

Someone Else's Problems in Doing This Work as It Is Linked to Writing¹

Keith Tilford

The domain of art history is strewn with the bleached bones and fossil remains of different species of developmental histories of art.

- Marx Wartofsky²

1. On the Reversal of Structural Consequences

So as to disengage from assumptions that it should be obvious, save to those who would comprise the kind of *cultivated audience* that, for better or worse, must as consequence be assumed to exist as that lot for whom explanations are not required, the title of this essay is a modification of one taken from a text conceptual artist Michael Asher wrote as a reflection on his exhibition at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago in 1990, written in 1991 nearly a year following the closing of the exhibition. Whoever such an audience might be, they are also among those potential spectators that fall within the speculative cross-hairs of the kinds of artistic practice that collaborative artist and non-artist sibling duo Ellis von Sternberg and Parker von Sternberg (EVSPVS) are interested in pursuing. The point here is not to draw out direct comparison in the respective practices of a figure from the history of conceptual art and the 'post-conceptual' approach of contemporaries *per se*, but more precisely to situate EVSPVS in a *technical lineage* relevant to conceptual and post-conceptual practices in general.

It is appropriate to refer to this lineage as technical since to produce works of art within or indebted to it is to admit that objects and documents, insofar as they obtain a degree of circulation within designated systems, serve a certain administrative function over aesthetic and cultural concerns as invariably mediated by institutions, power relations, interpretive framing, matters of taste, markets, and perhaps also the problem of an ambivalent relationship conceptual practices often have to writing, as is de facto the case with Asher. As is also the case with other practices in such a lineage, the works of EVSPVS ought to then be regarded—or rather *treated*, to preserve some clinical sting—as diagrammatic presentations that foreground an explicit antagonism to the assumption that art is an index of intentionality and a crypt of meaning that refers us back to the subjectivity of a creative agent.

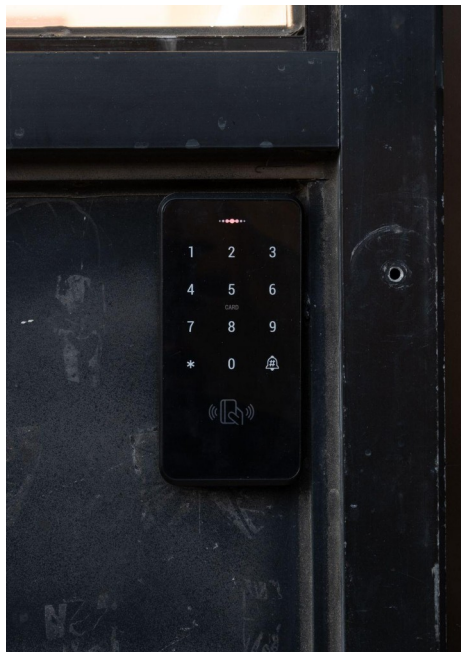
Writing does not here carry the same disproportionate weight in preserving and transmitting their practice as can be said for Asher. Nor is their practice contingent in the same way “upon the given circumstances which frame each exhibition and its context” (Asher, 1992/2019: 45). EVSPVS can certainly not be said to be incapable of providing their own critical assessment

¹ “Using reference in the work of art leaves the viewer to endlessly associate what the work is about. It thereby gives the viewer an illusion that they have experienced something profound. In this respect, it is a decoy so the viewer will do the artist’s labor for them. It is also a decoy to make it seem like the artist is situated within the work of art when the artist is really just back at the studio making another set of references in another artwork.” (Asher 2019, 34).

² (Wartofsky 2013, 227).

of why they do what they do in such and such a way, as is evidenced with their recently published *New Works* (2023). Although it should be noted that this document is so far one of their only publications, and that it also sets up the expectation that there will be more. However, it is of further importance to note that this document is also not exactly a document of what EVSPVS have written, but rather a redacted transcript of a conversation between EVS and artists Nandi Loaf and Pieter Schoolwerth as a reflection on an exhibition that same year at King’s Leap gallery in New York. This is only relevant to the extent that, concerning what follows, this document serves to elaborate without specifying in any explicit way the degree of complicity the objects they make have with language and concepts, which is also to say, discursive practices.

Insofar as a viewer or “participant” may also want to *access the work* of EVSPVS, this can only be accomplished if it is then taken into consideration that as practitioners, they have adopted a methodology that is, like Asher, interested in “using formal tools to engage social space” (Asher [1992] 2019, 59). It would be a mistake to see in this any kind of debt to the ambiguity and niceties of ‘relational aesthetics’. What I want to attempt to draw out here is how EVSPVS are, much like Asher, concerned with using art and its platforms for ‘highlighting structural elements’. This would at least seem to be the case with their 2025 lock project, which is described as “[a] permanent installation integrated into the doorway of King’s Leap Fine Arts LLC” that requires RFID keycard access such that those not selected to be in possession of one of 50 of them must request entry as visitors.³ As with their other projects, this work—its “material”—prioritizes social, cultural, or economic transactions in such a way that the results of a predetermined set of procedures, at least according to them, “reverses the structural consequences that artistic practices typically, and unknowingly, reproduce”.⁴



JASAG Complete Access Control Set, 125KHz Fully Waterproof RFID Keypad(3000 Users Capacity) + 180KG/380lbs Magnetic Door Lock + DC12V 3A Power Supply + Release Button and 10PCS Key Cards, Outdoor, 2025, dimensions and materials variable

A permanent installation integrated into the doorway of King’s Leap Fine Arts LLC: an electromagnetic lock system wired to a touchpad access panel and dead switch release. 50 RFID keycards programmed to the system have been divided between the artists and the gallery and granted to the public on a case-to-case basis. The remaining visiting audience, lacking keys, must request access in order to enter and exit. The gallery, during business hours, remains locked with this system.

³ As detailed by the gallery explanation: “A permanent installation integrated into the doorway of King’s Leap Fine Arts LLC: an electromagnetic lock system wired to a touchpad access panel and dead switch release. 50 RFID keycards programmed to the system have been divided between the artists and the gallery and granted to the public on a case-to-case basis. The remaining visiting audience, lacking keys, must request access in order to enter and exit. The gallery, during business hours, remains locked with this system.”

⁴ EVS, personal correspondence.

Even so, their position on what 'structural elements' are, or should be understood as, not only differs from what such prior—let's call them, "institutional critics"—took as their themes, but also undermines those very themes by deploying an inverted arsenal of formal tools that, all the same, are epistemic mediators⁵ aiding their *wish to know more about* the kind of audience they seek to address. One such formal tool is the contract and commission, a requisite structural element in extracting *this* piece of writing as a form of labor necessary for the realization of a particular work which is *not* this piece of writing but for which this piece of writing becomes another structural element that is its condition of appearance, perhaps in the same way that the frame is a condition for the appearance of a work of art—it is that which "separates two absolutely different spaces that somehow coexist" and defines a "classical screen" (Manovich 1995, 2).

2. Technique, Skill, and Knowing: Art as Cognitive and Cultural Technology

The reader might infer that the practice of EVSPVS is compositionally linked to techniques with dependencies on craft in the service of craft itself, and in particular the kinds of technical labor that must be performed by others, although as will be explored in what follows, this is not its only form of dependency or technique. As a protocol of any-work-whatsoever's formal and material execution, this artistic procedure is not merely on the side of either strategy or tactic but employs (in the literal and metaphorical sense) an ensemble of technical procedures, binding both practical and conceptual-theoretical skill that generates a kind of 'political pollution' (see Negarestani, 2008). It could go without saying, perhaps, that even for "artworld initiates" and those with *insider knowledge*, it is atypical to think of art as though it could arise only from such dependencies. Such dependencies are moreover, as technical lineage, determined by their relation to technique. That technique *as such* has been consigned to a subordinate role in art if not systematically evacuated from normative models of art's value in favor of narratives that instead suture its ontology to forms of subjectivity and expression remains one of colonial history's greatest ruses.

A significant resource in addressing this historical *cover up* that combines a decade of collaborative scholarship is the recent *The Making of Technique in the Arts* (2023) edited by Sven Dupré & Marieke M. A. Hendriksen, who build on the Art and Knowledge in Pre-Modern Europe Research Group at The Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (2011-2015) through the ERC ARTECHNE project between Utrecht University and University of Amsterdam (2015-2021). A caricatured takeaway is that "technique" itself as a term has been displaced from appearing as relevant to art, as this research makes clear, as consequence of the end result of an operativity of the recursivity of *research* itself that is complicit in a combined and uneven development. As Dupré & Hendriksen articulate it, "the classical association of *techne* with ethics made it a problematic term for describing the artistic manipulation of materials through hand and mind" which in part would help to explain why when examining a range of recipes, manuals, books of secrets, etc. across several centuries, "the terms used to describe the treatment of artist's materials and the creation of works of art in more than 600 different art technical and theoretical sources in six European languages published between 1500 and 1900, we see that the term 'technique' and related forms of the word do not appear until well into the nineteenth century" (9-10, original emphasis).

⁵ I take this term from Lorenzo Magnani where it has a very specific and functional role in the philosophy of science, but can also be attributed to things as banal as pencils and stoplights.

This lacunae, while perhaps seemingly not so important for considering how things are made in general, is, for the territory of art, of crucial importance. The contemporary is characterized largely by stakes in a game where technique has been overwritten by the ‘autonomous artistic subject’ as a residue of Romanticism (although it by no means begins there, see Beech, 2020, explored below). Perhaps more so because art presents as a self-reflexive model wherein the anticipation of an analytic and critical elaboration of the historical significance of technique’s role, which ought to be understood as noteworthy, recognized by artists or institutions, and otherwise made transparent, is substituted with a militant veil of opacity regarding the “semantic content” of an artist’s ‘intuitive access to materials’. The *reliable products* that result from *enlisting intuition* as the germane cognitive faculty when this model is inverted reveal this faculty as a *usual suspect*—the inevitable and discourse-supported culprit that dupes affect and intelligibility in what is, without hesitation, a crime of knowledge against itself.

This historically sanctioned subterfuge in the name of safeguarding an identity of art that is an invention of the 18th century can very much be legible as a symptom of underlying conditions concerning the meaning and uses of both technique and technology as conceptual resources. “Technology” ought to instead today be understood, as it long has been in France through the work of figures such as Marcel Mauss, Andre Leroi-Gouhran, and Bertrand Gille, in its literal sense as a “science of techniques”. Further historical revision is still required, and as has been suggested by Eric Schatzberg (2018), we should shift from an instrumental towards a cultural understanding of technology if what is at stake is our agency in the course of technological futures. Schatzberg’s scholarship has become a consistent point of reference for many in anthropology, and their historical revision is relevant to the re-assessment of technique (see Camolezi and Hilaire-Pérez 2024).

To do so would also necessitate by implication elaborating the consequences of sapience in its long cooperative history of *inculcation into cultural models* (on the idea of cultural models see Bennardo, De Munck, & Chrisomalis, 2024). As cognitive anthropologist Stephen C. Levinson (2024) has suggested, culture is not something from which technologies emerge, it is rather *itself* a technology at the level of cognition when cognition is understood in its ‘extended’ sense.⁶ In their assessment, culture is “an improbable biological outcome” that functionally carves out a central space “for sharing things that are useful (i.e., tricks for doing things), and the payoffs are that individuals get more out than they put in. What they get out, I suggest, is a whole new form of cognition, which has a curious ontological status and is not wholly in the head” (2024, 245). A cultural model, then, can be understood as mental configurations of minimally salient cultural content. While this is similar to the idea of “cognitive maps”, the notion of cultural models have the distinction of not merely being internal representations of mind. Consider the cultural model of the worker: it is more than possessing a subject-identity that can claim, “I have a job”, but is instead a model distributed and coded into wage contracts, labor laws, the “shift”, workplace hierarchies, moral narratives of productivity or laziness, and retirement systems, breaks, insurance, paid leave, or lack thereof. These enable behaviors and activities that are *meta-cognitive*—in Levinson’s example, following Jack Goody’s (1977) idea of ‘technologies of the intellect’ we can understand this through the example of writing as a device, technique, or instrument that offloads cognition to allow for processes of editing or

⁶ The contemporary understanding of cognition that has won out over the last decade is that of “4E Cognition” as a framework in the philosophy of cognitive science that argues cognition is Embodied, Embedded, Enacted, and Extended, moving beyond the traditional view of the mind as solely residing in the brain.

recombination that causally generate a panoply of new computational resources for intelligence.

Current related research in cognitive science is being pursued under the direction of Judith Fan at Stanford University's Cognitive Tools Lab as an extension of diagrammatic and gesture research in fields such as psychology, social robotics, and machine learning that uses images for *testing subjects on their understanding of mechanism*.⁷ Subjects are shown a physical device and asked to sketch out, diagram, and design how a particular device with cogs and levers could be said to work in order to solicit an added layer of understanding to information systems of “mechanistic explanation”. The relevance of this to a practice such as EVSPVS's is that the works they produce can be said to perform a similar inquiry on a social machine where not all parts are either visible or physical. Because the cultural model operating inside of this machine solicits others to participate in *taste*, their works might be understood as asking the viewer about their understanding of the structure and mechanism of that machine. In short, they present a diagram for a mechanism of complicity that, as and insofar as it concerns taste and *pace* Asher, is complicit in subjugation, institutional maintenance, and the stabilization of cultural hegemony as a category of ‘aesthetic experience’ that is also a “product of our market economy” ([1990] 2019, 28).



MCM Ceramic Black Glossy Silhouette Nude Man Sitting Sculpture Modernist Abstract, glazed ceramic, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), 2025
Courtesy of Sasha Miasnikova

Professional and personal associates, as well as employees of the exhibiting body, are invited to loan a piece of personal property to the artists for display in an exhibition. The specific items are agreed upon prior to the exhibition. Pending sale, a loaned item is replaced to the lender by the artists in full. Lender details are noted in the materials of each work. Method of presentation is determined entirely by the exhibiting body.

We might then benefit from thinking of projects that EVSPVS present ‘us’ with as “abstract artefacts” in the sense given to scientific theories in relation to art or comics by Steven French (2017), since they generate “instances”, none of the components of which (e.g. in French’s example with respect to comics, the drawings, plates, and lettering) count as instances, as it is only their combination in hybrid form that enables them to become encoded as theories, works of art, or comics. What does this actually entail? Couches, luggage, press releases, and other loaned property or acquired objects and materials in a field; framers determining what to do with unspecified images; this essay—not to mention the cultivated attention as a rule of

⁷ About the contribution of Cognitive Science here, see Judy Fan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AF3XJT9YKpM&ab_channel=MITQuestforIntelligence

engagement for any of them. It involves the activation of what art historian John Roberts refers to as “general social technique” as the historically developed ensemble of skills, procedures, and technical means through which social labor is organized—but only according to the way this technique appears after a breakdown of the dialectic between skill, deskilling, and reskilling that animated the historical avant-garde—where art no longer “opposes” technique as if from the outside.⁸ Here (in this “contemporary circumstance”), artworks cannot function as ‘autonomous exceptions’ but install themselves as a ‘norm kind’ where EVSPVS select from what French, following the “action networks” of Nicholas Wolterstoff’s *Work and Worlds of Art* (1980), refers to as “a certain set of properties in creating a work such that those properties become normatively associated with that work” (2017, 187, n. 12). There is a renegotiation with the work of art’s conditions of appearance that subtracts intentionality so that the end result of this appearance is dependent on the embedding of a symptomatic entanglement, in which the artwork’s properties are intelligible only through their imbrication in the general social technique that governs production and circulation. In each instance, it is an attempt to activate and draw out experimental consequences from such ideological circuits.



Couch (1), *PVC fabric, steel*, 60 x 42 x 42 inches (152.4 x 106.68 x 106.68 cm) Courtesy of Michelle Uckotter, Couch (2), *leather, steel*, 72 x 42 x 36 inches (182.88 x 106.68 x 91.44 cm), Courtesy of Otto Bonnen, Coffee Table, *glass, wood, steel, hardware*, 36 x 36 x 20 inches (91.44 x 91.44 x 50.8 cm), Courtesy of Eduard Weber, MCM Ceramic iBlack Glossy silhouette Nude Man Sitting Sculpture Figurine (1), *glazed ceramic*, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), Courtesy of Jordan Barse, MCM Ceramic iBlack Glossy silhouette Nude Man Sitting Sculpture Figurine (2), *glazed ceramic*, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), Courtesy of Jutta Holland, Ceramic Black Art Silhouette Man Sitting, *glazed ceramic*, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), Courtesy of Hyeon Jaesang, Ceramic Black Glazed Abstract Modern Seated Nude Figure Female Sculpture FVD2 Desk Table Ornaments for Home Bedroom Living Room Garden Office - Black (1), *glazed ceramic*, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), Courtesy of Didi Gantzmann, (all works 2024).

⁸ Yet, as Dave Beech notes regarding this ‘general social technique’, “What John Roberts calls ‘general social technique’ is not proof of art’s technical paucity but an increase in the identification of the artist with intellectual work. Mechanical procedures in art are not avowals of the mechanical but signify the authority of the rule-giver. As such, the return of the mechanical in art is a continuation of the hostility to the mechanical in works of art.” (2020, 267).

3. On ‘Collaborative Manufacture’ and the Historical Conditions of Art

Each project or product for EVSPVS requires some level of co-production, though I would hesitate to call this ‘co-creation’, as the end results do not sit comfortably within the ambit of accreditation that would qualify as “collaboration”. It would be more advantageous to select instead a relation to divisions of labor that Jonathan Birch (2021) refers to as ‘collaborative manufacture’ as evidenced in the archaeological record of ancient stone tool industry to motivate a ‘skill hypothesis’ regarding the evolution of cultural norms that emerge from “a special kind of coordination problem resulting from the causal opacity of complex skills” (196). In this context, expertise is distributed according to an agent's mastery of specific technical procedures where “[i]ndividual agents at the early stages of the process will not be fully aware of what the finishers do, and consequently will not be fully aware of the downstream consequences of their actions.” (196).

What in other circumstances, then, would be a necessary condition for the manufacture of parts or tools, is with EVSPVS a directed orientation of an artwork's non-utility towards a similar set of “downstream consequences” that requires certain agents along the way to remain unaware. As they have stated with respect to such lines of assembly, “[w]e can just as much ask ‘who authored this artwork?’ as we can ask ‘who is to blame for this artwork?’” (2023, 33). If EVSPVS are playing a game, then apropos Wittgenstein, one might say the concept of “game” is a concept with blurred edges (see Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, 34). EVSPVS's announce an ambivalence for the formal outcomes of individual artworks, and so they effectively demonstrate what other, perhaps more *expressive* art, cannot: a demonstration of art decoupled from individual agency, perhaps even community, and definitely from life. Perhaps this is even why death is sometimes leveraged by them as ‘subject matter’.

As indicated earlier with respect to the overwriting of technique in the developmental histories of art, an excellent analysis of the conditions of emergence for the category of art and its identity in relation to the artistic subject since early modernism expressed as a hostility to handicraft and the mechanical arts has been provided by Dave Beech (2020). For Beech, the categories of “art” and “labor” became “real abstractions” in the 18th century, meaning they took on abstract social forms that gave the impression of being free from specific modern social relations, much like “labor in general” was abstracted from the specificities of laboring. This abstraction coincided with the reorganization of work on the threshold of industrialization. If the very category of “art” emerged historically through a deliberate separation from handicraft, commerce, and industrial production, it did so only by way of a process, evolving from the Renaissance to the modern era, that aimed to establish art as noble, uncommercial, free, and individual. The artist was increasingly conceived as a special kind of subject, engaged in “artistic labor in general” rather than specific craft skills, becoming an emblem of freedom from conventional work. Beech refers to such subjects as “advocates of not-knowing” (256). Such advocates are perhaps the ‘dominant paradigm’ of what a contemporary artistic subject is expected to be, which does not in any way imply they are inarticulate, but instead advocates for a form of subjectivity that, in order to uphold a certain identity of art, doubles down in a rather Kantian fashion, inherited from Jena Romanticism, on the articulation of artistic procedures as inaccessible to intelligibility.

These subjects were already available for criticism in the 18th century, as when in d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse* ([1751] 1963) they observed that “[h]ardly a dozen among a thousand can be found who are in a position to express themselves with some clarity upon the instrument

they use and the things they manufacture. We have seen some workers who have worked for forty years without knowing anything about their machines” (123). Schatzberg notes that within this history, because there is a narrowing of the definition of art as it begins to assume an identity subtracted from manual labor, “technology” would be the term that comes to take the place of material processes in industry. It is a consequence of the encounter of reason with work, and of the ensuing separation of liberal from mechanical arts, and it should also be noted that d’Alembert’s attitude, insulting as it is, is derived from a Western philosophical tradition of reason’s diminutive gaze that frowned upon manual labor but incidentally becomes refracted through the identity of art and artistic subjectivity (See Rocca 2024). Either way, the attempt to valorize subjectivity is isomorphic with the attempt through discourse and practice (and what practice is not tied to *discourse* in our era) to subtract the work of art from rationality or heteronymy where historically, “the artisan tends to work to commission whereas the artist, by the end of the eighteenth century, had begun to work ‘speculatively’, that is to say, producing works independently of any commission and in advance of any sales” (Beech, 151). Art became, as Marina Vishmidt (2018) put it, “a sort of talisman or substitute for a freedom denied elsewhere in capitalist social relations” (49).



Gregory Jetstream LTS Hiking Backpack, *polyolefin, paper, inkjet on paper, marker, steel, PVC, fiberglass, nylon, polyester, polyolefin, inkjet on paper, steel, personal effects, 32 x 13 x 13 inches (81 x 33 x 33 cm), 2024, Courtesy of Madeline Stocker*

If EVSPVS are interested in exposing and inverting this, we might replace what EVS perceives as the “engrained negativity of modern art” (2023, 2) with respect to how they position their practice as instead an *engineered negativity* (and even a kind of “indebtedness engineering”, see Appuradai 2012) where their projects are only possible on the condition that the platforms in which they are entrenched (be they the institution or the market) have been—the phrase is not without its problems—socially engineered through capitalism. This returns us to certain consequences that arise when making hard-lined distinctions between art and technology or technique and the expressive creative spontaneity of the artist, that, as anthropologist Tim Ingold (2001) also notes with respect to an anthropology of skill, is an antagonism and reflex concerning our given understanding of creativity that is itself “closely tied to the rise of a peculiarly modern conception of the human subject” (18). When put under appropriate scrutiny, Ingold suggests, the inquirer is forced to acknowledge that “we cease to know, for sure, what we are dealing with” (20). If skill as Ingold seems to understand and affirm it (and this is not their invention) is “the coordination of perception and action” (20) then we could only benefit from dispensing with normative and interpretive frameworks of such categories as “freedom of the imagination” or “creative expression” that, in their foregrounding of artistic intuition, disguise the process of constructing artworks as though they emerge *ex nihilo* from a spontaneity that black boxes technique and skill through embodied ways of knowing. Not to

say that there aren't such 'ways of knowing' (as this is a developmental fact prior to the mastery of language) but that these prove insufficient to explain the appearance of works of art *in general* as it imagines them as disentangled from the systems that give rise to them and condition them. As Ingold also capitulates, plans and designs are also skills.

The consequences of such entanglements are at this point well documented in the history of science and STS (see Zilsel [1942] 2000; Smith 2004, 2006; Long 2011). It is only fairly recently, however, that the tripartite of art history, theory, and criticism has considered it with any noticeable scrutiny. The problem of how these entanglements condition and extract value and signification from artistic products is not unlike that of Jaques Lacan's (1972) example of the purloined letter in psychoanalysis: it is not the content of the letter that matters, but the circuits of possession that it enters into, which are the rules and norms hidden in plain sight. Given that such rules and norms are acted upon *tacitly* with regularity and reliability, to *take note* and to construct works that rely upon access to and visibility of such circuits of possession (of skills or objects, etc.) is to elicit from the viewer what anthropologist Cristina Grasseni (2004, 2007, 2025) has elaborated as "skilled vision". Their research points to a range of ethnographic examples of the more-than-visual apprenticeship of *expertise* since "several senses need to collaborate and be purposefully calibrated to achieve perspicuity: that is, the experience of perceiving a given item (or arrangement of items) as conspicuous to perception, relevant to context, and evident to expert scrutiny" (2025, 8). Not every eye or witness knows what to look for or what to point out at the scene of a crime—if, that is, they even know that they are looking at one.

4. Shakedown Logics

To begin with the colloquial, a shakedown is both an act of extortion and a test. In engineering, it names a trial run, the application of controlled strain to a new system so that hidden flaws can be revealed. This diagnostic modality does not differ in structure from the criminal one: in both, pressure is the instrument and exposure the outcome. The logic of the shakedown is in both instances coercive at the same time that its operativity is revelatory, given that a shakedown discloses, by force, something concealed by targeting the weaknesses or breaking points of systems. Contemporary life under capitalism is characterized by a dispersion of these logics that cohere into variable sets of operations where force, vulnerability, and extraction are enacted at every level. As such, they adhere to a general schema of human activity, describing, for instance, the predatory forms of neoliberal extraction that hold subjects in perpetual indebtedness or perhaps the institutional and bureaucratic frame where organizations extract surplus affect, time, or identity from their participants. On a psychic level, the shakedown describes the repeated return of trauma that itself becomes the trace of an internalization where the subject is constantly forced into the position of "giving something up" in order to re-stabilize, but at the cost of a recurrent dispossession—the pressure exerted until hidden reserves (land, labor, energy) are revealed and taken.

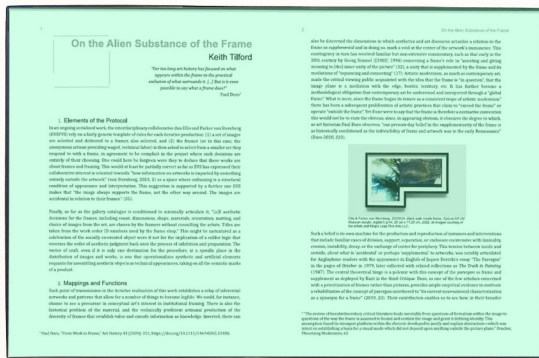
This will be performed consistently until a resource is uncovered or a weakness revealed. Even in the most technical of usages we find the same schema: pressure is applied until the system discloses its threshold, after which it reorganizes itself into a new equilibrium. One could say that shakedown is the name for the forced settling of matter under duress, the point at which

endurance itself becomes a visible form. Call it “coercive optimization”⁹ that a cursory comparative analysis of Foucault and Bataille could prove sufficient to make intelligible concerning a maximal extraction of capacity and expenditure where subjects are forced into the circuit of loss and risk, and where one's capacity to endure the shakedown becomes itself a surplus value (resilience as commodity). Crucially, the shakedown is never merely about what is extorted; it is about the staging of exposure in dramatizing the moment when the hidden is made visible. In this sense, it is a profoundly aesthetic as well as political form: its “show” is as important as its “take” in organizing visibilities and in forcing subjects and systems into disclosure through pressure, humiliation, or threat.

Someone Else's Problems in Doing This Work as It Is Linked to Writing by Keith Tilford (German), *Laserjet on paper, 11 x 17 in, (1/14), 2025*



On The Alien Substance of the Frame by Keith Tilford (English), *Laserjet on paper, 11 x 17 in, (1/5), 2025*



A writer is commissioned by the brothers to produce critical art historical and theoretical essays on one or more projects done throughout their exhibition history. Length, payment, deadlines, and publishing are agreed upon between both parties. Methodological and interpretive frameworks, style, content, title, and overall bias are determined by the author alone. Upon completion and payment the essay file is formatted, including font, layout, images, printing method, and page size, as well as language translations, by the artists and presented as artworks. Titles of the artworks are taken from the titles and author credits of the essays.

Consider for a moment the practice of the late conceptualist Lutz Bacher as an ongoing staging of shakedown logics. Such a reading would thankfully go against the grain of their current

⁹ This term is almost exclusive to mathematics, but here provides a utility as a conceptual resource for the humanities.

mythification and cult status amongst artworld insiders. Bacher's works often perform a kind of coercion upon the viewer, notably with their use of anonymity and pseudonymity that can be understood as an artistic shakedown of the art world's demand for legible subjectivity. Contrary to popular art critical opinion, the pseudonym here is primarily a ruse not at all in the service of anonymity but for exposing artistic subjectivity in a way that reinforces identity, hidden or not, as a cauldron of authenticity. This is the CPU of the 'secret logic' at work in their practice that is confused for intimacy, and that straight-jackets subject matter as ostensibly elusive to the understanding, or that which generalizes their practice and its products as resistant to stylistic categorization, etc. If trauma is a kind of psychic shakedown, then Bacher's oeuvre may be read as a translation of that recursive violence into forms that “mobilize entanglements” (see Huber 2023). Yet Bacher's work is conventionally read as possessing this enigmatic depth precisely because it presents us with opacity as surface effects that constitute the entirety of the work. There are no clandestine or intimate meanings behind the scenes; the suggestion of any is itself a ploy to extract unearned interpretive labor from viewers and critics complying to attribute hidden significance without justification. Art's ideological machinery responds automatically to confer an affective aura on these works, obscuring the network of relations and inscriptions formed through contracts, exchanges, and agreements between the agents involved in the set-up to legitimate the gestures that fill an apartment with sand or to put 50 baseballs on the floor. It is not impossible that such objects could be aesthetically relevant, but they are procedurally trivial in comparison to such complicities and the plausible deniability they incur.



Security Bar, wood 2x4, paint, 1.5 x 3.5 x 41 in., 2023, Courtesy of Twelve Ten Gallery

Rather than merely making use of such cultural techniques, however, what EVSPVS maintain is a practice that explicitly targets these techniques as the source of surplus value extraction in its own peculiar shakedown of what they would refer to as the 'meta-practical rules of artishood'. Adrian Piper would have called this meta-art, but EVSPVS locate their practice in a continuity or relay between the works and rules, drawing back the extended implications of artistic practices and their objects into the complicities of social life in its immanence to capitalism. Whereas it is often typical, if not implicitly, an institutionally sanctioned protocol of much contemporary art to, as Bacher has been valorized for, leverage a certain ambiguity through what Piper calls an artwork's “semantic opacity”, EVSPVS introduce a sharp polemic. Theirs is an intervention to state that contemporary works masquerade as presentations of authenticity when in fact they are operatives of concealment that disguise and mediate their relation to socio-technical conditions. From their perspective, what we are instead exposed to with their work is “a functional, and hostile, negative aesthetics; transactions made in the service of form are recouped as purely formal considerations without any strictly formal analysis to be found whatsoever on the part of the artists”, where “artishood itself is a

contingent personal relation predicated on, and insolvent without, its own infrastructure of increasingly parasitic social organizations”.¹⁰

Of course, it could easily be said, insofar as anyone has done the requisite work of carving out a bare minimum of art historical consciousness, that we know all of this already. The artworld has long been theorized as a network, system, archive, or apparatus for the circulation of information, the reproduction of value, and the interpellation of subjects. Yet precisely because this interpretive frame is so familiar, it requires restating in order to register its historical mutation. As suggested by art historian Francis Haslall (2008) (who, after Seth Price, diagnoses the current era as an 'age of dispersion'), the artworld can be evaluated as structurally homologous to a connectionist neural network, the associative engines that also underpin the ubiquity of contemporary AI architectures. How so? In machine learning, neurons are connected with weighted links, which determine the strength of influence, and in the artworld, these nodes could be people, institutions, markets, or media where “weights” are the degrees of influence, prestige, or gatekeeping power exerted by the nodes. Thus, as in neural networks, the strength of the connections—which is to say, what counts as valuable—evolves in response to input data, feedback loops, and shifting contexts. This could be further extended: sometimes the system learns to “generalize” by absorbing feminist, postcolonial, or digital/technological practices into broader canons. Other times it “overfits” by obsessing on a narrow trend that falls short of 'guarantee' by failing to sustain long-term (e.g., Zombie Formalism, provisional painting, NFTs). Not to forget the hidden layer adjustments of backroom deals, curatorial decisions, art fair selections, and collector choices that recalibrate the network without being visible as explicit rules.



Couch, *faux leather, steel, hardware*, 48in x 32in x 42in, 2022, Courtesy of Alec Petty, Coffee Table, *tempered glass, steel, hardware, safety corners*, 48in x 28in x 12in, 2022, Courtesy of Alec Petty

In this sense, the artworld operates as a form of distributed cognition whose logics of selection and value-production are inseparable from the infrastructural conditions of contemporary

¹⁰ Personal correspondence.

capitalism. To finalize the analogy, one might say that this distribution of cognition is not merely descriptive of institutional operations but resonates with anthropological definitions of culture itself. Ward Goodenough (1957), for example, famously defined culture as “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (167). In the case of art, however, the “acceptable” is always inflected by a constitutive ambivalence: artists are expected to act in ways that may appear unacceptable to broader social norms, but without all of that counting as any kind of *exception* to the rule. But it is a category error to think so, and logically a form of self-deception.¹¹ This is what allows not artists, but artistic procedures, to function as manipulation—not only in the classical sense of mimesis, subject to antiquity’s wary, contemplative gaze, nor solely in the experimental laboratory guise of material trial and error, but also through the techniques of what Robert Williams (1997) has described as art’s “superintendency” or “metatechne.” This latter dimension, emerging in sixteenth-century Italy, names the reflexive oversight by which art began to theorize and regulate its own operations. It is here that the identity of art is gradually constituted as something more than craft, an identity that reaches a certain resolution in the eighteenth century with the consolidation of modern notions of artistic subjectivity that continue to inform our understanding today.¹²

Art comes to be understood as a superintendency of knowledge, a form of knowledge or mode of knowing that necessarily involves a mastery of other modes and is distinguished by being potentially, ideally, a mastery of all modes. Williams shows how it is not autonomy that art seeks but a centrality in culture. This ‘reactivation’ of the past, while not an explicit vector for EVSPVS, can nonetheless, as Roberts has indicated,¹³ be seen as a condition for the production

¹¹ As Adorno famously put it, “the work of art’s detachment from empirical reality is at the same time mediated by that reality. The artist’s imagination is not a *creation ex nihilo*; only dilettantes and sensitive types conceive it as such. By opposing empirical reality, works of art obey its forces, which repulse the spiritual construction, as it were, throwing it back upon itself. There is no content, no formal category of the literary work that does not, however transformed and however unwares, derive from the empirical reality from which it has escaped. It is through this relationship, and through the process of regrouping its moments in terms of its formal law, that literature relates to reality. Even the avant-garde abstractness to which the philistine objects and which has nothing to do with the abstractness of concepts and ideas is a reflection of the abstractness of the objective law governing society.” (Adorno 2019, 359). We find a similar sentiment in Dave Beech: “One result of the supersession of the guild by the academy is that the modernists and avant-gardists who eventually pitted themselves against the academy did so, unwittingly, in normative terms that the Académie Royale had introduced in order to distinguish itself from the guild” (Beech 2020, 84).

¹² “A study devoted to the redefinition of art as a principle, a form of knowledge, might be expected to make some kind of case for the “autonomy” of art, for the emergence of the self-sufficient realm that later came to be called the “esthetic.” It should be clear, though, that the term “esthetic” is not really appropriate: It is not autonomy that art seeks, but superintendency; not distinctness, but centrality within culture. The development of attitudes that seem to anticipate modern estheticism would not have been possible without the recognition that artistic skills are fundamentally the same skills necessary for the conduct of life in culture generally, and it is rather the autonomy of culture as a whole — its emergence as a complex, yet integrated set of codes, a realm defined by the power of representation — that ought to concern us. Because representation becomes so important, art redefines itself as a technique governing it; theory, in turn, becomes the necessary metatechne governing art.” (Williams 1997, 23)

¹³ “the production of the new in art is not *in advance of past art*, so to speak, but, more precisely, *in advance* of the capitalist conditions under which the universal use-values of art as shared technique are suppressed. Hence, the call for the new as a break with the past has to be a process of *constructive* negation of the modern from within the social division of labour. This involves not just a dissociation of artistic technique from the pressures of art’s subsumption under productive labour and the ‘capitalist project’ – most obviously – but from the idea of new technology as the means by which the new is to be defined under art’s post-art condition. In other words, one of the critical functions of art today is to provide a set of temporal resources and strategies that breaks with the accelerationist dynamic of the social division of labour. And one of the most symbolically and practically efficacious ways of doing this is to re-enter *the*

of any contemporary art that could be adequate to the time in which it is made, and is aligned with what EVS describes as “engaging an imminent relation to capital on the pragmatic level” where “the primacy of transaction announces an ambivalence for the formal outcomes of individual artworks, and so they effectively demonstrate that the use value of the specific items (as an opportunity for aesthetic opinionation) is incomparable to, unto irrelevance, an indeterminable abstract value the transaction generates on its own and for itself, thus mortifying the function artworks have as typical affirming of individual subjectivity” and that in this, a negative aesthetics would succeed insofar as it performs a “violation of sense’s assumed relation to the virtue of expression.”¹⁴



Ceramic Black Art Silhouette Man Sitting, glazed ceramic, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), 2024, Courtesy of Hyeon Jaesang

Ceramic Black Glazed Abstract Modern Seated Nude Figure Female Sculpture FVD2 Desk Table Ornaments for Home Bedroom Living Room Garden Office - Black (1), glazed ceramic, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), 2024, Courtesy of Didi Gantzmann

5. Conclusion: Engineering a Negative Aesthetics

Craft is only one of these governing practices [of art]. The rules that dictate our practice as artists, the meta-practices, are just as important as the artist’s craft. To then go on and say that the institution of art hurts, that it is a system governed by acts of coercion, exploitation, [or] upon a sense of self preservation and to not expect that this implies, upon normative pragmatic grounds, that those same rules also govern an artist on a meta level is simply a contradiction. Because the artist, like any practitioner, has always been intrinsically dependent on the entire institution. Artists must be adept at navigating or dissecting these rules; in some cases the rhetoric and in other cases the etiquette, in some cases coercion and in other cases exploitation.

- EVS¹⁵

The Renaissance was a *prototype* for art’s capacity to manage and re-describe its own operations, but today this reflexivity is dislocated into wider socio-technical matrices where

past itself as the site of the new, that is, a space that releases the hidden, oblique, repressed energies of the past into the present as a means of ‘working through’ what capitalist reason expels in the name of progress and the new-as-the-same.” (Roberts 2023, xii-xiii)

¹⁴ Personal correspondence.

¹⁵ (EVSPVS 2023, 54-55).

its superintendency has become more about survival or navigation within systems whose rules it cannot fully command. Art still negotiates its identity by leaning on inherited tropes of knowledge, mastery, or reflexivity—but these are now inseparable from transaction, circulation, and the abstraction of value. What was once a “centrality” in culture is now an *exemplarity* of ambivalence: artworks are exemplary less for what they say than for how they model or embody conditions of appearance under contemporary capital. As with the example of “skilled vision”, the implication is that perceptions concerning works of art are always technically and conceptually mediated through social practices and imaginaries. For anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2015) such mediation is about how imagination functions as a shared, social resource where vision and pictures are “practices of mediation” (224) that themselves are a “culturally defined set of techniques” (234). The conditions of appearance for such practices of mediation emerge at the fault line between art’s historical claims to autonomy and its contemporary subsumption into the circuits of capital, where mediation itself as a “culturally defined set of techniques” becomes the contested terrain on which the value and legibility of artworks are determined in their ‘contact’ with capitalism and commodities. As Stewart Martin (2007) has explained the antimony:

On the one hand, autonomous art appears as the product, effect, or symptom of ‘high’ capitalism: autonomous art effectively comes into being with commodification, which frees certain products from their heteronomous determination by the church, state, or other forms of patronage, and, through the indeterminacy of their ultimate buyer, such works acquire an independent sense of their end and value. Autonomous art is thus an ornament of capitalist culture. On the other hand, there is the position that autonomous art is destroyed by developed capitalism. According to this view, the development of commodification as a general principle of society reduces all values to exchange-value, including the value of art, and thereby destroys art’s autonomy. (16)

If this is familiar and manifests as occurring frustration and boredom that is because its familiarity “is itself frequently a symptom of intensified internalization” (ibid.). Moreover, as Martin notes, if such an antimony is not immediately empirically resolveable, that is a result of the process of internalization itself which inevitably leads to further and further contradictions as immanently produced by capital.¹⁶ A “negative aesthetics” is intelligible only to the extent that we revise our understanding of aesthetic objects to be technical objects in the first place, which as Peter Fenves (2007) has shown, is not at all anathema to Kant but in fact *baked in* to their ‘ontology’ as *intended transmissions* of and for aesthetic evaluation within material-institutional complexes, irrespective of the ‘intentions’ of artists to obscure or display semantic content. Aesthetic experience in this sense is not merely empirico-phenomenological sensorial affect but rational-cognitive normative technique. There is no “private language” that has ever been put on display in an exhibition.

This is because to make works of art is to determine them for distribution and sharing, if they are not already so determined ahead of themselves, which therefore binds them to representational criteria concerning what can or ought to be said about them. Artistic conventions or the models that intervene dialectically to unsettle them and thereby establish an articulated antagonism serve as *cognitive artifacts* (again, see Levinson, 2024): they

¹⁶ “If autonomous art is an immanent contradiction of the commodity form, it remains an inherent potential within a commodity culture. New forms of commodification need to be examined as the heteronomous scene of new formations of autonomous art; new forms of art need to be examined as the contradictions of new formations of commodification.” (Martin 2007, 23-4)

stabilize knowledge outside individual memory, coordinate understanding across people, and enable complex reasoning that no single unaided mind could achieve. They are mediants that participate in culture as “operationalized shared information” (Berniūnas 2024). When this is lensed through EVSPVS’s practice, what is always on ‘display’ is not so much the work of art as the interpretive burden itself that, subtracted from its material instantiation in exhibition, is distributed across legal, sensory, economic, and narrative layers including the ‘merely formal’ cultural transaction of this commissioned essay “in the service of form”. There is a lesson to this about which contemporary art often seems in somewhat amnesiac denial of regarding paradigms of critical antagonisms to form and formalism that posture as its opposite: to side with the critical is only to install oneself into the networks of admissible statements that normatively determine the institutional frame, and, since they are awash with the immanently produced contradictions they internalize, are only formalism’s inverted mirror image, and precisely “a formalism we will have already been committed to for some time without knowing it.” (Mitchell 2003, 324)¹⁷



Ceramic Black Glazed Abstract Modern Seated Nude Female Sculpture Figurine 10.5”(1), 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm) ceramic, 2020, Courtesy of Arielle Friend, Ceramic Black Glazed Abstract Modern Seated Nude Female Sculpture Figurine 10.5” (2), 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 x 4 inches (25 x 20 x 10 cm), ceramic, 2020, Courtesy of Camila Nichols

Untitled 2, PVC heat shrink, assorted human remains, enamel, 5 x 28 x 8in, 2020

Human remains purchased from multiple ossuaries are consolidated at random in heat shrink PVC packing. Method of presentation is determined entirely by the exhibiting body.

With respect to what now fits under the umbrella term of “post-conceptual art”, which as Peter Osborne (2013) understands it by default involves complicity with such “distributive unities” (85), we might also isolate the tradition of the studio as an historical formation—its separation in the identity of art from manual or technical labor in the ‘mechanical arts’—as carried over

¹⁷ Thierry de Duve (1994), who also finds justification in critiquing the ideological progression of creativity as a myth, puts it quite bluntly: “the triad of notions, ‘attitude-practice-deconstruction’, is not the post-modern paradigm that supposedly substituted for the modern paradigm, ‘creativity-medium-invention’. It is the same one, minus faith, plus suspicion” (33).

in the dialectic between art's autonomy and heteronomy. Osborne will explain this in terms of a new operational logic where "[t]his new systemic functionalization of autonomy (this new 'use' of art's 'uselessness') corresponds to the global transnationalization of the biennale as an exhibition form, and its integration into the logics of international politics and regional development. From this point of view, art must reflectively incorporate this new context into its procedures if it is to remain 'contemporary'"(21). The work of EVSPVS does not so much display or exhibit this logic in any immediately legible way so much as it openly admits its complicity within it so as to render it intelligible in the explicit relocation of the works and their materials in the channels of agreement and exchange requisite for their execution and realization. The capacity of artworks to perform such perspectival shifts and semiotic 'tricks' is not, however, a recent discovery by any means. In fact, it can be linked to something that was established in Renaissance painting that logician Jean Petitot (2009) has referred to as the compositional strategy of *non-generic viewpoints* which exploit visual and conceptual convergences for the sake of a *semioticization* of the field of the image as such.

This idea of the non-generic can most readily be comprehended with the example of visual illusion, as in Petitot's example of the Necker cube: if the point of view were to change, the original convergence of tangents and intersections would disappear. Petitot's notion is technical, but is meant to indicate a compositional or modeled coincidence or correspondence on the image plane where aspects of pictorial and semantic content become legible. It adds precarity to the pictorial field itself, where vision becomes a problem of interpretation that opens artworks to the possibility of multiple readings, exploiting the viewer's capacity for noticing different aspects. Since it is a point of influence and interest for the artists, we might relate this to analytic philosopher Robert Brandom's inferentialism and the "game of giving and asking for reasons": to grasp a concept or claim is to know how it functions in a network of inferences that would consequentially entail determinations and judgments regarding what follows from it, and what would count as a reason against it. Discursive practices—and viewing art is one, rather than being a merely subjective configuration of the observer—are structured by this social game wherein we treat claims (and artworks are always claims) as moves in a space of justification. When an artwork is intended to exploit non-generic viewpoints or perspectival instability (why should I see it this way rather than that?), it forces the consideration of a staged situation in which viewers must *negotiate reasons* for seeing it one way or another. If in this case, there is a *reason* to see the form of the objects as trivial compared to the *other side* of the artwork manifest in the agreements and networks of relations that condition its appearance, or if the images are "accidental" in relation to their frames, that is because it encodes in one and the same viewpoint; a complexification of the legible content supported by these hybrid and extended forms.

With this, we are in a better position to understand what EVSPVS might mean when they reference a "negative aesthetics", which ought to be sharply distinguished from the anti-aestheticism of early conceptual art and practices from the 1960s onward as it is neither a refusal nor suspension of normative aesthetic criteria. In the context of more recent articulations through artistic practices, the game of giving and asking for reasons takes on a particularly interesting role. While it shares territory with the paradigmatic of 'criticality' in art, works can equally be encountered as a proposition, an inquiry, a claim about the world, or about art itself, that invites discursive engagement as an explicit participation in epistemic and normative questions: What is being claimed? On what grounds? What is the methodology? What is the work's relation to knowledge production?



Untitled 15, *PVC heat shrink, assorted human remains, enamel, zip ties, 20.5 x 7 x 5 in. (52.07 x 17.78 x 12.7 cm), 2025*

These practices (call them ‘post-conceptual’ or ‘research-based’) frequently draw on theoretical frameworks and adopt inter- or transdisciplinary methodologies that expose them to the same discursive obligations of other disciplines and practices that need to justify, contextualize, and situate by aligning artistic practice as a specific kind of intervention within discourse and social space. Conversely, for a negative aesthetics what is required is a technique ensuring that while all the necessary structural conditions of an artwork obtain, without regard for the outcome of what the conditions themselves produce, the works will also ape and confront the assumption held by the viewers (or in this case the readers) about what a work of art is, or should be. This is also how this writing (and here, *writing not done by them*) becomes *their problem*, and perhaps, their *mistake*—or at least, a case file concerning those structures, institutions, individuals, or relations that are liable to be blamed for certain things (and conceptual art, but not art in general, is historically familiar with pointing fingers and *placing blame*).



Couch, *leather, steel, cushioning foam inserts, hardware, 72 x 38 x 33in, 2022, Courtesy of Collin Leitch*



Untitled 4, *PVC heat shrink, assorted human remains, enamel, glitter*, 9½ x 42 x 10 inches, (24.13 x 106.6 x 25.4 cm), 2022

To be ‘invested’ in a practice the intentions of which are to call into question any original intention and therefore also the rules, the grounds of entitlement, and the institutional framing that determines whose reasons count, or what counts as the work, they reveal that the “game” is and has been always already afoot. Like their lock project, it (unfortunately) provides minimal security from those who might otherwise intervene, and limited assurance that those with keys can be trusted either not to lose them or to use them responsibly. This is to say that even while their projects generally bring with them a breakdown between the divisions of material production that are the conditions for artistic value by engaging a type of collaborative manufacture, they also bring with them the breakdown of who specifically benefits from the value expected to remain if the works are still exhibited and written about, as a structural problematic typically solved at the expense of a real answer by forcefully conserving the structure itself. It would be important to keep in mind, then, all the same, as Piper so deftly pointed out (however much as Naomi Zack put it, they should have smelled the bullshit they were stepping in early on in graduate school¹⁸), that if an artist, in ideological refusal to directly articulate their own practice, is for whatever reason unsettled, or unhappy, with what an art historian, critic, or theorist might say about their work, they have no one to blame but themselves.

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¹⁸ See their presentation at the panel discussion *Deconstructing the Truism of Race as a Social Construct* held at the Hammer Museum, November 3, 2018 and posted to YouTube November 8: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JMLV55AOK8&ab_channel=HammerMuseum

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