

THERE IS  
NO SUCH  
THING  
AS A  
FREE HAND  
[out take]

A response/essay by Leora Lutz  
on the recent and new work of Sarah Thibault and Micah Wood.

# *Begin the Beguine\**

For an exhibition at tmoro projects, Santa Clara, California, 2016

# FROM THE SHOW STATEMENTS

Sarah Thibault’s artwork for this exhibition—drawings, works on canvas, and sculpture made of provisional materials like cardboard and aluminum foil- investigates the quiet trauma of the everyday, a million small blows felt by the invisible and the silenced. Among her subjects are women, avatars for herself, grappling with a culture that values image and over agency; and the homeless population in San Francisco- people who are cast out and living at the fringes of the city. While the challenges faced by these groups are disparate, there is a loss of humanity and a degradation of the self that is shared. Engaging a Surrealist approach to image construction and materials as a way to access challenging subject matter, the work attempts to bring light issues that haunt our culture from the shadows.

Micah Wood’s small paintings on panels and reproductions of original posters offer a chance for the viewer to think about the current conflicts in the US and abroad. His use of posters by the French group “Atelier Populaire” draws upon the political context of France in the 1960’s, a time that is eerily similar to the American political landscape of today. Atelier Populaire posters were made for the May 68’ protests in Paris and primarily produced at the Beaux-Arts academy. The artists were addressing issues such as capitalism, fascist governments, consumerism and immigration, among other things. These artists decided to de-authorize the posters, making them available for mass reproduction—a nod to a more Marxist way of distribution. Wood felt a particular resonance with these posters while he was living in Paris this past year. The radical notion of giving up authorship of the “artwork” is also of particular interest to Wood in terms of appropriation and a conflation between political texts and painting.

## response

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Behind the motion and the act  
Falls the Shadow  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the Shadow

TS Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 1925

Society everywhere is in conspiracy  
against manhood  
of every one of its members.  
Society is a joint-stock company  
in which members agree for the better  
securing of his bread  
to each shareholder,  
to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.  
The virtue in most request is conformity.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 1841

# 1. Economy

Sarah Thibault recently wrote a satirical autobiography of dating and yoga. Through these musings, personal reflections of self-identity are called to attention through observations of the body and its relationship and interactions with others. Included in these insights are flatulence and feces—its conveniences and inconveniences—particularly when faced with attending to its physical achievements, complicated by limitations such as embarrassment, problem solving and social acceptance. In short we are forced to ask: where and when can we fart and poo?

Micah Wood has painted copies of posters from the social and economic uprising that took place in France during an event commonly known as “May ’68.” An extensive part of the protests involved advocacy for immigrant workers, *travailleurs*. These sentiments echo our current political climate; immigrants are the brunt of violence when an economy feels threatened by too many newcomers who might take jobs away from the locals. Wood’s selection of posters state “La Chienlit C’est Lui” and “La Chienlit C’est Encore Lui,” loosely translated as: The Shit is in the Bed, and The Shit is Still/Again in the Bed. Though the origins of the phrase allude to the sense of lackadaisical, the meaning at the time referenced the bed as the country, and the government as shit; recalling the phrase, “Don’t shit where you eat.”

[I open *The Plague of Fantasies* by Slavoj Žižek (do we still care about him?) On the back of the Index, I have written in pencil: “\*(Toilets)”. This is most probably a note from 2012. I revert to pages 3 and 4.]

“[. . .] In the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the hole is in the back—that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; in the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles—the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it—visible but not to be inspected.”

The two toilets, according to Žižek are symbolic of “French revolutionary hastiness, and English moderate utilitarianism,” and in terms of a political reading: “French revolutionary radicalism and English moderate liberalism.” However, of note is the general outlook on excremental excess: “The hasty attempt to get rid of unpleasant excess as fast as possible vs. treating excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in the appropriate way.”

In both of these cases, an analogy can be made each in relation to ourselves. If one were to think of shit as something that needs to be flushed, we cannot necessarily separate our own excrement and the shame and discomfort that we experience each time we render someone else disposable; every time we do it, we are in a sense disposing a little bit of ourselves.

[I walk the financial district at around 9 o’clock at night. As I head down to BART, I look into the vacant bank windows. Desks with computers in “sleep” mode fade in and out with motivational phrases (what I call refrigerator philosophy) that remind the workers that life is worth living. “Teamwork Makes the Dreamwork.” “Your Future is Created by What You Do Today, Not Tomorrow.” “Ideas Are the Beginning Points of All Fortunes.” “Don’t Be the Same, Be Better.” Peering in one window, mesmerized by the potential in the fading words, the waft of fresh feces lingers, where a person has defecated on the ground near a secluded doorway, a Styrofoam cup nearby was apparently useless as a toilet.]

# 2. Faciality

Thibault's new paintings are portraits of women whose faces are obscured and smeared with cosmetic facial masks. These masks are painted on the face, applied with hands and left on for a time, and then washed off. The idea is that the skin is rejuvenated and exposes fresh and awakened skin, new and more youthful.

Wood has re-appropriated nameless posters that in a sense became public domain at the moment of their making. At the time the originals were made, they were distributed widely; the posters were authorless, rendering them anyone's posters, anyone's slogans, anyone's sentiments, everyone's mantra, everyone's voice.

“The face is not an envelope exterior to the person who speaks, thinks or feels.”

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality”  
in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1987

The modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text;  
he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing,  
he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate;  
there is no other time than that of the utterance, and  
every text is eternally written here and now.  
[ . . . ] the reader is the very space in which are inscribed,  
without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its  
origin, it is in its destination.

Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*, 1967

I know you might be disappointed, but I am going to spare you the poetics and rambling prose of Deleuze and Guattari, and explain in simple terms—that the face is an object that connects language with meaning when two people talk to each other; it does not contain the contents as an envelope would, it is the content realized. It has a form that when activated is an object of communication; it is a moving thing with a surface and holes (eyes, mouth, ears, nostrils) that together give it its faciality. Faciality—apologies for sounding obtusely Heideggerian—is the face's “faceness.” In other words, it is the form of the face, the being of the face, its condition as a face.

Barthes argues that the author is not the owner and should not claim such—lest be a vagrant to capitalism, wandering and pontificating aimlessly for a hack wage. (Am I writing this?) What Barthes champions for is: the reader. Through her/him momentum is gained, that in hoards—not in the individual—the words have meaning, they resonate, they gather and spread. The faces of the youth shouted “The Shit is in the Bed!”

But the reader is only as good as the writing; s/he reads, and then s/he shares with their neighborhood. In private, faces are hidden if only for a moment, and then step outside to be with others.

# 3. Dwelling

Thibault gains contemplation of the self through observations of the homeless encampments in and around the place where she works.

Wood recalls the inhibition of Paris in a recent residency—the body and nudity are not as precious, not as shamed as in the United States. A residency is where artists go to work as artists away from home.

Our dwelling is harassed by the housing shortage. Even if it were not so, our dwelling today is harassed by work, made insecure by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the entertainment and recreation industry.

Martin Heidegger, “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .” 1951

The reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. [. . .] There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nullified — all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle.

Thus, what is referred to as a “liberation from work,” namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work.

The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires.

The spectacle’s estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual’s gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

Guy Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle,” 1967

Technology and its allure “engenders lonely crowds,” Debord says. Throngs of people, who in desperation for recognition and validation, are held in chains by a mutant desire to connect, a false sense of security and a desperate sense of belonging in the world. We all do it, we cannot exclude ourselves from the need to gather friends around us, of making place in our phone, and of proclaiming to the world that we are fun, we are happy, we are perfect.

On the other hand, technology has allowed us to see and to be exposed to things that we could not see, particularly violence. People are now empowered with a new kind of agency that they did not have before. For example, with the rise in phone cameras that shoot high-resolution videos, everyday citizens are capable of filming and posting breaking news on their facebook feed that subsequently gets shared with others. It spreads. Police violence, bombings, prayer and vigil all have equal play on social media sites, where only five years ago was overwrought with pictures of decadent foods.

Three years ago we became bored; we no longer wanted to see your food. We had tired of your nouveau, minimalist birthday desert with thin candle, your bulging hamburgers or your baked pies (except on holidays), your coffee foam in the shape of a leaf, your ribs, your decorated cupcakes, your steak from somewhere in Yountville, and your sushi from the Inner Richmond, your portrait in front of devoured meal remnants—cocktail held high, smiling.

Now we circle back again, but with restraint; we post less food and more accomplishments; the heirloom tomatoes, the urban-homestead eggs, the self-preserved jams, the successful first-time attempt at bread.

But we also use posts to share our sorrows, willingly and generously. We cry openly while typing our losses alone at the keyboard, knowing that hundreds of people will share in our pain along with us. We are a brazen lot, hungry for connection and that will never end. As social creatures, we survive together, thrive together, fight together, love together, bathe together, shit together, eat together; dwell together.

# \*Reprise

People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.

Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 1963

An exquisite corpse:

When they begin the beguine  
No, nothing of nothing  
No, I regret nothing  
When they begin the beguine.

My troubles, my pleasures  
I don't need them anymore.

And now when I hear people curse the chance that was wasted,  
I know but too well what they mean;

It's paid for, swept away, forgotten  
So don't let them begin the beguine.

Let the love that was once a fire remain an ember;  
I lit the fire  
Let it sleep like the dead desire  
I only remember  
When they begin the beguine.

Swept away for always  
I start again from zero  
And we suddenly know, what heaven we're in  
When they begin the beguine.

Cole Porter, excerpt from *Begin the Beguine*, 1935  
Edith Piaf, *Non, rien de rien, non, je ne regrette rien*, 1956