

a long leash

Throughout the Cold War, the American government discreetly backed and advanced Modern American Art as part of an operation referred to as the "long leash." Orchestrated by the CIA, this initiative aimed to relocate the epicenter of the art world from Paris to New York, ultimately bolstering American cultural hegemony. Seemingly provocative, in the grand narrative of global-scale chaos and atrocities sewed by the same agency during the era, it actually seems banal. Given the cognitive dissonance migraine we are collectively experiencing in our current time, you might glaze over and quickly tuck this idea into the category of "conspiracy theory." I certainly did.

During our conversation for this text, Ryan emphasized the importance of distinguishing between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory when discussing the show's title. As Ben Davis observes, the term "conspiracy theory" is used a bit like the term "hipster": "always to dismiss someone else's tastes, never to describe one's own."¹ Consequently, when digging into the reading list provided by Ryan, the evidence *does* seem to support the promotion of Modern Art, and Abstract Expressionism in particular, as part of an international influence operation by the CIA.

Americans, in their collective imagination of modern painting, see an iconic Jackson Pollock shot by Hans Namuth. Pollock in his Hamptons barn, a tempestuous genius dripping and drabbing over a large canvas as Lee Krasner looks on. This studio is now a realm of conspiracy. However, it's essential to acknowledge that Jackson Pollock was famously apolitical throughout his career. So, how did this hapless painter of "*melted Picasso[s]*"² become a spook?

Clement Greenberg recognized artists were naturally attached to elites by an "umbilical cord of gold."³ Money was, of course, how the CIA chose to control. The masthead of the CIA's long leash campaign became known as the *Congress for Cultural Freedom*, overseen by a CIA agent beginning in 1950. Through this organization, a complex network of artists, writers, and cultural figures received direct and indirect support from CIA funding. According to Frances Stonor Saunders, at its height, the long leash operation had "offices in 35 countries and published more than two dozen magazines, including *Encounter*."⁴

In the battle of Cold War propaganda, where Russia sought to portray America as a cultural wasteland inhabited by what Saunders describes as "gum-chewing, Chevy-driving, DuPont-sheathed philistines,"⁵ the CIA recognized the need for a compelling counterargument. Enter AbEx, a seemingly perfect weapon in this ideological struggle. It

¹ Ben Davis, *Art in the After-Culture* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 183

² Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 214.

³ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴ Frances Stonor Saunders, "Modern Art Was CIA 'Weapon,'" *The Independent*, October 22, 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>.

⁵ Saunders, *The Culutral Cold War*, 17.

embodied qualities that were "nonfigurative and politically silent," serving as the quintessential antithesis to the Soviet Union's preferred artistic mode—socialist realism.⁶

I will pause this history lesson here. Did the CIA *invent* Modern Art? No. Yet, the knowledge they meddled in its formative years shortcircuits our understanding of its history and meaning. In many respects, this historical narrative dovetails into our building collective paranoia that Günseli Yalcinkaya astutely characterizes as a facet of *psyop realism*,⁷ a concept that riffs on Mark Fisher's *capitalist realism*. It describes a vibe, part of a growing sense that we are being manipulated in more ways than we can conceive. Much like the silicone in Hawk's **Untitled (Front)**, spread across salvaged architectural glass, this *psyop realism* lives as a quasi-materiality, which clings to us, clouds our thoughts, and smears across our worldview.

It is well established in the canon of institutional critique that the art world and the non-profit industrial complex are vulnerable to elite capture, a truth easily discernible even with just a cursory glance at our local museums. Armed with this awareness, we internalize that the deep state, or maybe more recently the "derp state," has consistently held a vested interest in shaping cultural narratives. It becomes yet another weight upon the pile of complexities that artists navigate. This historical backdrop prompts us to question how it impacts our already delicate sense of self-worth within society and alters our perception of agency. It leads us to ponder the unintended allegiances formed in the process: Who or what are we unwittingly working for?

In the self-portrait work **Outside Agitator (All Artists Are Bastards)**, Ryan casts himself (quite literally) as a clown set in a whimsical prone. Clowns, fools, and tricksters are protean figures that straddle boundaries, embodying a paradoxical existence as insiders and outsiders. The figure of the clown often carries shades of queerness⁸, a performance of persona in make-up and wig, which toys with tropes and conventional boundaries. The sovereign and the clown share an irreparable connection, as only the fool in the king's court possesses the audacity to speak unvarnished truths to power. Hence, in this regard, the clown assumes a position of privilege, yet akin to the artist, this status remains precarious, tethered to the whims and attention of the patron elite.

The patron class, now more commonly referred to as the art market, has historically wielded a *long leash* over the type of art artists are incentivized to create. Baudrillard's essay, "Conspiracy," vividly portrays artists as tragic figures ensnared in an endless cycle of

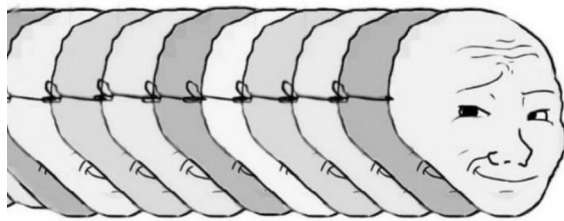
⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁷ Günseli Yalcinkaya, "We're Entering an Age of 'Psyop Realism,' But What Does That Mean?" Dazed Digital, January 26, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/58042/1/were-entering-an-age-of-psyop-realism-but-what-does-that-mean>.

⁸ Hawk acknowledged in our conversations an uneasiness with the term "queer" in contemporary culture. For him, this term—which is often used as a powerful reappropriation—should carry a certain level of antagonism. He observes that "liberal and commercial forces alike attempt to positivize queerness, which, in turn, drain it of subversive and political efficacy."

replicating art historical forms to cater to the market's demands. In Baudrillard's perspective, contemporary art had transformed into a realm where artists were compelled to merely "act out the comedy of art"⁹ rather than engage in the creation of substantive and meaningful works. It is like watching a sad clown slipping on the same old banana peel.

Over the last decade, the artist's role has had to come to terms with the rapid proliferation and maturation of memes. These bite-sized, often humorous, highly interactive forms possess a captivating power, swiftly disseminating cultural commentary and critique. As Baudrillard observed in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "Intellectuals are trying their best to save the empire of meaning"¹⁰ as they drift from (and grasp at¹¹) relevance. As memes multiply and mutate with viral efficiency, they assume a collective consciousness that eclipses the traditionally nuanced introspection offered by the artist. One particular meme figure, Wojak, or "feels guy," stands out. This crudely drawn everyman sports a face suited for any emotional occasion. Over time, Wojak¹² has evolved into a complex array of masks, each concealing the struggles of a figure buried beneath. Their meanings stack, like Hawk's **a heady deconstruction of the object and representation**, a tower of balaclava masks that extrudes upward, engaging in what Hawk describes as "a dialectics of representation and recognition" from black bloc, Zapatistas, Motherwell's gimp photos, and of course Brâncuși's *Endless Column*.



Within this stacking of meaning, we are awakening to a time of the crystalline *hypermeme*. We watch as these incantations (e.g., Woke, Black Lives Matter, MAGA, etc.) are invented, lobbed at the world, and lit up by the targeting lasers of culture. The loaded-baked-potato terms fractal, obfuscate, and finally die in the grubby grip of pundits and marketing teams. We can almost keep time to the rhythm of these terms as they bloom and wilt under the unrelenting sun-eye of the panopticon called X (formerly Twitter). Trevor

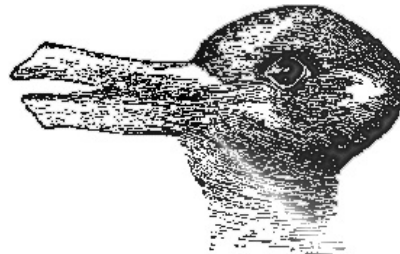
⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "The Conspiracy of Art." In *The Conspiracy of Art, Jean Baudrillard Manifestos, Interviews, Essays* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2005), 26.

¹⁰ Sylvère Lotringer "Too Much is Too Much." "In *The Conspiracy of Art Jean Baudrillard Manifestos, Interviews, Essays* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2005), 80.

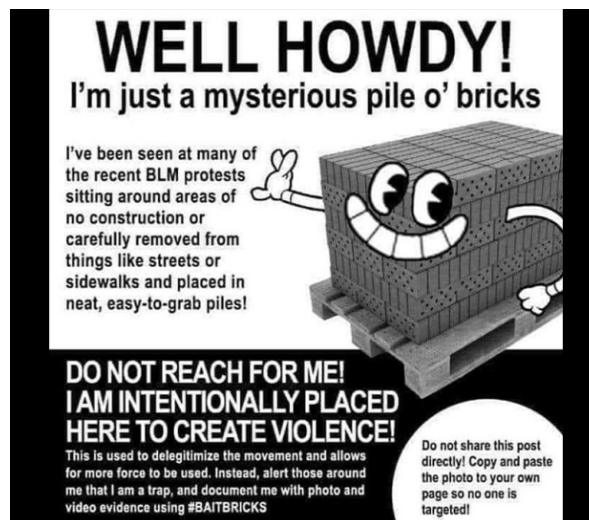
¹¹ One strategy has simply been to drag and drop art into the format. This takes various forms, such as meme accounts with art insider jokes, the lowly meme painting, or perhaps the saddest example, the meme placed in the discursive context of art.

¹² The name Wojak, taken from the screen name of one of the original posters on Krautchan in 2010, the word roughly means "soldier" in Polish. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak>

Paglen has recently discussed "adversarial megaterms" by likening them to optical illusions (like the classic rabbit duck). These terms assume different faces and meanings contingent upon the observer.¹³ Take, for instance, the #baitbricks meme, which gained prominence during the protests following George Floyd's tragic murder.



Protesters began to notice suspicious-looking piles of bricks during their demonstrations and subsequently shared posts about them. These posts beget posts, which beget posts about posts, which brought us to the tell-tale final stage of the meme as it was gobbled up into the outrage cyclone of FoxNews. Some believed these bricks were strategically placed by local law enforcement to incite violence, providing them with a pretext to suppress the protesters. Meanwhile, adherents of QAnon conjectured that these bricks were the work of left-wing scapegoats such as Antifa or perhaps even Bill Gates. However, Snopes and the Anti-Defamation League reported that there was no substantive evidence to substantiate any of these claims. So, what are we left with in the post-truth era? A fuzzy average of maybeness. An ambiguous signal that quickly dissolves into the luminous and toxic fog of our current cultural milieu.



¹³ Caroline Busta and Lil Internet, "Psyberspace w/ artist Trevor Paglen (NM68)" August 10, 2023 in *New Models*, 1:18:24.

Hawk's artist-clown, framed as an "outside agitator," is a mercenary. He is an out-of-towner who comes in to stir up trouble. It likens accusations lobbed at Occupy Wall Street as being paid protestors, a mob for hire funded by George Soros. These allegations parroted the skepticism that often accompanies social movements, where detractors attempt to delegitimize the cause by attributing its momentum to external forces rather than genuine grassroots activism.

My personal involvement with Occupy was limited to peripheral engagement with the protests (read white-guy with a camera). At the time, I was a part of the precariat class, fresh out of art school with the weight of crippling debt and surviving on bodega sandwiches. My existence revolved around sporadic work (a friend called me a "gigalo"), which predominantly involved day-playing in non-union art departments crafting sets and props for various television pilots. One memorable moment from those early days of marching down Wall Street found us gathered beneath the towering façade of Cipriani's, an *upscale* restaurant adorned with Grecian columns. Up on the balcony, a lavish event was in full swing, with attendees sipping champagne. As the protestors raised their voices in jeers and chants, the restaurant's patrons responded with laughter and pointing fingers, and then someone from the street threw a water bottle. Like almost anything in Manhattan, it felt cinematic but also a bit on the nose.



I could not help but reflect on the interconnectedness of it all. I would leave a sound stage, having contributed to creating a manufactured reality, only to immerse myself in another made-for-camera spectacle. Zuccotti Park, the site of the Occupy encampment, a privately owned public space in the financial district¹⁴ was a constant hive of television

¹⁴ The property is owned by Goldman Sachs.

crews and journalists around what looked a bit like a concert festival. According to Mark Bray, it was a movement that both the left and right looked at as a “source of nostalgia or idiocy, but neither took the cultural element seriously.”¹⁵ After a massive financial crisis was caused by fraud perpetrated blocks away, with no accountability, journalists just kept asking all these kids, “Yeah, but what do you want?”

At one point, Žižek made an unexpected appearance at Zuccotti, delivering a characteristically off-kilter speech amidst a shallow sea of protesters which contained a memorable joke from “communist times”:

“A guy was sent from East Germany to work in Siberia. He knew his mail would be read by censors, so he told his friends: “Let’s establish a code. If a letter you get from me is written with blue ink, it is true what I say. If it is written in red ink, it is false.” After a month, his friends get the first letter. Everything is in blue. It says: “Everything is wonderful here. Stores are full of good food. Movie theaters show good films from the west. Apartments are large and luxurious. The only thing you cannot buy is red ink.”¹⁶

The works in *this* park evoke “in red ink” a sense of suspicion and anxiety about the use and function of art in today’s culture—yet the artist’s use of craft and care seems to conclude something else privately. In Hawk’s pièce de résistance, ***Takeaway/Throwaway***, we discover that each brick is cast in sunken relief, bearing the imprint of a tuning fork. For Hawk, the tuning fork’s function possesses a poetic duality within the brick: “It can be used to tune instruments, to sing out tunes, but it can also be used as a medical instrument to check for broken bones—with the bricks, you can smash windows or construct sidewalks and so forth.” Like the tuning fork’s resonant tone, which is fated to fade, so too will this exhibition dissolve into portfolio—but while it is here in the park, it asks us to consider how we can use the tools we have been given.

– Trey Burns, 2023

¹⁵ Mark Bray, *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street* (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2013), 37.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “Remarks on Occupy Wall Street,” *Log*, Summer 2012. No. 25, 118.