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Frog



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Yan Pei-Ming

photographed for Frog by Marie Clérin

"Without frogs as a predator, mosquitoes and other invertebrates, themselves carriers of disease, will multiply."

Ligaya Mishan



Joe Mama-Nitzberg/ Matthew Brannon

I thought it would be interesting to start with *The Sensibility of...Time (Clock of the Heart)*, because I see Boy George as a telling pin on a map. In 1982 when *Culture Club* was releasing a steady stream of hit singles, I was 11 years old.

And I was 17.

Portrait by Marc Swanson — And it was a few years before I was introduced to punk rock, and I was also living in a very rural place, so I didn't have any ability to read those songs. When I think back to that time I'm still fascinated with that music propelling itself into such a mainstream space.

Yes, I was introduced to Boy George when the first single White Boy came out by my friend Devin, who has been deceased since 1986. Devin was this super fabulous glam, punk, junkie, teenage prostitute, and international traveler. He came back to San Francisco after one of his many travels, and he told me, "there is this Rasta drag queen in London that you are going to be OBSESSED with." I was 16 or 17 and I adored Devin and trusted his cultural instincts. So I was hooked immediately. I think it's very interesting now. I made a body of work in 1995 with Boy George for my graduate thesis show at Art Center [College of Design]. Boy George could not have been more out of fashion, and my thesis was somewhat about this. I was making a relationship between Boy George and Barnett Newman. I repainted Newman paintings, and I dressed as Boy George and then it was

photographed with me holding the painting and my figure as Boy George becoming a "zip" in the photo. It was a doubling, so to speak. This was a type of project that wasn't really what was in fashion in 1995. People were really like, "What the hell is this?" I thought I would never return to Boy George. I was just, like, I did that, but I've always had this true place in my heart for Boy George. I started thinking about all the current discourse on gender fluidity and Queer, and how it's back in the culture, in popular culture and especially social media culture. Boy George was obviously addressing so much of this, but in a very different way at a different time. It really became about a type of nostalgia for me in terms of this particular politic, and where that was placed... and I was just like, "I'm gonna use George again." That is how that piece came to be. The text in that piece, along with the text in several other pieces, is a quote from Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*. The images are halves of two images that I put together from the video for *Time (Clock of the Heart)*.

— Is that your favorite *Culture Club* song?

No, it was more just like this really flat-footed idea about "time." I was interested in what Sontag was saying about how the past and time operate in *Camp*, as well how the two halves of the image are from a split-second time difference in the video, but they can never become a unified whole. You know, "time." [Both laugh.]

— Before we get to the Sontag, I want to talk a little bit more about Boy George, specifically about your willingness to use subjects that are



out of fashion. That willingness in 1995 seems to still be present in your work.

Oh yes. I'd say it's defiance along with willingness. Who gets to decide what is culturally relevant and why? That's just me doing my push back on the power structures of cultural currency. It's like, "Fuck you, Boy George is more queer than..."

— *The hit Netflix series. Blah, blah, blah.*

Yeah, whatever. I'm cranky, I'm old.

— *Well, Time is my favorite Culture Club song, and it just predates my familiarity with subcultures and any ability to detect subversion. I'm always curious about such things making it into the mainstream. I mean, I remember those times as being extremely homophobic.*

Yeah, Reagan, Aids.

— *And yet, here were these songs on the radio, and I don't think most Americans could have told you the difference between Boy George and Billy Idol, who was wearing a cut-up, beaded, half-shirt.*

Yes! I think that is one of the interesting things about that time. This music and imagery were being mass consumed and the intricacies were illegible to most. It seemed as though they had no desire to "read" it, but just to consume it. I think everyone is so much more of a cultural critic now. We now all have this endless immediate access to culture. It can't grow and permeate, in the same way that did then, into a larger consciousness.

— *I fear there's a sort of insistence on consensus now, which is limiting. And this could bring us to the Sontag subject. To me there's a first and a second read to your show. Unless you recognize and can place the writing, you're left to sit with it as is before doing your homework.*

I think it's recognizable to a very small number. There is not a tremendous amount of surrounding information to point you to it.

— *There is so much to say here because I also think it relates to your relationship to poetry.*

Definitely.

— *You want to go back and spend time with it. Once you present text as a visual art like this, there is a different processing speed. Anyway, I did go back and read her essay, which is incredible. It had been a while since I'd read it and I was again so struck by it. The thing that always sticks out to me is her examples of this sensibility. They're before my time and would take some work to appreciate. I think someone could teach a class on these examples and by the end of that class, you would perhaps understand...*

... A time and a place.

— *Take Swans Lake. I'm thinking; I'm so far from that. I want to get back to that place where I could be a person who could have a camp relationship to Swans Lake. But that ambition to try to appreciate a sensibility feels like something nowadays people don't want at all.*

No. I think she is trying to locate and describe and theorize on a subculture's sensibility that is not meant to be described or spoken of, but simply understood. To align yourself to someone else or a

sensibility that is somehow illegible to other people. I think that is a lot of the point of Camp. It's an elitist proposition, as Sontag says. You know, it's like, "you don't get it honey, and you never will." And that's why I love it. Camp is generous, as she says, but it is also, you know... bitchy.

— *And also born of limitation? Doing something with what was available. This was all you had on TV, this all you had to wear.*

And you weren't allowed a voice in the world, as a gay man, for that is basically who she is speaking of, so you had to develop this language out of these discarded relics. They were communicating in a new way that could then be understood by people like you. But it doesn't make sense. I can't help but think that this sensibility has to somehow be genetic, and not just psychological and cultural. I mean, why do gay men of a certain age, at a certain time respond to these certain actress performances, in a certain way? People have theorized, and theorized and theorized on this, but I think it is somehow ineffable. I'm also fascinated by her (Sontag) as a semi-identified lesbian, trying to place it. It's still the definitive writing on the subject, whether it is tremendously outdated or not.

— *What year is it from?*

1964. A year before I was born. I was conceived while she wrote it.

— *[Laughs.] She was my neighbor for a time.*

You're such a namedropper.

— *[Laughs.] On a couple of occasions I was accidentally delivered her mail and had to return it to her. But I was so intimidated. I couldn't figure out what to say and how I would say it.*

Of course! But don't you think that was part of the practice too? She developed that persona. It was a decision. One of the other things I was thinking about in the show was the idea of the "celebrity intellectual."

— *I love that phrase. Just trying to think who that would be now.*

It's more the Celebrity Apprentice now than the celebrity intellectual. You know, the one who will go unnamed. That's where our American culture is. I mean, can you imagine, Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, even Truman Capote as a celebrity now on a mass scale?

— *Well, I think it's about access again. At that time, there were only three television networks, and I believe it was federally regulated; you actually had to have a certain amount of news and cultural programming. You could only have so many sitcoms and such. But where we are at now, you can just eat McDonald's all day, like they want you to. I don't think back at that time (when) Middle America wanted to watch Gore Vidal.*

I agree with you. I'd like to jump to your show now. I think it's interesting to think about when she is writing this and these specific celebrity intellectuals are on television, and how the subject of your show Concerning Vietnam is the exact same time that we've been discussing. I'm very interested in your take on popular culture at the time. Usually when the Vietnam War era is presented to us now or even in the last 20 years, it is all through the lens of protest and counter-culture. That is kind of the

takeaway visual of the time, not the imagery that you are presenting. You are working with imagery of the real power players and dominant culture of the time, yet we are often directed to think that what was really relevant at that time was the Protest.

— *SO much to say. Protest and its history are of course critical. Those people were trying to stop a war. My current project is more historical. It concerns a very upsetting time from the distance of fifty-some years. It concerns the time of a generation just before mine. The history of protest is not the vantage point I've addressed yet. I was thinking the other day, what my creative precedents could be since I don't seem to be pulling from the visual art world (maybe I never have.) In a way it's possible I'm doing something closer aligned with New Journalism. A subjective perspective to an intensive reporting of facts. I've always been a fan of that period and that blurry space in literature that people like Joan Didion and Michael Herr occupied. But there was a real moment when after a significant time reading about the war—a couple years—I had to ask myself if I could address it in my art. Part of me recognized on a deep level that I had found my subject. Now that I've been making the work, I'm kind of traumatized by the project that I put forward for myself, and I look forward to finishing it, but I know it will be a long, long time before I can do that.*

One of the things I find fascinating about this work is its relationship to your earlier work. It contains your hand and signature style and certain motifs, but the subject matter is one that supposedly shouldn't be used by this same artist. One could characterize your earlier work with a world-weariness, dark glamour and sophistication. This work is not participating in those things in the slightest. It's alluding to a very different point of view, but all through your point of view. And literal point of view is something I did want to ask you about as well. For instance, Bell AH-1S Cobra, Pilot's Seat is from the pilot's point of view, where Oval Office is from, I guess, the Press Corps's point of view and hence documents are upside down and hard to read. Is this something that I, as a viewer, am meant to highlight?

— *Yes, that is a very big point. Not to go back to Boy George.*

One should always go back to Boy George if one can.

— *To go back to the beginning of my career, I had wanted to use text and I had started to write and use that writing in my art, and people assumed that everything was autobiographical.*

Really?

— *And my instinct was to stop using text, and then I realized...*

[interrupting] that is so lame.

— *[Laughs.] Well, that was when I realized there was something to take advantage of there. I could play this pronoun game and I think if I was to psychoanalyze this strategy, it was born from someone immersed in popular culture. That's why I bring up Boy George, for whom "you, he, we, they" can be read on many levels. I developed this language of a sort of ventriloquism. Basically, it was a ventriloquist's act that I was doing with all my prints. Except with this new body of work I'm doing much more than the one-liners I used to. My wit is still there. Hopefully.*

Regarding the perspective. There is a film term/strategy called "split doper" that is used by Hitchcock a lot where onscreen someone will be very fore-grounded—their head taking up half the screen, and someone

distant at the same time, say at a desk. I'm trying to do something similar to sort of place the viewer inside my pieces in a similar way.

It took a second or third look at your show for this issue of point of view to become clear to me, but when it did I was really aware of how present it is in the work. And I thought; how could I have missed this? But the work is so visually pleasurable, and there are so many signifiers to play with that I went in for details before I took on the larger whole picture. I don't know if this has to do with viewing the work online rather than being in front of it, as I realize scale plays such a large factor.

— *Yes. Everything is slightly larger than life, as if to mimic, say, the way that you would look at your own hand. It's a very intimate viewpoint. I want to put the viewer in the perspective of power, executive power to be specific. And I don't think I really need to say this, but the show is not really about Vietnam, but about America's relationship to war.*

I think you do need say that, or why wouldn't you say that?

— *[Laughs.] Well, one, I don't want to give it away to those who don't know it, and two, to other people I feel like I don't need to say it.*

Oh, be generous. Give them some help.

Well, I've always enjoyed talking about the thing by not showing you the thing that you are talking about. I'm a big fan of Jean Renoir's Rules of the Game or even say, Hal Ashby's Shampoo because they are both talking about a very frivolous society in the foreground while the world is on fire in the background. I used to say I was addressing why we are our own worst enemies. I've translated that onto a larger and less personal scale. The problem I have currently is that my subject went from being something buried in the past into a sort of hot topic. That was an accident on my part. For one, I didn't realize Trump would become President and that would become the horizon for all conversations, and two, I didn't realize that Ken Burns was making this 18-hour documentary, and that was traumatizing for me. I've since worked past both of those.

I do that to myself too. The fucking zeitgeist. How dare they! [Both laugh.] But I actually think it's very powerful and we should try and embrace it a bit. Marc (Swanson, Joe's partner) always says this to me; "it means you're on the right track." It doesn't necessarily mean that people will think you stole the idea, or that the other individual will grab the attention, or that the idea is not special enough. It actually means that it is really relevant.

— *Yeah, I've always had such an uncomfortable relationship to the mainstream.*

Me too.

— *And now that the boundaries are so blurry...*

That's for sure.

— *I think we both share a nostalgia for a discomfort that we used to have.*

Absolutely. Or for a location, or for a way to define things relationally that is disappearing. I don't know if you are, but I am middle-aged, and it is so weird to think about the things that have come before as well as the things that are still to come. Where am

in relation to this or that? It's confusing.

— *Let's talk about...*

Let's not talk about aging.

— *Let's talk about the piece Our Grandmothers. I think this painting speaks to what you are talking about right now. To start, the painting behind the text is incredible. That is the level of 95% of everything that I see at an art fair. The text on top of it demands many steps: where does the text come from, whose grandmothers are we talking about, what does talking brilliantly mean. I don't think people would talk about painting like this anymore. It's gone back to this very conservative place. My enthusiasm for the art world has curdled so much in the last ten years. I wonder if it's returned to something, or if something is lost.*

I was very interested when you were talking about the pronoun thing with Boy George. In this show there are "theys" and "ours" and "I's". I had not even realized this until I was putting it all together in an exhibition. When I had this realization, I was very gray. The quote is from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It comes from a dinner party in the novel and this is just a throwaway. One out of a thousand quips. The character is actually talking about make-up.

— *Uh, Oh*

Which I loved, because along with so many other things, it is the story of a painting, and of vanity. Wilde is obviously hyper-aware of the double meaning here. The image that the text is placed on top of is a Google image search result for Lipstick Traces. It is a stock photo of "lipstick traces," and I know you get that reference! I, which I also thought was just a funny way to Google for makeup. I placed the text on top of the stock image in Photoshop, and had it ink-jet printed on canvas. While I don't necessarily consider this a painting, I wanted it to have some sort of physical relationship to a painting.

— *So much to say. So, if the subject of the show is a sensibility, then the opposite of a sensibility would be a default. I do happen to see this as a painting. There is a tension between this idea of a sensibility, and you are making specific choices, and then you are also just lifting your hands. I see this in the choice of magenta, and some of the typeface choices, and then Googling as well.*

Yes, I am very interested in this idea of the choice of certain fonts being "neutral", when they are tremendously loaded. Also, in the idea of a Google Image search being chance or neutral and objective, when it is in fact directed by your previous searches to try and get you to buy something. I'm also interested in the idea that one would pick the first image in an image search as the most illustrative of the subject. This idea that we, as subjects, viewers or consumers are making "choices" that suit our sensibility, which we are, but these "choices" are also being directed by that elephant in the corner, Capitalism. This is something I am trying to illuminate. Look at me and my unique sensibility, but I too am also trapped in this system. Does that make sense?

— *Oh it does. It's a very interesting thing to use as one's artistic palette. On one level a visitor to your show would somehow perceive this, but it sets up something very strange. For instance, one time I had a drink with Allen Ruppersberg. Someone had suggested that the two of us collaborate, but he didn't like my idea, and it didn't work out.*

When was this?

— *Oh, maybe 10 years ago or something I proposed that we would make an art supplies store, and he said, "I hate art supply stores." I said, "of course". The idea was that a customer would come in and ask for something, and we would then go in the back room and hand them whatever we wanted. And when you talk around your shoes, you say "this is a painting," "this is a video," "this is [...]", "I don't know what to call this third thing, "this is a work on fabric?" They are just barely passing. You couldn't even be bothered to go to the art supplies store, you wouldn't want to enter that space, if someone bought you paints and a canvas, you wouldn't want to use them. There's a tension there. There is, to use your word again, a defiance of the current enthusiasm for the return of the hand.*

I am working with my own limitations. I am not a draftsman. I've never been enamored of my own gesture. And I've never been patient enough to further develop that. I am very interested in the idea of something we might call the digital hand. I draw like a child in Photoshop. I cut things out in Photoshop, like a child with a tremor. I do it wrong because I'm old and I've never been willing to take a class to change this.

And this creates yet another sensibility where my work starts to have a "hand" to it. You can look at it and say, "Joe made that." There is not just a tone or subject matter sensibility, but there is actually a "hand" to it.

The forms and mediums that I'm working with are born out of economics and where I live. The paintings and the fabric pieces are all made on my computer and then sent away for using consumer-based technologies and fabrications. They are not produced in a fine art environment. These technologies and companies are for people doing home sewing or getting a canvas print of a family photo for above the couch. And I made the videos in iMovie because that is what I can do, what is available to me, and what is cost-effective. This level of production is also interesting to me. I think it creates a finish that is unsettling. They are neither rough, handmade or naïve; nor are they truly state of the art. And it's also simply the best I can do.

— *Listening to you now I think I have a different impression of it. Initially, I thought that you had taken a twenty-year break from art-making, or that this show took twenty years to make and there were like, four shows in one, as there were so many forms.*

That's kind of true too.

— *Now that you're describing it, I'm thinking, "oh yes, if you had a photograph of your family on vacation and you wanted to make it into an artwork for your house, you would go online, and oh, we could get it printed in canvas or we could get a little frame that scrolls through images of our vacation that we set on our nightstand.*

You're realizing how cheap it really is. Tawdry, vulgar.

— *Yeah. Which is a hard thing to do in a way.*

It's also, if I dare say, weirdly elegant. And I'm interested in that tension. I think you work with that tension too. You know, you have a fucking vacuum-cleaner in your show. I mean, other artists have used vacuums, but you use it very differently. I'm interested to hear you talk about that. Also, why is *The Quiet American* (Saigon sculpture) the biggest thing in the room? Obviously, the real work of the show is in your hand and your research, which

Painting is so corrupted and code for money now, I'm not sure what to say.

live in the prints. But when you walk into the show and see *The Quiet American*, you're like "Whoa, what's that big thing?"

— I've always been interested in a high/low dynamic and I've long felt that the purpose of art, for me at least, is to serve as an irritant. I want my work to visually attract, and camouflage darker content. It should have a visual authority, or a familiarity or correctness to it that is then countered by all these other things that I have done. In this particular show, I spent a great deal of time, perhaps a year of doing little else, making the works along the wall. I calculated that I put in tens of thousands of pages of research into them. So when it came to putting them in the space, I'm always very self-conscious about, and interested in display. It felt like there was physically too much space around it. I wanted to disrupt the gallery or change the architecture. And yet, how to do that I wasn't sure. I had this moment, which I'm still unsure about, where I envisioned this Saigon sign. I think it had something to do with a reversal. That if the prints are so information dense I could counter this by taking a single word, and turn a single word into an object, very clearly illustrating that a word is more than a word. It's a word that haunts language.

How I picked that scale is a little confusing. At one point the fabricator told me he could make it three times bigger than that [both laugh] and other people behind me were saying "let's do it", But no, no, it needs to be particular human scale that it is so that you can walk around and see it. So it's like signage, but it's also sculpture.

It is. It also has this decidedly clunky cutout edge quality to it, when obviously it could be smoothed out by a fabricator. Again, for me it alludes to either a manual or a digital hand cutting it out. Snip, snip, snip... these letters. What about that choice?

— It's not an appropriation or a recreation of a sign that already exists, but it refers to the many signs that did exist. A great deal of foreign money flooded into that city. In the 1960s a soldier heading into the city from the airport would see large billboards saying "Chase Bank welcomes you to Saigon" and such. But my piece is very much my hand.

Because that piece is so purposefully "THUD," if you had not have done that, it would be easier to move past. But then because it's the largest piece, I had to look at it and consider why you made the decisions that you did, relating to the other work. I had to consider how you made it, not just in content but of course formally. I think it's really interesting. You're always kind of done this. You, unlike me, can draw and paint but you didn't make big paintings. I mean; that's a decision you've always made.

— Yeah, there's a long history to it. As I'm doing my visual research for these things, there are many moments when I'm like, "oh that's perfect, I need this, I'm going to use this." There's the exact letterhead that somebody had, and then there's the choice, do I redraw that? Do I use a different font for that? Do I come up with my own font? These types of decisions are sort of going on all day long. It's amplified when you see it used in one large sculpture like that. But it's a kind of visual language that I've developed over time. It's always had a sort of looking back lens, but it doesn't have a specific date to it.

Well, I'm going to just ask a hideous question. Have you ever had anyone suggest that you make paintings so you could sell them for more money?

— Yes. All the time. [Both laugh.] It's not that I don't like painting. But I feel part of your brain has to fall out of your ears to make paintings.

Painters are going to love that [both laugh.]

— Well, maybe I'm just jealous. But painting is so corrupted and code for money now, I'm not sure what to say. And my relationship to paper is a problematic one; it's born from a love and fetishizing of printed matter. I've always liked the advertising more than the actual, in a way. I'm embarrassed by the whole project of being an artist. So, if I think being a painter is sort of embarrassing for an adult, but being a printmaker is really sad.

[Laughs.] Could one say tragic?

— *Tragic. Yeah. [Laughs.] There's something about the way I make things that corresponds to the way I think. There's something about the pacing, the cadence. There's something I haven't figured out for myself. I will say this; the subject of the American war in Vietnam allowed me to let go of a lot of restraints that I had put on myself visually. Because the subject was so consuming, it almost distracted the gates that I usually have for art-making, so that I ended up making everything a thousand colors and hundreds of screens.*

You could probably paint it quicker.

— *Laughs. Yeah, I don't think I could paint the way I would want to. Printing is a very different language. Sure you can print a painting. But mediums as the central subject are uninteresting to me. I have such an illustrator's way of making sense of things. I want the idea of the thing to be the focus. I want the visual to assure that focus. If I could figure out how to make what I want to make in the form of painting, I think I probably would.*

I find this fascinating and I love this sort of defiance. I mean, you could paint them in a way that people would like them, and sell them, and they would be able to be more valuable, but you don't do that. And then you also don't make multiples.

— *I also think that in my art education, this hierarchy didn't exist until I became a part of the commercial art world, and I'll just go ahead and say it, came to New York. I understood this, but it was too late in a way. I got into graduate school as a painter, and I have returned to painting, but...*

Maybe that's a good segue to talk about where you went to school and then coming to New York.

— *I think what is most exciting about painting and what I reserve for it, is that you don't know where you are going to end up. It's more related to music. I'm interested in a different sort of articulation.*

You were saying this hierarchy of painting didn't exist in your undergraduate education in Los Angeles, and this became more a part of your awareness when you came to New York.

— *I think it's a little different because you were going to graduate school, but we share something here. I arrived in Los Angeles in 1989, and the only thing I was interested in was music. I worked in record stores and went and saw bands five nights a week. Going to UCLA in 1992 or 1993. I transferred in after dropping out of three other schools. My first teachers were Paul McCarthy and Joan Jonas, and I took an art history class where we looked at a hotel as a museum, and broke down the lobby and the particular rooms.*

That sounds pretty grad level to me.

— *I don't think the boundaries were very clear between undergraduate and graduate or faculty for that matter at that time at UCLA. Or being a professional artist versus being a teacher, so that it was probably the most rewarding, exciting art community I've ever been involved with. Leaving school, and just sort of returning to going to see music... I kind of just went to graduate school to break free from a depression in a way.*

How much time was there between undergrad and grad?

— *I think maybe two years. Lari Pittman proposed to me that I go to school in New York and then return to Los Angeles. That was the plan. Columbia University had just started up an art program. And I had a hard time going to school there. It was more of a finishing school. It wasn't what UCLA was. I got a lot out of it in a sort of negative experience. Learning what I wanted to do against what was available to me. But, this is the thing I think we share, this other world. I think we share this sort of ambivalence about being an artist. Am I right?*

Yes. And I think we really share a lot just in terms of time and space. You know, I moved to Los Angeles in 1989 as well. I started graduate school in 1993 at Art Center College of Design and I had not gone to undergrad for art, but for film. You use many film references, when you are talking about your art that many people do not. I actually feel very comfortable with these terms and they really do help me to understand. As well as the music thing, obviously. But that is a whole other conversation. [Laughs.]

— *I think we both also think that the art world is in an unfortunate moment.*

Absolutely. And everything you said about the Los Angeles art community and art education, whereas mine was graduate school and I think somewhat different. But while you had Paul McCarthy, I had Mike Kelley and Steven Prina. It was such a small community and the market was really nonexistent everywhere, but especially absent in Los Angeles. You went to an opening and there were your classmates, and other art students from other schools, and faculty, and the art students from a generation before, and that was it. I met art school for art because when I moved to Los Angeles, I met artists, in particular Larry Johnson, who gave me permission to think that I was allowed to be an artist. They empowered me with that permission, because I had had some sort of weird preconceived notion or insecurity about what an artist was supposed to be.

— *Is it true that the first art you ever made was the art for your graduate school application?*

It is true. The legend is true. [Laughs.] I try and talk to art students about this not being a great way to do it. I was so ill-prepared for graduate school. I showed up and I was all "this is going to be so fun" and then... Oh my god. All of these people had already been to art school and many had been making art their whole lives.

— *You were at Art Center, and at least at that time, "fun" would not be the way I would describe it. [Both laugh.]*

I will never forget. On my first day of school, one of the other new students used the terms "ontological" and "epistemological break." [Laughter.] This was before the days of whipping out your phone to look things up. I was like, "oh shit. What the fuck! I have no idea." You know, "what am I doing here? This isn't going to work."

— *But here's another thing that's lost. I feel like, when I wanted to, before I ever understood anything in October magazine, I mean I bought the thing; it was beyond intimidated, then spent some time... There was a willingness then that isn't now, maybe this isn't true. The speed of appreciation that is current is very different from the notion of Camp we started with, that had a lot to do with negotiation, even if it was an informal occasion.*

Yeah. I mean, I also love the idea of *October* magazine being Camp. But that's a whole other... [Laughter.] Yeah, I think it has to do with cycles of interest. It's such a big thing to think about, the ways that certain things and ideas cycle through in the art world.

— *I think it's more than that. I think that art fairs and Google provide instant access to everything. Part of my project is amying in that manner. The information in it requires so much more of the viewer. It's trying to negotiate its own terms.*

I think we are both interested in that. Why would you bother making something that was that easy to consume? Like what is the point of that as an artist, other than to have it be consumed? I know people have very different ideas about this, but I just think, how is that rewarding as an artist? So you figure out how to make this thing that someone will look at on their phone and like, and never think of again. I guess that is a bit harsh. [Laughter.]

— *Also, the strategy of variation. I made this one and there are like two hundred of the same thing. You know, I think free would have been good.*

There are as many as there are collectors in the world. That is how many they will make. OK, cynical, harsh, here we go. I mean you're not exploring the possibilities of repetition. You're not fucking Warhol. And he made the commodity aspect of it part of the practice. I love people pretending that is not what they are doing. [Pause] I guess we should get back to us.

— *I want to go back to your process of using the consumer-based technologies. Knowing that made me like it more.*

Really? Why?

— *I had thought you were second-guessing yourself. I couldn't tell. I wasn't sure. Was it, there's so much that I want to do, so I'm going to do four different projects in one, or if...*

I do think that's part of it too. It's not just that I had not this large of a solo show in twenty-one years. Two years ago I had a show at Catherine Bastide Gallery in Brussels, which were four pieces I had made over the past few years that the gallery curated into a group that became a small solo exhibition. It totally worked. It was Three Chairs Three, which is a collaged photograph referencing Kosuth's chair piece. There was the painting Nevermind, a painting of Nevermind the Bollocks with the color and text removed. There's the photo of my mother after Mapplethorpe's Man in a Polyester Suit. And the video *StyLe is Everything*, which again is Sontag's text. They are all black, white and grey. So there's a photograph that I took. There is a collage of other people's photographs printed on paper. There is a painting on canvas that I didn't paint, based on something from popular culture, and there's a video. In certain ways, that is my practice. I'm not trying to be, nor am I capable of being a painter, or a master photographer or a video artist. You know, I really don't know how to do any of them. The majority of my art training at Art Center College of Design, I was already having people make things, as I was so insecure and behind the curve. I had friends and other students help me. And then I was a creative director in the music industry for many years, where I was overseeing people "making" things. So this show and the things I've made in the last few years, feels to me like the first time that I am actually making

art, and not just being a creative director. But that creative director process is still such a part of my project and I can't unlearn that.

— *Right. So these last two shows you've done don't become a solution, but more their own information.*

And I look at Concerning Vietnam, and I see a line through from your older work, in both the prints and the sculptures, but developed into something very different. And you have made embroidery on canvas, silkscreen, prints that you paint on, sculptures, a book, films. I don't think we get to that way of working in the same way. But I don't look at your work and wonder, why doesn't he make just one thing?

— *Yeah. I wish I made one thing, but it's too late now. I've learned the hard way. I don't want to suggest that I haven't tried that. Something happens. I have an in-built self-destruct. Every time I make something that I think people want, they don't want it. Later on it's clear why they wouldn't want it. They don't want it. Every time I just make what I want to see, then it's more interesting.*

Marc and I always talk about that. Marc will tell me that I often say, "I just made something and it's so stupid" and he'll say, "Well, those are always the best things."

— [Laughs.] Yeah.

And Marc will say about something he made, "there's not enough here. It was too easy." Then years later he'll realize that he fucked it up, and it was done when it was too easy. I think that finding that space between self-doubt and criticality and confidence in your own, dare I say, sensibility, I think that is a real common struggle for people that are good artists.

— *Yeah. And we'll never be able to see it outside of ourselves. It's always traumatic for me to have an exhibition because it's like a taste of how somebody else might see it. And then you're getting all this information back. I always feel like I wish that you could build a house, live in it, then tear the whole thing down and then rebuild it. I feel the same way with an exhibition. I wish you could make it, put it up, have people see it, then oh, tear it all down and the do it again and correct everything. I mean, it wouldn't be rewarding to do that, but there is something very difficult about presenting artworks publicly.*

Yeah, but I think that is why people want to see art. They want to somehow feel that, uh oh, now I'm going to sound really touchy-feely! Feeling that flaw, that humanity, that imperfection, that vulnerability, that is what real communication is about. I mean, that is why your work isn't advertising.

On that note, it was great to talk to you as always.

— *You too.*

1. *Lipstick Traces* is a 1962 song that has been covered by many musicians from Ringo Starr to Alex Chilton and the title of a book by Greil Marcus subtitled "a secret history of the 20th century," published in 1989. More recently the reference has been used as the title for a Manic Street Preachers compilation [Ed. Note.]