

Hans-Christian Dany

When
the
Present
Moment
Gets
Lost
in
the
Desert





Questions like to catch you when you're least expecting them. They sneak up on you, and then suddenly they're standing right in your face. That's what happened to me a few days ago on the outskirts of Las Vegas, where the city gives way to desert. In the afternoon sunlight, I couldn't even recognize the spaceship I'd taken into the city anymore. The flat cuboids along Sahara Avenue now looked like those beginnings of American cities I believed myself to know from cowboy movies. I was inside one of the utilitarian structures, at a stripper supplies store, sitting on a sofa watching a young woman trying shoes at a pole. The situation was way too intimate for me. We'd only known each other for two hours. As the decision-making process wore on, I retreated into a conversation with the man this woman had brought along. He was in his mid-twenties and introduced himself as a Russian who had moved to Kentucky with his family and was currently working as a consultant for American Apparel.

Upon completing the transaction, the shoe salesman recommends the Japanese bistro a few doors down. We enter the windowless joint a bit later. In the dim light, I stare transfixed at the carpet, its pattern an abstract painting of spots and circles extending in magical monotony, until we step into the tatami landscape.

While we're waiting for our rolled rice, which they've been serving here since 1969, my new buddy asks me what I think of the "Cologne Conspiracy". I look at him, perplexed, as he elaborates: that network that formed around

a group of artists in Cologne, mostly Martin Kippenberger's assistants, in the nineties, and went on to expand its sphere of influence into the USA via the Städelschule in Frankfurt. My mouth is probably hanging open by now. In an attempt to find out if I've simply misunderstood something, I start listing some names hesitantly: Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter, Josef Strau, American Fine Arts, later John Kelsey, Bernadette Corporation, Reena Spaulings. My interlocutor nods. My confusion is slowly giving way to curiosity as he unfurls his take on things in concentrated sentences. It doesn't take long for him to spin a complex web of names of artists, galleries, collectors, magazines, bars and anything in-between. Long lines crisscross and coil up into nodes. The whole thing covers a quarter century. The young Russian concedes that people in the US constantly get the facts wrong when they're analyzing this conspiracy. For that reason alone, the entire structure needs to be painstakingly indexed and interpreted. He doesn't see this as a matter of some kind of communicating network; it's more like a tacit understanding whose stability is impressive in its continuity. Sure—those kinds of conspiracies are a dime a dozen in the art scene. But what makes this one special, why its unwritten history would be worth writing, is its impending effect on the future. He is currently observing how a younger generation, younger than himself, has been developing its artistic stance under the influence of The Conspiracy—mostly guys, toiling away on the long shadow of The Claim. These people are excluding lots of other possibilities, direct articulation most pointedly, generally opting instead for putting

off anything that could be done, and all this is justified by the indirect claim, which is The Conspiracy's claim, that Art could not yet occur, or not at all, under the prevailing conditions. And of course young guys are impressed by how much cooler non-action and compensatory gestures simply look. And then these defeatist poses and ensuing meta-refusals get served up with a nice Marxist sauce, like when the quote unquote Gallery Reena Spaulings Fine Art—operating as some kind of quasi artist—exhibits mannequin legs at the London show *Pop Life*, legs otherwise disembodied but wearing leggings printed with slogans from Merlin Carpenter's "double political kitsch paintings." The painter, who wasn't aware that his text paintings would be repurposed into multiples, considered the stunt gross misconduct. A profuse apology led in turn to Carpenter's counter-show "Tate Café" at Gallery Reena Spaulings Fine Art. That and other displays of a recursively mirrored negation are hollowing out the stage of the present; what remains is a blank position framed by references. The occurrence diffuses through a desert of stories, rumors and fictions. Beads of sweat are accumulating on my forehead, but at least the circle from The Conspiracy to American Apparel has now closed by way of leggings. In my mind, the sight of Carpenter's "Die Collector Scum" printed all over footless pantyhose suddenly looks kind of like how I pictured those crickets gone wild from the vaguely surreal passage in *Das Kapital* where Karl Marx puts a literary spin on his explanation of the table's dance as commodity.

For now I'm going to toss the ball back into the past and ask my interlocutor if that might not have all taken on the stench of conspiracy because Wolfgang Bauer's *Change* belonged to the complex's references? And whether that might have meant that an appetite for theatricality had been scripted into the course of events from the outset?

In *Change*, a group of bored antiheroes hatches a plan to inflate a dupe hanging around at Café Hawelka in Vienna to a major artist. The gallerist of the crew gives Blasi Okopenko a show, the critic raves over his St. Pölten landscapes, and the collector is the first to buy them. At the climax, the puppet is supposed to crash; his world should crumble around him, to the point that he kills himself. But just in the nick of time, the cunning pawn turns the tables, and instead of Okopenko hanging himself, it's Fery, the cynical artist who masterminded the plan.

Change was a hit in 1969. Bauer couldn't, or didn't want to hang on to his fame. More concerned with roulette, booze and women, he kept himself afloat as an *enfant terrible* by writing articles for in-flight magazines, joined the Archduke Johann Freemason Lodge and became one of the founding members of the Grazer Lord Jim Lodge; Martin Kippenberger also belonged to that society. So closes the circle back to Cologne.





Considering everything he would call the Conspiracy, has it all been a matter of playing with literary figures since the beginning? The play *Change*, Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim, but not just those two. And wasn't Martin Kippenberger's body of work not at its core an attempt at writing a novel to his own ineffectuality, to compensate by trying to turn his own life into a novel? While we're in fact still sitting on tatamis in that Japanese bistro on the outskirts of Las Vegas, the young Russian has spun a thread from Lord Jim, the sailor awash in dark maritime powers, who never loses faith in goodness over his erratic trajectory, to the new book by Seth Price. I get it instantly, and we both start gushing over the cover of *Fuck Seth Price*. High fashion graphics that looked old before they got printed. A big hole is punched in the middle of the cover that makes the book look read as soon as you pick it up. Between compass marks, the dirty word title glows in colors that might as well have been taken from the preset of a digital paint box and sum up the contents: a disoriented sailor or disembodied post-conceptual painter is drifting indefinitely in the circles of his own narrative.

All of a sudden I remember how it occurred to me what to write in my art school application letter at the sight of that cover. I claimed to have heard that Americans can only conceive of the world within twenty-four hours. Yesterday and tomorrow are unimaginable to them. And that is my dream, to become a similar being in an eternal present, which I intend to pursue by studying art. I believe I wrote that

to stand out from widespread complaints among my peers about the trendy obsession with the present in the art business and affirm that very thing. It was an attempt at saying yes to the now and delighting in its transitory nature. Anyway, that was last century.

In the Price book, the continuous present shines, abruptly inserted acts of violence excepted, through absence. Little or nothing happens in a digitalized world which has turned into "affirmative mush". The reading eye follows a mind with no vehicle, at least none that leads a life worth mentioning, through its thoughts. Maybe it's Seth Price's alter ego—although as soon as that reading starts to set in, it breaks back down again.

The internal monologue about what supposedly was and may have been done starts with a culinary shift from what his parents' generation thought of as Italian cooking to the moment in the nineties when people began eating something in the style of Italian cooking. Talking to himself as he does, he comes across as slightly unstable and demoralized by the unlimited yet also narrow options "post-problem art" offers. By that he means the attitude toward art that has been dominant for the past decade, whose criteria derive exclusively from market value, and in which more and more artists act like professional gamblers at the casino. You place your bets at a certain moment, and that has led to a total overvaluing of the now. In that state of affairs, the Price hero wonders whether one might not as well become a drunken,

marauding backpacker? The answer to that question will remain unspoken and meaningless.

Couldn't it be—I'm speculating now—that this novel is a refined strategic move by Price? People say he's translating his texts into objects when he makes art, which is probably also because he started out as an author. Price responds to potshots about his art being a three-dimensional extension of his writing with the picture of a contemporary artist who turned himself into a literary figure in *Fuck Seth Price*. The American Apparel consultant asks at this point whether making the artist literary in that way should be taken as another development in the Cologne Conspiracy? When I fail to offer an immediate response, he brings up Tobias Madison. The Swiss artist compounded the claim that Price's art is a footnote to his texts with the rumor that he, Tobias Madison, had already written the title *Fuck Seth Price* on a lampshade in a bar in Zurich years ago.

I reply that Madison's benign tall tale and his ultimately affirmative dis—he does credit Price with writing the novel of a generation—are probably rooted in hip-hop culture, just like the notion of the poser is. And if I really think about it, would I not be remiss to consign the big talker, the rumor and the lamp to the Kippenberger Complex for all eternity? There have always been big talkers. Rumor is a form with tradition. And the lamp is usually just a lamp and nothing more, not a reference to a certain person doing a drunken dance on a twisted pole.

Because the lady wanted to, we have by this time driven to the Palomino. But it barely dawns on us that we've just stepped foot in *The Only! Fully Nude Club With Alcohol In Las Vegas*, something I will only read on a pack of matches later. We keep talking, quite disinterested in this present of bodies removing their clothes and whatever else the pitch black interior of this local tradition since 1969 has to offer. In the historically fixated film we're moving through, it's far less a matter of what is visible than it is in the American table dance. At a certain point, we picture the next dancer wearing an over-sized Brioni button-down with "Die Collector Scum" leggings underneath, and using them to sweep up all the dollar bills thrown to her. But the picture remains invisible; no performance comes. The leggings probably only work detached from the body. And there's probably only so much talk about the present moment because it hardly registers in the desert of references.

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