

# DO WE NEED A TURING TEST FOR ACTIVIST ART IN A BARE ART WORLD?

**GREGORY SHOLETTE**

*Repetition and doubling—themselves  
an uncanny pair which double and repeat  
each other—seem to be at the heart of  
every “uncanny” phenomena.*

—Mark Fisher, *The Weird and  
the Eerie* (2017)<sup>1</sup>

In its simplest form, the Turing Test involves a human evaluator physically separated by a wall or other barrier from two participants so that all communication between the three of them must take place through a keyboard device. The evaluator knows that one hidden participant is human and one is a machine, though which is which remains unknown. The evaluator is tasked with trying to identify who is the person and which is the imitation person. Simultaneously, both participants try to convince the evaluator they are human. At the moment the evaluator becomes genuinely uncertain which participant is machine and which is human, the machine has successfully passed Turing’s Test.

You’re in an art gallery. Toward the back of the space you spot a weird, ill-fitting emergency door. A question arises silently: is it a work of art or not? Just above your head is a rusted valve jutting out from a faded metal sign encased in white paint. Same question: Art? Not art? What about that awkwardly bent length of drainage pipe running alongside the track lights above the exhibition? Does anyone else see this? Should you refocus your attention exclusively on those objects with wall labels? Moments later, a dozen people enter the space singing, shouting, making boisterous declarations: “I Can’t Breathe”; “De-Colonize this Place”; “Not My President”; “Respect Workers Rights in the UAE.” Before leaving, the group hands out photocopied flyers and performs an Occupy Wall Street General Assembly in the middle of the gallery, complete with a Human Microphone.

When they do exit, the space returns to its muted, white-cube status. But you do not return to normal. Not completely. A string of questions follows: Was that a genuine, spontaneous activist intervention, or was it a carefully rehearsed performance of an activist intervention, and therefore a work of art? Then again, if something appears exactly the same as what it appears to be—if it stirs the same emotions in us and carries out the same task of raising social awareness—then does it really matter if we are uncertain about what it actually is in some fundamental, ontological way? What if this event was both at the same time: art and life, mimicry and authentic protest, fiction and fact, all doubled up and coexisting on a single continuous surface, sort of like a Möbius strip reality? Marcel Duchamp once proposed what he termed a “Reciprocal Readymade,” in which a work of art is converted to an object of everyday use.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps what you just witnessed was that thought experiment put into practice?<sup>3</sup>

The questions do not leave you alone. They return, repeat, becoming obsessional, even addictive. You find yourself wondering how and when things got so disorderly—and you wonder what it might take to tidy them up again. It’s not only your unease that seems at stake here. How many times have you overheard an art historian, critic, or even fellow artist demand to know “is it art or activism?”<sup>4</sup> Remember how they sought some type of epistemological solace such as providing empirical evidence that demonstrates activist art’s effective social outcome? Yet what that

proof, should it be made, assures the mainstream art historian is that these practices subordinate aesthetics to utility, allowing for a return to business as usual. It pissed you off. But it also led you to suppress your own need for certitude with a faint-hearted swagger. And contrarily, the same questioning demand arises from community activists troubled by what they perceived to be the enfeebling effects of aestheticized politics. This is when you ask yourself only half-sardonically: does contemporary art, especially art activism, require its own version of Turing’s thought experiment? Though even as you consider this, you can’t help but suspect that if this test were given today, nothing would change.

## INCIDENT REPORTS

October 26, 2017: a manifesto appears online from a previously unknown organization identified as the Monument Removal Brigade (MRB). The announcement begins ominously by stating, “Now the statue is bleeding.” Hours earlier, a gory splatter of red paint was splashed across the base of the equestrian statue of Teddy Roosevelt that stands outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.<sup>5</sup> “We did not make it bleed,” explains the digital declaration, “it is bloody at its very foundation.” MRB goes on to insist that their action “is not an act of vandalism. It is a work of public art and an act of applied art criticism,” thus allegedly expanding the concept of institutional critique outward from the interior of cultural spaces into the broader public sphere. The immediate aim of the



Figure 1.

attack was the manner in which the 26th U.S. President and former New York City Police Superintendent is depicted astride a horse, clothed in his signature Rough Rider uniform from the Spanish American War, and flanked by an African man in sandals and a barefooted Native American chief. But targeting this patronizing artistic arrangement in which a viral white leader towers above non-white subordinates is merely the start of MRB's critique. "The museum itself is an expanded monument to Roosevelt's [white supremacist] world-view. . . . In response, we choose to act immediately with the means at our disposal: artistic expression." Significantly, the

MRB in 2017 was in fact restaging the same direct public gesture made by six members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) over forty-five years earlier in 1971.<sup>6</sup> The 2017 MRB sabot-critique self-consciously leaks a bit of the past into the present in order to "clear space for new visions of reparation, freedom, and justice."<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, an inner link has always connected the artistic avant-garde with acts of insurgency carried out by socially disenfranchised populations insofar as both embrace the possibility of an emancipated future that is radically at odds with the present (picture Gustave Courbet helping to topple the Vendome Column in 1871), which makes the historical repetition that MRB performed all the more curious. As an attempt to confront the spreading reactionary penumbra cast by the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, activist aesthetics is compelled to repeat episodes of its own suppressed and under-represented history. But in light of recent political events about which I will have more to say below, we must ask if the mutual concerns of vanguard aesthetics and radical resistance have grown into a full-on, ontological entanglement precisely as the present has effectively immobilized the future (and this ontological uncertainty has also begun to migrate into the realm of activists who are beginning to question whether or not their activity might be art).

Consequently, would our activist art Turing Test be nuanced enough to detect this condition, and if so, from what observational

perspective would it operate? Or would the test evaluator not already be embedded within this unruly state of affairs? Consider three additional cases.

From September 2014 to May 2015, a female student attending an elite university in New York City carried her dormitory mattress around campus everywhere she went, including taking it to her graduation ceremony. The explicit purpose of the action “Carry That Weight” was to shame institutions that ignore the plight of female students who are harassed or abused by classmates; but the work also explicitly aimed to humiliate one particular male peer whom she has accused of raping her.<sup>8</sup> According to the student, and her instructor, this steadfast act of protest was also a work of performative endurance art, submitted as a class assignment and graded as such. Eventually, Columbia University’s internal investigation absolved the accused male student of wrongdoing, at which stage he brought a lawsuit against the school, ultimately receiving a cash settlement for his professed mental suffering.<sup>9</sup> The question that comes to my mind is not who was truthful or justified here—the art student or the teacher, the university or the accused—but instead on whose behalf the case shifted from performance to litigation. When has anyone ever settled a legal dispute based on charges alleging they were bullied by a work of art?<sup>10</sup> The materialization of aesthetic practices within the everyday world of depositions and litigation suggests that something unique and profound has happened to art’s once protective autonomy—a

change that is not without its critical possibilities, though it could just as easily devolve into a form of resignation to capitalist hegemony.

Starting around 2002, the absolute monarchy of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates began positioning itself as a wannabe cultural modern Constantinople thanks to its colossal oil reserves, but also to its oppressive labor and human rights policies.<sup>11</sup> Though far to the east of New York City, where the mattress and monument actions played out, Abu Dhabi is celebrated by many Western liberals who consider the Gulf monarchy crucial to the future of high art. Not only has a new Louvre Museum been constructed on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Cultural District, but a Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, is also in the works. The sheikhdom also recently played host to what they described as the first “Culture Summit,” the mission of which explored “the future of culture and how its power can be harnessed to produce positive social change.”<sup>12</sup> Over one hundred and fifty guest curators, composers, museum directors, cultural advisors, and visual artists were flown in from around the globe to participate in the four-day event. Nevertheless, one must ask the obvious question: in what type of world do regressive labor policies and progressive social manifestos sit comfortably alongside one another with no apparent conflict, at least not on the part of participating Western liberals?

Although such contradictions have always been present in liberal capitalist nations, the tension generated between artistic autonomy

and the market was once the very space in which critical practice and theory flourished. When these antithetical positions shed their negative charge and become frictionless, the very possibility of radical critique was dismantled. The default position became the familiar process of arbitration within neoliberal enterprise culture, as institutional critique is ensconced within the museum and the future is once again abandoned for the demands of the present. A final example underscores this dilemma.

September 29, 2008 offers a final augmentation to this riddle. In the aftermath of the spectacular financial collapse, most capitalist markets spun into all-out free-fall, but not that of the fine art market. A *New York Times* headline underscores the culture industry's surprising post-crash vigor: "As Stocks Fall, Art Surges at a \$315.8 Million Sale."<sup>13</sup> And yet, as artist Caroline Woolard incredulously asks, "what is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees?" Woolard answers her own inquiry by contending that "a work of art today is a product of the classroom, the loan repayment, the lecture-hall, and the homework assignment."<sup>14</sup> We might reframe this contention by asking where the work of art begins and ends in relation to the capitalist marketplace today. Whereas the work of art has traditionally been considered a realm of non-productive labor immune to market forces, does society now so totally overlap with and enclose art that it is no longer insulated from commonplace legal procedures (the mattress endurance performance outcome);

from undisguised instrumentalization by ideologues (the Abu Dhabi Cultural District); or from subsumption to capitalist markets (art as an asset)?<sup>15</sup>

## WELCOME TO OUR BARE ART WORLD

Something more profound is clearly going on here than just the old familiar paradoxes of late capitalism. After all, is there really anything left to pry loose from the contemporary world's ideological façade when a sitting U.S. president utilizes the fuzzy realm of social media to blatantly contradict documented facts, including contradicting his own previous statements? Meanwhile, not only is Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital now instantly convertible into just plain capital (or perhaps bundled financial art instruments),<sup>16</sup> but the affirmative utility of art is everywhere visible, both as investment and social practice, even as its spectacular post-autonomy is celebrated by superstar curators, artists, and wealthy liberal collectors.<sup>17</sup>

We appear to have entered a "bare art world," one that is conspicuously entwined within, as well as undaunted by, its relationship to the economic values, laws, and chronic political crisis of global capitalism. In this sense, contemporary artistic culture—but activist art especially—fulfills the early avant-garde's maxim of "art into life," except it does so in a world far from the socialist utopia envisioned by such radical cultural innovators as Vladimir Tatlin or Lyubov Popova or Kazimir Malevich. Instead, the dream is made flesh at

a moment of profound social disenchantment, as initially demonstrated by Brexit, and then with the 2016 U.S. election results, among many other bad omens. Welcome to what political scientist Rebecca Bryant terms “the uncanny present,” a present that is unfamiliar in its *present-ness*, and a future that is imaginable only as its own past.<sup>18</sup> I also note here that the term “unreal” has become a commonplace adjective among news commentators of late, with *The Guardian* describing the current American president as a “master of unreality,” and the *New York Times* labeling his administration an “unreality show.”<sup>19</sup> But to be sure, the uncanny present has spread beyond Washington. As one counter-demonstrator at the University of Virginia campus, where, on August 11, 2017, members of Antifa (and other opponents of racism and bigotry) confronted armed white nationalists reported, “I never thought I’d have to see this in America in my lifetime” (although, in truth, for most Black, Latino, Muslim, and Jewish Americans, this is simply business as usual). Still, what is relatively new is having a modern U.S. president condone this display of white supremacy.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, as of now, everything carries on, just as always, reminding us of Walter Benjamin’s ominous insight that “[t]he concept of progress is founded in the idea of catastrophe. That it continues like this, is the catastrophe.”<sup>21</sup> So while bare art is as strange as it is mundane, it is nevertheless also fully consistent with our post-2016 reality, which includes a U.S. president who has a documented history of misogynist behavior, though no political

experience, and who successfully hacked into the Republican Party, humiliated its leadership, and then received their endorsement as well as, of course, the White House. Still, even as we intuitively grasp the uncanny nature of the present, the very act of acknowledging this reality leads us to remorse, or even resignation. It need not be so. Stripped clean of autonomy and mystery, the most engaging contemporary “bare” art emerges brilliantly, if vulnerably, within a world lacking depth or shadow, its aesthetic so banal as to be monstrous. Nonetheless, it is the ordinariness of the uncanny present that makes it so very strange: a weird and uncanny phenomenon, as the late Mark Fisher understood it, within which contemporary activist art is both issue and barb.

## RADICAL LAUGHTER

Do we need a Turing Test for activist art? By now the answer to my opening question is painfully clear: There is no wall or barrier concealing anyone’s identity. Our test participants are successful machines, just like their evaluator, and activism as a rehearsal of the future has become activism as a rehearsal of the present, in all its preternatural materiality.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent to the events of November 2016, the question that now comes to the fore is how to reintroduce the notion of futurity as a horizon of radical alterity—not in either a vague or prescriptive way—but nevertheless with enough integrity and urgency to recognize both the vibrant, archival agency at work within activist art, including its repetitions and reoccupations of the past, as well as the unsparing conditions

generated by a bare art world brimming with unconcealed (and *unconcealable*) paradoxes and contradictions. Like the troupe of actors who, in wild fits of laughter, awaken to their own fictive roles in Alejandro Jodorowsky's film *The Holy Mountain* (1973), victory over the uncanny present will ecstatically, even deliriously, demand taking and failing the Turing Test, as often as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" *Art and Artists* 1, no. 4 (July 1966): 47. Theorist Stephen Wright has examined this aspect of contemporary art in works such as in the curatorial statement for his exhibition project: "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The use-value of art)," 2004, <https://apexart.org/exhibitions/wright.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> See Wright, "Future."

<sup>4</sup> During a recent set of workshops I gave at Tania Bruguera's *Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt* (INSTAR) in Havana, Cuba (from January 19 to 24th, 2018) I was forced to confront the apparent cultural specificity of the arguments made in this paper, which was still in progress at that time. During two compulsory interrogations with Cuban officials my wife and I were threatened with "punishment and deportation" were we to continue our association with either Bruguera or INSTAR. 'She is not an artist,' they insisted, 'but a political activist.' We pointed out that Bruguera is exhibited at major art museums around the globe and even has an art work hanging in the city's own *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana*. Though briefly surprised by our challenge the uniformed official reiterated that 'regardless, in Cuba she is *persona-non-grata*.'

The immediate take-away from this encounter was that in capitalist nations an artist can claim to be an activist, or anything else she or he wants by self-definition, while in socialist Cuba, the designation *artist* is granted solely by the state. And while the impact of art activism may be difficult to measure in the US, UK or Europe, it is by contrast at least effective enough to be considered a nonexistent category in Cuba where a more orthodox definition of art is backed up by the state. Still, on further reflection, along with the growing privatization of tourism and high culture on the island, it is clear that the very same ontological entanglement of art and activism taking place elsewhere will not be halted in Cuba, but only delayed, as the vision of a true socialist future recedes. For more on the INSTAR incident see the blog *Greg Sholette: Welcome to Our Bare Art World*: <http://gregsholette.tumblr.com/post/169234308680/a-week-in-havana-at-instar-part-2-or-flow-my>

<sup>5</sup> For more about the controversies over public statues, see Gregory Sholette, "Reimagining Monuments to Make Them Resonate Locally and Personally," *Hyperallergic*, November 6, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/408996/remagining-monuments-to-make-them-resonate-locally-and-personally/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lesley Oelsner, "Six Indians Accused of Defacing Theodore Roosevelt Statue Here," *New York Times*, June 15, 1971: 37, <http://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/15/archives/six-indians-accused-of-defacing-theodore-roosevelt-statue-here.html>. The three men and three women accused, all of whom were either Comanche, Navajo, or Cherokee-Seneca, appear to have carried out the action to protest the government raid on Alcatraz in San Francisco that had removed a group called Indians of All Tribes who occupied the island from March 21, 1963 to June 11, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> All citations are taken from "Prelude to the Removal of a Monument," *Monument Removal Brigade*,

October 26, 2017, <https://monumentremovalbrigade.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, Columbia University, New York, 2014–2015. For two opposing views within the liberal/progressive press, see Michelle Goldberg, “Emma Sulkowicz and the Benefit of the Doubt,” *The Nation*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/emma-sulkowicz-and-benefit-doubt/>, and Emily Bazelon, “Have We Learned Anything from the Columbia Rape Case?,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>.

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear if the student had this in mind when she began her protest; however, one of her professors—an esteemed contemporary artist in his own right—encouraged the so-called “mattress-girl” to develop her practice along the lines of legendary performance artist Tehching Hsieh, who lived for an entire year physically tied by a rope to another artist, Linda Montano, between July 1983 and July 1984. See Catherine Trautwein, “Columbia Settles Lawsuit Brought by Former Student Accused of Sexual Assault by ‘Mattress Girl,’” *TIME*, July 14, 2017, <http://time.com/4858979/columbia-university-paul-nungesser-mattress-girl-emma-sulkowicz/>.

<sup>10</sup> Most instances in which an artist, or a particular work of art, get entangled in legal battles pivot on either copyright infringement or challenges to an art work’s authenticity. For example, the widow of a little-known photographer successfully sued Jeff Koons after he transformed one of her husband’s images into a sculpture. The ruling found that Koons had not sufficiently transformed the photographic source into something significantly new. To settle the charges of plagiarism, his company paid the widow and her family \$42,000, plus another \$4,200 for posting

the work online. Many other legal cases involve the sale of an artistic forgery to an unsuspecting buyer, often settled in the buyer’s favor even when the seller was unaware of the bogus nature of the work sold. Nevertheless, successful lawsuits involving direct personal damages caused by a work of art are rare or unprecedented, though that may not be typical in the future if the “mattress girl” situation serves as a precedent. See Claire Voon, “Jeff Koons Convicted of Plagiarizing a Photo of Naked Children,” *Hyperallergic*, March 9, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/364267/jeff-koons-convicted-of-plagiarizing-a-photo-of-naked-children/>.

For an engaging overview of recent cases, see Daniel Grant, “The Art of Art Lawsuits,” February 4, 2014, *Hyperallergic*, <https://hyperallergic.com/107150/the-art-of-art-lawsuits/>.

<sup>11</sup> Abu Dhabi holds the vast majority of oil reserves in the UAE, 92 billion barrels versus the next closest kingdom of Dubai with only an estimated 4 billion barrels. “Oil Reserves in the United Arab Emirates,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil\\_reserves\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Arab\\_Emirates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_reserves_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates).

<sup>12</sup> See my detailed discussion about the Abu Dhabi Cultural Summit: Gregory Sholette, “High Culture in a ‘Bare Art’ World: The Politics of Direct Art Activism,” *Pluto Press Blog*, May 10, 2017, <https://plutopress.wordpress.com/2017/05/10/high-culture-in-a-bare-art-world-the-politics-of-direct-art-activism/>. See also David Rothkopf, “The Urgency of Art in a Dangerous, Rapidly Changing World,” *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/10/the-urgency-of-art-in-a-dangerous-rapidly-changing-world-united-arab-emirates-culture-summit/>.

<sup>13</sup> Carol Vogel, “As Stocks Fall, Art Surges at a \$315.8 Million Sale,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/arts/sothebys-contemporary-art-sale-totals-316-million.html>.

<sup>14</sup> BFAMFAPhD and Caroline Woolard, "Pedagogies of Payment," *The Enemy* 2, no. 2 (2014), <http://theenemyreader.org/pedagogies-of-payment>.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, we now know, thanks to the scholarship of Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbault, and other researchers, that the U.S. State Department and CIA promoted the arts, including Abstract Expressionism, around the world in order to support a Cold War ideological agenda against the USSR and its allies. However, these facts only came to light after considerable effort. See Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). By contrast, the overt alignment of high culture with the interests of free market, corporate neoliberalism, or with a particular national program as in the UAE, is today taking place in real time and directly before our eyes with no need for secrecy. Consider this self-assured (and self-promotional) quotation promoting Athena Art Finance by Ben Genocchio, executive director of the Armory Show: "art has become a multi-billion-dollar asset class traded globally in a market." "Why Athena?," *Athena Art Finance*, <https://www.athena-art.com/why-athena/>.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu would balk at this proposal having written in 1985: "As everyone knows, priceless things have their price, and the extreme difficulty of converting certain practices and certain objects into money is only due to the fact that this conversion is refused in the very intention that produces them, which is nothing other than the denial (*Vermeinung*) of the economy." Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, Nicole Woolsey Biggart, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 281.

<sup>17</sup> In the past few years, an increasing number of U.S. foundations have initiated grants for funding socially engaged art (and, in full disclosure, my

program at Queens College is a recipient of one of these). This includes the Obamas, who, between the time I began this essay and completed it, added their high-profile presence to this phenomenon in September 2017 by offering a fellowship to generate artistic projects aimed at inspiring "civic good." The Obama Foundation Fellowship program, <https://www.obama.org/fellowship/>.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Bryant, "On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present," in "Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe," Daniel M. Knight and Charles Stewart, eds., special issue, *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2016): 27.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, "How to Survive the Trump Era—Be Vigilant and Resist at Every Turn," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/feb/20/how-to-survive-trump-era-be-vigilant-resist-joseph-stiglitz>; David Barstow "'Up Is Down': Trump's Unreality Show Echoes His Business Past," *New York Times*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/us/politics/donald-trump-truth.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "White Nationalist Rally at University of Virginia," *BBC News*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40909547>.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, cited by Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 169. Theorist Sami Khatib's succinctly summarizes Benjamin's approach to history and time when he writes that "capital-time structurally necessitates an endless repetition of its retroactive measurement—even though a final measurement is endlessly postponed. Against this form of spurious infinity, Benjamin called for a 'messianic arrest of happening,' breaking off, interrupting, derailing the historical dynamic of the auto-temporalizing movement of capital-time." Sami Khatib, "The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time. Marx with Benjamin,"

*Studies in Social and Political Thought* 20 (Winter 2012): 60, [https://www.academia.edu/482245/The\\_Time\\_of\\_Capital\\_and\\_the\\_Messianicity\\_of\\_Time\\_Marx\\_with\\_Benjamin](https://www.academia.edu/482245/The_Time_of_Capital_and_the_Messianicity_of_Time_Marx_with_Benjamin).

<sup>22</sup> My position in this essay may appear to be at odds with conclusions drawn in my 2016 essay “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys,” from the fourth issue of Grant Kester’s journal *FIELD*. In that text, I optimistically asserted that activist art might best be thought of as “an event-object situated partially in the here and now, and partially in a time, place and medium still to come . . . [that] interrupts the present by drawing upon its own impending futurity. . . . artistic activism may not be the viral video or spectacular photograph but the moment participants and bystanders are temporarily disengaged from familiar social narratives and forced to confront their own tacit state of *un-freedom*.” Gregory Sholette, “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 4 (Spring 2016), <http://field-journal.com/issue-4/merciless-aesthetic-activist-art-as-the-return-of-institutional-critique-a-response-to-boris-groys>.

The first draft of this essay was completed in June 2016, six months before the election of the current U.S. presidential regime. Without rejecting the arguments found in “Merciless Aesthetic,” it would be the worst expression of groundless idealism not to acknowledge the sense of political defeat and emotional desolation that the left has experienced over the past fifteen months. Even worse, despite an initial outburst of spontaneous opposition following the November 2016 election results, a growing normalization toward current political conditions is now becoming sadly detectable. I put this essay forward, therefore, as a sobering adjustment to the realities of an unreal

world; though hopefully it is neither completely pessimistic adjustment, nor an adjustment made to reconcile ourselves to a permanent condition, for no matter how intransigent the present appears, we must continuously prepare to storm the future.

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## MARTHA DOES DONALD

MARTHA WILSON

Hello, America! People keep asking me how  
I’m going to make America great again.  
How I’m going to make America safe again.  
It’s you and me, baby—we’re going to do  
this together.

It’s the coming of the solid state  
When we’ll all be together again  
Just like—I can’t remember when  
We’ll have paradise on Earth at last

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*ASAP is committed to exploring the richness and diversity of the international contemporary arts as well as the critical methodologies used to elucidate them.*

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