

DIARY

TROPICAL MODERNISM

April 12, 2018 • New York • Suspended Reason



Backporch in Bolivia performing a free show at Brooklyn Museum's Target First Saturday.

At 7:12 p.m. on a Saturday we convened at AJ's apartment in Boerum Hill, a neighborhood long home to literary figures like "that one character from *10:04*," and maybe Jonathan Safran Foer. I had come straight in a Juno from La Guardia off a Cape Air flight, just hours after meeting in Cambridge with K. Michael Hays. (United prices were cheaper, but politically unsavory.)

Brooklyn Museum was opening its James Polshek-designed doors to anybody and everybody, another evening of Who's Who shot through with the spirit of democracy, just as Dewey always imagined it. A very chic-looking trio, standing in line behind us, had moved into the neighborhood from Bedford ("the one in Manhattan"). We laid bets on whether they were poly. A couple in matching camel-hair pea coats tried futilely to bring their Afghan Hound inside, while AJ couldn't stop mouthing, "Balenciaga."

While we prowled *Infinite Blue*, a (very much finite) collection of museum assets prominently featuring the color blue, we tried to remember what wall labels were called, only to be disappointed upon looking up the answer. "I just feel like it needs a -taph, -graph, or -thet suffix, you know?" I wondered. AJ stared at his iPhone. We were standing in front of Samuel Levi Jones' *Blue Pill*, designed to challenge "the assumed authority of institutional texts on history, law, medicine, and higher education."

"One problem with contemporary art," I said, "is that even though some kind of conceptual 'integrity' exists, it's only known privately by the artist, and therefore is completely closed off to the audience. It's really a bizarre reversal of the typical effect triage." Everyone agreed that paintings which rely on labels to explicate their purpose pose a specific phenomenological challenge: after all, what happens to a painting when you know it's been named off of *The Matrix*?

We wandered down the hall past 18th century portraits of Incan Kings, a series of paintings and busts playing cleverly with other public visual vocabularies such as the "meme" and "reaction GIF." "Wouldn't this make a great TFW photo?" one Gen Z-er with an Apple Watch asked as he passed out of earshot.

The idea stuck with us through the Rodin statuary, and we made a quick exit circa the battered *Balzac Monumental Head*. "It looks like a mid-tier French bureaucrat receiving oral exultation in exchange for paperwork." A round of tired puns ensued, riffing on Honoré's family name. Next to a collection of bronze appendages, a guest could be heard loudly commenting, "Nice."



Left: The artist Bridgette McNeal holding a martini. Right: Performance-art team Radical Blitzkrieg.

Given the high concentration of carpenter's glasses, one can only assume most of the night's visitors had come to see *One Basquiat*, the new exhibition featuring a single painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat. For those impressed by money, the sheer capital worth of the painting dominates experiences of the canvas: dimly lit from the sides, and complete with rows of communal benches, it had something like the effect of an altarpiece or religious iconography. AJ: "All I can think about is the fact that I'm staring at like thirty million dollars." The NYPD officer stationed stoically in the corner appeared to agree.

We "gathered ourselves" (exposure to diverse cultures is a must) in the second-floor bathroom outside Arts of Korea before proceeding to Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, the museum's crown jewel *éternel*. A dance party was well underway on the third floor, and blaring traphouse could be heard from the mezzanine level. "Is that music?" an elderly woman said as she walked along the balconies. "I think I just saw Chris Kraus" someone said after she'd passed. We stuck around to salivate over a particularly sumptuous Art Deco study set up just around the corner from Saudi photographs of Mecca.

There was a brief, windswept lull between Brooklyn Museum and our next event of the night, an “architecture and labor” party at Prime Produce in Hell’s Kitchen, so we stopped at Mitchell’s near Prospect to get collard greens and drumsticks. Unlike Peaches Hot House, none of the fellow customers were members of the creative class.

The quick transition from a public space to the privacy of each other's company had left us both in need of a drink. AJ put on his best impression of Frank O'Hara, improvising a stanza between sips of Sixpoint: *Since the symphony was late / sharing food with someone is better than any artwork / That is why I'm going to have to leave you now / When the orange orchids of San Sebastian don't have to wait for anyone*. Nice, I said. “The second line was earnest,” he replied. Nice, I answered. “Orange you glad I didn’t say banana?” AJ inquired. “It’s a New York joke, because only New Yorkers say ‘orange’ like ‘aren’tchya.’”

Hell’s Kitchen may be the least fashionable neighborhood in Manhattan, but that didn’t prevent us from enjoying ourselves. Spotting Chuck Close with a friend near the laser-lit DJ lounge, we made our approach, only for it to turn out to be an ad consultant standing next to a lecturer “on hiatus” from the New School. We wanted to ask, but, you know. One doesn’t do that.

Susanna De Martino, rumored to be writing a book on the Italian mafia, tells us over Coronas and sweet-and-sour how when she was at the Met for the Hockney exhibition everyone smelled like weed (*s. diesel?*). “It’s still surreal to me... it’s 2018,” a casual quipped from the corner. It was at that moment Susanna’s music producer boyfriend Maurice Marion pulled her away for a one-on-one in the gender neutral bathrooms. Ah, youth. AJ and I were forced to go our own way across the dance floor, where Zak Hap met us with updates on his dayjob. “I sold my Ripple and bought Ether. But now I’m thinking, maybe I sell my Ether and buy Ripple.”

An hour later we stood near the exit as AJ held court on the Oulipo because he was “taking a class” for his MFA program. Like all fashion-forward parties, the music was too strange for anyone to comfortably pass judgment on, and too loud to do more than go through conversational motions. Dan Taeyoung, manning the lighting, was making heroic

attempts at small talk. “What?” AJ said. “What?” Dan Taeyoung said. “I don’t know” AJ replied.

Outside over a smoke, a quiff-cut in a Carhartt administered strong words on the “anti-nicotine circlejerk.” “All My Friends,” Brooklyn’s dance anthem *de rigueur* going on a decade, could be heard faintly through the entrance doors: the cue for anyone whose career arc hadn’t peaked in 2007 to leave. We were just in time to catch the end of a Rangers Game at Lincoln Park Bar & Grill. A current of warm air — unseasonable in its equatorial humidity — had slunk into Manhattan from the south, and we walked freely for a while. “Don’t you have a Tinder date?” AJ asked me around 3:15. “It’s Coffee Meets Bagel, and I don’t want to pay for condoms. Isn’t art enough eroticism for the night?” With eyebrows furrowed, AJ was forced to concur.

— Suspended Reason

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REAL LIFE

The Mask is the Face

What does self-design look like in the age of the algorithm?

Suspended Reason

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Image: Modern day scarification practices.

"We wear our souls in here." —Second Life resident

Biology's offspring is culture, but culture feels little allegiance to its heritage. It has become rabid, turns back and attempts to devour its father. But culture is a Cronus, a middle way, a transitory stage.

Culture in turn gives birth to the algorithm, but the algorithm feels little allegiance to its heritage; it has become rabid, turns back and attempts to devour its father. So the algorithm lives cannibalistically off the calories of the human body.

Biological evolution begets cultural evolution begets algorithmic evolution. Data points the way to fulfillment. First nature shaped our bodies, then we adorned and modified them with culture: tattoos, neck rings, body ideals, body piercings, shorn hair, clipped nails, ritual scars, labor, trade, and craft. These practices have inevitably migrated to the Internet: the most ephemeral, abstracted “site” in our lives, analogized popularly as a cloud, exerts increasing influence over our physical bodies. Energy in means energy out; our “feeds,” populated by the cyber self-representations of others, shape our development, while integrated technologies bring into question traditional boundaries of the body. We exist now in stretched forms across the web, loosely held together across countless subcontainerizations on any platform that will have us.

(And yet culture and algorithm cannot ignore their origins in DNA: in order to mold bodies, they must engineer games to counter the evolved laziness, or exploit the evolved thrill-seeking, of their human hosts; in order to sell products, they must predict hormone cycles, trajectorize fertility.



The body has always been a vehicle for the expression of the self. The heart breaks, the eyes cry. Wrinkles are a testimony to time lived; experience leaves scars.

But the body has also acted as a vehicle for the realization for the self, undergone through processes of ongoing material modification. In Christian

worldview, the soul was clothed by the surface of the body, and visible only to God. Design, humble and human, was free to treat trappings and ornament on their own terms. As Christian ideas withdrew in the 20th century, the soul was suddenly revealed, and design became a way of expressing, communicating, and understanding it second-hand. A person could be at least partially understood through appearances, though there was always a process of reverse-engineering, of knowledge through proxy.

Now we are inside an era in which not just mind-body or surface-soul dualisms, but boundaries or borders of any kind, are under scrutiny. There are the emerging concepts of embodied and extended thinking, which run against not just Cartesian preconceptions but the very idea of an autonomous thinking individual. “Context” myths of success are replacing “genius” myths of success. Entire platforms are dedicated to networking seemingly distinct ideas and objects. Concepts of ambient meaning are blossoming out of the fertile compost of gestalt theory. Binaries of gender and attraction are bleeding into spectrums. Maps act on territories through reinforcing feedback loops, and a cultural constructionist, ev-psych synthesis looms. The inside information is that [the idea of] yourself as "just little me" who "came into this world" and lives temporarily in a bag of skin is a hoax and a fake.

The modern soul, then, is not merely made legible by proxy, by observing a subject's conscious, mediated actions (both on its body and its surrounding landscape). The soul itself is inside these actions, these externalities, externalities which go far beyond the physical body and into digital and analog technologies alike. It is constructed across avatars and web profiles which are not just “evidence” of the soul but part and parcel to it. The soul's very existence is predicated on the an external world, so that what we colloquially call personal branding is, acts on, and is acted upon by the soul all at once. Design of one's “external” form is more important than ever: while present-day cultural correctness entails the conscientious disavowal of body-based prejudice, the rest of social ideology and techno progress pushes the opposite direction.



Image: Abbey Lee Kershaw in the #mycalvins campaign.

Sometimes this embodied, extended, and virtualized soul occupies closed, safe communities; other times it is public on the web and theoretically visible to all. Before, identities were largely inherited: trades passed from father to son, domestic life reserved to women, class basically fixed. In small communities, people adopted the identities of their trades: doctor, shaman, chieftain, cobbler. The almost inconceivable expansion of personal mobility and

network size in the 21st century brought with it the growing anxieties of identity: the anxieties of opportunity and possibility, indeterminacy and “what if”; the anxieties of layered cultural and subcultural affiliations, of navigating simultaneous ingratiations. Personal identity is the solution to a high-dimensional problem, the overlapping Venn diagram zone of varied cultural constraints.

If bundling and unbundling technology has been the main driver of capital creation over the last twenty years, technologies to bundle and unbundle identities will be the main driver of identity creation over the next twenty.

*Think of a joke, then check on Twitter to make sure no one's made it yet. "All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyper-linked... World without end, amen" (D. DeLillo, *Underworld*). Digital originality looks suddenly one in 3.8 billion. The upside is that digital networks also mean endless sources of inspiration, unprecedented source material for endless unique recombinations. Follow your idols, and merge your favorite attributes. The image feed acts as mood board for the mind and body.*

The two primary identity responses to the crises of networked culture have been consolidation and diversification. Modernist café society had its third spaces — informal social environments outside the home and workplace — where a third self could emerge inside bistros, barrooms, and Cotton Clubs.

entities or a person's true social space, subnetworks — friendas, twitters, Tumblrs, Reddit accounts, Second Lives, 4chan anonymity, IRC infamy — are where users can be someone specifically oriented and specifically situated,

catering to a curated audience often known only through URLs. The selves presented on these subnetworks are no less mediated, no less constrained, but they take on a certain reality in amalgam: different audiences come with different rules of acceptability, different aims and functions and social pressures. "Real" elements of the self which are stifled in one context are revealed in another, so that many users see subnetwork spaces as outlets into their "authentic" selves: "Finstas are used to publicise the real us. Rather than being illegal behaviour, [we're] just posting what we really think about others," says Windell. "They kind of are our opposites of our real profiles. Ironic."

A primary response to network culture has been the consolidation and diversification of selves. If bundling and unbundling technology has been the major driver of capital creation over the last twenty years, technologies to bundle and unbundle identities may very well be the major driver of identity creation over the next twenty.



Self-design is inherently performative and transactional, exchanging time, money, and physical suffering to bring the body into agreement with the idealized soul. But the performance is not purely outward-facing: self-design is also a means of creating internal coherence, of combating cognitive dissonance between body and values. In Brooklyn, Poncho Martinez leads a team of left-leaning powerlifters committed to honing their bodies into fascist-fighting machines. The stated purpose might be physical self-defense, but the actual function is less pragmatic and more identity-bound: "[Conservatives] think we're weak, we're snowflakes, we're hiding in our safe spaces. That's not the case." In tattoo parlors, a not insignificant number of customers pay to undergo ritualized, socially acceptable pain — self-design as alternative to self-harm — where the resulting body art serves as visible testimony to hidden hurt. Self-modification becomes an exercise of autonomy, a form of self-assurance which proves to a subject his control over his body.

We are shifting away from a conception of identity as “who you are” — fixed and immutable — towards “how you do it.” What you add to, or subtract from, your body, how you conceptualize and frame the self, is becoming more important than what was “there to begin with.” In other words, *how you do it* is the body, *how you do it* is the brand, and *how you do it* is the soul.

Platforms like Second Life give users full autonomy (with respect to a finite set of customization options) over their physical appearance. In the physical world of 2017, only the body's margins can only proxy for the soul: the ten percent of alterable qualities is tasked with representing values, beliefs, and feelings. In the digital world of 2017, every element of the self is chosen. The soul — insofar as we understand it as *taste*, a set of preferences, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and longings — becomes extended into the digital self, acts as the digital self’s very basis. In the same way we talk about art or literature as an extension of its creator’s soul, so we can understand the virtual body. This shared expressive ground goes part-ways toward explaining why so many Instagram influencers and amateur models run side projects in music, or describe modeling as their art.

When these virtual selves are monetized and commodified, when they appeal to lowest common denominators, they pick up the language of commercial creative practice. Instagram influencers have been compared by Bloomberg to miniature magazines, serially releasing professional photographs, product recommendations, and politicized editorials.

If the physical body has been described as a canvas, then digital bodies, to those who occupy them, are a form of fictionalized autobiography, a fabrication more real than reality. Bridgette McNeal, a Second Life-using mother in Atlanta, sports a blonde, fit avatar named Gidge Uriza, an alternate self she describes as “her” if she’d “never eaten sugar or had children.” Twenty-somethings on BodyBuilding.com talk about actualizing into the men they’re biologically “supposed” to be — fit, bulked up, dominant. The mentality carries through onto digital platforms, where more radical and less labor-intensive transformation is possible. Whether its building blocks are proteins or pixels, musculature is a projection of (self-perceived) inner

strength. The digitally slimmed waistlines of Instagram stand in for an inner discipline stymied by daily trials, but no less “real” or central to the self-slimmer. Digital bodies becomes an interface for transforming belief into reality; the digital self becomes a lie we tell in order to tell the truth, at least our version of it.



Recent lines from our popular culture: "I'm not myself when I'm hungry." "I'm not myself when I'm depressed." "I'm not myself when I'm stressed out." "I'm not myself when I'm anxious."

“Authentic self” is a ready-branded stand-in for “best self” so long as no one is willing to admit self-absorption, gossipping, binge eating, or alcoholism are parts of their “inner being.” It is a self-flattering substitution where “true self” slips into “best self,” an epistemic shoddiness by design. We subscribe to a Rousseauian models of a fallen angel, inscribing the Biblical story of Adam and Eve onto our own personal teleologies. *Our true, inner selves were pure. We were corrupted by society. We must reclaim the authentic inner self who would have flourished.*

Some have argued that virtuality has rendered the body inconsequential. Cyberspace is certainly diminishing the relative importance of flesh-and-body anatomy, and some users of IRL-anonymous web platforms certainly roleplay (or “actualize”) as races, genders, body types, and ages other than their own. But for every instance of this phenomenon a dozen counterexamples are at hand: the overwhelming majority of such users maintain a strong, discernable correlation between what their bodies look like in cyberspace and what they look like in meatspace. Farsighted gamers adorn their avatar alter-egos with glasses, despite a lack of in-world visual impairment. McNeal may have shed pounds in her online transition, but has preserved the rest of her physical body in simulacrum. Social behavior, speech style, and other manifestations of selfhood similarly transfer: Role-playing quickly becomes old, limited, the role-player feels stifled at the inherent boundaries of inhabiting a stereotype.

Inevitably, players default to "being themselves," which means striking a balance between living as an idealized self and minimizing the work required to maintain the idealization.

Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But the type of image, the category of reflection, has changed. Literal mirrors — dynamic but not manipulable, presenting a single authoritative image — are being replaced as reflectors of self by a network of altered images, frozen nanoseconds atemporally linked. The "plandid" image — a portmanteau of "planned" and "candid" — becomes the default emblem of self, while narcissistic scrolls through personal profiles reinforce a self-flattering self-image, based on manipulations initially (or purportedly) meant for others. Product loyalty and the weight of branding can only become more important in this new identity landscape. Increases in purchasing power mean increased consumption choice and agency; increased consumption choice and agency mean more power and legitimacy lent to "superficial" judgments. Is it fair to judge "tall skinny blondes" in a simulation where users self-design their bodies? The model of marketing will be the same as it's ever been — enough idealization to flatter, enough accuracy to be believed. Self-design is the high-brow steelman of self-care, with the courage to admit its inherent narcissism and the aesthete sophistication to imagine everything as surface (or everything as soul). "When I step into [Second Life], I'm afforded the luxury of being selfish," one resident confesses. Self-care aficionados, meanwhile, cloak nine-dollar organic gelato purchases in appeals to mental health.

Where self-care treats the body as all too human and inherently fragile, self-design treats the body as cyborg, antifragile, constantly expanding and ripe for optimization. One story replaces another; the mask becomes the face; happiness is born of costuming.





Image: Neil Harbisson, famed cyborg artist

“The fourth advantage I see in the word ‘design,’ is that it is never a process that begins from scratch: to design is always to redesign. There is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem.” (Bruno Latour)

We have been cyborgs as long as we have been human. All technologies which extend the body — hand tools, clothing garments, weaponry — are part of our cyborg heritage. But our degree of cyborgism is rapidly accelerating, past heart valves into brain chips, calling for a discourse which has thus far been largely limited to cybernetics and academic feminism.

To understand the cyborg, or cybernetic organism, requires a shift in conceptualization. There is no longer a distinct boundary where the human ends and the tool begins. The central human element in the cyborg is not the specificities of anatomy but, as the Istanbul Biennial contends, the act of design, which makes the algorithmic future of autodidactic AI all the more existentially uncertain. The arbitrariness of the body as “soul container” gives

way to technologically extended selfhoods. A Twitter account is not a disembodied self but a bodily techno-extension. It only looks disembodied from the outside.

“Grinding,” a techie, cyborgic self-modification subculture, can be seen as a brave forsaking of future nausea in the name of exploration — or else as yet another subculture basing its membership around the technological modification and extension of the body. Grinders must undergo ritualized pain themselves in order to participate, inserting foreign objects like RFID chips and magnets under the skin through amateur surgery, often resulting in infection. Central to grinding culture is a communal belief in abstracted “science,” but it is a fetishized, cargoculted value more than a central tenant to grinder practice. The augmented selves which are produced by grinding — at least in theory — are here a variation on the “best self”/“true self” conflation seen across body modification practices.



There are downsides to digital embodiment, to unlimited choosing, to avatar as identity, to an ease of self-design and self-customization. One is anxiety — the flipside of choice is always the panic of choosing wrong. Another is the avatar’s disconnect from the subject’s experience.

We are our own protagonists, and we mark our presence in the world by our exertion on it and its exertion on us. Physical self-transformation, from fashion to body art to surgery, is an abstracted, higher-dimension, costly-signaled equivalent of the prison tally mark. It is a testimony to not just a life lived but to the conditions of the living — material, social, historical, political.

Without real-world correspondence, physical appearance becomes at once infinitely meaningful and entirely meaningless. If the wrinkle, the scar, the muscle are products and evidence of living, then airbrushed skin and electronically induced muscle reflects nothing other than (ephemeral) inner desire. The avatar is both essential and arbitrary.

First, we build emoticons which stand-in symbolically for our emotions. Then, we use emotions to stand-in symbolically for our emoticons. Facial expression are already associative, meaning-carrying vessels. But they do so with a debt to biology: tears are tied to trauma; smiles to oxytocin. If expressions become untethered, malleable, consciously pre-determined, they sever this tie.

The ability to fully engineer your own body entails also the ability for others to control it. All the artifacts of external being — image, voice, facial expression — can and have been manipulated. The easier it becomes to become ourselves, the easier it becomes for us to become others, and others to become us.

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<p><span style="font-weight: 400;">

<p>We'll be looking at the historic terrazzo sidewalks of Downtown Los Angeles, talking about the weather. Do you miss the seasons?</p>

<p>It'll be a sky blue sky, with only a scattering of clouds, miles apart, and I will wonder whether I can accurately gauge the space between them from below. I'll be smoking a cigarette, and I will not be inhaling because I no longer smoke, have no tolerance for it, would only give me headswarms, but I am with you and for the sake of company I join you, if only from the outside.</p>

<p>Would you be jealous if you knew? Would you think yourself betrayed?</p>

<p>You'll make your legs command distances out the Angelino avenue, stretching the fabric of your Ralph Lauren pants with the length of your strides. After a bit of walking and perhaps a cab, we will see the silver light of the Gehry concert hall in the distance; we will emerge from air-conditioned shops into warm-if-dry heat; we will enter a movie theater and see the new Coppola films, double-headers, and in the intermission between them we'll emerge sunblinded by the last image of day. Will you be saddened to miss it as we step back inside?</p>

<p>When I think of you it is as your Platonic form. I have heard rumors that to love someone is to accept their faults, and I am theoretically certain that you have a few — faults, that is — but when I think of why I love you it is because I feel you have no true faults at all. </p>
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<p>The intricacies of your mannerisms astound me. You will show me a picture of yourself as a child when we retire to your apartment. You are you, just before college, your dark hair in bangs and you will disclaim, "I wish you knew me when I was young and beautiful." I do not. The girl who is looking out at me from the photograph knows nothing of what she wants. You <i>do</i>, <i>exactly</i>, and it is what compels me most about you. It is in your mood, your bluntness of presentation. So little exhibition to it, really, not the way some people we know perform. </p>

<p>"I used to buy flowers for myself and carry them on the subway, so that people would think I was wanted." I say, "I was awkward too once," met only with a shaking head. "That's comparing apples to starfish."</p>

<p></p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*</p>

<p></p>

<p>You'll be wearing a dark, faux green fur coat, dyed so that the tips are lighter, and I'll think you'll look fabulous in it, and you'll think so too, which is really the best thing of all. California, you're so good to me I'll think, while I watch you cross the street, end to end.</p>

<p>Where are you going? To MoMA? I can't see you across even the emptiest of trains. We've switched geographies. I can only describe the places, around us together, soft and sharp, but perhaps such places are memorable only because, in my memory, you're in them. </p>

<p>You'll have a soft spot for Marsden Hartley, a successor artist in your personal canon of bests (after I tease you gently for loving Benton, loving him unduly). You'll be riding one of those bright red Spacelander bicycles with the bubbled fiberglass cut-outs, and possibly two racoon-tail handlebars, looking very chic. It's the last day before it gets too cold to leave indoors. I'll look past a Robert Zettler wood carving in mahogany, past a bronze bulbous floral shade dome lamp, and wish they were ours.</p>

<p></p>

<p style="text-align: center;">*</p>

<p></p>

<p>A winter mix coming down outside the windows. I'll go to bed with you, praying for feet of snow, and in the morning it comes.</p>

<p></p>

<p>I'll be in the kitchen and you'll be sleeping, a little second-story apartment. "Chelsea Morning" on the stereo. Me making drip coffee; you'll get up and walk-cross behind me, over the hardwood floor, to the small balcony over the street, a balcony cramped yet noble, and I can bring a cup to you on the veranda, no Montana in sight.</p>

<p></p>

<p>I am a Papageno! I have seen you in a flash and sizzle of the pan before you left! I have played the fool; I have initiated; I have talked to you in my cell against all predicate.

<i>Disclosure of love too early is its death; guard the secret as if it were love's very survival itself.</i> </p>

<p></p>

I will emerge in spring. I will emerge in full song. I am like the man who stencilled “Not Art” in crate-barrel typeface on the wall outside the Brooklyn Museum — through the statement, intending to prove himself an artist. So I’ll be a man in love.</p>

<p></p>

In love? In love? A man in love?</p>

