

# *The Big Mess With Us Inside It*

## Text

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Is it possible to convey sound through language? Photographs get us closer to who we are. By representing our likeness, and showing it back to us. Is it possible for photographs to convey emotions? Sometimes, the trees speak to me. Only things I want to hear, most of the time. Statues fall, and their dust billows for a few moments. Usually they are brought down. We say: don't show us this anymore. I don't want to think of this image. How will I remember this. Some events we can imagine, without them happening. I think though, it makes them happen in the end. How will I live without meaning?

Billboards go up and then they come down too. For a healthy sum. Are all pictures trying to sell us something? In fact, they don't really come down, they are covered, one image after another, pasted over top of each other. They fade in the sunlight, like fruit. Trees of a human made order. I miss the sea, and the ocean. Their pictures don't do it for me, but they'll have to do. Can the circle be unbroken? By and by lord, by and by. There's a bitter home a waiting in the sky lord in the sky. They're putting consciousness in cameras now. Given what I know, I object. I'm still trying to figure out mine. So I keep digging. Through pictures, and stories, trying to trace back to infinity. The clouds too, have something to say. There are conditions to everything. Although where these conditions come from, anybody's guess. Everything has consequences. Some predictable, and some not. Photographs too. Time is chaotic, and unpredictable, not the opposite. Sounds which repeat seem to change shape over time. Things that are predictable, become unpredictable. Everything, in the end, becomes a big mess. What do you see? Clouds are like dreams. Their shape and texture mold themselves into an understandable form.

What is power? A good friend said we are obsessed with images of power. I can't get that out of my head. Knowledge, and the act of knowing. What do you see? How do you know? Who are you hanging out with on the week-ends? Who chooses what gets preserved? Why do we own things? Have you ever fallen asleep to the sound of the ocean? Mourning involves a collective recollection. What is the opposite of mourning? Is it joy? But a certain kind of joy. One filled with hope. Is Hope freedom? Is knowing remembering? Is questioning critique?

We take the footpath.

We forget the phenomenon of distance specific to this city after being in another city for so long.

In this one, viaducts pose and answer their own question in gentle ascension.

It's all much further than it seems. This is what image does.

And yet, what is there to see other than verticality?

When we inhabit otherwise, how do we keep track of where we've been?

The multiplexed boulevard

Another season happened as our shadow against building.

Future conditional a facade of clarity.

We run laps around the campus.

In our dreams we find ourselves back in a house that meant something, once.

In the unclaimed lot we encounter the cellular level of sunlight.

We value materiality, corporeality, inhabitation.

That is to say, we thank you for being here tonight.



The first photo I ever took of my father is also a self-portrait. We are standing next to each other in the entrance of the living room in his apartment in Casablanca, it is 2017 and I am just about to turn 23. A few days earlier, me and my family had come back from Essaouira, a small peninsula in the south of Morocco, where I had bought a two-piece lounge suit almost identical to one my father had owned for years. In the photo, my dad and I are wearing our matching outfits and looking straight into the camera, a light smile brushing over our faces.

I got my photos developed in Montreal a few weeks later and spent the following months looking back at this portrait obsessively. I was realizing I'd unknowingly provoked something very specific in the making of this image: here was a fixed photograph that offered me the opportunity to see to what point I could

find resemblances between my father and I. At last, an even plane of comparison! Wearing the same clothing, my long hair gathered into an invisible ponytail, both lit by the even, diffused natural light coming through the big windows of his 4th floor apartment, *bref*: stripped from any context that might highlight our differences. In this photo I could see our faces next to each other, and I was comparing and contrasting our features, engaged in playing some twisted kind of “spot the difference” game.

But I guess sometimes context is necessary — so do not roll your eyes as I share my backstory in the most concise (yet hopefully immersive, dare I say... poetic?) way possible: In 2002, when I was 8, my mother decided to leave Morocco. Her, my brother and I moved to Montreal, without my father. Casablanca became the theatre of my summers, thanks to my dad's job at Royal Air Maroc, the Moroccan airlines that offered employees' families 90% discounts on flights. Every year, from June to late August, it was *le retour au bled*<sup>1</sup>: the mandatory visit to my father and half of my family. I became aware of some new sorts of games, or I guess you could say they were — still are — more like tests: the subtle implications (anxious, not malicious) from my Moroccan aunts that by moving out of the country, I might have lost my Moroccan-ness, already fragile given that my mother is Québécoise. When asked if I want a fork to eat my tajine, I know to refuse. I am still Moroccan; I use bread as my utensil. In the streets of Casablanca, people call me Catherine or Isabelle, which funny enough is my mother's name. They believe I am an outsider, a *nasramia*.<sup>2</sup> In a way, they are not wrong. But when I walk around Baladia, the small working-class neighborhood where my dad grew up, people immediately know I am a Sabiri; more specifically somehow related to Saïd, my dad. *Ach jak Saïd? Tu es son portrait craché*.<sup>3</sup>

1 A return to the “old country”.

2 A non-Muslim foreigner; a westerner.

3 “What is your relationship to Saïd? You look just like him.”

I believed this when people said it, but back in 2017 I was not entirely sure I saw it myself. So, back to the aforementioned photograph – it became a moment in which I could finally observe the resemblance between my father and I, and therefore a place where I could reassure myself of my Moroccan-ness. *Reassure myself of my Moroccan-ness...!* It feels so foolish to write this down now, at a moment of my life where I feel saturated with all discourses about *reclaiming our identities*, and where I am constantly thinking about my difficulty in trying, for the love of god!, to speak of something else than my confusion regarding my mixed cultural identity while feeling stuck in a system that valorises artists who address “cultural identity”, but also this is something that I am indeed confused, curious about (and, I admit, obsessed with!) and therefore wish to explore, and at the same time I feel so burdened by it as a recurring subject in my work... But anyways that is an entirely different discussion, and although Nabil and Parker are kind enough to offer an immense amount of flexibility in the form and subjects of our texts here, I really do want to get back to unpacking this relationship between my father, photography and I (give me a call at the end of the day if you’d like to get into a discussion about the rest, 514 246-2960, I am absolutely serious).

So: most of all this 2017 photo allowed me to look at my father, to practice facing him. We never really talked, unless my brother Nôamane was around. Dialogue between my dad and I stayed hauntingly minimal, as if our way of sharing moments with each other was through interior dialogues we were both having with ourselves. It took a lot of sadness, anger, then inner work and eventually healing (early 20s shit?) for me to stop taking my father’s silence personally and to realize that it wasn’t a sign of disinterest from my life; it was more a way for him to respect my privacy, which is in fact... so generous and open-minded given that he is a muslim father of his background and generation. I could feel that as much as I had always felt shy around him, he also felt shy around me and the details of my life, made sure he was never prying.

The most comfortable I ever felt with my dad was in the car with him, when we were both facing the same direction. Looking straight ahead made it easier for me to talk to him, to ask for his advice or confide in him. Our non-confrontational postures in the front seats of the car made everything I was burning to ask or discuss seem like it was easy for me to address; it made me come across as *une très casual daughter*. I could pretend our relationship was closer to the one between him and Nôamane. And it allowed me insight into my father’s ways, without making it seem like I was too eager to investigate. More importantly: I knew he couldn’t see my eyes get watery if somewhere along our conversations he went on a ramble about the *golden days* before my brother and I left Casablanca, a subject he often circles back to even today.

Back again (I hope you are not getting motion sick... haha...) to the image of the two of us from 2017, the starting point of my photographing my father. Just like in the car, we are both facing the same direction, side by side. This photograph slowly became a point of reference to justify my eventual wanting to face him deliberately through my camera. It is as if, unknowingly, I had set the scene of a situation that would give me an excuse, a pretext for wanting to face him. In the following years, I caught myself developing a quiet approach to this unconscious mission: *Remember that photo of the two of us? This photo is important; it is useful. Photos are necessary, and I will take more of us, and sometimes of only you.*

Photographing my father became a way of entering an alternative yet deliberate form of communication with him, despite the portraits being taken mostly in silence. Simultaneously, it was a journey with myself that unearthed many uncomfortable questions around my sense of identity and my need to be approved. By asking if I could take a photo of my dad, I was expressing worry, or maybe was it hope: *am I accepted, do I belong, am I like you?* In time, along the years and many portraits later, I eventually realized that I would rather this photographic practice about my father be a way to



state reassurance: *I want to address you; I have left and live without you but I still am interested in you;* and perhaps even (I apologize in advance) a desire to attain an absence of patriarchal fear!!!!: *I am not scared of entering into an exchange with you.*

Last summer, in 2022, I visited my dad in Morocco only to find out his mobility was extremely limited. It was hard for him to walk, and he couldn't even drive anymore. I knew he had been sick but out of pride he hadn't mentioned how limited he was over the phone before my visit. There was no car in which we could both face forward. I was forced into an unexpected and perpetual face to face with him.

It was a challenge to find ways to stay stimulated and connected within the walls of the house, where we spent most of our time. I was thinking maybe a good way of staying entertained was to play some board games, but there were none around, and it would've felt forced anyways. I was trying to figure out in which ways my presence could help with morale, how I could be useful... *What am I good at?* I reflected on the ways in which I like to engage in games, in play... I found myself going back to photographic solutions. I thought of some simple visual exercises. We made a few photo studies, using objects of the house, creating spatial patterns with these objects under the pretext of passing the time. In one of the images, my aunt Malika accepted to be photographed in a setup that involved bread she had made that week. But in most of these images, my father is the main subject.

These were definitely not the *golden days* before I left Casablanca as a child, and yet it really felt like this way of relating could only have been inspired by childhood. And through all this curious unfolding, I could feel there had been a shift in my father and I's relationship, I could sense it by the way we were both accepting to enter these unnatural exercises. In setting the scene for the images, it prompted new, concrete conversations about the objects that we used as props and where they came from, which lead to



stories from my father's past. Most of all, my dad's acceptance to take part in my games despite his lack of mobility, his loss of weight and his injured dignity came as such a gift of trust. Slowly, I found myself no longer as terrified to confide in him, unpromptedly sharing details of my life as a then unconscious attempt to honour the vulnerable position he was putting himself into by accepting that I take photos of him. I could tell he was enthusiastic about my opening up, eager to give me his advice and even ask more questions. We were learning to talk simply, finally, facing each other. Maybe we felt this was a common ground in which we could offer each other something, a presence that didn't need the conversational structure of the car to exist, a concrete activity that was reciprocal: we were both doing each other a favour.

And behind our at last assumed curiosity there was this longing for humour, lightness. Humour requires play, and play turns humour into something reciprocal... I had often thought of humour as a solution, and cultivating humour as an ongoing act of care. Last summer my camera became a tool in accessing, provoking these situations of humour and eventually in accepting, in slowly helping me get to a place where I engage with my father without need for a justification. This is the place in which photography becomes so essential to me, the place where the act of photographing and its resulting images serve both as process and as document.

I am in Casablanca right now, and my father still cannot drive. Instead of the car, we spend most of our time together at a café near his house called Golden Space (*wallah*). We hang out there for a couple hours and I would be lying if I said we can't shut up. Silence will always be part of my father and I's relationship, but I am no longer afraid of breaking it, and I know my words will be welcomed, my initiative for conversation reciprocated. We still sit side by side, but it seems to me that it has become a posture of companionship, no longer of avoidance.



*After Taming the Garden, directed by Salomé Jashi (2021)*

To look in the direction of a tree  
Is to enter into custom

Succumbing  
To the realm of pure conversation

Workers excavate root formations under darkness  
Knowing the mass won't last the trip to a private garden

The tree is wheeled past homes one third of its size

Into a distant agenda

Reducing the contours of childhood  
A person now without circumstance

A road was introduced but how to measure  
Without the original measurement of time?

Most aren't alive to cry  
Only a small group look off past the camera

When asked about life under  
Light sifted through the foliage

They recall a life prior to the tension of working against the world  
Mass magnificence of moss and bark

## ***A Timeline of Removal* Lucas Regazzi & Petra Bibeau**

I find the metanarrative of photography really challenging to deal with, to the extent that, as an artist who studied the medium, I seek out working methods for escaping the camera. I have this enduring—perhaps idealistic—idea that photography can be a metaphorical device rather than a discipline with distinct materials and processes. Through this I've made drawing, textile, and performance that I understand to be photography. The goal is to produce alternative documents of truth and of time, to protect the work against legibility. I have affinities for artists that I perceive as pursuing a similar resolve for their work.

**Petra Bibeau** is a writer, curator and gallerist based in New York. Originally from San Francisco she has spent her career working in galleries that foster a specific scholarship in the photographic medium in relation to modern and contemporary art.

We got together recently to discuss a number of artists working through the medium's trouble, to pin down their strategies on a spectrum of complicity.

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Mention of Amalia Ulman refers to her seminal works *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) and *Privilege* (2015-2016), both performances that took place in real time as a series of photographs and videos on Instagram.

Mention of Katherine Hubbard refers to the exhibitions *Bring your own lights* (2016) at The Kitchen, wherein the artist used the gallery as a darkroom for live performance and, engaging with the gallery building's history as an ice depot, presented images made using ice

blocks as de facto lenses atop photosensitive paper, and *water is what holds the heat* (2017) at Kate Werble, which formally presented the silver gelatin prints borne of her performance at The Kitchen.

Mo Costello is an artist based in Athens, Georgia, whose work, spanning drawing, performance, photography and sculpture, interrogates the social lives of images.

Pia Arke was a Kalaaleq and Danish artist (d. 2007) whose art and writing critiques the colonial dynamic between Denmark and Greenland, within a framework the artist termed Ethno-aesthetics.

**Petra Bibeau:** Photography is indebted to the everyday world.

The other day I went to the Buck Ellison exhibition at Luhring Augustine, there was a great reader associated with the show. In it there was a reproduction of a Walker Evans FSA photograph, Kitchen Wall (1936). The picture is of a barren, kitchen wall, capturing the kitchen of a sharecropper family during the Great Depression. There's no one in the photograph, it's just a few meager objects against a wood plank wall. For some reason, that deeply captured my attention. For some reason my mind ran away with this photograph, even now in 2023. Perhaps this is due to the realism of the photograph.

But that doesn't happen that often.

**Lucas Regazzi:** It seems like the only way that photography has any bearing on the New York art world recently is in the exploration of the staged image.

Ellison as you mentioned, Clifford Prince King, Roe Etheridge. The only photography show I've noticed that's pursuing "authenticity" is Wolfgang Tillmans at MoMA? His work is interesting as a form of diarism. The other folks I just mentioned are interested in an opposite, sort of fantasy space, and the level of consciousness with which they want their viewer to enter that fantasy space seems to be the trick.

**PB:** Ellison is hiring actors and is staging them to reproduce situations of great American white privilege. It is staged, but it's also real, because he's staging it after reality. It's not the real thing but it's the closest he can get to what would have been. It's all in the sake of projecting the privilege.

I do think a lot of the staging of photographs and our interest in that is because it's the way we most interact with photographs. We interact with marketing at a rate that's unprecedented at any point in history. At some level it's subversive to mimic that action for a different set of reasons.

**LR:** I'm more interested in a photography that says no to the ways we're currently experiencing images. I like the idea of leaving photography, leaving the camera. It could be argued that photography has eroded what might otherwise be a more liberated experience.

Through my conversations with Mo Costello, they've described "wanting to be the hole," or the opening that would otherwise be the camera's aperture. A motivating question for them is: how can one work through a method of photography that articulates embodiment more closely than the distance it produces, and the power dynamic that inevitably comes with taking a photograph, or being photographed.

Something I was thinking about with Pia Arke is that she would make her own camera obscuras, and document the landscape of Greenland. As the image was being made in the camera obscura, she'd dance around in the beam of light cast inside the camera, implicating her body and producing a kind of symbolic intimacy with the landscape through the flattened image. It makes me think about how the body in this instance is acting as a sort of shield against the way the image of the land could be exploited.

And then considering Nabil [Azab] for example, their process for the work we showed at April April, was one in which they took a slide photograph found or not, used a projector to project the image onto their studio wall, expanded the image and blurred it out, and then took an image of that. So the resulting thing is this time-confused, subject-confused bath of forms.

These strategies seem to be responding to the history of photography as a history of violence, as a history of subjugation, by finding a backdoor out of the document.

**PB:** One way to remove the terror is removing physical documentation. Equally, there is the element of spectatorship to contend with should you attempt to remove documentation as material and replace it with performance like Amalia Ulman and Katherine Hubbard. Both using spectatorship, right? Real time spectatorship. They're using the audience to react to the performance. These artists are trying to incorporate time as a function of spectatorship in context. In Nabil's case, a material product is still produced even if they didn't *make the image*.

**LR:** What's made the image is a series of obstructions.

**PB:** In that case any personal intention is so far removed that it becomes neutral. But that's another thing, getting rid of the

camera or removing yourself from the event is an attempt to produce some form of neutrality, which photography does not offer up. And we can see the entire scope of it, the far right of this is the introduction of the Ring camera. Even if nothing's happening, it's going to be capturing that. And then the pendulum goes all of the way to the other side, which is, like, using ice as the apparatus...doing something that's so far removed that the question of whether it's even photography emerges.

The conversation we're having is about a timeline of removal. How to remove yourself.

**LR:** The realm of images has refracted to such an extent that an image is polysemous as a standard; it's kaleidoscopic. It feels like we can't trace the source.

**PB:** Do you think this has made us more cynical?

**LR:** Yes.

Of course people are also using photography as a way of documenting moments that express a breadth of emotion, and I'm sure, feel true to their own reality, but there's no way of removing us from the specter of horror, or the is-it-trueness.

It's a bind that photography's in, in the realm of personal expression. A camera images the world, and the world is the most complicated thing we deal with. When a camera takes the world in as a photograph, and the photograph becomes a static object, the stakes are different.

**PB:** Maybe we have moved beyond the still image, because the issue is time-based. With the advent of the 24 hour news cycle, we accepted a world that does not turn off so how can a still image hold attention, let alone emotion for too long? That's

the culture we're dealing with. Photography is the practice of (durational) looking, thinking, considering. That's rarely encouraged in our world now.

**LR:** We can acknowledge a spectrum of strategies that critically engages the problem. At one end, using the tool of photography to fractalize and expand out into the space of what's become extremely complicated, and at the other end, using photography as a metaphor. Interrogating an exploded view of the process, and taking what's relevant.

If we can experience photography online as performance, as ground-breaking, world-changing artwork, why do we have any need or interest in going to a show with prints on the wall? Which is maybe why photography...should abandon the lens. Photography is then a mere historical jumping-off point through which we navigate a new material trajectory.

**PB:** Photography has always been about materials, from the first heliograph to the daguerreotype, using plates to make images. There was a need to record something in a way that was different from memory, or conversation, or writing something down. Now we're at this point where it's stuck on repeat. I believe the efforts of both extremes constitute an evolution in the medium that challenges the tool conceptually more than materially.

**LR:** I wonder if it's a fear of obsolescence. I think there's a depth of nostalgia that we have for photography that keeps us tied to the idea that there's a possibility it can save itself from evolving.

I find it really challenging to isolate photography. The way that we're talking about it, it's clear it's always been in relation to network actors, it's always relied on distribution, in a

way that's different from painting or sculpture. The only thing I can think of as similar for sculpture is, souvenir?

**PB:** But that's not a problem for sculpture. And even alternative processes (in photography) seem to stem from a subversion to the methodology of traditional photography, yet they circle back to the very beginning instead of forging a totally evolved path.

**LR:** We're struggling through the horrors of our past, as we see them through a particular tool, when we could instead, look at ourselves.

**PB:** We are. The problem is the mirror—we're so involved.

**LR:** To draw up the spectrum once more, of at one end leaving the camera and deeply implicating oneself with it. If the standard of use for the camera is documentation, at both ends of the spectrum is a means of rejecting that standard, but it's also a way of manipulating the mirror. To not look at oneself, or to pose.

**PB:** Making a basic image of the world that's condensed and controlled is going to come out as "balanced", because these other sides are trying to induct some level of change at the median.

They're two good options, two ways of negating that middle-ground. One uses the tool to the extreme—doubles down on it—and the other side removes it completely. There are two ways forward.

**LR:** And neither of them will fundamentally change the world.

**PB:** Both of them have their flaws.

**LR:** Even if you were to remove the camera from the process, substitute the camera, it's still going to affect the world whether you decide to abandon it yourself or not. Conversely, just because you've decided to more deeply invest in unearthing the unsavory qualities of photography, to double down on it, doesn't mean that the illumination banishes it from the world.

**PB:** It's one of those things where it's such a dominant medium, it begs for an all or nothing approach.

**LR:** Photography contends with communication, as broad as that is. It's always a weird question—what should photography be?—when we have to unpack sociality writ-large. I like the idea of leaving the camera as rejecting the responsibility, in not being able to meet the demands of the tool, and obscuring the outcome.

\*

The streets and alleyways of my neighborhood are lined with wooden utility poles. These stripped trunks of Fir, Cedar and Pine support the wires that physically connect me to the digital world. Down below, intact, degraded and fragmented posters alike cling to their surface. On the busiest corners posters overlap with one another in an effort to compete for our attention. It may be one of the only places where teenage babysitters obstruct public protests. Or where the details of used e-bikes align perfectly with the descriptions of lost cats. A poster aims, as Susan Sontag writes, to seduce, exhort, sell, educate, convince or appeal.<sup>1</sup> As a result of these sometimes contradictory aims, they wrestle with each other until, eventually, they become entangled. Sontag goes on to mention that “posters are aggressive because they appear in the context of *other* posters.” City legislation was written to prevent postering on these utility poles. Threats of removal and fines are intended to deter people and direct them towards designated poster cylinders installed along shopping streets, but use of the neighborhood utility pole persists. What most attracts me to posters is that their ephemerality is an integral part of their power. The people who make them understand this well. Posters direct our attention to things, people and events out in the world and eventually, the world impresses itself back onto them.

A poster is a poster because it is posted. This action distinguishes it from other kinds of visual material. By contrast, a flyer isn’t affixed and could very well fly away should a sudden gust of wind roll through. In cities they are pasted and pinned to bus stops, bulletin boards, building facades, light posts, and monuments. Despite their continued presence in our everyday lives, the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of the poster is more than a century behind us. As art historian Dawn Ades notes in her 1999

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1 *Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity*, Susan Sontag

essay *Function and Abstraction in Poster Design*, “The poster belongs to a specific phase in the age of mechanical reproduction: for seventy or eighty years it was the most conspicuous, accessible and familiar form of pictorial production.”<sup>2</sup> During this period, the street is the domain of visual culture. Some artists were magnetized by this new street aesthetic and the closeness of contact between art and life, while others damned it a visual plague that needed to be contained. The latter attitude has most impacted the appearance of streets and facades today. In 1872 John Ruskin reluctantly expressed his view that the poster had finally usurped painting: “The fresco painting of the bill sticker is likely, so far as I see, to become the principal fine art of modern Europe... Giotto’s time is past... but the bill poster succeeds.”<sup>3</sup>

Conceived as the early couriers of advertising, posters were fundamental in establishing the inexhaustible desire of consumer culture. In *Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity* Sontag posits that “...the poster could not exist before the specific historic conditions of modern capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> Inevitably posters have become commodities themselves. As early as the mid-19th Century, designs by artists such as Alphonse Mucha, Jules Chéret, Eugène Grasset, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec “...were almost immediately collectors’ items, with price lists and catalogues, and they were frequently stripped from the walls by enthusiasts before the paste was dry.”<sup>5</sup> A century later, the pursuit of collecting posters and graphic material continues. In *How Posters Became Art*, Hua Hsu traces the ‘poster craze’ of 1960s America: “More than a million posters were sold each week to the ‘visual maniacs’ craving ‘expendable art.’ Posters were cheap and abundant and, whether you

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2 *Function and Abstraction in Poster Design*, Dawn Ades

3 *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, John Ruskin

4 *Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity*, Susan Sontag

5 *Function and Abstraction in Poster Design*, Dawn Ades

preferred Jimi Hendrix or Che Guevara, an easy way to convey your sense of taste.”<sup>6</sup> These collections have found their way into museums and galleries despite their relegated status as ephemera or graphic art. They are materials still considered distinct from unique artworks because the poster is without a meaningful original, there are only copies. “Art historians and critics have had little regard for anything existing in multiple copies made for mass consumption,” remarks graphic art collector Merrill C. Berman, “also, art dealers prefer one-of-a-kind works. They can’t relate to multiples unless they’re numbered and signed by a famous artist. It’s a prejudice that has affected the attitude of many people toward this material. They have never understood typography, anything with a message.”<sup>7</sup> For collectors interested in graphic material and ephemera this secondary status has made collecting more accessible. Today, the subculture of collecting posters as art has gone mainstream. Most recently an international version of a *Metropolis* poster from 1927 reportedly sold to Leonardo DiCaprio for \$690,000. It is the most expensive poster ever sold. As Hsu says, there is something perverse about the commodification of posters as they are “a product of capitalism, intended to beautify the act of selling.” As such, the secondary market developed around the sale of posters which function to advertise other products and events is a testament to the narcissism of consumer capitalism.

Unlike the mainstream art world, however, the market for posters cannot influence their *raison d’être*: their message. That doesn’t, of course, mean that a poster can or should only exist out in the street. Between 1965 and 1971, artist, nun, educator and activist Corita Kent used her platform as pedagogue and household name of the pop-art movement to voice concerns about poverty, racism and war in America. Kent emphasised screen printing as a material because of its potential for democratic and expedient outreach — an affordable art for the masses. Printed in large unnumbered editions, serigraph posters such as *American*

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6 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/how-posters-became-art>

7 *Collecting Graphic Art*, Merrill C. Berman and Alma Law

*sampler* 1969 and *love your brother* 1969 combined photographic images, found printed matter, text and poetry. They are bold, colourful and incisive. These works were displayed mostly on the null white walls of art galleries. Despite this, Kent’s exhibitions handle materials and space with an irreverence usually only seen in the street. Prints were left unframed and pinned to walls in tight-yet-expansive arrays. All of it — the process, the prints, the gallery — was in the service of her message.

The billboard is a distinctly American mutation of the poster. They are the inevitable next generation of a pictorial form born by capitalism. In 1835, the circus was the first business to use large format outdoor advertising. Unlike the poster, the billboard is privately owned and therefore requires both permission and payment. Designers and artists who make billboards unavoidably compromise with property owners. As a result, billboards don’t share as broad a history of use as political material as posters. This is because the process is much slower and controversy risks interfering with private gain. Billboards resist becoming commodities to a greater extent than posters, however, because they are printed in sections, bound to a structure, often very large and collaborative in nature. In *Causing Conversations, Taking Positions*, artist Peggy Diggs reflects that, “Much short-lived public art, of which the billboard is the most familiar form, is relatively inexpensive to produce, is sometimes made collaboratively with groups of non-artists, and is difficult to collect. Although the artist’s billboard appears in a space dedicated to advertising, it cannot be commodified; such a billboard makes its point - usually to an unintentional audience - and then is gone.”<sup>8</sup> It has become a trend for sign companies to partner with arts organisations to use some of their billboards (often for a reduced fee or no cost at all) in an ongoing effort to avoid further business regulations citing that they are making a ‘contribution to culture’. Photography festivals, in particular, have gladly accepted these offers as an easy way to stretch their programming into public space. In order for photography to behave as public art it necessarily co-opts the spaces and materials usually reserved

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8 *Causing Conversations, Taking Positions* Peggy Diggs



for advertising. Where else can artists find a large, easily seen, surface to mount photographic material to? This is a crossover of convenience. Photography is a natural fit for print advertising because, as Rodchenko said, it is fast, cheap and real. Comprehending a photograph is much quicker than reading a few lines of copy. Their origins also bind them together. Unlike other visual art forms, Sontag writes, "... the poster (like still photography and the cinema) carries no history from the pre-modern world; it could exist only in the era of mechanical duplication."<sup>9</sup> It is a generation of materials spawned by technological revolution. Free from the burden of pre-modern history, all three disciplines have seamlessly integrated themselves into our lives today. Their use as advertising have become interchangeable components in the public delivery of products and services.

As part of the inaugural exhibition at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Canadian artist Ken Lum was asked to remake one of his photo-text works in billboard form to promote the exhibition. On the condition that the billboard excludes his name and any information about the exhibition, Lum agreed. Installed on an outer wall of the museum, the work depicts a young woman sitting in a cramped office juxtaposed against text which reads *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*. When the exhibition was finished, the Melly billboard was removed. Not soon after "the Witte de With staff received several telephone calls and a number of written protest messages demanding Melly's reinstatement" says Lum. "Several callers reasoned that every city needs a monument to hating one's job."<sup>10</sup> Melly was reinstated permanently on the building's facade in 1990 and in 2021 — reckoning with its namesake's colonial ties — Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art changed its name to Kunststituut Melly. "While I may have created *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, the public has been activating the work far beyond my initial intentions." The public's reinstatement of Melly is certainly an unusual outcome for an artist's billboard since, like posters, their impermanence is an integral

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9 *Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity*, Susan Sontag

10 <http://kenlumart.com/melly-shum-hates-her-job/>

part of their being. Artists' billboards are more often removed due to controversy than they are reinstated due to praise. In 2020, Vancouver's Capture Photography Festival was forced to remove seven billboards made by local artist Steven Shearer. These billboards featured photographs of people sleeping in a variety of positions and environments. Within two days of their debut, before the festival had even officially begun, Capture staff received a flood of angry emails complaining that the images reminded them of dead people. In articles, context is often vague. The toxic drug crisis and opioid epidemic is, like in many other parts of the country, an urgent concern in Vancouver. Perhaps residents of the high market condominiums which face the billboards didn't want to be reminded of this reality. "Clearly we overestimated Vancouver's appetite for provocative work" said festival founder Kim Spencer-Nairn.<sup>11</sup> In response, Capture deinstalled the images and left nothing in their place.

The paradox inherent to billboards is that they are public only insofar as the private property on which they stand has good visibility. They are always in our field of vision but rarely within our control. Lum and Shearer's respective reinstallation and removal are exceptional instances of the public speaking and property owners listening. Complaints which remain unheard have compounded into organized resistance intent on reclaiming public space. San Francisco's Billboard Liberation Front, for example, alters and defaces signage while Scenic America tries to educate and effect government policy. Liz McQuiston claims that "defacing and graffiti magically transform" billboards "into a two-way conversation" in which "the voice of authority is overtaken by the voice of resistance, and commercial power is subverted to people's power."<sup>12</sup> On the website of Cuban-born American artist Félix González-Torres, documentation of *Untitled (It's Just a Matter of Time)* 1992 and *Untitled*

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11 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/04/02/they-see-dead-people-billboard-works-removed-from-vancouver-photography-festival-after-locals-complain>

12 Liz McQuiston, *Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics Since the Sixties* (London: Phaidon Press, 1993)

1991 include images of these billboard works which over time have been covered in graffiti, posterized over or are in the process of removal. These artworks cannot be seen outside of their ephemerality. In the context of the AIDS epidemic both of these billboards depict something fragile and fleeting. The black-and-white image of an unmade bed seen in *Untitled* 1991 is clearly imprinted with the traces of two human bodies. *Untitled (It's Just a Matter of Time)* from the following year features white text on a black background which according to the viewer can read like either an omen or fortune. The language of both billboards is ambiguous: one utilizes the emptiness of the so-called 'objectivity' of photography and the other the emptiness of idioms. Perhaps this is how they slipped by the conservative filters of signage companies. Yet understood through their placement along areas of major protest in New York City and the zeitgeist of the early years of the AIDS epidemic, their subversion of the public—which willfully ignored the crisis—is both powerful and poignant.

Although billboards are two-dimensional and inflexible in scale, the contexts of their site and public afford artists a flexibility to generate new, and sometimes unpredictable, meaning. The site is the frame through which what an artist attempts to say (or not say) is interpreted. In her essay *Disturbances in the Fields of Mammon: Towards a History of Artists' Billboards* Harriet Senie writes "Certainly billboards that are part of exhibitions are likely to be reviewed as art. But artists who approach billboards the way they make gallery art do so at a risk."<sup>13</sup> What is meant by this isn't that a pre-existing artwork couldn't become a billboard or vice versa,<sup>14</sup> but instead, that making an artwork for the sterile space of a gallery demands a different kind of awareness. Senie later writes, "considering the relative absence of art in our public education

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13 *Disturbances in the Fields of Mammon: Towards a History of Artists' Billboards*, Harriet Senie 1999

14 Ken Lum's photo text works and Barbara Kruger are examples of this transfer.

system, the greatest strategic pitfall when it comes to artists' billboards today would seem to be irony. An accepted postmodern attitude, irony is an in-joke. You have to catch the tone and recognize the reference. While intending to undercut the dominant discourse, it may instead exclude (and alienate) the very audience it seeks to address (and convince)." In their use as commercial advertising, billboards already alienate anyone who doesn't fit their target demographic. This is further exacerbated by the exclusivity of their unobstructed view and the private property upon which they stand. Thus the irony which artists so often wield to 'undercut the dominant discourse' within an art context ends-up mimicking the very thing it attempts to critique.

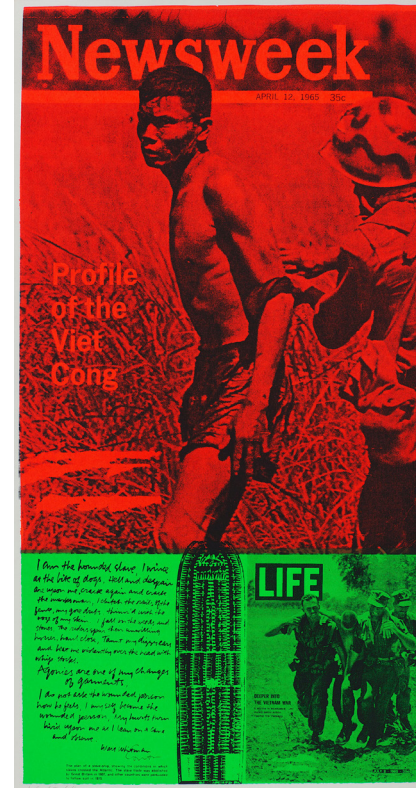
Today, the ubiquitous understanding of billboards as sites for public art are a long way from their pointed use in the 1980s and 1990s by artists such as Félix González-Torres, Edgar Heap of Birds, Barbara Kruger, Ken Lum, Martha Rosler and others. This is because — as is often the case with photography festivals — artists are conveniently given access to billboards instead of independently seeking them out as a unique, contextually specific, format.<sup>15</sup> That billboards have become a fixture of arts festivals' programming proves that their primary relevance in advertising is passé against the omnipresence of digital marketing. The charitability of profit-driven sign companies towards the arts is agitated by the fact that what is being given away is temporary access to a commercial asset with a diminishing value to commercialism. Since artists aren't being asked by these companies to sell toothpaste or cars, I wonder, what are we being sold instead? Posters, by contrast, necessarily participate at eye level in the everyday give-and-take of images. Collecting, covering, defacing or removing are all acceptable ways of engaging with them. Furthermore, allegiances with companies and their private interests can't grant them immunity. Vulnerability to their surroundings and competition with other posters means that, even as artworks, they hold no exclusive rights to their place in public.

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15 As evidenced by Ken Lum's *Melly*, this isn't to say that making it easy for artists to access billboards necessarily results in dull public art. Just that billboards should not be treated as a surface like any other.



“The current record-holder, the ‘international’ version of the Metropolis poster – the same Heinz Schulz-Neudamm design as number 3 minus the German writing. The clean lines and delicate shading make this a wonder to behold. It sold for \$690,000 in 2005; the rumoured purchaser was Leonardo DiCaprio”  
**The Guardian**



**Newsweek April 12, 1965**  
*Profile of the Viet Cong*

**LIFE July 2, 1965**  
*Deeper Into The Vietnam War*

A marine is evacuated during patrol action against the Vietcong

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of dogs, Hell and despair are upon me, crack again and crack the marksman, I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinned with the ooze of my skin. I fall on the weeds and stones, the riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close, taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments, I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person, my hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a can and observe.

-Walt Whitman



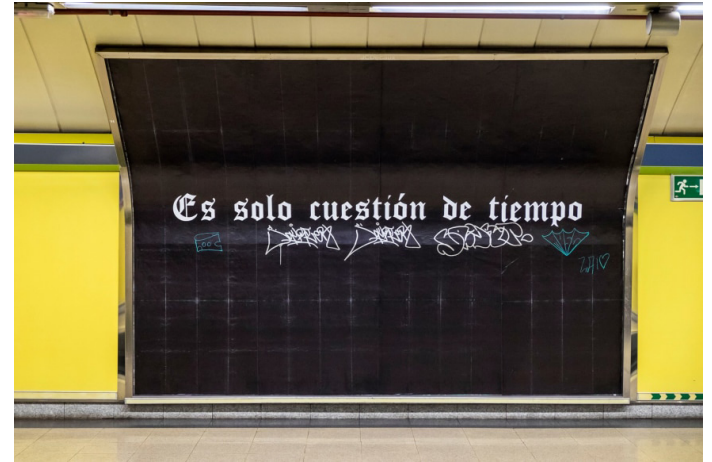
*Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, Ken Lum.  
Installed permanently on the outside of Kunstinstituut Melly.



Artist Steven Shearer's untitled billboard images of reclining and sleeping people were displayed as part of Capture Photography Festival in Vancouver but were soon removed due to complaints.



"Untitled", 1991. Outdoor billboard installed as part of the exhibition Tema AIDS. Sonja Henie-Niels. Onstad Art Center, Hovikodden, Norway. 8 May – 8 Jul. 1993. Cur. Kim Levin. [Traveling.]



"Untitled" (It's Just a Matter of Time), 1992. Diego de León metro station, Madrid, Spain.

Inflated by a sense of luck Or perhaps the cresting of chance  
The ground rolled out From Under itself Denying external  
Expectations Two pins shot towards one another From Miles  
apart When their heads collided All we could see was dust

**Nabil Azab** (b. 1994, Paris, France) is a multidisciplinary artist of North African descent. They live and work in kanien'kehá:ka territory (Montréal). Azab employs drawing, painting, writing and researching as fodder for abstract photographic works that resist the objectivity and disciplinarity of the medium in contemporary life. Recent solo exhibitions include *Something good that never happened* at Afternoon Projects, Vancouver (2022) and *the welling up which would not pass* at DRAC, Drummondville, Quebec (2022).

Born in Casablanca, Morocco, **Fatine-Violette Sabiri** lives and works in Montreal, Quebec. She holds a BFA in Studio Arts with a Minor in Film Studies from Concordia University. Her work has been presented in several solo and group exhibitions, including Patel Brown (Montreal, 2023), Espace Maurice (Montreal, 2022) Joys (Toronto, 2022), Joe Project (Montreal, 2022), Le 18 (Marrakesh, 2021), Jedna Dva Tři Gallery (Prague, 2020) and Soon.tw (Montreal, 2017). She is the 2022 recipient of the Burtynsky Grant awarded by the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

**Felix Rapp** (b. 1993, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany) lives on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations known as Vancouver. Rapp's artworks often blend photography, printmaking, sculpture and writing. These various approaches are bound together by a fixation on ephemeral visual material from popular culture such as t-shirt graphics and movie posters. Rapp has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in Vancouver, Antwerp, Brussels and Paris. He is the co-founder and co-editor of the community arts magazine *Le Chauffage*.

**Emily Zuberec** is a poet working in Montreal. She is the editor of Commo Magazine.

**Lucas Regazzi** lives and works in New York City, where he runs april april, a gallery and poetry program co-founded with Patrick Bova in 2021.

**Petra Bibeau** has spent the majority of her career working for galleries that foster a specific and considerable scholarship in the photographic medium including Stephen Wirtz, Fraenkel Gallery, and Casemore Gallery, all in San Francisco. As a writer and curator Bibeau has organized large-scale, multi-generational exhibitions that follow specific social narrative arcs including: *Prescribed Liberalism* (2022), *Time of W* (2022), *Considered Interactions* (2022), *As Far As You Can, Tell the Truth* (2021), *Handless Operative* (2019), and *Option to the Death of Freedom* (2017). She is the co-owner of Bibeau Krueger, a contemporary art gallery in New York City, and holds a BA in Liberal Studies from the New School for Public Engagement and an Art Business and Administration Certificate from New York University.

