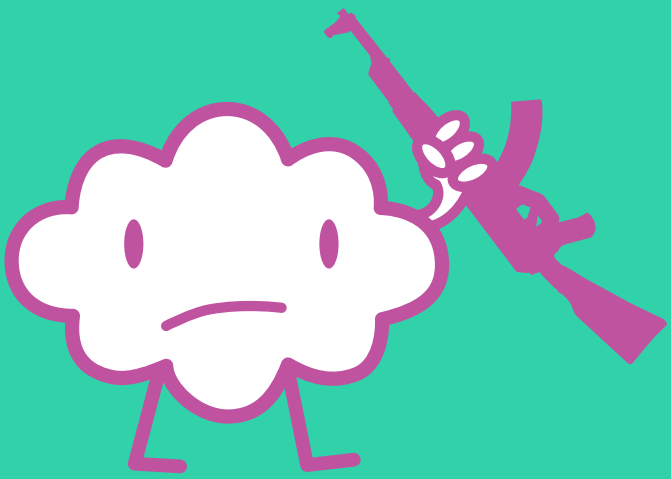
THE LETTER I



IAN LYNAM

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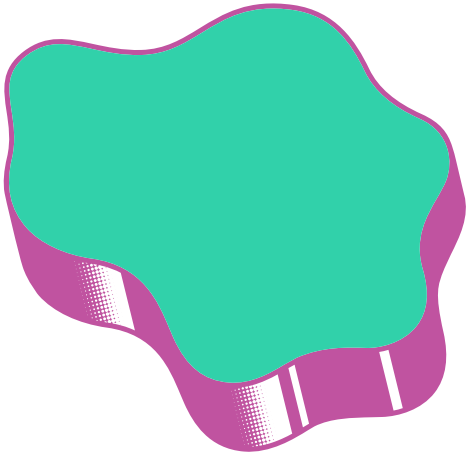

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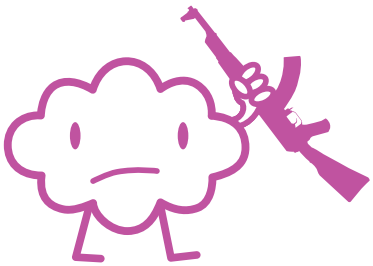


IAN LYNAM

Edited by Taro Nettleton

Published by Wordshape | wordshape.com in conjunction with West | westdenhaag.nl

For Mark "Cheese Party" Anderson, duplicitous to the end

Thanks to Akiem, Matt, Laura, Gail, Randy, & Chris. And Yuki, always.

Colophon:
This booklet is typeset in Oh No Type Co.'s Hobeaux &
Wordshape's Vaud families of typefaces

Published on occasion of the exhibition **Writing Writing**
at West Den Haag
former American Embassy
Lange Voorhout 102
Den Haag, The Netherlands

Printed in The Netherlands
Oh look, an ISBN: 978-0-9984237-7-7

THE LETTER I:

ON AUTHENTICITY

WORDSHAPE | WEST

"It is a word of ominous import."

-Leonard Trilling,
Sincerity and Authenticity (1972)

The desire to be authentic—to live an authentic life—stands as one of the greatest driving forces of life today. Authenticity is also one of the biggest myths of the contemporary moment—a symbolic construct predicated on our relationships to consumer culture that seemingly helps us to define choices we make in how to live our lives. The drive for authentic goods and experiences fuels desire and like an enticing bit of social media, the sense of satisfaction vanishes into the stream of experience incredibly quickly once digested.

The packaged notion of "authenticity" offers up a schizophrenic confusion of the real, the historical, and the perceived, in terms of who we are, how we present ourselves, and how we see ourselves and others. The lure of authenticity as it has been presented by marketers to the citizens of the world is that it is a psycho-emotional sense of place where genuine desires for truth and self-cultivation that stands in opposition to capitalism writ large upon our world.

Authenticity comes in a variety of flavors and aromas. There is the notion of authenticity as being unsullied—of being pure, original, honest, and of the utmost fidelity. This is the idea of an authentic good that springs from original sources and functions as intended. Authenticity is often constructed by our collective understanding of traditions—if an object is marketed to us as it has historically been used or perceived, we are more likely to conceptualize it as retaining authenticity. Often, patina helps to define the object as aesthetically "authentic", much like how the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi* focuses on the worn materiality of things

and imbues these objects with meaning and projected feeling.

Consistency, as in a faithfully reproduced historical object, is one way in which authenticity is conveyed. If you were to purchase one of Canadian designer Jacques Guillon's original cord chairs first released in 1953, you most likely wouldn't be able to sit in it unless it had been re-strung with fresh cords, as the ones from 1953 would have borne the weather of time and wouldn't support your weight. For the chair to work, you would have to re-string the chair, taking away part of the original material. Yet, if the majority of the original chair remained, you might still consider the chair to be authentic.

Alternately, you might purchase one of the 2009 re-releases of the chair, similar in every way, yet manufactured within the past two decades, and that might render the chair just as harmonious and authentic enough for you. The chair-as-object might have enough connection to history because the design is so singular and so few, even including the re-releases, have ever been produced. They are so scarce that they may retain the aura of apparent authenticity, despite being mass-produced products—one of the inherent contradictions of conceptions of authenticity. Or perhaps a product or a person feels authentic to you out of sheer identification—an outward-looking expression of the desire to feel that we are akin to something or someone.

What undergirds all of these varying appreciations of authenticity has everything to do with you and your conception of yourself.

That's right: the letter "I".

The Smell Of Smoke and Electrical Fires or The Semantics of Authenticity

When asked what character trait or factor made other people "authentic," more than one-third of respondents said "personality," while 38 per cent could do no better than to answer "other." When asked to pick from a list of words the one that offered the best definition of "authentic," 61 per cent chose "genuine" while 19 per cent opted for "real."

-Andrew Potter,
The Authenticity Hoax (2010)

We tend to think that Authenticity is a positive word due to contemporary cultural tendencies—consumer society has been structured so that "authentic jeans", "authentically artisan-roasted coffee", and "authentic Thai restaurants" appeal to its citizenry of consumers.

However, if one truly peels back the meaning of authenticity, and considers it, one will find it to be a far more value-neutral term. For example, consider:

"an authentic ethnic cleansing"

or

"an authentic unmanned killer drone".

Neither are positive statements, yet "authentic" is perfectly apt in both. The thing is, contemporary society tends to not use "authentic" to describe negative phenomena, in much the same ways that phrases such as "organic pogrom", "innovative fratricide", and "creative abortion method" are unlikely not be used in contemporary parlance—certain

words heuristically (bearing emotional appeal) feel better to us when talking about positive aspects of society and culture in lieu of the darker, more real, genuine, truly authentic, and abject way of describing the world.

Usage, context and convention instill objects, experiences, and our conceptions of people with Authenticity, yet it is an authenticity which is wholly subjective and is based on our own worldview, tastes, inclinations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and millions of other criteria. Authenticity is manufactured within our own minds—it makes us feel good, so we seek it out. Authenticity helps balance out our interior lives and how we perceive the outside world. Authenticity, just like beauty, is a subjective aspect of comprehending the world and ourselves.

In short, Authenticity is not truth. It is very much the opposite—it is a yearning for an age that never was and never has been, but one we nevertheless feel might come into being if we cultivate enough experiences. It is a desire for harmony, for feelings of belonging, for a sense of place and purpose and spiritual repose. We seek tranquility through consumption.

Though not always based in historicity—as my colleague Taro Nettleton put it, "We are as likely to seek out the most authentic trap rapper as the cobbler"—the hunt for authenticity instills in us a nostalgic quest to make things right for ourselves internally. Authenticity and Nostalgia share a lot in common, as they are based on ideas of constructing comfort using both actual and perceived memory that derive from personal experiences and cultural playback in order to instill desire within individuals and societies for a home that never was and never will be.

In her essay "The Future and its Discontents", the late Svetlana Boym wrote that, "nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."

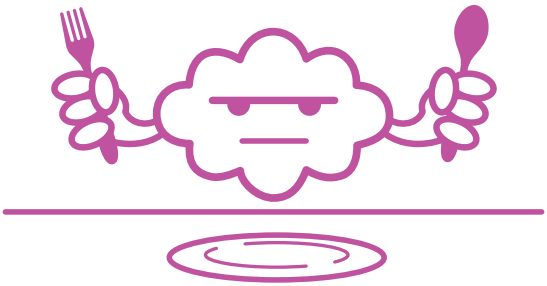
Nostalgia conjures within us a desire for a mythic home that we might return to based on

individual and collective experience, yet it is a home that we construct in our minds that is pure fantasy infused with only the best parts, the tastiest morsels, of reality. Nostalgia attaches itself to *place* foremost.

Authenticity is similar in that it harks to something just as unrealizable—satisfaction within consumer society through the aggregation of objects and experiences that purport to be real and trustworthy—a form of Edenic satisfaction with our very selves. In *The Authenticity Hoax*, critic Andrew Potter writes that "in the beginning, humans lived in a state of original authenticity, where all was harmony and unity. At some point, there was a great discord, and we became separated from nature, from society, and even from ourselves. Ever since, we have been living in a fallen state, and our great spiritual project is to find our way back to that original and authentic unity."

This search for one-ness, for being made whole, seemingly again, but impossible in a world where every one of our lives is incredibly complex, no matter how elevated our socioeconomic status or how luxurious our actual home, is one of authenticity's great ruses.

The reality is that *life is never simple* and that it will *never be* simple.



We Don't Need Another Hero

"The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible.
What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered."
-Oscar Wilde,
Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young (1894)

Where does this fascination, nay, obsession with the self come from? One might be able to trace aspects of it back to the rise of consumerism and the construction of the self-as-consumer as engineered by the public relations boom of the interwar period, notably through the career of the father of PR, Edward Bernays. Bernays and his colleagues and compatriots helped shift American society from being needs-based market economies to desires-based economies. After the reconstruction of a great deal of the world after World War Two, much of global society was reoriented toward conceptualizing each of us as individuals and that we might gain pleasure through consumption. Informed as much by writings of his uncle Sigmund Freud, as much as his career as a propagandist, Bernays was able to engineer marketing at an unprecedented scale.

Bernays' career was wide-ranging and it might be easiest for us to examine a minute facet of it—notably his management of the movie star, model and actress Clara Bow. Bow is notable as personifying the archetype of the female sex symbol of the "Roaring Twenties" due to starring in numerous silent films, most notably the 1927 silent romantic comedy *It*, due to which Bow was lavished with the nickname "The It Girl".

Known for her bobbed hair and lavish attire (provided by other clients of Bernays at steep fees for placement on stage and screen), Bow was an international sensation and symbolized the image of the modern woman—most noticeably outside of America in, of all places, Japan.

The 1920s were an incredibly important era in Japanese history, largely in the construction of a truly Modern society and its embrace by aggregate citizens, most notably Japanese women. The waning years of the Taishō Era (1912–1926) were a time of incredible liberation and newly found self-expression and cultural engagement for women.

Yet, for this to happen, something had to give in the capital, and it did on September 21st, 1923 when the Great Kanto Earthquake struck—rocking the greater Tokyo area, surrounding environs, and the nearby port metropolis Yokohama. The scale of the quake cannot be underestimated—in a span of time between four and ten minutes, Tokyo was leveled.

Over 142,800 people died between the quake, freak firestorms that raged through the city, and a fire tornado claiming the lives of 38,000 Japanese within minutes due to a typhoon off the coast that same day. Martial law was declared, and enraged citizens formed mobs which hunted and killed hundreds of ethnically Korean and Chinese individuals living in Japan after rumors abounded that Koreans were poisoning Tokyo's water supplies.

When the unrest quieted down, the people of the Kantō region were forced to create makeshift homes and businesses, called *barakku*, or barracks, from what they could salvage in the wreckage. Thousands lost everything in the fires and the ensuing years would mean an adoption of more modern clothing—both Western style clothing, or *yofuku*, as well as Japanese clothing, or *wafuku*. The advent of technological advances in weaving and dyeing made more modern style clothing incredibly abundant and far more affordable than clothing had been previously.

New "forms" (in the Japanese parlance) of women began appearing in the late 1920s, heralding the arrival of the Meiji period from the end of 1926 onward. Preceding and traditional roles for women in Japan were those of the loyal daughter, obedient wife, and devoted mother. The right to state-ordered compulsory basic education paved the way for the *jogakusei*, or female student; the huge mobilization of the Japanese populations to cities created the *atarashii onna*, or new woman; and the boom in clerical and secretarial work cast many as the *shokyugō fujin*, or working woman. Meanwhile, this differentiation led to the widespread recognition of the role of the *shufu*, or housewife. The most romanticized

OGAWAMACHI STR (BUSINESS SECTION OF KANDA) TOKYO 狀慘の通町川小田神 （況實之災火震大京東）

THE YOKOHAMA SPCIE BANK 狀慘の近附行銀金正濱橫 （濱橫）

日本橋丸善ノ倒壊

ビルディング外内ヨリ焼失セル建築中　（関東大震災）

and threatening new female archetype to emerge in the late Taishō and early Shōwa eras, however, was the *moga*, a neologism and abbreviated shorthand for the "modern girl".

The stereotypical *moga* wore Western clothing and bobbed hair, which was often permed or curled (curling machines became readily available in the 1920s); was a city dweller and occupied public spaces; and was sexually promiscuous as exemplified by her deliberate use of makeup and cosmetics. The *moga* style imprint was none other than the big screen star Clara Bow.

Both the allure and perceived threat of the *mogas* lay in their ability to think and act freely—to merely exist as cosmopolitan beings in opposition to the filial and feudal roles of the daughter/wife/mother from preceding eras. Perhaps the ultimate archetype of the modern girl was the character Naomi from Tanizaki Junichiro's serialized book *A Fool's Love*, published merely as *Naomi* in the West. The eponymous character stands in opposition to her husband, the book's protagonist Jōji—she is sexually aggressive, manipulative, and an insatiable shopper. Over the course of the novel's installments in the Osaka Morning Press, which started in 1924, she shifts from a subservient, Eurasian-complected fifteen-year-old café waitress to the dominant force in their household. Her husband, who sleeps in a separate room, is tormented and simultaneously sexually enthralled by Naomi.

Needless to say, the story of Naomi shocked older readers. Unsurprisingly, it titillated younger audiences and also provided a model of autonomy for younger Japanese women. It is notable that Naomi is a café waitress, or *jokyū*, in the beginning of the book, as cafés were some of Japan's first liminal public/private spaces that allowed women to express themselves sexually, politically, and culturally. The café was rivaled by the dancehall, cinema, and department store. All were locales where the modern Japanese citizenry reveled in consumption and simultaneously forged new modes of thinking about gender, labor, and individuality.

Most metropolitan women, however, were not Naomi. They did not fall into simple definable categories of being "traditional" or "modern", but instead represented and embodied a complex and heady mix of traditional values and cosmopolitan desires. Kon Wajirō's 1925 survey of the Ginza, Tokyo's most popular shopping district, showed that two years after the


資生堂
石鹸
泡立ちよく
廉價
SHISEIDO SOAP

Great Kanto Earthquake, a mere 1% of women wore Western-style clothing, while 67% of males wore Western garb. Neither tradition nor modernity were positions which were set in stone in the 1920s. "Modern" applied to nationalist propaganda as much as the *Mingei* folk craft movement founded by Yanagi Sōetsu and inspired by traditional vernacular pottery.

The Modern Japanese woman was definitely "feminized", though not necessarily "feminist". The first real wave of Japanese feminism did not kick in until the mid-1940s after women were acceded the right to vote in the post-War Constitution. Feminism as a movement did not gain mass popularity until the publication of Marxist historian Inoue Kiyoshi's 1948 book *Nihon joseishi* or *Women's History of Japan*. The 1920s and early 1930s largely offered women social autonomy, but denied them the same individual rights as men. The urban centralization of Japan's economy created more options for women economically, socially, culturally, and otherwise.

The modern Japanese woman wore a mix of Western clothing and kimono and were as modest as they were objectified in literature, cinema and stage at that time. The cut of kimono did not change in that time, but instead the patterns applied to the cloth that they were sewn from employed a wider variety of expression due to the popularity of synthetic dyes. Patterns ranged from traditional abstract and organic themes to the whiplash line of Art Nouveau to geometric Art Deco patterns and anti-patterns. Some of the most expressive are termed *omoshirogara*, or "novelty patterns". Department stores such as Mitsukoshi offered catalogues with sample fabric swatches for shoppers both in cities and rural areas.

Mitsukoshi was a Tokyo kimono retailer turned department store that was a leading early force in female-targeted marketing and consumer goods production. Led by Japan's first graphic design superstar Sugiura Hisui, hired in 1910, the promotions department at Mitsukoshi used a wide array of advertising methods to attract female consumers of all stripes to buy ready-made, affordable kimono and rewarded them with lavish experiences at Mitsukoshi locations that can largely still be enjoyed today. Department stores in Japan include a mix of fine dining, cafes, semi-public spaces, and exhibition spaces, as well as retail offerings—all catering to shoppers to induce them to part with more of their hard-earned yen.


MITSUKOSHI Tokyo, Japan
三越
新年號
昭和七年一月一日發行
第二十二卷 第一號

Mitsukoshi offered its own lines of seasonal kimono fabrics starting in 1895 created by both hired artist/designers and in-house staff, generating a demand for clothing designed by the company in lieu of merely selling other manufacturer's products. Mitsukoshi launched its own public relations magazine in 1899 and was the owner of Japan's very first delivery van emblazoned with its corporate logo in 1903. The company's strategic marketing and public relations were leaders at the start of the century and Mitsukoshi's posters and billboards created resounding notice throughout the nation. Mitsukoshi's American business school-educated chief executive Takahashi Sadao insisted on constant iteration and expansion; by 1922 the main store boasted fifty different departments over six floors with a rooftop Sky Garden "replete with pond, fountain, shrubs and *bonsai* plants".

The 1920s and 1930s saw the staggering rise of publications specifically for women, as well as giant industries sprouting up around advertising for women as much as manufacturing products for them. It was no coincidence that the Aubrey Beardsley-obsessed Yamana Ayao, Japan's second graphic design superstar, worked first as designer and illustrator for the women-oriented magazines *Josei* and *Kuraku* published by his employer Club Cosmetics' publishing division Platon-sha before going on to work at Shiseido, Japan's leading manufacturer of cosmetics. His popularity was due to the graphic work that he had done for female audiences and consumers.

Shiseido's advertising, promotions and product design helped to cultivate and inculcate women in changing social roles and norms as they sought to adhere to new notions of public and private beauty. The company's founder Fukuhara Shinzo had spent years studying in Europe and the United States and was incredibly dedicated to shaping how his company worked in regard to an internationalist approach to cosmetics. Fukuhara, himself a painter and photographer, was well aware that in order to effectively promote products which aestheticize women, the products themselves would have to be aesthetic and promoted as thoroughly as possible. He contributed artwork to the promotional materials produced by Shiseido, and brought on the absolute best talent possible to Shiseido's design departments in order to market the company's cosmetic products.

Strategically, Shiseido positioned itself as a luxury goods manufacturer and its products were much more expensive than other companies' comparable products. Specific attention

was paid to Shiseido's packaging and print promotions, each intimating luxury and beauty through the use of contemporary trends in lettering and illustration as much as the representations of beautiful women featured on bottles, in ads, and on boxes.

The company conspicuously utilized a mix of Latin lettering alongside Japanese characters to impart a sense of international luxury that enshrouded all aspects of communication. Shiseido's designers, notably Yabe Sue, Maeda Mitsugu and Yamana Ayao were all incredibly adept at lettering and illustration and created bilingual packaging designs that tastefully integrated connotative approaches to typography. Maeda integrated arabesque patterning into ads and packages alike—a trope that Ayao would take to dizzying heights of expression over the following decades.

Stylistically, Japanese graphic design cycled through a range of modes of graphic expression during this time—shifting from the curvilinear forms of Art Nouveau to Art Deco to more constructed, Futurist/Bauhaus/Constructivist-influenced composition. The design surrounding and emblazoned on Shiseido's products suggested what feminine beauty might be to consumers—Yabe Sue's advertisements for *Eudermine*, a toning lotion which was one of Shiseido's leading products, mixed the ornamental, baroque, and restrained, while focusing on the product and the atmosphere of luxury which it conveyed. Other advertisements designed by Yabe focused on the female form, most often through stylized illustrations of their ideal customers—women who viewed themselves as Modern Girls surveying themselves in the mirror and evaluating the change brought on through the use of Shiseido products.

It is against this cultural and aesthetic backdrop that we can get a clearer sense both of the dawn of the Modern Japanese Woman and the romanticizing distortion with which she is represented by today's media. Marketing, publishing, and public relations, translated through graphic design, were as formative in changing conceptions of women for both women and society generally.

That so much of the actual imaging of the then-modern woman was predicated upon Edward Bernays' engineered aesthetic of Clara Bow is incredibly noteworthy. Many depictions of modern Japanese women in advertising and packaging of the 1920s bore

significant similarities to photographs of Bow that circulated globally at that time. Much of the packaging and advertising of that era featured illustrations of women looking at images of themselves—there is little doubt that this insistent reflection upon one's self-image conjured profound new senses of relatability and consumption-based desire in consumers. I am the woman looking at the woman of the new age looking at herself—a narcissistic echoing effect that no doubt helped to cultivate a newfound desire for that which had previously been unknown in the modern age: a lived modern life that felt *authentic*.

I consume the object of modernity,
and thus, I too become modern.

In this way, the female consumer in Japan became a tautological participant in the construction of a new form of *self* both attached to and adjacent to a rising modern consumer culture. This wasn't just happening to Japanese women, mind you—portrayed by the rejection of the sacred, the adoption of more liberal values, and the embrace of the market economy, the modern age loosed sectors of privileged societies from traditional sources of emotional security—notably religion, governance structures, and national fealty—and engendered the rise of techno-capitalism.

Prior to modernity, there was whatever God or Gods that were popularly worshipped where you lived, as well as adjacent morality that dictated appropriate behavior and social norms. After the widespread acceptance of modernity, "right", "wrong", and how to live were supplanted with new forms of governance predicated on human desires in lieu of established, time-tested morality. These new forms of self-rule are what have wrought the trauma of the contemporary age and our collective infatuation with the authentic, even if you fast-forward a century later.

We feel as if we are missing something, so we scramble to purchase everything that might fill up the gap that we feel between ourselves and the sacred in a world where H&M has superseded the mosque.


¥100

Q: What do we do in a world without God?
A: Buy shit.

So, how does authenticity *work*?

Authenticity is a chameleon—just like Bruce Springsteen and his various adopted working-class personae that splay across his early music catalog. In a world deprived of essentiality, people have tried to assemble the most satisfying moments of comfort—in essence swapping out the pearly gates for Swarovski crystal-bedazzled smartphone cases. If the under-threat promise of the hereafter is made unpopular, then perhaps things akin to "heaven on earth" might just suffice—especially if they're sparkly!

Authenticity exists as a form of escape. It doesn't exist to help us build things or create new possibilities. Instead, it asks us to try and take root in what purports to be real and genuine, but is always and ultimately fleeting and persuades us to reject community for objects and affective experiences. Authenticity instrumentalizes us by suggesting that our individuality might be bolstered through acquisition—real emotions and true communication are replaced with the spectacle of experience—experiences are instantly spectacularized and sold back to us as nostalgia.

A case study: for the past number of years, American artist Rutherford Chang has been collecting and exhibiting his collection of copies of the Beatles' eponymous 1970 double LP record set housed in white gatefold jackets. When originally released, the lone decoration on the cover of each edition of the pressing of what is colloquially known as "The White Album" were the words "The BEATLES" typeset in a plain sans serif typeface. The covers of the original pressing were blind debossed (the opposite of embossing—the type stands *out* in lieu of being pressed *in* to the covers), not printed. Chang has been exhibiting his collection of 2,620 Beatles records under the exhibition name "We Buy White Albums", with each installation set up to look like a stripped-down record store: copies are on display on the wall as one might in an actual record store, while the bulk of the collection is housed within plain, white cardboard boxes on folding tables. Despite being an impressive collection

of a serial object, there were over three million copies of The White Album released over the years. For the first five years that the records were produced by the Beatles' record company, EMI, each had a unique serial number, however in 1975, the serial numbers stopped being added and the type was printed in grey in lieu of the debossing treatment.

While most of these records were produced in an incredibly similar fashion, each of the records in Chang's collection show evidences of wear and use ranging from the yellowing of the covers to ring scuffs to coatings of mold and graffiti. Time has made each one of these albums, both the covers and records, unique. Heat and cold subject vinyl records to expansion and contraction of the grooves. Playing a record using a dull needle tends to flatten out the grooves, imbuing certain copies with a fuzzier and flatter sound. And of course, there are the scratches, the inevitable sign of a well-loved and oft-played record. In Chang's words, "Each copy has become a unique object because of the physicality of vinyl records."

While each copy of “The White Album” in Chang’s collection is indeed a unique artefact , whether one in a manufacturing run of three million is “authentic” is debatable. Authenticity is based on *perception*—the slippery sense of *feeling* whether something is authentic or not. Authenticity has no actual substance—it is not a thing or an experience, but is instead what we *feel* about an object or event. Authenticity is therefore *subjective*. It is based upon personal preference, inner cultural critique, and how we feel about our interrelated experiences with individuals, objects, cultures and societies.

Authenticity is always defined by how one perceives the world and never by quantifiable truth. Due to this, it is a malleable and incredibly handy tool for marketers to help instill desire for products and services. Authenticity can help fill in those self-perceived gaps that we feel emotionally and psychologically with subjective feelings of “genuine experiences” to help assuage our trauma.

Simultaneously, authenticity helps to bolster a sense of individuality. Our tastes and preferences seemingly help to reify our positions as individuals made manifest through our spending habits. We navigate the world through these associations with things that are augmented to make us feel as if they are good and that they are real—they have the patina of some kind of history, after all—and it makes us feel as though we are both part of a continuum and standing outside of it: the loner, the lone wolf, the gunslinger, the hero.

"What is, or was, the heroic? What is a hero? A good answer was given by the late Robert Warshow when, in an essay on Western films, he said: 'A hero is one who looks like a hero.'"

- Leonard Trilling

This notion of the hero is rendered odd in the contemporary moment. In my earlier publication *The Thing*, I wrote about how each of us is the protagonist of our own stories, but not necessarily the hero or the villain. Instead, we are a mix of the two as popularized by streaming web-based television series such as *Breaking Bad*. Cinema used to be the closest analogue to lived human experience, but the world has shifted and now our lives are instead akin to the streaming "television show" which we cannot help but binge-watch every day because we have little control over our habits, tendencies and desires. Netflix is the closest analogue to contemporary human existence. I think I nailed this idea when I wrote:

We're collectively locked in the Netflix-esque binge-watch latest season of Stranger Things, but the lesser version—that which we cannot pause or escape from, so we dutifully gaze upon the closest approximation—literally Netflix—to escape our own individual yet collective trudge toward an end unfathomable: be it in diapers, in an ICU, or at the bottom of a water-filled quarry.

So, we may not be heroes, but we are the *protagonists*—the center of the story. This is directly in tune with how the forces of marketing hope that we see the world: as individuals who feel *in conflict* with mass culture. This alienation helps to give form to the desire for authenticity—as we have been shorn from tradition, we are offered authenticity as a consolation prize. Rob Horning writes in his 2017 essay "Mass Authentic" that authenticity "reconfigures an old Romantic ideal whereby one chooses one's own life, and finds the purpose of life by uncovering one's originality, and translates that into consumerist terms,

according to which one chooses one's own clothing brands and one's favorite foods. We consume authenticity as though it made the integrity it has promised consumable as well".

Authenticity represents, in this way, a rather dark side of humanity. While allowing us to fleetingly enjoy objects and experiences in this highly engineered way, an authentic product usually costs more due to the marketing that has been assembled to ensure that it feels appropriately authentic. This creates simultaneous class and "experience" divides that inevitably generate resentment from others—authenticity may make you feel good, but it generally makes the people around you like you a bit less due to being unable to participate in the same activity, unless they run and replicate it, which would feel incredibly inauthentic to all involved. In that way, our understanding of authenticity myopically focus on our *selves* and greedily serves our desire for pleasure at the expense of others. This is derived from the 18th Century notion of the "inner self" and the "outer self"—a schizophrenic dichotomy that is mirrored in our desire to be authentic while feeling inauthentic, and thus driving our desire to consume things and experiences which feel authentic. It is the classic "Which came first: The chicken or the egg?" / Ourobouros type of situation that is so narcissistic and interwoven that it is incredibly difficult to see one's way out of.

As an individual whose persona was intimately tied up with trying to be "punk rock" in the early- to mid-1990s, I palpably felt this ragged divide between who I *was* and who I *wanted to be*. In retrospect, it was an impossible situation—no matter how many experiences I consumed, how many records I bought, and what clothing I wore, I could not create enough authenticity-based "infill" to relax my anxiety over living a "punk" life. Externally, I was a judgmental jerk who reflected and refracted the mores and attitudes of the members of the subculture that I attempted to immerse myself in (to try and help quench other aspects of this same anxiety) in order to both make my life feel more authentic to others.

Later on, I jettisoned the puritanical, packaged notions of what might be "punk" for the more exciting ideological roots that underlie the 1990s variant that DIY punk had become in the San Francisco Bay Area. At its core, punk 3.0 (preceded by 1980s hardcore punk music) embraced stylistic experimentation and classical punk irreverence, but above all, privileged a prosocial, community-oriented quality of living life and looking at things. I realized slowly, very slowly, that a life that was predicated on these ideals in lieu of a packaged aesthetic

and worldview would make me a happier person and have a more valuable return on intellectual and emotional investment than trying to balance both ideals and lifestyle.

A big part of this is *taste*: preference and discernment for particular things. Taste, of course, applies to flavors, but also to our judgements of aesthetics and experiences. The notion of taste and the imposition of taste on others is a terrifying prospect to me. Nearly two decades ago, an older ex-girlfriend of mine—not surprisingly a graphic designer—explained to me that I had *zero* sense of taste in regard to fashion, ceramics, lighting, and home decor, and that I was just starting to figure out how to express the rudiments of appropriate taste via my own efforts in graphic design. She might have been right, but it left me feeling completely gutted.

No one should be made to feel as if they are the opposite of a connoisseur in regard to aesthetics and supposed "mastery" of taste—that perspective is a form of cultural fascism. Becoming a sophisticate at something, say graphic design, is different than becoming a connoisseur. A sophisticate is a person with a wide array of worldly experience and a knowledge of culture, whereas a connoisseur is an expert judge in matters of taste. The sticky bit is in the differentiation between being *knowledgeable*, as opposed to being an *arbiter* of taste—with judgement comes critical evaluation and, inevitably, derision, especially when said judgement is predicated upon subjective notions of taste.

Taste is always determined by *inclinations*, whether in regard to discernment, appreciation, or critique. Just as Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Taste is not objective. It cannot be. Taste is always imposed, be it on food, art, objects, experiences, or music.

Taste is Authenticity's secret weapon—the core of the Turducken of consumption-based alienation, from ourselves and from society and culture.

Social media exacerbates the dysfunctional and combative relationship that our inner and outer selves are locked in. How we present "our best selves" to the world, a truly global audience, is in no way who we actually are. This cultivation and curation of representation is endemic to social media as a multi-tentacled platform.

“Curation” itself is another “hot” term—seemingly everyone in the creative industries strives to participate in some aspect of curation these days. Despite there being incredibly few opportunities for making ends meet financially as a legitimate curator globally in the art world, hordes of people have assumed “curator” as part of their title and taken on cultural activities related to curation, no matter what area or areas of culture they work in.

Curation as a “hot” concept has a relatively recent history. It was largely popularized and legitimized as a form of art-making itself by the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann starting in the 1960s. Szeemann had a transcendental career—at 28, he was the youngest museum director in the world, leaving his post at the Kunsthalle Bern in under a decade to become a freelance curator working with institutions all over the world. He curated over 200 massive exhibitions in his lifetime, shifting the focus of exhibition-making from the actual artworks to gestures and attitudes around them.

Szeemann’s methodologies were picked up and wielded by another Swiss curator, Hans-Ulrich Obrist starting in the early 1990s. He has since curated dozens of exhibitions and published scores of art and curation-related books and catalogues. The participatory approaches expounded by Szeemann and Obrist gained incredible cultural momentum in the late 2000s when the public took notice of their activities, as well as those of then-upstart curators like Jens Hoffmann and Tirdad Zolghadr. The word “curation” has since been sapped of nearly all meaning. From “curated menus” and “curated experiences” to “curated web content”, curation is used as an elevated-seeming expression of individual taste. It has passed from its museological roots into mass consumer culture, where it is used to ascribe value to subjective decision-making and quality or authenticity to what is being “curated”. When beamed out via social media, curation reifies subjectivity in an often authoritative way that might be considered oppressive.

Simultaneously, social media makes us all spies of the habits of others and places our everyday selves, our inner lives, and our outer visages in uncomfortable counterpoint. What follows is a letter I wrote to a former student in 2019 after they freaked out about their partner “friending” a former lover on Facebook:

Letter to a Young Person

Dear young person,

Greetings. This letter is addressed to you. It contains both good news and bad news. As we are so much alike, I shall deliver the bad news first:

Most young people are taught neither to listen well nor to deal with their emotions. This is complicated by the extraordinary gentility and sensitivity with which individuals are expected to comport themselves both historically and in the contemporary moment.

We live in the most mediated time in history. Any missteps in regard to behavior can be broadcast around the world and because of that a spotlight is shone upon the global individual presently. That spotlight is known as *shame*, and we see it in the public outing of individuals' shortcomings and mistakes, flaws and contortions, in the hashtags and the JPEGs with the typeface Impact baked into them, trigger warnings gone awry and interactions with strangers on the street.

Oddly, there is that external spotlight, but there is an internal spotlight as well. This internal spotlight is called *guilt*. Guilt is something that Western folks have known intimately for generations. It is part of Judeo-Christian culture. It is baked right into our society and every form of cultural expression that surrounds us, from cosplaying to pastry-making to writing sonnets to Country Western music. We know guilt because we've been steeped in it ever since our first breaths.

Shame, though, not so much—shame is something that is built into Confucian cultures and what fuels things on the side of the world where I live, except for South Korea. They

have both a rich history of Confucian shame and the endless bounty of relatively newly imported Christian guilt. (Note to self: I need to talk about this with my friends in Seoul next time I am there.)

Once upon a time, let's say in the 18th Century, a British man named Jeremy Bentham designed a prison called a Panopticon. A Panopticon is a prison where the cells are built into a circular or semi-circular building with a guard tower positioned directly in the center so that the guards might survey the activities of prisoners in their cells at any given time. It had the added feature of the prisoners never exactly knowing whether they were being watched or not, as it was really difficult to tell if the guards were watching you or your neighbor or someone a few floors above or below or hundreds of meters away from you.

It seemed like a smart idea—because of the omnipresence of surveillance, the prisoners would start policing themselves. Any action that a prisoner might undertake was potentially scrutinized, and the prisoners would hopefully begin to understand and correct their moral compasses, with the structure of the Panopticon itself creating behavioral reform.

Many of the built Panopticon-based prisons featured shuttered windows in the central guard towers, keeping prisoners from seeing their jailers. Beyond self-correcting, many prisoners underwent psychotic breakdowns and began assuming the roles of jailers themselves, actively and savagely policing their fellow inmates, meting out punishments as they saw fit, and often imprisoning others in their own cells.

Remember how I wrote just a few paragraphs ago that we are in the throes of the most highly mediated age of history? This is the Panopticon, and somehow we are *both* the prisoners and the guards. And the psychotics raining down insane justice on those around us—both internally and externally. Guilt tends to be *internal* whereas shame tends to be *external*, yet the Panopticon model wreaks havoc with all of it, intensifying our feelings of suffering, as anyone globally might see us or hear us at any given moment, but whether through the lens of how we project ourselves or how others might project their interpretations of our selves.

Jeremy Bentham thought that he was doing something good for the world, but he really just figured out how to exert surveillance-based alienation and social dominance en masse.

Obviously, I think about this shit a lot. I am a public figure somehow—both as someone who has cultivated a public persona and a public-facing body of work as well as someone who is a teacher of many different types of students in a number of institutions. I see the psychosis of the people around me and have grappled with it myself, a person raised in a culture of guilt living in a different culture of shame, all clashing with new technologies and ways of mediating our understanding of and interaction with these technologies.

It's a dark new world that you have largely grown up in and that I have slowly, and resistantly, settled into middle age in. There is seemingly no space for peace, and I see that reflected in contemporary global societies. Thus, like the veritable good uncle I try to be, despite not being communicative often enough, I wanted to reach out and tell you some things that I wish someone might have told me if I had been a young person in 2020:

1. The schizophrenia you feel is felt by many right now. It is a condition of the contemporary age, just as it is a condition of every contemporary age, though current technologies make this unknowing-ness of the world feel as if it is on steroids.

2. You are a good person. I know you. When we cannot think or feel well of ourselves, we must do our best to listen to those that know us. This is an incredibly hard thing to do.

3. You are an *adult*, with all of the baggage that term suggests implicitly and explicitly. This is something that I, as an adult, still grapple with, as I wish to forever stay a child but know that I cannot and am not. Take time to look at yourself in that light: as an adult.

4. Being an adult is not a bad thing. It just is.

5. Now, I am going to read you a poem:

My century, my beast, who will manage
to look inside your eyes
and weld together with his blood
the vertebrae of two different centuries?

So long as the creature lives
It must carry forth its vertebrae
as the waves play along
with an invisible spine.
Like a child's tender cartilage
is the century of the newborn earth.

To wrest the century away from bondage
so as to start the world anew
one must tie together with a flute
the knees of all the knotted days.

But your backbone has been shattered
O my wondrous, wretched century.
With a senseless smile
like a beast that was once limber
you look back, weak and cruel,
to contemplate your own tracks.

In this poem written by Osip Mandelsam in 1923, the poet asks questions of himself and his relationship to the contemporary moment, reflecting on the previous century and all that occurred and how that has informed his life. He looks toward the obscure, the dark parts, the ugly parts, in order to understand his own age more fully.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben used this poem in his essay "What is the Contemporary?" to help illustrate and elucidate our collective and individual struggles with understanding time and what it means to more fully comprehend *our own* time.

About this poem he writes:

"The poet, who must pay for his contemporariness with his life, is he who must firmly lock his gaze onto the eyes of this century-beast, who must Weld with his own blood the shattered backbone of time."

Through this poem and through the essay that it is quoted in, both writers are trying to understand time and their places within a seeming continuum, much like you are trying to do presently.

When I first read these two bodies of writing, it helped me to understand my own time more fully. Agamben posits that by not being blinded by the light of the current century, the contemporary is able to discern and articulate his or her place. He writes:

"The contemporary is one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time."

Both writers were trying to contend with the archaic and the modern, much like we do today. The issue is that time, cruel and unrelenting, trudges perpetually forward. There is no fixed position. There is only movement, the ticking of the hands on multiple clocks.

I have learned to find solace in that movement and embrace the fluidity of time so that I might be able to understand our time and past times more fully. I feel that this is paramount in order to be a historian and critic, as well as a human. To attempt to understand *how*, *what*, and *why* I am on this earth.

I can only encourage you to do the same.

We all struggle to understand where we are in time and how our time might be defined—it is part of what it is to be a sentient being with modernity imposed upon us.

Through all of this struggling, I implore you to lean on your empathy for others. You are a lot like me, notably in your ability to be empathetic. And that, my dear young person, is your superpower. You can see yourself in others' shoes. (That is the good news part, actually.) Empathy is the kind of thing that you can cultivate, though it is tough for people who have very little of it. You don't have that problem—you relate to people around you and you see yourself in them. You are lucky in that way.

Try and be empathetic toward yourself, which sounds schizophrenic, but fuck it, society and culture are so fractured in the present moment that often we just need to talk like we are crazy as fracture is the very essence of contemporaneity. Give yourself a break—not meaning that you should be fraught with self-pity, but that instead you shouldn't beat yourself up so much when life feels frenzied and as if it was swirling around you. It's not your fault that you were born now and not the past or the future. Living just happens, just like dying just happens, so try and ease into all of it. You're worth it and everybody fucks up sometimes, which is the long and short of it: everybody makes mistakes, but give yourself the space to forgive yourself.

You didn't do anything wrong by being on this earth. I'm glad you are here. I utterly cannot and do not care to imagine a world without you in it and on it. You are vital to me and I love you more than I could ever express.

And on that heavy, heavy note, I would like you to know that anytime you want, you can go to University College of London to see either the mummified head of Jeremy Bentham or alternately his skeleton padded with hay, dressed in his clothes with a wax head atop it sitting in a glass-faced closet-thing engraved with his name.

Perhaps we might go together sometime.

Love,
Ian

I, Cannibal
or Our Bodies, Our Selves

Popularized in his 1974 book *Discipline and Punish*, French philosopher Michel Foucault used the Panopticon as a metaphor for the modern surveillance state. Foucault's ideas proposed that a society based on discipline had emerged in 18th century, and that this discipline society utilized a variety of techniques for potentially punishing citizens in order to create a docile public, notably via surveillance through both overt and implicit observation.

The Panopticon, it turned out, was the perfect metaphor for the idea of the surveillance state, and Foucault's ideas were evolved by dozens of other philosophers over the next few decades. Perhaps most saliently, Texas-based Canadian educator Simone Browne noted that Bentham travelled on a ship carrying slaves as cargo while drafting his initial proposal for the Panopticon, and that the structure of slavery haunts the theory of the Panopticon as much as the actual built structures that have resulted globally.

The Panopticon-as-metaphor stands as the base for how we might view social media and its effects on contemporary people, though social media has mutated into an infinite loop-like shape in which we monitor ourselves and others simultaneously—a Moebius strip of the infinite gaze unchallenged by bandwidth or prior social conventions. Privacy has been replaced by a willing participation in a constant renewal of authenticity: sharing our desires, experiences and attainments, consuming others' experiences and holding them to the light of judgement both momentarily and in aggregate, monitoring and judging behaviors, and participating in what would historically be labeled as "spying", but has culminated in an excessive, all-consuming juggernaut of collective exhibitionism of our curated, edited, and digitally pruned "best selves".

Social media and expressions of purported authenticity make us simultaneously the prisoners and guards of the helical neo-Panopticon, producers and consumers engaged

in market capitalism, but dematerialized and atomized to sell, consume, expose, witness and exact judgement over ourselves. It is no wonder that people feel so lost today. In the contemporary moment, participation in the neo-Panoptic is normative. We are too busy cannibalizing others and ourselves, seeking an authenticity that mimics our own desires.

Perhaps that is why certain folks—most notably corporate oil money-backed academic turned self-help network marketeer Brené Brown—are so good at packaging and selling mutant variations of Authenticity in the contemporary moment. Brown says that authenticity is "a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen."

In Brown's writing and speaking, "tasteful vulnerability is the foundation of authenticity" and she constructs a whole variant form of authenticity so skewed from the original definition and predicated on placing authenticity in dialogic opposition to her just-as-misled definition of "shame".

The whole thing is highly problematic because her definitions are utterly subjective and she has used them as the ideological foundations of two monetized self-help-flavored networks of workshops, lectures, and private coaching. These are supplemented by multilingual videos, books, podcasts, and a legion of people teaching Brown's trademarked methodologies internationally for over $500 per session, with Brown as ringmaster of the entire organization.

Brown's manipulation of language, affect, enablement, and empowerment initially sounds reasonable, yet the network-based multi-level marketing schemes associated with her ventures point to a far more insidious than therapeutic outreach. Her messaging style combines feel-good manipulation with the goal of onboarding new acolytes, all in the name of a passive-aggressively wielded "authenticity" designed to groom her followers for leadership roles in their communities, businesses, and (perhaps most creepily) familial structures. All of the properties associated with Brown's ventures market and *monetize the insistence of a simultaneously universal and subjective personal truth*—making something salable out of ether and the contemporary condition.

City Baby Attacked by Rats
Or Geezers Want Excitement

It is unsurprising that people will attempt, and succeed, at harnessing Authenticity as a concept—Authenticity is so subjective that we can weaponize it as we see fit. At its base, Authenticity is so self-defeating that it is rife for marketeering. The concept itself is so ephemeral, amorphous, and ultimately unfulfilling that it presents incredible sales potential in a world deprived of essentiality.

Between the imagined past, the experienced past and hopes for the future lays the very precarious present in which we are enthralled in entertaining and being entertained so much so that we are losing our ability for discussion beyond 140 characters per Tweet. As writer and artist Martha Rosler has succinctly put it, "Celebration and lifestyle mania forestall critique; a primary emphasis on enjoyment, fun, or experience precludes the formation of a robust, meaningful public discourse."

Reasoned criticism has been supplanted by the medium.com pseudo-op-ed piece (sans editor, publisher, or suitable publication), the Facebook post, and the ever-expanding lifestyle publication (e.g. The Sunday New York Times having morphed from a news publication into essentially a self-contained Style section with a thin news wrapper).

People want experiences. The contemporary populace wants their H&M, their Disney/Time-Warner-controlled NYC-theme park Union Square, their simulated city-as-entertainment/shopping complex, smooth English language transactions at exotic tourism destinations replete with Thai and Mexican food options, an Oculus Rift forever within arm's reach, and the absolute right to broadcast whatever they want to say whenever they want to say it without thinking about it too much.

The currency of the experience economy is "authenticity" as we have constructed it at

present. However, what we consider authentic now has very little to do with the historical sense of being genuine or historical—instead, it is about how experiences feel to us. In short, authenticity is a style of experience, as opposed to being evidence of an experience having an origin. Writer Sharon Zukin puts it best:

> **"Claiming authenticity becomes prevalent at a time when identities are unstable and people are judged by their performance rather than by their history or innate character. Under these conditions, authenticity differentiates a person, a product, or a group from its competitors; it confers an aura of moral superiority, a strategic advantage that each can use to its own benefit. In reality, few groups can be authentic in the contradictory ways that we use the term: on the one hand, being primal, historically first or true to a traditional vision, and on the other hand, being unique, historically new, innovative, and creative. In modern times, though, it may not be necessary for a group to be authentic; it may be enough to claim to see authenticity in order to control its advantages."**

Our sense of what is authentic at the current moment is a construct of control operating hand-in-hand with political and economic power structures. Of course, we want the most fulfilling experience out of every interaction, transaction and communication when we all nostalgically long for an imagined time before the destabilization of the global economy and the terrifying state of "absolute freedom" that we live in currently.

Dances with ~~Wolves~~ Interns

German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl wrote in her essay, “Freedom from Everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries” that we are accustomed to regarding freedom as *primarily positive*—the freedom to do or have something; thus there is the freedom of speech, the freedom to pursue happiness and opportunity, or the freedom of worship.

But now the situation is shifting. Especially in the current economic and political crisis, the flipside of liberal ideas of freedom—namely, the freedom of corporations from any form of regulation, as well as the freedom to relentlessly pursue one’s own interest at the expense of everyone else’s—has become the only form of universal freedom that exists: freedom from social bonds, freedom from solidarity, freedom from certainty or predictability, freedom from employment or labor, and freedom from culture, public transport, education, or anything public at all.

I was first introduced to the term “permalancer” in 2002 by a designer friend as he described his situation working for a motion graphics studio in Los Angeles. The company paid him an extremely fair day rate, but he never knew if they would call—it was consistently feast or famine. He’d work tremendously long hours for months on end, then would not hear from his contract-based employers for months on end.

Over a period of years, I watched his cognizance of his situation turn into a form of precarity-induced psychosis. He’d gain weight due to the extremely long working hours, then rapidly lose it all by manically cycling the smoggy hills surrounding LA’s sprawl in the weeks that he wasn’t called in to work. His moods were erratic. He couldn’t maintain friendships, and much less romantic relationships, easily. I don’t know if my friend was the one who coined “permalancer” as a neologism, but the symptoms of his condition were striking. Most notable, however, was his nostalgia for the conditions of stable employment.

Contemporary creative work embodies a form of nostalgia—nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Authenticity operates in the inverse way—it is a sentiment of fulfillment, yet one that fades nearly immediately. Just as Svetlana Boym wrote, "Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship". It is the same with our relationship with authentic experiences and objects—once we have experienced them or acquired them, their value "disapparates" like a character on the run in a piece of wizardly youth literature.

Nostalgia divides us. It is the promise to rebuild the idealized home, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition.

Authenticity divides us. It is the promise of feeling cozy, safe, and materialized in a world fraught with atomization and Post-Fordist precarity as Late Capitalist operational norm. Authenticity as a sentiment is at the very core of the modern condition alongside nostalgia; they are twinned concepts that leave every person who experiences them dissatisfied.

Nostalgia is not always about the past. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Nostalgia is about the relationship between personal and collective memory—akin to, but different from, melancholia. As Martha Rosler puts it in her book *Culture Class*, "Only through the act of mourning something as having been lost can the melancholic possess that which he or she may never have had; the contours of absence provide a kind of echo or relief of what is imagined lost, allowing it to be held."

Svetlana Boym wrote, "Nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure". The dreams of imagined homelands cannot and should not come to life. They can have a more important impact on improving social and political conditions in the present as ideals, not as fairy tales come true. Sometimes it's preferable (at least in the view of this nostalgic) to leave dreams alone and let them be no more and no less than dreams, not guidelines for the future.

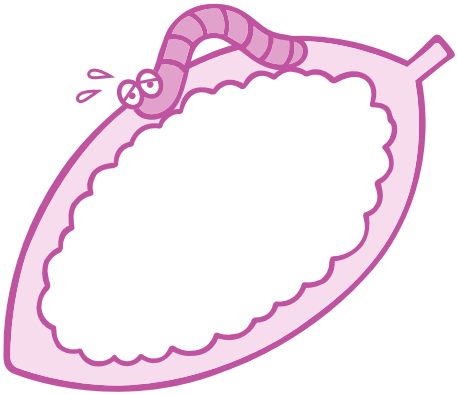
We live in a time where nothing is clear and everything is incredibly complex. Some of our greatest cultural and societal currencies include nostalgia, authenticity, technology, innovation, design, and, yes, art. To explain that into relations of these concepts and how they work, we need less fixed positions and more openness and ambiguity as to where we stand with them.

When I invoke the term “composition”, I speak of a composition that is not fixed—a composition of shifting nodes and elements. It is more important for us to try and understand the contemporary than it is to imagine that utopia will be realized by working for self-driving truck manufacturers, drone companies, nano biotech startups, or tech companies who create internal privatized mass transit systems for their employees. Big Tech, like all corporations, is interested in *profits*, not a more egalitarian future.

As Svetlana Boym wrote, “Fellow survivors of the twentieth century, we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. But there seems to be no way back.”

We are all in the thrall of seeking authenticity at nearly every turn, yet will never again be satisfied in this quest.

And thus, we must trudge, ever forward from our hazy past, through our very precarious present, fraught with desire for the authentic, to an uncertain future.



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