

***An
Excuse
for
Cruelty***



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Little thought is normally given to the role that hoax can play in art. Usually, when one finds out that what they have been told about an art project is untrue, the work is written off in its entirety. Instead of treating art that is found out to be completely (or partially untrue) as a betrayal, I intend to show that should be accepted as it fills a necessary and important role. It allows art that otherwise should not exist to exist. It allows art that is either physically dangerous, or that challenges the most fundamental and protected assumptions of our society, to exist without real danger to the artist or others. Artists like Chris Burden and Bob Flanagan aside, most artists are unwilling to directly sacrifice their own health and freedom for their art, but there is legitimate need for art that is transgressive, art that confronts and opposes our fundamental values. Pretense allows for this art to exist without risk.

With so many people experiencing so much of the art world remotely, there is some question as to what the real difference is between a real work and one that is only presumed to be real. Unless one is a professional critic or art blogger, spending most of their time travelling the world, one only gets to witness a very small percentage of the art that exists. With so many museums and collectors being protective of their rights concerning photographs or copies, a large portion of art will never be experienced by people except through retelling. With retelling comes distortion. The space this distortion occupies, neither entirely and accurately representing a piece, nor obviously and destructively lying about it, is being increasingly used by artists to explore issues that would otherwise be challenging to explore. As we examine different projects that occupy this space, both current day ones and ones that existed prior to the Internet, it will become obvious that there are other criteria that can be more important than that of literal truth. It will also become clear the important role such art fills.

On April 17, 2008, The Yale Daily News published a story on its website about a piece to be shown at that year's Senior Art Show.¹ The artist, Aliza Schvarts, claimed that she had inseminated herself at the most fertile time every cycle, using sperm from disease-screened and permanently

anonymous unpaid volunteers, and then, just prior to when her menstruation would normally begin, taken abortifacients. The physical result from this process was collected, and the process was filmed on a VHS camcorder. The blood was to be mixed with Vaseline to prevent it from congealing and spread between layers of plastic sheeting that would be wrapped around a large cube. This cube would be suspended from the ceiling of a room in the gallery of Holcombe T. Green Jr. Hall where the senior projects were to be shown. The video was to be displayed on the cube using projectors, with similar videos displayed on the walls.

Instead of merely reporting the artist's intent, the article provided a framework for interpretation of the piece. We are lead to assume that each attempted insemination was effective, a statistically improbability, and hence the labels 'miscarriages' (even if Shvarts also uses this term) and 'abortions' (which she does not use) are given to events which may have only been her normal period. Presenting these labels with certainty, the reporter then goes on to interview parties active in the abortion debate on the Yale campus. We are given quotes such as “[Shvarts’ exhibit] turns what is a serious decision for women into an absurdism. [...] It discounts the gravity of the situation that is abortion,” from a 'Sara Rahman '09' who may or not be related to Reproductive Rights Action League of Yale, and “I feel that she’s manipulating life for the benefit of her art, and I definitely don’t support it. [...] I think it’s morally wrong.” from 'Jonathan Serrato '09' a member of Choose Life at Yale.

The article also includes a few quotes from Aliza: “I believe strongly that art should be a medium for politics and ideologies, not just a commodity”; “I think that I’m creating a project that lives up to the standard of what art is supposed to be”; “I hope it inspires some sort of discourse.” But at no time does the article discuss any philosophical underpinning the piece may have or discuss what the artist may have been trying to express. Considering this, it is understandable that a large majority of the reactions to the piece considered it poorly thought out and without substance. Assuming that the article was an

accurate, and complete, presentation of the piece, it is hard to have a different interpretation of the piece. While the article mentions that Aliza had hoped her piece would "inspire some sort of discourse", it does not even hint that Aliza has any sort of idea what discourse it might actually inspire (indeed, quoting her as saying "some sort" implies that she really has no idea what kind of discourse that might be). As far as the public is concerned, Aliza's piece is a generalized and undirected attack on both the sanctity of human life in general and motherhood specifically. She serves as a great candidate for most of the public to represent everything that is wrong with 'today's liberal education system'. Not only does she seem morally and ethically deficient, as far as anyone can tell, she is that way without reason, and as a student at what is often considered one of the most prestigious universities in the country, both not having ideas and not being able to express those ideas if you do have them is damning and inexcusable. A quote from the Washington Post article sums it nicely, " But to many, her piece symbolized the worst of art -- shock without substance -- and of academia, with professors encouraging useless introspection."

The article was linked by a news aggregation site, The Drudge Report², and within hours was picked up by major news outlets including Fox News and the Wall Street Journal. Thousands of blog posts and comments were posted about this event, almost all of it blind outrage. This outrage was directed both at Aliza herself and at Yale, who in the opinion of many Alumnae should stand for something better. In the opinion of many others who either attended other Ivy League schools or were not able to gain admission, Yale's reputation was forever besmirched. This public attention brought heavy-hitters to the debate. Fox News' coverage included quotes from the president of the National Right to Life Committee, Wanda Franz, saying "It's clearly depraved. I think the poor woman has got some major mental problems She's a serial killer. This is just a horrible thought." She went on to compare what Shvarts did with Nazi experimentation during the holocaust and "She really has hit on a reality that what she has done is legal. Anything she chooses to do here can't be stopped in terms of

legality. And there are people fighting for her right to do this." But these comments were later edited out of the piece and only exist mirrored in quotes on blogs and other sites. Also edited out of the piece were comments from their Health Managing Editor, Dr. Manuel Alvarez, on the value of the piece as art, "I don't see anything artistic about this. ... It's completely unethical and immoral. What have we accomplished? Absolutely nothing."³

Within hours Yale Administration and Public Relations had released a response to the initial article, and media frenzy that followed. It read:

Ms. Shvarts is engaged in performance art. Her art project includes visual representations, a press release and other narrative materials. She stated to three senior Yale University officials today, including two deans, that she did not impregnate herself and that she did not induce any miscarriages. The entire project is an art piece, a creative fiction designed to draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding form and function of a woman's body. She is an artist and has the right to express herself through performance art. Had these acts been real, they would have violated basic ethical standards and raised serious mental and physical health concerns.⁴

For many, the controversy was over, the project declared a hoax. Many news outlets posted updates, and some (like Fox News discussed above) edited their original articles to represent this new truth. Very few outlets, if any, made anything of the statement "the ambiguity surrounding form and function of a woman's body", the first glimpse we're given that there might be some sort of substance to the work. Even though the press release was pasted several hundred times around the internet, its existence was missed by a significant portion of the public who kept posting as if it were incontrovertible that she had performed these acts.

The next day, Aliza published her own response to Yale's press release.⁵ She re-iterated that the events described in the initial story did happen, but that due to privacy reasons, only she "know(s) the number of fabricators who participated, the frequency and accuracy with which (she) inseminated and

the specific abortifacient (she) used." Her response emphasizes that the point of her piece was the ambiguity, that because there are never any clear answers permitted, it is up to the reader to decide, by the process of attaching a label to the events, what it is that occurs. Aliza labels what happens miscarriages, but points out that that term is neither more or less accurate than the term period to describe what occurred. As far as proof of whether anything at all ever did occur, the only evidence that has ever been presented is a video in which Aliza bleeds into a cup in the shower.⁶ The Yale Administration did feel the need to test her Studio for blood, without any stated reason to believe that any of the piece had occurred in the Studio, but found none.⁷

Far more interesting than the issue of specifically which acts it is that Aliza has claimed to perform, and which of those were actually performed), is that in her editorial piece Aliza was able to document and present to the world the philosophical underpinnings of her work. For the vast majority of the readers of her response, her discussion was seen as largely unintelligible and was for the most part ignored. Fox News' inclusion of them as randomly interspersed quotes that are not responded to or referenced in the rest of the article⁸ is a fairly good representation of how the parts of Shvarts' response that dealt with her ideological basis for the work were treated.

Not everyone treated her "manifesto" (as some have called it) so casually. An article was published in Prometheus, the John Hopkins Undergraduate Philosophy Journal, entitled "Threatening Ambivalence: Aliza Shvarts's Disruption of the Patriarchal (Hetero)Normative".⁹ While confused in parts, it does a good job of tracing the philosophical origins of the ideas that Aliza espouses in her text. We are shown the clear ties with Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, and also more importantly Judith Butler, who has been called both "the most famous feminist philosopher in the United States" and "the queer theorist par excellence"¹⁰. The article includes a quote from Butler that obviously serves as a direct inspiration for Aliza's work:

Butler writes: '[what] constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but [rather] the surface, the skin [of the body] is systemically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become [...] the limits of the social per se.' In Kristeva's account, these boundaries through which the discrete body and the discrete subject are constituted require the 'abjection' of that 'which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement,' and for these abjections to be 'literally rendered "Other"' in order for the body to maintain its status as a discretely demarcated entity and a discretely defined 'self.'¹¹

Even if one dislikes the philosophy her art is based on, even if one thinks it is bad philosophy or even philosophy that is deficient intellectually (as many of the bloggers did), it is very hard to apply those same labels to the art. Providing expression, and indeed popularization to the difficult ideas of contemporary philosophy is of course a widely recognized and valid purpose for art. If the expression of a 'bad' philosophy is able to exemplify the ways in which the philosophy is 'bad', it has done the world a wonderful service and is tremendously successful. It is this manner of working that led many to wonder if Aliza was secretly part of the anti-abortion crowd, or was trying to mock Leftist thinking.¹² Those interpretations are yet more oversimplifications of her piece. Regardless of our opinions on the philosophical basis and successfulness of her art, we are clearly shown how filling the role of expressing ideas becomes more complex if the philosophy is oppositional to the norms of a society. Doing so prescribes that the art based upon this philosophy also violates those norms. It is difficult, if not impossible, to successfully challenge societal ideas of what bodies are for and allowed to do, challenging the assigned moral and ethical boundaries, without in some way breaching those boundaries.

It is in acknowledging these difficulties that makes Aliza's work most successful. In being able to craft a work that at the same time allows her to fundamentally challenge assumptions on what is acceptable use of our bodies (and indeed if we should interpret our bodies to have any inherent purpose), while saying at the same time with some measure of honesty in both statements, "Yes, I did do this" and "No, I did not do this", she achieves a brilliant achievement. Its brilliance lies in the fact that

without the ambiguity, the piece either does not exist or too brazenly crosses the boundaries of what society is willing to accept.

Unfortunately, the terms in which it has to exist to be a successful piece, are in direct opposition to the terms in which the media that report on her piece operate. Her piece is able to exist because she is able to state that something may or may not have happened depending on the meaning the reader attaches to it, but those that report on her piece exist to report exactly what it is that occurred. Readers are prepared, in some instances, to form a personal opinion about an occurrence, but they are rarely if ever prepared to make a personal decision about what it is that did occur. Readers are not prepared for ambiguity of fact, and the media is not constructed in such a way as to be able to successfully communicate it. The news exists to tell us concrete facts about occurrences and to offer opinions on those facts. It does not have a mechanism to report that on the Yale campus, a thing both did and did not occur at the same time today. Discussing the story of Habacuc's Exposición N°1 will make this more clear.

In August 2007, Guillermo 'Habacuc' Vargas held an exhibit in the Códice Gallery in Managua, Nicaragua entitled Exposición N°1. This exhibition went largely unnoticed throughout the world at the time it was presented, but was reported a couple months later in Nicaraguan papers *La Nación*¹³ and *La Prensa*¹⁴. Those papers took cues from the blog of Rodrigo Peñalba who reported on the event. In the version of the event reported in the papers, Vargas burned 175 rocks of crack cocaine and an ounce of marijuana in a censer while playing the Sandinista anthem backwards. He also had an emaciated stray dog tied up in the corner, with "Eres lo que lees" (You are what you read) written in dog food on the wall above his head. The dog was reported to have only lasted through that one day of exhibit and starved

to death. The fact that the dog died is presented as incontrovertible, with *La Nación* serving as the source for *La Prensa's* article, and *La Prensa* serving as *La Nación's* source.

The exhibition was said to be inspired by the story of Natividad Canda Mayrena, a Nicaraguan immigrant to Costa Rica, who was attacked while trespassing on the property of an auto shop (most likely for purposes of burglary) by two guard dogs, Rottweilers.¹⁵ Natividad is purported to have been a crack addict, which may have influenced the reaction of the firefighters and police called to the scene. The local paper reported that, after being mauled for half an hour by these dogs before they showed up, firefighters tried for another half an hour using their hoses to separate the dogs and the now unconscious man. The police reported that they were unable to shoot the dogs for fear of accidentally shooting Natividad, which apparently left them nothing else to do except idly stand around. The video from the TV crew (who also failed to help) shows instead firefighters, police, and security guards standing around watching, and taking no action whatsoever, while Natividad is mauled to death. Depending on which source one believes, the video of Natividad being mauled, without interaction of those on the scene, is either half an hour, or two hours.¹⁶

From the initial blog post on Rodrigo Peñalba's blog, and the reports in the newspapers, the story of Guillermo's piece spread steadily. Its real momentum began when it inspired a petition to try to prevent Vargas from appearing at the Bienal Centroamericana Honduras 2008, a biennial of Central American art featuring art from 36 artists from five countries.¹⁷ Quoting Rodrigo Peñalba's blog (which has since been changed to only read "El perrito se fue por aqui; The doggy went this way; In dieser Richtung ging der Hundchen; Il tal modo si è recato a pecorina"¹⁸) via an automatic translation, the English language version tells a new version of the story.¹⁹ It tells of the dog being chased for blocks to be captured by children bribed to be complicit, how the patrons in the gallery begged for the dogs release, how it was left chained upon Vargas's refusal, and how it eventually starved. Currently the

English version of the petition on petitiononline.com is showing 1,530,302 signatures and the Spanish language version is claiming 2,750,054 signatures²⁰. The correlation between signatures and actual people is unknowable, but a random sampling of the responses shows that this does represent a huge number of actual people, even if it isn't necessarily millions of individuals (although millions is possible as well).

By the next spring it was a major news story. Pictures, of unknown origin, had been spread by thousands of bloggers, calling for the condemnation of Vargas for animal cruelty. A Google search shows that there are over 130,000 sites that reference either "Guillermo Vargas" or "Guillermo Habacuc"²¹. There are more than 100 videos on youtube of people expressing their outrage about the art (unless they're being subtle about it, I could find none defending him).²² As it spread, the story transformed to make Guillermo seem even more evil. Not only was the dog chained in the gallery without being allowed food or water, food and water were present but out of his reach.²³ Patrons in the gallery begged for the dog to be released, but their pleas were refused.²⁴

The story was picked up by The Guardian on March 30, 2008.²⁵ They reported the initial version of the story, except at the end of the short article, they had reported the results of an interview with Juanita Bermúdez, director of the Códice Gallery, where the exhibition took place. To quote, she "insisted Natividad escaped after just one day. She said: 'It was untied all the time except for the three hours the exhibition lasted and it was fed regularly with dog food Habacuc himself brought in.'"

The reaction of the Humane Society International is especially telling²⁶, they admit that it is likely that the dog was in captivity only a day and later escaped, but "condemn Vargas' actions and the use of live animals in exhibits such as this" and state "Even if he wished to bring the larger picture of the state of street animals to the attention of the public, exploiting an already-suffering animal is unacceptable." If we accept the gallerist's statement, all Vargas has really done was to capture an "already-suffering"

animal, feed it, and put it in a public area on display. I'm not sure if the location of the dog's display being a gallery is somehow more harmful than other sorts of retail establishments, but that sounds like exactly what the local Humane society does here. They capture strays, feed and care for them, and put them on exhibit, in the hope that someone will take them home. The controversy surrounding the event has occluded the issue of whether the dog was ever for sale, as art often is in art galleries, but the differentiation seems to be a tenuous one, whatever the intent was, especially if we believe that the dog was indeed fed. Indeed, we are assured that an animal welfare organization in Honduras is on the alert, lest Vargas have another chance to feed starving animals.

The World Society for the Protection of Animals also released a statement.²⁷ Accusing him of violating the "Five Freedoms that form the basis of animal welfare"²⁸, and claiming that he only escaped prosecution because of the lack of animal cruelty laws in Nicaragua, they reported on their initial efforts to prevent his inclusion in the "VIth Central American Visual Arts Biennial - **and any future exhibitions**". Failing that, they did manage to get a position for the Honduras Association for the Protection of Animals and their Environment as observers, and rules that prevent abuse of animals for the contest. Depending on interpretation, it is possible the dog may have been put in a situation that somehow violated one of these: freedom from thirst and hunger, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury, and disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress. But an argument that three hours without food and water, after being fed and watered, is somehow worse than what that dog was clearly experiencing in its normal life seems lacking. The pictures also certainly do not appear to show an animal that is actively suffering because of the environment in which it is located. Trying to permanently end his career as an artist for emulating activities which animal rescue groups commonly engage in certainly does seem to be an overreaction.

Vargas himself calls attention to this disparity in an interview with El Universal, a Mexico City daily paper.²⁹ He said he had already signed the petition against himself, as it was tradition for an artist to sign his work. He also states that very few signatures (referring to the 2 million on the petition at the time) have more hypocrisy in the entire world, because the signatures were more based in the desire to express solidarity with other people over their outrage over virtual suffering than their concern over real animals.

The parallels between Exposición N°1 and the case of Natividad Canda Mayrena are clear. In the art piece, Natividad the dog, as far as the onlookers can tell, continues to starve to death, while they walk past, either oblivious or unmoved enough to intervene. They do so in much the same way that those who watched the mauling of Natividad the human failed to act. The less immediately obvious idea Guillermo is trying to bring to our attention, is that it is only the presentation that brings us to care. It is only when presented to people in a safe, detached, 'virtual' form, whether in later reports on the Internet of events in a gallery, or later reports on the News of events that had occurred on the streets, that people are willing to care and to demand action. Unfortunately, even then, they are only brought to care about those that the reports covered.

What was especially damning for Guillermo was his continual refusal to answer questions as to what had become of the dog. On site after site, and even the WSPA press release, his refusal to talk about this issue was seen as justification for assuming the worst about the outcome of the dog, and the worst about Vargas. Assuming the worst about Vargas was seen as justification for taking action against him. To quote the blog of Jacquelyn Striker on this (she is translating an interview with Vargas that appeared on Yahoo!)³⁰:

He won't comment on the ultimate fate of the animal because he wishes to retain a sense of doubt. "Las respuestas categóricas no aportan nada," he says. (Categorical responses do nothing.) He further observes, "El ojo humano es traicionero. A fin de cuentas, lo que uno ve es

aparente y cabe la posibilidad de que luego venga un momento de reflexión." (The human eye is treacherous. After all, what one sees is apparent and it is possible that then comes a moment of reflection.)³¹

Again we see that it is the ambiguity of the piece that is creating difficulty. His piece also exists in a difficult space. If he claims that the dog is dead, the state of the animal that would provide the strongest and clearest correlation to the death of the human Natividad, he is placed in the position for being responsible for the death of an animal that, because of its life on the streets was found in a near-death state. If he admits that the dog escaped, he is in some manner still responsible for its death, as it obviously was not thriving on the streets, and the act of capturing it and displaying it somehow seems to give him some responsibility for the dog's future. Achieving nothing, the point of his exhibition is neutered. Natividad (the dog), has become a sort of Schrodinger's Cat of the art world. If he is still alive, we can let Guillermo off the hook and go on ignoring the less fortunate people and animals of the world (as we are likely to do anyway) without feeling the slightest bit challenged about it. If he is dead, whether by Guillermo's hand or by the streets of Managua, we are put in a position where it is appropriate to examine the criteria we use for what we decide is important enough to try to change in the world. Whichever state of the dog we personally find more likely, it is clear the media is not able to successfully deal with the ambiguity. They can report on the art of killing the dog, and make a retraction later, but reporting on the event and straightforwardly dealing with the implications of having an alive/dead dog are beyond its capabilities. It is only the articles that include interviews with Vargas that contain any treatment of this ambiguity, and even then we only see this discussion in his own words, not in the discussion from the author of the piece.

Next, we will discuss the story of John Fare.

In November 1972, in the letters section of art magazine *Studio International*, Tim Craig responded to a letter asking for more information on the artist known as "John Fahey"³². The letter

mentioned that Fahey had met up with an Italian cybernetic sculptor and through a process of 6 performances in England, gradually lost pieces of himself to computer-assisted amputation, until the final performance during which his head was amputated. Craig's response was an intricately detailed record of the life of an artist named John Fare up to the present time (apparently John Fahey was instead a popular guitarist of the time). He did not agree that Fare's career as an artist, and indeed his life, had been short lived and was already over. Instead Craig built up a sense of expectation by recounting his performances with exquisite and loving attention to each aspect, describing them as a process which was going to inevitably end with Fare's death.

The details really make the story. We learn the schools he attended in his youth "Forest Hills Collegiate" and the "Bartlett School of Architecture." We are given locations where he lived, and stories that occurred on certain streets. We are told the names of the artists who worked on the performances with him, "Golni Czernath", an Italian cyberneticist and "Gilbert Andoff", a painter who ended up being responsible for the performances' sets. We are given locations and dates of performances, and are treated to obsessive details such as the performances always starting at 8:30 PM. All of these build to give an air of authority to the piece, even though the only sources that are listed are the unintelligible John Fare Vital Information Bureau, and being 'told by others'.

We are also given several stories of his mental instability, hospitalization and imprisonment. These stories that provide a framework for understanding how this man would be able to defy basic human instincts. Compounding the stories of his mental instability, having the first performance involve a lobotomy further eases the ability of the reader to believe that Fare would be willing to subject himself to the brutality that follows. And, first presenting the laundry list of things that have previously been removed, "one thumb, two fingers, eight toes, one eye, both testicles, and several random patches of skin", prepares the reader emotionally for a detailed description of the removal of a hand. Seen through

the right eyes, even the potentially risky flights of fancy in description provide the reader an outlet for the tension that might build within while reading the more brutal parts of the story, which makes it more likely they will continue reading until the end. Obviously the story must be successful at interesting the reader and even making them believe there is some possibility this person may have existed, if the story has able to exist and spread for so very many years.

From a modern viewpoint, the story certainly has its problems. If we excuse its misogyny (contained in a description of Fare in Craig's response) as being merely indicative of the time, we're still left with the basic premise that co-artists Czervath and Andoff took a mentally ill man, and used a machine to replace parts of his body with non-functional "bizarre metal or plastic facsimile(s)". Violently exploiting the vulnerable in the name of the art certainly speaks to the voyeuristic aspect of performance art, but without him being of sound mind enough to be a capable and willing participant, it is difficult to see what else it says. Luckily, in the retelling of the story Czervath and Andoff all but disappear, and it is Fare that is left making gestures that are profound, if only because of the stakes involved, in the name of art. It is always the story of John Fare, not the story of Fare, Czervath and Andoff.

This story, except for the initial letter asking the question, and the introductory paragraph that would suggest that there is question as to the legitimacy of some of the claims, was reprinted in a magazine released by an experimental musical group called 'COIL' in 1987.³³ The exclusion of the initial letter asking about Fahey and saying he is dead, removes the contradiction that initially appeared in the pages of *Studio International*, which would have left readers uncertain about the truth of Craig's statement that John Fare was still alive. This further emphasizes the tension contained in Craig's response by creating a desire in the reader to know the details of Fare's final demise, which a reader in 1987 would most likely assume had already taken place. During the 20 years COIL was active, their fan

base, especially amongst other musicians, grew to be quite large, and devoted. This magazine was recopied and circulated amongst their fans, and hence an entirely new generation was exposed to the idea. Being reprinted in this format also gave the story added believability. The rest of the magazine was devoted to real things that are mysterious, deviant and occult, thus giving credibility to the story. The fact that COIL was also very fond of speaking in metaphors and using figurative language (and were open with the fact that they were at the time heavy psychedelic users) meant that the parts of the account, for example the description of a trip to Neptune, that might otherwise bring the reader to question the truth of the article as a whole, were more easily written off as being solely literary excess.

It is likely that COIL's reprint of the story served as the inspiration for the impersonation of Fare at a Nocturnal Emissions concert in 1997. To quote Stuart Home from *D>Tour* magazine: "Fare cuts an eccentric figure. He wears trousers made from zips and has a diagram of a brain tattooed onto his shaven scalp. The performance artist placed his left hand on a chopping board with the fingers spread. Fare's assistant, Jill Orr, is partially sighted and she slammed an axe between her boyfriend's pinkies with increasing speed. Eventually the axe severed Fare's little finger. This was the end of the performance art element within the evening's entertainment".³⁴ It is interesting that Stuart Home was the one to report on this concert, during that same year he released a compilation entitled "Mind Invaders: A Reader in Psychic Warfare, Cultural Sabotage, And Semiotic Terrorism" that contained an essay "Chronicle of the Neoast observer at the so-called Millionth Apartment Festival". This essay, likely written by Chris Mason, was attributed to John Fare, and shows the influence of the piece by Craig. It tells the story of a man, who calling himself John Fare, tours the November 1988 apartment festival held in the Lower East side of New York while blindfolded. The apartment festivals (or APT festivals) were "usually one week events with various activities such as conferences and performances, but the main purpose of these friendship gatherings, drills, habitation manoeuvres(sic) is to create a simple and comfortable situation for personal meetings between the concerned collaborators"³⁵ put on by the

neoists in New York, and other cities. One of the primary things the neoists were interested in exploring was identity. As such, they were fond of using group monikers, two of the more popular of which were Monty Cantsin and Karen Elliott, but John Fare probably seemed like an excellent name to use for a project of being lead around blindfolded. John Fare willingly gave up his eye in the name of art, and so did the person writing this essay, albeit in a more temporary fashion.

The end of the life of the John Fare story is probably as debatable as some find the circumstances of his death. An excellent candidate for the final death of the story is a post on the blog of Belgian artist and musician DDV. On November 16th, 2006, he posted a scan of a letter he received from the director of the Isaac Gallery Av Isaacs in 1985.³⁶ He had been researching the details of John Fare's story and had written to the gallery, as this was the place Fare had supposedly had his hand amputated on September 17th, 1968. The reply stated "The story of John Fare which has managed to persist for almost twenty years now, has no factual basis. In the late '60's, I put on a series of mixed media concerts in my gallery, and that is where the rumour began. There was no such person as John Fare as far as I know." This was the first solid evidence that the entire story was a fabrication to appear on the Internet, and is popular enough that it now appears on only the second page of a Google search for "John Fare", so should be easily findable by anyone searching for information about the artist. DDV was prompted to post this message because a Belgian gallery called Extra City had put on an exhibition named "More Stories on Absence" which in large part was just a representation of Tim Craig's story, although with some notable omissions, such as the more contentious views of women and some of the more figurative descriptions.³⁷ Information on what exactly those concerts were that would prompt the story does not seem to exist at this point, hopefully that information will surface at some point, as they sound fascinating.

If we take the viewpoint that a blog post on a somewhat obscure artists site is not enough to kill a story that had been spreading for 40ish years, the other good candidate for the death of the John Fare story is "The Last Piece by John Fare" an exhibition held as a conference of John Fare's life presented by Raimundas Malasauska with Gabriel Lester serving as John Fare's avatar.³⁸ Visitors to this exhibition were lead through a gallery full of pieces inspired by, and purported to be by Fare, while being told about his biography and viewing artifacts from places described therein. Even if we believe the reviewers who gave generally positive reviews of the exhibition, it is hard to deny that the exhibition killed whatever mystique was left in the John Fare story, or at very least has made it clear to most everyone that it was a fiction all along. Part of the appeal of the story was always the sense of mystery, the sense that it may have actually happened and has been kept quiet. This exhibition removes the ability of the story to work in that manner. However, the fact that many artists would want to get together and celebrate the concept of John Fare's art in 2007 by sharing pieces that had been inspired by him is certainly a testament to the longevity of his story.

Compared to the other pieces discussed in this paper, the story of Fare seems singular, not only because of the obvious difference the media in which the stories are retold has on their spread, as is discussed later, but especially because of the lack of recorded outrage about it. The editorial comment above the appearance of the story in *Studio International*, mentions that Craig had 'held over' the response because of 'motives of distaste, and for checking'. It is unknown if they received replies about the piece that condemned it, and just declined to print them. While it is believable the readership of SI is more sophisticated than the average reader, it is hard to believe, especially considering the sheer number of people we have seen who believed the other stories we have discussed, that none of them believed it. Stories of people believing in the existence of John Fare are common on the internet. According to an Austrian music fanzine, *Rokko's Adventures* even a young David Bowie was so enamored with the idea of John Fare, that it was difficult for the staff at *Studio International* to get him to believe

that the article was indeed a hoax, and that he could not contact John Fare.³⁹ Either from the angle of 'taking advantage of the mentally-ill man in the name of art' ala Vargas, or completely ignoring 'acceptable human behavior' ala Shvarts, it seems strange that there is no record of controversy. Perhaps this expectation is itself a product of the Internet Age, when the need and right to post one's opinion on any topic is seen as somewhat universal.

While the story of John Fare does not seem to have directly sparked its own controversy, it certainly has inspired some, as we will see in the discussion of our last story, involving German artist Gregor Schneider.

On April 17, 2008, Art Newspaper contained a short article by Gareth Harris, stemming from an interview he had had with Gregor Schneider. Entitled "An exhibition to die for -- Literally", it discussed Schneider's desire to finally stage a performance he has been talking about for thirteen years.⁴⁰ The article quotes him as saying, "I want to display a person dying naturally in the piece or somebody who has just died [...] My aim is to show the beauty of death." The story was not well received. It spread throughout other media outlets within hours, with those two quotes being widely used to frame the artwork as being sensationalist and exploitative of the dying. The Times contained the following, "The head of the German hospice foundation that provides care for the terminally ill, Eugen Brysch, said, "This is pure voyeurism and makes a mockery of those who are dying."⁴¹

In fact, it was so poorly received, that Gregor felt the need to write a rebuttal piece, which was published in *The Guardian* the following week on the 26th.⁴² His motivation for writing this article was twofold: first that his idea had been poorly represented and needed to be defended; second, to stand up to the hate mail and threats upon his life and safety he was receiving after the articles were

published (the number and severity of which were probably greatly magnified by the poor expression his idea had been given).

Gregor is best known for his architectural pieces, and the main impudence for this piece on dying was to construct a place where someone could die with peace and dignity. Instead of trying to exploit the dying process, he wanted to draw attention to how "brutal and bleak" most of the "conditions of dying" were in Germany and England. He wanted to provide a better alternative. Of all of the pieces that admit to using John Fare as an influence, (Gregor has been open for years about the influence the story had on his work)⁴³ this is the one that has gotten the most exposure. It is fitting that the most popular piece to be inspired by John Fare, has not yet, and indeed may never yet occur. But the influence is clear. Anyone who finds the myth of John Fare compelling, especially as it is told by Craig's piece, must wonder and imagine what it would be like to be present at the final performance. The transformation from a static event having already occurred that is referenced in the letter asking about John Fahey, to an artist that will at some point be voluntarily decapitated in front of an artist is the masterful stroke by Craig that aided greatly to the stories longevity. The transition from imagining that mythical performance, to creating the one Gregor is proposing, is straightforward. Especially in comparison, one can see the intimacy, dignity, and respectfulness that Gregor's piece provides to the volunteer. And as an unattributed quote in Craig's response says, "Dying is an art like everything else."

What makes this piece by Scheider especially interesting is that even though it is reported as a work in progress, a work that has been unrealized for thirteen years, its discussion and treatment does not differ tremendously from what it would have been if the piece were claimed to have already occurred. It is likely the outrage would have been more pronounced, and also that the event would have received more coverage, but if we are to believe Gregor's assertion that "thousands of articles" appeared within a couple of days, one has to wonder just how much more exposure is possible. Since

most of Gregor's work relies so heavily on the physiological and emotional effect spaces have on people, it is difficult to have a truly meaningful and complete discussion of a work of his that can not be directly experienced. The lack of physical expression of the idea does allow for a more pure evaluation and discussion of the concept of the work, however. Being able to imagine the work, without the crowds that would gather, without dealing with any personal reaction to the disease that is claiming the volunteer's life, and without worrying about any aspects of the volunteer triggering individual prejudices, does allow us to truly reflect on what an ideal space to die would be like. It allows us perhaps a better vantage point for comparison to the actual conditions that members of our society die under. The usefulness of such an exercise, the value of imaging art without context and detail, is certainly questionable. Whatever value there is, it is almost certainly reliant upon the ability of a particular individual to imagine it. Even if we excuse a large part of the negative reaction upon the basis that the initial presentation of the idea was deficient, it does seem clear that a large portion of those exposed to the idea were unable derive any aesthetic benefit from the process of trying to imagine this work completed.

There does certainly seem to be a tradeoff, when one compares the pieces that happened before the popularization of the Internet and those that happen after, between the longevity of one's piece and the amount of exposure it gets. The difference is most clear when we compare John Fare and Aliza Shvarts. John Fare's story was traded in relatively obscure magazines and over dinner tables amongst artists, and had a lifespan of some 40 years. Aliza's story, within the span of a day was in the attention of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people all over the world. Within that same day, the Yale Public Relations team attempted to kill it. Guillermo shows a nice balance, existing for months with virtually no attention, with no real question to the accuracy of the initial reports, and then a sudden

explosion of popularity followed quickly by exposure of the details of what had really occurred. It is less clear if there is a relationship between longevity and the amount of influence a piece has, just as the relationship between amount of exposure and the influence and importance of a work is also unclear. The impossibility of quantifying the comparative influence of these stories complicates the process of comparison. It is easy to see the effect of the story of John Fare's work when we see it referenced and recreated and mentioned many times over the period of several decades, especially when it is by popular contemporary artists such as Gregor Schneider. Being able to, using the Gregor's own disclosure of the influence, see the resonance of the John Fare story in new planned work makes it easy to attribute weight to the effectiveness of the story. But if we decide that Aliza's piece is less effective based on having no examples of it clearly influencing other art, how much of that is because of its comparative freshness? If we had 40 years perspective on her work, would we even remember it, or would it be easy to see what other artists she has influenced? Is she currently influencing other artists who would never admit to her influence because she is a newcomer with no popularly exhibited works? Will this change if the pieces she is preparing for the Tate are successful? For that matter, did anyone exposed to Guillermo's work adopt a puppy or assist a homeless person that they would otherwise not have helped? Were any armchair activists convinced by his exhibition to instead work for real change in the world, or were only those already skeptical even able to see the distinctions he was speaking about?

If we work under the assumption that even a short lived piece with broad reach is influential, we still unfortunately have to come to terms with the medium involved. The examples shown here highlight that the audience for Internet attention is unsophisticated. We see, especially after Aliza's rebuttal, and the popularization of Guillermo's piece (especially considering the rampant inaccuracies in the depictions of what his work involved) that the percentage of those in the Internet in general and the 'blogosphere' in particular that are in any way equipped to deal with art on a philosophical or intellectual level is comparatively low. In looking at the spread of these stories, we can only come to the

conclusion that it is only through the initial misreporting or simplification that they were able to be popularized as quickly as they were. Not only does the majority of the reader base seem underprepared to be able to handle the complexities of current day philosophy and contemporary art, it is questionable if the media in its current form can support the widespread transmission of complex ideas. To properly come to grasp with the ideas involved in Shvarts' piece requires not only the digestion of the initial report, Yale's PR press release, Aliza's rebuttal, Yale's administration's response to her rebuttal, and additionally, if one is unfamiliar with the philosophy that influenced her work, an essay that explains at least what the philosophical underpinnings are, if not how she uses them. The next logical step is to consult the source material, if one is unfamiliar with it. If I post this paper on the Internet, it will certainly serve most of those purposes, but doing so is still outside of the bounds of what normally occurs in the medium. At best we get well thought out reactions to specific aspects, at worst we get link lists and summaries.

There is another trade off as well, in gaining the ability to have our ideas exposed to the entire world within the span of a day, we may have forever lost the ability to have another success story like John Fare's. If the story had been released in today's environment it would only have two options, perpetual obscurity or a short lifespan, although even complete obscurity is likely not enough to protect its lifespan. Even presuming the initial source of the story had enough reliability that it was initially believed, it is only a matter of time before a Washington Post reporter, a Snopes researcher, or an interested artist (like DDV) take the effort to dismantle the story. It is especially unlikely that a story like John Fare's with a fictional lead would have the ability to be successful. Without someone believably real to answer, or at very least refuse to answer, questions, and to serve as the target of revulsion and admiration, the dynamic of the news story is broken. As it becomes increasingly difficult to be completely invisible from and unrepresented on the Internet, it also becomes increasingly difficult to believe stories involving characters of which we are unable to find the history. The credibility of Aliza's

story was increased when bloggers found pictures of her as a high school valedictorian.⁴⁴ For greater knowledge and transparency, we have traded our sense of mystery, and our ability to believe in things that do not exist, even if we think they should.

While perhaps unscientific, it seems useful to explore some of the characteristics these four stories had in common. Recognizing that hoax can serve an important purpose, exploring these characteristics will aid future artists in being successful. The characteristics that they had in common that struck me as successful are: **Detail, Distraction, Distortion & Ambiguity, Non-disclosure, Display & a Figurehead.**

Detail

We see the importance of detail in the John Fare story obviously, but it also plays an important part in the acceptance of the other stories. Aliza's story offers what salespeople call 'preinoculation' to problems people may have with the description of her project by stating up front that she had the 'fabricators' screened for STD's and that she understood that the herbs that she took to induce the miscarriages might be harmful to her health, but she just did not care. As it was, there was a lot of discussion about some of these points. If she had not provided this information up front, instead of talking about the issues Aliza was interested in (at least, in so much as any of the conversation was rational and covered her intended topics), a distracting amount of attention may have been on those points. We also see this in Guillermo's story when, finding what was provided insufficient, the public added more as the story went on to increase its believability. It is important to note that the some of the detail included in the John Fare story, in as far as it contained verifiable facts, ended up killing the idea. Other detail in the piece, such as the description of what the sound was like while the amputations were performed, was beneficial to believability the story. Specific details help increase

perceived source expertise and message representativeness (the extent to which other important aspects exist about a topic than what are covered), which boosts the reader's interpretation of credibility and apparent reality.⁴⁵

Distractions

While this does overlap some with the previous point, adding information solely to fill the role of extra flavor seems to be a useful one. We see this technique used effectively in the John Fare piece, as discussed above, while possibly overdone. An aside about a trip to Neptune seems of little usefulness, but tempering the brutal nature of the rest of the story is a good goal. We also see this in the Guillermo story but less directly, the details of the rest of his piece while perhaps instrumental in the actual exhibition, were completely irrelevant to the spread of his story. Almost no one commented on the burning of the crack cocaine and marijuana (although a few bloggers did use this information to support labeling Vargas as crazy), or bothered to interpret what it meant to play the Sandinista anthem backwards. Those facts did certainly add to the mystique and general believability of the story. It only stands to reason that if you can convince someone to imagine a censer burning crack cocaine, they may do that instead of asking questions about the other information they have just read. How is it that Rodrigo Peñalba knew details about setting up the exhibit that occurred before it opened (about the children capturing the animal) unless he was there? Why would he be there unless he was friends with the artist? No one asked these questions as they were concerned with the other details of the piece, many of them irrelevant ones.

Distortion & Ambiguity

As we saw in discussion of all of the pieces that spread over the internet, it seems essential that complex ideas be reduced to their lowest common denominator for them to spread easily. All of the examples we have seen here have had complex ambiguities reduced to emotional triggers. This does not seem to

be an optional characteristic, but seems to be something that will be forcibly done to the ideas if they are not presented in such a way as to be understandable on a basic enough level to provoke an emotional response. Throughout the process of researching this paper, I have debated with myself whether or not I thought Aliza was involved in crafting the initial story that appeared in the Yale Daily News about her piece. If she wasn't involved, it is fortuitous that she got a reporter with an eye towards scandal.

The real issue here, however, is that it is probably in the artist's best interest to choose how the work is simplified, rather than to have it happen to them randomly, if possible. Also, this is the facet through which a responsible artist needs to build in ambiguity into the piece. It would be easy for someone to go and get as many abortions as possible, or to starve many dogs to death, but it is in the distortion of what actually happened, and the packaging of that into a consumable form, that the real artistry takes place.

Non-disclosure

Guillermo and Aliza were well served by refusing to answer at least some of the questions about their pieces. Rather than answering questions from the media, prepared statements were released, and thus the flow of information about their projects could be controlled. This prevents the possibility of misspeaking or releasing information that would damage or prematurely end one's project.

Display

While only Guillermo's piece used this, the spread of pictures of the pathetic dog in the gallery clearly added to both the popularity and outrage of the story. I have no question that there had been a screen-capture of a still from the VHS tape with Aliza in the tub, the story would have spread even faster, and the outrage been more pronounced. Whether it would have been desirable for the outrage to be even more pronounced is a question she would have to answer.

Figurehead

It seems essential (especially in current times as discussed below) that there be a representative to take credit for the idea. Having someone serve as an emotional repository for the reactions to the piece seems to be a necessary component of the process through which most people seem to interact with these stories. Whether or not this figurehead needs to be a real person, and whether they need to be the person 'actually responsible' for the result of the project is unknown, but it does seem that the time of being able to get away with a marionette with no puppet master is likely over.

While almost all of the readers of the initial story about Aliza Shavarts were willing to believe its truth, it does seem probable that eventually people will start applying their burgeoning skill at spotting hoaxes, the skill that gets daily practice as we gauge the truth contained in the offers of Nigerian riches and funny stories from our friends in our E-mail, on a more widespread basis to everything they encounter on the Internet. Maybe that is the lesson from the lack of recorded outcry at John Fare, that people did not believe the story enough to get upset about it but thought the idea was sufficient to want to share and discuss it with others.

If we accept the premise that hoax is an essential part of the art process, because it allows for the safe exploration of ideas that we believe either cannot or should not be explored otherwise, we are left in an interesting position if the ability to pull them off successfully is threatened. If the need currently filled by hoax is going to be satisfied in a world without hoax, people are either going to be required to actually cross the boundaries and do things like starve dogs and have parts of their bodies amputated and replaced with cybernetics (and who can only guess what next), or we are going to have to agree on a societal basis to be less concerned with the amount of actual truth that is contained in the

stories we are told about our art. As the first option certainly seems to be one more likely to occur, hopefully there are better options that will be discovered by future artists.

For the present, the ability to present fictional and partially fictional artistic efforts as true is unchallenged. The space created by ambiguity between what is literally and figuratively true is safe. As long as it is still possible, it is important that artists use this space to explore topics that are taboo. Through this exploration we can come closer to understanding the difference in what is truly innate in humans and what is cultural. Through this exploration we can think the unthinkable and experience the absurd, and we can do so without causing real harm to any one or any thing. I anxiously await what we fill this space with next.

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