

Selections from
Catalog Version 2.1: The Lazy Machine

Prologue: The island

Everyone talks of the high life, money, carousing, and non-stop parties. I love touching antennas with the tribe. But by now I find that my last antennae touch happens earlier than before, as I head back to my hotel and I run into scores of people I know on their way to some other event. They always stop and gush, "I've just been at the party from Hell." I so enjoy how the world loves Hell.

I am always astonished by stories I hear and pictures I see. The gigantic parties, celebrities I didn't even know were there, stars with oligarchs, ferried about on private boat, packed into palaces and fancy hotels, always screaming at the top of their lungs to be heard over whatever "important DJ" had been flown in first-class. But that is what these shin dig sleep overs are. And it's all good -- even if I miss the good stuff and end up writing in my room, which is good in its own way, as well.

I've been lucky to come here many times, and every time it has involved boats. This year I came with nothing to produce, to organize or to work on, a free man just going around and seeing, a kind of novice in a well-known busy hub of an island, floating on the waters. I cruised through the city with the ghost of my experiences.

My first prosecco of the day was at an opening which doubled as a breakfast reception for an art project. "The thing I love about it is that it puts the emphasis on community," the artist and curator ventured, "It's not that I want to see my name everywhere, but I understand its power as a brand. When people see it, they know they aren't getting sculptures, they aren't getting paintings—it's about performance."

Next up was a quick spin around another exhibition and then, alas, a longer spin searching for the boat that would take me directly across the water to the next exhibition. The works were lusciously installed throughout, beginning with a whimsical tea party in the front garden, where an artist served visitors sweets while they stood waist-deep in holes in the ground.

"How can anyone see everything during these critical four days," I asked him.

"You don't see, you scan," he said, laughing away.

I arrived at the next location. Pausing to cool off, seated in the lobby of the palazzo, I was gazing at the green water off the palazzo's private dock when a water taxi arrived and two bodyguards emerged, followed by Elton John. Suddenly the organizers dashed in and a tour for Elton began.

I went the other way, holding my scanning pace. Then I sat on the lobby bench to think, before going to the next stop. I was chatting with a man next to me. The concrete block sculptures in front of us were his.

Elton John looked at them on his way out and asked, "Who is the artist?" My new friend got up. "It's me." Elton said, "How much are the works?" The artist responded "\$70,000." Elton said, "Sold." He needed an outdoor piece for his garden. They shook hands and a deal was done.

I had lunch near the show and a friend joined me for coffee and lemonade. We talked. After this interlude, it was off to the garden. I walked along the quays where beautiful yachts are docked. Then, from the deck of a staggering 170-foot-long sailing yacht, I was summoned by my friend just in time for dessert and coffee. I met the owner of the boat, a celebrated art patron.

In addition to advocating for emerging artists, the patron has become something of an ambassador for Ukrainian pop music. I cornered him briefly to gush about last year's concert by Russia's first drag superstar. "The problem is, everyone remembers the party, but no one ever remembers the performer's name," he shook his head with a smile. "We'll try to change that this year." Before he could elaborate, we were interrupted by the announcement that Elton John had arrived.

People don't seem to have much trouble remembering his name.

Next, I stopped see thousands of small balls, assembled by robotic devices completely free from the touch of human hands. Visitors influence the ambient light around the devices, which is detected by optical sensors and later translated into tangible form by the mechanical robots. It began as nothing, and is a real work-in-progress, literally interacting itself into being.

I was told by a passing acquaintance that earlier today, an international cyber group had informed the general public, the President, and the Curator that they are extending the garden with extra pavilions constructed in the new medium of Augmented Reality (AR) – and that some of these works have also leaked out into the public space of the central town square.

The impossible enormity of the beast began to sink in. This place currently has more on offer than any one person can see, even without the usual considerations of time, money and eye-strain. You have to try to pick works that can be conveyed in a picture. The deluge that is art is on many levels, a contest. Aesthetic response is ungovernable. Your taste will surprise and betray you; that's how it grows and adds to wisdom.

Now in the mood for cabaret, I went back by boat for a performance, part of the program of events taking place in and around the show. Over at the back end of the space, the artist had beached an enormous sculpture that offered volunteers the chance to spend twenty-four hours in the belly of a whale. The artist showed me around the all-white interior, sparsely outfitted with a bed, water tank, toilet, and a terrarium with a live cricket. “Wouldn’t you go crazy in there?” I wondered, feeling my heart beat faster the minute the door clicked behind us. “I’m not sure,” the artist confessed, before motioning to his studio manager. “But he spent twenty-six hours here once.” The assistant nodded weakly to confirm. “I talked to the cricket.”

Back outside, I traded whales and crickets for rats. An impresario, continuing his quest for art-world domination, had secured a marvelous palazzo around the corner from the Arsenal. Two curators and a film-maker lined the stately inner courtyard, silently regarding an artist, who was lying prostrate in the center, his face suspended over a well for his performance. Behind was a sprawling lawn speckled with chill-out zones, picnic blankets, and—naturally—giant inflatable rats (part of an installation). “We’ve been coming here every day,” one of the members of the collective mused. “Just hanging out, playing pickup soccer. It’s amazing how you can forget there’s a show on.”

In that moment, I almost did. I was snapped from my reveries, though, by the PR girl, who tramped through the field squawking at the picnickers. “Guys, the artist is leaving now! Come see him go! He’s been there for *ten* hours—*tennn* hours!”

Dashing through two exhibitions, I arrived at a honeysuckled garden for a dinner. An outburst of rain brought guests including a curator to seek shelter alongside the most elaborate buffet I saw all week. (“Oh, I remember vegetables!” one guest proclaimed, with a triumphant scoop of zucchini.)

Another drink down, I returned for follow-up festivities, where I watched the crowd baffled by a Delphic cheerleader/Ukrainian pop phenom. The artist, and a dealer, swore that the headlining Brazilian samba band (whose name I conveniently forgot) was “absolutely not to be missed,” but alas, that was the word on every event that night—particularly the next two on my agenda.

You know a party will be ridiculous when people begin circulating tactical disinvite emails, but no one anticipated the brutality of the scene at the hotel, where a party was being hosted in honor of an exhibition of over 130 artists that originally touted a “giant mobile video screen traveling the length of the Grand Canal.” It turned out to be slightly less of a “conspicuous intervention” than the press release promised: In an eerie foreshadowing of future exhibitions, the video-barge idea was nixed and the “pavilion for this century” was reconceived as purely an iPad app.

Perhaps the party would have been better experienced virtually as well. Outside the hotel, a mob flocked like moths to the glow of the iPad guest list. Not that being on the list meant much. “Excuse me, I think there is a misunderstanding,” one particularly distinguished guest began. “I’m—”

“They all are,” said the security guard, shoving him to the side. He looked like he was made of wax.

Past the first doors, we found ourselves somewhat magically in the midst of a reading, an unrelated event somehow sandwiched between the PR checkpoints. Revived, we rallied around the next set of doors, where guests pushed their faces against both sides of the glass, pointing in vain at stranded companions. Once past the second ring, the frenzied push for what turned out to be straight Beluga in a cocktail glass and yet *another* VIP zone would have rendered the situation truly comical, but for the aftertaste of the manhandling at the door. When the security guards at last consented to open the door to let me out, they warned I couldn’t come back.

Having had more than I could bear for one evening, I began the trek to a bash. Between the two parties, I got swept up in the massive crowd spilling out of a bar. Turns out the bash was nearly impossible to get into as well (no small wonder when the roster of hosts alone already exceeded the venue’s tiny capacity).

I cast a wary eye at the lines for drinks at the bar, spotting the artists edging to the purportedly closed bar across the piazza. “They’ll still serve us!” one of the artists called back. “But they don’t have any ice.” “No problem,” a curator beamed. “We’ll make our own small world!”

Another bottle down, I decided to try my luck at the real bash while others left in search of a “sex party.” It was already 3 AM, but the door was still jammed. “Sir, you don’t know us, but we’re actually very popular,” pleaded the rock-star ingenue pressed against my back. I was only saved by the “conspicuous intervention” of the cohost. “It’s very important she get in, because . . .” He paused, fumbling for a reason before blurting out, “She’s my wife!” Maybe not the most appropriate alibi for a club known as *the* place to pick up sailors, but it worked better than “very popular.”

A spatter of green LED lights swirled over the dance floor, where I squeezed past dealers. The set list made it all feel like a 1980s music video. “Weird listening to this music here,” a dealer observed. “It’s like, can this city get any gloomier?” He paused to reconsider. “Though it’s probably very educational for the city.”

Hours later, I was standing in a square, nursing a Campari soda at a Scottish

party and someone said to an old hand, who'd been here since the 1970s, "Has it changed?" And he said "Yes, and everything about it is worse."

Just then, Elton John swept from his speedboat and beamed like a proud parent at a school prize-giving.

Elton shook hands with his friend, a steel and media magnate.

"Art exists not only in Italy and Europe and the States but throughout the world, there are artists at the heart of Africa that are just as great as Europeans or Americans," said the magnate.

A trusted lieutenant in his conglomerate, said: "When you hear what's bought and sold, it's curious how the institutions are just not in the game any more."

In preparation for her opening, a curator was circulating a questionnaire. It contained a set of five questions "on themes of identity and belonging" such as "if art was a nation, what would be written as its constitution?"

At one end of a former navy complex that serves as the show's other main venue, a likably nihilistic "happening" was staged by an international artist collective. It featured a live punk band, a naked young man sitting on the ground drawing, and broken glass melted in a kiln before being poured onto the ground. But it fizzled out when the kiln's opening became blocked by cooling glass.

I spoke to an architecture and engineering consultant who had been hired to solve the problems tossed up by the artists' challenging ideas.

"My job was to tell them what's possible and what is not," he said. "And to keep the costs within the realm of the possible."

By then, I was past the point of education. What's more, another grueling workout lay ahead—kicking off with a breakfast and ending (as if days here ever ended) with a last-minute bash at a bar.

"Something definitely happened this year," a dealer said to me over coffee the next morning, after a night of enough parties to sink the city. "It's all now so big, so full of . . ." He didn't have to say what. Repeatedly, conversations began not with "What did you see today?" but "Where are you going tonight?"—and continued with talk of whether last night's dinner had been seated or circulatory, in a palace or a hotel, on an island or a yacht, and of how many soirees one could take before falling into a canal with her fanny hanging out—the trauma that befell one dealer who was briefly the talk of the town.

There were plenty of other tongue wagers during the week, like the moment an artist duo's pipe organ—ATM rejected a certain art dealer's debit card. And the night that the duo, after being fêted right and left, forgot to attend their sponsored dinner after their sponsored cocktail. "We got confused," they said. Small wonder. That's life.

There was plenty of art to raise temperatures as well as hackles. Censorship, for instance. The startling films in a pavilion remade into a church with an enlarged photograph of an anus for a rosette. Or the outdoor glass-blowing performance, where one naked artist submitted to some rear-action noodling by one of his colleagues, while another danced to the music of a hardcore band. "This restores my faith in art," said a happy director. "Sometimes," she added, "the art world is a little too precious."

After lunch, an artist led a private tour of an impressive forty-year retrospective of his paintings, in a magnificent museum, on a nearly pigeon-free city square. Many joined the show's admirers, though the most ardent may have been the artist himself. "Look at the way the paint lies on this surface," he said at one point. "I think that's pretty nifty." This was not all braggadocio. "He is a very great artist," a curator confided. "But he is also his own worst enemy."

On my exit, I ran into several acquaintances in such short order that I knew the troops were massing for the invasion. One was heading to the location where she had installed a glowing ampersand sculpture on a balcony. I followed, only to come abreast of a phalanx of Italians rushing off to destinations unknown. (Rumor had it that one of them, an artist, whose stuffed pigeons sat atop the international pavilion, was the one responsible for the dearth of live birds in city square.)

After hitting a scab-rat garden party that evening, I happened on the opening of a show of paintings.

"And now the fun begins," I thought to myself.

And so the bacchanal began again.

Tuesday found the city free of public boat bus traffic as well as pigeons, when drivers went on a one-day strike and everyone—and I mean everyone—took to the labyrinthine streets as if called to revolution. Tuesday was also press day at to which I raced after learning that they were providing taxi service to the first preview in the gardens. One pavilion handed out the sexiest tote bags, which had the look of black negligee.

As twilight fell, and the hangers-on rushed off to parties, I wandered into a group of interns on their way to the opening of a film installation that I couldn't quite

make out. Seeing it was one of the unexpected highlights of my week—worth getting lost for, this time in while attempting to find a boat party.

Just when I thought I would faint from hunger, who should emerge from the darkness other than a group of curators—escaping a prolonged dinner. “We’re going for pizza and gelatos,” one of them said, and sweeter words were never spoken.

Wednesday was my first visit to the former shipyards, which felt just like home when a model strode by with a collector and an artist. Inside, the artist was appearing in the form of a larger-than-life burning candle by his friend, who paired it with a monumental taper replicating a famous sculpture. Though many claimed not to care for its pronounced theatricality, judging by the number of camera phones aimed at the installation, it provided the most crowd-pleasing image, even if an addictive film about clocks did take the top prize.

After asking directions from a group of white-robed nuns, I found my way to the cloister where two art dealers, and an absent third were holding a dinner that proved this to be the one city where good food is hard to find. But the artist, who was to receive an award for lifetime achievement, was a hoot and a half, especially when she enthused over traveling in a private plane. “It has bedrooms!” she exclaimed. “I never want to fly commercial again.”

Back on the street, an artist and I picked up a painter and his artist-girlfriend for a short water taxi ride, where a party was going so full-throttle that a brother from another planet might think it was the only game in town. But it wasn’t. Hopping another taxi with two other acquaintances, we sped across the lagoon to where an artist was giving what he had advertised as “the worst party ever” for *the third issue of his magazine*—and he wasn’t kidding. We didn’t stay long. We couldn’t. A pop-up store was singing its siren song, but by that time I just wanted to curl up with a book.

But the fun was just beginning. The next day included a morning repast with two artists, a tour of a museum with *an* editor, and a lunch, where five people swept me off to my next location. Only a pause for a gelato shored me up for the opening of a private collection in a glam locale, which one dealer termed “an act of revenge.” And how.

This was the night of a thousand parties, the night it all got to be too much. After touching base at one reception, it was off to a party for a vertiginous bamboo structure, which I resisted climbing. There wasn’t time. A dinner at a sumptuous palace had begun. “It’s so nice here,” said an artist. “I don’t want to leave.” Did we really have to go to all the other events? Wasn’t life supposed to be about something more than the next party? On the other hand, perhaps it couldn’t get better than this.

But it did, on Friday, when I had the best meal of the week, thanks to a curator- and artist-heavy lunch on a terrace; loved everything in the far end of the exhibition grounds; and topped the day off an all-night dance party on an island, which for many was the most down-to-earth fun of the week, though I did finally make it to the top of the bamboo structure.

“Magic!”

“Orgasmic.”

“Courageous . . . ”

“I hate this place.” I heard this more than once, and really, it can be such a drag. It’s a town of hyperbole and hubris, the sort of place where you can park your 377-foot megayacht and set up a security fence blocking off half the street, detouring the yachtless hoi polloi who have to walk. A place where one might spot guardian snipers in buoys floating in the shallow waters surrounding such yachts. The sort of place from which, just for fun, a prominent collector may fly out several dozen “friends” for a one-night rendezvous. A place where Courtney Love might appear at a party like an apparition, breeze through three tiers of velvet ropes, have a conversation, and then walk, barefoot, through the broken glass back to her hotel room. “It used to be you’d just go to the gardens, go to your dinner, go to your afterparty, and then go home,” a curator sighed at that particular party.

The gardens were quiet enough when I arrived on Monday afternoon and began to peek through the show. One artist had transformed a pavilion into a rambling, caliginous apartment complex, which broke into a skylit courtyard in the center. Another had filled the pavilion with an eye-roll-worthy rotary press running anonymous baby faces. WE MUST FIGHT AGAINST TRANSPARENCE EVERY-WHERE, a banner proclaimed in a crystalline labyrinth. TRIUMPHANT SECRETIONS SCULPTED IN FOUL MIST DEHYDRATED SPECTRAL BIRTH began a verbose billboard raised above another pavillion. Everyone had something to get off their chest.

I spotted an artist, a curator, and a collector being followed around the grounds by a small camera crew. As they walked, the artist trailed the curator and ripped off black electrical tape to “slyly” make an anarchy sign on the back of the curator’s pale blue blazer. The cameramen prodded the artist: “Do you think the art world is open to unknown artists?” one asked.

“There is no such thing anymore as the ‘unknown artist,’ ” the curator said with a flourish, disappearing before I could hear him finish the thought. Welcome to the age of the known unknowns.

I poked around some more—a ludicrous cathedral, with its cardinal grannies

flickering on screens, was one high point; a video and an installation were another. I ran into installers (the unknown knowns?) still making adjustments and a jurist trying to keep up with her tribe. It seemed a bit early to be making calls.

After a couple more hours of snooping, I joined several colleagues on the terrace of a fifteenth-century palace. “Well, I’m still alive,” said a curator somehow looking both pained and relieved. “But the making of this show might be lost to history.” The night prior, her MacBook Air had slipped from under her arm and into the water as she was boarding a boat, the neoprene sleeve acting “like a sponge.” She didn’t look convinced when I suggested, optimistically, that it gave her narrative pathos. “Undocumented experience is life thrown down the lavatory!” a character admonishes in a twisted video. But at least the evidence of all that hard work is here.

The next day was the first of several official “openings.” “Who needs other people when you can fuck your seat?” a prominent critic asked as we stood watching a gymnast wrap her body around a replica of a business-class airplane chair inside an Olympics-inspired pavilion. Outside, a crowd of press and curators hooted for the athletes who were assembled for a photo shoot behind an upside-down tank.

I ran into an artist and he shuttled me, along with four collectors, and a *soigné* curator for a preview of a new exhibition space in an eighteenth-century pile. “I have to give a tour now,” he said, turning to me. “Don’t make fun.”

We wended through the building, which the foundation had restored to glory in a brief five months. The enamel on the handrails is still tacky. “Can you believe the beauty of this? This installation?” the curator said. We stopped at a sculpture of an ostrich, its head buried in the floorboards. “Oh boy . . .” a collector grinned.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” chuckled his wife.

“And here’s the grand finale,” the artist said coyly at his installation, featuring a pair of busts: a rendition of the artist coquettishly admiring a replica of the Apollo Belvedere.

“Gorgeous!”

“You’re so beautiful!”

“But this will fade,” the artist said, looking slightly overcast. “The statue remains, though. And they erased my wrinkles.”

After the artist’s quick (“Ten more minutes, I promise!”) meeting with an

architect, a collector, and a curator, we hitched a ride to an installation and then the preview for a subtle work involving a smoke machine. “It’s a bust!” said a museum board member, catching the spirals of smoke in one of its waning moments. “Just wait,” the artist told him. Then, seconds later: “Aha . . .”

When I walked into dinner that night, they were playing “Party in the USA” and a rock star was leaving with two curators. I snacked on some eggplant parmesan while watching gymnasts dance and then an artist picked me up (“I just want to be known as your driver,” he implored sweetly) and dropped me off across the water, just south of where my friends had docked their boat. I removed my shoes and joined the dinner for two *certainly* knowns, finding that, alas, most of the guests were already repairing to other parties. So, shoes on, then another water taxi to the hotel and past a done-up lady “going for some jet-lag rehab—ciao!” and then a quick walk to another pop-up store in a private palace.

Next morning, in the garden of the exhibition grounds, the mayhem only increased. Lines to enter the most buzzed-about venues got longer, the humidity rose, extroverts in outlandish outfits seemed to multiply, and an atmosphere of fun-fair absurdity took hold.

“You’re teasing us!” someone squealed, poking at the barricades.

“Let us in!” someone yelled above the din.

Walking out of a venue, I saw a small crowd gather at the sight of a barge sailing past just off shore with a sign that read “To hell with everything.”

The barge was covered with a strip of lawn, a tree, and a tinfoil sculpture of a small plane that appeared to have nosedived to earth. A woman sat reading a book under an orange beach umbrella, as if personifying the island republic’s former name — “the most serene.”

The crowd erupted in cheers. Everyone understood. The week could not have had a more fitting epitaph.

She had, it seemed, successfully gained access to the present.

264. Pole and cloth

A sculpture of brightly colored planes. Painted newspaper strung across a broken bicycle frame. A towering, square-ish structure of cloth-enveloped aluminum tubes propped up on jars of preserved fruits. A pole-and-cloth structure in the room next door. A film documenting all angles of a public sculpture of a rearing bull and figure. A film washed in a crayola box of neon colors. A pulsing soundtrack. An ironic evocation of military parades. A weirdly pleasurable call to arms. Freak flags of some other order. Silvery scaffolding. A hall of mirrors. Sculptures in a new light.

265. She is

She's in the front row at almost every fashion show. She's a fixture at every cool art-gallery opening and fashion party. She's best friends with celebrities and luminaries alike. She still isn't a household name.

She's the 32-year-old girlfriend of a man who has assumed the role of demigod. She has found herself attending a host of galas and events. She is receiving a growing amount of media attention on her own. She begins to appeal to people outside the small worlds of art and fashion.

She graces the cover of a magazine. She is the 'it' girl but still only known by those really in the know. She is.

She is also the "it" girl who just happens to be black. She doesn't sing or act. She deserved the cover of the high-society magazine. She's interesting. She has a story people will find fascinating, fresh, and new. She landed in New York straight out of high school 12 years ago. She began working as a hostess. She met a man. She befriended a fashion designer. She's her official muse.

What does she do? She appears constantly to be in the right place at the right time. She has the look and the style that people notice if you're in a place where the right people can see you. She has been in the right place, and now it's happening for her. She's perfect in that spot.

She stays busy. She has served as an editor. She's featured another magazine this month in a vibrant six-page layout. She is listed as a fashion consultant for a fashion label. She is one of the new print-ad models for the online purveyors of a high fashion website.

She is sometimes seen with her boyfriend. She is largely mum. She only vaguely described him. He has been a great mentor. He's one of the most stylish people I know. He deals with things. She was mysteriously mum in her more recent interview. She declines the opportunity to talk about it.

She had become visible. She was no more.

270. Various allusions

I realized that this game of mix and match that we've all been playing points to a reality that the objecthood of the artwork and its symbols now only becomes a kind of platform for readymade intellectual ponderings. However, the joke is on us if we favor "discourse" as a justification for enjoying that which is right in front of our eyes: a wonderful architectural detail. That is to say, there is always a "man" behind the curtain; however, it is useful to ask, what the curtain is. It's not the ceiling, which hides the dancer; it's the press releases, catalogs, and other like devices, which cloak the work.

277. A disclaimer

And in those circumstances, why not have fun?

303. Briefly, only briefly

During a recent visit, the conversation at a local restaurant on Saturday night turned briefly, only briefly, to politics. But one of the artist's wife, and one of the most famous women artists today, turned the conversation to her upcoming 2012 retrospective in New York, ignoring the nearby television blaring reports of the turmoil in Libya.

The whole scene was a little surprising. Some successful artists look forward to political reform, but many more of them are in bed with the ministry of culture. In that sense, the avant-garde is conservative. The current system has made them millionaires, and the last thing they want is change.

Little overt political art is on view in the gallery district. Once a massive munitions plant built in the Bauhaus style and covering acres of land, it has been SoHo-fied, with more boutiques and cafes opening each month. The area includes a number of galleries and a nonprofit private museum sponsored by a businessman with a massive collection of contemporary art.

Meanwhile, several strong shows were on view at galleries within the art district, with works on offer for substantial prices. At the top of the food chain were two mammoth sculptures, consisting of a pair of solid brick walls, built in parallel, with a kind of tricycle-cart contraption inserted through slots at the walls' bases, as if to suggest the constraint of elementary mobility (280,000 dollars). Another artist, who is perhaps better known for his theatrical, large-scale, high-key photographs, here presented what looks like a shiny, stainless steel version of a tyrannosaurus skull

A younger artist to watch is one whose painted abstractions mimicking the texture of flowered fabrics are priced at around 68,000 dollars.

Elsewhere, haunting pictures of disembodied heads and cadavers in forests filled with klieg lights were selling for up to 38,000 dollars, not bad for an emerging artist.

Outside, a witty group show focused on the impact of the internet on daily life and identity. A young artist took over a wall with a series of lightbox works consisting of digital portraits of attractive young webservers with their desktop icons scrolling across their faces. The editioned works were priced modestly at 2,000 dollars each.

Also interesting were the set of tapestries, trashy looking but nevertheless craftsmanly works that used images from email spam -- Viagra ads, mostly -- that were priced at 19,000 dollars a piece.

311. What does an abstract painter want?

What does an abstract painter want? Color, texture, surface, material, light and dark, maybe, gesture, maybe. . . . Is that everything?

Authority, also? A painter who was born in 1952, and also writes art criticism and curates exhibitions, displays a distinct sense of command in his recent undertakings, if that's not too romantic a notion. Something happened in his visits to Southeast Asia, something like the world suddenly offering up freely its simple wealth to his senses. For those of us back in New York, his breakthrough was his 2009 show, where he exhibited a room full of simple yet powerful abstractions, made not with paint but with the simple folding of one fabric onto another, the kind of discovery that made heroes of New York artists in the 1950s.

His new show includes sculpture and photography as well as his now-signature fabric abstractions. Reflections of his journeys to Southeast Asia are especially visible in his photographs, which show a rough-hewn peasant world highlighted with swaths of brilliant fabric, which covers the roof of a hut, hangs from a corral, and even dresses a cow. Ineffably, the touches of color summon human emotions from the natural landscape.

The sculptures are more provocative still, poised on a threshold between Greenbergianism and a scavenger economy -- a few weathered wood planks, joined by a loop or two of fabric, suggest an artist fascinated with poverty's resourcefulness, with the iconic power of a simple cloth headband, and also happy with a subtle joke about a painting's surface and its supports.

The fabric paintings are something else again, enlivening a familiar language with vivid colors and patterns, and a new kind of layering and transparency. With pigment-in-tubes abandoned, color and shape simply abide, while lines of glue and gentle puckers of the fabric trace the absent artist's hand. It's a painter's apotheosis.

Epilogue: Q and A

Q: Good morning. What are you working on today?

A: At the moment, I'm inside a black box every day. I'm working on the only theatre piece of my life. It will open in July. Yesterday we were working on the funeral scene. I was lying there, dead, while three other avatars buried me. It's very funny. So today, I will be lying in a coffin, thinking about my life. I am really busy with the legacy at the moment. I am thinking that I am in the third act of life, the last stage. The death can come any moment. I may live another ten years, twenty, thirty or maybe five. Or tomorrow. Finish. You don't know. The legacy of performance is very important. I am working to open an institute for performance art. It is the long durational aspect of performance that is most important. It has a big potential not only to transform the performer, but also the public, participating in the work. We live thinking about the past or thinking about the future, but somehow, we always miss the point of being in the present. Performance is about the present. When you are really in the present, time doesn't exist. That is a very important realisation I have had. I also realised that we are surrounded by universal knowledge, which is always there and accessible, except that we never choose to receive it. By not moving and not thinking and being in the present this knowledge is revealed. The only way to really communicate these realisations is through experience. The only way to experience it is through long durational work. So actually in the end the artist, needs time, to get to a space where there is no time. The audiences have to give themselves unconditionally to experience it. During one of my performances, there was an enormous participation of the audience. You sit on the chair and look at me, but after a while, it's not me anymore. I am just the trigger for you to introspect yourself. You, in your own life, can do this, but you don't. You make any excuse not to face yourself. But in this situation, there was no escape, you only focus on my eyes and then my eyes disappear too. You are alone with yourself. No time, no thinking. Everything is together. So many people went into a kind of catharsis and became incredibly emotional. I had these hells-angels types, who came to me suspicious and angry. But after ten minutes they cry like a baby and completely lose themselves. Being an artist is like breathing. It's this incredible urge to create, that you can't question. Like breathing you just have to do it, or else you will die. This doesn't make you a great artist, it just make you an artist. What makes a great artist is a different story. It will contain both old and new work. I went to the South of Italy, and made work with goats and sheep. I needed something that was very much to do with the earth. I slept under the trees, and wanted to be within nature. I first visited London in 1971 and I remember seeing an exhibition at the gallery. The gallery overwhelmed me. I was too shy to say to it to him then, but I felt that it was my dream to work with this gallery. It somehow took until 2009, when he came to the show I curated. He asked me if I "wanted to be his?", I immediately said 'yes'. Then a very weird thing happened. The next time I saw him was when he visited the museum on the final day of the show. At 4pm, one hour before I finished, he received a message to say that someone had died. It was a

very strange experience for both of us.

I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960's, I lived in a place where there were still bomb sites from the war. I remember spending a lot of time exploring ruined, abandoned buildings as a small child and playing in strange, mysterious places. I went to a convent school from which I was expelled. I think I was just always very independent and creatively minded. I liked a more experimental approach.

At first they spent all their time trying to stop me, but finally they just gave up.

I had to work at other things to support myself financially. One of the first things I did was travel. I needed to go somewhere completely different to get away from the whole system. In those days, the art market was extremely basic. Only one or two artists able to support themselves solely from their artistic practices. There were only three or four serious contemporary art galleries. There was barely anything. The contemporary art market in those days was extremely rudimentary. I didn't really expect to have a professional career immediately; in those days I didn't think about my career in those terms.

I was catapulted into the unknown, into another territory, into another world, into another experience. I'd had enough of the college environment. I just wanted to get out in the world and get on with things, really.

I had to be quite careful about how I earned money. I started restoring houses for people because it allowed me to carry on working. The skills that I used to restore houses for people were the same skills that I had been using and developing at college; in fact, I'd used them even before going to college to earn money. As I carried on, my skills developed and I could do more things. Some of the skills were related to skills that I used in my sculpture.

There is often a tendency toward the bipolar in my work. It may have to do with balancing. One can also use it as a device to juxtapose opposites...Positives or negatives...Or different elements. And it's a useful artistic device anyway for your creativity, bringing different elements into play with each other to shed light on new ideas.

I was always quite focused on what I was doing. I had the intention to do what I was doing well and to take it as far as I could. I didn't really think about it in terms of success, more in terms of opportunities.

When I was a student, I had one or two small shows. I met some people and they asked me to do a show in a tiny little studio. In those days, having your work exhibited was a great platform. The gallery was in a house, and the work

that I made was a sculpture that had three tables and two chairs. The tables contained objects from the environment where I was living and working. The tables and chairs functioned as vitrines. The space was a very beautiful space to show in. It was a great privilege to show in such a fantastic space for the first time. I think any career has multiple turning points. My first show was a turning point, and the second show I did was another turning point because that was when collectors first bought some of my work. Coming here was also a turning point for me.

I'm always challenged. I like to be challenged by exciting, unusual contexts and situations for my work. I hope opportunities grow and become more varied.

I am a conceptual artist, so it's exciting to go somewhere so different and not know what one is going to do there or what one is going to bring back. You have to take those risks in art. When I first arrived here, my immediate reaction was that I didn't know if I could respond by making any art.

Since January, I've been trying to have this discipline of writing a text every week. There have been a lot of new texts, and obviously they are very often based on interviews. To record is a process against forgetting. I do interviews because it's what I've been doing every day for a few hours since I was a kid. I've always talked. When an artist dies, I realized I only vaguely remember so many things that they told me. It is such a pity. Had I only recorded their voices, they would still be with me and I could listen to them from time to time. It is very painful not to have done this recording, and that's why I've tried to not let this happen again. In some kind of way, the interview always goes in two directions. On the one hand it goes into depth, and on the other hand it goes into a broader reality. It goes into depth by speaking to people again and again. It can go on and on for many decades and you still have always a completely exciting, new conversation. In-depth conversations are more vertical. Then, obviously, there are the more horizontal conversations, which is when an artist tells me about a scientist, an architect, a composer — that's this moment of going beyond the art world into other disciplines. When the vertical moment comes to a standstill, we make it horizontal again, it's a push and pull between those two. I think this is kind of infinite, but I need to think more about your question.

In English you say "two is company." There are different possibilities to break open that format: to leave the room — we could now go on a walk — which I do quite often. If that's stuck, you change the spatial circumstances. You can also test other kinds of temporalities: a conversation with someone for 24 hours, which I suppose leads to the marathon... "Two is company, three is a crowd." These are dialogues: you go and see someone with someone else. And then obviously, you can go from there into the polyphony: if "two is company and three is a crowd," then a project is the portrait of a movement. At some point there were all these movements, sometimes with a manifesto, sometimes

without. In our times, when I speak to young artists, they have a lot of collaborations and dialogues but less movements — it's more atomized. Now obviously again there are movements, but they are more political movements. That's interesting. Maybe they will happen in art as well. In the art world there aren't that many movements yet. When I was a kid, and started to be obsessed by art, the art world was in this polarity. Both poles expanded the notion of art extremely but in very different ways. What is interesting right now is that these initiatives remain very often individual and you don't necessarily have movements. The 21st century is more about conversations.

I'm interested in resisting the homogenization of time: so it's a matter of making it faster and slower. For art, slowness has always been very important. The experience of seeing art slows us down. One more thing to quote is "delays are revolutions," which was a good exhibition title.

The beginning of my whole journey was night trains. It's a slow way of travelling and now we are working on solar airplanes. They fly at a hundred miles an hour, so it would be a little bit like travelling on a night train. Travelling might get slower again, if it's sustainable. All my shows have been conceived on night trains. I would take a night train and reflect on the conversations I've had and arrive in the next city. Somehow that night train rhythm was an idea factory.

It is part of my biography and of my experience that I do these intimate exhibitions. I don't think it's necessarily about myth-making. Obviously, these shows do become rumors. Not that many people see them, but people tell each other about them. This also has a lot to do with early performance history, when seven people saw these performances and now they are world famous. That is a mechanism that is very key.

I don't believe that I am an artist, but everything in my shows is done by an artist. The more I can disappear, the less my signature is there, the better it is. If it is a performance, it's a performance that has always to do with someone else, or for someone else.

What it's about, for me, is two people in a room and the discomfort and beauty in the space between them. There's this idea that anything can happen in a room with two people: there are problems and concerns, implications...sometimes this person is at fault and sometimes that person's at fault, but most of the time something beautiful can come out of the power struggle. Is the work biographical? No, it's a construction. Am I a stand-in?

No, I'm an actor. I'm a performance artist or an actor in that scene. It's not *me*, it's some sort of hybrid with me in my body going into the space as a character. I

definitely see it as a performance. It's not me.

I think there's something thrilling about the unknown. I certainly feel like it's work that challenges people to worry or not worry about the protagonists. But I've never done anything where I thought I was risking my life. I've made work that in retrospect seems that it was risky, or took chances, but when I made the work it was never about setting out to kill myself or get killed. It was always about this investigation. Now I look back at some of the work and I think, *God, I was really lucky!* But mostly I look back and I think I was really brave.

The work is about telling stories that are difficult to tell, stories that are wily and winding, and what I love about them is that anything can happen, anything is possible and there can be any ending. It's as complicated as any unknown, which we unravel through chance and creation and sorting through stories. I have a hard time categorizing things, I feel that it's dismissive and not fair to the work. It's performance-based work, and so by its very nature, experimental. And what I love about performance is that it can only happen that one time and that one way. You can try to recreate it, but it will never be the same and there's something beautiful about that. But I find trying to label a piece of art as a specific thing problematic and reductive. Every painter has the right to say they are actually making sculpture, and every sculptor has the right to say they're doing performance art. And every audience member has the right to read it as something else. Open and generous is where you have to be.

I certainly see darkness in the work, absolutely, but I don't think darkness is bad. I think darkness is lovely.

The work is an exorcism. Once I'm done a performance... it's always different. Sometimes you'll do something and you'll feel like it's resolved, and sometimes you'll keep pounding on that door. You can't win, because if you don't keep pounding on the door people say that you're a one-hit wonder; if you do keep pounding, people say you're narcissistic or obsessed.

Now, I'm writing a screenplay and working on a book project. I'm also kind of babysitting my show in the sense that I'm still talking about it a lot. It just opened, so it's still really new and exciting for me. I've got a show of new work opening at the end of April. I'm just going to take the summer to work on the screenplay.

It's about adults, that's what I'll say now. Consenting adults.

It's hard to see yourself in this situation anyway, and I already knew how very sick and in pain I was. I wasn't sure what would be shown and what wouldn't. It was hard. A lot of my friends were texting me support, so it was good. My mom is a nurse and really kind of protective, and she'll see me, then turn around and

say, "Oh my god, I can see how much pain you're in." I was way struggling. I have a tendency to be kind of a soldier and try not to complain too much. I try to not let it be over-apparent. I was in a lot of pain. Physical pain. I was really curious how others would view it. For me, I was there. I could fill in the blanks in my head.

I don't think that you can see, really, what I am feeling and experiencing physically. The body and the mind are one, so physical and emotional are one. So of course the emotional comes out. The physical is a definite component to show why I was losing my shit. No pun intended.

I have various autoimmune issues. The predominant issue is a digestive disorder. It can be quite painful and debilitating. It's kind of funny how much the show was really about digestion. The theme kept coming up! There must have been something in the air. Digestion is really complicated — it's the seat of all our physical health. It's an important aspect of your vitality. To be challenged with that, it can be complicated. My work really stems from this personal experience of pain and confusion of the body. But you know, I've said it before and I'll say it again, I aim to make work that's more about universal themes of the human condition and this shared experienced of living in the body, this idea that we all have this anatomy under our skin. We're all going to die, but it's this appreciation and celebration of the body, and also this recognition of suffering, being able to look at it square in the face. Perhaps finding the beauty of something can transform it, being able to have a dialogue of the anatomy of our bodies. That's why my work comes from that place. The materials I use are intentional — dough, pastry, jelly. I'm using these kind of sweet materials as metaphor, and as surrogates.

I like work that ranges in scope and dynamic, but where the artist was really meditating, again, on this idea of the human condition and things people would perhaps see as quite ugly. There's one quote that I have taped to my studio wall of an artist that is "I'm just trying to make images as accurately as possible off my nervous system as I can. I don't even know what half of them mean." It's this idea of making things as an artist and channeling your vision from your nervous system, from your life, from your being. I think I really relate to that. I feel kinship with such artists. This his how I'm making my work right now because it's what's coming off of my nervous system

I don't know if I would have done things differently for the show. It's hard to kind of navigate and decipher in my head. If I was well, would I make a different decision in what I was making and yada yada? Yeah. I made a video, and, sure, that wasn't something I'm familiar with.

It's not all that different, video from photography. I was making work that was flowing through me at the time, and I don't regret it. But I don't think the work was up to par as to what I would make. It was definitely just a sketch, an experiment, and not something I would write home about. I was actually

bunkers that will exceed any scale that I have worked on in the past. They will be exhibited next year and might tip the scale on the neutrality of that country.

A fundamental critique of capitalism is built into my work. My interest is to expose the absurdity of materialism's manifestations. But it's a more literary and philosophical search, in which I often resort to humor.

I've been writing fiction since childhood; I like the experimental side of it and the surprise of the final result. But in my art works I'm dealing with scenarios that have severe consequences, such as observations about the endpoints of excess. There was a real temptation to use subversion and resistance in times of opposition, to expose the conditions revolving at that moment. Art works are consumer objects; they sell back their image to an elite society that is part of the condition we find ourselves in.

What else to say? Should I foreground the apparatus at work when artists appear in magazines? Because an artist's relation to publications, websites, blogs, or any other discourse and/or chatter is fraught. Should that fraughtness become the subject and engagement of these words: how it's all part of a subcultural anthropology that works to determine the visibility or invisibility of a practice? How it talks about how bodies making work are transformed into figures: into big-shot proper names making art? But maybe that's obvious. But is it? Should the language be rigorous with an exhausting attempt to impress or should it exude a kind of well-rehearsed casualness? Maybe I should just recite a short narrative about what's going on with me now. Just tell the story. A story I never thought I'd have the good luck to tell.

Q: If you were not an artist, what could you imagine yourself as?

A: James Bond.

Q: What project are you working on now?

A: I am working on a big group of drawings and photographs related to the nudes of the early Renaissance.

Q: Is alcohol the drug of choice for art appreciation, in your view?

A: No, it's an attitude.

Q: Your art, which ranges from sculptures of figures struggling inside their own sweaters to oversize police caps, is frequently humorous. What, in your opinion, is the funniest work of art?

A: Funny? No! My work is cynical with regard to our common understanding of the world.

Q: What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

A: Days of Our Lives.....until eternity.....

Q: What's your favorite place to see art?

A: Don't have one.

Q: What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

A: Passion

Q: Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

A: Not on Facebook or Twitter!

Q: Do you collect anything?

A: Vintage furniture.

Q: What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A: It was a drawing of my father.

Q: What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

A: There are many bad shows... I can't remember which one was the worst!

Q: What's your art-world pet peeve?

A: Hubris

Q: What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

A: The drink dispenser close to my studio.

Q: Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

A: I have a not-to-go-there routine!

Q: What work of art do you wish you owned?

A: The art of placidity

Q: What would you do to get it?

A: Work 30 hours a day

Q: What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

A: There are many over appreciated and nearly none under!

Q: What project are you working on now?

A: I've just been completing a book of poetry and a double 45 / 7" record. I'm also commencing a cycle of paintings for an exhibition.

Q: Is visual art best understood in the context of other media?

A: I don't think so. Nothing is manufactured to enhance another area, though of course it obviously does.

Q: You are incredibly prolific in a variety of mediums, including painting, poetry, and music. Do you find certain concepts are easier to communicate in our medium than another?

A: Yes, ideas that need to be clear and perhaps pinpointed are usually best

allowed in poetry and prose. Music is probably the most emotive, but painting is the least regulated of all three. Ham-fistedness is acceptable at the top of the painting world, but not at the top of the music industry or in the field of literature. You can't have a number one hit with a cassette recording, or a poetry prize for swearing, but you can paint badly upside down and get a round of applause.

Q: What do you think of the state of painting today? Any alarming developments?

A: Nothing has ever alarmed me in the tame world of art.

Q: What's your favorite place to see art?

A: Someone's front room.

Q: Do you make a living off your art?

A: From painting, yes. From music and poetry, no.

Q: What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

A: That's tricky. Paint rags. Hog hair brushes, oil paint, canvas. A cup of tea. Me. Beethoven on the record player smashing his piano with hammers — take your pick.

Q: Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

A: In my family, and a growing interest in the world of others: the brave human beings.

Q: Do you collect anything?

A: I have a lots of hats and boots.

Q: What's the last artwork you purchased?

A: I don't really do that, but I do swap.

Q: What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A: A portrait of my girlfriend when I was 18, I think.

Q: What's your art-world pet peeve?

A: Timidity in the face of sex, money, and perceived power.

Q: What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

A: I just get on my bike and head home and drink a green tea.

Q: Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

A: No.

Q: What work of art do you wish you owned?

A: None

Q: What international art destination do you most want to visit?

A: None.

Q: You have said that you dislike the label "performance artist." Why?

A: I dislike labels in general, but I'm particularly allergic to the "performance artist" label. I'm a trans-disciplinary visual artist working through photography, video, and installation. I'm not an actor, a dancer, or an entertainer.

Q: What's the last show that surprised you?

A: I haven't seen that show yet.

Q: Do you make a living off your art?

A: No. I do not make a living off my art; I make a life off my art.

Q: What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

A: I don't have a studio. I work in my head and from my heart.

Q: Do you collect anything?

A: No.

Q: What's the last artwork you purchased?

A: I've never purchased a work of art.

Q: What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

A: Does anything weird ever happen in a museum or gallery?

Q: What's your art-world pet peeve?

A: I'm not interested in the art world because the art world is not interesting. The art world is not about art; it's about privilege.

Q: Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

A: No.

Q: Know any good jokes?

A: I know a few bad jokes, but who wants to read a bad joke?

Q: What international art destination do you most want to visit?

A: I hate to travel.

Q: Who's your favorite living artist?

A: My favorite living artist was born an hour ago.

Q: What are your hobbies?

A: I don't have any hobbies. Hobbies are for boring people.

Q: Do you see yourselves as a political artist?

A: No. All art is political, but I am not a political artist. I have no desire to be didactic... or to be labeled in any way.

Q: Will it ever end?

A: Not as long as there is money.

Julien Bismuth 2012