

Reexamining Cezanne's Doubt in the Post-Internet Age

Essay presented at Northern Iowa University

As the art world heads further into the 21st century, we are beginning to see the effects of a post-internet age on making and our relationship to images. Art's reaction to the internet has proven to be similar to that of the impressionists' epochal response to industrialization. The internet, with its accessibility and proliferation of imagery, has changed the way art looks, the way it is presented, and the role of the gallery and its relationship to the artist and collector. Unlike the cultural struggles of the AbEx, Pop, and Minimalist artists of the previous mid-century, whose reactions to world war and trauma were dealt with philosophically and psychically in their work, the impact that the changing role of the image has is felt philosophically, psychically, and literally in our economies, our production, and our methods of exchange. Within these shifts, the artist and their relationship to their work is changing and evolving to adapt to the speed of viewing and consumption. Work, possibly due to these current forces, has made a return to familiarity and comfort while stepping away from work that is abject, unheimlich, shocking, or heroic. What has been left behind, is art's relationship to doubt.

The uncertainty of the image has seen the traditional gallery system destabilized and patronage redefined. In a more global market, galleries are placing greater importance on fairs and the internet to attract collectors while relying less on traditional community patronage. These nomad galleries are reevaluating their own literal presence, operating low overhead physical locations as an almost secondary function to the primary role of fairs, online sales, and pop up exhibits. An increasing amount of galleries are choosing new locations outside of major metropolitan areas to avoid the soaring rent costs of the Lower East Side as they are relying on Artsy and international fairs to maintain their market impact.

But as fairs become more important, artists have been forced to define their relationship to them. Fairs, which have been traditionally excluded from artists' curriculum vitae, are now being perceived as traveling platforms for artists to engage with new audiences and spectacle. Fairs such as Volta in NY, Untitled, and Nada, are carefully curated and designed in an effort to connect artists to collectors through episodic presentations of their work. Fairs have traditionally acted in the unsavory role of international gift shops, providing collectors with samples of the gallery's roster. More recently, it is not unusual to see fair booths perform as corner solo shows. During the Frieze art fair in New York, Select-Art Fair dedicated an entire floor to performance- an intriguing insight into the developing role of the fair. When it is not unusual to see a booth go anywhere from \$8,000 to \$20,000, what does it mean that fairs, perhaps the definitive example of the shark tank like art market, are beginning to exhibit non-commercial, non-sellable performance art? The booth as site may be a form of artistic reclamation. Cynically, it could also be interpreted as a major symptom of the declining status of the physical gallery and gallery exhibitions.

But more importantly, these changes in the market manifest themselves physically and aesthetically within the artwork being made. Raphael Rubinstein coined the term provisional painting in a 2009 issue of *Art in America*¹- work that is unambitious and unassuming, clever, small, parodistic, it was work that seemed purposefully unfinished

¹ Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art In America* (May 2009).

and unmonumental. Jerry Saltz in 2014 referred to this trend as zombie abstraction². This abstraction is doomed to continuously ape the 60s AbEx movement but is devoid of its life, resulting in endless cynical copies without advancement or critique. But both critics while commenting on the look of the work, neglect to define what is a potential external motivator for this type of work which is its accessibility to the simultaneous changing role of the fair market. Galleries have been pressuring their artists to adjust to the atmosphere of the fair by making quick, small, serial work. Painting specifically is encouraged to be made small for easy transportation and shipping, multiple because of more inventory and its collectability, and easy on the eye to attract casual collectors. It is not hard to understand the current trends with these factors in mind - abstraction's return to optics, design, and patterning along with representational painting's movement towards quirky, Etsy looking humor and ambivalence. This has signaled a return to easel and the cramped Bushwick studios they suggest. Artists embark on these meditative, self-oriented wars of attrition, hoping that in hundreds of works that act like color swatches and journal entries that one will hit the intended collector target (or their vacation house color scheme) through sheer probability. One must look no farther than the case of Ibrahim Mahama³, and the lawsuit against him by his dealer Stefan Simchowitz, to see how these factors can become a costly prison.

It is impossible to completely anticipate the ramifications these changes will have on art and audience. What is known is that teenagers today will be confronted with more images in their lifetime than any other generation before them. They will have a completely unique understanding of images and their relationship to language and communication through emoticons, memes, and gifs as acts of communication. As the social critic Hito Steyerl discusses in her essay "Spam of the Earth" we are quite literally surrounding ourselves and our planet with in limbo images and we are unaware of the complex effects this will have. It is my belief that this relationship to imagery has

Contemporary artists have proven their understanding of Copy/Paste, but do they understand the drama and anxiety of Delete?

Of course there is anxiety in spamming, and the anxiety of spam folders is well represented in countless fair booths and exhibits throughout Brooklyn. But what of the residue and residual data left in a search field? As we learn more about our own online lives, we are constantly reminded of the false promise of deletion- Facebook's memories of your unposted statuses, retroactive archiving of deleted tweets and forums, and keystroke mining employed by hackers all come to mind. As immediacy and image cacophony combine seamlessly with spectacle and performative painting to adapt to our struggle to relate to globalization and post-internet imagery, there is an alternative approach found in the approach of Cezanne and the artists of the late 19th century to the effects of industrialization and the new speed and ecology introduced at the beginning of the 20th century. *Cezanne's Doubt*, an essay by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, addressed the artist's doubt and trepidation he felt as an image maker. It is said that Cezanne would take 100 sittings to accomplish a still life, 150 for a portrait. He would endlessly rework areas, placing demands on the canvas and the paint in pursuit of a sensation that would outlast a flat image. Cezanne was

² Jerry Saltz, "Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?" <http://vulture.com>, June 17, 2014

³ Sarah Douglas and Andrew Russeth, "Jute Sack Artworks Are at the Center of Simchowitz Lawsuit Against Venice Biennale Artist," <http://www.artnews.com>, August 25, 2015.

not preoccupied in making a painting or a picture, but in capturing a way of seeing, a radically different approach to making than say Manet's practice that deconstructed and referenced the conventions of art history. He slowed his practice down to answer to the world around him. We now know this pursuit was integral to the development of modernism, but at the time he had great doubt in his personal accomplishment..

It is an interesting phenomenon and perhaps a definition of contemporary art equal to its aesthetic the assuredness with which many current artists operate. Perhaps due to the pressure of collecting youth, artists are early adopting a narrowed body of work to make subtle derivations from. Doubt has traditionally played a significant role within the creative process, a natural compliment of the avant-garde; but the language and motivation of doubt has been disappearing from the conversations and practices of contemporary artists. Doubt is different than ironic self-deprecation. It also runs counter to the strategies employed by MFA students of "artist by proxy" work, seen in the work of Korakrit Arunanondchai's latest exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo⁴ or Joe Scanlan's controversial body of work by proxy of a fictitious Donelle Woolford. These painters are able to, in theory, successfully distance themselves from criticism by channeling performative aspects of the painting process, thus allowing them to disregard the mistakes as inherent to the narrative while stepping out from behind the curtain to receive any critical praise the strategy may attract.

Perhaps it is a relationship to the academicized role of the artist as the the pressure to pursue graduate and doctoral degrees in addition to making and producing is increasingly felt. Within these bundled roles it is no surprise that there is little room for doubt in the face of efficiency and immediacy. Pollock would say to Lee Krasner "Just tell me if this is a painting." It is important to remember that when the Abstract Expressionists began making their work, there was no previous model for a successful American artist, nor was New York City regarded as it is today. The art world was still Eurocentric, and the Abstract Expressionists had no ambition to become full time artists, let alone to become celebrities and art stars. Matisse's "Bathers By A River", at the Art Institute of Chicago, is one of the seminal paintings of his career. The dates of this painting reveals a beautiful biography: March 1909/10, May-November 1913, and early spring 1916-October (?) 1917. This is a painting that stayed with the artist, off and on for many years.

It is equally important to understand how much of current work is made and intended to be viewed in a gallery. Art is infrequently thought of as a personal journey, but as ghost appendages to the elite gallery representation they require. Can doubt offer us a forward model of creation and how does doubt look in a nervous, spectacular society?

I want to pose here a few manifestations of doubt within work that approaches contemporary concerns from a different angle than the tentative work of provisional painters.

Perhaps the spamming work of zombie abstractionists and provisional painters could claim the playful painting games of Oehlen, Kippenberger, and Morley as their paternal influences. If so, the sphere of influence of generative doubt can claim Amy Silman as its patron saint. Silman's transparency about her practice has greatly influenced a new generation of painters. Using and relying on camera and tablet phones along with drawing and painting apps, Silman can take her work out of the studio and into a virtual realm of editing and deleting before

⁴ Joseph Nechvatal, "An Installation that Squeezed the Art Out of Painting," <http://www.hyperallergic.com>, September 1, 2015.

returning it to the physical and tactile space of the studio and palette. Sometimes these digital interventions only serve the physical paintings as documentation or as a 21st century drawing practice. However, sometimes these screen drawings become their own finished pieces- taking on a new life of their own as they are transformed into animated sequences or presented as prints side by side with the physical paintings.

Zach Seeger's practice likewise involves a circulating doubt. Viewing his already existing body of work as a finite archive, he continually recycles repurposes, destroys, cuts, paints over and paints on the work he already has, choosing to not develop new work until his already existing work is adequately recycled, reconfigured, and reprocessed. Zach has at various times viewed himself as a curator more than an artist, an iconoclast of his own work, a pragmatist and a conservationist, his work brings into question the ethics of creating and the morality of filling and occupying space with mounds and heaps of work. But it is this compulsion, one born out of a generative doubt, that allows Seeger a unique and doubting heroicness. He is able to recycle paintings into sculptural material and rework these images and parts into new contexts. He couldn't be further from Narcissus who couldn't break his own stare, rather he sees his own reflection and wades in, splashing at the water to break the vision. Similarly to Beckett, there is a languishing "I can't go on, I'll go on" that is present in the work. Also similarly to Beckett, is a self imposed limitation. Beckett who famously switched to writing in French, a language he did not know and did not feel comfortable to create for himself an opposing force, Seeger has drawn up his own limitation to his practice-leaving himself with only his own past languages to retranslate and adapt. His studio resembles a salvage yard and documentation plays an important role within his work as each piece moves in and out of existence, changing form and, in doing so, developing its own history. Seeger has likened art to "cleaning up" because as he puts it "isn't that what humans do? Taking glasses out of the dishwasher and putting them back on their racks where they belong." Seeger has also spoken about his work in relationship to poetry, sharing the poetic inclinations of Amy Silman. His paintings start as succinct, pure form ideas, whose lines are then endlessly moved back and forth in search of perfect rhythms and contexts.

Justin Lieberman has likewise adopted doubt into his practice of making, employing a practice that routinely assimilates self doubt, self hatred, and the doubt of the speculative nature of the art world into his work. Lieberman recently sent out an email to many of his friends and artists announcing that he was leaving New York City and wouldn't be doing shows there for at least a decade. Included in the email, was a copy of a document requesting asylum to the German embassy, to which he eventually relocated. Under a section that asked to "Please describe the nature of your request (why you seek asylum)? he wrote...

"To be honest, you would have to be a complete dipshit to stick around this soul-sucking city. Give it another five years and you'll be living in mud huts and favelas, complaining about how New York is just a poor man's version of Dubai. I couldn't give two shits about having my work in your crappy galleries, or landlord Goo-Goo's house next to his collection of rusty prouve chairs. It's pretty obvious to anyone who paid attention that I set the terms for what all of you are cashing in on these days, with your cute little rectangles and magazine pages. After all, weren't they the 'antidote' to the mess I made? I can tell you this much—without what I did to stand on, your cute crap would be wallpaper..."

The publishing and circulation of this letter, and the artist's usage of a mundane government form as an expressive tool, makes perfect sense in the artist' past practice and nihilistic sense of humor. His last show in

America, entitled “Thanks for nothing” was shown at Know More Games in Brooklyn. Included in the show, was a video Lieberman recorded when he was working as a dishwasher, of kitchen staff pouring all of the uneaten food into a trashcan at the end of a night’s work, in a text superimposed on these images:

“...who’s it for anyway? The assholes of the future? I don’t need some four-year old fascist flipping through my shit in his Google glass cyber-cryo tank. It all gets cut up into pieces and scattered to the four winds. Everybody takes home a souvenir...”

Previously, Lieberman has collaged work from his own life into his shows, including the bank notice marking his house’s foreclosure and his eviction, an event that happened after the 2008 housing market crash and his primary gallery dropping him from their roster. Lieberman is both true and untrue, playing the character of the “malcontent artist” while also being a malcontent artist. Truth and fiction blend together along with his angst and self-doubt, his hatred of the art world and his need to be accepted by it. His brilliantly self-aware work, written with these contradictions played up, defeats itself while trying to be victorious, doubts itself and derides itself while attempting to forge a new path. His work intimates a casual yet exhaustive understanding and recall of art history (his most recent works at Martos Gallery was based on the “squeezed reliefs” utilized by Donatello in the 15th century). He sees it as both a history worth keeping alive while despairing in its current state. His collages seem to be out of the Rauschenberg-Oldenburg playbook. Beneath the surface of the doubting iconoclast is an unwavering belief in the potential of what art can be, and a demand for what it should be. Lieberman’s work has a relation to the films of Lars Von Trier in that way. Von Trier, known for his grand baroque sense of nihilism in films like *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac*, remains devoted to a traditional, beautiful sense of filmmaking. His belief in everything is despondent cynicism, except for that placed in the conventions of filmmaking and the tradition of film. Lieberman similarly seems to hold a specific morality—all is lost, all is nothing, but Art is still good, and those who truly follow that path can be forgiven of any of their sins or vices.

Here is the text from the press release of one of his last American shows, shown at Martos gallery. Similarly to Seeger, Lieberman has turned to excavating and exorcising his own work.

"For this exhibition, I have reassembled a large amount of my work of the last 15 years, both painting and sculpture, into a series of pieces which I call "Squeezed Reliefs," a literal translation of the Italian “rilievo schiacciato” a 15th century technique perfected by Donatello and regarded as the apex of perspectival illusionism of that time. Now we have the prerequisite macro- historical and micro-biographical contextualization.

My work is a place where capitalism goes to die. Or if not to die, than to become infected with a crippling disease, which slows it down immensely. Like Polio. Or Multiple Sclerosis. The works here are the same works you've already seen in other shows, so they are not even new. They're just cut up, reassembled, and painted black and white. Why black and white? I'm not going to lie. It's just because that's what we're all doing these days. Check out the group show over at Bortolami for more examples. Every month there's another 3 or 4 B&W shows, and I don't want to cause too much fuss. My strategy is in keeping with the bundling and repackaging of bad debt, (unsold works from old shows by a notoriously "difficult" artist, meaning I've been ripped off by plenty of galleries), but the repackaging here, while stylish, offers too much information concerning its provenance to qualify as a sexy redress of a devalued asset. Basically, there is nothing behind the curtain.

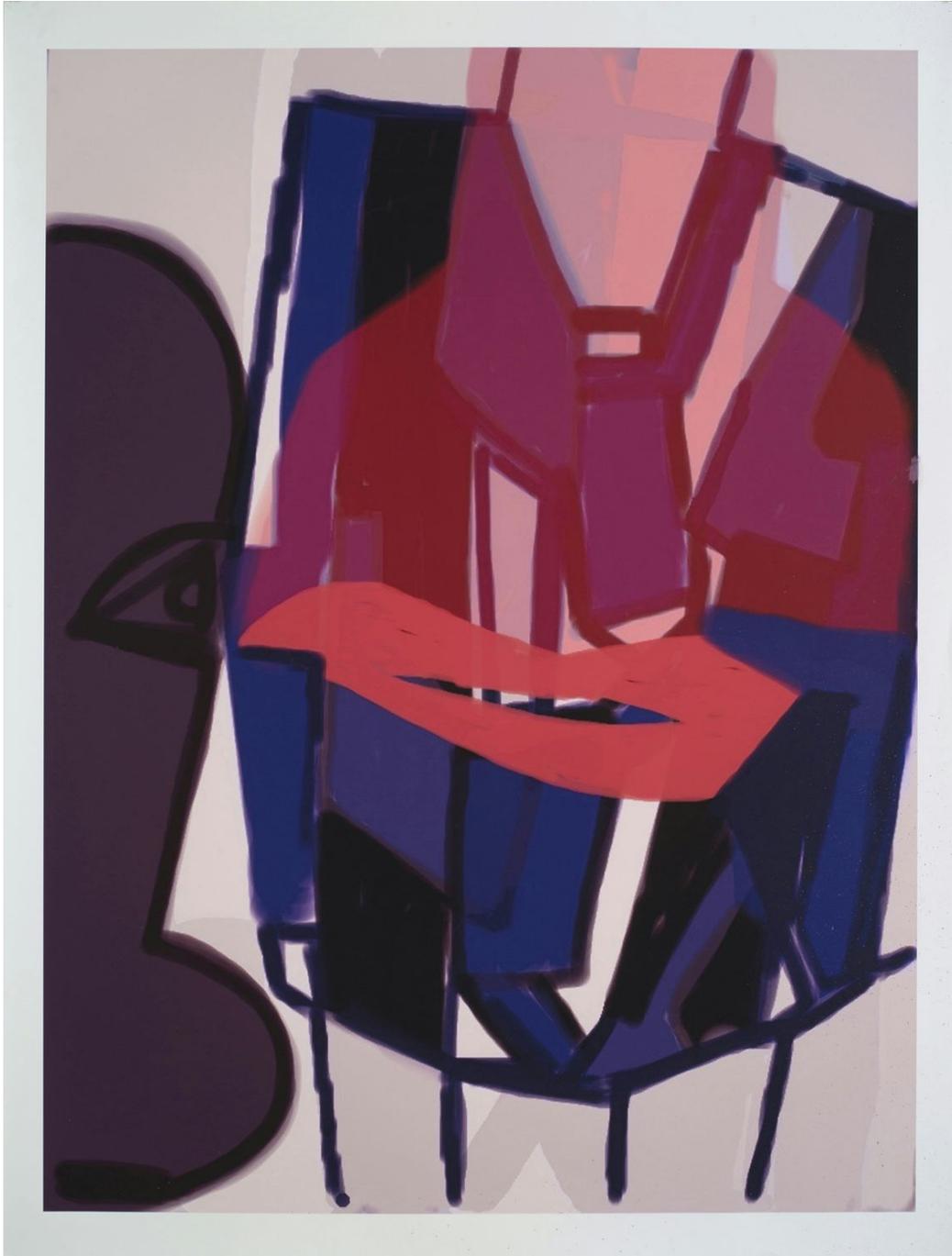
Economic humiliation is really the worst. Especially if you thought you "earned" what you had before. There is an upside however, which is that this repackaging significantly reduces storage costs, and offers transparency for those more interested in the reality of the situation than its fantastical, romantic, or surrealist variants. Here is ground zero of art-as-career, and not just for those of us in the art world. It's got to be said that the do-gooder community builders and the participants in Madame Wal-Mart's Baptist Biennial also have a spot in our boat."

The work is disarmingly pragmatic, an apology of doubt surrounded with the exaggerated posturing and performance/caricature of white male anger in the face of criticism. This economy of making, that Lieberman and Seeger both share, was also the starting impetus to RH Quaytman's work, who has said she began her current body of work, which she conceives of as chapters, after considering all of the work her family had made before her and the space her work along with theirs was taking up in storage facilities.

Cezanne, according to Ponty, was able to transcend humanness to perceive it. Cezanne famously treated the face as if it were an object when he painted it. As Ponty puts it, Cezanne "reclaims the classical Definition of art: man added to nature." Cezanne's transcendence came from this complicated relationship to doubt. He doubted himself, his work, his trajectory, yet that doubt manifested itself in an incredible, tireless devotion to his project of painting. Cezanne painted on the afternoon of his mother's death and was found painting at l'Estaque when there was a warrant for his arrest for dodging his country's draft for war. He did doubt his process, but doubt for Cezanne was a generative obsession of making, making within the finite limitations of a human lifetime.

But there is a final model Ponty in his essay describes that "Cezanne's difficulties are those of the first word. He thought himself powerless because he was not omnipotent, because he was not God and wanted nevertheless to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make visible how the world touches us." Cezanne's representation was unique in its convergence of representation with experience. Which reminds me of the work of Roxy Pain and his study of what he calls hyper-banality, specifically his work "Checkpoint" which was exhibited this last year at Marianne Boesky Gallery. A perspectival reconstruction of an airport terminal made out of wood and aluminum. Pain, who is interested in the facsimile presented by dioramas, painstakingly applied this illusion to a banal yet psychologically and emotionally charged situation. Expertly, the wood that it is made with creates a cold, textureless space. The affect is born out of the sterility of the environment. The monochrome shift of this psychologically charged space has a mimetic closeness to the environment it represents.

In summation, I am hoping that this model of Cezanne, one that returns to doubt, could give us a lens with which to identify some potential trajectories within current practices. Because within Cezanne's doubt, it is important to remember there was a pure faith-faith in art, faith in making, and faith in a life lived in its pursuit. If Cezanne left us only with doubt and cynicism, he wouldn't pose a model that runs contrary to many contemporary artists. However, his doubt is that of the cynic who truly wants to believe, of the romantic nihilist putting the dishes away. I want to leave you with the promise of Neil Young's folk anthem: "My My Hey Hey, Rock and Roll is Here to Stay." In this song about the surviving power of Rock and Roll, Young provides us with no evidence as to why or how Rock and Roll will continue. Rather, it is an anthem of faith, that hopes to conjure within itself the power it needs to make itself true. Art, like Rock and Roll, is here to stay.



Amy Sillman, still from the video Draft of a Voice-Over for Split Screen Video Loop, 2012, (made to a poem of the same name by Lisa Robertson) Animated drawing made on an iPad with a drawing app, with sound, 6:06 minutes



Zach Seeger. Formatting Valentine. Mixed Media. 2015.



Justin Lieberman. Installation View. Martos Gallery. 2014



Justin Lieberman. Checkpoint. Marianne Boesky. 2014.