

EQUIVOCUS



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GREATER NEW YORK

“Why should I worry about the money? The money is always around to be had. The main thing is to have an idea. A plausible idea which can be dressed up and sold.”

—Charles Ponzi, *The Rise of Mr. Ponzi: Autobiography of a Financial Genius*, 1936

Marcel Duchamp was a reluctant correspondent—a point he made abundantly clear to the receiving ends of his mostly brief letters (e.g. “...writing’s a pain in the ass for me,” “I reproach myself every single day for taking so long to reply,” “I tried to... convey my writing paralysis to you as an explanation for my long silence.”)—yet he somehow managed to write hundreds if not thousands of notes and telegrams during his lifetime, a selection of which were translated from French to English and published over a decade ago. Perusing someone’s correspondence without his permission is *ipso facto* uncouth, akin to rifling through an intimate’s email outbox, but for the most part, these letters prove short of scandal, and make for almost shameless reading. Many traipse nonchalantly over significant events of their narrator’s life, as if whatever were happening to him, for better or for worse, might just as well have been happening to a passing acquaintance instead. The most impassioned bits of the published letters involve, on the one hand, ideas for new works and/or assorted schemes for gaming various systems, and, on the other, occasional rants against the unleashed “fakes and crooks” running in and around the “Art game.” It’s a curious split. One longer than average note from autumn of 1922 begins (after brief niceties) like a missive from the representative of a recently displaced Nigerian prince: “There’s a possibility of a big project which might well make some money.” Duchamp, who is 35 years old at the time, is writing from New York to his friend Tristan Tzara in Paris. He continues, “This would be to have the 4 letters D A D A punched or fashioned in metal separately and then linked together by a little chain. Then make a leaflet, just a short one (about 3 pages in each language). In this leaflet, we would spell out the virtues of Dada, basically to get people from the provinces from all different countries to buy the insignia for a dollar or equivalent in other currencies. The act of buying the insignia amounts to a rite of passage to Dada status for the purchaser. We would of course explain to them that there are 3 types of Dada—the anti-Dadas, the pro-Dadas, and the neutral Dadas. But that whatever their point of view, the insignia would protect them against certain illnesses, against many of life’s problems, something like Pink pills that cure anything.” He sketches some further details about the would-be contents of the “mouthwatering leaflet,”—the real “trick” to making the endeavor a “financial success”—including how to wear the amulet and the variety of styles and materials in which it would eventually be made available. The proposal is a thin and thinly veiled get-rich-quick scheme, designed to exploit either the gullibility or the inextinguishable enthusiasm for novel metal trinkets presumed to flourish among provincial populations. The only real risk Duchamp

foresees, “the first and only argument against,” is the considerable expense of putting 100,000 leaflets in the mail. Duchamp encourages Tzara to share the idea with Man Ray, whom he thinks will “find it amusing,” but there’s no clear indication the scheme is intended as farce, other than the fact that it wasn’t executed. Judging by the contents of the letters overall, Duchamp worried about money most of his life. He stretched to get by for much of it, a feat achieved only with the benefit of inheritance, first from his father, and later following the death of the artist Mary Reynolds, his long-time unofficial partner, who left him with a comfortable monthly income. By then, he was already in his sixties. In 1922, when Duchamp wrote to Tzara from New York, the country was on the rebound from a short but severe recession, marked by extreme deflation, greatly decreased industrial productivity, and a sharp spike in unemployment. This same recession, when the US stock market was at its lowest point since 1901, was also the backdrop for the rapid rise and fall of Charles Ponzi, who, between late 1919 and 1920, had infamously defrauded roughly 30,000 people out of about \$15 million (equivalent to over 150 million in today’s dollars) through a scheme that promised to double investors’ money in 90 days. Ponzi was an Italian immigrant about five years older than Duchamp. He had served time in Canada on a forgery conviction before drifting south, back to the States, to continue a life of increasingly inventive crime. Judging by his autobiography, which he self-published in the mid-1930s, following his deportation, Ponzi was a pathological liar with no capacity for remorse, as well as/therefore a talented storyteller. *The Rise of Mr. Ponzi: Autobiography of a Financial Genius* stars its author as the hapless screwball hero of a slapstick comedy. His every effort to do good and make good is distorted or thwarted by sinister opportunists. (The man was swagger embodied.) Ponzi’s eponymous scheme evolved from a failed attempt to launch a journal. Though the publication never got off the ground, in part because no bank would loan him money, he received an enquiry about it from a European contact. The correspondent enclosed a coupon for return mail, which had been purchased in the sender’s local currency but was redeemable for a miniscule profit at a US postal office, which miniscule profit in turn caused an enormous imaginary light bulb to explode over Ponzi’s head. He started a business called Securities Exchange Company and soon convinced thousands of people from all walks, including his wife Rose and her relatives, to hand over large sums on the promise that he would double their money in a short period of time by investing in the exchange of these international reply coupons. He paid off the initial round of investors in half the 90 days he had advertised by simply passing a second round

of investors’ money to them. Word spread (thanks to front-page coverage in the *Boston Post* and other newspapers), and investors flocked. Many simply folded their “profits” back into the enterprise. Within a few short months, Ponzi even bought the bank that had denied him a loan for the journal. He then offered double the going interest on savings and was soon overrun by depositors. But the bottom fell out just as quickly from Ponzi’s scheme, as well as that of a half a dozen banks, when regulators became suspicious and investors made a run. Ponzi was captured, tried, and convicted in another Ponzi-worthy chapter of this epic tale, but he maintained his innocence until the end of his life, when he half-confessed to a reporter in his Ponzi way, “Even if they never got anything for it, it was cheap at that price. Without malice aforethought I had given them the best show that was ever staged in their territory since the landing of the Pilgrims! It was easily worth fifteen million bucks to watch me put the thing over.” Today, his success as an entertainer remains largely underappreciated. He died in 1949 in Rio de Janeiro, where he was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave. Ponzi’s plan was a straight con. Duchamp’s was a possibly farfetched but legitimate business idea to sell metal charms for a fairly low price at a fairly high margin to a fairly large number of people by way of a persuasive pitch. His mouth-watering leaflet wouldn’t explicitly suggest to would-be customers that there was a real-money return to be made directly off an investment in DADA—the amulet only promised good fortune in the figurative, unquantifiable sense—but both were “plausible ideas to be dressed up and sold,” designed to manipulate an investor’s or a customer’s willingness to pursue a talismanic advantage—a hot tip, a shiny trinket—against known odds. Like Ponzi, water inevitably finds the most efficient way to get wherever it’s headed, which is always the same place, the place where gravity draws it, towards the center of everything. Water flowing down a hill will run directly into an obstacle in its way if the path of least resistance leads directly to that obstacle. Suppose the obstacle is a boulder. Eventually, oncoming water will either undermine the boulder, or the obstinate boulder will succeed in splitting the flood of water into two smaller streams that gradually form trenches around the sides of the rock, hence cutting a more efficient path in the direction of gravity’s allure. Suppose the obstacle is not a boulder, but something you would prefer to keep dry. Let’s say it’s your house. To protect your house from runoff, you would need to perform water’s labor for it by digging trenches a few feet from the perimeter walls, then laying a perforated pipe inside the trench and covering the pipe with loose fill. Water will seep into the fill, pass through the perforations, and zip down the slope

through your pipe like a commuter on a high-speed train. This ingenious detour is called the "French drain" after its inventor, Henry Flagg French, who was born in New Hampshire in 1813 and spent his adult life as a lawyer, judge and public servant—he was even a US postmaster—not to mention engineer- agronomist-inventor, and author. French published on the topic of his drain under the title *The Principles, Prospects and Effects of Draining Land with Stones, Wood, Plows and Open Ditches and Especially Tiles: Including Tables of Rain Fall, Evaporation, Filtration, Excavation, Capacity of Pipes, Cost and Number to the Acre of Tiles* in 1860, when publishing norms dictated that titles fully inform rather than merely entice their prospective readership with regards to a book's contents. A few years later, French moved his family to Concord, Massachusetts, where they became neighbours of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Alcott sisters, who reportedly cast a spell of enchantment over French's son, Daniel Chester French, then a teenager, soon to become a highly esteemed artist and, eventually, the sculptor of Abraham Lincoln's statue at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Thus, the French drain and the Lincoln Memorial, which have no symbolic coherence, have a great deal to do with one another. The first leads directly though not significantly to the second. While directly insignificant relationships between objects, instances, people and thoughts are ubiquitous, they are almost impossible to discuss cogently. Insignificance operates like kryptonite against the superpowers of narrative. It weakens and destroys a story. "Insignificant" is another way of saying "opposed to pattern," is another way of saying almost nothing while still making sounds. Remarking on sound in her 2009 essay "Words about Architecture," Denise Scott Brown wrote: "Charles Seeger, philosopher of 'musics,' believed that art, music and architecture cannot be explained in writing, because words are linear and hide the essence of the arts that are nonverbal and nonlinear. Stravinsky, too, when asked the meaning of a composition just played it again. But then what were Seeger and Stravinsky doing, and what am I doing writing words? [...] Can the nonlinear arts help each other? Can we best describe a building by writing music? Or a poem? My argument with Seeger is that words too, especially poetry, have vast nonlinear dimensions through the layers of association they evoke, and that these can be primary sources for creativity in architecture. [...] Creative cycles call for reading, thinking, impassioning, then sleeping and opening a new book. There need be no preconceptions. The world can start again on a white page. [...] As the design evolves, the words return in altered form." That words return, altered, as nonverbal forms evolve, is true not only in the sense demonstrated by Scott Brown's own writing about

architecture, but also in the literal, physical sense that words change shape over time. Language is a builder's trade. The very concept of distinguishing between verbal and nonverbal forms only evolved *through* language over hundreds of years, in tandem with writing. In ancient Sumerian—the language originally spoken in southern Mesopotamia, now Iraq—the word for door, *ig*, had a syllabic value. It could be combined with other words to create openings, much like the way a door can be added to a wall. For example, *munus*, the word for "female," plus *ig*, produced *mug*, meaning "female genitalia" or "nakedness." The word for "eye" was *igi*, roughly *ig* + *ig*, presumably because there are two of these doors right next to one another on a human face. The word for "side" or "edge," *úz*, added to *ig* produced *zi* or *izid*, a word for "wall," particularly a partition or interior wall—as opposed to an exterior, fortified wall, *bad*, a more commonly used word that predated *zi* by half a millennium. Oddly, the phrase *igi bad* meant "to open the eyes." An alternate meaning for *bad*, which was a highly flexible term, it seems, was "to open" or "undo," rather the opposite work of a wall—more the job of a door, at least historically. Some four millennia since *igi bad* has meant anything to more than a handful of linguists, a wall can be a window can be a door. Within the relatively brief period of Scott Brown's architectural career, glass and steel have assimilated the three. If ancient history is any indication, our language, too, will follow suit; and if recent history is any indication, the process won't take half a millennium this time. Historically, the birth of a new language was an arduous drama played out in slow motion over what may as well be units of geologic time compared to the scale of an individual human lifespan. Today, the process can be practically instantaneous, as in the case of a computer language, when a given linguistic anatomy fully integrates a new technology. In fact, technological change has consistently catalyzed language change. Written phonetic languages descended from complex, nonstandardized pictographic systems in which individual signs represented single concepts or things rather than sounds—though these "systems" hardly warrant the designation since they weren't initially systematic. Only as technologies of inscription evolved and literacy increased accordingly did it become necessary to make pictography more expedient in order to meet the booming demand for written words. Still, contemporary written languages, in which symbols represent sounds rather than ideas, were conceived almost inadvertently. Design followed inception. The first known instance of a pictograph used to represent a sound instead of a concrete object occurred in Mesopotamia, when a scribe attempted to write the expression for a Sumerian god called "Enlil, the lifegiver," a phrase

pronounced *Enlil-ti*. Instead of writing the pictographic signs for the two words, the scribe wrote the sign for “Enlil” followed by the sign for “arrow,” which was a homonym for “lifegiver”—both words were pronounced *ti*. Graphically, the phrase “Enlil-arrow” would make no sense, but read aloud as *Enlil-ti*, it could be understood. Thus, *ti* became the first syllabic sign. From syllabic systems, in which signs represent groups of sounds, phonetic systems, in which signs represent single sounds, were derived. That is, written language began as an unruly, expandable set of graphically complex symbols that utilized concrete relationships between signs and referents to convey meaning. The atomized, phonetic system by which this text is written consists of a fixed set of far fewer, far simpler symbols that refer only to sounds in spoken language, but permit vast possibilities for both precision and abstraction in linguistic representation relative to a pictographic system. We might then conclude that, when it comes to written language, the more economical the system, the more efficient. But this assumption holds only within a specific speech community—readers of a phonetically written language must necessarily be speakers of that language since the sounds of speech are all that a phonetic sign system denotes. To compare: a few eons ago, in what is now China, someone drew a stick-figure horse to represent the concept “horse.” Today, the same proto-Chinese horse sign can be readily understood by readers with no prior exposure to proto-Chinese. However, it is not possible to deduce from the picture-word the pronunciation of the original spoken word. The horse sign embeds its referent’s meaning, but transmits nothing of the word’s sound. A pictograph can carry a message through time without necessarily bearing language along with it, which leads us to wonder about possible relationships between time and signs, not with regard to the inevitability of linguistic change, but instead with a broader regard to the fundamental resilience of signs. In other words, rather than asking the etymological question, “What is the true meaning of a word as it changes over time?” we might ask, “What signs or qualities of signs remain significant over time?” In Scott Brown’s words, this is like asking, “What are the nonverbal, nonlinear qualities of language?” Sumerian was eventually replaced by Akkadian, which incorporated some Sumerian characteristics, though it was a syllabic system derived from Phoenician, like Greek. It is not by coincidence that the Akkadian word for “door,” *daltu*, represented by a triangular symbol, closely resembles the Greek letter *delta*, though *delta* doesn’t mean “door.” Greek was never a pictographic language (no direct relation to Sumerian), but “delta” did come into use much later (and is still in use) as an English word referring to the mouth of a

river. This is a result of the formal correspondence between the geographic element and the triangular shape of the Greek letter, which bends “delta” around to the condition of a threshold, at least in modern terms, just as it bends English around to Akkadian, and the Greek alphabet around to pictography, though these latter feats require more stretching. Therefore, pursuant to ancient Greek standards for etymological research, which were synchronic (“with time”) as opposed to diachronic (“through time”), door, *daltu*, and *delta* are indeed related, if only here, only now, and only according to this narrator. That is, the future presently re-reflects the past, unpredictably, albeit conveniently, at least in terms of ready-made associations among ostensibly dissociated words, doors, triangles, and epochs. Incidentally, the Sumerian symbol that the Greek delta closely resembles—a triangle positioned on point like a downward arrow cleft by a vertical line—was the sign for “woman,” a figure that corresponds perfectly with a diagrammatic satellite view of the Nile delta. To speak of nonverbal forms as expressing linguistic attributes or following linguistic principles in their formal evolution is a commonplace. How often we hear about the “language,” the “vocabulary,” or the “grammar” of dance, cinematography, even toothpaste packaging. That nonverbal forms communicate and evolve among “literate” communities in ways that are analogous to language is evident, as is the fact that one can be more or less literate in a nonverbal “language.” Nevertheless, the analogy has its limitations, which have something to do with the conceptual confrontation between a proto-Chinese horse and a Sumerian *ti*. The potential accuracy of any formal analysis corresponds to the degree of systematization of whatever is being analyzed. A highly systematized form like a language can be analyzed with relative precision compared to less systematized forms like building façades or handmade pottery, as Scott Brown and her students discovered when they analyzed the architecture of Las Vegas in the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the physical form of a vase (if not a façade) has proven more stable, and certainly more universal, than its various linguistic signs. And the phonetic sign has ultimately eluded neither pictography nor poetry (as the case of the delta illustrates), despite all ambitions to the contrary. In other words, pottery, like poetry, is resilient despite apparent fragility, and a door is a word we understand but don’t know how to say. A dying language typically suffers a long decline through several generations of decreased use and neglect. A population of speakers devolves into a shrinking community of semi-speakers, until the last of these, too, finally disappears, and the language passes away in quiet, almost unnoticed. Ancient Sumerian lingers as a specimen of study because it was

reserved for use by a ruling class well after Akkadian supplanted it, and because it was written in stone, like an ancient building. Abiding the immortal words of contemporary poet and philosopher of “musics” Jay-Z, who maintains that he “speaks things into existence,” a tongue that creates, persists. For the Sumerian scribe, the same was true of the writing hand. Words have been sounds as long as they’ve been words, but writing was drawing until perhaps 5,000 years ago when a pictographic arrow pronounced “lifegiver” simultaneously adjoined and separated nonverbal and verbal language. Will words set in bits prove more pliable than those written in ink? (Are words written in ink more mutable than those set in stone?) The opposite may be true. Certain words have transcended time and the rise and fall of civilizations. The English word “wall” sounds a lot like the proto-Indo-European *walso*, which meant “a post,” and the Latin *vallus*, also meaning “post” or “stake”—though English is a Germanic language. The Italian and French versions, *muro* and *mur*, appear to have descended just as directly from a different Latin word, *murus*, which meant “wall” as in “protection” or “defense,” more like the Sumerian word *bad*. Other proto-Indo-European words meaning “to cover” and “to form” engendered the ancient Persian word for wall, *dēga-vâra*, and, later, the blatantly compressed Persian word for wall, *dīvâr*. But spend a few minutes online translating the word “firewall” into other languages and notice how many cultures and languages import the English term unaltered. What does “firewall” mean? It’s a portmanteau word that in current usage most often has nothing to do with either fire or walls, rather the inhibition of communication. Though the word originally referred to a physical wall built to contain the spread of fire, it is now best known and most widely used in reference to software that thwarts unauthorized agents from accessing information stored on networked computers. Firewall’s ubiquity across languages, the fact that it supersedes other longstanding, local renditions of “wall,” is testament to one present outcome of an ongoing contest between technological speed and cultural mass in linguistic evolution: populations of semi-speakers are emerging simultaneously within many different speech communities, globally. If the “vast nonlinear dimensions” evoked by words persist only to the extent these dimensions (like words, through words) are continually spoken into existence, and if design evolves as words return in altered form, then the layers of association found within both poetry and doors will (or already have begun to) merge accordingly. Incidentally (or not), the advent of a global Internet has given rapid rise to a new system of pictographic symbols: typographic signs used as elements of images (rather than as phonetic or punctual cues). The first

emoticon appeared in 1982, when a computer programmer posted a suggestion on an Internet bulletin board that a colon followed by a dash followed by a closing parenthesis be used to signal that a preceding statement should be interpreted lightly. The string of signs “:-)” cannot be read aloud, but the message has already traveled farther in 30 years than a stick-figure horse did in several millennia. :-/ “I’m uncertain,” is not a message performers (or writers, or artists, or news anchors, or elected leaders) are typically meant to convey. A performer’s job is to divert attention from any inkling of bad faith. That’s the whole idea behind stagecraft: block out whatever’s extraneous, which is almost everything; make people see only what you intend, not what you’ve obscured. It’s called make believe, not make disbelieve. When a performer confesses, “I’m uncertain,” what she really indicates to an audience is, “I don’t know what I’m doing,” which means, “I’m not a competent performer.” *Equivocal* is the word to describe her apparent lack of conviction. It can mean ambiguous, open to interpretation, and worse. In English pronunciation, emphasis is placed on the second syllable, “quiv,” made from parts of both roots: equi + vocal = eQUIVocal. While *quiv* sounds like quiver—what animals do when they’re afraid—the roots of equivocal don’t mean quiver, they mean “called equally.” But to be called equally seems a relatively shameless predicament. Aren’t most of us ‘called equally’ most of the time, often by more than two equal priorities at once? Yet, ‘equivocal’ is typically used in the pejorative. Allegations of equivocation signal dangerous territory for political candidates, for example, though “flip-flopper” is a more familiar epithet than “equivocator.” People understand instantly and viscerally what flip-flopping means: it’s bad. Confidence, above all else, is good. Ardent single-mindedness—certainty—is virtue, especially where matters and figures of authority are concerned. The degree to which this is so indicates, in turn, the power of aesthetic authority; style and charisma—a show of confidence—are signs to trump reason in realms of public opinion. Sometimes, when it’s the Oscars, this is just as well. Other times, when lives and shared resources hang in the balance, this may be cause for some concern. Incidentally (or not) and on the off-chance that uncertainty might be revalued (and not in a bad way) by attending to some minor linguistic detail, a new word is offered as the title of this publication: *Equivocus*, pronounced EQui-VOcus, is a noun, a person, a place, or a thing minted here to mean “equal voice,” and equally, “equal focus.” Incidentally (or not), if you focus intently for a while on something moving steadily in one direction, like a waterfall, then shift your gaze to something stationary, that immobile thing will briefly appear to move. The perceptual experience

is paradoxical. Stationary objects appear to move without changing position. Though this motion aftereffect is known to involve multiple stages of analysis in different parts of the brain, it is not yet well understood, and the question remains as to why this “misperception of the world” has survived biological adaptation. According to contemporary research into the minute workings of the brain, information processing occurs at a cellular level, and cells adapt to persistent stimulation. When you look at a static object, its horizontal contours stimulate detectors in your visual cortex for downward and upward movement, but since both directional sensors are equally stimulated, they cancel each other out, and the object appears static. But if you look at something moving in one direction, perhaps downward, as in the case of a waterfall, cells consistently stimulated by the ongoing motion will become fatigued. When you shift focus from the waterfall to a static object, cells that sense an opposite motion will be newly stimulated, and their signals won't be effectively counterbalanced. The object will appear to rise. That is, cells develop expectations, and these cell-level expectations inflect organism-level perception. Or, this is the current theory. Regardless, there's no easing into the fog that clings to Appalachian highways on damp winter mornings. Either the thickness is up ahead of you, like a soft white wall, or you're inside it, surrounded by its dingy blankness. That is, until you're simply not inside it anymore, until you're suddenly returned without warning to the infinite spread of sublime but unremarkable details the fog briefly obscured: meandering blacktop, dry brown hills, mile markers, billboards, distances. Traveling at the specific speed of a car on a highway forces dissociation between these two dimensions, one thick, the other thin, one formless, the other infinite, whereas if you were to cross the hills slowly, by foot, you would enter and exit the clouds gradually, acclimating to subtle changes with every step. At an ambulatory pace, the transition would grade so quietly as to disappear from sense altogether. There would be no separate dimensions, just one varied but seamless atmospheric quality. Then again, if you could travel at an even much faster speed, the two conditions would merge into a single, milky landscape, forging yet another unity, as when rhythm becomes tone, or a sequence of still images produces an illusion of motion. Similarly, you could see the world the way Aristotle did when he wrote in his *Metaphysics* that “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect... This is the most certain of all principles...” or you could peer through the book of Zhuangzi, a near-contemporary of Aristotle—“That which is one is one. That which is not one, is also one.”—in which case your perspective

would incorporate Aristotle's, just not on Aristotelian terms. Aristotle's vision belongs to the eye from which it alights. Zhuangzi's vision alights equally from all it alights upon, such that distinction of one vantage, one eye, one subject from another, if possible, is only ever partial and uncertain. From his driver's-side window, Aristotle glimpses Zhuangzi treading slowly on foot, but disregards the One comprised between the two—the span of time and distance, of which no isolated instant or increment actually exists except in the imagination, as an abstract thought rather than an observation. And thus continues the interminable tail chase of subjecthood—Aristotle and Zhuangzi circling each other on a Möbius strip of foggy road in the foothills of the mind. One's sameness is as paradoxical in physiological, material terms as the other's oneness is in logical terms. Every discipline conducts its own variation on the same disputed theme. I sat next to an algebraist by chance on a bus ride one spring. I had just come off a nerve-wracking flight. I felt relieved to be stuck to the surface of the earth again; happy to be on a packed bus; and fortunate, above all, to be returned to the illusion of a foreseeable future. I was chatty and solicitous and with minimal prodding the algebraist soon submitted to explain his life's work, which he at first summarized as the problem of “ $xy \neq yx$.” Sounds innocent, but after two and a half hours of his patient analogizing and finger-diagramming on the seatback in front of us, I had no better sense of how it happens that XY is not equal to YX . I only grasped that it has something to do with time. Whether that's the time that passes between two variables or two sides of an equation or two other, more obscure abstractions, I still can't say. At a certain point, he used both hands to indicate a grapefruit-sized sphere between us, which stood for the thought model of all possible planes of space-time in simultaneous existence. I nodded along faithfully. As we spoke, it occurred to me I had little sense for how mathematicians do their thing. In the most mundane terms, how does someone work on one equation for years? Sitting at a desk in front of a computer? Writing on a chalkboard? Tapping into a calculator? What is the material evidence of this thinking labor? So I asked my algebraist about his daily life. I might've supposed he wouldn't answer concretely regarding pencils and software. He did assure me that research mathematicians like him don't consider the practical implications of their work, as a rule. They don't, for example, tangle with theoretical physics. In a way, the separation of powers serves both fields. The physicists are notorious for making sometimes insupportable, or at least temporarily unsupported, inductive leaps of the sort that mathematicians, with their relatively stringent standards, wouldn't allow. This particular mathematician

had broad interests, however, and perhaps also sensed my taste for sensational science. He told me about a theoretical physicist who studies time, though as my memory of our conversation has since faded, the likelihood that I am all but making up what I'm about to say he said has increased. In any case, I understood from the mathematician that the physicist seems to have discovered that time is discontinuous. At the tiniest quantum or even sub-quantum level, it may well be that time exists in discrete increments. We experience these as continuous, much like we experience a digital audio sample as continuous sound. I spent a considerable portion of my shower time after that bus ride meditating on the what-is-in-between nothingnesses: if time is discontinuous, so is space, so is matter, and so, too, are we. In a memory that may be a dream, I am walking through shady pinewoods behind my grandparents' house when I come upon a circular clearing colored by bright warm sunlight. That's the whole story. I am walking in a place I know well, the light changes, I'm in a place I haven't been before. End. This memory comes to mind with some frequency, though I can't be sure whether it appears once every few weeks or once every few years, only that it returns rhythmically from wherever it is lodged, and as it does, it marks a tempo too slow to track. The vision—and it is a vision, not more, not less—is as uneventful as it is vivid. Algebra is that part of mathematics useful for reckoning the known unknowns. According to my dictionary, it is a means of mental bone-setting, a way to effect “the reunion of broken parts.” From Arabic, from *al-jabr*, from Spanish, from *jabara*, meaning reunite, meaning restore, algebra was invented to rectify regrets. Its methods were established in *The Science of Restoring What Is Missing and Equating Like with Like*, alternately translated as *The Condensed Book on Calculation by Restoring and Balancing*, an ancient volume by al-Khwarizmi, the Persian astronomer and mathematician who, around 1200 years ago, recognized something that is almost nothing could be worth a great deal. Al-Khwarizmi picked up the Hindu concept of zero during his travels through India. He then brought it home to the system of Arabic numerals he also invented more or less through import. The general public resisted the concept for centuries to come, but it proved eminently useful nonetheless. By definition, zero holds the place of a number subtracted from itself. Five minus five equals zero, which is not the same as nothing. With zero plus the concepts of algebra, complex Islamic laws governing the distribution of inheritance and obligations of debt after death could be applied far more efficiently. The last portion of *The Condensed Book* is dedicated to example cases. The problems are verbalized and contain no figures. A typical excerpt reads like a morbid math exam: “Suppose that a man, in his illness,

has made a present of a slave girl, her price being three hundred, her dowry one hundred dirhems; and the donor dies, after having cohabited with her. Computation: Call the legacy thing: the remainder is three hundred less thing. The donor having cohabited with her, the dowry remains with him, which is one-third of the legacy, since the dowry is one-third of the price, or one-third of thing. Thus the donor's heirs obtain three hundred less one and one-third of thing, and this is twice as much as the legacy, which is thing, or equal to two things. Remove the one and one-third of thing, and add the same to the two things. Then you have three hundred, equal to three things and one-third. One thing is, therefore, three-tenths of it, namely ninety dirhems. This is the legacy.” One thing, three-tenths, ninety dirhems, the tidy resolution of life's remainders: this is the legacy. Al-Khwarizmi translated his name to Latin as *Algoritmi*. From this translation, the word *algorithm* was derived. An algorithm is a formula—a recipe for solving a problem mathematically. More generally, it is a way of understanding one thing in precise relation to another. Think of al-Khwarizmi's algorithm for computing the inheritance of a slave girl. The same formula can be applied to different circumstances—different deaths, different slave girls—to calculate like results. Basic terms needn't be reassessed each time a master dies. For example, imagine an algorithm that would determine the size of a typical Western tombstone. It would relate bodies to language to death, mediating the literary form of the epitaph. Consider that even a large tombstone is constrained to the baseline of a grave. A grave is likewise proportioned to a coffin and to a human body, in turn. The formula for determining the number of words that could fit comfortably on a typical stone would therefore entail some variables for average human dimensions—shoulder width and height, for example—and some for the proximity of living readers to the stone. The typical reader stands at the foot of the grave, a full height's distance from the head, rather than at the navel, say. So, figure that an engraved text must be sized in such a way that a reader—standing a human length and height away from the marker—can discern it easily. Voluptuous sentences are out of the question. An epitaph must be brief, either pithy or simply reserved. Most stones list a name, possibly the name of a spouse, plus the date of birth, the date of death, and perhaps a short phrase or a symbol—a rose, a cross, a single Hebrew character, disembodied hands pressed together in Christian prayer. At an old cemetery near my house where I sometimes go to walk or to read, a filigreed network of sidewalks progress from the oldest plots at the top of the hill, down to newer plots around a small goose pond at the bottom. Moving from one end of the cemetery to the other is like

passing through history. The earliest stones date from colonial times. Between then and now, the size and heft of the average marker has grown from brittle to husky. Names have changed, too. And contemporary stones are relatively reticent. The most significant discovery I've made there is that men who fought in the first World War and died before the second were buried as veterans of The World War, not A World War, and not World War I. There's no first until there's a second. The message of this elision coheres over time in the aggregate texture of discrete memorials as an absent thought, a failure to account forwards in time, evidence of a certain optimism that no such accounting would be necessary. The one would not be the first, rather the only. The fundamental calculation of the animal brain is risk versus reward. That is, brains evolve to improve organisms' odds of surviving risks and reaping rewards. Or, organisms with more evolved brains tend to outwit those with less evolved brains, and thus survive to reproduce, with notable exceptions, such as mindless microorganisms who might disturb some vital supply (water, food, light) of a more advanced animal and thereby threaten its survival, or humans, who are brain-endowed for a long view, yet short-sighted in practice, with an unfortunate propensity for compromising the biosphere. The concept of an instinctual, biological correspondence between risk and reward is symbolically embedded in all sacred artifacts. "Precious" materials require a requisite effort, expenditure, or risk to procure or produce. Among the oldest artifacts are 100,000-year-old beads made of seashells. The ancient shells have been found in three locations, each one far from the nearest sea, indicating that they were transported some distance after they were obtained, in which case they would indeed signify a certain effort, expenditure, and risk rewarded—messages jewelry transmits to this day as a symbol of status, wealth, sexual desirability, and, ultimately, power. Considering that our oldest evidence of any written language is only about 5,000 years, an amulet communicated good fortune ages before the advent of marketing or even stone tablets. Its statement was (is) universal and transhistorical. Apparently, the advertising tropes that "diamonds are forever" or gifts of jewelry are "timeless" contain a degree of anthropological truth. A few centuries ago, a small band of warlords ritualistically transferred both risk and reward in the form of a precious emblem conferred upon the one among them who credibly threatened to defeat the rest by force, henceforth their "king." It's difficult to imagine that once upon a time (only a blink ago compared to the inception of beads), there was no such thing as a king. Crown jewels may have initially symbolized the relinquished power of a few, willing subjects—that their submission to the

rule of an agreed leader would be preferable to continued strife, battle, damage, bloodshed, etc., among all contestants—but the authority of the monarchy soon took up a narrative force entirely its own, refuting any progenitor other than God, who of course was not to be reached for comment. Professional swindler Charles Ponzi's concept of a "plausible idea dressed up and sold" is little more than a machine-stamped, silver-plated nickel charm compared to the concept of royalty and the loot (not to mention the mystique) its authors consolidated over generations—though the preceding history is partial conjecture based not on certified knowledge but on a visit to the underbelly of the former summer palace of the Danish royal family in Copenhagen, where several centuries' worth of crown jewels are entombed in glass cases for the close-up consideration of a museum-going public. Old crowns don't look like the sort of polished costume Peter O'Toole would've worn in a tragic period drama about an aging royal. They are quite evidently hand wrought. And what might be interpreted (since the dawn of machine tooling) as their amateurish charm, is undermined by the tawdry excess of gem-y bits and bobs encrusting their surfaces. It hadn't occurred to me before I descended into the palace that metal and precious stones are beyond dead, in fact outside the question of life and death, or that this is what "inorganic" means, until I saw for myself that elderly jewels are even more dead than your average stainless steel implement. After a few generations' wear and tear, hard, shiny objects, including noble accoutrements, acquire the look of butter stored at room temperature. A crown's sum potential energy inevitably turns toward imminent, oozing collapse. Collapse: to need something badly—an organ donation, let's say—is to need it urgently, whereas to want something badly is merely to really, really want something the way kids in stores desperately want brightly packaged things displayed on low shelves. You cannot urgently want anything the way you can urgently need a heart transplant. It is possible, on the other hand, to desire what one needs. Conceivably, need is the basis of all desire, in which case want and need may indeed be imagined as a continuum. Practically speaking, though, to meet one's needs is essential to survival, while to fulfill one's wants is just very nice. That is, want pertains to desire as need pertains to survival. And since survival relates directly to mortality, so, too, does need relate to mortality. Urgency, then, has something more to do with avoiding death than it does with pursuing desire. "Urgent" means almost too late already. Urgency is a state of duress. Tragic drama necessarily entails urgency. Hence the disproportionate representation of cops, soldiers, doctors, armed criminals, terrorists, psychopaths and vigilantes in film and television productions. Sports

events, too, construct a theater of urgency—figure skaters, like stunt performers, tempt gravity, fate, death. Within the acknowledged bounds of fiction and games, the threat of imminent danger is evidently thrilling to watch. There, entertainment equals the difference between urgency and its suggestion. (An air raid in a dramatic film represents urgency; an air raid in a news video documents it; an air raid above my head or yours is it. You and I are likely to remain seated during the former and to be moved by fear during the latter. One might also be provoked by a depiction of urgency to respond with significant action—a petition, a protest, a poem—but that response would be an inspired choice, not a reflex.) An urgent question demands an immediate answer, some form of “do or die,” just as an urgent issue requires action or else it isn’t actually urgent. Thus, urgency tends to simplify matters—there are no options to weigh, only imperatives to abide. Does it follow that circumstances that force decisions are preferable to those that afford choices? The anxiety otherwise attached to setting priorities may be wholly relieved by the insistence of an urgent need—crisis evokes a kind of euphoria for some—but a state of sustained urgency is a hell of a place to live. People who settle there can look forward to shortened life expectancy, a detail that should alert anyone who hankers after urgency, “be careful what you wish for.” Ten years ago, I wandered into an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum called *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*. It wasn’t a particularly well publicized show, and there was nothing ostensibly urgent about the ancient artifacts on display, but the year was 2003, the place was New York, and the political context was the onset of what would ultimately become a long, extremely violent and destructive US military occupation of the region represented by the exhibition. Considering the lead time involved in organizing anything on an institutional clock the size of the Met’s, the show’s prescience was probably a fluke. Nevertheless, *Art of the First Cities* assumed incidental significance against the backdrop of news media propaganda that had created a caricature of place and people from the Mediterranean to the Indus, emphasizing fundamentalism, oppression, exploitation, anger and sand to the neglect of fertile minds and resources, and seminal literary, philosophic, scientific and technological contributions to world civilization. As a spectator, I did experience a feeling of urgency at that show—I remember thinking, “I must remember this,”—but the urgency welled in me not as a museum patron at an exhibition, but rather as a witness of false consensus, against which the *First Cities* exhibition, fastidious and self-assured as any at the Met, stood out like a glaring error. Art itself isn’t urgent, it’s

important. *Importare*: Latin, “bring in.” In contemporary usage, important means consequential. The work of artists, curators, publishers, and anyone else involved with the institutions of art is to bring within its purview that which they deem to be of consequence. As a result, the form they give their work indicates what they value, how they choose. By contrast, to desire urgent circumstances is to desire not to be responsible for what and how, rather to find oneself compelled. Someone asked me recently whether I could recall the first time I was affected by a work of art or an exhibition. I do remember learning to read. I remember the special intensity of reading fiction when language was new. And I remember learning in a first grade drawing class that eyes sit in the middle of the head, not at the very top, a fact that surprises me still. The first exhibition I remember seeing occurred around the same time I discovered language and the rudiments of anatomical proportion. It was a touring show of Amish quilts that passed through the art museum in my town. The Amish, a Christian sect committed to communal, agrarian living, reject electricity, motorized vehicles, birth control, military service and Social Security. They drive horse-drawn carriages and wear simple, dark clothing reminiscent of the American pioneers: ankle-length dresses and bonnets for women; long pants, vests and flat-brimmed hats for men. In large part, they preserve the habits and mores of their 18th-century Swiss-German founders, including exquisite handicrafts. Amish quilts, often made of the same violet, indigo, and madder colors as their clothing, are startlingly graphic, however, somewhere between the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt and the digital landscapes of *Q*bert*. What I remember best about the exhibition, aside from mental images of particular quilts that deeply impressed me, is the explanation I was given as to why every regularly patterned quilt contained a conspicuous deviation—an error. “That’s to let God out,” I was told. What is this god, I wondered, and what would happen to it if there were no mistake? What kind of fallout are we talking about in the event God gets stuck? I was intimidated by adults and answers. I accepted for a while that a perfect quilt would be an affront to the gods and internalized that whatever warranted display in museums rivaled divine perfection. Now, when I consider exhibitions, I bounce between two poles. At one extreme, I wonder, “Why in the world has someone done this, when anything at all was possible?” while at the other, I perceive, “All the world is here, in this,” but my axis is subject to all sorts of vagaries, from time to weather to war. Sometimes it bends round, and the two poles meet to form a circle. I have a picture of Helen Keller meeting Charlie Chaplin. The two of them are sitting on a bench outdoors. It looks like summer, but she’s wearing

a long skirt and he's in a little suit, so maybe it's only spring. They're on the youngish side of middle age, youthful but wizened. According to the caption, she's teaching him her alphabet, but according to his expression, she's sharing the most interesting, enlightening, soul-expanding insight he's ever heard. Her eyes are closed, as if she's trying to recall the details of some long-savored story, and he's leaning forward a bit, looking up at her (he's a tiny guy) with a half open smile like he can hardly believe what's happening because nothing this unbelievably good has ever happened to him before. If you didn't know better, you would think they were in love. Of course, you do know better. You know that she probably wasn't talking with her voice at all when that photo was taken. She wouldn't have seen Chaplin's films (or anyone else's), obviously. And he could only talk to her through a translator since he didn't know her touch alphabet. Speaking of touch, does a proliferation of screens and camera phones equal a move away from verbal communication? I don't think so, nor did I make up the question to confront myself rhetorically here in the middle of a Chaplin-Keller photo op. The idea was put to a small group of respondents as a given during a so-called "online forum" for which I was compensated to participate to the tune of \$300, two museum entrance tickets, and a book on Gutai, part of which I urgently needed at the time. Before considering the possibility of new visual languages to replace current visual languages, I replied at some later point in the staged discussion, it's worth second-guessing whether the presence of more and varied visual cues necessarily signals greater visual literacy. Being sensitive and responsive to visual cues isn't the same as being visually literate, just as understanding spoken language and knowing how to speak isn't the same as knowing how to read and write. Even highly educated adults often lack a vocabulary or framework to analyze visual information. Basic drawing skills are rarer still. So, who exactly is the "we" allegedly moving from predominantly verbal to visual modes? Who is "using" visual cues, and who is merely or mostly subject to them? And back to the first question, is there really a zero-sum relationship between text and image so that more images means fewer words? In the case of computer-interface design, a more significant shift may be towards systems that are not visible at all, or are barely visible, like tiny cameras, microphones, and speakers that approximate the functions of human eyes, ears, and voices and are embedded in walls, garments, and skin. We may look back aghast in fifty years, when we're whispering to ambient interfaces, when we think of how much time people spent tapping and typing at the turn of the century; when the obvious answer to the question "What happened to the grid?" will be "What grid?" and a

modern-day Helen Keller will be inconceivable. That aside, if visual literacy is a concern, and if *you* think increased visual literacy will lead to a society with a more "expressive" visual language and that this would be an improvement, then the important moral question for you should be that of how to increase visual literacy. In the case of graphic interfaces (or advertisements, or other major elements in the visual environment), however, the "emotional verve" you posit as an ideal is not a "pure" expression of an "out-of-control" creator but the very element that most effectively controls users' or audiences' behavior—hence the efficacy of avatars in winning human trust and loyalty online, and images of beautiful women in selling cars, lingerie, cereal, insurance, contact lenses, and dog food. *Is architecture rational?*, we were next asked. By then I had completely lost track of the conversation's reason for being, but my own reasons for being in it—a contractual obligation and a paycheck—urged me towards completion. What were we talking about, anyway? And who was listening (really)? The organizer/editor of the "forum" recruited one or two people to respond to each response so the comments sections wouldn't remain blank. We continued: Rationality is not an on-off quality intrinsic to an object. It's a property of interpretation. Any choice can be rationalized, more or less persuasively, any number of ways, which means rationalization itself is subject to style. Yet while individual opinions about whether or not any nonmathematical argument is rational are, strictly speaking, only ever opinions, in the aggregate these opinions (including opinions about aggregate opinions) are entirely significant—philosophically, economically, and materially. "The constant morphing of aggregate opinion" is another way of saying "fashion," though many people call it "thought," and with good reason: aggregate opinion currently holds that fashion is trivial. That "nobody can afford to admit" that fashion underlies rationalized decision making is an observation worth pondering. What could be the cost of this confession? Also: Why does fashion (in architecture, in discourse, in politics, in consumption) obtain? Or, Why have prevalent styles of rationalization changed in the particular ways they have during particular times in particular places? And, How will they change next? Data is expensive because there is money to be made by correctly anticipating answers to this last question, and influencing them. To this end, Keynes' beauty contest has for decades occupied economists and game theorists seeking to model reasoning processes and learning over time: "Professional investment may be likened to those newspaper competitions in which the competitors have to pick out the six prettiest faces from a hundred photographs, the prize being awarded to the competitor whose choice most

nearly corresponds to the average preferences of the competitors as a whole; so that each competitor has to pick, not those faces which he himself finds prettiest, but those which he thinks likeliest to catch the fancy of the other competitors, all of whom are looking at the problem from the same point of view. It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And there are some, I believe, who practise the fourth, fifth, and higher degrees." (p. 140, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes, 1936.) A first wave of researchers tested the effects of many vs. few subjects and the influence of outliers. Subsequent efforts expanded to include wider ranges of participants, teams vs. individuals, players with varying degrees of experience, and differing parameters. What subjects learn is to anticipate what other subjects learn (and whether and how they will behave accordingly) in given circumstances. According to a recent paper published by economist Rosemarie Nagel, the most significant finding of all the experiments has been that Keynes was right. "Subjects apply only 0 to 3 levels of reasoning," she writes, and it is primarily economists who operate on the third, deepest level. Practically speaking, they know the metrics for beauty. The forum was on the topic or the supposed problem of "the aestheticization of everyday life." While the values of a culture show up in its artifacts—not only in how they look, but in what they're made of and by whom, how long they last, how much they cost to produce and to purchase, who owns them, etc.—it's difficult to accept as a legitimate political problem "the aestheticization of everyday life," or even the idea that said aestheticization is on the rise, I wrote. (Three years later, in parentheses, the more important idea I hear in the question of "aestheticization" is a growing critical awareness of the pervasive power of aesthetic authority. Hence the question can be articulated outside the provinces of what is typically deemed Aesthetic: the art and design industries.) Deep in the woods, a lost hiker or hunter is surrounded by food and other supplies necessary for survival, all free for the taking. But how many know to recognize the available resources? How many have the skills to identify nutritious, fatty insects? How many can say which vegetation is edible and which will also prevent scurvy? Who can make a compass from a needle, the small amount of oil wiped off the surface of her forehead, two blades of grass, and a little pool of water? (Who happens to carry a needle on a hike?) With only a bit of relevant knowledge, one can survive alone

in the wilderness indefinitely. Or one can perish rather quickly from ignorance. Right? I went on, in that way I sometimes regret, "One could argue well, however, that increased aestheticization (if it exists) and a related opacity (as opposed to transparency) between means and ends (e.g. objects and the effects of manipulating them) are characteristic or symptomatic of a particular political orientation. (The values of modernism, after all, are purportedly expressed in forms that reveal the process of their own construction.) The making and selling of food, clothing, and other products locally in reaction to perceived aestheticization and opacity could then be considered politically motivated responses to those symptoms. In that case, though, it would be more instructive (and structurally consistent with the nature of the complaint) to scrutinize the politically motivated activity—the "how"—rather than the product—the "what." The how of local and lo-fi production expresses a desire to labor and a desire for the irregularity of hand-made small-batch goods over a desire for leisure, convenience, and manufacturing consistency, as well as a dose of skepticism towards industrial technology and industrialized production, all at a price premium that is far from competitive with mass-market retailers, however. By this analysis, the politically charged "transparent" object entails a high labor cost, low-yield production, and a high price. Once economics are brought to bear, this form of so-called "transparency" seems oversimplified or merely gestural as a political proposition—at worst, tantamount to an individualized version of national fantasies of isolationism and self-sufficiency, at best, unsustainable. There is a pleat, or a certain type of gown, known as a Watteau Pleat or a Watteau Gown, though the painter Watteau doesn't seem to have had much to do with its invention. He merely depicted the look repeatedly, famously, and once in petal pink satin on the back of a woman ascending a step. The latter stars in a shop sign commissioned by a man who made his living selling art and baubles to aristocrats, though it's unclear whether artist or client truly expected the painting to advertise anything other than itself. Indeed, the sign depicts aristocrats shopping for art and baubles, but a buyer acquired it from Gersaint, the shop owner, almost immediately; Watteau died shortly thereafter; and now the work is considered his final masterpiece, rather than, say, a watershed in the history of sign making. Novelties browsed by the clientele in Gersaint's actual shop included ornate mirrors, articles for the vanity table, and paintings of various sizes and subjects. In Watteau's version, frolicking nudes, religious tableaux and regal portraits line the stall, which is open on one side like a doll's house. The lady in the pleated pink sack gown steps up from a cobblestone street to enter

the shop as if to cross a proscenium. One foot in the scene, the other still lingering outside, she hesitates to place her right hand in the open palm of the solicitous, curly wiggled man who attends her. Instead, she looks away from him, over her left shoulder, down towards two workers who load a framed mirror and a painting of the old, dead King Louis XIV into a crate. Her silk cape extends from the gaping booth like a wet tongue while, a few feet away, at the opposite edge of the painting, a mongrel dog strains to lick his haunch. No one in the painting makes eye contact with another. The clerks regard their customers, the customers regard the paintings, the gentleman regards the lady, the lady regards the workers, the workers regard their work, and the dog minds a flea. Distraction is their common drama. A century and a half after Gersaint's sign changed hands, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote, edited, and designed several issues of a fashion magazine called *La Dernière Mode*. The journal, published in 1874, was categorically indistinguishable from other such publications available at the time, though likely better written. It appears Mallarmé created it in earnest. Perhaps for this reason alone, *La Dernière Mode* was long ignored by scholars, who had difficulty integrating the apparent non-sequitur with the rest of the poet's oeuvre. Under several pen names, each imparted with a different voice and agenda, Mallarmé filled the pages of the magazine almost single-handedly. Marguerite de Ponty, its ostensive editor, wrote a lengthy column on the topic of jewelry for the premier issue. She begins: "Too late to speak of summer fashions and too soon to speak of winter ones (or even autumn ones). Though several great Paris Houses, as we happen to know, are already busy over their end-of-season selection. Today, in fact, not having to hand the elements needed even to begin designing a new toilette, we would like to chat with our readers about the objects which serve to complete a toilette, i.e. jewels. A paradox? No: is there not, in jewels, something permanent, fitting to speak of in a fashion journal still in suspense as to what was fashion in July or will be in September?" From there, she continues to muse through several hundred words on the art of jewelry and its proper applications for girls and women of various ages in various circumstances. "Who is interested in bracelets? I saw a splendid one yesterday made of gold and rubies: then several rings of brilliants, or emeralds, or with cameos (these last are coming back into fashion). I leave it to you to choose the clasp for the shawl ... Nevertheless nothing can ever rival a fan, with a setting as rich as you please or quite simple, but affirming, above all, ideality. What sort of ideality? That of a painting: an old-master one, of the school of Boucher or Watteau, or even by them ..." A footnote to this passage from the English translation of "Boucher or

Watteau" (published only a decade ago by P.N. Furbank and Alex Cain) notes that Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, contemporaries of Mallarmé's who disdained his work, "had recently tried to revive an interest in these 18th-century painters." When Jules died of syphilis in 1870, his brother Edmond began to publish the daily journal they'd kept (and also continued to write it alone). The journals were full of gossip-worthy details about the lives, habits, petty behaviors, and fashions of the artists of the day, including, for example, Baudelaire, Zola, and Flaubert. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), had she been conceived 20 years hence, would have stashed issues of Mallarmé's magazine in her mental bunker, amongst other Parisian fashion rags, those "imaginary assuagements for her personal lusts." Not coincidentally, the same moral ambiguity attaches to *Madame Bovary* as to *La Dernière Mode*. While Mallarmé may have intended to parody the cult of fashion along with other theaters of bourgeois aspiration, and perhaps even in direct response to the frivolities and delusions of the brothers Goncourt, he—like Flaubert—lavished considerable time and care on the endeavor. This critical mass of attention, in itself, constitutes a certain valuation; regardless of the artists' motives and whatever verdicts they may have privately passed on their subjects' indulgences, if "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," so, too, Madame de Ponty is Mallarmé, and that browsing, pink-robed aristocrat is Watteau. "But what did it mean (if it is true, as poets say, that a dress means something?)" Marguerite de Ponty asks the question in issue 6 and reiterates it in number 8, the final installment of *La Dernière Mode*: "In a publication studying Fashion as an art it is not enough (not by any means!) to cry: 'You must wear such-and-such.' One needs to say: 'This is why,' and 'We told you so!'" An online image search for "watteau" returns pictures of his major works interspersed by contemporary bridal gowns modeled against seamless grey or blush backdrops. From the 18th-century Watteau Gown, assorted costumes—a "Cheap Watteau," a "Luxurious Strapless Watteau," and a "Watteau Train One Shoulder Short Dress," to name only a few—have evolved to outfit modern day wedding role-play. The style gives form to a fantasy of the good, bucolic life: a time before the Revolution (whichever one), when silk-clad haves watched the world through airy gauze on mild summer days while submissive have-nots did their bidding. But unlike Watteau's sign, a studio shot of a readymade wedding dress conveys no hint of irony—no mangy dog conducts his business in the corner, no narrator interprets the look under a winking *nom de plume*. The model in a Cheap Watteau wedding number is a Bovary refracted and unbound. Just as the passive, coy half of Watteau's, Mallarmé's, and Flaubert's alter-egos is memorialized in

countless white garments on innumerable wedding days, the other, greedy, sexually insatiable (and often violent) half has fueled the entertainment industry for at least as long as show business has been big business. The young distributor and theater owner William Fox launched his production in 1914 of *A Fool There Was*, a story adapted from a play based on a painting (!) of a woman in a negligee, who may have been a vampire, as well. In the painting, the woman/vampire sits on the edge of a bed, dominating a ravaged male lover who is either asleep or dead beneath her. In the movie version, a seductive young woman/vampire rather warmly dressed in modern, Poiret-style clothing ruins a successful family man. (More plot detail might make a better synopsis but would obscure the bottom line—that an unattached woman in dark, straight-cut clothes spells trouble.) Though female vampires had begun titillating cinema audiences some years earlier, *A Fool There Was* created a sensation, turning its lead, an unknown named Theodosia Goodman, into a star overnight. Goodman was either a mediocre actress or a fine one who convincingly played a mediocre one. Early moviegoers knew her as Theda Bara, a fiction cooked up by the public relations people working for Fox Studios when it was still a fledgling company, before receipts from Bara's films helped Fox swell to a behemoth. Most of those films, with the exception of *A Fool There Was* and a handful of others, are gone now, as are most people old enough to remember seeing them. Box office accounts, reviews, and images survive, but they're ambivalent. After her stunning debut as a bloodthirsty home-wrecker, audiences only really loved Bara when she again played the Vamp, while critics occasionally respected her when she (very rarely) didn't. Bara is alternately captivating and plain in photographs, yet she was once considered the most famous woman in the world. That Marilyn Monroe was the Theda Bara of her generation should put things in perspective: the fact that you probably haven't heard of Bara, for one, or that you can't bring to mind an iconic image of her. Under the weighty caulk of garish screen makeup, Bara put sloe-eyes and round hips on a new, cinematic archetype—the femme fatale—but off screen, she disappointed press photographers and gossip columnists in search of a man-eater. She lived with her mother and sister during the rapid rise and peak of her career. For pleasure, she liked to read. According to confused immigration authorities, Bara's father, a master tailor, hailed from "Poland, Russia." Her Swiss-born mother was a wig-maker. Both eventually became owners of successful businesses in their respective costume trades, acquiring the means to raise children in high middle-class Cincinnati comfort. Theda and her siblings were well-dressed, well-educated, and encouraged by their parents in

their leisurely pursuits. After spending some time in college, Bara moved to New York, where she unsuccessfully attempted to forge a stage career. Almost 30 when she finally landed in front of a movie camera, she made a marketing decision to reduce her age as well as her name. All in all, Theda Bara was an unlikely candidate for the office of erotic scarecrow she ultimately attained. The vamp style was to Theodosia Goodman as the pleated sack gown was to Antoine Watteau. Neither invented the objects they portrayed, but, inadvertently, both popularized forms that grew up and away into icons of their own, which outlasted particular fashion cycles and the artists themselves. "What is the meaning of a dress?" Mallarmé asked. Unlike, "What is the meaning of a flower?" the question can be answered. Most people ponder the matter every time they put on clothes, or make or buy or even see some. But much like, "What is the meaning of a sign?" the question pervades daily social experience such that it disappears from conscious, critical awareness, while a thousand subtle answers register with every scanning glance of a crowd or an image. But again, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Etymologically, it may've been the chicken—at least in France, Hungary, and Germany, where the clucking sound made by hens is thought to have inspired the nursery language equivalent for "egg," as in *coco*, *kukó*, *gaggele*, and *gagkelein*. Biologically, of course, the egg was first, as egg-laying reptiles preceded birds on the evolutionary chain. Granted, these answers merely evade the question. Even in terms of biology, to say an egg precedes a mature life form is not entirely accurate. Before she hatches from her particular shell, a hen fetus already contains within her ovaries many eggs—maybe tens of thousands, maybe millions, but at any rate, all the eggs she'll ever have. And while the first generation of bird that was legitimately "chicken" must have hatched from an egg, that first chicken-containing egg wasn't laid by a chicken, was it? In which case, the first chicken must have preceded the first chicken egg. Not that the first chicken is even a legitimate entity, in itself. Species distinctions are a bit like causal explanations—they entail the sorites paradox, otherwise known as the paradox of the heap, otherwise known as getting something from nothing, otherwise known as the rhetorical sleight by which our brains run our lives. *Sōros* means "heap" in Greek, and it's probably worth mentioning that the chicken-and-egg question traces back at least as far as ancient times, which means the modern etymological references above are moot. The sorites paradox should not be confused with the causality dilemma—in logical terms, chicken versus egg means, *If X is contingent on Y and Y is contingent on X, which came first?* while sorites has more to do with vagueness in language, which is not to say it's

“just” a semantic problem. See here: if Y is some indefinite quantity (n) of X, like a million billion grains of sand (nX) that comprise a mound (Y), and I remove one grain, I am still dealing with a mound ($nX = Y$ and $(n-1)X = Y$). So at what point, then, during my grain-by-grain raid is the mound no longer a mound? There must be one grain of sand that makes the difference between some number of X and a Y, but if there were, then we would necessarily define a heap as a particular quantity of something, which of course we don’t and we won’t, because that kind of precision would defeat the point of having a word like ‘heap’ in the first place. Similarly, though more disturbingly, if I remove and replace a small part of a ship, presumably it is still the same ship. But if I remove and replace every part of the ship, is it still the same ship? If not, at what point did it become some other entity? Now, at what point did the offspring of whatever bird or birds that were breeding prior to the origin of chickens proper propagate the first chicken, proper—that is, at what point was there a first chicken? What difference finally made the difference from one generation to the next? Is there even any such thing as a chicken? A ship? A heap? Or is it the case that nothing defined in terms of its physical composition exists, as such? That is the only logical conclusion. In a backdoor way, all of this has something to do with the paradox of beginnings, which is that the concept of a beginning of beginnings, much like the concept of “nothing,” and even a little like the concept of “something,” is impossible to understand and/or to represent precisely in language, as in mathematics. If the infinite regress of causation in the universe is not infinite, if it ends instead at some singularity—a big bang—before which is nothing, not even a before... Per Aristotle, the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect. But “same” refers to a relationship between two or more, which necessarily entails distance, time, and difference. In fact, the very concept of sameness only exists in time, by way of contemplation, itself a process, therefore non-instantaneous. One morning a few months or years ago, before winter officially gave way to spring, but sometime after the anticipated date of transfer had passed, I drove to a nature conservancy near my house, laced up my snow boots, and set out across the broad field that connects the parking lot to the trails. The day was sunny and warm, but the preserve was still covered with snow and ice leftover from what seemed at the time to be an endless season. The walk verged on a trudge, despite the fact that the trails were thoroughly trodden by other people and animals, and I soon found it necessary to remove my heavy coat so as to continue the trek in short sleeves. At the first fork, which divided the trail to the “overlook bench” from the trail to the

“picnic gazebo,” I headed in the direction of the latter, at least according to the footprints of those who had gone before me, since snow had made any other path indiscernible. Naturally, I arrived at the overlook bench some minutes later. That morning, I had departed my house on the lam from a case of blankness extending several days. Anywhere I might have arrived, particularly some unintended place, was destined to become an answer in what amounted to a blind search for fate (fate being tantamount to inspiration in my personal economy). I sat down on the bench and looked over the edge of the overhang, over the landscape, over the river toward the mountains, overseeing a complete overview of that small section of the world. I was reminded of Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*—the painting of the hunters in the snow and little Icarus upside down in the frozen lake below. To “overlook” something is to miss it altogether (that is, to overlook something inadvertently). Or it is to purposely disregard some issue or detail (as in, I overlook your bad behavior because you’re my guest, or because I find you attractive, or because you helped my grandmother with her plumbing years ago). It must be confusing to non-native speakers that an overlook invites the opposite of overlooking. A “lookalover” would be a more logical name for this sort of place. The overlook bench itself was made of tree branches whimsically wrapped around a plank wood seat configured in a semi-circle, as if it were constructed by hobbits, or by set designers for a movie about fictional characters who live in the glen under mounds of earth in adorable homemade cottages fitted with druid-inspired trims. When I stood up from the bench after several minutes of attempted inspiration, I observed that people inscribe things there. They write their own names or their initials, along with their lovers’, inside of hearts, and so on. Apparently, visitors come to look over the vista then pull out their pocketknives and set to work marking the occasion, overlooking the landscape but commemorating the moment with the first thing that comes to mind, that thing never far from the mind, but not the same as it, either: one’s identity. I wondered about the cave artists of Lascaux. Did they have names? Maybe they didn’t have names, and maybe that partly explains why their pictures convey more dramatic tension than our bench graffiti. (Subsequently, and for no related reason, I learned that the “problem” of proper names was indeed an impetus for the shift from pictographic writing to syllabic then phonetic sign systems; it is challenging if not impossible to come up with and recall a distinct picture to represent every proper name.) As I turned to leave, a glint caught the corner of my eye from underneath the far end of the bench. I squatted for a closer look and discovered not a magical treasure, but the ripped and discarded gold foil

packaging of a Trojan Magnum. When I returned home, I looked up the painting and discovered that I had conflated Bruegel's *Icarus* with Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*, two separate paintings depicting two separate seasons, with action oriented in two separate directions: right to left (*Icarus*, plowman, summer); and left to right (*Hunters*, dogs, winter), which seemed a perfectly appropriate response, given the indecision of the weather, but also disturbing, in that way it's usually disturbing to realize after some minor, inadvertent cognition your mind is not an "I," but an "it" that generates an "I" for expediency's sake. There's a famous portrait of Jean Cocteau with too many arms that illustrates the idea well. He's wearing a tweed jacket sleeveless and backwards, his head evidently at the mercy of a disparate tangle of limbs. I won't say the mind is at odds with the body, because each of the parts are mind and body, but the arrangement suggests that limbs, given more mind or greater numbers, could readily unite in mutiny against the head. In Cocteau's case, the head is trying to read and smoke. Some of the limbs—the three right hands—are on board. One holds an open book, another a pen, and a third presses a cigarette to the lips. But the left side is poised to distract. The middle hand grasps a pair of scissors while the other two gesticulate above and below it. Reader, writer, smoker, explicator, editor, critic, head twisted front-to-back, the frenetic insect in the photo is made for multi-tasking, but not for navigating. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Cocteau said, "I feel myself inhabited by a force or being—very little known to me. It gives the orders; I follow," and later, in what could be the synopsis of a topless essay or a caption inscribed on a vandalized overlook bench, "Appreciation of art is a moral erection; otherwise mere dilettantism. I believe sexuality is the basis of all friendship. ... This sickness, to express oneself. What is it?" and so on.

Portions of the preceding text originally appeared in: *Old Gold*, a book of approximate values by artist and jeweler Kara Hamilton; "To Whom It May Concern:" an essay written as a letter to long-deceased storyteller and performer Spencer Holst in *A Needle Walks Into A Haystack*, the publication of the 2014 Liverpool Biennial; an essay called "Talking _/_)_s Into Existence," published in *HDM*, the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Design; "Futures," an essay concerning optical illusions and deregulation of derivatives markets, written for publication in parallel with the exhibition of a video projection called *Fountain* during the 2014 Whitney Biennial; "Costumeless Consciousness," an essay on motor control and misunderstanding poetry written for *Lisa Oppenheim* and published by Grazer Kunstverein; a text called "Not Nothing," concerning exactly that, written to fill a book to accompany an exhibition of Alejandro Cesarco at MUMOK in Vienna; "Found Wanting," an essay on urgency commissioned for *Mousse Magazine*; an untitled and [no longer] anonymous entry regarding a staged photograph of the mute meeting the silent in a magazine of anonymous entries called *Ginger & Piss*, reportedly published by Kunstverein Amsterdam; an online forum called "The Aestheticization of Everyday Life," sponsored by the Guggenheim Museum; "Where Were We," an essay about a dress named after a shop sign published in *The Bulletins of The Serving Library*; and "The Paradox of Beginnings," written in conversation with Lucy Skaer for *Speculation, Now*, a book published by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics. *Equivocus* is produced with appreciation and gratitude to all of the aforementioned publications, and specifically to Kara Hamilton, David Reinfurt, Lily Healy, Mai Abu ElDahab, Camille Pageard, Anthony Huberman, Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Jennifer Sigler, Leah Whitman-Salkin, Anthony Elms, Lisa Oppenheim, Krist Gruijthuisen, Alejandro Cesarco, João Ribas, Maxine Kopsa, Domenick Ammirati, Christine Roland, Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey, Lucy Skaer, Prem Krishnamurthy, and Carin Kuoni.

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sions will be corrected in sub-
sequent editions.

Published by MoMA PS1
22-25 Jackson Avenue
Long Island City, NY 11101
www.momaps1.org

ISBN 978-0-9968930-0-8



Available through D.A.P./
Distributed Art Publishers
www.artbook.com

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Editor: Jocelyn Miller
Designer: Vance Wellenstein
Project Assistance:
Alejandra Ott
Printed by Bestype
Typeset in Stanley

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Published on the occasion
of the exhibition *Greater
New York* at MoMA PS1,
Long Island City, New York,
October 11, 2015–March 7,
2016.

Greater New York is
co-organized by Peter Eleey,
Curator and Associate
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Sunday Sessions events is
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Major support is provided by
MoMA's Wallis Annenberg
Fund for Innovation in
Contemporary Art through
the Annenberg Foundation.

Generous funding is provided
by The Contemporary Arts
Council of The Museum of
Modern Art, The Friends of
Education of The Museum of
Modern Art, and The Junior
Associates of The Museum of
Modern Art.

Additional support is provid-
ed by the MoMA PS1 Annual
Exhibition Fund.

Special thanks to Elham and
Tony Salamé.

The artist would like to
thank Per Blomquist,
Rhea Dall, Sarah Demeuse
and Kara Hamilton.

Cover image of Nile Delta.
Photo: NASA/GSFC/Jeff
Schmaltz/MODIS Land Rapid
Response Team.

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