

Con Jobs and Exhaustion

(Originally performed at the closing event of WINONA, Brussels, 15 April 2023, announced as *Female Genius Nightclub*. The text was delivered in the mode of a stand-up comedy routine.)

(Intro Song: Schizophrenia (1993) by Sonic Youth, plays out to silence)

In an essay I wrote on heartburn and luxury in art production, titled “Luxury Goods: A Burning Desire”, in 2016, I wrote:

The confidence man is a traditional American character, a product of the geography of a new, unregulated country: he is a travelling salesman who arrives to sell what in the end turns out to be lies.

But the con man is not a simple thief. He is a pedlar of a concrete good: belief. In fact, from a good con, all you might get is the feeling of being swept along in the fiction of the moment: belief in what turn out to be lies, which feel good at the time. You’ve lost something, but you still have the fantasy.

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23:22 Sat, 21 Jan 2023 text to A

OK I think I understand my fascination with the con now. There’s an increase in financial fraud because it’s embedded in our form of contemporary capitalism. And art is the aesthetic of that capital form ... I think we’re all busy basically participating in a big-ass-con-job.

(Loudly):

**Busy ness! Meh
Busy-ness! No?!**

(Smiling broadly, speaking fast):

**busy ness busyness busyness busy-ness, busyness, busyness,
business, business business business, Bussinass, bus-nass-
nasty, nasty, nasty business.**

Part I: The Snow Job: You have to want it

To quote David Hammons:

“As an artist I’m not aligned with the collectors or the dealers or the museums; I see them all as frauds.”¹

What’s the business of busy-ness? What systems do I find myself circling in, what activities have I been roped into, what words am I unwilling to speak? Why is everyone saying email is killing them? I heard George Soros at Davos say that email is dead; it’s just WhatsApp group chat, cold call, short-attention-shorting it.

So busy. I’m imagining the speed of different fabrics stretched over different bodies, actions documented to near infinity on YouTube emulating the aesthetic vantage point of Jane Fonda, who gave up on politics to *get busy*, counting time away in productive sections of 10, 9, 8 ...

¹ David Hammons as quoted in Elena Filipovic, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (London: Afterall Books, 2017), 45.

Speaking of Spandex, it says today in The New York Times that the ads for cryptocurrency at the Superbowl were suspiciously missing. What were those guys busy with?

A sent me an article about the disgraced entrepreneur Charlie Javice after an exchange which included:

20:30 Fri, 20 Jan

Not every field rewards directly exploitative and/or self-abusive/
destructive behavior. The arts do. Porn does. Maybe athletics do.
Entertainment. And fashion.

Javice is a woman in her late twenties who sold a completely fabricated start-up company to JP Morgan Chase for 175 million dollars.

(*Loud Italian American accent*):

"We all understand the art of the sale, but some of the things that were being said were just inexcusably inaccurate!"²

What's this grey area of truth in the world of speculation?

Cady Noland begins her 1989 essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil," by stating that there is a "meta-game available for use in the United States. The rules of the game, or even that there is a game at all, are hidden to some."³ The essay goes on to describe in an oblique manner a relationship between X and Y, in which X is constantly, in a Tom-and-Jerry-like scenario, trying to "con" Y.

The game is a machine composed of interconnected mechanistic devices ... A con or a snow job is the site at which X preys upon the hopes, fears, and anxieties of Y for ulterior motives and/or personal gain ... These machinations exist a priori of X or Y as an indifferent set of tools and could conceivably be picked up by anyone and used against anyone else.⁴

Noland's interest in the con is never clearly stated: instead, it is used as a cipher through which to view interactions: personal, political, financial, aesthetic.

The contemporary obsession with the con, arising 35 years after Noland's essay, is evident from a quick scroll of Netflix documentaries: dramas and semi-fictionalised films trace every move of sociopathic behavior: "characters" such as Bernie Madoff, Anna Sorkin, Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos and titles like *The Tinder Swindler* (2022), *The Puppet Master* (2022) and *The Great Art Heist* (2021).

"Where did all the money go?", Netflix editors ask over and over again. And we watch: yachts, Michelin restaurants, private clubs, watches, yawn, hotels, beach holidays, gold, yawn, gas, sex, food uneaten on porcelain plates, bodies getting paid to service others.

These documentaries remind me of watching TV toy store shopping spree competitions as a child during the 1980s, where winning children had 30 seconds to run wild in a fully stocked toy store with an empty shopping trolley. I would watch incredulously as mini-brand obsessives searched the aisles for specific G.I. Joes or Lego, running out of time and grasping in the last seconds for some pathetic bit of plastic.

Which was fabricated just before the train derailed, spilling vinyl chloride all over the place, slowing PVC production down by... absolutely nothing.

- 2 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandralevine/2023/01/19/charlie-javice-jp-morgan-frank-lawsuit/>. Last accessed 6 July 2023.
- 3 Noland, "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil", 410.
- 4 Ibid.

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The profit made is always more important than the process of making, in capitalism.

In all ponzi schemes, the con is enacted by taking someone's trustfully given "investment", then gambling or investing it, and re-distributing the winnings or losses in an outline of a pyramid. To keep the money coming in and collapse at bay, the new investors' cash is fed up to the small amount of original investors or the original con artist. Some money is spent, but the con artist, to keep the con going, needs to play with the money, and hide their losses in order to appear "flush", because they know the investment is not sound in the first place.

Incredibly, in the largest known ponzi scheme in history, run by the disgraced banker Bernie Madoff,⁵ no one worked with or invested a penny of investors' money. It was simply redistributed, moved around, whilst all the energy was spent on fabricating a fictional space of exclusivity and desire to lure new money.

BZZZZZZZZZZ TIME'S UP!!!!!!!

(Bossy voice)

It's all about quality, a male painter tells me. And he's right, it's all about the quality of the surfaces produced: and why not? So many to choose from.

Noland also aptly said, a couple of years before *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis was published:

"The psychopath shares the societally sanctioned characteristics of the entrepreneurial male."⁶

I walked through a Swiss museum recently and had a vision where all the oil paint was like sagging patches of skin, falling off the small squares of rotting linen. Everything from before 1959 screaming PTSD: cuts, holes of colour, blood, shit, lumpen shapes, men holding their passports up to the mirror, misshapen faces.

**The thousands of colours in our world now are so sharp!
More quality! People are so brightly lit, tight, flat.**

As I stare at the photo of *Blizzard Ball Sale* of David Hammons' work from 1989, in which he sold snowballs at the New York's Cooper Square flea market, I realise that the careful placement of 20 large snowballs, under which are six sets of six snowballs of descending size, looks just like a pyramid.

Part II: The Con Job: You have to believe it

Marcel Duchamp's playing with value as a conceptual mind-fuck with art objects is well-documented, but less so is the idea of Duchamp as a con man. He *is* the perfect confidence-man: convincing people to invest in a completely fictional situation, turning it into profit for his legacy. Duchamp's one and only solo exhibition, in Pasadena in 1963⁷ (which Hammons saw) was held during the advent of conceptual strategies in art. Before 1963, when Duchamp finally claimed authorship of the supposedly "original" conceptual artwork *Fountain*, most of the people who knew anything about the original authorship

- 5 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/business/bernie-madoff-dead.html>.
- 6 Noland, "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil", 412.
- 7 Marcel Duchamp, 8 October – 3 November 1963, Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena CA, USA.

of *Fountain* were dead (it was only replicated in 1964). Until then, Duchamp was mainly known as the ex-painter and chess-playing curator of Surrealist exhibitions.

What did Rose Sélavy make? She made *Air de Paris* (1919). She made *Freshly Painted Widow* (1920). She made *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* (1921). Was she the author of *Fountain* from 1917 also? Did she arise out of the fiction created in order to orchestrate an aggressive take over? When absurdity is mixed with intention, even experts can be put off the track.

The profit made is always more important than the process of making (or effects), in capitalism.

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My parents live in a tiny town in rural Tennessee called Jonesborough. Their town hosts the International Storytelling Festival each year, and thousands of people from around the world come to sit in rocking chairs and listen to people “spin” tales and mirror the way their politicians lie to them.

Some of the audience members probably listen to Salem Radio, which is a national syndicate in America that produces right-wing content for local radio stations. One in five Americans listens to Salem Radio content. In the final episode of an *NPR* special that I listened to recently, Katie Thornton interviews Phil Boyce, the vice president of Salem Radio.⁸ She questions him about the radio hosts who knowingly spread misinformation and lies about the 2020 election “theft”. She asks if any proof has been found of election fraud, and Boyce explains how his radio hosts are telling the truth, because despite not having proof of election fraud, they *believe* fraud has occurred. And their belief is good enough to report on (for profit).

Narratives - they are spun, bought, dominated...

Or, maybe

(Lowdly):

“We all understand the art of the sale, but some of the things that are being said are just inexcusably inaccurate!”⁹

Part III: What you can’t do without it

I’m just so exhausted. I’m going to be honest: having to work full time is exhausting when you have an entire career you are supporting on the side.

Oh man, the stories of Chris Kraus and Cookie Mueller: girls, you put me off fast money and here I am, trying to operate as a respectable character in an increasingly criminal enterprise.

Being an artist implies and necessitates having free time, right? But increasingly I find myself surrounded by some deep café culture, itinerant work, grant application writing, MacBook-strapped cultural practices.

**Paintings on budget canvases of internet research?
Living with less in order to have more Instagram exposure?**

How can I continue to operate in a world in which the spectrum of support creates increasingly uneven conditions for making work? When children of wealthy industrialists and citizens of countries with vast earth-killing support structures want their subjectivities to be not just *seen*, but

⁸ The Divided Dial, Episode 5, 15 December 2022: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/divided-dial-episode-5>. Last accessed July 5, 2023.

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandralevine/2023/01/19/charlie-javice-jp-morgan-frank-lawsuit/>. Last accessed 6 July 2023.

In an essay I wrote in 2015 titled “Presence and Absence” on dropping out, I said:

Increasingly as an artist I have begun to feel my voice becoming disembodied from myself. Who is it that is “speaking”? It is strange to envision oneself as a construct, a concept, outside of one’s own body, but that is exactly what is perceived by others: an accumulation of objects, made by a non-entity with a vague persona, skewed and squared by gestures and contexts.

Dropping out is a gesture of walking out. A strike. A Human Strike. Dropouts walk off the edge of the world in which they exist at the time: off the map, off the grid. As characters for others to see, dropouts act outside the bounds of the playing field of contemporary art, and by doing so, reveal the shape-form of the container: when the boundaries that hold these gestures become immaterial.

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So can we think of our field as a dumping ground? For ego?

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(Spoken excitedly!)

The team at Studio Olafur Eliasson consists of about ninety people, from craftsmen and specialised technicians, to architects, archivists and art historians, web and graphic designers, filmmakers, cooks, and administrators. They work with Eliasson to develop, produce, and install artworks, projects, and exhibitions, as well as on experimentation, archiving, research, publishing, and communications. In addition to realising artworks in-house, Eliasson and the studio work with structural engineers and other specialists and collaborate worldwide with cultural practitioners, policymakers, and scientists. The studio hosts workshops and events in order to further artistic and intellectual exchanges with people and institutions outside the art world[!]¹²

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I’m a failure. No, I am. You might laugh or not think so, it’s ok. I’ve just actually realised this.

Someone I loved dearly passed away suddenly recently. They were a complete dropout. They had no job, they had no money, no home. They refused to participate in any system. They refused not to be alive each day. Until they weren’t anymore.

I’ve realised that if I don’t start living without the expectations of success, I’m going to be a failure in so many other ways.

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¹² Olafur Eliasson, “About Studio Olafur Eliasson”, <https://olafureliasson.net/studio>. Last accessed 10 November 2019.

A asked me to clarify, when we spoke last week, after she read this. What am I missing, what have I been cheated of? I answer: no, it’s not me, this isn’t about me.

I've created the life I want to live, I know exactly what I'm doing.
It's the world I find myself living in that's being cheated:

Believing

That value itself

Makes anything worth living for.

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(Brightening right up, typical stand-up intro):

So! One night, in my mid-30s, at an opening, I was talking to an artist who I barely knew at all, about the endless slog of my teaching job at Goldsmiths with newborn twins.

"How did you get that job?" He asked.

[Suppressed laughter in the crowd]

"Well," I said,

"Because I'm a fucking genius."

(Cue to: Not the End of The World (2020) by Katy Perry)

understood, when collectors' eyes light up realising they could put their drink on that, when I look around and realise, in 2023, as Hammons said about the 1980s in New York,

"everybody was just groveling ... anything to be in the room with some money."¹⁰

Well, the party's over, or maybe it will be on again tomorrow, but somewhere else.

As large gallery rosters swell, becoming the wholesale outlets of institutionally backed art, I feel more and more crushed under the weight of the feeling that I've been conned.

Are leisure and perseverance hegemonic? Am I hanging onto a fantasy?

No one cares. No one's replying to my emails anymore anyway - Didn't you hear? Sorry, we're all outside Trump tower today, we're in the tent, I can't pick up, I'm on the plane.

Busy ness business.

But:::

IT is YOUR choice: YOU, be YOU. This is what we're doing, right? Being ourselves?

I mean, who do you want to be: The Gentlewoman cover presentation of a female artist: iPhone in hand, hair smooth from expensive conditioner? Business.

Or, as my ex-gallerist said to me:

"You're not the kind of artist who's ever going to be in *Vogue*."

(Raises eyebrows)

OR: The wife of ..., the nobody, the forgotten genius! The funny old lady, ha ha they are so cute! Like cats!

(Laugh uncontrollably, then stop).

That veil falls as we follow Helen Molesworth in her 2022 podcast *Death of An Artist* to the door of Carle Andre's superior upper west side loft. The doorman repels her politely.

The profit made is always more important than the process of making (or of cleaning up), in capitalism.

All the mess to clean up. Who is cleaning it up? Did Carl Andre clean it up?

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Recently someone was shocked when I told them I'm only interested in negative comments on my work. "That's so sad", she said. No, sadness has nothing to do with it: I'm interested in negativity because it reveals readings that I am blind to.

Only in the art world do two extreme forms of capital production, with their own forms of exploitation – as A pointed out – come into regular contact: craft and investment.

¹⁰ David Hammons as quoted in *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 43.

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As I'm hanging work in the collective space of my residency, a "famous artist", to be known hereupon in as FA, is holding his Zoom conference in the high-ceilinged gallery space, rather than in the small, cramped huts where we live. Assurances are given, benches are inquired about, I hear murmurs of "the space looks amazing" and in short, I feel like I'm listening to a sales pitch, until the conversation turns practical: "Everyone's bought these bonds, and then, you know, the value of everyone's bonds goes down when interest rates go up, because, you know, the bonds are literally worth less, so that's what's happening."

Meanwhile, I'm silk-screening – a backbreaking, 12 hours a day, labour-intensive, thankless, bad-for-my health medium. And FA tells me that the problem with it is that everything done with silkscreen looks so '60s, as he shows me the UV printer that he hires for a cool five hundred a day.

I gotta know what a five dollar shake tastes like.

As Ursula Le Guin quotes the civil rights activist Lillian Smith as saying:

"What Freud mistook for her lack of civilisation is woman's lack of loyalty to civilisation."^{II}

And we can take that a step further, right? It's not just women, it's anyone who's not winning that is uncivilised, don't you think? Or, to put it in other terms: why, if you're excluded from a form of participation, should you give a damn about the game? And let's think about craft-making for a second: in what other world than the art world does someone or a group of people produce a lot of stuff, let's say organic taco shells – why not? – while only one person in one hundred can actually make a living off the black corn organic taco shells, and that one person keeps it all for themselves, while being surrounded by starving taco-shell makers?

It's cool. I went to college with those guys at Zwiner or wherever...

But ... How much better are the tacos?

Part IV: How *you* make value

Nope.

Art has always reflected aesthetically, in a broad and functional sense, the mode of contemporary capital in which it finds itself. Art is bloated, investment heavy, fabricated. Financial bloopers come and go, shuffling investment in an endless shock doctrine, fracking to squeeze every last bit of already accumulated resources. But on a larger scale, art is mirroring itself on a breed of capitalism in which con jobs are rife, because money changes hands over snow jobs. There's coffee, and then there's coffee that's shit out by a small animal, and the person selling that coffee is a much better storyteller.

I am a female artist, so I must speak twice, and my speech is confusing.

II Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction* (Peru: Terra Ignota, 2020), 30.