

# The spiritual hunt



A meditation on presence, intellectual hunger, and what it means to care—for yourself, for others, and for the work you do.

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As told to Jacqueline Mabey, 2816 words.

Tags: Curation, Culture, Art, Success, Identity.

This is a bit of a long walk. I am grateful that you've chosen to take it with me.



I've always been an excitable sort. As a child of 12, I did a personality test—I don't remember which one—and the data indicated that my energy level was off the chart. This overabundance of enthusiasm is the reason I've never been, and will never be, cool. At most, I've been cool adjacent: I had the look and pastimes many might identify as "cool," and was fluent in all the relevant watchwords and shibboleths. But cool is literally that: aloof, distant. And I care, deeply. I am, after all, a curator—from the Latin *cura*, to care. Moreover, for as long as I can remember, I have been *hungry*, rattling with restless energy, a thrum just beneath the skin, desirous to consume and be consumed by the world around me.

For this reason and others, I've had numerous people throughout the course of my life suggest I take up meditation. I was, however, always resistant to the idea, partly because of where I grew up. I was born New Jersey, but I was raised in Nova Scotia, Canada. My family relocated to Halifax in 1986, the same year that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and a large group of his followers, practitioners of what is now known as Shambhala Buddhism, made the same move.

As you might imagine, the influx of New Agey, affluent Americans into an isolated, have-not Canadian province went over like a lead balloon, and a sort of guilt-by-association took root in my mind. But more than this, I was loath to give meditation a try because I thought Buddhism was about renouncing the world, renouncing desire. And I am hopelessly in and of the world. Desire to understand the world and to encounter it on terms authentic to my embodied being has determined the course of my life.

Thus, I felt a profound spark of recognition when I first encountered an excerpt from a conversation between Sylvère Lotringer and David Wojnarowicz, where Wojnarowicz says,

Peter [Hujar], in his Buddhist leanings, always encouraged me to meditate and I tried it for a period of time. But it made everything I did worthless. I no longer wanted to paint these images, and I no longer wanted to deal with violence. I was on this health diet. I'd given up smoking, sugar, salt, meat, all these things. I did it for four months and it scared the shit out of me. I was at a total loss as to what to do, what to paint, what to make. None of it made any sense. I can't think of an interesting way to present beauty unless it's inside of death or violence. That's where I make violent things beautiful.... So I gave up meditation and went back to eating sugar and pancakes. I became violent again. It made me feel much better.<sup>1</sup>

This passage became my ready reply to the coded suggestion that I might want to learn to chill the fuck out.

As an artist or artworker, one's labor is deeply imbricated with one's sense of self. What you make is who you are. Thus, professional shortcomings feel personal, and harder to shake off.

Arriving in New York at the height of the Great Recession in 2009, I spent a lot of time thinking about failure. Partly, it was in the air: it was the era of failed banks, failed wars, failed states. But more than this, my fixation with failure emerged from the unpleasant aftertaste of graduate school and my complete unpreparedness for the perils of the New York art industrial complex.

While a life in the arts has never been a simple proposition, the position of the contemporary artist or art worker has been fundamentally altered by a series of developments, within the field and the larger society, starting at the end of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The end result is that many practitioners are forced to weather a perfect storm of greater debt load, higher cost of living, stagnant wages, and increased competition.<sup>3</sup> Today's artists and art workers labor 24/7, without security, and are expected to be thankful for every scrap thrown their way.

A few years ago, a friend made a comment about my success and I was immediately flummoxed. I have no savings, I sputtered, no stability. As an independent curator, the only certainty in my life is uncertainty. The art world is a place where the indicators of success—international travel, a packed schedule, press coverage—do not guarantee the rewards that come with achievement in other fields. I told my friend that my term for the strange positionality of the contemporary artist or art worker is "precariat jet-set." For us, a day in the life could look like:

The art fair will pay for your ticket abroad so you can speak in their public program, but you can only afford to eat granola bars while you're there.

The gallery pays you \$30,000 a year and expects you to look like a million bucks.

Doing the creative work you were hired to do, and then also having to do the work of endlessly nagging the client to pay you.

Maxing out credit cards to make new work for a show, only to be paid in "exposure."

...and so on.

*The math of possibility becomes the subtext of every interaction: You don't want to leave the party because you're having a great talk with a curator and maybe that could lead to something? But it means you'll be useless at work tomorrow. And you can't afford a cab, so you'll have to wait forever for the train and the walk from the station late at night is kind of sketchy... but what if this moment is the moment when everything changes, when you get your chance?*

What underlies all of this is the demand for presence. One must attend every opening, every artist talk, every afterparty. One must be available to drop everything, jump on an airplane, and embody one's intellectual labor before an audience. This kind of presence is only really possible for people who care for no one and need no one to care for them. It is, as Jan Verwoert says in "Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform," "based on the illusion that each individual should be able to generate an inexhaustible potency solely from his [sic] own resources."<sup>4</sup>

The demand for presence; the endless, unnecessary barriers to entry; and the persistent, pernicious idea that you shouldn't be paid well for what you do if what you do is a creative calling—it all combines to create a chilling effect on who participates in the art world because it presumes financial independence and a frictionless life. It lends itself to an art world that stays white, affluent, hetero- and homonormative, able-bodied, cis-gendered, risk-averse and IMHO-boring as fuck, full of the children of the international elite who form new old-boy's networks that masquerade as Marxist reading groups. If you're not pale and male with a degree from Yale, a life in the arts is a gamble.

This shit is exhausting. I am exhausted.



During the Kavanaugh hearings, I joked with a friend that the internet was “peak interneting.” It was, simultaneously, a fetid cesspool of misanthropy and a space of bravery, community, and affirmation. But at a certain point I had to look away in the name of self-preservation.

Over the past few years, I can’t count the number of times I have gotten lost in the infinite scroll of confessions and revelations. Staring at the screen, stuck in a fugue of feeling heartbroken when reading about all the terrible things that have happened to friends and acquaintances, and being reminded of the all things I can’t forget and all the things I’ve suppressed. If I look too long, a rush of sorrow fills my body, my chest crumples and my words fail. Bodies are palimpsests. The marks of trauma may fade, but they never disappear.



Consequently, I’ve been occupied by the relationship between community and care. In turn, I’ve been thinking about the commodification of self-care, which now conjures images of white women in terry cloth robes and sheet masks, instead of, for example, the nation-wide care clinics set up by the Black Panther Party. I read the latter as a community-centered “act of political warfare,”<sup>5</sup> to borrow a phrase from Audre Lorde, and the former as another attempt to master the body, and to do it alone, doubling down on the American fixation on self-reliance.

The reason why I’m resistant to monographic approaches to art history is also one of the reasons why I dislike the overuse of the word “curator”: because it places undue emphasis on an *individual*, putting their labor in a vacuum. It does not tell the whole truth of how culture is made. As an artist or artworker, one’s work is fundamentally communal. There’s no art without a public, and a life in the arts is exactly that, a whole life. Culture emerges from the dialogue between the work of previous generations and the current milieu, that endless conversation with friends and lovers and mentors and bosses in person and on text message and email threads, in bars and galleries and studios and lecture halls.<sup>6</sup>

The current practice paradigm discussed above is exclusionary, unsustainable, and profoundly antisocial. A first step in pushing back might lie in disclosing the human cost of a presence-dependent, hyper-productive mode of working, and what it is doing to our health, our relationships, our fiscal stability. An honest accounting is necessary to create a field where people of manifold modalities of embodiment can thrive.

In all of this, it is crucial to acknowledge that there is no homogenous, universal “we.” As Susan Sontag said in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.”<sup>7</sup>

While there may be no universal “we,” I believe there can be a strategic “we.” A “we” that emerges from an ethical relation that is specific, responsive, and rooted in interdependence, in reaching out. A “we” that is temporary, attuned to the varying degrees of privilege, access, marginalization, and so forth between people in a given context, leveraging these differences to create arenas of holding for conflict, hurt, alienation, weirdness, and failure. The “we” of care.

We can make a space for fluid practices of devotion. We can take our time.



Eventually, dear reader, I broke down and gave secular meditation a try. Though some things get easier with age and you stop caring so much about little things, other habits become more entrenched as the neural pathways grow evermore well-worn. The stakes get higher and the highs produce diminishing returns. Because of the lingering traces of old trauma and the professional demands of 24/7 presence, I found myself unable to be present with the people I love. Thus, the old dog is forced to learn new tricks.

As I said, I have always been hungry. Collective cathartic experience helps me process all that I take in. Live music was an early outlet: throwing myself into a sea of writhing bodies or getting lost in a beat. Creating a queer family of choice, invoking a connection to those that came before who, like us, spent their nights wandering in circles and being consumed by fires. Once, during a group meditation, it occurred to me: sitting in a room full of strangers, breathing in and out, is another way of vibrating in time with others, like when you're dancing. I've never had a spiritual bone in my body, but I've always believed in people—that a group of people working intentionally and with care can transform the fabric of the social.

Meditation has become, for me, one way of pushing back against the demands of a 24/7 world, a form of quotidian chrono-political dissent. Verwoert, again, in "Exhaustion and Exuberance," asks, "What silent but effective forms of non-alignment, non-compliance, uncooperativeness, reluctance, reticence, weariness or unwillingness do we find in everyday life?"<sup>8</sup>

Personally, I've found a line of flight in doing "nothing," stealing back time from neoliberalism's plunder. And I am eager to share strategies for non-compliance with you, dear reader. To that end, I've recorded a guided meditation for The Creative Independent Transmissions. [You can listen to it here](#). The caveats: I am not an expert, not by any stretch of the imagination. I am just DIY 'til I die; my default operating mode is "learn something new, share widely." Also, as a white person, I recognize the potential for appropriation. In this, as in most things, I am trying to tread with care.

Mindfulness techniques can be done anywhere, by anyone. They don't require disposable income, just a willingness to try. Like in any practice, there will be ups and downs. I encourage you to persevere through the rough patches, be patient with yourself, and "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."<sup>9</sup> If you hate it, you can always go back to eating pancakes.



*The spiritual hunt* developed out of a lecture performance of the same name that took place at the International Center of Photography, New York on November 13, 2018.

1. Quoted in "David Wojnarowicz's Death Mask," History is a Weapon blog, May 6, 2010, <http://blog.historyisaweapon.com/post/577497540/david-wojnarowicz-death-mask>
2. These include, but are not limited to: the emergence of the independent curator; the growth of transatlantic commercial air travel; the expansion of the art market and the art object as a speculative commodity; the increase in art fairs, biennials, and triennials internationally; the proliferation of post-secondary art degrees and an incommensurate opportunity growth. Or, as Hito Steyerl states in her text, "Duty Free Art": "Contemporary art is made possible by neoliberal capital plus the internet, biennials, art fairs, parallel pop-up histories, growing income inequality. Let's add asymmetric warfare—as one of the reasons for the vast redistribution of wealth—real estate speculation, tax evasion, money laundering, and deregulated financial markets to this list." Hito Steyerl, "Duty Free Art," *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (New York: Verso, 2017), 78.
3. For more information, see The Creative Independent's "A study on the financial state of visual artists today," <https://thecreativeindependent.com/artist-survey/>.
4. Jan Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform," *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want*, edited by Vanessa Ohlraun (Rotterdam and Berlin: Piet Zwart Institute and Sternberg Press, 2010), 48.
5. The full quote is, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (Mineola: Ixia Press, 2017), 130.

6. For example: The title of this piece, *The spiritual hunt*, is taken from the title of a lost prose poem by Arthur Rimbaud. His friend and lover Paul Verlaine claimed that it was Rimbaud's masterpiece, even though Verlaine couldn't remember a line from the poem after it was (likely) destroyed by his wife, Mathilde. Wojnarowicz famously appropriated a photograph of the young Rimbaud for the series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, 1978-1979. The artist photographed himself and his friends wearing a mask of the poet's face, in locations around New York City. The photographs depict the liminal spaces of a lost bohemia: after the Stonewall riots and before the AIDS crisis, a New York of cheap rents, easy sex, and hard drugs. The series creates a kinship across time and continents, drawing attention to the parallels between the life of the poet and the artist, namely, their homosexuality, difficult childhoods, escapes to the city, the key role played by an older lover and mentor, and early deaths.
7. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.
8. Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance," 20.
9. Samuel Beckett, "Worstward Ho" in *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 89.



Cold, rainy, and pleasant

Brian Eno, Philip Glass, Harmonia, Mary Lattimore, KÁRYYN, How To Disappear Completely

Brooklyn, Toronto, and West Hollywood

Those that come with stock-taking and trying to be soft in hard times.

Name

Jacqueline Mabey

Vocation

Curator

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