Lawrence Weschler

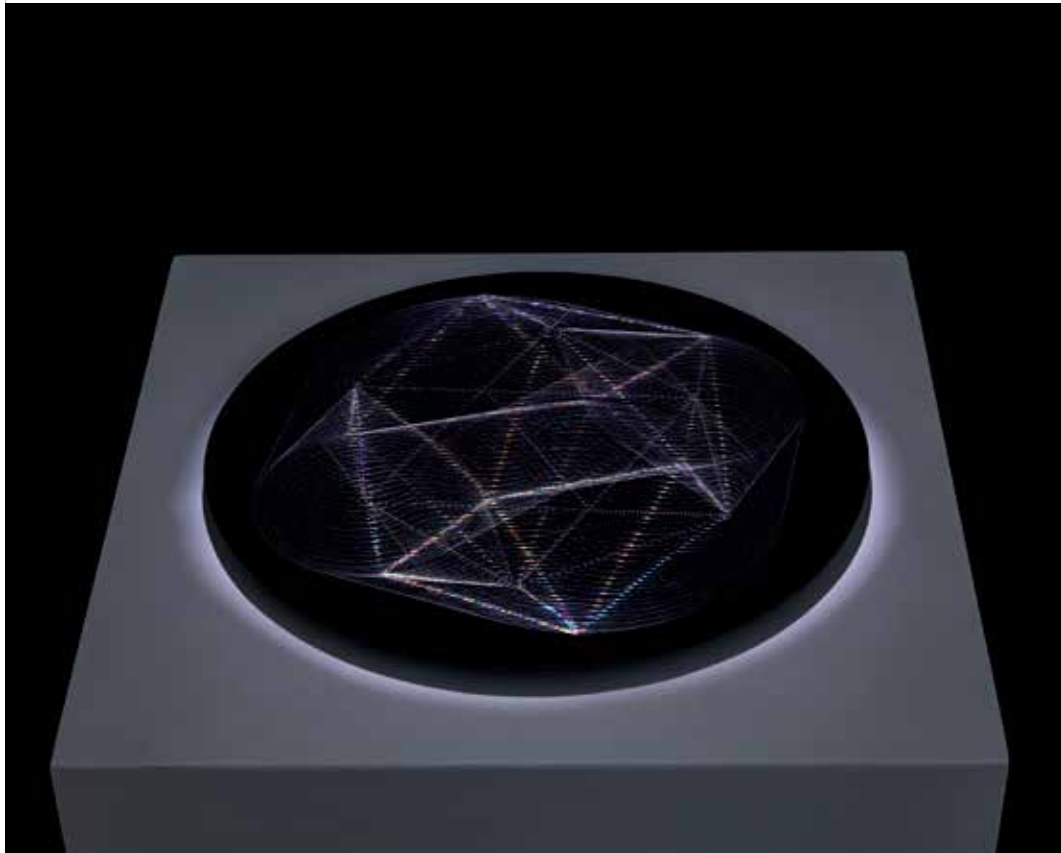
TRISTAN DUKE (PART I): THE MAGUS IN HIS YOUTH

Tristan Duke. *Diorama Boxes*, 2004-2008
Wooden boxes with viewing lenses and miniature dioramas inside, 8 x 5.5 x 4.5 inches
Photography by Tristan Duke

You may have first encountered some of the gob-smackingly prestidigitaceous marvels of the young LA magus Tristan Duke at LACMA's current *3D Double Vision* show (those astonishing rotating aluminum platters off to the side in the first room after the entrance, where, thanks to the scratches he's somehow hand-etched into the platters, sequential Platonic solids seem to hover, ghostly translucent, pirouetting in midair above the turntables). Or by way of the recent Disney-released vinyl LPs of the music to "Star Wars" (above which wraithlike simulacra of the Death Star and the Millennium Falcon likewise seem to gyre). Or maybe it was by way of those mind-boggling in-folding and exfoliating handheld notched wooden contraptions (cubes transmogrifying into dodecahedrons in the flick of the wrist, for godssake). Or by way of several of his secret optical-trapdoor contributions at Culver City's endlessly confounding Museum of Jurassic Technology. Or as in my case, it might have been by way of the Liminal Camera, the shipping-container-sized pinhole-camera-obscura mounted atop a flatbed truck which he and his artistic collaborators in the Optics Division of downtown LA's Metabolic Studio have been dragging all around the country, documenting scenes of ecological devastation on wall-length sheets of photographic paper (and not infrequently developing the results in the very toxic muds left over, as in the Owens Valley, by all that blight).

Whatever the occasion, and even if you had not yet heard his name, you too might have found yourself wondering, as I certainly did, *WTF, WTH is this guy!?*

Tristan Duke
***Icosahedron (intersecting plate)*, 2014**
Hand drawn hologram on metal plate with rotating turntable, 10 x 10 inches.
Photography by Joshua White/ JWPictures.com



Tristan Duke, *Holo Lab*

So it turns out, as I recently discovered on a visit to his tiny private studio squirreled away in a cubbyhole workspace in the bowels of the Jurassic, that Tristan Duke — he prefers that I refer to him as simply Tristan — is a joshingly boyish (open-faced, close cropped yet still unkempt brown beard) 37- year-old gentleman, given to long-sleeved pearl-buttoned cowboy shirts and black Dickies workpants which might well put you in mind of Woody from the "Toy Story" series, or maybe it's just the gleaming aw-shucks conviviality the two seem to share.

Tristan was born (1981) and raised in the college town of Urbana Champaign, Illinois, "an island in the cornfields," as he likes to say. His parents landed there in headlong flight from their shared stereotypical suburban upbringings in Park Forest, Illinois (the site as it happens of the dismal 1950s sociological study, *The Organization Man*). Though even back there his family had its curlicue aspects. His mother's father, for example, was a seemingly conventional "Mad Men" type, though on the wacky side of the spectrum, being one of the advertising illustrators who brought us such seminal icons of the era as Toucan Sam from Fruit Loops and Cocoa Krispies' Sonny the Cuckoo Bird. Tristan's mother's brother fled home for the circus (not entirely to their parents' distress), eventually befriending Roger Brown and other stalwarts of Chicago's Hairy Who art scene, then becoming a noted *trompe l'oeil* painter. Tristan's mother — herself something of a proto-Buddhist — became a specialist in Chinese art and presently came to constitute the entirety of the Education Department of the Krannert Art Museum on the campus of the University of Illinois there in Urbana. Tristan's highly educated father got an MA in ceramics, but really wanted to be a painter, albeit an intensely private one, with a hermetic visual language and highly ambivalent attitudes toward the art market (he never had gallery representation and made his living as a handyman/carpenter/contractor).

Tristan's own upbringing was enveloped in something of a Bohemian vibe; his parents were so poor that for a while early on they took up residence in the university's Japan House where they were both studying the Japanese Tea Ceremony ("So my own first steps," notes Tristan, "literally came across tatami mats"). In later years the family would move from one time-worn, hundred-year-old house to the next, his father fixing them up, selling them, and everyone moving on. A family friend and neighbor turned out to be Chungliang Al Huang, the storied close advisor to both Alan Watts and Joseph Campbell; another of his mother's friends was Cecilia Vicuña, the eminent Pinochet-era Chilean émigré poet and performance artist. Hardly a conventional upbringing.

Tristan Duke
***Hologram Box*, 2012**
Laser hologram in folding display box, 3.5 x 7.5 x 4 inches.
Photography by Tristan Duke

Yet for all of that, Tristan's childhood was also steeped in standard heartland American tropes: a large tribe of cousins living close at hand, diving into each other's houses and running around in nature. "Our parents just turned us loose, we'd be riding our bikes into the cornfields, building forts, catching turtles, and the like—we and our friends pretty much had the run of the town."

Though Tristan proved a consistently above average student and enjoyed science (particularly those classes that allowed him to indulge his Rube Goldberg side) and math classes (the latter that is, until geometry gave way to algebra —"For me, I had to see it, or even better build it or draw it, to understand it"). If truth be told, he hated school in Urbana, from beginning to end (*"Why,"* he'd demand, *"do I have to keep wasting my time on all this crap?"*), and from day one seemed to resist its social striations and demands. All the way back in preschool he'd staged a semester-long war with a teacher who had his charges draw, then would transcribe their dictated explanations of what they had made at the bottom of the drawings. "Tristan does not have anything to say about this drawing" was the caption beneath every single one of his.

What he did love from the very start, though, was *drawing*. His spiral notebooks became festooned over with doodles and diagrams, often at the expense of almost anything else. He'd spend hours at home, in the company of friends, scrawling away across big sheets of paper. He also became obsessed with glue guns; his father brought home randomly shaped pieces of scrapwood from his jobs that Tristan would contrive into ever more elaborate structures. Despite this relentless drive to express his visions, Tristan did not much like art classes. He hoovered up techniques — perspective, Photoshop and the like — but rejected all the intellectual snobbery and the hierarchy of teacher's acolytes, actively resisting being drafted into the clique of "art stars" as the teacher dubbed them.

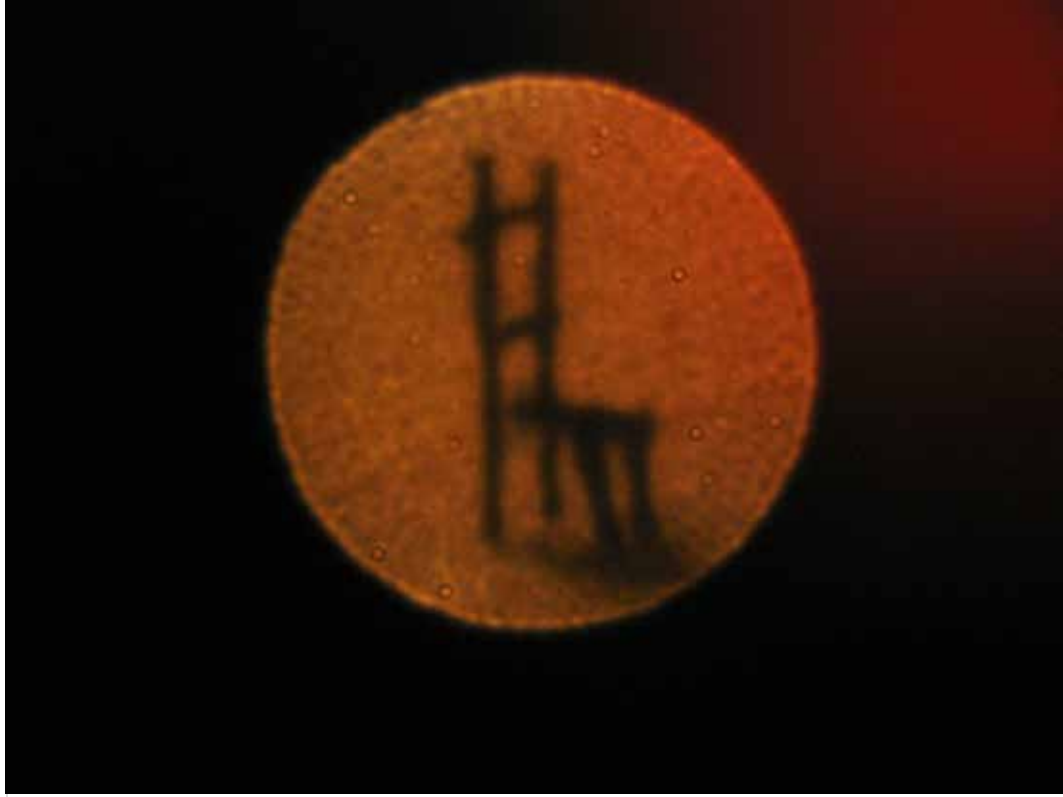
There were about 300 students in Tristan's Urbana High graduating class, though he was not one of them. The year before, administrators noticed he'd simply stopped attending school – he would do the homework, pass the tests, but was never there. So they expelled him into a special school for gang members and drop outs, where he endured a fairly harrowing semester (though they did let him read whatever he wanted, and he read everything: Salinger, Baldwin, Snyder and Trungpa). He went on to the local community

college to finish his last semester's units, and received a full scholarship to the University of Illinois, only to drop out after one week; college, it seemed, was just not going to be his thing.

"Had I grown up with any other family," Tristan once told me, "I'd likely have become a scientist — given the kinds of things I was drawn to — though with the family I had, I was pretty much stamped from the start." Stamped, that is, to take the other road. So he dropped out of college and spent the next several years bumping about in Urbana, "working in coffee houses, hanging around with the other fuck-ups, trying to figure stuff out." What stuff? "Well, life and things." Things, especially: he'd wake up in the middle of the night, his mind aflame with ideas, with contraptions he just had to try out — his "insomnia machines," as his mother took to characterizing them. For example, he "borrowed" one of his father's yardsticks, the kind that used to come with a veritable farmer's almanac of tables on the back side (the number of ounces in a pound and pounds in a ton, centimeters in an inch, inches in a foot, yards in a kilometer, acres in a hectare, the speed of a horse, a car, electricity...light). Tristan proceeded to slice, facet and hinge the yardstick into a stack of roughly 2-centimeter-square-stubs for which he contrived a series of overlapping, folding, connecting joints such that the resultant approximately wallet-sized, pristinely engineered gadget – his Non-Euclidean Ruler, as he'd taken to calling it – could turn and flip in his hand, displaying one select info segment followed by the next, over and over, opening wide and closing shut, in a deft eternal rotation. "And see," he now pointed out, as he showed it to me, "here comes the table with the hectares and then here"— turn turn turn —"the one with the speed of light: all the sorts of figures you might one day find yourself needing out there on the farm." Artful, elegant, and downright mesmerizing.

Not that he didn't remain deeply ambivalent about art, or at any rate about the art world: he was after all his father's son, deeply torn about monetizing his creations, or subjecting them to the typical art gallery horse races and betting salons. If anything, he wanted to fend off all such commercial considerations and simply focus purely on the give and play of creative, insomniac inquiry, always willing to jerry-rig other ways of making a living.

After his parents divorced, his mother moved out to Los Angeles to head up the education department at the Hammer. Which is, in turn, what brought him to LA a few years later, in 2002, and into an auditorium at



Tristan Duke. *Hair Chair*.

UCLA where David Wilson happened to be lecturing on the history of the micro-miniature.

David Wilson was the founder of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, and if you don't know about that diminutive giant of a fellow and the tiny epic museum that he and his cohort have been conjuring into existence off Venice Boulevard in Culver City, you should drop everything and head over there right now, or at least take a moment to look them up.

While the audience that evening in the UCLA auditorium was becoming ever more confounded and confused by the little man's peroration, as it somehow tumbled straight through an initially straightforward survey of masters of micro-miniature calligraphy, painting and sculpture, on into the marvels of Soviet rocketry set against swelling chords of a Purcell opera: (the "Aria of the Cold Genius," from King Arthur, to be specific), and well beyond that—for Wilson's flights of fancy not infrequently entail a certain amount of, shall we say, *slippage*—Tristan for his own part was growing ever more thoroughly engrossed and entrammeled.

For one thing, Wilson was summoning forth long suspended (suppressed?) memories of a time, ten years earlier, when Tristan's mother had invited a micro-carver named Chen Zhongsen over from Fuzhou in Southern China for a special showing of his drop-jaw astonishing achievements. These included poems calligraphed across a single strand of hair and long sequences of ornate Chinese ideograms etched onto a single grain of rice, all culminating in a live demonstration where the master proceeded to cover over a miniscule, certifiably blank pebble with all manner of microscopic carved inscriptions, deploying no magnifying equipment whatsoever and, for that matter, doing so *with his eyes closed!*

Inspired by the UCLA talk, Tristan resolved to visit with Wilson at his museum the very next day and was completely bowled over. Here was an artist who had somehow cracked the mystery of how to stay true to one's art and vocation while steering clear of the perversities of market pressures. Well clear at that – and to this very day (no one can figure out how he keeps the place running.) Wandering through the museum's labyrinthine halls, with their myriad trapdoor mysteries, Tristan grew increasingly impressed by the democratic quality of Wilson's sly deceptions, the way he was constantly playing with his guest's perceptions and yet letting them see how he was doing so. For example, in the space given over to Athanasius Kircher, the way Wilson and his team were regularly deploying Pepper's Ghosts to sublimely haunting effects.

Tristan and Wilson subsequently convened in the still-under-construction tearoom upstairs and spoke for hours: a regular mind meld. At one point Tristan pulled out his "Non-Euclidean Ruler," and began putting it through its paces (suddenly, he noticed, as if for the first time, how in one of its rotations, the name of the owner of the yardstick's sponsoring lumberyard surfaced in big letters, DAVID W) . . . it was just one of those kinds of meetings, everything just seeming meant to be, culminating with Tristan's plea to Wilson, "What can I do? Just tell me what you need, I'll do anything." Which is how Tristan came to fashion, for starters, the mold, featuring the Museum's primordial totemic visage, "Mr. J," for eventual use in a run of chocolate bars — yes, chocolate bars — for the museum shop. As the years passed and Tristan started traveling back and forth between Urbana and LA, he took to designing other magnificent, quirky objects for the Museum Shop and for that matter becoming sporadically involved in installations within the museum itself.

Back in Urbana, though, the lure of the miniature began to take hold. Tristan would wake up in the middle of the night, possessed by visions. In his spare hours, he began crafting miniature scenes, meticulous dioramas not much bigger than the final joint in your pinkie. "I was making these things *because I simply had to,"* Tristan recalled, "their manufacture infused with all the angst and pressure of that time in a person's life, with all the urgency of my trying to make sense of the world." Tiny foreshortened hallways, teeny room-scapes (another of the advantages of this sort of work being that it didn't require much by way of studio space, as he really didn't have any). In one instance, he inserted a Pepper's Ghost of his girlfriend at the time in a long red ball gown, hovering translucent in the middle distance of a tapering hallway; in another he contrived the effect of a television hidden behind an intervening wall, its flickering light playing upon an abandoned chair visible through an open doorway. How had he done that? By taking the surprise audio mechanism from a cat food box which sang "Meow, meow" and rewiring the thing's circuitry so that instead it sent staccato electrical pulses to a tiny LED bulb hidden off to the side of the pinkie-nub sized room.

One challenge, however, became how to display the results. A building across from the coffee house where he was working got condemned and wandering its emptied halls, Tristan began extracting the peephole eyepieces from out of the doomed apartment entry doors. Back home, at his midnight desk, he would fashion exquisite blond wood boxes, slotting in his carved miniature dioramas, meticulously adjusting the lighting effects, closing up the box and then inserting the peephole scopes with their fish-eye lenses that, enforcing spooky depths of field, rendered the objects simply magical. As the work evolved, the boxes somehow began to resemble baby birds, their boxy bodies atop elegantly curved, intricate brass legs, with the beaks formed by those re-purposed door peep-scopes now seeming to tilt up expectantly, invitingly, toward any passing viewer ("Feed me!" Feed me with your attention.)

"I used to love watching visitors as they'd lean down to peer in," Tristan said. "Eventually, in 2005, I mounted a little show of the pieces at the Angel's Gate Cultural Center down in San Pedro. Because of the nature of the lenses, the experience had to be essentially private: only one person at a time. And it wasn't necessarily entirely clear what you were gazing at — there was a dreaminess to the effect, and people's responses were often deeply subjective, projecting as much into the scene as they were drawing out from it.

Tristan Duke
***Image Name*, 2018**
Medium
Size inches
All photographs courtesy
Tristan Duke
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"For me, meanwhile, across those endless nights of making things, I came to realize that my primary interest was becoming perception itself: the optics, the lenses, the focal lengths — all pointed to something deeper. I was becoming fascinated by the way perception feeds into the experience of meaning. The way the Alchemists of old used to conceive of the camera obscura as a model of the mind itself; I was captivated by the marvel of how we come to experience anything at all across that thin membrane — mind — that perhaps is only just seemingly separating self and world."

And it was thus that Tristan now determined that he wanted to pursue a more advanced education after all. It came down to a choice between CalArts, with its exceptionally well endowed, elite interdisciplinary arts focus, or the Naropa University, a conspicuously less well endowed liberal arts college founded in 1974 in Boulder, Colorado, when the Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa invited Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, John Cage and other similarly minded beat and avant-garde types to help innovate new ecumenical (though Buddhist centered) ways of teaching and knowing. In the end, Tristan chose Naropa, because it offered a wider and more eclectic way, he felt, of pursuing questions of perception and meaning — besides he had never wanted to be simply an artist.

At Naropa (from 2005 through 2010), he began by tapping back into his family roots, and indeed his own primordial memories, launching into an extended study of *chanoyu* — the way of the Japanese tea ceremony. In keeping with his more recent concerns, Tristan focused on the phenomenological aspects of *chanoyu*, including, and perhaps surprisingly for such a visual soul as his, its experience as a soundscape. These studies culminated in an exquisitely modulated short essay on "The Acoustics of Tea," which started out by citing a poem by Sen Sotan, a 17th-century grand tea master ("If asked the nature of chanoyu / say it's the sound / of windblown pines / in a painting"), concluding four delicately observed (or should one say "heard"?) pages later, with Tristan's observation: "The acoustic landscape of tea is beautiful and subtle, offering a complex interplay between silence and non-silence, intention and non-intention. The silence of tea is a pregnant one, from which laughter is liable to burst at any moment. It is the silence between the heartbeats. Here in the tearoom we may happen to hear the sound of one hand clapping."

Such attention to attentiveness spread over to another early focus of Tristan's time at Naropa as he now followed his miniature diorama passion clean over into the micro-miniature. Once again studying the processes of his childhood hero, the master Chen Zhongsen, as well as engaging several other micro-miniature practitioners, contemporary and ancient, Tristan began to recognize in the micro miniature passion another form of contemplative practice.

A long paper he subsequently compiled on this body of research culminated with an account of his own first attempt at a micro-miniature sculpture (ridiculously gross and crude though it was going to be when compared to the work of the masters he had been surveying, but still): a chair he hoped to fashion out of strands of hair from one of his tea ceremony teachers, using no magnification and limiting himself to only a needle and a razor. It took him three attempts, each representing hours upon hours of focused concentration. The first time, just as he was turning to the attachment of the final leg of the chair (an exceptionally delicate moment in the process), a slight flicker of frustration flashed across his mind, instantaneously transmitting itself to the tips of his fingers. Though his hands shuddered barely a 32nd of an inch, he figures, the sculpture looked like it had been run over by a truck. The next day he started afresh, this time keeping his attention completely focused, pausing to regain his composure between each operation, succeeding at great length in affixing that final chair leg, at which point he let out a deep sigh of satisfaction, blowing the entire work clean away in the hurricane of his outbreath. The next day, a third attempt, steady, steady, steady, and only after he'd safely stowed the completed chair under an upturned teacup did he let out a full exhalation. At which point he felt the sudden desire to be out and about, under the bright sun and the vast Colorado sky, jogging up a winding mountain road. "Breathing deeply," he concluded, "my arms swinging freely, and with my heart pounding, I was suddenly struck by an expansiveness unlike anything I had ever experienced. I felt so tiny, and yet gigantic all at the same time. As my feet pounded against the mountain path, I was repeating the mantra, *'I am the point of a very fine needle.'"*

Coming in Fabrik, "Tristan Duke (Part II): The Magus in His Prime"

Richard Speer

Truffault's Fahrenheit 451: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Image: Anish Kapoor. *Cloud Gate*.

Jeff Koons. *Dious*, 2015
The Centre Pompidou

There is a scene toward the beginning of François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* that isn't in the Ray Bradbury novel from which the film was adapted. After a busy day of burning books, the story's protagonist, "fireman" Guy Montag, is riding home on a suspended monorail. Although he does not appear to notice, fellow passengers are engaged in conspicuous spectacles of self-obsession. A flaxen-haired girl kisses her reflection in the tram's window, a young man languorously massages his own shoulders, and a woman nuzzles her fur collar, eyes closed in delectation. No one is conversing; the absorption with self is complete. This appears as avant-garde filmic collage at its most obvious, but the random images are rife with meaning — and prognosticating power.

No one on the monorail is reading a book or newspaper; the government has forbidden them. Books — their paragraphs, sentences, and most elementally, their words — have lost currency. Without words as a bridge to other people's ideas and contexts, to the word outside themselves, these voluptuary self-smoochers and fur-fondlers have lost the faculty of empathy. Unable to acknowledge or feel with a world beyond the self, Truffault's urbanites are rendered infantilized, unindividuated, and — most relevant here — wholly subject to the state.

Watching Truffaut and co-screenwriter Jean-Louis Richard's 1966 take on Bradbury's 1951 classic today, does not feel like a nostalgic look back, but a prescient documentary of our times, with one essential caveat. While

books have not been literally outlawed today, words and the depth of thought to which they give permission are increasingly marginalized, ever under siege; not by the state directly, but by a stealth, relentless loss of complex language, and a move to increasingly and exclusively imagistic forms of experience and human connection.

The trajectory is not exclusively technological, but as Truffault noticed before most of us did, technology certainly colludes. The units of ideological discourse and, more importantly, creative output, have been historically contracting — from epic poem to stage play, from novel to novella, to short story, on to Cliff's Notes and the Wiki summary. The tradition of political oratory descends into the presidential tweet storm; corporate culture and mass media pare our collective experience into ever-shorter, dumbed-down sound-and-scene bites: KFC, the HuffPost, a gourmet is now a "foodie." The written letter has ceded to the email, the email to the text message, the text message to childish acronyms such as LOL, ending at the wholly wordless emoticon, quintessential nadir of our devolution from the language of Shakespeare to a menu of iPhone pictographs that Apple — prescribes, and we accept. These, then, are the prominent signifiers and boundaries of that most subtle of events: human consciousness. Imagine a world where a brown thumbs-up comes slowly to stand in for/address the profound complexities of race. Truffault did.

Word-challenged me-engaged, we have become a disinterested populace, immersed in our screens, our *selfs*, our *self-ies*. This is by now a tired yarn, but what we fail to notice when we either ignore or lament the loss of the word, is that such a condition leaves a citizenry politically disengaged, primed for dictatorship. Bradbury's version showed us a society of bookless lemmings in a totalitarian state, but Truffaut showed us totalitarianism's less obvious precursor — the narcissism that arises when words are devalued and empathy atrophies. If ever there were a time to revisit Truffaut's film and attend to its message, it is now.

From the very beginning of *Fahrenheit 451*, Truffaut zeros in on the repercussions of devaluing the written word. He begins the film not with traditional printed credits but with an unseen narrator announcing the names of actors and crew as the camera zooms in on images of television antennas. The message is clear: Words are expendable in the mass-media paradigm. In an early scene, Guy Montag, lying in bed with his vacuous wife, Linda, is reading a newspaper, except there is no news in it, only comics – quick-read

caricatures with no words, no dialogue, not even so much as a thought bubble. When words vanish, Truffaut implies, thoughts too become less relevant.

The center of Montag and Linda's home is their "wall unit," a flat-screen television that plays shallowly consumerist images of women dispensing beauty tips and getting facials, as well as proto-reality TV programs narrated by an anodyne hostess – recall this is a full nearly 50 years ago when TVs were still cutting edge. Occasionally, the players turn and appear to ask Linda questions, giving her the illusion of interactivity. Between programming that stages these stand-ins for connection, the wall unit displays non-stop kaleidoscopic patterns, pretty colors going around in pretty patterns, then going around some more. Nearly everyone, Linda included, is hooked on mood-altering pharmaceuticals, which further dull the mind, discouraging genuine reflection and any engaged political agency that such reflection might arouse. Without recourse to written notation, school children learn mathematics, not by scribbling out equations, but by reciting sing-songy formulas applied to nothing real in the world. Knowledge has become the province not of the analytic but of the repeated and the rote. Prescient?

Truffaut wanted the film's soundtrack to underscore the eventual impact of all this: infantilization. His brilliant pick for composer, Bernard Herrmann, deployed a battery of glockenspiels, marimbas and xylophones to highlight the juvenile mentality of a bookless, thought-thin world. In Herrmann's orchestrations, these clunky percussions bang away in sinisterly mindless cadences, telegraphing a society that is part kindergarten, part concentration camp. In this sensation-centered, concept-phobic society, no one remembers dates or events, because no one writes in diaries or sends cards to mark important occasions. Linda can't remember where or when she and Montag met; Montag can't remember how long he's worked on the book-burning force. When Linda buys Montag an old-fashioned straight razor to replace his electric one, she erroneously tells him, "It's the very latest thing. Everyone's using them now. Can I throw your old one away?" With no words, there is no history, there is no memory, and we do not know what is new or what the same is.

The image in front of us — the prevailing screen — meters the only sense of time. All sense of what has come before, any conception of cause and effect have evaporated. This, Truffaut suggests, is what happens in the absence of written history: personal memories fade, followed by cultural memory. Unrecorded, lessons of the past go unheeded, police brutality goes

Random International, *Rain Room*.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

undocumented, genocides come and go and political accountability ceases. As the opiated masses gaze at pretty patterns on screens, governments wage internal and external wars no one reacts to or questions.

The parallels to our current era are chilling and manifold. Whatever side of the blue-red image battles you find yourself on, no one can deny that our president is an empathy-challenged former reality-TV star whose speech patterns are repetitive and whose syntax is a mash-up of grade-school taunts and mind-numbing doublespeak. His preferred mode of — unilateral — communication is the 280-character tweet. It is notable that Trump, a personification of our word-phobic age, reportedly reads neither fiction nor nonfiction but prefers pre-prepped briefings short on words, heavy on pictures. Predictably, we have witnessed state sanctioned unremitting attacks on our free press, the historical word-armed watchdogs of democracy.

Like the denizens of *Fahrenheit 451*, we have been de-worded, dumbed down and infantilized. Like them, we have bought into the illusion that our self-preoccupation equals self-actualization and self-sufficiency. In fact, we are more dependent than we have ever been. The film's habitués depend on the state; we depend on our screens and the unseen special interest billionaires who mediate those screens to their ends. Our apps purport to curate, customize and maximize our every whim, fostering a false sense of control and self-containment, but like Freud's dependent oral stage infants, we would be lost if the digital tit suddenly dried up. What might happen if the signal

flickered and died? Could we write cohesive idea longhand or compute distances by long division, or would decades of verbal atrophy betray our total dependence? More importantly, could we muster the intellect and fortitude to defend humanism and compassion against imminent threats, having spent the last decades immersed in fast-satisfaction juvenilia like video games and Instagram?

Suddenly Bradbury's and Truffaut's dystopias appear not so distant from our real-world status quo. This is evident not only in our current political crisis but also in the arts. The visual arts — which have always reflected a notion of our collective humanity, our profound ideals — increasingly reflect the literal, the local and the utterly banal. Like Truffaut's monorailing onanists, today we take an unflagging interest in gazing at our own images. If there is a visual leitmotif of our day and its ethos, it is the reflective surface – that pluperfect conceit for our conceit. Whether in Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* in Chicago or Jeff Koons' balloon animals and gazing balls, we never tire of the stare that stares back. "In a reflective surface, your existence is being affirmed," Koons told *Art in America* in 2014. "When you move, your abstracted reflection changes. The experience is dependent upon you; it lets you know that art is happening inside of you." You, you, you.

The last 30 years of art practice and discourse – at their best — celebrate art that includes, rather than dictates to, the viewer, but even this noble cause descends into a surface of images that are "all about me." Random International's *Rain Room* lets us play God, puts *you* at the center of a faux cosmos, controlling the weather with your movements. The kaleidoscopic, contentless imagery that plays on the wall units of Montag and Linda's living room prefigures the shiny, flashy sensation-stroking that used to be the province of packaging design but increasingly infiltrates fine art. We find it in the LED-light fantasias of Leo Villareal and Hap Tivey, the immersive polka-dotted many-mirrored installations of Yayoi Kusama, the sequin-encrusted tableaux of Liza Lou, Mickalene Thomas, and Shawne Major, the bubble gum-palette paintings of Omar Chacon or the pigmented grids of Albert Contreras. On the art-life boundary, ASMR promulgates hypnotic imagery of food coloring drip-dropping into water, pink soap sliced into mesmerizing patterns, and audio of gently pelting rain, or microphones being sensually patted with fluffy makeup brushes.

This is not to suggest that any of these cultural products are content-deficient, rather that they are superficially spectatorial in nature and

Jeff Koons. *Balloon Dog*, 2008
Palace of Versailles

tend to balm and mesmerize more than to pique and activate. Anesthetized by the glitz, we're less likely to look to images to project us into far-away lands, to afford us glimpses of the next world or the not-like-me; we do not engage images to understand the plights of the persecuted and aggrieved — we look for the gratification of our own faces, our own butt-selfies and dick pics, our own visuals parroted back. It is not a portal into other minds we seek, we want a hand-mirror. Bathed in happy glowing colors, ogling our over-documented body parts, we are neither engaged or engage-able. Our cultural condition is one of stupefaction, of being struck dumb: mesmerized in the moment, unable to speak, write, or dream of the past or future. No words written, uttered or required. The nation grows silent, voices of dissent muted, a citizenry lulled into passivity, image-opiated, proudly unerudite, easily manipulated.

In Truffaut's film, the government wages secret wars, men are summoned to military exercises and never return, state-controlled media broadcast propaganda sound bites unchecked by a free press. There is no press because there are no words. Truffault's vision is prophetic — a cautionary tale.

Narcissism is certainly neither new nor necessarily evil. Neither this writer nor Truffault would be short-sighted enough to make such claims. Central to the Enlightenment was free will and a celebration of individual agency as against autocracy; late-19th century aesthetes and avant-gardists lauded a sort of preening cult of the self. But those eras had their chroniclers, like an Oscar Wilde (among others), whose rapier wit deployed words as weapons to model creative thought, to advance and historicize challenges to blind authority. The Jazz Age trafficked in youth absorbed subjective superficialities, but the ethos of that rebellion found expression and critique in the lasting prose of Scott Fitzgerald. The idealism of the hippies gave way to sexual hedonism, set the stage for the "I'm okay, you're okay" crazes of the 1970s and the *Me Generation* widely lampooned for its unapologetic solipsism. But that very moniker was coined, investigated, and distributed by satirist nonpareil Tom Wolfe, as well as poignantly scrutinized by high and low culture thinkers like Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, or the whole of *Rolling Stone*, with its pages so packed with logorrheic excess, that its layout was dubbed "the wall of text." As egocentric as each of these eras was, they did not want for words; they left their mark on us as words.

In Truffaut's film, Montag embarks on a crusade to rescue words and books from the oblivion to which the state has consigned them. He begins to steal books from the pyres he is forced to ignite by day and reads them later in the middle of the night. With the zeal of a monk he devours tome after tome, intent upon rediscovering the knowledge of the past. Truffaut even outfits him in a terry cloth robe with an exaggerated cowl to heighten the monastic associations. As Montag's passion for books grows more feverish, he barges in on Linda and her friends to read aloud a passage from *David Copperfield*, like an evangelist. One of the friends begins weeping. "I'd forgotten about all those feelings," she cries. Dickens has transported her into the minds of characters who inhabit a world far removed from her own. This is what great words/books/artworks do – they liberate us from the myopia of our microcosm and invite us to investigate, to transcend the self, to know the Other. Acronyms and emoticons simply don't have that power.

Images are not the enemy of books, nor are pretty lights, polka dots or selfies. Images and words have coexisted as reflections of personal and collective consciousness for millennia. It is only when images supplant words that the critical faculty suffers and the mind, lacking empathic connection to others, dead ends at narcissism and political lethargy. François Truffaut illustrated these connections more than a half-century ago. It seemed hyperbolic then. If there is a message here, it is that only by re-elevating discourse — as Montag does at the conclusion of *Fahrenheit 451* — can we set aside the hand mirror.

David Pagel

PARA ART AND THE CENTER FOR LAND USE INTERPRETATION

***Perpetual Architecture: Uranium Disposal Cells of America*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2012**

Sometimes a bicycle is just a bicycle. No matter how beautifully crafted the sleek, two-wheeled piece of human-powered transport, it's still a tool: an exceptionally efficient mechanism for moving individuals from one place to another, without burning gas or doing much damage to the environment.

The first part of that description has a lot in common with what we expect from works of art: that they are images and objects and stories and songs that move us, changing the way we relate to our surroundings while doing all sorts of things to our conscious–and unconscious–understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit. Bicycles and works of art both deliver experiences otherwise unavailable to us, intensifying the highs and lows of our connections to our surroundings, broadening horizons, expanding possibilities, and generally making life more meaningful. But it's important to resist the impulse to treat bikes as works of art, as somehow endowed with some kind of magical mystique that makes them seem to be better than other things and deserving of special privileges.

That is particularly true today, when the Supreme Court has muddied the distinction between wedding cakes and artistic expression (i.e., free speech), when people happily "curate" their own lives (online and otherwise), and bartenders have been replaced by "mixologists" and "cocktail designers."

***Pavement Paradise: American Parking Space*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2007**

***Foreground: The Landscape of Golf in America*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2015**

***Initial Points: Anchors of America's Grid*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, 2012**

***Intrepid Potash, Wendover, Utah*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

***Intrepid Potash Cane Creek Mine, Moab, Utah*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

At a time when overspecialized preciousness seems to have teamed up with an unwillingness to draw any lines between art and anything else made by humans, it might be more interesting to forget about art for a moment and start, instead, thinking about *para-art*—objects and images and storylines that inspire fascinating turns of mind while never insisting or presuming to be works of art, especially if that means standing apart from the nitty gritty vicissitudes of everyday life.

Bikes are like that. So is every exhibition ever organized by the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), since it opened in 1994. The idiosyncratic institution located on Venice Boulevard in Culver City is all about para-art. Founded and directed by Matthew Coolidge, it is a plain, unassuming place, a sort of DIY information booth, an easy-to-use venue whose letterhead and logo state that all of its work is "dedicated to the increase and diffusion of knowledge about how the nation's lands are apportioned, utilized, and perceived." Its bricks-and-mortar features are modest: a single exhibition space—about the size of a public-school classroom—that includes a front desk, a two-shelf book store, an even smaller gift shop, a rack of brochures free for the taking and a backroom that functions as an all-in-one office, library, research center and workshop.

With similar efficiency, its website, www.clui.org, lays out its mission: "The CLUI exists to stimulate discussion, thought, and general interest in the contemporary landscape. Neither an environmental group nor an industry affiliated organization, the work of the Center integrates the many approaches to land use—the many perspectives of the landscape—into a single vision that illustrates the common ground in "land use" debates. At the very least, the Center attempts to emphasize the multiplicity of points of view regarding the utilization of terrestrial and geographic resources."

For the last 25 years, Coolidge and his small staff have organized exhibitions and events that, like bicycles, function in many of the same ways that art does, and, like bikes, do not insist on being seen as works of art. Rather than worrying about their status, identity, and what category they might belong to, the works in all of the exhibitions organized by CLUI simply go about their business—laying out lots of information about a particular aspect of how humans have used—and are using—the land that makes up the United States, and, in the process, inviting viewers to interpret that information however we see fit.

As Coolidge puts it, "It's a funny situation. Yes, art is supposed to be a product and a byproduct of what we do. But we don't start the discussion by

asserting that we are artists and that our exhibitions present works of art. At the same time, "information" is too stale a term to describe what we're about. We're telling cultural stories, hopefully so people from lots of backgrounds—art backgrounds, tech backgrounds, other backgrounds—can get something from our work. It's the general public we're trying to reach. We want what we do to be compelling to lots of different people. Sometimes the idea of art gets in the way of that."

It's important to distinguish what goes on at CLUI from anti-art. At the heart of anti-art is the desire to destroy—to toss out art and everything it stands for because its downside (elitism, pretense, expense and stifling solemnity) has won out over its upside (enlightening, edifying and informing an expansive audience). Para-art has a more complex—and paradoxical—relationship to established art. "At CLUI," Coolidge says, "We like art. It's part of the language we use, part of the context and the spectrum of the dialogue we're having. It's not the only part." Rather than engaging historical works by attacking them directly, works of para-art leave traditional art in the background, preferring to foreground what they can themselves do in the present, while, at the same time, leaving viewers free to come to our own conclusions about the similarities and differences that link and differentiate art and para-art. The relationship between the two types of art is more nuanced and slippery than oppositional. Its fluidity—or open-endedness—demands participatory engagement. Works of para-art are works of human ingenuity and insight that open the eyes and expand the minds of individuals, often in the same ways that the best works of art, the best works of journalism, and the best works of scientific inquiry change the way we see the world and, better yet, live in it.

To visit an exhibition at CLUI is to feel as if you've stumbled across the mongrel offspring of a booth at a mid-level tradeshow and a project at a middle-school science fair. Monitors, both touchscreen and otherwise, are handsomely installed amid big color photographs, slide shows and wall labels, all with captions that explain the subjects documented and explored in the presentations. None of the digital images or videos in the exhibitions is listed as having been made by an individual artist. Each is simply referred to as a "Center for Land Use Interpretation photograph." Neither are the dimensions of any pictures noted. Nor is any one presented as being unique or even limited to an edition. That's because it's more important that the information delivered by the exhibitions makes its way into the world, by way of viewers who visit the modest center physically or via its website.

***Intrepid Potash, Wendover, Utah*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

***Intrepid Potash Cane Creek Mine, Moab, Utah*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

***Mosaic Bartow Facility, Bone Valley, Florida*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

***Phosphate Mines, Phosphoria Formation, Idaho*. The Center for Land Use Interpretation.**

At the same time, the exhibitions at CLUI don't rule out the possibility that art may be everywhere—that it exists whenever human beings shape our surroundings by transforming nature through artifice, will, and effort. In either case, if art is to be found at CLUI, it happens in your head—as a consequence of what you perceive and apprehend. And that idea leads back to what Conceptual Art does when it works best: change minds and transform our relationship to previous ideas, not to mention the world around us, by treating our thought processes and frames of reference as raw materials to be worked on—just like works of art. Coolidge explains, "At CLUI, we are on the generating side, not the receiving end. Whether what we do is art or not is up to others to think about. It's a point of view, a set of thoughts, that create art. Anything *can* be art... But that is a matter of how it affects you, the decisions you come to. Art is a discussion, a dialogue, a channel, among many. It's an adventure, it's inclusive, it's forever changing."

The recent CLUI exhibition, *The Ground Our Food Eats: Industrial Fertilizer Production in the USA*, turned the tables on conventional thinking by inviting visitors to see the links between what we eat and what we feed the plants we eat. It started simply: In plain language, a placard explained that 95 percent of the food consumed in the United States is the product of industrial agriculture, and that the nutrients those plants need—primarily nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—come from industrially produced fertilizers. Those fertilizers are made of inorganic elements and fossil fuels, all dug from the earth in open pit and underground mines. Three touch-screen monitors took visitors on a tour of dozens of mines, plants and processing facilities, as well as the vast network of natural gas pipelines, railways, rivers and seaside ports that connects them. Concise, matter-of-fact captions linked them to other businesses, including the manufacture of ammonia and explosives, both military and civilian. A corporate network—of subsidiaries, partners, and competitors—came into focus, outlining relationships among multinational corporations, the U.S. government, the agriculture industry, and the vegetables in your salad—not to mention the feed livestock eat, until they become dinner. *The Ground Our Food Eats* ultimately revealed that whether you are a carnivore, a herbivore, or even a vegan, you are, inevitably, a geophagist: a person who eats the Earth—whether you like it or not. For better or worse, we're all in it together, even if those facts are obscured by those who benefit from keeping them hidden.

That's one of the best things about CLUI: Its exhibitions invite visitors to think big, in terms of systems rather than only from the indi-

vidual's point of view. Art, for the most part, typically has focused on the latter— on the achievements of geniuses more than on the collective activity of humans, irrespective of our backgrounds, genders or ethnicities. Taking a more expansive perspective, CLUI programs explore what humans do as a species—and the consequences of those actions—in an engaging manner accessible to anyone who knows how to use a cellphone. As thought-provoking as the most sophisticated art being made today, the Center's exhibits also function in ways that play off of scientific or sociological research: revealing truths about the world slowly and steadily, by connecting the dots across various fields, disciplines and social groups, especially when that information does not immediately meet the eye but must be carefully and conscientiously dug out of reality and then woven into narratives that are open to further interpretation, discussion, and, hopefully, understanding.

Previous exhibitions include *Desert Ramparts: Defending Las Vegas from the Flood* (2017), which examined massive, flood-control structures as a kind of anonymous land art; *Hollowed Earth: The World of Underground Business Parks* (2016-2017), which revisited the idea of underground art in terms of corporate architecture; *Executive Decisions: The Personal Landscape Legacy of American Presidents* (2016), which focused on the intractable relationship between history and myth; and *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline* (2008-2009), which charted the uneasy overlap of nature and culture and humanity's precarious place in it all.

In a sense, CLUI's staff is a group of hardworking para-artists, who, like paramedics, paralegals and enthusiasts of paranormal phenomena, prefer the hands-on immediacy of interactions that take place before the specialists get called in, the experts take over, and big, bureaucratic institutions—like hospitals, law firms and museums—get involved. Para-artists find freedom at street level, far from the ivory towers of academic institutions and the white walls of commercial galleries and museums. In another sense, they do what journalists do, but with less editorializing: They present information necessary to be a citizen in a democracy. In yet another sense, they do what Robert Irwin did when he found that galleries and museums where not places to go to get away from it all, but places to visit to refresh our perceptions of the world around us, to sharpen our senses so that we might intensify our experiences, deepen our understanding of reality, and live—more fully and sensitively and insightfully. That's what happens at CLUI, regardless of whether you think of its work as art.

AD

Johann Garber

INSIDE OUTSIDE

Margaret Hawkins

On a hot summer night, high on a hill overlooking the Vienna Woods, the museum opening reception gets underway — as these events typically do. People show up in fancy dress, Champagne flows. Entering this festivity unannounced, from a wooded path, are the featured artists, Karl Vondal and Johann Garber. Artists are natural aristocracy at these occasions and do as they like. These men keep their distance, seemingly oblivious to the social scene around them, and settle quietly at a table with a museum staff person. Then the director makes a speech, the doors open and the invited guests enter to view the exhibition.

Museum Gugging, Garber-Salon, Foto © Ludwig Schedl

If the opening is typical, the artists are not. For one thing, they live here. Opened in 2006 on the rebuilt site of a former pediatric psychiatric hospital where Nazis once imprisoned and executed mentally disabled children, Museum Gugging, in Maria Gugging, Austria, is the flagship of The Art Brut Center, a unique compound where artists with serious mental illness live and work. Once accepted as residents, primarily on the merits of their art, artists are free to live there for life.

Also on the grounds are a sunny, open collective studio stocked with art supplies and a gallery that sells residents' art – and provides them a fair cut of the proceeds. There's also an event space called The Birdhouse for the many bird paintings that adorn it, and the Artist House, where the residents live. Colorfully painted inside and out by past and present artist-occupants, the house exudes the vibe of an art school dormitory (although far cleaner), with kitchen facilities, big windows, a lounge and ample outdoor space that includes an anthropomorphically painted barbecue grill and a tennis court.

Director Dr. Johann Feilacher describes Gugging's mission in simple terms – it's a place for artists, currently 12, to live and work. Feilacher, a psychiatrist and an artist himself —who exhibits internationally and keeps a sculpture studio nearby — is uniquely qualified to understand the needs of the residents. They are, after all, the needs of any visual artist: studio space, materials, exhibition opportunities, the company of other artists. And respect.

"Respect is what saves your life," he says, echoing Elyn Saks' words from her 2007 memoir about schizophrenia, *The Center Cannot Hold*: "When you're really crazy, respect is like a lifeline someone's throwing you. Catch this and maybe you won't drown."

Gugging provides psychiatric treatment, but therapy —both talk and pharmaceutical — is secondary to art-making, and optional. What residents do not receive, and what Dr. Feilacher does not believe in, is art therapy. Art is their work, he says.

Something else Feilacher does not believe in is the myth of the mad genius. "To say a mentally ill person is [by definition] also a genius is stupid, a fairy tale," says Feilacher. "There's the same proportion of geniuses in the group of mentally ill people as there is in any other group." He chooses the artists who live at Gugging for their talent, and says they make art for the same reason anyone makes art, because they want to and because they must, not because they are mentally ill or because they are told to, and certainly not to make themselves "better."

Once a year, Feilacher takes everybody on vacation, by bus.

Johann Garber
***Krickerl*, 2010**

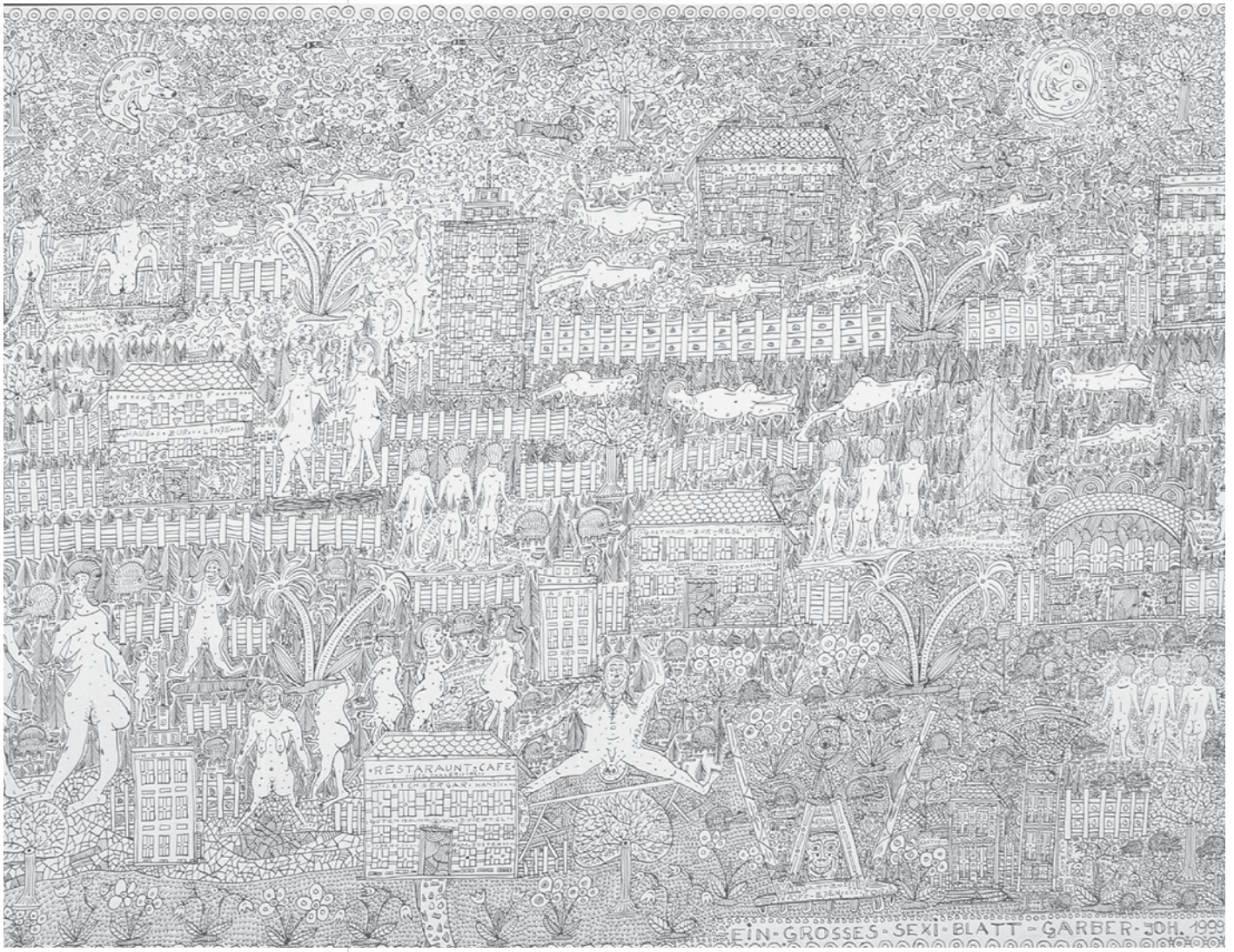
Perhaps Feilacher's unusual approach to psychiatry comes from his atypical background. Feilacher started as a painter. He attended art school in Vienna, switched to medical school, and began a career in emergency medicine before quickly finding he preferred psychiatry. Meanwhile, he kept making art. Now his monumental wood sculpture, fashioned from fallen trees, can be found in sculpture parks in Europe and the United States.

Feilacher's vision, while radical, is neither romantic nor sentimental. He believes in creativity and talent, in the inviolability of art-making as a fundamental human endeavor.

Psychiatrist Leo Navatril founded Gugging as The Center for Art and Psychotherapy in 1981. Navatril had been using drawing as a diagnostic tool, and when Feilacher took over in 1986, he recognized that some of the drawings his patients made were more than merely symptomatic, revealing not only a view into the patients' mental states, but also real talent. He set about refocusing the Center's mission and renamed the place *The Artist House*, to reflect its new emphasis on art over therapy.

Now called The Art Brut Center, in a nod to Jean Dubuffet and his advocacy for the purity of art made outside the mainstream, the center has evolved into a protected zone where creativity flourishes outside the usual structures that shape it – financial, academic, critical. Residents of Gugging are selected because they are particularly talented – not because of their mental illness, but in spite of it.

Much that's been written about self-taught and outsider artists focuses on their specialness, an attitude of cloying exceptionalism that marginalizes both the art and the people creating it — while unrealistically valorizing mental illness and, often, the poverty that can accompany it. Gugging is the opposite



Johann Garber. *EIN GROSSES SEXI-BLATT*, 1999

of all that. Interested parties willing to make the trip will find it open, welcoming and deeply normal, if you accept creativity and diversity as norms.

What is exceptional about the place is what it lacks – art world trappings, the vast mercantile structure that assigns value, drives sales, fans fame and cultivates prestige. Yes, there's a museum and a gallery, but these are mainly for the visitors, and to help support the mission. The heart of the place is the creative spark it keeps lit – namely, that human drive to *make*.

Jean Dubuffet defined Art Brut as "those works created in solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses." Art made from no motive

but art-making itself, by children, or by people with mental illness or disability, can stun with its power and directness.

Why, after all, does anyone make art? Pablo Picasso: "The purpose of art is washing the dust off the daily life of our souls."

Nearly 5,000 miles from Gugging, on another blistering summer day, David Holt sits in the shade on the south side of Chicago, drawing a portrait of a dog in his signature graphic style. Nearby, a young woman reads tarot cards. A DJ plays Latin music. It's Sunday afternoon at the Bridgeport Art Center, and Project Onward is holding its Pet Portrait Slam. For 30 dollars plus tax, a Project Onward member will draw a portrait of your dog from life or a photograph.

Holt, who tells us via an artist profile on the Project Onward website that he is a Virgo, enjoys softball, basketball, weightlifting and is involved in autism advocacy, copies the dog's contour onto a piece of corrugated cardboard. He is methodical and focused, following the dog's outline around seven appendages – two ears, four legs, and a penis. Holt works quietly for a while, then asks what color the dog's eyes are. "Light brown, like peanut butter," the dog's owner says. Holt picks up a caramel-colored oil pencil and begins to fill them in. He will get $15. The other half goes to Project Onward.

Founded by the city in 2004 as a pilot initiative for six artists who had aged-out of a local youth job-training program, Project Onward was de-funded in 2014, requiring a move out of their high-profile quarters at the Chicago Cultural Center. Now the facility is happily relocated on the fourth floor of the less-central but vastly more commodious former Spiegel Catalog warehouse turned multi-use art center in the Bridgeport neighborhood.

Unlike Gugging, Project Onward is a day program, but its mission is similar – to provide studio space as well as sales and exhibition opportunities for artists with mental disorders and disabilities. Members range in age from their 20s to early 70s, commuting to the studio from all over the city and some of its suburbs. Studio space and materials are free, but to qualify, applicants must demonstrate talent and commitment.

"All are well aware that this is a job that requires them to make art for sale," said Nancy Gomez, executive director. Board president Marsha Woodhouse, who got involved with Project Onward early on when her daughter joined the program, put it differently, "This is not babysitting."

"Most galleries that sell outsider art focus on the bios," Woodhouse said. "Here we focus on the art." On a tour through the studio, she lamented the fetishization of outsider artists. Even in this city, where self-taught artists

(Below)
Karl Vondal, 2017
© Foto: Ludwig Schedl

(Bottom)
Karl Vondal, *Paar unter Palmen*, 2013
Privatstiftung - Kunstler aus Gugging

are part of the story the art community tells about its provenance, where the work of outsiders inspired the young artists who became known as the Chicago Imagists, too much is made of biographies, their sad personal stories. She wants people to know that Project Onward is about art and artists, not mental illness and disability.

The tour quickly makes this point obvious. The artists are downstairs making pet portraits, but even in their absence, the rambling common studio buzzes with purpose, creativity, joy. Each artist has a roomy well-equipped space, with art supplies galore and just the right mix of mess and order. These are digs that many an MFA student would envy.

Mental illness can be isolating. Both Woodhouse and Gomez pointed out that Project Onward is also about community. "Most of our artists have been with us over five years," Gomez said. "So we consider ourselves not only friends but family. We are very selective in the quality of art when we're interviewing a new artist, but also we want to make sure that a new artist is a good fit personality-wise."

Five miles north and a world away, in the pricey River North neighborhood, Chicago art dealer Carl Hammer presides over an elegant, eponymous two-story gallery known for representing the estates of self-taught artists. Hammer started collecting folk and outsider art even before he opened his gallery in 1979, while he was still a high school English teacher. Now his roster includes the best artists of the genre – former slave Bill Traylor, visionary Joseph Yoakum, preacher Howard Finster, infamous Chicago recluse fantasist writer and painter Henry Darger, whose 15,000 page novel was discovered in his one-room Southside apartment after his death in 1973, and hometown favorite, Lee Godie, who lived on the street in Chicago for decades, late in her long and peripatetic life – she died in 1994 at the age of 85 – and was known for hanging out on the steps of the Art Institute where she sold her drawings to passersby for astoundingly small sums.

Swanky surrounds notwithstanding, the spirit and intensity of Hammer's artists echo what one finds at Project Onward and Gugging. This collision of contexts by which we come to know this kind of art raises questions about social justice, to be sure; Hammer acknowledges the possibility that the art world is sometimes guilty of exploiting artists. Still, the fact remains – without a market that buys and sells art, much of this work would simply disappear from view. The real attraction for Hammer, he says, is not market potential but the mesmerizingly fresh sensibilities of the art itself. He cited Dubuffet's definition of art brut —"anything produced by persons

Karl Vondal, *Frau, Bleistift, Farbstifte und Steine*, 2002
Privatstiftung - Kьnstler aus Gugging

unscathed by artistic culture" — as the key factor that influences his decision to represent or collect an artist.

A few weeks after the Gugging opening in the Vienna Woods, artist Karl Vondal makes his way toward a drawing table in the museum where, for the duration of his show, he will create art alongside his exhibited drawings. A gregarious man, he appears to enjoy this arrangement. Recognizable in the same baggy orange T-shirt and cargo shorts he wore to the opening, he approaches a visitor, gesturing to be understood. Vondal speaks German, the visitor only English. The artist makes it clear he is offering a trade, a small erotic drawing on the back of a gallery card for money to buy a can of orangeade from the vending machine. An undercover transaction ensues – sales are usually handled by the gallery – and a price is agreed upon.

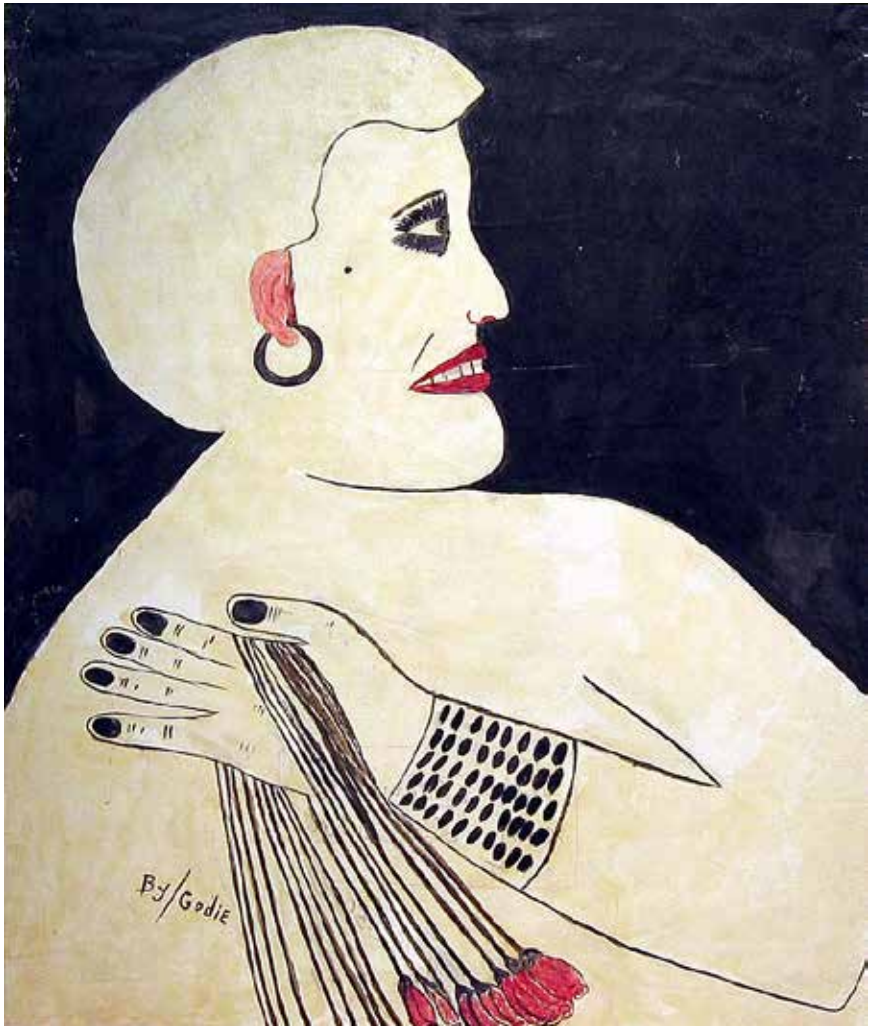
Vondal jams the ten-euro payment in his pocket, then throws in an extra drawing, maybe as a thank you, or just to flirt. The buyer blushes and slips the drawings carefully into the little bag that holds the postcards she's bought. She notices a stack of more drawings spread out on Vondal's table to entice — handmade currency. Drawings are valuable, they're tradable for euros, which in turn can be exchanged for orangeade and chips. It's that simple and that beautiful. Later at home in her English-speaking country, the buyer takes out the cards, props her favorite on her desk.

It shows a naked man and woman engaged in stand-up sex in what looks like a tropical paradise. The man is in profile but the woman is shown in full frontal display. She looks like a blow up sex doll with an O for a mouth, zaftig curves and big yellow hair. Twirling flowers seem to propel a small island toward the couple. On this island stands a tall palm tree. The tree is the star of the drawing. Its dome of foliage vibrates outward like a frizzy hairdo; its trunk leans voyeuristically toward the couple as if to get a better look. Two eye-like coconuts at the top of the trunk seem to bug out to watch, their shape and size perfectly rhyming with the woman's breasts.

It's the oldest subject in art: The Woman of Willendorf comes to mind. Picasso as well. Is Vondal somehow consciously taking part in an art historical dialog? Feilacher doesn't think so. Reluctant to characterize the style of the art his residents make, he concedes that the one quality that does distinguish the art of the mentally ill is that it is "uninfluenced."

"It is not necessary for these people to have Picasso in their head," he says. "And they are not able to. They can't copy. They couldn't imitate a Picasso because they are not interested in anything other than what is in their own mind."

This single-mindedness may be why art brut fascinates. Brut, as in raw. In the over-saturated, hyper-educated, so consciously strategic world of visual art, where every image is begotten by or borrowed from one that came before it, here are artists who live closest to the bone, who simply create.



Lee Godie, *Eldorado*, c. 1970. Mixed media on canvas, 26 x 21.5 inches (unframed).
Courtesy Carl Hammer Gallery

Constance Mallinson

#NatureToo

Matthew Brandt. *Lake Luis, WA 3*, 2012. C-print soaked in Lake Luis water. 46 x 64 inches. Courtesy the artist and M+B, Los Angeles.

"Nature exists to be raped" – Pablo Picasso

"Nature too awaits the Revolution!" – Herbert Marcuse

Over several decades environmentally active artists have produced artworks that document and challenge the spaces, systems, processes and language involved in human interactions with nature and the physical world. A substantial body of contemporary art presents nature as a multi-faceted *subject* rather than as object-acted-upon. These works reconfigure and interrogate existing norms, stressing themes of partnership, mutual needs, connectivity and respect for the rights of nature.

Following the groundbreaking work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, who directed art to environmental ends, many contemporary artists have conjoined human artistic activity with issues around nature to co-create impactful artworks. The most notable of these artists, such as Andy Goldsworthy who since the late 1980s has used live and decaying vegetation, rocks, ice and sand to create ecologically sensitive art with and within a growing, living nature, are radically reinterpreting the definitions

(Opposite)
Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio
***Not A Cornfield*, 2005-06**
The corn tassels arrived as the corn reached maturity. At this point the stalks were well above our heads.

(Below)
Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio
***Not A Cornfield*, 2005-06**
People would come each Sunday to hear stories around a fire. It was wonderful to sit together with the downtown skyline in the background and watch the sunset

and cultural attitudes towards nature. Eschewing conventional artistic productions and representations, Goldsworthy and a global community of artists are emphasizing the interactions, exchanges, ephemeralities, contingencies and transformations endemic to natural processes. Examples of art that sees nature as other than what author John K. Grande termed "aesthetic real estate" are numerous.

Reintroducing the idea of natural systems and a growing, living nature into the urban consciousness, Los Angeles artist Lauren Bon and Montreal-based Doug Buis have created "interventions" in urban environ-

ments by planting or regenerating native and non-native species in abandoned spaces and public parks. Collaborating with the scientific community, multi-disciplinary Los Angeles artist Jessica Rath explores the impact of human behavior on native species and food plants. Her recent installation, a *better nectar*, was an immersive, human scaled recreation of a bumblebee's journey from its underground nest to process floral signals in the search for nectar. Incorporating handmade sculpture, sensitive watercolor renderings of flowers, light projections and sound recordings of human voices interpreting the bees' various hums, Rath draws viewers into intimate and wondrous appreciation of one of our crucial partners in the biosphere's survival.

While our era is producing paradigm-shifting artworks embracing the mutualism of humans and nature, examining historical prototypes reveals a quite different perspective. The thundering waterfalls, moist forests, green hills interspersed with copses, turquoise waters stretching to the edges of the imagination filling centuries of paintings, photographs and illustrations comprised the main historical and imagistic forces shaping our attitudes towards nature. Landscape art, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, does not simply signify or symbolize our relationship with nature, but is an instrument that promotes and enacts cultural and economic power. Not surprisingly then, an examination of the historical constructs of landscape reveal not a mirror held up to nature but a reflection instead of human longings, needs and will.

Western civilization's equation of progress with a relentless push for territorial and economic power had to begin with controlling and dominating an often unsurmountable nature. Though history confirms that there were matriarchal fertility goddess cults in ancient Malta and Knossos, as well as indigenous cultures that equated and continue to equate nature with a giving, nurturing mother force, the archeological record tells us these were short lived and rare, abandoned in favor of patriarchal systems supporting masculinity's capacity to conquer presumably obstructive natural forces.

To achieve such ends and perpetuate the belief that nature is a vast repository of resources serving human/male consumption, nature had to be objectified. Any familiarity with feminism recognizes this mechanism--objectification permits exploitation.

Eco-feminists like Carolyn Merchant make the connection between exploited femininity and exploited nature. Women have needed to scrutinize the imagery that entrenched patriarchal culture. Similarly, the current desecration, endangerment and violation of the natural world on a scale now

(Below)
Jessica Rath
Better Nectar, Installation
Photo by Brian Forrest

(Bottom)
Jessica Rath
Better Nectar, Installation
Photo by Aisha Singleton

threatening the planet necessitate similar scrutiny of the gendered nature tropes and mythological devices embedded in exploration, science and language for centuries.

Stereotyped conceptions like Mother Nature, Eve, *Magna Mater*, and Virgin Land, fashioned the perception of nature as passive, "ripe for the taking" and ready to be owned and improved by heroic men. Whether implemented consciously or subconsciously, this terminology and imagery drove and even assisted economic and territorial expansion, arguably contributing to the roots of the current eco-crisis.

Merchant identifies the Garden of Eden story as among the earliest phallo-centric myths used to manage nature and solidify man's rightful domination within it. Eve's actions expelled man from the garden and Adam's task was to reclaim it. Some of the very earliest explorers' maps included symbols for nature/its landmarks imagined in the guise of naked females ready to be "taken;" Merchant speculates that these acted as less than subtle inducements for rapacious discovery, conquest and settlement. The Colonial era was replete with rhetoric and images likening undeveloped lands to fair virgins in nuptial beds and wombs — waiting to be opened, ready to pour forth their bounty.

European landscape art developed — as did the whole of Western culture until the '60s — in the absence of any female-generated interpretations; the male lens determined all forms of representation. The natural world was fully construed as a surrogate female, fetishized and subjected to the same curious and controlling gaze. Note philosopher Francis Bacon's precept that nature must be forced from *her* natural and primitive state and molded by the artful hand of man.

With nature firmly cast as a subdued female object, 17th and 18th century Dutch and English paintings of plowed fields about to yield fruits, or fecund hills dotted with flowers induced both pleasure and proprietary instincts. Wide, open vistas suggest and invite expansion and exploration, and were crucial to the advance of empires. In *The Experience of Landscape,* Jay Appleton raises the possibility that images of "refuge" provided by trees and shrubbery in these 18th century landscapes immerse creator and spectator in the predatory visuals of (male) violence like hunting, war and surveillance.

Theories of the sublime and the beautiful by 18th century philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant expanded gendered land narratives. In Phillip Shaw's "The Sublime," he notes that Patricia Yaeger

Matthew Brandt
***American Lake WA A3*, 2012**
C-print soaked in American Lake water, 46 x 64 inches
Courtesy the artist and M+B, Los Angeles.

describes the sublime as a mode that depended upon a notion of the feminine in support of the masculine sense of self. Any vast landscape inspiring astonishment, awe, and ultimately terror was characterized as sublime. The driving assumption here was that only masculine mastery, rationality, courage and self-reflection could transcend or overcome destabilizing confrontations with an awesome nature. It is hard to quickly dismiss Yaeger and others offering this view when we consider images like Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer Above A Sea of Fog" (1818). A bulky male figure, back to us, poised on a mountain, dominates the picture plane and takes in the infinite expanse, erect in his ability to conquer awe/emotion with logic. A finer example of Kant's logical transcendental male subject cannot be imagined.

By the mid 19th century, American landscape painters applied similar concepts to their wild and yet unsettled land. A female nature — illogical and disordered — required power and mastery in order for civilization to progress and prosper. Carolyn Merchant mentions US writers of the time

Robert Smithson
***Spiral Jetty*, 1970**
Photo by Retis

who "used the imagery of sexual assault to advocate the mining of female earth for metals." Merchant's "Reinventing Eden, The Fate of Nature in Western Culture", references that Appleton also suggested a pervasive if subconscious sexualized anthropomorphism in US landscape imagery of the 19th century. He notes a "persistent aesthetic interest taken in river valleys at the point where they pass through ridges or mountains"... in gorges that read as vaginal symbols, in dark caverns "partially concealed by foliage"... in clefts and chasms that even a skeptic can acknowledge as invoking the vagina (Jay Appleton, "The Experience of Landscape").

Consider Asher Durand's Hudson River painting "Kindred Spirits" of 1849 featuring as its subjects the artist Thomas Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant, standing at a precipice before a rushing waterfall. Here also is Cole's textual, hardly subtle, graphically erotic relation to the "land," excerpted from Matthew Baigell's "Thomas Cole:"

Beautiful vision! Now the veil is rent,
And the coy earth her virgin bosom bare
Slowly unfolding to the enraptured gaze
Her thousand charms.

Thomas Cole, (who interestingly enough was described as an early environmentalist) and other artists like him, used such conceptions of the land to visualize and romanticize American Manifest Destiny, with its directives of populating the land, clearing forests, draining swamps, decimation of native tribes. In "The Magisterial Gaze," Albert Boime describes the production of this type of art tellingly: "The myth of nature and its conversion into religious doctrine.... [centered] on the need to resolve the antimony between nature and culture, between the Virgin Land and its deflowering... far from being passive recorders, [these] participated in the very system they condemned and projected it symbolically into their work." More nuanced but to similar ends, the writings of Thoreau, Emerson and Muir venerate a gendered nature via references to *her* mysteries and metaphors of suckling mothers, fallen virgins and sublime mistresses.

With the advent of the camera, landscape photographers competed with painters, adopted their tactics and often joined ranks with military, geological and railroad enterprises to advance the growing travel, mineral and land development industries. Continental settlement was facilitated by appealing to the theological, political, industrial and social interests at the time. Written accounts were rife with sexual allusion. A traveler returning from an excursion in 1846 gleefully wrote: "Here they glide over cultivated acres on rods of iron, and they rise and fall on the bosom of the deep, leaving behind them a foaming wheel-track." Another wrote of huge machinery as "a steam screw upon the landscape." Rather humorous to 21st century eyes yet blatantly phallic are A.J. Russell's split canyons with spewing steam engines crashing through, William Henry Jackson's trains prying open canyon walls and gorges, and Carleton Watkins' multiple pipes ejaculating plumes of water over the rounded rocks in hydraulic mining operations, as referenced in Leo Marx, "The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America."

All these photographic strategies coalesce in early 20th century advertising photography that yet today continue to use gendered tropes for

marketing purposes. Parts of nature, even redwood trees, are contextualized as symbols of male virility or longevity. So long-standing and normalized are these hidden persuaders of a feminized nature and masculine machine that powerful vehicles then as now base their appeal to males with representations of wheels tearing through deserts, streams and countryside. Also symptomatic of our loss of contact with nature in an urbanized world, is the "nature porn" industry, what writer Rebecca Solnitt likens to "girly" calendar pin-ups: desk calendars, coffee table books and posters offering up a glossy, juicy land that we cannot wait to get into.

Twentieth century artists gauging progress as an unremitting assault on realism sought and arrived at a fully abstract art; literal landscape depiction all but disappeared. The near total censure of the female body and nature in abstract art — defined in terms of heroic male Ab Ex gestures — was not an amelioration of gender stereotyping but actually a demonstration of its persistence in *extremis*. The millennium-long objectification of nature/the female body, as well as their 20th Century erasure in abstract art, was a major catalyst for feminism. Emerging feminist art of the 1960s focused on the female body, goddess imagery, and body performances, to interrogate an obvious lack. While bringing about less marginalization, there was little to change longstanding ideologies. The development of a "get back to nature" site-specific art in the 1970s renounced urban galleries in favor of remote natural places. Uninhabited land — the Salton Sea, the desert — continued to invite discovery, exploration and in this iteration looked like innovative institutional critique. Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer gained notoriety with "Earthworks," large scaled outdoor art involving massive engineering, violent land alterations and the imposition of male energy and will. These artists were occasionally criticized as being allied with human rapaciousness, ego and its harm to the fragile earth. Responding, Smithson described himself instead as not representing the sublime that is historically encountered in painting, but actually producing or "fathering" it— with himself as a natural force, recalling Jackson Pollack's famous dictum, "I am nature."

In place of entrenched domination, oppression and exploitation, there is a growing quest for a biocentric ethic based on the idea that all living things have intrinsic value and rights to exist. Humans, as the only moral agents on earth, are ethically obligated to reduce environmental impact and to choose lifestyles that minimize natural destruction. Feminist artists have

Michael Heizer
***Double Negative*, 1969**
Photo by Retis

dismantled patriarchal structures by innovative strategies designed to encourage inclusivity, abolish stereotypes and remedy marginalization. Effecting such a monumental change involves unmasking exploitive historical biases and allegiances in representing nature and seeking new visualizations.

Reforming long-standing anthropocentric and selectively gendered views of earth to create a relationship with nature that is mutually beneficial will entail diverse cultural productions that recognize and promote the health and autonomy of nature. With climate change and species extinction now major existential threats, artists — as throughout history — will be essential in visualizing and understanding humanity's place and role in the ever-evolving events.