratives – a Fanfiction creator can queer a cast of characters, changing their identities to represent their own. Fanfiction can educate a public on minor histories, or emergent facets of contemporary society.



Fanfiction does not create new cultural forms, but imbues old ones with new meanings, allowing characters to grapple with their written fates, and freeing them to become mouthpieces for other modes of speech. Fanfiction gets the pill down easier. It is a creative tool for subverting cultural forms, while making dense observations on contemporary life accessible to broad audiences. It is a form I employ in my art practice through known cultural characters and narrative canons: whether it be 101 Dalmatians (1996), The Sorcerer's Apprentice, Mr. Peanut, Frank the Rabbit from Donnie Darko (2001), or Bambi's Thumper (1942), to name a few. I cross these characters with folk meme typologies, as well as recognizable cultural objects, such as the ubiquitous Amazon delivery bins.

I utilize known forms to bring up a more difficult cultural thematic surrounding the changing landscape of labor, or the role of the artist as knowledge worker. Fanfiction is a way to communicate, to make tough topics accessible, and to bust known narratives wide open to accommodate otherwise fringe narratives, characters, and conversations. If Fanfiction is Cringe, I am Cringe. To be Cringe is to be human.

Parallel to her visual work, artist Dena Yago is a founding member of the trend forecasting collective K-HOLE, best known for naming Normcore, the 2014 trend of the year. Addressing emerging cultural behaviors is at the core of Yago's visual and critical practice. Yago is represented by Bodega (New York City). In September, she is presenting a solo project with the gallery in the Statements sector of Art Basel in Basel.

All images of Yago and her studio by Peyton Fulford for Art Basel, 2021.

X—TRA

Of Boomers and Bass



Dena Yago, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish (detail)*, 2020. Chalk, charcoal, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

*For the Re:Research column, artist Dena Yago takes us into the as-seen-on-TV murk of Boomer pathos that spawned her latest exhibition, *Dry Season*, on view at Bodega, New York, from September 12 to October 24, 2020.*

Somewhere among my adolescent memories of George W. Bush—lodged between him choking on a pretzel and falling off of a Segway—is an image of him standing in his living room in Crawford, Texas, during the Florida election recount with Big Mouth Billy Bass mounted on the wall behind him. I imagine him parading former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and House Speaker Dennis Hastert before the animatronic fish, triggering its rendition of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” while millions of Americans sat in a state of suspended animation as the nation descended further into an ever-widening gyre of chaos.

Since 1998, the animatronic bass has accrued a layered, river scum-like patina of cultural signification. Superficially, it is nostalgic kitsch—a novelty item intended to communicate everything and nothing simultaneously. At its rubbery surface, the object feels most at home in a wood-paneled American pastoral: an uncle’s fishing lodge, a father’s workshop. These trophy fish hang in declaratively patriarchal spaces—spaces where men can be men, where dads can crack a beer and loosen their ties, where uncles can do whatever it is that uncles do behind closed doors. The fish is rumored to have graced the walls of Bush’s Oval Office. Bill Clinton gifted one to spurned presidential hopeful Al Gore. Big Mouth Billy Bass has become a transactional object among Boomer men both powerful and pedestrian. The fish’s unexpected animism elicited chuckles nationwide, and that was enough. Meanwhile, embedded in the object’s production and material signification was the imminent collapse of Boomer hegemony (which we have unfortunately not yet reached) and yet another nail in the coffin of American industrialism (designed in the USA, manufactured in China).

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2020

Knowing this, why wouldn't one of the most nefarious and inept American presidents—who followed Rumsfeldian vagaries into unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have, as of 2020, resulted in shy of three hundred thousand deaths—find peace in a novelty fish that, like a big-box store Lazarus, reanimates again and again to sing neoliberal mantras such as Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy," or Al Green's cleansing, baptismal tune, "Take Me to the River." With all that blood on your hands, Billy Bass may be the only figure telling you to chill out and seek redemption as you continue hurtling a nation towards financial, environmental, and ethical catastrophe.

My more recent interest in Big Mouth Billy Bass was piqued while watching the millennium-cresting HBO series *The Sopranos* twenty years after its premiere. At multiple points in the show, Tony Soprano is gifted, and subsequently haunted by, the singing fish. First, Billy is left on Tony's desk by an underling, where it prompts a nightmarish vision of Pussy, a friend whom he left to "sleep with the fishes," brought back to life in the form of a talking fish. Tony later uses Billy Bass as a weapon to beat up a bartender who mistakes the cursed object for harmless decor. His daughter, Meadow, unaware of the trauma it brings her father, gives Tony a Billy Bass for Christmas, setting off a dissociative state in the family patriarch. The fish appears once again during an exchange between the older Boomer Paulie Walnuts and his young Gen X protégé, Christopher Moltisanti. After a threatening "snitches get stitches"-style warning, Christopher sees Paulie reach in the back of his car and fears that he is pulling a gun. Instead, Paulie pulls out a Billy Bass and states, "My godson got me this. They're all over the place." After pressing the button, Christopher looks on in horror as the fish sings the lyrics to "YMCA": "Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground / There's no need to be unhappy." Both characters proceed to nervously and maniacally laugh as the threat of violence diffuses. In each of these episodes, Big Mouth Billy Bass serves as a vessel for Boomer pathos. It triggers memories of past violence and the potentiality of future violence. It becomes quite literally weaponized. It is the object through which trauma and violence, whether it be real or imagined, is passed intergenerationally from one man to another. Like many novelty items, Big Mouth Billy Bass is something to give the Boomer men in your life when there is nothing left to say.



Dena Yago, *Trawler* (detail), 2020. Audio, wood, enamel, Big Mouth Billy Bass, 30 x 27 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega, New York.

Dena Yago, X-TRA, December 7, 2020

I began writing the monologues for *Dry Season* in May of this year. Any frustration or antagonism in the text exists because of my own anger at how the coronavirus was being mismanaged, and how systemic racism and a state of policing remain widely unchanged in the US—in part, it seems, due to Boomers' incapability to see beyond their own self-interest. To clarify, Boomerism is not solely a demographic but rather a state of mind. One that fails to recognize its own privilege, that can only view the world through the lens of its own material conditions, that mistakes the anecdotal for the objective and the experience of one for the experience of many. Because of a fundamental breakdown of intergenerational understanding, *Big Mouth Billy Bass* seemed to be the optimal conduit for a family constellation therapy session among characters that stand in as generational archetypes.



Left to Right: Dena Yago, *Pitcher*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; Chum, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in.; *Pleader*, 2020, audio, wood, enamel, *Big Mouth Billy Bass*, 48 x 24 x 5 1/2 in. Installation view, *Dry Season*, Bodega, New York, September 12–October 24, 2020.

With a vague knowledge of what is needed to mod a readymade animatronic, plus the volume of YouTube videos and Reddit threads on the subject, it seemed feasible to reanimate the Billy Bass toward my specific ends. During my early research I learned of Billy Bass choirs angelically singing Handel's *Messiah*, the Bee Gees, and the Talking Heads. There are Alexa-enabled bass telling you about the weather in Samuel L. Jackson's voice and delivering lines from *Rush Hour 3*. And then there are many snuff films where Billy Bass meets its tragic end. Knowing that this was possible, I reached out to embedded systems engineer Sam Wolk. After de-skinning and disassembling the fish, we learned that there are three motors: head, body, and tail.

The fact that the fish originally turned its head at a nearly ninety degree angle off of the faux-wooden plaque is a key reason that Joe Pelletieri, Billy's inventor, believes the fish was such a success. "It really goes back to that head turn," he told *MEL Magazine*. "If it was just a wiggling fish on a plaque, we might

have sold some, but it would have been long forgotten.” The originally programmed movement of the fish’s body jerked off of the backboard with such violent force that you could hear a large thump whenever it returned to its still position. The violent erectness with which the flaccid trophy fish performed led me to believe that this full-body movement was seen as so appealing by its creator due to a latent anxiety, intuited or perceived, surrounding erectile dysfunction and decreased virility among Boomer men. All of these fathers and uncles were inviting their colleagues, family, and friends to walk by and gawk at an animatronic semi.

The fish in Dry Season are all mounted to wood panels, mimicking the fish- and speaker-mounting system on the original plaque. The hollowness of the panels greatly helped the audio amplification, but also amplified the violent thud every time the fish returned to resting. In order to avoid this, Sam and I decided to tailor the mouth, body, and tail movements of each fish to its particular personality. This was also necessary because I had sourced original Gemmy-produced Big Mouth Billy Bass, and wanted to protect their longevity by using softer movements. With a microprocessor and wireless radio system animating and cueing each fish, Sam was able to wirelessly synchronize them. We designated a “leader” fish, which then sent signals to each subsequent fish when it was their turn to speak. The scripts were all written as individual monologues, and there are minimal points of direct address among the fish. They speak in the royal “you,” “us,” and “them.” It intentionally seems incidental that their statements ever feel responsive to one another’s, even though, at the level of their program, they are communicating directly. The ham-fisted comparison is that this is not so dissimilar to contemporary public discourse as it plays out on top of highly synchronized, intentional algorithms that are architected to determine a specific outcome in favor of the platform over the user, no matter how discordant or destructive the conversation happening on top of it is.

After watching many Billy Bass both glitch out and function with uncanny seamlessness, I have a plan for the body doubles amassed in my studio. I hope that one day, be it the day that American cities divest from their police forces and invest in community-based alternatives, or the US truly commits to healthcare for all, or Amazon workers are able to unionize, I can synchronize all of their batteries dying simultaneously as a kind of twenty-one gun salute to a croaking Boomer ethos.

X—

Dena Yago is an artist and writer living in New York. She is a founding member of the trend-forecasting group K-HOLE.

Soft Serve

Consumption and affective labour in today's
corporate cafeterias



BY DENA YAGO

The American workman's metal lunchbox – filled with a triangular sandwich, apple, crisps and a soda – feels as anachronistic as the old-timey popcorn machine in the Playa Vista, Los Angeles, office – and the company-wide 'popcorn's ready' email sent daily at 4 pm. No lunch bell rings, as food no longer plays the role of bisecting one's day. Rather, it is continuously present in the form of snacks or small plates to be taken at will. You are your own master, self-assessing when you can reward yourself, when you can dip into the honey pot of amenities that mask an otherwise unliveable, always-on, flexible and ambiently present workday.

For approximately the past decade, my corporate working life has been marked by a sense of dread. A haunting feeling lingers that I am a modern-day Persephone about to be sentenced to a seasonal life in Hades for eating the damned fruits. Mythologically, these were pomegranate seeds, though for me they were anything from Taco Tuesdays at the in-house, subsidized cafeteria at the multinational advertising agency to Sushirritos offered by nearby food trucks. It was soggy wraps and vending machine sandwiches that I ate during my 3 pm-to-midnight shift in the IT department of a corporate law firm on the perimeter of Zuccotti Park. It was

Dena Yago,
Hands Full, 2019.
Courtesy: the artist,
High Art,
Paris, and Bodega,
New York

an endlessly filled wall of infantilizing cereal dispensers, a perverse and eternally refilled volume of Lucky Charms, or excessively moist romaine-lettuce salads in plastic containers during my short term in Fremont and Hawthorne – the industrial underbelly of Silicon Valley – working in communications as a social media creative manager. RFID-chipped superfruits and conflict grains were served from 'healthy alternatives' smart fridges, while an international buffet touted cuisines from far-off lands: Wednesday was Malaysian and Thursday brought Senegal to Palo Alto.

In an exertion of control over my own hunger and consumption, I mostly opted for the money-saving, but time-intensive, alternative of preparing and bringing my food from home. I had, after all, taken these jobs to pay off personal debt much lower than the American national average. But, I was also working towards and maintaining an attachment to what affect theorist Lauren Berlant defined in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) as the 'good life fantasy', an attachment that allows people to make it through day-to-day life even when the day-to-day has become unliveable. This was aspiration without the acknowledgement that the social institutions of stability granted to previous generations lay in ruins around me.

Instead, these meals became insultingly small moments of respite, which made an untenable situation palatable – small rewards after commuting two hours a day to do immaterial, cognitive and affective labour. Assorted salads, assembled bowls of rice and vegetables, soups and purées served to bring me back to myself, placating a default mode of dissociation in a corporate environment. One day, sitting on my ergonomic inflatable ball chair, I looked down at my thickened coconut carrot soup and realized I had made myself baby food. Control over the food, drink, psycho-pharmaceuticals and nootropic supplements that entered my body made this work bearable, which, in turn, postponed full acknowledgement of attritional labour's fatal aspects, in the sense that it kills you slowly.

Food and drink structure time – time that is not your own – within two other institutions that structure tempo: the temporality of debt and the speed of communication demanded from cognitive and affective workers.

Americans' personal debt amounts to an average of US\$38,000, including student loans and credit cards. Repaying this debt creates a temporal relationship

LUNCH BREAK

where 'the debtor is ensnared in a bond that enables the creditor to own the debtor's future'. As author and poet Jackie Wang emphasized during a talk she gave in Berlin in February titled 'Carceral Temporalities and the Politics of Dreaming', this is a temporality that people in the US live with in a paralyzingly intense way. Debt in America is not a moral failing, but an institutionalized predatory structure which disproportionately affects minorities and marginalized communities. The penal system structures time rigidly, resulting in modern prison life being described as 'doing hard time'. To be able to eliminate debt through work and to actively choose the form that this labour takes – what can be described as 'soft time' – is an inherently privileged position.

Today's start-ups and apps that fuel the gig economy, the foggy cottage industry of branding and strategy, and creative and cultural institutions have weaponized time as a form of social control. They promise that workers are the masters of their own, flexible, individualized time. This myth further isolates precarious labourers from one another, and thus from imagining themselves as a collective class – in turn, precluding collective action. When working under the nested temporalities of debt, high-speed and constant communication, the effects of time spent is physically inscribed on the worker's body. I could feel its impact almost immediately: the stiffness in your back, the strain on your eyes, the lack of sleep, the exhaustion that eliminates the possibility for imagining alternatives.

Control over my consumption became a way to ward off the etching of time on my body. I would take nootropic supplements and

"I will not ingest
the damned fruits and I will
own my hunger."

psycho-pharmaceuticals that created the effect of speeding up or slowing time. L-Theanine provided the focus that accelerated lingering afternoons. Ativan furnished the floating numbness that permitted me to not care. Microdosing psilocybin mushrooms enabled distraction and a wandering mind. CBD did something I couldn't put my finger on. Mediating what I did and did not ingest began to also feel like soft resistance. I prefer not to eat lunch with my co-workers; I will not be baited by sugar-laden amenities that would send serotonin signals to my brain. I will not drink energy drinks or take easily-available Adderall that would make me a more productive, more efficient and more enduring worker. I will not ingest, digest or excrete any of these products. I will not ingest the damned fruits and I will own my hunger.

Leaning on my standing desk in Fremont in my *en mode* French chore coat, I thought of Simone Weil spending time alongside the Renault factory workers in 1934 to experience the conditions of modern industry. She restricted her food consumption: an act of solidarity that also aligned with her ongoing, at times politically and spiritually minded, anorexia. For Weil, to ingest any food beyond what was

available to the workers, or rationed to French soldiers, was to ingest bourgeois excess, akin to digesting the ideology of capitalist labour. For myself, working at a company that spanned industrially scaled physical graft and immaterial knowledge work, it was clear that the cafeteria's food options catered differently to each group. In one section, there were electric-hued energy drinks and Flamin' Hot Cheetos, while diagonally across the room were Yerba Maté alternatives and chia-yogurt smoothies. This high-contrast stratification of nourishment is rooted in class difference, implying that the manual factory workers desired and were served unhealthy, cheap options while the engineers and communications employees were served the foods of an acculturated or gentrified palate.

The speed of communication and constant attention demanded in my role could be blamed for eliminating my appetite, but this explanation would ignore the distinction that 'the gut is an organ of the mind: it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends', as gender theorist Elizabeth A. Wilson writes in *Gut Feminism* (2015). The biology of hunger, disgust and repulsion 'are already and always a minded event: contractions of the stomach walls, changes in blood sugar, liver metabolism are phantastically alive'. Allowing for the imbrication of cognitive and physiological responses, specifically between the stomach and the gut, can allow us to acknowledge what is critically fatal, imbalanced and untenable in any situation.

It was during this time that I visited the Reddit offices in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. To enter, I stepped over bodies of displaced people experiencing homelessness largely due to tech-driven gentrification and, after being given a name tag with a rasterized image of my face, I was led to cornucopious snack and beverage options. I opted for a child's-sized carton of Blue Bottle Coffee's New Orleans-Style Iced Coffee. My stomach immediately churned – a physiological response which was, in that moment, uncontrollable. It was time to leave ●



A man skateboards past a row of motor homes in the heart of Silicon Valley. Courtesy: AP Photo; photograph: Marcio Jose Sanchez

DENA YAGO is an artist and writer based in New York, USA. In 2019, she has had a solo show at High Art, Paris, France. Her fourth book of poetry, *Fade the Lure*, is published this month by After Eight Books and High Art. Yago is a founding member of the trend-forecasting group K-HOLE.

GARAGE



Why The Gig Economy is Creatively Bankrupt

TRAVIS DIEHL
Mar 22 2018, 9:50am

In a conversation with GARAGE, K-HOLE founding member Dena Yago obliterates the WeWork aesthetic.

Artist, poet, writer, and founding member of trend forecasting art collective K-HOLE, Dena Yago trains a materialist's eye on the world of contemporary art. A recent body of work includes panels of felt punctured with the outlines of paintings and stock photos of laborers—from Courbet's wholesome *Grain Sifters* to the denizens of co-working lofts. Her latest solo exhibition, *The Shortest Shadow*, which opens at Atlanta Contemporary on April 12, weaves a southern sci-fi autobiography from the cultural fibers of two fantasy rabbits: stars of *Donnie Darko* and *Bambi*, respectively. GARAGE met Yago at an LA cocktail lounge where the bartenders wear lab coats and the DJ sounds like Spotify.

GARAGE: Jerry Saltz recently looked up “precariat” in the dictionary—the definition is basically, “uncertainty, irregular work, financial insecurity”—then he wrote something like, “What’s the big deal? That’s been the case for 99% of artists throughout time!” What do you think about that idea—that there’s something inherently precarious about art and artists?

Dena Yago: Yeah, there’s a fetishistic imaging of the precariat, including 1099 workers and freelancers more broadly, that represents their position as emancipated, free, and fluid. That presents an image of choice and lifescaping rather than a reaction to market conditions. The reality is way more squalid.

Travis Diehl, Garage, March 22, 2018



Did you hear about the Uber driver who committed suicide, with passengers in the car? What a horrifying demonstration of the gig economy's fucked-upness.

There was also the Uber driver who went on a killing spree and picked up fares in the middle of it.

In Kalamazoo. But back to the precariat—as a class of laborer, the artist is a model citizen in that precarity is inherent to the wholly unregulated art market and mythologically tied to an artist's reticence about structure and stability.



Drawing by Dena Yago. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary

In your essay “On Ketamine and Added Value,” you talk about how something that fails in the real world can still succeed as art.

There's a lot of art which is corporate fan fiction—romanticizing the way that commerce works, trying to demystify the inner workings of capitalism. A recent example is how artists have gotten into cryptocurrency and blockchain, even investing in coins like Ripple that are antithetical to the ethos of blockchain and decentralized networks. Sometimes artists address commerce or tech culture with an air of criticality, but they really just want to be tech bros.

But you know what commercial work is actually like.

Yeah, and it's worse than you think. If anything, working in a corporate setting made me more idealistic about art. You realize that it is a space where the baseline is discourse and skepticism, as compared to marketing or tech. It's disheartening to see any nuance of identity or community get completely flattened out. At least in art—not in the market but in communities of artists—there are greater allowances for depth and time spent with things.

So art shouldn't try to be something it's not?

I'm not saying that necessarily. Art can try to be anything, and sometimes its failure in being the thing itself is what reveals its boundaries.

My show at Atlanta Contemporary is going to include a number of textile sculptures that are a continuation of the works included in *The Lusting Breed* at Bodega last year. With those works I was thinking about forms of gendered labor in the images, processes, and materials used. While the Atlanta Contemporary show also looks at the history of women and textiles, I'm using other imagery in the work. But, for example, an early iteration of the show included a textile sculpture with an image cut into it from *The Wing*, a women-only co-working space in New York. I contacted them and requested to come in and do an hour of shooting, and the response I got was, “We cannot accommodate your request at this time.”

Travis Diehl, Garage, March 22, 2018

But they let you in eventually?

No, they didn't. So I had to rely on their press imagery, which is really good enough—women lounging on chaises-lounges and sitting at pastel terrazzo coffee tables with their laptops, working, in pastels. You look at it and you see the absurdism of the joy and enthusiasm and positivity expressed in these images that depict affective, immaterial labor. I assume that they turned down my request because it wouldn't matter if I just represented it as a photograph or abstracted it into a textile sculpture—the act of putting it on display could be seen as being critical, or trolling.

Like they're aware of the thinness of their self-image.

Across the board there's an awareness that you must own the means of production of your own self-representation. And that letting in another lens is dangerous to the entire construct.

The abstractness of stock images can be unsettling. Everyone looks the same when they're on their laptop.

And beyond the laptop trope, there are also stock social media images. Take *Infinity Mirror Room*, or the Museum of Ice Cream, or *Levitated Mass*. These things are functioning in and of themselves as content farms. A lot of the reason that those things are really popular is that they provide a backdrop that's divorced from context.



Dena Yago, *The Grain Sifters*, 2017. Courtesy of Bodega, New York

Because art isn't the real world. I see that with your practice as well. You have an inside perspective on the commercial sector, and commercial activities could be seen as "selling out," but your experience ends up being the polemical part.

If some art is fan art, then maybe it exists because there's no space for it in any other discourse. Chris Kraus wrote a good essay about this, about how art has absorbed a lot of other practices that are no longer supported within their given genres, like experimental, independent film or "art writing"—artists who write poetry or science fiction within the frameworks of an artistic practice. Or multimedia journalism, for lack of a better term, that doesn't want to exist as a Vox article. And artistic research. I know how to function in a commercial sphere—K-HOLE provided me with that skill—but there are certain times when that's not enough. Art has become a lynchpin for representing classist, elite society—"artwashing" is now a widely understood concept. I think that a lot of that is a tech-driven culture that equates artists with "creatives" and holds nebulous "creativity" and "disruption"—a cringeworthy word—in high regard.

Should artists guard against that confusion?

In New York, the price of a WeWork membership is cheaper than an artist studio. An artist could just go to work at WeWork, but that sounds awful. They'd be role-playing as themselves, in a perverse way, and their work would be reduced to one of those stock images, an artist working on a laptop. Co-working spaces are so much about a performance of creativity—you show up, get your latte, and... Someone non-art related asked me, what do you do, do you go to WeWork or something? No, I go to the public library.

bodega

Josephine Graf, Cura, Issue 25, Summer 2017

CURA.



DENA YAGO BORING DOWN

BY JOSEPHINE GRAF

In a recent show in New York, Dena Yago presented five large sheets of felt hanging heavy from wall-mounted steel racks, like Robert Morris's skewered on so many Donald Judds. Made of pressed wool tinted with natural dyes to a bruised purple-grey, each felt slab was riven with incisions that, in a slashing of minimalism's masculine legacy, traced depictions of "women at work." Women sift grain and spin wool in two tableaux lifted from Courbet paintings, while three others offer more contemporary *mise-en-scènes*: a desk-bound assistant, an "influencer" on her laptop at a cafe, and (in a spin on Courbet's sifters) women perusing thrift store bins for vintage steals. Translated into cuts, the images are hard to parse.

This abstraction echoes a relay between artisanal and affective labor embedded in Yago's choice of images and production techniques: craft demands visibility, but affective or immaterial labor is, of course, harder to "see." And a concern with the (seemingly paradoxical) emergence of a contemporary craft fetish within an economy increasingly premised on immaterial labor threads throughout Yago's practice. It surfaced in a 2014 exhibition at Eli Ping Frances Perkins, where rugs hand woven in Bulgaria and dyed naturally in New York were slung on rusty metal harnesses, yoking outsourced handwork to conceptual ends. In a series of sculptures from 2015, industrial-seeming chains were adorned with such objects as old medicine bottles, a corroding garden tool, and miniature plastic cakes and buns—conflating relics of labor past with contemporary twee.

If Yago displays an interest in the imaging of labor, her practice—which encompasses

not only sculpture, but also photography and poetry—more broadly engages the labor of the contemporary image and, by extension, artist. What does the "work" of the artist look like, and how does the "look" of the image *work*? There's a contemporary understanding that ours is no longer a society of the spectacle, with its highs and lows, and whose numbness one could presumably wake from. We're stuck, instead, in an image ecology of the average, in the mathematical sense: the dimensionless byproduct of mergers between periphery and center, alternative and mainstream. In light of this leveled topography, what, exactly, is the critical labor of the aesthetic, the poetic? These are not new questions, yet it seems newly pressing to consider the fallout from this categorical breakdown: is it potentially liberating, or the cause of inescapable ennui (an ennui of the average), or both?

Yago works at the seam of these distinctions. She muddies them. But she does make clear the futility of piercing this ennui by recourse to any outside position—a position represented in her work by the crafty, pastoral, vintage, or rustic. In an odd turn, these nostalgic aesthetics have become the bastion of a desire for an authentic outside: the reactionary wish-fulfillment of the yearning for an avant-garde, the frontier fed back as *look*. (And this not only in restaurants and advertisements but also, more insidiously, in conservative US politics). Yago's work doesn't so much call out as resuscitate this aesthetic position, with an eye towards replaying the loss of its alterity.

A 2016 exhibition at Sandy Brown in Berlin, for example, included four photographs of Pioneertown, a town built outside of Los An-



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Josephine Graf, Cura, Issue 25, Summer 2017



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Josephine Graf, Cura, Issue 25, Summer 2017



geles in 1946 but modeled on a frontier settlement from 1870. The images show a wagon wheel, windmill, saddle, and bell tower, each rusting and weathered and cropped tight. Pseudo-documentary (like the town itself), they image the staging of authenticity at the heart of the content they depict. And yet they do this without rupturing its façade, that is to say without irony (or even metaphor or metonymy, for that matter). Another recent work consisted of floppy rubber words piled on the floor, like deflated concrete poetry—a mode of spatialized writing typical of her practice. These were jumbled and difficult to read but in fact spelled out the work's title, *Remove the Outside and the Inside Remains*—a reminder that even when Yago appears to have led us to the final frontier of comfortable meaning, she's often rehearsing the disappearance of that far-away edge. It's in this sense that Yago eases into the average, harmonizing with its drone while deftly tweaking the notes.

Critique so often relies on irony—on distance—that the sincerity at the heart of Yago's work can puzzle. That her work is neither sardonic nor appropriated sets it apart, both from a “post-internet” style contemporaneous with her early work and from historical precedents like the Pictures Generation, who otherwise similarly dip into mainstream syntaxes and pull from collective image environments. And an attention to environments—social, urban, natural—and the flow of images, trends, and affects within them, is central to Yago's practice. But in contrast to these other artistic approaches, there is no big reveal here; she never unveils supposed authenticity as fake. So while there can be a sort of “thinness” to her works (often literally drooping, harnessed or hanging), Yago never fully deconstructs her subject (or subjectivity). She just carefully stalks its operation.

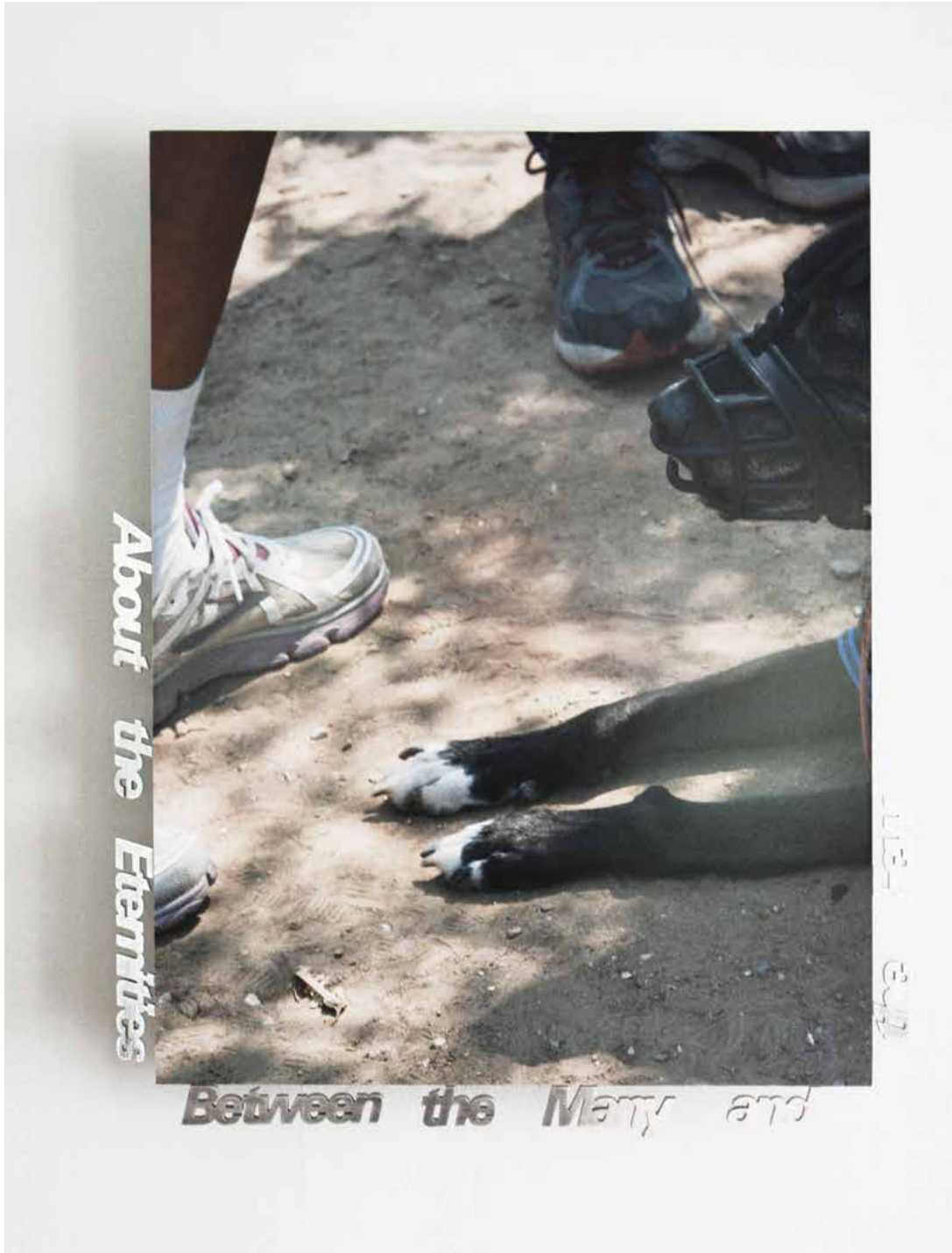
There is therefore something trickier and more poetic at play here, and a slightly different legacy comes to mind, one encompassing artists such as Josephine Pryde, Josef Strau

and John Miller, as well as younger practitioners like Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff, Rose Marcus, Buck Ellison, Anna-Sophie Berger, and Oto Gillen. A common inquiry—into what differentiates artistic labor or subjectivity when individuality is standard and particularity general—seems to unite these artists. And like them, Yago is less interested in mocking the bombast of corporate optics than in finding the oblique within the average, and resistance within the pedestrian or pleasingly poetic—and vice versa. This is maybe a contemporary gloss on “immanent critique,” what the theorist David Harvey once explained as a “boring from within.”¹ Harvey uses “boring” to mean “drilling” or “hollowing,” but its more colloquial usage seems pretty applicable: Yago digs, but she also bores, and with crystalline purpose. Her work holds a mirror to contemporary appeals to individuality, and what we see reflected back is a glazed stare, a low hum—an average ennui, delivered precisely and with poetic potential intact.

It seems somehow fitting, then, that the “women working” in the two Courbet paintings whose imagery appears in Yago's recent felt works are dozing off on the job. It's easily missed in *The Grain Sifters*, but the figure in the background rests with suspicious languor against a sack of grain, and with eyelids half lowered. Less subtly, the slumped protagonist of *The Sleeping Spinner* is totally out, a tuft of raw wool about to drop from her relaxed hands. These moments of ennui are historically specific, more bodily and born from a different kind of overload. For Yago to choose them suggests the obvious point that what today seems delightfully artisanal was once numbingly average; but by doing so she also reveals something about the labor of her own practice, and the resistance to be found in submitting to boredom, or yielding to gravity's pull—a pull that tugs always towards some center.

1. David Harvey, “Introduction,” in *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1990, p. 5.





The New York Times



Dena Yago's "Sleeping Spinner" in felt. Courtesy of the artist and Bodega

DENA YAGO

Through April 2. Bodega, 167 Rivington Street, Manhattan; bodega-us.org.

For "The Lusting Breed," at Bodega on the Lower East Side, Dena Yago colored five large sheets of store-bought felt with a homemade purplish-black dye. She cut and scored them with more or less recognizable shapes borrowed from two Courbet paintings — one of a woman sifting wheat, another of a woman asleep at a spinning wheel — and from three scenes of more contemporary labor, including one of people prospecting for vintage finds in a Salvation Army bin. She worked with an artisanal dyer to add accents of orange, green and ash gray. She asked the artist Brittany Mroczek to embroider a few yellow lines on "The Influencer." And then she pegged up the results like animal hides.

Neither attacking the notion of "women's work" nor mining its craft-based, collaborative potential to revitalize art practice is a new idea, though both are still needed. But what makes this work so striking is how powerfully it brings out the ambiguous violence of all image-making. Ms. Yago's as much as Courbet's. The felt sheets start as rectangles, but the cutouts leave them distorted and fragile, as if the only way to mark a surface were to partly destroy it. The orange dye looks like blooms of rust, and the green like mold. And the bottom edge of "The Grain Sifters," under a long slit, hangs open like a grimacing lip.

WILL HEINRICH

March 16, 2017

frieze

CRITIC'S GUIDE - 28 FEB 2017

Critic's Guide: New York

Ahead of the spring fairs opening in the city this week, a guide to the best shows to see around town

BY ORIT GAT



Dena Yago, *The Grain Sifters*, 2017, pressed wool, natural dyes, steel, 73 x 85 x 6 in. Courtesy: the artist and Bodega, New York

Dena Yago

Bodega

25 February – 2 April

The five tableaus that comprise Dena Yago's 'The Lusting Breed' are made of pressed wool felt, a material chosen for its association with femininity, but here displayed protruding the space in a far-from gentle way. Hanging from metal rods, the felt squares are cut through with scenes taken from both art history and contemporary life, which critically look at the image of women's labour, displayed as craft (hence the felt) or affective emotional work. It's a timely subject at a moment when women's rights and bodies are back to be disputed by male politicians. Yago, whose work spans different mediums, subjects, and affiliations, presents an exhibition with a political stake that uses recognition as a way of alienating the viewer from the work. These hanging objects are droopy and dark, and they tap into that uncomfortable moment when an image or a scene rings familiar, demanding the viewer look again and judge whether all is as true or normal as it seems.

Michèle Faguet, Artforum, January 2017

ARTFORUM

Dena Yago

SANDY BROWN

The four photographs displayed in Dena Yago's recent show "Heck & The Divested Set" were shot by the artist in Pioneertown, a fake western frontier outpost conceived and built by Hollywood investors and production designers in the 1940s to serve as both a TV/film set and temporary housing for actors and crew members. A rusty town bell atop a wooden facade in *Pioneertown, 2015 (Bell)*; a close-up of a brittle leather saddle in *Pioneertown, 2015 (Saddle)*; a rickety wagon, long abandoned, in *Pioneertown, 2015 (Wheel)*; and a slouching windmill with faded signage in *Pioneertown, 2015 (Windmill)* (all works 2016) were all unspectacularly rendered. But these props of the western genre also allude to another seminal chapter in American cultural history: the photographic documentation of westward expansion that helped survey and commodify vast swaths of uncharted territory while consolidating a uniquely American visual identity based, in part, on the suppression of existing Native American settlements.

Opposite the photographs, a sculpture made from industrial rubber depicted a sad, tired-looking horse encircled by fragments of text that could be put together to read the words of its title, *Behold the Tears as Such that Were Oppressed They Had No Comforter* (all works 2016). The horse is modeled on one from a 1930 Workmen's Circle children's book the artist inherited from her grandmother, who had been a member of the Warsaw Jewish Mutual Aid Society. The text, an oft-cited verse from Ecclesiastes, seems to resonate with the horse's gloomy demeanor. It is also a reference to film history, as it is quoted by Franz Biberkopf, the antihero of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1980 film adaptation of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), as he contemplates

the fate of those, like him, condemned to perform the latent violence of the Weimar Republic's last days. A second text piece, *HONK ONCE IF YOU LOVE LIVING, HONK TWICE IF YOU LIVE WITH THE DEAD*—this one unillustrated, consisting only of words cut from rubber bending and folding over one another—continued the dual biblical/filmic reference but with a textual twist that returned the narrative to an American landscape filled with corny bumper stickers that vainly attempt to elicit a sense of social cohesion.

In the accompanying exhibition text, Yago, who is also a poet, compares her pictures to stock images—commercial photographs that are staged, bland, or interchangeable enough to fulfill an endless series of aesthetic or illustrative functions—that will soon be made redundant by the proliferation of user-generated content. According to one UGC site, it is precisely traditional stock photography's "utter lack of authenticity" that will ultimately lead to the genre's demise in the age of the so-called selfie revolution and the transition from text-based browser searches to image-based ones. And yet, as Susan Sontag wrote almost



Dena Yago, *HONK ONCE IF YOU LOVE LIVING, HONK TWICE IF YOU LIVE WITH THE DEAD*, 2016, industrial rubber, dimensions variable.

four decades ago, the very medium of photography has always been burdened by false claims of authenticity, and "despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth." Nowhere was this more evident, perhaps, than in the American West, where mechanical modes of visual representation imported from Europe coincided with the consolidation of a nationalist tradition of landscape painting also dependent on European models; both endeavored to faithfully depict preindustrial landscapes and their inhabitants as part of a larger project of scientific examination, acculturation, and exploitation.

Such photographs were reproduced in guidebooks that traveled back across the ocean to the medium's place of origin where, along with other mass-cultural documents, such as maps, posters, and novels, they helped create a romanticized version of this last frontier against industrialization. In Germany, Wild West fervor was embodied by the best-selling author Karl May, whose tales of the fictional Apache chief Winnetou and his German sidekick Old Shatterhand fostered an identification not with the enterprising cowboy but with the good native, the *Indianer*, in a bizarre, unapologetic case of cultural appropriation that continues, almost unabated, up to the present day. Yago's juxtaposition of seemingly empty pictures—she calls them "stand-ins, props"—and migrating poetic fragments exposed the strangeness of such historical fictions.

—Michèle Faguet

Art in America

SELF-RELIANCE

Dena Yago: *Love Has Its Price*, 2014, C-print on aluminum, 16⅞ by 13¾ inches. Courtesy Boatos Fine Art, Sao Paulo.

With understated imagery and subtle verbal allusions, Dena Yago conjures precarious economic conditions.

by Sam Korman

IN DENA YAGO'S photograph *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?* (2014), a pair of mallards swim on a placid body of water. The male, identified by his iridescent green head, trails the more unassuming female. Foliage in the foreground of the image partly obscures the ducks. Crisp light, cast at a low angle, illuminates the scene, conjuring a late fall afternoon. If the image depicts an idyllic natural world, its framing suggests a decidedly urban context. Yago mounted the photograph on a metal grate similar in form to those that cover sidewalk ventilation shafts for New York's subway system.

The title borrows a line from Katy Perry's single "Firework," a clichéd portrayal of hopelessness: "Do you ever feel like a plastic bag / drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?" The lyric imbues the ducks' apparent calm with a sense of melancholy. At the same time, Yago's reference to a cheesy 2010 pop anthem establishes an ironic distance from the work's apparently simple contrast between urban and rural. *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?* is part of a series of similar works depicting waterfowl that were included in a 2014 exhibition at Cubitt, a London nonprofit. Together they constitute a generic vision of a secluded duck pond, like a catalogue of stock images waiting to be employed in an ad campaign.

Currently based in Los Angeles, Yago has been exhibiting widely for the past five years. Her work, which has been shown in galleries around the world, often includes photographs of animals and plants that evoke pastoral settings. Yet, as with *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?*, Yago contextualizes these images in such a way as to convey an urbane, even jaded sensibility, one rooted at least partly in her previous work with the New York-based "trend forecasting" collective K-HOLE. Beginning in 2011, K-HOLE, whose members also included Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, and Chris Sheron, produced five PDF publications that employ imagery from advertising and fashion while offering theoretical discussions of abstract concepts related to freelance labor,

individual identity, and the viability of community building under capitalism. The group's distinctive texts meld the flippant tone of gossip magazines, the personal insights of *Cosmopolitan*, and the sweeping scope of critical theory tomes. K-HOLE is best known for coining the term "normcore," which describes a deliberately unflattering, unsexy approach to fashion. The group argued, counterintuitively, that by adopting a generic style, individuals could achieve true agency, pursuing whatever they desired by continuously blending in with different subcultural groups.

Even when staking out an ambiguous position on consumerist culture, one that eschews hardline critique while nonetheless revealing the absurdities of corporate rhetoric, K-HOLE cultivated a relatable perspective that wouldn't be out of place in more mainstream marketing materials. Their PDFs are easy reading, and many offer gossipy insights into the group's working dynamics, which involved constant self-examination and criticism. By contrast, Yago's solo work—often cryptic, reticent, and opaque—reveals much less and alludes only faintly to the conditions of its production. Though it disbanded last year, K-HOLE remains a relevant touchstone for understanding her project, which can be read, at least in part, as exploring the tensions between the need for individual fulfillment and obligations to collectives, be they communities of artists or corporations.

In a 2013 interview with curator Isla Leaver-Yap, Yago described her experience working at a law firm as a tech consultant, installing software and training employees to use it.¹ This job informed her 2011 exhibition "Esprit," at Tomorrow Gallery in Toronto. The show comprised images of almonds, apples, lemons, sushi, fish oil capsules, a watch, and a bottle of green tea—snacks and other articles that office workers might have around their desks. Rather than photograph these items, Yago placed each on a scanner. The resulting series alludes to the kind

SAM KORMAN is a writer and curator based in New York.

bodega

Sam Korman, Art in America, November 2016



Yago traces overlapping personal and professional networks, many of them forced into existence by the brutal economics of city life.

of self-care regimen followed by workers attempting to maintain a healthy lifestyle while putting in long hours. The nutritious foods and wellness supplements appear in high-resolution, every surface detail rendered with precision. Yet they look lifeless and fake in the scanner's stark, clinical light.

In the interview with Leaver-Yap, Yago described her intention to examine (scrutinize, really) how certain products fit into an ideology of self-care. She ultimately found herself doubting not the efficacy of care but the coherence of "self." Though none of the objects in "Esprit" carry conspicuous logos, Yago connected the images she produced to the kind of brand consulting work she did with K-HOLE: "When ascribing subjectivity to a brand or product, you begin to empathize with it. By defining its identity, you end up privileging that object on the same level as yourself. This can throw your own sense of self into a tailspin."² In this way, we might regard the highly detailed images as a kind of portraiture, elevating the depicted objects to a level of quasi-subjectivity, even as they appear totally flat and artificial.

Animals also exist on this threshold between subject and object in Yago's work. The 2014 exhibition "You and You're People" at Boatos Fine Art in São Paulo featured thirteen photographs taken in a Los Angeles dog park. From each photograph, the title, laser cut in aluminum, hung like a nametag. Yago took these evocative phrases and expressions from the titles of chapters in Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which was famously adapted for German television by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The original 1929 drama follows murderer Franz Biberkopf after his release from prison. His reentry into society coincides with economic depression and the rise of fascism in Weimar Germany. Caught between self-destruction and warring ideologies, Biberkopf enters into a relationship with a prostitute who offers him brief succor, before his criminal colleague shoots her dead.

Yago's *The Sun Warms the Skin, but Burns It Sometimes Too* (2014) focuses on a dog wearing a prong pinch choke chain; a graying, older dog smiles through his muzzle in *About the Eternities Between the Many and the Few* (2014); and *Love Has Its Price* (2014) shows an owner's watchband mimicked by his dog's studded leather collar and shoulder harness.

The leather collars appear like S & M instruments of restraint on these dogs, and by lashing the metallic words to the photographs, Yago plays up such fetishistic associations. Döblin's macabre humor casts the relationship between pet and owner in terms of a gloomy fatalism: food, shelter, and care become synonymous with bondage and domination. In *Knowledge is Power and the Early Bird Catches the Worm* (2014), however, Yago complicates this relationship by underscoring the animalistic side of the human owner. The photo shows the hands of a person sitting at the dog park, eating a hunk of meat out of a Styrofoam container.

Within Yago's practice, certain bonds with and dependencies on human community can also throw the self into a "tailspin." "Heat Island," the title of her 2014 show at Gasconade, Milan,

refers to Urban Heat Islands (UHI), a term that climate scientists use to describe a city where the infrastructure has caused an artificial increase in temperature. Among its many effects, this condition allows nonnative species to thrive in urban zones that in previous generations would have been prohibitively frigid. As Yago states in the exhibition press release: "Fig trees and certain artist communities all thrive in New York City." The show included five photographs depicting fig trees, the pictures affixed to wicker baskets as if they were bed-and-breakfast decorations or Bed Bath & Beyond merchandise. The frames seem to avoid the overt urban/rural contrast evident in *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?*, though the exhibition's title hints at a similar intent.

If these fig trees are meant to be read as invasive, another series from the same show illustrates an ambivalent attitude about the "artist communities" that also live on the urban heat island of Manhattan. Yago screenprinted canvases with images of human silhouettes and odd confessional texts. *ON SELF RELIANCE* appears at the top of one otherwise untitled canvas, and continues, *EVERYONE'S AN ISLAND. / NO ONE'S AN ISLAND / I HAVEN'T READ IT, BUT IT FEELS LIKE THE REST OF THE CITY HAS.* It's an embittered and contradictory evocation of John Donne's appeal to human interdependence and Emerson's treatise on individualism, and it seems to end in a deflated acceptance of a go-it-alone attitude.

Yago also writes fragmentary, confessional poems in this same vein, many examining the strange attributes of a lifestyle that combines corporate freelancing with self-directed creative work. Her prose poem "Do You Ever Feel," printed and distributed in a chapbook of commissioned texts and poems that accompanied her 2014 London exhibition, similarly conveys a sense of disenfranchisement among the privileged precariat, educated workers and creatives who nonetheless can't or won't land full-time jobs. In the midst of a claustrophobic cab ride, Yago traces overlapping personal and professional networks, many of them forced into existence by the brutal economics of city life. Relationships are brokered, acquaintances are currency, and the ineffable reassurance of shared intimacy gives way to cold economy—people become exchangeable for one another, valued mostly for their social or professional status. When she arrives at her destination, Wall Street, Yago realizes her inescapable situation, hopelessly greeted by a statue of Cerberus, the guard dog at the gates of hell.

WHAT ARE THE politics of Yago's lament? In some cases, she can be painfully direct. For her 2014 show at Cubitt, she invited the animal rights organization London Wildlife Protection to participate, allowing them to distribute materials and raise awareness of their cause. The advocacy group's altruism is difficult to reconcile with Yago's work, considering how the ducks in her photographs are heavily mediated, symbols of the natural world that facilitate enigmatic ruminations by participants in the highly artificial art world.

For her 2014 exhibition "Distaff" at Eli Ping Frances Perkins, New York, Yago included flyers produced by the ASPCA protesting horse-drawn carriages in the city. The show featured a series of

Sam Korman, Art in America, November 2016



This page, two photos from the series "Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?," 2012-14, eight prints mounted on metal grates, 27 1/2 by 39 1/2 inches each. Courtesy Cabot, London.



Sam Korman, Art in America, November 2016

View of Dena Yago's exhibition "In Escrow," showing *PITI*, 2016, colored chalk on wall. Courtesy High Art, Paris.



rugs strung throughout the gallery, some hanging from chains. The charity's intervention suggested a comparison of these textile sculptures to a stable of abused horses. The title of the exhibition suggested an equally important conceptual reference. A distaff is both part of a loom and the name for female lineage. The press material explained that Yago commissioned the rugs from Bulgarian women who work with an intricate traditional process. The equation of these women's work and animal labor is uncomfortable, to say the least. It may be a provocative extension of Yago's "object-oriented" position. Still, it is difficult to believe that the well-meaning advocacy group or the weavers consented to facilitate this point, though there is a kernel of empathy in Yago's attempt to connect networks for animal and human welfare.

While her aesthetic means may vary widely, a melancholic anti-humanism encroaches on Yago's irresolvable politics. "In Escrow," her 2015 exhibition with High Art, Paris, included a wall drawing representing a scene from Disney's 1951 cartoon *Alice in Wonderland*. In the film, the perennially late March Hare orders Alice to help him find his gloves. While searching the house, Alice uncovers some inviting cookies, eats one, and grows exponentially in size. Her arms and legs protrude from the windows and doors, and her face peeks out from a pair of pink shutters. The rabbit yells, "Help! Monster!" and runs away, gripping his pocketwatch. Yago's version of the cartoon drama, *PITI* (2016), is a chalk wall drawing that contains some apocryphal details: three marijuana leaves with legs and baggy eyes march toward the foreground, the hare looks at his clock with bloodshot eyes, and the Mad Hatter peers luridly at the house's backside with an unlit joint in his mouth. Alice's torso and butt are encased in the house, and her face appears quite worried, while an orange flower stares at her, enrapt.

Stylistically, the psychedelic mural is unique in Yago's practice. But its merger of Alice's body with the house provides a relatively

direct summation of her interest in flattening any hierarchy between humans and objects. *PITI* is based on a mural that decorated a former marijuana dispensary, which, after it was closed for being too near a school, Yago was able to rent as an affordable studio. As the press release outlines, *PITI* is an acronym for principal, interest, taxes, and insurance. In real estate terms, it represents the buyer's total monthly payment. It's also, of course, a pun on the infantilizing sentiment "pity." As the title of the wall drawing, the acronym connects the sexualized parts of Alice's body that are visible—"ass, breast, legs or hips," as specified in the press release—to the language of asset management and real estate calculations. A series of photographs included in the same show offers fragmented views of a female dancer. Shot from disorienting perspectives, some of these images appear to have been taken by the dancer herself. If the sexualized Alice of the mural has been placed on display, the photographs allude to a culture of online self-presentation, facilitated by Instagram, wherein a user can potentially monetize her body through carefully composed selfies that attract large followings.

Underneath these layers of appropriated imagery and references to zoning laws and financial transactions, Yago's work remains connected to her own experience. The chalk mural serves as a kind of emblem for economic processes in which she, as an artist-tenant, is implicated in ideological positions that slur together objects and human bodies. Even when she employs vernacular aesthetics (like the mural) and craft techniques (like the Bulgarian rugs), or depicts pastoral worlds, Yago never seems to be reaching for an outside or an elsewhere, a zone of escape from a world of anxious freelancers, on-call creatives, and branded lifestyles. ○

1. Isla Leaver-Yap, "Life on a Heat Island: Dena Yago," Dec. 12, 2013, leaveryap.wordpress.com.

2. Ibid.



ESPRIT (Green Tea), 2011, C-print on aluminum, 20 by 16 inches. Courtesy Tomorrow Gallery, Toronto.

bodega

Laura McLean-Ferris, Flash Art, November–December 2015

Flash Art

FEATURE



Laura McLean-Ferris: *To begin this discussion about pastoralism, I'd like to ask about your most recent body of work, which draws on the idea of the "pioneer woman," specifically in certain depictions from 1990s television. Can you describe these recent works and your interest in this kind of feminine archetype from the media?*

Dena Yago: There was a show on the Outdoor Channel that aired around 1999, *The Huntress*. In one episode, the host — Heidi Wilson — goes hunting for squirrel with her son. The show quickly segues into a cooking show where she prepares her son's kill into "squirrel melts." With *The Huntress*, homemaking is expressed in its traditional forms, through hunting, killing, cooking. I'm interested in Wilson's proximity to violence and the subsumption of that very direct violence into an expression of care, love and home making. Or in how direct aggression, through one step of removal, quickly becomes an act of maintenance, of sustainability.

Recently I've become aware of people evaluating their art practices and lifestyles in terms of whether it "functions as a sustainable model." In the way I see it being used, it's less about sustainability in terms of avoiding the depletion of natural resources, and more about depleting just the right amount and setting up a very complex system of equivalences (i.e., the cost of therapy equals a gym membership or the framing of a photograph; my internet use equals a case of wine). A "sustainable model" hints at a sense of responsibility for something larger than oneself, though it's rarely used to refer to anything beyond the individual.

LMF: *That's true of these complex equivalences. I wonder if these strategies are also about buying time in an abstract sense. I used to have a part-time job at the Environment Agency in the UK, and sustainability was one of the main development concepts used at that time. It also seems that the "sustainable model" is used to discuss certain art practices that are at risk of burning up in a speculative economic climate — sustainability as a counterpoint to market-driven speed, something like the ethos of the slow food movement.*

Food carries a complex value system in relation to the land. In preparing for this conversation you sent me an article on Alice Waters, known for founding the restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, in 1971, and largely spearheading the organic food movement on the American West Coast.

DY: George Packer's article on Waters, "Radish Queen," was included in his book *The Unwinding: An Inner History of New America* (2013), which charts a history of deindustrialization in the U.S. through profiles of individuals like Waters. Chez Panisse opened at a time when affluent and middle-class Americans were eating either frozen dinners or French cuisine. That's no longer the case, but produce and fresh foods are still pretty unaffordable to the general public — there aren't many affordable options for unprocessed foods to those that are strapped for time and cash. When

Circle the Wagons

*Laura McLean-Ferris in conversation
with Dena Yago*

you do see some solutions to these issues, they're often framed as clickbait, such as "Ten Easy Ways to Pack a Healthy Lunch" or "life hacks." Alice Waters and the chefs at Chez Panisse would famously forage alongside railroad tracks to source greens. But you need more than just resourcefulness; you have to have time. Writing about a relationship to food and time can become a stand-in for talking about class and social relations.

LMF: *It's clear that certain aspects of health and well-being fall under the heading of "luxury," because they require time and money, but healthiness has an even more distinctly stratified marker of class than ever before, because the signs of its display are more subtle. Growing one's own vegetables or going to the farmer's market can be read to signify a higher class status than going to Whole Foods does because, perversely, it's more difficult and requires more time and effort. Thorsten Veblen in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) describes the idea of the pastoral as "rural" literature and art that develops in the midst of a crisis about urban values. The artifice of a pastoral past (back to the land) and the fictions that it draws upon and perpetuates are undergoing something of a resurgence — moving to Upstate New York, or even moving to somewhere like Greece (rich in soil, produce, history; poor in economics in terms of a modern global economy).*

DY: When affluent people move to Hudson or Greece, a lot of these lifestyle decisions are framed as "retreats" — whereas you might refer to places that are ripe for foreign real-estate investment as "escapes." There is something to go back to, and it's implied that these retreats are temporary. Motivations for moving to these places are different from those of groups like the Greenhorns in the Champlain Valley of New York, who work as farmers and advocate for young farmers across America. The former falls under what Sean Monahan and I recently talked about for a *K-HOLE* talk at the ICA Miami, the concept of "Survivalist Cos Play," which is an act of performing one's ability to survive. Or performing self-sufficiency and demonstrating that one could live outside of the

*Previous page:
Across Lots (2015)
Courtesy of the Artist*

systems of capital that they've wholly bought into, or in a post-apocalyptic world. We used *Naked and Afraid* and Barry's Bootcamp as examples, but many urban farming projects (within cities, not outside of them) fall under this category.

LMF: *How do you think that that pastoralism is used to affirm or deny certain realities today?*

DY: The pastoral tradition in art and literature often deals with social order, and clearly delineates the borders of an urban and cultured experience. The position of many of the artists working in this tradition has frequently been distanced — romanticizing the farmer, the shepherd, the huntress, without getting one's hands dirty. In some ways the pastoral as it existed at the birth of the industrial revolution served as a reminder that the spaces outside of industrialized cities still existed. It also functioned as a way for the leisure class to distance themselves from industrial workers; they instead identified with agrarian laborers, whom they deemed pure and natural.

But pastoralism becomes something else when the only remaining frontier is ourselves, which we then in turn cannibalize — all while still using the totems and iconography of the period of expansionism, when the rural and the frontier were vast expanses of land to homestead. The most direct example of this would be restaurants that source ingredients from their rooftop gardens while decorating their sustainably designed interiors with reclaimed wood and small wood-burning stoves, all the while mood-boarding their menus and websites with images from “The Source” era of communalism in the late 60s.

LMF: *Can you expand on what you mean by this “human frontier” you reference?*

DY: I mean more that an expansionist view has turned inward; the space we're left with is more about making space within already populated landscapes. As in, figuring out how to make space for a community in an untenable environment that one has willingly chosen to inhabit. On the individual level, an example might be how our vision of a modified futuristic human body was more based on external prosthetics, whereas now it's less visible, more about performance-enhancing brain and body hacks.

LMF: *I'm interested in the way that several of your works tend to problematize constructions of the rural or natural as artificial, and vice versa. In Venkatesh Rao's essay “The American Cloud” (Aeon, July 2013) he outlines the way that the contrasting economic visions of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton have come to overlap in contemporary America. He describes certain artificial constructions — such as the farmer's market design-feel of Whole Foods — as giving the consumer an “emotional satisfaction” for which they are prepared to pay. How do you conceive of this emotional power and its application?*



DY: Rao speaks of how we skin the back ends of American commerce and infrastructure (which he refers to as “Hamiltonian cathedrals”) with a thin film of craft-oriented and “emotionally satisfying” visual cues (which he terms “Jeffersonian bazaars”). As an example, he brings up the design of Whole Foods, which tries to feel more like a farmers market, less like a Costco. Constructions like this are by no means new, and the iconography of expansionism, rural life and the American West have long become an established design aesthetic. It's this aesthetic of homesteading that interests me, whether it's looking to craft or the use of mechanical tools or rusted domestic objects. This aesthetic is often used to imply intimacy and the presence of a community, which is pretty suspect. I'm interested in what the habitats of occupied communal space look like — not in a broader ethnographic way, but in my immediate surroundings. I continually photograph and work with materials from my domestic life, while simultaneously photographing sites like Pioneertown in Yucca Valley, which was built in the 1940s as a live-in film set.

LMF: *Your work has also focused on cohabitation with animals. There's often a suggestion of a gray zone between intimacy and dependency — or violence and care. For the exhibition “You and You're People” at BFA in São Paulo in 2014, you showed photographs of dogs taken at a dog park*

*This page:
Excerpt from K-HOLE
#5 (2015)
Courtesy of the Artist
and K-HOLE*

*Next page, above:
Peer Evaluation (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist
and Gasconade, Milan*

*Next page, below:
Distaff (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist
and Eli Ping Frances
Perkins, New York*

bodega

Laura McLean-Ferris, Flash Art, November–December 2015

FEATURE



FEATURE

strung with aluminum text pieces taken from the chapter titles of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's series Berlin Alexanderplatz (1980), such as "The Sun Warms the Skin, but Burns it Sometimes Too."

There is a sense of a strictly bounded existence of submission that amounts to a lack of freedom for both animals and their owners, which is nonetheless a form of love and care. Have you developed such slippages formally in the work?

DY: I've photographed domesticated animals, such as dogs and their owners in dog parks, and then I've photographed the animals of cities like New York City and Los Angeles. I think of animals like squirrels, pigeons and ducks as cohabitants in a city. You have certain similarities between groups; talking about pigeons can quickly turn into a conversation about artist communities. For instance, both groups are used as icons of the city (pigeons signifying urbanity and artists signifying New York City as the creative capital of the world), though the city creates "proper" representations of both and renders all others invisible. Both groups thrive on hostility.

Photographing dogs in a clearly delineated and enclosed space of leisure, the dog park, you quickly see social relations played out. These photographs are of relationships — between dogs, between dogs and their owners. There was a photo of a chow who had a collar tag that read "Have Your People Call My People." I didn't notice this until afterwards, but it sums up a lot of things I'm discussing in that work: subservience,

deferral, care and control. The tag led to the title of the exhibition. The distinction between violence and care can be read in subtleties — shifts in body language, changes in the conjugation of words and pronoun usage.

LMF: *And how does that relate to your ideas about care in the work? In your writing, your poetry, your work with K-HOLE and your art practice, you explore cohabitation and collaboration. How has your own understanding of the way intimacy evolves among friends and peers changed, and how do you see this relating to something like gentrification or a sense of place? Can you describe your sense of a practice that is dispersed among a community?*

DY: One way that I see this cannibalized pastoralism existing within art is with the romanticization of artistic communities. Artists are known for living in totally collapsed social spheres and having messy relationships in which people play every role in one another's lives — friends, lovers, collaborators, gallerists, therapists, art dealers, drug dealers, interns, family. In a loosely tied, disembodied network of 1099'ers and artists with day-jobs, I think that different kinship models provide some sort of alternative to the atomized, isolated "cooking for one" life that is encouraged. I'm interested in relationships of kinship and care, and bonds between people that choose to cohabitate spaces, and in how in these kinships you slip into and out of shared spaces of intimacy. In many ways you make these chosen families out of a survivalist urge; it's a circling of the wagons. In terms of how this relates to gentrification, the nature



This page:
Aequians, Saines,
Volscians (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist

Next page, above:
The Ruler (2013)
Courtesy of the Artist

Next page, below:
A handful of people in the
depth of silence (2014)
Courtesy of the Artist and
Boatos Fine Art, São Paulo



of some of these kinds of communities are based on exclusivity, and by making space within an already occupied landscape it's rare that you're not edging other communities out in the process.

LMF: *The exhibition "Heat Island," held in 2014 at Gasconade, Milan, was attentive to the climactic conditions of a hot, busy metropolis such as Manhattan, where plants such as figs, usually requiring warmer conditions, can grow due to the heat of buildings and people and all their energy and labor. I suppose that this is why your work has occasionally been positioned within a discourse about the Anthropocene. How do you think about that discussion, which has gained a lot of traction in the past five years or so?*

DY: The heat island effect is a rising in ground temperature due to population density, but that is just one of many environmental aberrations that exist in a city like New York. Other aberrations can be seen in people's behavior, how communities are formed, what relations exist within those communities, and how they emerge out of hostility. For a certain type of artist, living in these environments can breed complicity. Survivalism largely precludes critique. They are both affecting their environments on a geological scale while being products of their environment that they've created as a collective whole or bought into as individuals.

*Dena Yago (b. 1988, USA)
lives in Los Angeles.*

Laura McLean-Ferris is Flash Art US Editor.



bodega

Marie Heilich, Bomb Magazine, May 8, 2015

BOMB

Dena Yago
by Marie Heilich
Care and control of the social and self.



About the Eternities Between the Many and the Few, 2014. Digital c-print mounted to aluminum, aluminum lettering, 17 x 21 in. Courtesy of White Flag Projects, St Louis.

Yago began working primarily in writing, suggesting poetry as a place where relationships between objects and images could be easily mapped without sacrificing the richness and precision of language. In 2011, she debuted a book of poems alongside an exhibition at Tomorrow Gallery (then in Toronto, now in New York). The exhibition, titled *ESPRIT*, consisted of high-resolution scanned images of products associated with self-care, such as fruits, tea, and fish oil capsules, while a poem from the book, also titled *ESPRIT*, describes a body caught within a cycle of self-care and resignation, starting with:

Marie Heilich, Bomb Magazine, May 8, 2015

Aporia in love
Aporia in a bouquet of flowers that smell
Do these smell correctly or am I the one that
stinks?

And ending with:

What am I? Dead meat?
As aside—I am so dead meat

Yago continues to tether language to objects and images, grounding explicit everyday encounters while thinking through cohabitation and survivalism in contemporary urban environments. This past fall I had the pleasure of working with her on a presentation of new works at White Flag Projects. This interview revolves around the process and evolution of that body of work.

Marie Heilich Poetry and language are so intrinsic to your practice. It's surprising to me that the two series discussed above were the first time you merged text and image. What was gained through isolating text and image previously, and what about this new series was conducive to having text and image in the same work?

Dena Yago I'm exploring the relationship between the two, which I see as being inflective rather than representative of one another. In the works using a scanner, where I scan a specific object and correlate that to text, it can be seen as illustrative or metaphorical, which are two things I'm working against and why I have kept them separate. With my photography there is more complexity to the images. They are un-constructed scenes photographed in the world, which can exist within the same space as my writing without falling into being understood as metaphor.

MH I like this use of the word "inflective," and I believe it describes or reveals a crux in your practice. Inflections of speech are modifications made to the spoken word to guide meaning. So, rather than text and image being illustrative of one another, new information guides rather than determines meaning. The disparate sources of the dog park images and found text allow for a similar guiding of meaning without ever landing on a fixed materialization of the topic at hand. Can you talk about how you came to this source material?

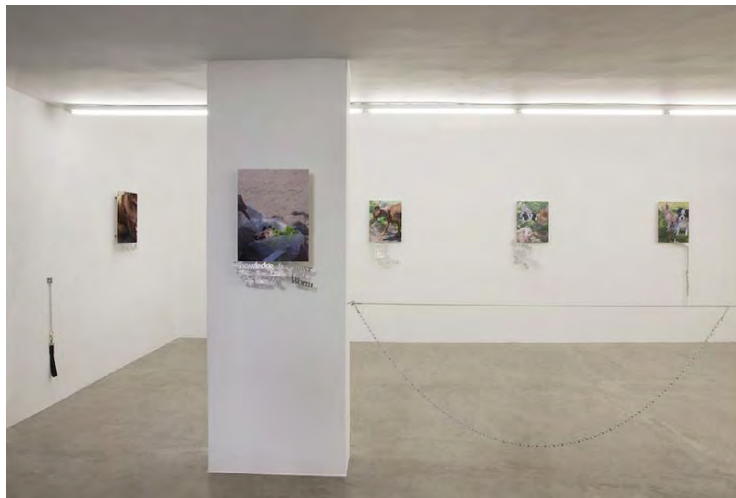
DY The text in these works is not my own. It's taken from episode titles of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1980 television miniseries *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In the first episode, "The Punishment Begins," Franz Biberkopf, the protagonist, is released from prison. Throughout the series he falls under many different systems of control, whether it be love, employment, addiction, or the political forces struggling for power in 1920s Germany. I'm interested in how these relationships of control, care, domination, and submission bleed into one another, and how these are acted out in spaces that are clearly delimited as free. The imagery is taken from a series of photo shoots in dog parks around Los Angeles, depicting dogs at rest in a fenced-in (fence not depicted) space otherwise meant for exercise and recreation. While the relationship between the text and image is intended to stress non-equivalences, both point to the experience of the submissive.

MH The planning of your small solo presentation of these works at White Flag Projects in St. Louis coincided with the death of Michael Brown and the antagonistic police response to public protests. In a recent essay, "Material Witness: David Joselit on Visual Evidence and the Case of Eric Garner," Joselit writes, in relation to the death of Eric Garner just a few months prior, "While the life-and-death exigencies of American race politics should not be glibly equated with art's more distanced forms of engagement, proponents of visual politics would do well to learn from the Garner case." Here Joselit is a proponent for examining human rights through visual evidence while asserting art's shortcomings with taking the place of human rights activism. While the merging of art, life, and politics is the primary project of a prevalent art historical narrative, I think your work not only anticipates, but intentionally situates itself within what Joselit calls "distant forms of engagement" by promoting difference, not only between art and politics, but a fundamental dissimilarity that manifests through your seemingly disparate, yet topically specific examples of social phenomenon.

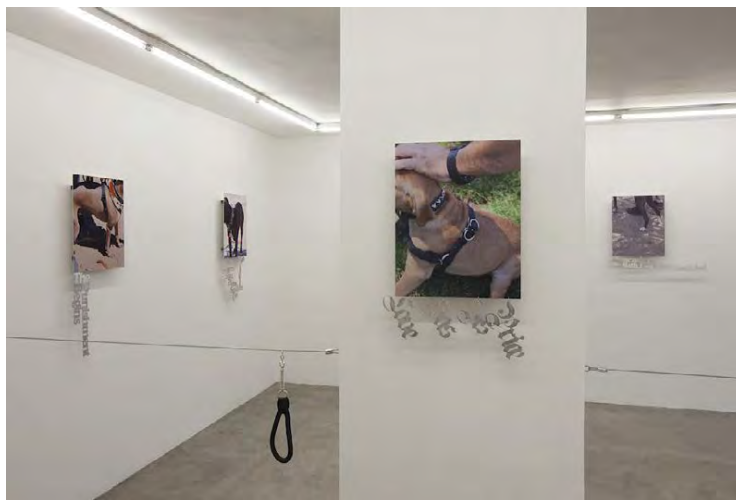
Marie Heilich, Bomb Magazine, May 8, 2015

DY I didn't make the work with Ferguson in mind, but the way it dealt with dominance and control was heightened in the wake of Mike Brown's death and the subsequent protests. The way that corroborative evidence has failed to result in indictments indicates a systemic failure of representation and a silencing of visual evidence. As a contemporary photographer, this should come as no surprise, though, as a citizen, this elicits a far more enraging response. Visual forensics' failure as veritable proof throws everything into the realm of abstraction. So, in my work, I find myself using representational forms to work against the creation of false equivalencies. My images are not to be used as evidence, and I am not a representative. I am interested in the question explored in Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Letter to Jane*—what part can artists and intellectuals take in political action (their direct question was “what part can cinema play in the development in revolutionary struggles?” or “how should intellectuals take part in the revolution?”)

MH The series of the dog park images further developed in your solo exhibition with Boatos Fine Art in Sao Paulo, *You and You're People*. Using wildly different fonts (imbued with their own meanings) and chain-link joints connecting the words gave the texts a sense of unwieldiness as the words sort of drip off the images. How did you come to this, after only using the perimeter of the image in the works shown in St. Louis?



You and You're People, 2014. Installation view at Boatos Fine Arts, Sao Paulo. Courtesy of Boatos Fine Arts.



You and You're People, 2014. Installation view at Boatos Fine Arts, Sao Paulo. Courtesy of Boatos Fine Arts.

DY The library is a small space and the viewers have a close and more isolated experience with the works than they did in Sao Paulo. With the works in St. Louis the words constituted incomplete frames for the photographs. Those two works are to be read as a diptych, tied together with incomplete frames, plain fonts, and with two titles I wanted to be read as clearly dealing with relations of dominance, care, and control.

MH As you mentioned, the complexity of the photographed images—expounded by the way they're cropped, so as to deny any hierarchy of subject—is key to resisting an illustrative or metaphorical relationship with the titles from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Similarly, as neither text nor image are privileged, and therefore exist on their own terms, a metonymic relationship is allowed to form. This continues with the use of the dog leash to control the movement of the viewer in *You and You're People*, as another metonymic example of control, this time within the context of the exhibition experience.

DY In *You and You're People*, thirteen photos and titles were installed in a much larger space. I chained off half of the gallery so that the works would either have to be seen at a distance, or there would be the inconvenience of having to walk around the perimeter of the space to get to the other side. All of this created a rhythm in viewing the works. The way that the text hangs from the photos creates another layer of that; creating different tempos in reading the titles depending on how they're hung from the photos, while the different fonts create different intonations.

MH In the exhibition *Distaff* at Eli Ping Francis Perkins in New York, ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) signage and pamphlet information regarding The Coalition to Ban Horse-Drawn Carriages was provided alongside your sculptures of rugs and horse tacks. How would you describe your work's relationship to activism?

DY I wouldn't call myself an activist, but with *Distaff* I used the exhibition as a point of access for advocacy groups to speak with an audience that sees themselves as being sympathetic subjects and could potentially be called to action. In working with the Coalition through the exhibition, and the London Wildlife Protection at *a caelo usque ad centrum* (an exhibition with Laurie Spiegel at Cubitt), I was moving toward giving both the advocacy groups and the art audience access to different publics and seeing how they would engage each other. The form of engagement that I'm hoping to instigate is one that requires time and the formation of relationships between individuals under the directives of a specific issue, whether it is to work on a more grassroots level or change public policy.

Marie Heilich is assistant director at White Flag Projects.

FLASH ART

Joshing the Watershed *Del Vaz Projects / Los Angeles*



Dena Yago, Human Applause (2015). Courtesy of Del Vaz Projects, Los Angeles. Photo by Daniel Sahlberg.

A glass of absinthe, such as those as seen in two of Willa Nasatir's rephotographed photos on display in "Joshing the Watershed" at Del Vaz Projects, can evoke a certain nostalgia for a particular era in the life of a Western artist, roughly spanning the period from Impressionism to the Lost Generation of the '20s and '30s. The exhibition space itself, an unassuming two-bedroom apartment in a dense part of Westside, can then suggest the domestic settings of the artists' salons of Mallarmé or Stein. Yet perhaps a closer comparison could be made between the academic salons of the 19th century and our present-day art fairs. The challenge of navigating hundreds of canvases hung closely together has something in common with the bewilderment provoked by mazes of gallery booths, and our more democratic incarnation remains beholden to our schools of art. All this only highlights the contrast between the dying gasp of an idea of art as an imitation of life on one end of the timeline and a situation in which art claims its legitimacy as an imitation of art on the other.

Nasatir's work is especially keyed in to this conflict. The anxiety latent in the formal process of damaging or altering the surface of a photograph and photographing the results recalls the crisis provoked by the medium's emergence well over a century ago, when painting began to emphasize individual perception over mimesis and so approach the sort of self-referentiality that has become the hallmark of modern art. This quality being now thoroughly fetishized, the work seems imbued with a life of its own, entering a sort of society as a debutante, only to go to die in a domestic grave, the trophy of some collector.

Here, in an apartment that may as well stand in for this twilight space, a carnivalesque atmosphere takes hold, playing Jessica Williams's bittersweet, painterly portraits against the chrome, chains and key-ring charms of Dena Yago's Human Applause, while Math Bass's tortoise stages a lightly comedic encounter with Sam Davis's anthropomorphized mic-stand readymade. In the show's other room, a bedroom, the intimacy of the space invites a disarmingly empathetic relationship with Adrian Gilliland's camp male playing-card nudes, and Dwyer Kilcollin's vases, produced through what could be called an artisanal version of 3-D printing, address questions relating to technology, the human hand and failure. These are rooms that seem hardly fit to host a person's watershed moments, yet are much like many in which people come into the world and leave it.



Dena Yago | Art in the Anthropocene

November 16th, 2014 by [David Andrew Tasman](#)

Most known for her work as a founding member of the trend forecasting group K-Hole, poet and artist Dena Yago has over the past five years produced a cycle of meditations on the city and its destabilizing effects on communities and landscapes. Her work engages with the infertility of the urban sphere, and the paradoxical attraction it has over different species. In New York, ducks no longer migrate south for the winter, making Central Park pond their permanent home.

From her first solo show, ESPRIT at Tomorrow Gallery, to You and You're People in Sao Paulo, her evolution from a jeune fille to an artist deeply committed to her community is evident. For Yago, artist communities are unsupported in the urban environment, and in her work she explores the affinity between this predicament and that of animals, who likewise cohabit an unsupportive urban terrain.



Dena Yago, Meyer Lemon, Granny Smith Apple, Navel Orange, 2011, Digital C Print mounted on aluminum, 16x20

David Andrew Tasman, DIS Magazine, November 16, 2014



Dena Yago, Green Tea, 2011, Digital C Print mounted on aluminum, 16x20"

Dena Yago, Fish Oil, 2011, Digital C Print mounted on aluminum, 16x20"

After completing her undergraduate degree from Columbia University, Yago worked in the IT department at a downtown law firm, where for the next year and a half she limited her artistic output to the written word. Much of the work from this period was an attempt to reconcile a lifestyle inflected by corporate expectations while confronting the performativity of personal choices regarding health, food, and clothing.

"At that time when thinking about making an image or a sculpture I would ultimately become very disappointed, because of the richness and multi-valence of language. Poetry and writing had become a way I could draw out landscapes and relationships between objects."

In preparing for ESPRIT, a launch for her poem by the same name, Yago would rediscover the visual counterpart to her practice. "ESPRIT," she explains, "was an attempt to balance a poetic meditation on objects and a more objective meditation on poetry."

In a slightly contradictory tone to the dulled ambivalences of optimism and resignation in ESPRIT the poem, the visual component of the exhibition are bright, clinical images made from digital scans of objects relating to the text, from fruit to fish oil.

"The way to hell or paradise

modal variation

*I've gone too fast and feel
a wave of loneliness in this these waters"*

For her sophomore solo show, A Car Ride Driven Topless, Yago maintained a textual component as the driver of the exhibition, but allowed the visual component of her practice to take center stage. The poem, which like ESPRIT, is the exhibition's namesake, was framed and hung out of sight in the gallery office.

The works from the exhibition are portraits of various forms of 'impressions. In one instance the voids left by entangled bodies are documented in slabs of medical impression foam, which are then scanned and printed, creating a visual fossil of intimacy that dialogues easily with Bruce Nauman's 'Wax Impressions of the Knees of Five Famous Artists'.

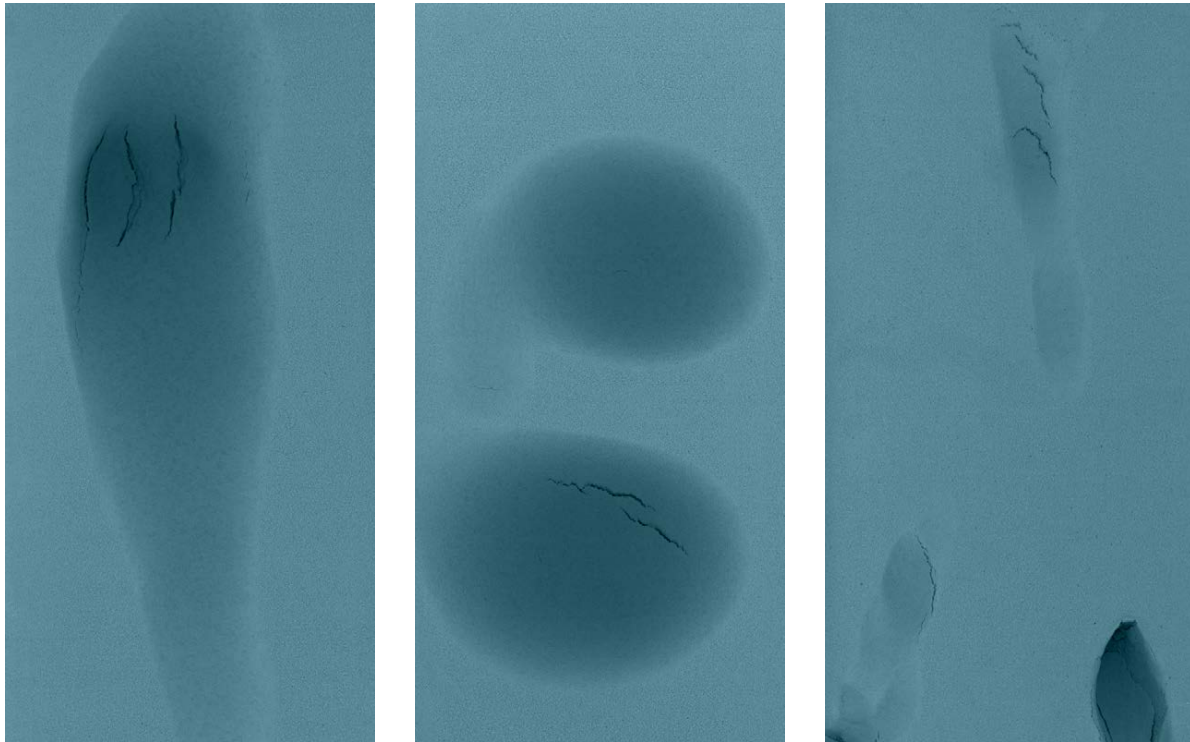
David Andrew Tasman, DIS Magazine, November 16, 2014

A Car Ride Driven Topless marks the introduction of a metaphysical 'transcription' where Yago begins to disassemble the nucleotides of the intimate and personal, and to reassemble them into unexpected formations—ones that destabilize the status quo as they expand out into the city.

"In my work I try to take the personal and see how it is indicative of a larger environmental situation."

The title of the poem, a stanza in itself, illustrates this expansion from the personal to the urban:

"A car ride driven topless taken alone
Reminds major city thoroughfares of their
Contracting hopes as they pass, to carry the
Breasts of the drive."



Impression (arm), 2012, Digital C-Print mounted on aluminum, 29 x 59 cm

Impression (ass), 2012, Digital C-Print mounted on aluminum, 29 x 59 cm

Impression (tail), 2012, Digital C-Print mounted on aluminum, 29 x 59 cm

In Urbanities, a group show at James Fuentes Gallery, black and white gelatin silver prints taken at the painter Dan Colen's farm in upstate New York depict what could be a photograph from the distant agrarian past. In reality it is an image of the agrarian only accessible via the capital success (or total rejection of it) of a city dwelling artist.

When asked about the relationship between her research to the autonomy of the artist and journeymen artists such as Gauguin, Yago shifts the context to a more fundamental concern about the survivability and sustainability of an artistic career on the infertile ground of the urban.

"'Farming in Europe'[a play co-written with Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff, and Pablo Larios at New Theater, Berlin] is different from what Gauguin was working with. The play is focused on a small community of artists in a large city. It has more to do with the relationship

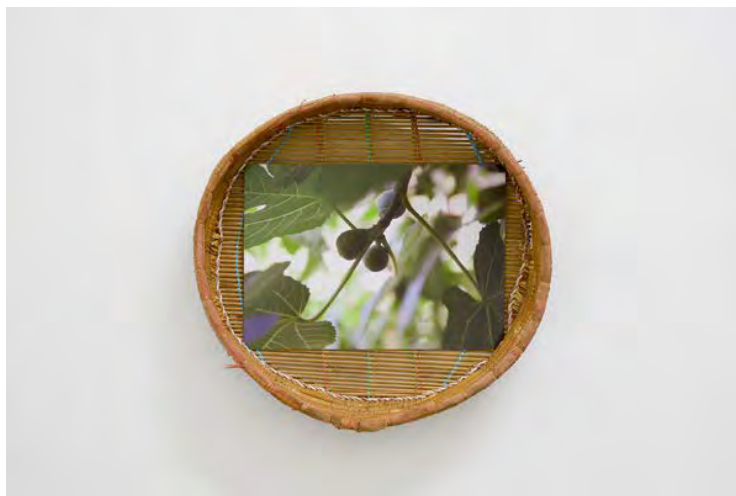
David Andrew Tasman, DIS Magazine, November 16, 2014

between the urban and the rural, and what it means when elements of the pastoral are played out in the city. There's less notion of, "back to the land" for primitivistic entertainment – it's more about survivalism.

Yago's 2014 show Heat Island, at Gasconade in Milan, demonstrated a new, heightened level of specificity and research. The urban heat island (UHI) effect describes the increase in temperature of the ground that occurs when there is not enough natural ground cover to dissipate the heat from the sun, and energy is retained by sidewalks and roads, resulting in disruptions to the local ecology. For Heat Island, Yago chose to show images of fig trees, which now may survive with less difficulty in New York due to the increased temperatures resulting from radiant heat.



2x2, 2014, Digital C-print, wooden tray, 45.5 x 29 x 2.5 cm



cannibal of my own flesh, 2014, Digital-C print, straw basket, 36 x 36 x 6.5 cm

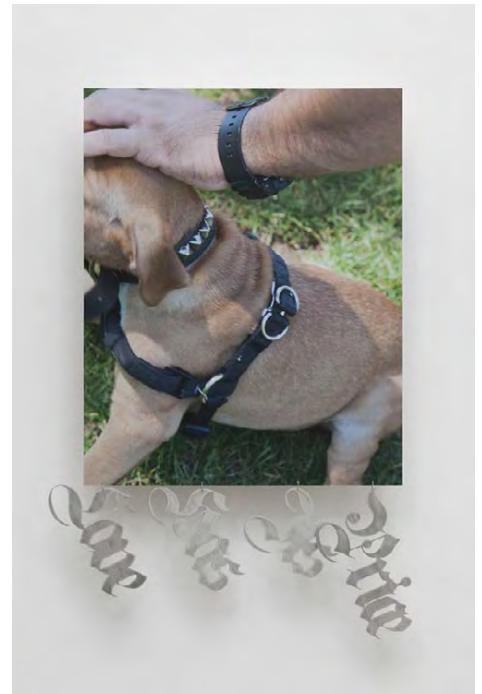
For her show at Eli Ping Frances Perkins Gallery, Distaff, Yago privileged for the first time sculptural material over image based or text based works. Distaff is a double entendre, meaning both a female horse race and the rod which holds wool before it has been spun into yarn. Wool blankets strewn across the gallery into tent-like forms are the connective tissue between the leather straps which retain them. The blankets have been provided by entrepreneur Denitsa Popova, whose company works with female labourers in Bulgaria who weave woolen goods, and then dyed in collaboration with Cara Piazza, a natural dyer and textile designer in New York.

"With Distaff I was focused on taking up a writing of the self. This whole show is sort of about craft and gendered craft. But also about different modes of contemporary labor that women are dealing with. With the horses, the pigeons, and the ducks it's more a question of cohabitation, co-inhabitation of a city."

David Andrew Tasman, DIS Magazine, November 16, 2014

For You and You're People, which opened recently at Boatos Fine Art, in Sao Paulo, Yago shifts her attention from urban hegemony to domestic hegemony, depicting a cycle of work on the forces of love, ownership, and control. Photographs of dogs are displayed without frames on aluminum panels which are mounted an inch off the wall. When the exhibition is documented, a subtle shadow from the downlights will reveal the objecthood of the works.

In the gallery a dog chain languidly sections off the first bay of the room, forcing visitors to circumnavigate it, or to view the pictures from afar. In one image a dog stands on manicured grass: around its neck is an oversized pronged obedience collar. Hanging from it is the dogs red aluminium heart-shaped name tag – a small detail dense with the power dynamics of the domestic and the ethics of co-habitation.



The Sun Warms the Skin, but Burns it Sometimes Too, 2014, Digital C-print mounted on aluminum, aluminum lettering

The Outside and the Inside and the Secret Fear of the Secret, 2014, Digital C-print mounted on aluminum, aluminum lettering

Love Has Its Price, 2014, Digital C-print mounted on aluminum, aluminum lettering

Simone Krug, Flash Art, October 9, 2015

FLASH ART

Unlock the Gates *JTT / New York*



Unlock the Gates installation view at JTT, New York (2014) Courtesy of JTT, New York. Photography by Charles Benton

The spiritual bliss of heaven on earth — as in, “I am in total heaven right now,” “my own little slice of heaven” — is frequently an individual experience, even when shared aloud. But hell on earth is a collective experience. *Unlock the Gates* at JTT proposes that the gates to hell are always open. The show explores how the hyperbolic language surrounding concepts of heaven and hell describe singular and collective joy, suffering and other modes of lived experience. Behrang Karimi’s painting *Bedren* (2014) evokes Hieronymus Bosch’s spiritual landscape rendered in Cy Twombly’s loose brushstroke. Smoke billows and phantasmal demons contort against a crag. The piece stems from the story of the famous mountain climber Reinhold Messner, whose brother died descending a Himalayan mountain. *Bedren* is a grief-stricken hell in somber gray.

On the opposite wall, four blurry photographs of an austere young woman echo the climber’s solitary voyage in Ellie de Verdier’s *Untitled* (2014). Shot from the perspective of an object on display in a shop window, glass reflections occlude de Verdier’s central figure. Amplifying the conversation (think Josephine Pryde) between photography and sculpture, steel rings hang from the corners of each photograph, dangling like decorative fragments of industrial chain link. De Verdier recalls the bleakness (or hell) of a late January afternoon in Berlin. De Verdier and Dena Yago, the show’s curator, interpret suffering most literally in their collaboration *Column of Black Salt* (2014), a pile of salt clumps strewn over a long strip of galvanized steel. The work invokes Lot’s wife’s craning neck from Genesis’s cursed cities, Sodom and Gomorrah.

Yet there are quiet moments of pleasure amid the pain. Oto Gillen’s *The Robin’s Nest* (2014) consists of a photograph of a robin’s nest and a computer mysteriously concealed within a hand-carved wooden frame. The piece connotes both the stillness of bird watching and the serene flickering of a sleeping laptop. Elsewhere, a twisted wooden branch gestures gracefully in Ben Morgan-Cleveland’s *Untitled (Where are you from? How do you know this person?)* (2014). The branch resembles a slouching cross or a figure extending skyward.

Kayla Guthrie’s eponymous poem *Unlock the Gates* (2014) in vinyl letters on the gallery window tangle the experience of heaven, hell and earth into a network defined not simply by joy and suffering, but by uncertainty. Her protagonist is at once everywhere: terrestrial, celestial and in purgatory. Within and without the gates, one migrates easily between each realm.



London Round-up 2

Anthony Reynolds • Cubitt • Dilston Grove

In the late 1960s, when Kenneth Clark made his television series *Civilisation* (Features p8), the agenda that backed it – spelled out by the patrician presenter in his introductory remarks to camera – was a reaffirmation of establishment values threatened by that decade's social upheavals, by the purportedly 'uncivilised'. While Tate Britain exhibits its absorbing curate's egg 'Kenneth Clark – Looking for Civilisation', Anthony Reynolds appears to have taken that exhibition as embodying Clark's position and mounted a small, would-be embattled counter argument that contains, as the odd press release puts it (while switching between uncredited first person singular and first person plural), a 'token selection of works of art that suggest a few alternative or lateral views'. That one of the first pieces on view is Cisco Jiménez's *Transporte Anarquista*, 2005 – a little wheeled device containing, among other things, a Molotov cocktail, pamphlets and cable, and emblazoned with the capitalised legend 'Next Pope has to be black (or brown)' – might hint at the tenor of the show.

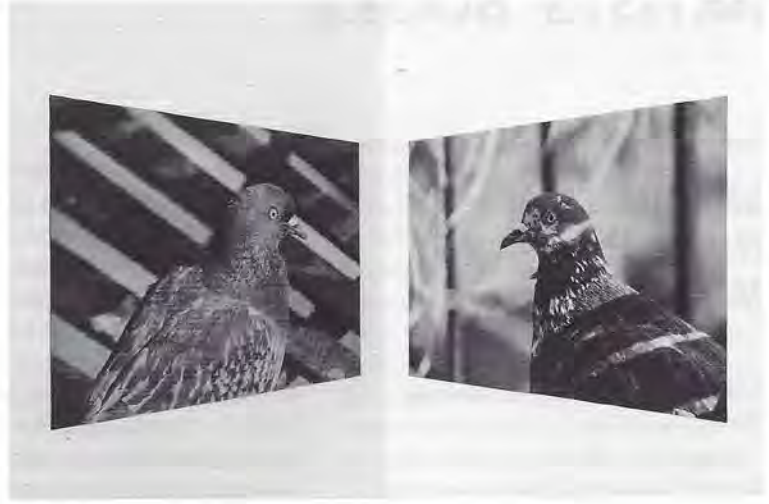
Civilization, which pointedly adopts the Americanised spelling of the word, reflects contestation, shifting borders and power struggles. Asier Mendizabal's *Burn! (Flags of Queimada)*, 2010, pulls into the real world objects – a pair of flags – briefly glimpsed in the 1969 film *Burn!*, which was released the same year as *Civilisation* was screened and starred Marlon Brando as an agent sent to organise an uprising in a Portuguese colony so that Great Britain could claim its sugar plantations. That might is right is asserted sardonically in various examples of overmastering elsewhere in the show: Nancy Spero's brutal, paired *For God and Country I and III*, 2008, summarise free speech via cut-out drawings of heads dangling from chains, bloodied tongues emerging from their mouths, while Richard Billingham's *Lion I*, 2005, shows the titular proud beast curled in the corner of a dirty zoo cage. The most evocative work is the most open-ended: Peter Gallo's undated *Utopia & Anguish* features a pair of roughly hewn little stars dangling down a wall, each featuring one of the title's words.

'Civilization', in its compound pains and fidelity to the established format of the downbeat summer show, proffers almost as edited a view of reality as Clark did. But then mournfulness and the evocation of decline are near-bulletproof attitudes for contemporary artists to adopt, always defensible as being in the service of illumination and, ideally, social change. See, for example, **Dena Yago and Laurie Spiegel**'s collaborative show at Cubitt. The theme, specific to New York but applicable to London, is the increasingly uneven, unequal state of the rental market in overcrowded and, relatedly, fast-gentrifying urban locales. Recordings of talk radio alternate between callers in rent-controlled properties and those suffering the whims of landlords who agitate for short-term leases: tenants who improved properties at their own expense only to be turfed out of them; the victims of noisy upstairs neighbours stomping on paper-thin carpets; the general false sense of ownership that tenants feel, the sour repercussions of same.

These recordings come from *The Neighbors*, 2014, a 16-minute video by Yago whose visual component is blithe ducks on a lake. In intertwined suites of photographs hung around the walls, more serene waterfowl – photographed by Yago – mounted on metal grates alternate with urban pigeons photographed close-up by Spiegel grabbing perches where they can. The analogy is a bit slippery, but none of these birds has a home: they simply get to make one, to some degree, while some are seen as pests and others seem secure and have tranquil acreage to glide across. Thinking through how this might relate to different kinds of tenant, and the benisons of landlords, opens up a seemingly didactic if heartfelt show to the subjective, to active engagement. By the end, one doesn't miss the fact that Yago, a poet, hasn't offered poetry (or if she has, it is of a different sort) and Spiegel, whose electronic music is thrilling, presents no music. One might also feel differently about pigeons, which, we're told by a London Wildlife Protection leaflet offered at the entrance, can, in formal trials on their cognitive abilities, 'perform on a par with dolphins, chimpanzees and art students'.

In 1943, the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet recorded *Stalin wasn't Stalin*, a catchy addendum to Joseph Stalin's stand

Martin Herbert, Art Monthly, July–August, 2014



against ‘the beast of Berlin’ when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. By 1982, Stalin’s reputation had fallen, and when Robert Wyatt recorded the song for his album *Nothing Can Stop Us Now* it was laden with mordancy; the title, for one thing, read differently. In **Richard Grayson’s** five-screen video installation at Dilston Grove, named – relevantly, it becomes apparent – after Wyatt’s album, the song is sung a capella by five singers against a London backdrop defined by the city’s transformation via financial services. The song begins hesitantly, each vocalist on a different screen, before, slowly, they come together on each one in front of sites including Tate Modern, the ‘gherkin’ and the Jubilee Walkway. By the end, there are 25 voices in play, the song’s architecture of complex, chirping harmony is vast and it will lodge in your head for days.

Grayson’s work, which has frequently been articulated through the voices of musicians formed by the 1960s – see, for example, *The Magpie Index*, 2012, featuring a wise, sharp-tongued monologue by Roy Harper on music sharing and intellectual property (Reviews AM354) – is about the legacies of the left and collective action, and *Nothing Can Stop Us Now* offers a historical chain that leads from the quashing of Nazism to the betrayal of Marx to the apotheosis of global capital. The record it references, additionally, was released on Rough Trade at a moment when independent music really was that, rather than wholly interfused with the mainstream (which is a larger issue: as Jonathan Crary points out in his 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, the dismantling of ‘alternative’ spheres of cultural production vouchsafes that alternatives to consensus are unnecessary). But Grayson’s chosen title switches significance more than once. *Nothing Can Stop Us* presents collective action rendering, first of all, a glorious choral noise that feels like a justification in itself and, second, a group of figures taking a



specifically weighted stand that reflects how collective action has hardly died out, just evolved. Each singer, you notice, is kept in touch with the whole song via an earpiece, the whole work is a digital video and the collective resembles a miniature flash mob. Protest and group action haven’t gone, they’re just mutating via technology. Lord Clark, you imagine, would not have wanted to see this, but he couldn’t have argued against the music, which is highly civilised and rooted in classical counterpoint. Voiced en masse, the closing line, ‘This is how it all began’, cuts through its attendant ironies into something like renovated optimism. ■

left
Richard Billingham
Lion 2005

top
Laurie Spiegel
Winged Neighbors
2004-14

Richard Grayson
Nothing Can Stop us
Now 2014
installation view

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Frieze

In the Company of Flesh and Blood

Approaching sincerity via poetry and art

It was a question of sincerity that, in 1964, prompted then-poet Marcel Broodthaers to announce that he was becoming an artist. For the first time in his life, he claimed, he wanted to make something insincere: 'I, too, wondered whether I couldn't sell something and succeed in life,' he declared in the invitation to his first exhibition. 'I had, for quite a little while, been good for nothing. I am nearly 40 years old [...] The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once.' Broodthaers's rhetoric doesn't just suggest visual art's compromised status, sold as a commodity or an instrument of the culture industry or institutions of state. It also implicitly elevates poetry as neither false nor hypocritical – an invention of the utmost integrity. Unlike artists, poets don't (or can't) sell out.

Whether you read Broodthaers's words as prescient, cynical or naïve, variations on this debate still play out 50 years later. For example, in a recent panel discussion at the Audiatur poetry festival in Bergen, artist and publisher Jason Dodge (who is featured in this issue) remarked that, whereas the market for published poetry is non-existent in comparison, the vast amount of wealth circulating in the art economy has the potential to fuel all kinds of unscrupulous behaviour. Of course, exposure within an art context can help poets reach new and possibly more lucrative markets. During the same discussion – albeit on a somewhat different register – Italian Marxist theorist and art-camp follower Franco 'Bifo' Berardi advocated for poetic ambivalence against capitalism's 'techno-linguistic automatisms' and cynical attitudes that suppose ethical action to be impossible. While neither Dodge nor Berardi addressed sincerity explicitly, their comments nonetheless described a tendency to exalt the reading and writing of poetry as a possible counter to greed, disillusionment and meaninglessness – a resistant, if not altogether anti-capitalist, position. On the economic periphery, poetry makes the development of a renewed ethics possible, a solidary stance toward other human beings.

Paralleling these sentiments, poet and painter Etel Adnan, in 'Letter to a Young Poet' (a text commissioned in 2013 for the Serpentine Gallery), advises that when a person begins to write poetry, 'you have put your life on the line [...] not metaphorically, but in a kind of a tragic honesty'. Tragic, she cautions, because poetry is a sort of destiny; no one would actually choose such a difficult, impecunious existence. Reminiscent of Michel Foucault's later writings on the Greek concept of parrhesia (or fearless speech), Adnan paints a compelling picture: a young poet embarks on a hero's journey, and is saved precisely because he or she is damned.

As someone who came to poetry through working as an artist, I'm sympathetic to these ideas. It's emboldening – although ultimately misguided – to think that writing poetry is a critical solution (if anything, it opens more questions). It's advantageous to imagine that the reading and writing of poetry can constitute a kind of linguistic rupture in the central nervous system of contemporary capital. Indeed, this emergent politics likely gives a partial account for the enthusiasm with which artists have rediscovered poetry in recent years. The contemporary art world has shown a renewed interest in concrete poetry and 'conceptual poetics', fostered in part by Kenneth Goldsmith, poet and founder of the internet archive UbuWeb, as well as the inclusion of work by poets such as Adnan, Susan Howe, Eileen Myles and Ariana Reines in the most recent Whitney Biennial (the latter two as part of the contribution by the publisher Semiotext(e)). While it's heartening to imagine a multitude of readers experiencing the challenges and thrills of poetic language, I hesitate. Especially when I see exhibition announcements written in confessional fragments or elliptical free verse.

Since William Wordsworth's claim in 1802, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that 'poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling', the demand for a coextensivity between avowal and sentiment has become, if not a major poetic value, then at least a premise whose popular acceptance remains contested. In a series of lectures from 1970 titled *Sincerity and Authenticity*, literary critic Lionel Trilling argued that sincerity as a dominant literary standard had been replaced by a 'more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in'. In other words: authenticity. Whereas sincerity can be motivated by social norms and relationships – such as considering the demands of another, a public, a market – authenticity emerges instead from the imperative to be true to oneself. (Obviously, as Trilling himself was aware, the ideal of authenticity produces its own norms, such as nonconformity and idiosyncrasy). Marshalled against things like academicism, intertextuality and appropriation, sincerity in writing often appears as an ethical stance of emotional honesty, fidelity to individual experience, and transparent, demotic speech: expressions of one's being and sensibility. Of course, the way individuals read and appropriate text is partly how a sense of self is constructed. Think of how we receive, interpret and restate different cultural 'texts' on topics such as gender, class and race. Boundaries between something like self-realization and external, normative prompts are fluid. Even Wordsworth admitted that poets must occasionally 'slip into an entire delusion' while writing.

As a qualitative measure, sincerity also runs aground. It would badly miss the point, for example, to question the sincerity of artist and poet Jimmie Durham's 'I Want You to Hear These Words About Jo Ann Yellowbird (*Ars Poetica*)' (undated), an elegy for the Native American activist who committed suicide after a police officer's kick to her stomach caused the stillbirth of her child. On another level, measuring the sincerity of a text by an artist and writer such as Caroline Bergvall, whose work often deals with etymology and changes in language use over time, doesn't really make sense given the complex historical and performative concerns embedded within it. These kinds of failings are, perhaps, also why today the word 'poem' tends to resonate with more dubious ones such as 'unsophisticated' or 'escapist' or, somewhat less harshly, 'quirky', 'romantic' and 'sentimental'. Certainly, many writers lumped under the new sincerity moniker, such as Dorothea Laskey and Tao Lin, can read this way. Others, instead, offer sincerity not as an end but as a means – a lifestyle urging readers to 'be more awesome' because 'you only live once'.



Dena Yago, 2014,
performance
documentation,
'Poetry will be made
by all!', LUMA
Foundation, Zurich.
Courtesy: the artist
and LUMA Founda-
tion, Zurich

Counter to such practices, the sincerity that I'm interested in makes itself felt as both a rhetorical value and as a mode of address: to paraphrase Wordsworth 'from one speaker to another'. In this sense, it's useful to think through how sincerity is modulated, especially in contemporary art, where it tends to appear as both disavowal and appro-

priation. As in the work of Broodthaers, whose status as an ex-poet tacitly authorized his artistic work, sincerity is full of contradictions, inducing linguistic slippage and opening poetic fault lines. It can even become ironic, as it did during the opening of the exhibition 'Poetry will be made by all!', recently on view at the LUMA Foundation in Zurich and organized by Goldsmith, Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist as part of the 89+ project. This two-day event comprised a series of readings by an array of artists and writers from the 'generation of innovators born in or after 1989', as well as their older and more established counterparts. Among the younger group of invitees, American artist Dena Yago's reading was the most overtly sceptical. Wearing an outfit printed with the word 'SALE', Yago read poems from her forthcoming book, *Ambergris* (2014), that she had printed out and affixed to unopened plastic food wrappers, including bags of organic salad and leafy green vegetables. While suggesting that her own writing rests squarely on the surface of things, Yago's performance also comically rebuked the links to freshness, wholesomeness and even purity that her participation represented. More poignantly, however, Yago – who is also part of the trend-forecasting group K-HOLE – hinted at what is at stake in contemporary art events such as these: namely, the reduction of poetry to a label, a brand, a sign-value.

Admittedly, the art world isn't wholly to blame for this reductivism. Much can be attributed to the spread, during the last decade or so, of the aforementioned 'conceptual poetry' practices that, like conceptualism in visual art, tend to give preference not to the solitary act of reading but rather to devising systems, distribution channels and virtuosity in performance.

In a rebuttal of such moves, German artist, poet and co-founder of American Books, Natalie Häusler, envisions a poem's performance not as a demonstration of the author's individual expertise, but as a readerly agency that is given form when spoken aloud. Seldom performed live, Häusler's poems are typically heard as looped recordings within an exhibition context, either embedded in individual works or as part of a larger installation; the readers are acquaintances and friends who are identifiable only by the sound of their voices (and sometimes their initials). Yet, while composed with others' voices in mind, Häusler's poems don't read like instruction works or scores. Her long poem 'Impressionisme' (2013), for example – a 12-hour sound piece featuring several readers from various places around the world – is a quasi-phenomenological investigation that employs a straightforward, descriptive style. Shifting between English, French and German, it is personal and contemplative, containing passages such as: 'I leave a trace on the ground. I am / breathing, changing therefore the air around me. / All of this is happening at any moment, at least. / Er sagt in seiner Antwort auf den Rilke Text: / «Dieser Malte ist...» Parisis Passes «einfach nur / ein Kleinbürger.» Auch ich bin, denke ich dann, / eine Kleinbürgerin. Nyami 54 passes.' While listening to the recording, one hears the non-German speakers tentatively making their way through this passage. Conversely, one can also hear the German speakers negotiating with the English and French. Being myself a speaker of neither German or French, I receive them mostly as rhythm and tone. Despite its plain address, Häusler's work calls attention to the slippages of the voice and the poem's non-denotative meanings, the ways it is re-authored when it comes into contact with different readers. As happens with the names of the passing tourist boats that recur throughout the poem (such as Parisis and Nyami54 in the excerpt above), attention is paid to what takes place when a statement is displaced – when it moves through a foreign context, whether a language or a body.

Indeed, as the Swedish artist and poet Karl Larsson writes in his book *Parrot* (2010), 'to a certain extent / an assumed body / (like an exotic bird) / can hold almost any argument / it can be the screen of endless projections'. Also playing with notions of displacement and assumed identity (it was Larsson's first book written in English), *Parrot* is both reverent and irreverent, a three-part poem on the artistic work of Broodthaers and, more generally, the application of literary methodology to artistic practice. Austere both in its language and design, Larsson's book is nevertheless dense with historical and literary references, appropriated text and echoes of the Belgian artist. However, Larsson's parrot doesn't speak nonsense; it doesn't just mimic, make allusions or (half-jokingly) point toward absence. No, this parrot is also serious; it has something to say. But how can such a bird speak for itself? Later on, in

the same passage, Larsson provides one answer: 'it takes a long time / to learn the obvious / and to agree / with the standpoint / that poetry emanates / from silence / when casual living suggests / that all things become / what they are / by being spoken of / parrot / body of words.'

Clearly, the assumed body to which the poem refers is that of poetry itself. Here, poetry does not figure as a conceptual construct or an indiscriminate host for whatever utterance. Rather, in a continual state of emergence, poetry must always find its own form. That is, it not only insists on its materiality and presence, but also on its inheritance as a product of reading. Lines such as 'To be a poet is to be literal / unaffected by allegory and metaphor / just like a beast / myopic and bad', while undermining the poet's visionary status and claims to moral authority, also suggest that, as a way of doing and making, poetry is not always transcendent, but very much implicated in the present – however mundane, messy or impure that may be. Indeed, in the last of the book's three sections, 'Torrent', Larsson reminds us that the concept of sincerity was once used to denote a measure of purity in things and not people: 'sine (without) / cera (wax) / and the wonders of the hand that gives, / the hand that takes / sculptors / of ancient Greece or Rome / who were skilled enough / not to use wax / to cover the flaws / in their work / sincerity.' A sculpture can be considered sincere when all its faults appear deliberate. The sincere artist, far from being naïve, is a master of craft.

If sincerity can emerge through style and skilful performance, then this aspect, whether in art or poetry, does not merely take shape with reference to the tragic honesty of self or its ethical coherence. Rather, it gains definition through the complex relationship between author and reader. This is one of sincerity's most compelling contradictions and, as Trilling pointed out, one of its most enduring problems. It's also what Broodthaers was saying in his announcement. And Wordsworth too, each time he slipped into delusion. In order to address an outside, artists and poets alike have to break with our identities and speak beyond ourselves; we need spaces and occasions for it. I'm interested in these margins. I'll seek them in the company of flesh and blood.

bodega

Coco Young, Alldayeveryday, June 18, 2014

ALLDAYEVERYDAY



COCO REVIEWS

Dena Yago, "Distaff"

By Coco Young

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What really interests me about the work of Dena Yago is her exploration of how writing and visual art can intersect, and yet remain anonymous from each other. A few years ago, my boyfriend gifted me a book of her poetry, "Esprit", a collection of writing produced alongside a series of works for Tomorrow Gallery.

For her first solo exhibition in New York at Eli Ping, "Distaff", Dena Yago collaborated with Denitsa Popova, a rug weaver from Bulgaria, and Cara Piazza, a natural dyer. She harnesses these rugs onto old horse tacks, creating droopy objects nostalgic of rural life.



Coco Young, Alldayeveryday, June 18, 2014

The exhibition takes its focus on the paramount role the horse and its carriage, once central to agricultural economy prior to the industrial revolution. Today, in urban settings, the horse and its carriage is now used for leisure in Central Park, considered a cruel and inhuman facet of tourist trade. ASPCA Signage and pamphlet information regarding The Coalition to Ban Horse-Drawn Carriages is available at the gallery, and included in works in the show.



Dena directs the fate of objects from the small village in Bulgaria, for instance, to the hip art space. As it parallels the economic aspect of the art market, her interest in the heritage narrative of soring horses also sheds light on the origins of our general economic system. This paradigm to Dena is the macro version of the network of art producers as she submerges herself in in New York City.

The amorphous rustic objects only serves as a vehicle for the artist to speak of pedigree altogether, as her role an artist is the last on their line of transformation from objects to gilded art. The blunt irony in "Distaff" is subdued by Dena Yago's approach as she is clemently telling instead of showing, applying her writing skills to the three dimensional world of objects.

MOUSSE



LIFE ON HEAT ISLAND

BY ISLA LEAVER-YAP



Top - Impression, 2012, installation view "A car ride driven
topless taken alone/ Reminds major city thoroughfares of their/
Contracting hopes as they pass, to carry the/ Breasts of the dri-
ver", Sandy Brown, 2012. Courtesy: the artist, Sandy Brown, Berlin

Bottom - "A car ride driven topless taken alone/ Reminds major
city thoroughfares of their/ Contracting hopes as they pass, to
carry the/ Breasts of the driver" installation view at Sandy
Brown, 2012. Courtesy: the artist, Sandy Brown, Berlin

In the contemporary vernacular, the distance between product branding and our expressions of intimacy is shrinking. Familiarity, complicity and affection are no longer the mainstays only of personal interaction, but have widened to include objects produced for and by affluent lifestyles and the leisure industry. Speaking with Isla Leaver-Yap, New York-based artist Dena Yago discusses how her texts, images, installations and collaborations probe such object-oriented ontologies, calling attention to critical points of emotional deficit and excess.

isla leaver-yap: Many people first encounter your work through your poems and prose. Your texts often precede the exhibition, but also serve as the primary documentation after the show has come down. So words appear as a “primer” to experiencing the exhibition, not simply because the texts are released first, but because they set a particular register that permanently inflects the images, objects and more abstract qualities of your exhibited work. I’m conscious also that your short poems, almost prose poems, and their structural syntactic qualities are loaded with highly specific proper nouns. You appear to address deeply privileged lifestyles, urbanity and, perhaps at the intersection of many of these things, art world privilege. The writing often concerns a female body, either through the external observation of a female subject, as in your text *Chinese Woman Stuck Between Walls Mistaken for Ghost, Rescued 7 Hours Later*, 2013, for example, or a first person observation that is clearly female.

We will pay you to cross the river towards Jordan
As serious as cancer
Who am I?
The product of deep pockets and soothing creams
With a maximum of three strong opinions
at any given hour
De trop
I've been on vacation for most of my life
but now a sick leave feels appropriate
maybe to Phucet or Bondi
Where I can wear a menu like a wraparound Sari
I will have one of each.
I will take the remainders, to-go.
I will eat all of it.
To take the cells of each fallen hair
extracting every song they've ever sung
creative dispositions towards
inanimate I's
The floutist in flip flops swaying gently
denying the sound of their slap against
cracked heels
My pores hold secrets, oxidized
This one goes out to
all the oxen as they moo silently
their lips hardening along the rounds of an O
Many many many men have fallen into their lovers arms
before you.
A brief stare complementing an extended glance
with commendation for stamina
Stamina ramen
I want to feel many things between my toes and the sand
between my buttocks
Sweet milk pressed from wheats
I am pointing with two upturned breasts
directly at the both of you
As the watch presses deeper into the tan skin of your wrist
I sit breathlessly after running towards you
Anonymous landscape
Between heaven and hell
I will carve your face onto the face on this mountain.

Stamina, 2012. Courtesy: the artist

dena yago: My use and inversion of proper and common nouns serves to gauge distances within a pretty specific landscape, that of New York City, which is totally saturated with the things you mention. Using proper nouns collapses distance, it makes the relationships that are closest to me more widely accessible. Calling anything by its name creates intimacy. I will call my water “Voss,” rather than water. Conversely, to create distance from that which is closest to me, I use common nouns. This is how I find myself addressing the female body. Or, for instance, I will call my boyfriend “**boyfriend**” rather than addressing him by his full name.

ily: It is interesting to think of Lauren Berlant’s writings on intimacy in relation to what you are saying. Berlant describes the mass-mediation of intimacy through products like therapy, self-help and talk shows. It also makes me consider how intimacy can be used to camouflage difference, and how branding reduces proximity to create the appearance of intimacy. It is useful for thinking through the way that more “authentic” or traditional expressions of intimacy have to now emerge through generalized terms such as your use of the word “**boyfriend**,” for example.

dy: This form of intimacy is a top-down use of general address to create a tone of proximity and imitate collapsed distance. For example, with “the Royal We,” or terms like “**brother**” and “**friend**.” But proximity doesn’t equate to intimacy. Through writing, with my use and inversion of generalized and specific terms, I’m trying to gauge distance bi-directionally and between multiple points. In this way, writing functions like radar, or GPS. And it’s through writing that I am able to produce images. I can address formal and compositional questions without exhausting limited resources and secreting byproduct. It grants me an amount of freedom—freedom within the constraints of language. It serves as the most effective object-oriented logic for me to form compositions—all while carrying the least amount of dead weight.

ily: What do you mean by an “object-oriented” logic?

dy: “Object-oriented” in that you are incapable of differentiating yourself from the world around you. Or, you are unable to create a hierarchy of objects. This is something that I experience through my work in branding and trend forecasting. When ascribing subjectivity to a brand or product, you begin to empathize with it. By defining its identity, you end up privileging that object on the same level as yourself. This can throw your own sense of self into a tailspin; you end up seeing everything within an object-oriented ontology.

ily: So if your practice is so heavily rooted in text, how does the writing interact with the exhibited objects or images?

dy: Leaving the text as a standalone entity is too abstract—images serve as an external tethering point. They function in a non-illustrative relationship to one another. One does not represent the other. Register and inflection are both good ways of looking at it.

ily: Practically and conceptually, then, how do you compose these texts? The texts all possess an explicitly distracted, scattered quality. Did they begin in response to a specific situation or experience?

dy: After finishing school in NYC, I started working at a law firm across the street from the gaping hole of the World Trade Center. The Freedom Tower was erected while I worked there. My job was to distribute and teach everyone in the firm how to use new Blackberries and Windows 7. There was a lot of time spent sitting in empty offices after hours, having downtime when you’re installing and activating software. I developed a lot of anger towards the leisure and the lifestyles I was facilitating and was implicated in—art and elsewhere. And I also felt like I didn’t have much of an out—NYC problems—the job paid really well, was self-managing and easy. A best-case scenario. Practically speaking, writing is always accessible for me. Language is a post-scarcity resource. What is within the realm of scarcity though, is meaning.

ily: Both your texts and the work seem to gesture towards the existence between public and private realms. Of course this public/private thematic is too broad to really break down within our conversation, but nonetheless I mention it because of what I think your practice points towards: embodied experiences of the public and private. For example, your flat-bed scanner images of fish oil capsules, of health food supplements [*Esprit*, 2011]—these are all images that hint at the invasion of the body on a molecular level, and the increasing movement of affluent, sanitized culture into the “terminal” of the private: one’s own body.

dy: By taking supplements, you’re applying “act local, think global” logic to “your body, its environment.” These gestures become ridiculous when they get wrapped up with a sense of responsibility—or when applied in any sense be-

yond “I’m taking fish oil to promote brain function and reduce risks of cancer.” Generally though, I don’t feel like there are many points that distinguish the public from the private when information is so accessible.



Fish Oil, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

ily: Do you imagine the work expressing a desire for resistance, in a political sense?

dy: Specificity—talking about what is directly in front of you—can seem so banal and totally passé, and I find that within art the discussion of the practice of everyday life often remains in the field of generalization and abstraction. My use and inversion of proper and common nouns, for example, is largely in resistance to this abstracted discussion of the “political.” With representational photography, as with plainly written text that transcribes what you are seeing in front of you, things can get so literal. A photograph of a duck can be a photograph of a duck [*Do you ever feel like a plastic bag*, 2013], a scan of a fruit can be just that, without metaphor. If there is resistance, it is a resistance to abstraction. When placing these images in relation to text, through titling or co-exhibition, any use of metaphor stresses nonequivalence.

ily: In terms of the loss of self, leisure emerges as a highly fraught activity and, as you mentioned previously, so does intimacy. The skeleton of a sun lounger you presented, almost as a surrogate self or viewer in *Esprit*, seemed to articulate this precisely: a structure that hints at a body at rest but lacks the support to allow such an act. And in your show at Sandy Brown last year [“A car ride driven topless taken alone / Reminds major city thoroughfares of their / Contracting hopes as they pass, to carry the / Breasts of the driver”, 2012], you exhibited suspended white fabric sheets daubed with marks made through frottage rubbings over people’s bodies, which implied a kind of “dirty protest” gone wrong—the painted sheets were rendered in different colors, so even the act of a dirty protest was reduced to a kind of chromatic splitting [*Interfacing* series, 2012].

dy: Thinking about it in retrospect, *A car ride driven topless taken alone* was a break-up album. It was trying to make sense of what it meant for me to continue being in love when everything surrounding that love had broken down. I made the interfacing pieces with my ex-boyfriend, and afterwards we ended up watching the television show *Breaking Amish*. Very confusing.

ily: The exhibition seemed to be a more absolute form of losing yourself amidst your environment, or an expression of the attempt to give yourself over to other things or people. How does this kind of dissolution func-

tion in your other collaborations, or is it necessary to maintain a position? I am thinking specifically of things like K-HOLE [the trend forecasting group Yago co-founded three years ago with Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Chris Sherron, and Emily Segal], as well as *Farming In Europe* [a collaborative play for theater, written and produced by Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff, Pablo Larios, and many others].



Do you ever feel like a plastic bag, 2013. Courtesy: the artist, Sandy Brown, Berlin

dy: K-HOLE is a total collaboration; producing a report requires a pretty extreme amount of negotiation, meeting in the middle, interpersonal mediation. It’s really messy. In our collaborative writing, we have agreed on a voice that is external to any of our individual voices. We’ve gotten really good at writing within this voice, and knowing when we drift outside of it. Meanwhile, there is little or no delegation of our particular roles in this writing. Usually though, when working with other people, roles are clearly defined. This is true for *Farming in Europe*, the play at New Theater in Berlin, where my role was as playwright. But even having these delegated roles doesn’t mean it’s clean. It is a completely collapsed social sphere. Relationships create shared space. It’s very intense; everyone is so deeply entrenched with one another. I feel that I’m choosing to lose myself in these relationships somewhat, but I wonder what totally surrendering to that would look like.



Walkway, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

ily: In relation to these collaborations and communities, our contemporary environmental or technical situation is complicit with such highly specified forms of working, often with unexpected ecological consequences. You told me that New York City’s electrical infrastructure has raised the temperature of the ground soil, allowing non-native plant species to thrive.

dy: It’s called the “Heat Island Effect”. There are anomalous environmental factors that effect the blooming of communities, and create a codependence. I see this in my relationship to New York City—a pretty hostile environment that isn’t a very viable place for artists. Nonetheless this is where I am, and I take a lot from the city too. The “Heat Island Effect” is created through population density, the electrical infrastructure, and the subway system. In turn, the ground is warmer than it should be. Water doesn’t stay frozen, and migratory ducks stay in Central Park year round. Fig trees and certain artist communities all thrive in New York City.