Cover: *Bekah*, 2017. A watercolor portrait of Rebekah Mercer, political strategist credited with placement of Steve Bannon and Kellyanne Conway in the Trump White House, produced by the author for sale at an upcoming auction to benefit voter registration efforts in New York's 19th congressional district, covering parts of upstate New York on both sides of the Hudson River, from the city of Kingston to just south of Albany, and including the author's home in rural Columbia County, two hours north of the Bronx. Ms. Mercer is the daughter of Robert Mercer, who is an owner of both Breitbart and Cambridge Analytica, and partner at hedge fund Renaissance Technologies. Media reports convey that Bekah, as friends know her, would prefer that her efforts to influence politics go unacknowledged, her image remain unrecognized. The Mercers reportedly donated upwards of a million dollars to influence the 2016 congressional race in the aforementioned swing district, specifically to finance deceptive TV advertising misrepresenting the Democratic candidate's agenda. The seat went to Republican John Faso, who thus far has refused to hold public meetings with his constituents and has already voted to eliminate health care for tens of thousands of us in the 19th.

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They say, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," but the comparison is hardly fair. For one thing, it's exceedingly easy to imagine the end of the world. We've all seen the place explode a thousand times to stoke or conclude assorted dramas on various screens. That's not counting the implicit demise precipitating all those nascent (and doomed) colonies on Mars, or the same backstory haunting the ominously adrift outer-space barge that typically serves as the last, unreliable refuge for the few surviving citizens of humanity. Here in real life, we can observe first-hand the sudden death of the Great Barrier Reef, the disappearance of the glaciers, and fish swimming the sidewalks during high tide in Miami, if only we dare to look. Or we can follow the new leaders at the US Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency, who recently forbade use of the terms "climate change" and "global warming," programmatically cleansing their mission statements and their "literature" of the very idea. Seems they, too, have watched too many movies or read certain works of dystopian fiction as instruction manuals, rather than the edifying warnings to future readers they were conceived by their authors to be. From the current vantage, a willful ignorance on the part of the US government willfully compounded by concerted disinformation campaigns foreshadows that the terminal ends of nature and culture will soon coincide, though, given the astounding marvels and sheer unfathomable complexity of natural and human systems, surely it didn't (doesn't?) have to be this way.

As for capitalism, I wonder how many of those lamenting our apparent failure to imagine its conclusion have bothered to ask any capitalists whether they might be up to the task. Some of the more notorious tech entrepreneurs and investors, most of whom made their fortunes over the past two decades as networked computing became commonplace, then wireless, mobile, and ubiquitous, have proffered an answer: it's unnecessary to imagine the end of capitalism, because we've already reached the event horizon. So far, their chorus remains barely audible, but their numbers are growing.

The basic tune is easy to follow. Key to understanding the idea is grasping that complex human social organization — call it "civilization" — evolves to address the problem of scarcity, which is the same problem on which its economies are premised. This parallel between social purpose and economic premise is neither coincidental nor consciously designed. It emerges from social complexity. To participate in the collective process of scarcity-problem-solving, members of sufficiently complex societies need not knowingly submit to the program or even be aware of it. In fact, participation is compulsory — this is what it means to function in society, however enthusiastically or reluctantly one may assume the mantle. On the upside, the labor is hardly monotonous, at least not if one assesses the endeavor across eons of hindsight. And in the same, long take, the job becomes decreasingly taxing, physically, while providing all sorts of knock-on benefits for a booming global population — increased longevity and decreased child mortality being chief among these.

A second key to bear in mind is the concept of exponential change. To borrow an exemplary narrative from a draft manuscript of *World After Capital*, by Albert Wenger, one of the venture capitalists alluded to above (Wenger is developing the book online with the help of crowdsourced editorial input, no less) — for thousands of years, humans observed the heavier-than-air flight of birds, but it wasn't until 1903, when the Wright brothers succeeded at Kitty Hawk, that technological innovation enabled human flight. Within the span of mere decades to follow, the technology curve for air travel shot straight up — from no human flight in 1902, to transatlantic passenger jets in 1958, and manned space travel a few years later. Concepts of locality, community, scale, and distance changed in tandem, along with global distribution of people and resources.

Human flight is but one, small-ish example of a nonlinear development affecting social and material conditions, instigating rapid, largely unpredictable adaptations among whole populations who are suddenly compelled to live and think differently. Now consider the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions in total, when widespread adoption of new technologies resulted in the complete reorganization of social units and superstructures, with corollary impacts on prevailing concepts of value: over hundreds or thousands of years, as the problem of scarcity has evolved, so has the economic basis for solving it — from clan, to land, to capital.

According to Wenger's synopsis, within our own lifetimes, digital technologies have facilitated a sudden, exponential increase in the production and distribution of information, the effects of which we are only beginning to comprehend. Like early airplane passengers, we are seeing the world from an entirely unprecedented perspective. Our intricately networked, information-rich conditions have already further catalyzed exponential increases in the efficiency of agricultural land-use, as well as automation in manufacturing and transportation, which in turn further reduce the meaningful scarcity of land and capital, globally. By the same token, the resource needed to convert useless information into useful knowledge — human attention — is suddenly more highly valued than before and/because its scarcity has become meaningful instead; the sum quantity of human attention is ultimately constrained by the biological capacity of living human populations to "pay" it. (After all, there are only so many of us aboard Earth at any one time, and we may dedicate only so many hours of so many days over the course of our brief, mortal lives.)

For the first time in history, *information is abundant, attention is scarce.* Year by year, the relevance of capital wanes as

technological innovation allows humanity to do exponentially more with less. The new, big problem to which we've recently, collectively graduated, therefore, at least according to a certain relatively imaginative subset of the capitalist class, is that of better allocating our resources, including not only energy, food, and cell phones, but knowledge-based services like education and health, so that more people can be liberated from wage- or subsistence labor to connect to the global communications infrastructure and to make meaning and know-how. The emergent, pro-social aim appears to be for more people to focus more attention on knowledge creation, instead of dedicating their life force willy-nilly to the now meaningless enrichment of Industrial-era capitalists, a cause and a breed our expanded knowledge should soon enable us to retire humanely, their historic functions duly acquitted. *Et voilà*: behold the end of capitalism, thoroughly, realistically, and imminently imagined as a flatter, wiser, more universally sated and benevolent society.

Supposing Mr. Wenger and his ilk are right about at least some things, and the light at the end of the tunnel of capitalist oppression already shines brightly on the near future, are we yet prepared as a species for the psychological freedom they envision? If the recent, ongoing fake news pandemic proves any indication, we've embarked on a steep and rather treacherous learning curve. Stakes are high: survival of civilization; most living species, including our own; and a hospitable planet all hang in the balance. At the time of this writing, the prognosis isn't positive. A couple of weeks ago, leading climate scientists put the likelihood of our success at reducing carbon emissions to a level that would check global temperature rise this century at a largely unlikely 5%. This week, the leaders of North Korea and the US, similarly ridiculous men, began a dramatic standoff, threatening each other with awesome nuclear strikes.

In the prelapsarian spring of 2016, months before the Brexit vote in the UK or the Democratic and Republican Presidential conventions in the US, before "alternative facts" and the introduction of other equally clumsy, equally destructive reality stylings by a dubiously-elected US administration apparently hell-bent on emulating murderous dictators and dissolving democratic institutions, I happened to convene a public round table to ask, "What is authority?"—quoting the title of an essay by journalist, teacher, and political & moral philosopher, Hannah Arendt.

Arendt emigrated to New York City in the 1930s as a refugee from Nazi Germany, and lived there until her death in 1975. As a philosopher she was occupied, in part, by the moral crises she perceived to accompany modern humanity's detachment from a historic chain linking authority to a transcendent power. She pondered not "what is" but "what was" authority. In her distillation, *authority was neither violent nor persuasive,* a product of neither force nor argument. Instead, authority was "a relationship in which the compelling element lies in the relationship itself and is prior to the actual issuance of commands"—a mutual obligation derived from sources external to any particular individual. The externalization of power could effectively sustain dignity of subordinates and fallibility of dominants without jeopardizing status quo. This relationship, first dramatized in Plato's parable of the cave, was thence a form of "obedience in which men retain their freedom."

When commercial transatlantic air travel was the game-changing reality of the day, the middle class was on the make, and the horrific destruction of WWII wasn't yet out of sight and mind, Arendt wrote in 1958,

Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need [...] Its loss is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed since then has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape unto another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else.

She went on to document the signs:

The most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its depth and seriousness, is that it has spread to such prepolitical areas as child-rearing and education, where authority in the widest sense has always been accepted as a natural necessity, obviously required as much by natural needs, the helplessness of the child, as by political necessity, the continuity of an established civilization which can be assured only if those who are newcomers by birth are guided through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers. [...] The fact that even this prepolitical authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really *is*.

Our modern revolutions are not violent rifts, in Arendt's assessment. They're not rebellions against long-standing political traditions. They are instead "gigantic attempts" to restore the collapsed "experience of foundation," which may be as fundamental to humanity as adequate parentage is to successful maturation. Or was.

One might conclude on a quick, first read of her essay that Arendt's bent is conservative, that she, too, longs to restore something that is lost, that she would've one day fantasized about making modern society "great again," but this is explicitly

not the case. As she writes, "The loss of worldly permanence and reliability — which politically is identical with the loss of authority— does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us." Building, preserving, and caring, she recognized as just imperatives; restoration of worldly permanence and reliability, not so much. Yet her insight about the basic need driving certain revolutionary impulses is instructive: underlying the popular cry for revolutionary change — whether a return to a fantasy golden age, typical of conservatives, or a quest to build entirely anew, typical of radicals — is in fact a desire for sound moorings amidst unbearable fear of a change already underway.

The round table took place at MoMA/PS1, a center for contemporary art in Queens, New York, on the closing day of a large survey exhibition, and brought together practitioners from disparate fields: consumer marketing; political science; literature & philosophy; and the visual arts — all of whose work entails the communication of nuanced ideas on a public, globe-spanning media stage. I asked them to consider the hypothesis that the contemporary locus from- and means by which a semblance of authority — a non-violent, yet obliging power — is conducted today is primarily the aesthetic realm and its devices. I asked them to reflect on the extent to which a perceived disposition amounts to a position in their respective work, and what that degree of equivalence might indicate about contemporary prospects for political engagement, or the political dimensions of mass communications, and of art. Rather than seeking conclusive answers from the conversation, I listened for how the questions were approached, and for the context that developed. A year and a half later, I produced the script for a one-act play, *What Is What*, adapted from the transcription of the round table event, and published here for the first time.

My intention was to capture a conversation among professionally thoughtful people (artists, academics, executives) for later re-presentation by professionally charismatic people (actors). I had observed over the preceding months the unwillingness on the part of the Republican party to condemn then-candidate Donald J. Trump as unfit for Presidential nomination. I perceived the party to be facing a double-bind: to condemn him would require hailing a clear moral or political rationale for legitimate candidacy above Trump's formidable popular appeal, which was based on the very absence of a coherent moral and political program. This would fracture the party, risking a loss of power, whereas to acquiesce in his demagoguery would be (in fact, was) to tacitly admit that the grounds for party identity and affiliation are aesthetically premised, rather than politically principled. This double-bind seemed to me an important knot to publicly articulate and untangle at that time.

The idea that authority — a subtly obliging, but non-violent, non-argumentative power — persists today, and that it is aesthetic, occurred to me after chance discovery of a book with the market-repellent title *Contextual Authority and Aesthetic Truth*, written by literary scholar James Hans in the early 1990s. To paraphrase Hans's idea, "disposition" — call it "attitude" or "tone" or "the content of any expression or object of thought that is not, itself, a product of thought" — is the source of the authority of that expression. In other words, "authority is a function of context." Hans's thesis (here I'm quoting the publisher) "declares all authority to be aesthetic in nature…" The book is a meditation on charisma — on the possibility that charisma, too, can be a product of context, as much as it may be an effect of any particular individual; and that charismatic authority can be transmitted by way of *aesthetic context.* Hans applied the formulation to explain the lasting authority of certain authors' texts despite the supposed death of authorship, which he attributed to identifiable rhetorical style, or "voice," but it accounts as well for the effect of brands, notable personae, even remarkable architectural sites like grand estates, houses of worship, capitol buildings, and art museums.

Western political thought has been motivated since Plato by questions concerning how aesthetic endeavor — construed broadly to encompass not only art, but technologies of representation and persuasion, generally — impacts civic life. Arendt worried more precisely that the pace of technological development would outstrip our ability to devise moral frameworks adequate to manage it. She wrote about the military-industrial complex, but the same contest between technological capacities and moral-political capacities presents today in the apparent wholesale usurpation of politics by the rampant proliferation of misinformation emitting from quasi-private and private sectors. Much of the covert propaganda impacting last year's sentiment in the UK against the EU and in the US in favor of demagoguery was deliberately, strategically generated by private enterprises to degrade collective political competence, and was distributed through corporate-owned channels that optimistic technologists like Wenger imagine to be the means of our unfolding liberation from destructive capitalism.

Cambridge Analytica, plus Breitbart News, plus Facebook does not equal a work of art according to current definitions, but if you'll permit the rhetorical sleight of hand, their ganging makes and facilitates the same, dangerous work — as in effect — of art on Plato's terms by micro-targeting specific segments of the population with aestheticized messages that manipulate their targets' affective states to influence political action. Persuasive technologies have been exponentially inflated in a very short period of time thanks to a cheap, ubiquitous, decentralized distribution network in which most of us are effectively operating nodes, and we have been slow to grasp the existential threat, because

we have lacked the requisite experience of adverse consequences. Public awareness of the situation has been growing since late 2016, but the full extent of systemic disruptions to result from the political turmoil ensuing here in the US, the most thoroughly armed country in the world, is still unknown. Meanwhile, campaigns of non-democratic subterfuge continue globally.

The challenge we face as a civilization whose moral infrastructure lags behind our technological capacities, is that as greater power and resources are consolidated into fewer hands, the extreme advantages gained by a few versus the many further enable a tiny minority to exercise their concentrated power to alter global systems quickly, further defending and increasing their advantages in the short term, thereby making it increasingly difficult for the rest of us to readjust the system in turn so as to regain equilibrium — socially, politically, economically, ecologically. A handful of those who hold power now dominate much of our collective attention with distracting and incoherent misinformation, while, at least in the US, these same individuals actively work to undermine public education and other means we have of equipping ourselves with the critical wherewithal to combat their undue influence and sustain life.

Maybe we will manage to transition through the end of capitalism without declining into chaos — that is, if we survive the ecological fallout of current abuses. I am not optimistic, but I'm encouraged by reminding myself how much remains unimagined and unknowable. As an artist and citizen, I hope to focus my attention on possible solutions, however naïve and unfashionable the aspiration may be, rather than disengage under duress. I don't see a middle road at our current juncture. To this end, during last year's election season, while teaching a critical studies seminar at Yale School of Art, I began, in conversation with first-year MFA students, to formulate a model describing distinct possibilities — strategies, really — to comprehend the political potential of art.

One is an explicit approach: a direct effort to move a particular discourse in a specific direction. In many cases, this type of politically-engaged work pursues an evident activist agenda. As an audience, we may be agitated, inspired, or otherwise, but we have a fair degree of confidence regarding the artist's intentions. The artist occupies a clear moral position. The second approach is "provocative ambiguity." This category of work often invokes a complex narrative concerning nuanced characters or ideas at cross-purposes in morally ambiguous situations. Either it is unclear within the scope of the work itself exactly where the artist or author stands with regard to the moral dilemmas they present, or the author initially appears to hold a morally abhorrent point of view. Focused, provocative ambiguity tends to stir up controversy. In effect, the work of moral judgment is thrust back upon the audience.

There is, however, another kind of political potential in the *work* of art — meaning the choice, the act, the effort of making art, which is to say the work of artists. To endeavor to speak publicly, through the effort of one's work, on terms of one's choosing, is itself a political act, uncoupled from any specific artistic representation inasmuch as this work of artists engages prevalent social dynamics of agency, acknowledgment, and authority — rules about who is permitted to speak, and to act, and to say and to do what, specifically — a permission often granted by informal consensus. These three approaches aren't necessarily bound by any political agenda more specific than "critical thought," which of course is not nothing and not neutral, considering that cultivation of critical capacities is fundamental to liberalism and anathema to autocratism.

A fourth possibility I see for political engagement via one's capacity as an artist is the instrumentalization of art works and their related distribution systems for explicitly political ends. It may be that this possibility is an inevitability for professional artists. If one's work is published, performed, exhibited and/or sold, it is instrumental to the validation of those channels through which it reaches a public, as well as the potential enrichment of its buyers, in all senses of the word "enrichment."

The following play, *What Is What*, was conceived with the above potentials in mind, in attempt to address particular moral conundrums we face, which I hope to have framed by way of this introductory essay. The script was written with full awareness of the parochial taboos against so-called didactic, moralistic, purposive art that dominate contemporary artistic discourse. Its author maintains that *moral permissiveness is itself a defensible moral position* with an estimable history, but the permissiveness we create is neither boundless, nor is it sustained without ongoing advocacy. Artists may be only an incoherent plurality, but we have in common that we have self-selected to value and promote our own attention in the public realm. I believe those of us who care to concern ourselves with the possibility of a public must recognize that "status quo" isn't a fixed entity, it's a medium; the onus is upon us to participate in defining it instead of defining ourselves against it, as the self-anointed *übermensch* always have and likely always will do.

Ghent, New York
August 10, 2017

*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ARTIST
MARKETING EXECUTIVE
SOCIAL SCIENTIST
PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR
SIDEBAR

Overhead SPOTLIGHT shines directly on a round or square TABLE, joined by four CHAIRS. The table is prepared for an orchestrated conversation of the sort that typically occurs in academic or institutional settings where professionally-qualified participants convene to discuss topics of mutual interest and current significance, usually accompanied by small audiences, members of which tend to depart noisily through squeaky back doors as their attention wanes or the speakers grow tiresome. Bottles of WATER, DRINKING GLASSES, NOTEPADS, and PENCILS are placed on the table. The four discussants (ARTIST, MARKETING EXECUTIVE, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, and PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR) are already seated. They make unscripted small talk about THE WEATHER until the ARTIST spontaneously initiates the proceedings.

The following headlines comprise a sample SIDEBAR. The specific content of SIDEBAR and the form of SIDEBAR's dramatic presentation are open to elaboration and interpretation, but the SIDEBAR elements should accompany the other characters' scripted ROUND-TABLE conversation from beginning to end, picking up where small talk about THE WEATHER leaves off, ardently competing to control audience attention thereafter.

FEATURED: THERE'S A HIGH CHANCE OF A MAJOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN (Subhead: What we're expecting; plus, a disturbance in the Atlantic)

FEATURED: TYPHOON NORU LEAVES AT LEAST 2 DEAD

TRENDING: HE DIDN'T WANT A PIECE OF WHAT'S DOWN THERE (Visual: Man in swim shorts standing atop paddle board on still water suddenly toppled by dramatic swell briefly revealing large, spotted fin. Cut. Loop.)

TRENDING: CAN YOU BEAT THIS? $15K COULD BE YOURS (Visual: Lone polar bear captured in profile gazes across sunlit ice drifts extending towards horizon like heaven's clouds.)

TRENDING: TULSA CRUSHED BY SEVERE STORMS, POSSIBLY TORNADO

TRENDING: DEADLY FLASH FLOODING STRIKES VEGAS STRIP

TRENDING: FLORIDA SINKHOLE GROWS TO 260 FEET WIDE (Visual: Between well-kept suburban houses and neatly maintained lawns, apparent chasm consumes mess of building debris and vegetation.)

TRENDING: PROOF THINGS AREN'T HOW THEY ONCE WERE (Visual: In black and white archival photo, men wearing detectives' trench coats and fedoras observe the cracked front window of a wrecked, mangled, late-1940s sedan suspended upside down by a crane.)

RECOMMENDED: 12 INCREDIBLE ARTIFICIAL AND MAN-MADE BEACHES (PHOTOS)

RECOMMENDED: A TORNADO DESTROYED THEIR HOMES, BUT NOT THEIR SPIRIT (Visual: Large woman, her breadth emphasized by wide angle of camera lens, wears vintage Def Leppard 1981 tour t-shirt while smiling peacefully amidst residential wreckage.)

RECOMMENDED: IT'S AMAZING OUT THERE PHOTO CONTEST: WIN $15,000! (Visual: Lone polar bear captured in profile gazes across sunlit ice drifts extending towards horizon like heaven's clouds.)

RECOMMENDED: THE MOST DRAMATIC STORM RESCUE PHOTOS OF 2017 (Visual: Big, uniformed fireman carries beautiful, long-haired woman wearing high heels through cresting flood, away from stranded vehicle. Heavy rain, headlights, water everywhere.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: THESE ILLEGAL PHOTOS OF LIFE IN NORTH-KOREA WILL BLOW YOUR MIND (Visual: In medium close-up, a line of buxom Korean women with chic pixie haircuts, wearing tight, scoop-neck, military green t-shirts, adjust the straps of protective gas masks they hold in-hand.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: 3 FOODS TO AVOID THIS YEAR (Visual: Ripe yellow banana halfway unpeeled on a dark grey background, the exposed fruit sliced into several sections of equal thickness.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: HOW TO FIX DARK SPOTS (Visual: Clenched pink fist of elderly white person marbled by blue veins and large, dark freckles.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: LOCAL DRIVERS SURPRISED BY NEW RULE (Visual: Elegant, long-fingered hands of a woman either peel away or affix transparent skein to license tag on front bumper of red car.)

SLIDESHOW: AMAZING RESCUES THROUGH THE YEARS (Subhead: Severe weather and hazardous situations come in all shapes and sizes. Luckily, so do heroes.)

FEATURED: UNUSUAL WEATHER ABOUT TO DOMINATE MOST OF U.S. (Subhead: And it could hang around for some time)

TRENDING: $15,000 IS ON THE LINE. YOU COULD BE NEXT! (Visual: Lone polar bear captured in profile gazes across sunlit ice drifts extending towards horizon like heaven's clouds.)

RECOMMENDED: ONCE A POPULAR BEACH, NOW A GHOST TOWN (Visual: Abandoned concrete motel sited next to paved road, sand, a single palm tree. Dusk.)

TRENDING: CORN TOWER CRUMBLES INTO FIERY HEAP (Visual: Yellow explosion, massive dust cloud.)

TRENDING: ONE OF THE LARGEST ERUPTIONS IN MONTHS SHOT ASH MILES HIGH (Visual: Grey explosion, massive dust cloud.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: WARNING: DON'T USE PROBIOTICS BEFORE YOU SEE THIS (Visual: A closely cropped shot of what might be either a piece of cooked, pinkish fish, knife-scored around the hole created by cutting away a chunk of flesh, or a freshly excised, full-mouth dental implant, or part of a partially-skinned, brown coconut, repulses and intrigues in equal measure.)

SPONSORED CONTENT: THESE ILLEGAL PHOTOS OF LIFE IN NORTH-KOREA WILL BLOW YOUR MIND (Visual: Now the shot is wider, and we see that a line of buxom Korean women with chic pixie haircuts, wearing tight, scoop-neck, military green t-shirts, adjusting the straps of protective gas masks they hold in-hand, are also wearing skintight black hot pants with 1-inch inseams, revealing comely thighs.)

TRENDING: NIAGARA FALLS: "DEAR GOD, DON'T BE AN OIL LEAK"

TRENDING: STRONGEST STORM ON PLANET EXPECTED TO GET STRONGER

. . .

ARTIST: Ok, right. What is authority? Uhm, I'll just start. I'll just start, uh, answering this question we've been given and also asking some questions. So, I think—, I think, like, a big question for me has to do with the sort of, like, dislocation or, uhm, mutability of the source of things. I think as artists we're given the room to not necessarily be the authority on a particular subject, to not be an expert on a subject, but at the same

time, there's an expectation to have a certain force, to be a forceful voice, to be charismatic or to create charismatic work, and therefore to, like, uhm, persuade your audience that, like, what your questions are or what your interests are, are, uhm, intriguing for them—enough for them to, like, give over and surrender to what you're doing.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Well, in my line of work, you'd have a much more clearly defined objective. There's typically a needle to move around perception or awareness or sales or something of that sort. Credibility is the key thing that companies need to establish, and they do it through branding. Branding tells the consumer what kind of role the product or whatever you're selling can play within the category it occupies. And aesthetics can be added onto that once we have thoroughly defined what is a credible and clear purpose that that brand or politician or celebrity or whatever can play out in the larger world.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Ok, yeah, let's just keep moving around the table then. So, so, my job is to watch politics. So, what I am constantly seeing is each faction's, each party's, intent to kind of—, to shift the focus of conversation to what exactly it is—, exactly what issue it is that the public thinks they should be dominant on—the issues that they own. If they can make people focus on those issues, then the people are going to evaluate that party as dominant. They're going to highly evaluate candidates in that party. Like, one party is considered dominant on defense. If defense is the subject, the other party will be perceived as weak. The irony is that wars have happened and are happening under both parties, so the perception isn't necessarily based on facts so much as what might be considered a political brand or, short of that, just non-rational but well-established expectations. In the end, the parties do fight a battle for authority, but it happens by switching their audience's attention, not by competing on their competitors' terms.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: What I find interesting in both of your responses [*indicates MARKETING EXECUTIVE and SOCIAL SCIENTIST*] is that authority seems to be highly connected to competition. And certainly that's—, certainly that's one of the traditions. To gain dominance and to establish a hierarchy in which authority is derived from that hierarchy that's been established—be it the market, or be it, let's

say, a set of opinions that can be measured through polls—in either case, the outcome of a competition is what sets the standard for authority. I teach at a university that's widely reputed to be liberal, yet even on that campus, there's an expectation that authority is established, and that the established authority has to do with dominance. This is one of the trickiest things to manage when, for example, my preferred teaching objective would be to transfer the authority or to disperse the authority.

ARTIST: Yeah, that's similar to what I was describing, I think. As for my own position, I never —, I never want to find the source of my authority, I think, ultimately. I never want to hold it, and I never want to find it. I want it to remain up in the air. Is that good?

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: Well, often in the classroom, when you try to disperse authority that way, students become angry. They think, "You should be the authority, and when I have a question, you'd better have an answer. Otherwise, your authority is done for me."

[*All laugh in recognition.*]

ARTIST: Right, right, and my job as an artist, I feel, is to try to transform that expectation to dominate and be dominated into a different way of communicating where communication would not come down in some way to an effort to be better than others, but communication would be something where, you know, maybe we can just experience something together through the actual setting we are in, something that we couldn't otherwise experience. Maybe this is a recognition that authority is in the—, it's in the—, it's in the audience, right? It's just like, it's, like, a consensus, right? I mean, authority, in the way I am interested in it, isn't held in this higher power, it's not this position of power that reins down. Authority is consensus, which is why it's something that you [*Indicates MARKETING EXECUTIVE*] also deal with, in terms of getting people to be interested in products, or in an ideology, or whatever — that it's about understanding the authority of a consensus.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yep.

ARTIST: It's the power of belonging, the power of—

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Sure, but, "I deserve to be voted for because … look at the polls!"—that's circular logic, you know what I mean?

ARTIST: Mmhm.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: And what you're describing about consensus can be troublingly volatile if it isn't counterbalanced by something more stable and concrete—for example, a robust legal system of established laws and precedents.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: I saw an ad on TV a few days ago that showed beautiful images of people in the great outdoors, doing basic sorts of Americana-type things with a saccharine Simon & Garfunkel song playing over the top of it, and at the end, the candidate says, "I'm so-and-so, and I approve this message." But, like, what was the message, right?

[*All laugh.*]

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Some of the more famous ads, like Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America," you watch, and they're just beautiful images—they just create this feeling, which is an aesthetic experience, and you don't know what's hit you, but you walk away feeling good. I mean, that's what positive political ads try to do. Maybe this is meant to simulate the kind of shared experience you're [*Indicates ARTIST*] talking about. But in the research that I do, we've learned that positive ads carry no information whatsoever. Everybody claims to hate negative ads, but negative ads have a lot of substance and information in them. There's a lot of other stuff, too, but people never learn from positive ads. They don't learn political information. What audiences get — it's a feeling, right?

ARTIST: But then, I mean, the ads do create learning. A feeling is a kind of learning.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: [*Quips*] Or is it manipulation?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: There was a review of the ad in the paper, and they said, "Well, no claims have been made, so I suppose this ad is true."

ARTIST: [*Laughs*] Yes, a true feeling!

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Part of the problem is that we flock to scandal and conflict like moths to flames, which makes sense, if we agree it's by focusing appropriately and successfully on causes for alarm that we've survived as a species. But, so, the way the news media works, they cover scandal and conflict because we can't look away from that, and their business is built on holding our attention. Over time, this has become a runaway feedback loop, where the conflicts and scandals grow and grow, and people become increasingly informed about muck, but also increasingly distrustful of both their government and the media. This sets the scene for a demagogue to enter. All he needs to say is, "We're gonna do things differently." "I'm gonna take care of you." "I love you guys, I love you guys, and I'm gonna take care of you." He's pointing to the muck, which piques anxiety and therefore gets attention, and then he's saying he's going to make it better, he's going to soothe the collective worry. And people buy it.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: The question of the spectator, of the audience, that was brought up—uh, uh, I'm wondering how that's changed, or if that's changed, if you've [*Indicates MARKETING EXECUTIVE*] seen that change in the way that you're formulating your strategies, even in the last ten years or so?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yeah, uhm, so, great question. And, again, it just really depends on the category and what the appropriate level of involvement is. There is talk now of "prosumers"—the idea of the audience wanting to feel like they're in control. You see people creating Super Bowl campaigns and crushing the Super Bowl with things like potato chips, getting a really active, almost overwhelming audience involvement. But when you get down to categories where there's perceived expertise needed, like, for example, with pharmaceuticals, then it's just less credible for audiences to contribute to things so fundamental, where something serious is at stake. When you talked about competition a minute ago as a key differentiator to understand, uh, you know, where the kind of power lies, I was thinking—in our world, in the advertising or marketing world, you have only one real choice: *Either you're different. Or you're better.* [*Others laugh spontaneously in recognition of- and accord with this*

idea while MARKETING EXECUTIVE continues speaking.] Those are the only two things that you can be if you plan on having—a position. If you look at the current candidates, some are positioning themselves as better and others are clearly positioning themselves as different. Layer the aesthetics of authority on top of the positioning of difference, and you start to get really significant results. You can start tracking how the pack will pull apart. So, authority can be either the strategy, or the messaging, or in this case it just seems to be the aesthetics of the delivery of a … of a message around difference, which is very interesting to watch.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: I see, though it sounds like you're talking about authority as a particular tone, which we could say is authoritative or, beyond that, authoritarian. I think we're all using the word authority sometimes to mean "power" and other times to mean this particular flavor of power, which is authoritarian.

ARTIST: Well, what is that—what is—off the cuff, can you [*Indicates MARKETING EXECUTIVE*] think of an example of creating an "aesthetics of difference?" Is that, wait, did I—?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: No, I don't know if the aesthetic can be—I just think from a strategic perspective, you know, it's that you're saying, "I'm really different," or "I'm better." So, I think in this case, in the current political campaigns, the loudest candidate is just saying over and over, "I'm really different," but delivering it in a way that's as if they're the expert—

ARTIST: Right.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: —with that kind of gravitas and authority, so … there's an interesting kind of fusion between saying, "I'm different" in an authoritative—or maybe it's an authoritarian—way, like the Professor pointed out.

ARTIST: Yeah, it seems like "different" is really a certain kind of better. So, maybe, in your business, the product can either be better—or it can be better because it's different, which is another way of saying it can only be better!

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: Or maybe we have to think about what we mean when we say "better," whether we mean "preferable because it's higher on a hierarchy of dominants and subordinates," or we mean "preferable because it's good—more ethical, more moral, according to our norms, however we define them."

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: There are certain kinds of research in our field that are considered more credible, that have a certain kind of authority, in that everything is supposedly done according to a scientific method. And, so, there's very much a focus on what can be measured. If it cannot be measured, if it cannot be replicated in other studies, if you can't make data available for replication by others, then whatever it is you might be doing, it's not credible knowledge. But as a result, we're losing a lot of other research. In political science, historically, we also had political theory. The work of philosophers would thereby be included as part of political science. But there are departments recently saying, "We don't need political theory anymore," and they're actually getting rid of it, so the authority of the scientific method is really shaping how we think about politics in the field—for us, "scientific" equals "better" in the sense of "good" you're [*Indicates PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR*] describing. But, then, what's interesting is now, right now, political scientists really want to talk to the public—they want to be relevant to this larger consensus process we were just discussing. And to talk to the public, you need to be able to tell stories, which requires interpretation and speculation. We need narrative frameworks in order to make use of these quantifiable things we gather scientifically, and that kind of framing entails aesthetic decisions.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Now, with being able to listen in on all social conversations as they are happening—and millions and millions of them are happening every day—what weight does that kind of information have as you start to think about—

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: You mean the kind of studies that are working with that kind of data, when you're going out, you're scraping—

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: You're listening in on all conversations currently to understand what sentiment is, like, you know "where consumers

are now,"—evaluating in real time what is happening and what weight does that have within the context of your—

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: It's huge right now. That's where all the growth is.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yep.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: It's still hard to figure out what it all means. You can say, "There are all these searches on this term after, you know, something was said in the media," but what motivated that? Why is that significant? That's where we lose credt— Well, we don't have the imagination—

ARTIST: Right.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: —that would explain these things that we're seeing.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Right.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: We've lost the imagination, because we've forbidden ourselves to employ it.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: You can really get a gauge on the sentiment, though, around what people are saying. You can see that if you search a candidate, right, there's a cloud of words that really describe the sentiment and the strength of the sentiment—

ARTIST: You mean feelings… ?

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: It seems like there's just all kinds of information that—things that could be measured in new ways.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yeah, driven by consumers to contribute—their willingness to share—

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: [*Simultaneously*] Mmhm.

ARTIST: [*Simultaneously*] You mean, in terms of social media?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE & SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Yeah, right, mmhm.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: I mean, no one can look at their social media feeds now and not have a—and my feed isn't journalism—not have at least ten things that are political, you know, like, propaganda.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Right, and of course there are other kinds of researchers, say, on the commercial side, who probably have the motivation financially and otherwise to do a lot with the data that people in the field who see themselves as observers, rather than influencers, necessarily won't do.

ARTIST: Wasn't it Hannah Arendt who warned against our technological capabilities getting to a point that our moral capabilities would lag behind? Like, there's this potential now to gather big data and to use it, and we don't have any idea how to handle it, because there's never been that potential before—we've never been connected 24-7 to this kind of, like, instantaneous communication network.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: Well, I think one of the first sentences in her essay on authority that we have been considering is that the question, "What is authority?" has to be "What was authority—

ARTIST: Right.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: —in the modern world?" Something like, "Authority has been facing the aftermath of the breakdown of authority," and an outside source of hierarchy that would—, that would—, that one could self-evidently refer to and believe in. Tradition or religion, for example, would be sources of authority we no longer believe in—

ARTIST: Right.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: —as modern individuals, but historically, they would've been the go-to to guide behavior and decision-making. Now we have these new technological means, but the old frameworks

don't apply. I mean, she wrote the essay "What is authority?" between 1955 and 1961, but the connections I see between what we're discussing here today and her essay, are, I think, around two main ideas. One is that she was thinking through how to distinguish, uhm, different forms of government, and authoritarian government in the aftermath of the Second World War—uh, that was one of the questions at hand— "Are we having new forms of government now?" So, to assess the forms of government and to distinguish authoritarian government from totalitarian government, for example, is–, is–, is— [*Trailing*]

ARTIST: [*Encouraging*] Right?

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: —is one of her priorities… [*Louder now, focus regained*] The other idea has to do with the question of how a given form of government is always closely related to a given concept of freedom. One thing I always find inspiring in–, in–, in Arendt's writing is that she would—when she goes back through, let's say, the history of thought, she attempts to recreate what kind of experience shaped, let's say, uh, the republic, or Plato's *Republic*. She asks, for example, "What kind of experience shaped the conceptualization of Machiavelli's *Principe*?" So, then, basing the question of government on experience immediately makes any concept of government related, rather than absolute. Now you don't just think through, "Oh, what's the best kind of government? Here you have it. Apply it." Instead, what Arendt has given to us—by looking as she did at unprecedented forms of political experience, such as totalitarian regimes, she gave us the idea that we need to *conceptualize the difference.* In her political thinking, there's always this relatedness, rather than an absolutism of concepts of political terms. And authority would be another idea that is linked to actual experience and not to, let's say, an abstract, absolute concept.

ARTIST: And, so, what is the experience we are having now? That would help to answer the question of what form of government we're stumbling into.

[*Quiet, uncomfortable chuckles and murmurs of affirmation, followed by awkwardly long pause in which all regard each other, but none volunteer an answer*]

ARTIST: I wonder, just in terms of, like, some of the things we've been talking about—we talked about big data—what are the—, where would we locate physical experience, each of us, with, like, a sense of authority? Like, where's an experience where this is—, this is [*holds up an object in-hand*]— something that feels like—? I mean, *where is authority?* And how is it even possible to answer that question, if it means you'd have to think outside the basis on which you make every decision every day, but in order to judge you'd have to use the criteria by which you make every decision every day, so there's this paradox, like you can't ever step out of the authority in order to get a look at it. But, uhm, I feel like since we're here to solve that, uhm, I wonder if, like, I guess if just starting with, or like so maybe going back to this idea of, like, so "big data"—or what's one thing that you do when you're trying to research a specific sentiment? [*Indicates SOCIAL SCIENTIST*] Like, where—, how do you find sentiment? Where is sentiment? Or, like, where is experience in the classroom? Or, like, so, ok, so, you're looking at data but, like, what is—, what does it mean—, what is the actual, like, physical thing that you're looking at by which you can say, like, "This information, this chart that just went like this [*Gestures in the air to an imaginary point on a curve, as if on a graph*]—that means "important" because it's at this point, rather than this one?" I guess I'm thinking that in terms of locating the conversation specifically in aesthetic experience, what is a tactile example that's coming to mind for any of you guys?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: I mean, I don't know if this is going to answer your question, but I think, well, within the context of big data, too, it all really just depends on having real clarity in what the question you're trying to answer is.

ARTIST: Mmhm.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: What is actually the problem that we need to solve for?

ARTIST: Yeah.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: The data can help you see the question. Tracking sentiment around an existing product may help you see that you

need to solve a very different problem than the one that you initially thought you needed to solve. You may see that your assumptions about a problem, about public perceptions, are way off, so knowing more prompts you to ask a better question.

ARTIST: But, like, how do you find the sentiment?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: There are new tools every day claiming to be better than the last ones. They look at language people are using, they look at activity patterns, at frequencies and contexts.

ARTIST: So, you look at the affectations of people via—

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: You can search "bottled water" and words will pop up—what do people say about it? How are they using it? What words are attached to it? Now search "Evian." Is it really bottled water? Or is it something else?

ARTIST: Yeah.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Who is saying what? Who is not? And then they become part of a—like, you have to present what you find in a way that tells a story so that people can understand "Okay, with this data, what do we need to do?" You can analyze to determine what part of the problem we need to solve, or who we need to solve the problem with. That's most important because each person sharing data has a different level of influence-engagement with the problem, too. You've got to, you know, pick who you need to solve this problem with first—who will be the most, you know, influential.

ARTIST: Mmhm.

SOCIAL SCIENTIST: Everything I work with is survey data, so we'll ask people to watch a political ad, and we'll ask them how it made them feel by using this standard battery of emotional questions: "Did it make you feel worried?" "Did it make you feel hopeful?" You can also have people watch ads and use little dials. "I like that more." "I like this less." It sounds ridiculous, but, I mean, that's how emotion works—that's

positive and negative affect. "Do I like them?" Or, "Do I not like them?" This seems to be the main shortcut people use when they're assessing political candidates or politicians. It's just, "I like the person." "I don't like the person." And if you ask them, they will be very rational, and they will explain how all the issue positions they hold are similar, but we've seen that it's all just rationalization. You just have this sort of emotional response—maybe that's the same thing as an aesthetic experience, I don't know. You just—it's a gut feeling.

ARTIST: You mean, it's just popularity.

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Right.

ARTIST: In my field, there's been a lot of writing around the so-called crisis of art criticism throughout maybe the last decade—a lot of concern that critics, art critics, those kinds of expert viewers and thinkers don't have the same kind of power that they once did to establish legitimacy. A curator said to me—which I couldn't believe—she was doing a bunch of different things around the world at one time, and she said, "Yeah, it's all about aggregation. You know, it's just aggregation. That's how you're really gonna make it. You need to have a lot of things going at once so your name's coming up all the time." Maybe you're not going to hold onto a lot of credibility that way in certain circles, but, in terms of authority, if by that we mean power, it seems that authority is increasingly dispersed, and that maybe the word we could replace authority with today would be "popularity."

[*All laugh.*]

ARTIST: Well, I mean, that's how you're figuring out "sentiment," right? By the popularity of certain terms?

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yeah, you're right, it's the people or the products coming up time and time again that turn out to have the authority.

ARTIST: You hear people say, "Oh, they're everywhere."

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yeah. And that gives them authority—being everywhere—by being on the TV or the Internet or the social media app every time you turn on or tune in.

ARTIST: And that's interesting, actually—the being everywhere—because, thinking back to that question, "Where was authority in the past?" or "What was authority?" It wasn't here, it was in, like, abstract land. Like, it wasn't the ruler—it was the law, right? So, it's like authority can only exist in a non-space: the World Wide Web.

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR: That's a very good point, yes.

ARTIST: But, again, to bring it back to a tangible understanding—I'm searching for a contemporary equivalent to understand the authority historically projected onto the tall, white-haired, older white man with a loud, deep voice. If we imagine dislocating all those physical cues from the specific person—

MARKETING EXECUTIVE: Yeah, which is it—your branded haircut or your omnipresence that gives you more authority today?

ARTIST: [*Laughing*] Of course, no one would notice my hair if I wasn't everywhere, but I wouldn't be everywhere if not for this hair!

[*Laughter that begins as expected continues for too long while SIDE-BAR crescendoes, gaining dominance over the table, and "A trap-door may or may not open; or perhaps the stage may or may not slowly collapse, and the characters—all unwittingly—gently sink and disappear without interrupting their actions—or just quite simply carry on, according to the technical facilities available," the very same way Eugène Ionesco imagined* THE FUTURE IS IN EGGS or IT TAKES ALL SORTS TO MAKE A WORLD *(1957) would end.*]

CURTAIN

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