MAGGIE NELSON

American Society is Saturated with violence—and not just the violence horrifically displayed in early December 2012 at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, where a former student returned to shoot 20 children and 6 adults before he trained his rifle on himself. In 2011, the homicide rate in the United States was more than four times greater than Germany's and more than eight times Japan's. But violence here is not just a social fact—it's also a cultural phenomenon, as poet, critic, and essayist Maggie Nelson understands. Anyone who watches television and YouTube, or spends hours playing video games, will recognize its pervasiveness. But Nelson finds violence in a place we might never think to look—in the high arts, especially the cutting-edge tradition known as the avant-garde.

Past defenders of the artistic avant-garde celebrated the possibilities opened up by "aesthetic shock," the experience produced by radical disorientation. But they have tended to soft-pedal its complicity with sadism and terror. At times, Nelson herself seems to be thrilled by the avant-garde's liberating openness, but she tries to nudge artists and art lovers toward what one reviewer, writing in the *New York Times*, calls a "post-avant-garde aesthetics." Such an aesthetics—a new framework for the arts—might, as Nelson claims, "deliver us to a more sensitive, perceptive, insightful, enlivened, collaborative and just way of inhabiting the earth." Nelson's shift from art to "inhabiting the earth" might seem to give too much importance to what goes on in galleries, museums, and film festivals. But the sadism of the avant-garde has never stopped at the museum door: in fact, its influence reaches everywhere: into popular films and magazines, architecture, television, fashion, and design—the entire "cultural imaginary." When Nelson questions the pieties of past art criticism, she does so because she understands that the arts help to create the texture and the shape of our experience.

Nelson, who received a Ph.D. in English from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has taught writing and literature at the Pratt Institute, Wesleyan University, and the New School. Since 2005 she has been on the faculty of the California Institute of the Arts (CALARTS). While Nelson's essays on culture explore new directions in the arts, she also speaks for a post-Boomer generation of writers and artists who have had to live without stable jobs at marquee newspapers

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The *New York Times* quotation is from Laura Kipnis, "Why Is Contemporary Art Addicted to Violence?" *New York Times*, July 14, 2011. The quotation on inhabiting the earth is from *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, 265 and the quotation from the interview in the online journal comes from "Pathos: Maggie Nelson," *Full Stop*, January 24, 2013 <http://www.full-stop.net/2013/01/24/interviews/the-editors/pathos-maggie-nelson/>.

or tenured professorships at universities. As she told an interviewer for the online journal *Full Stop* about the difficulties of the writer's life today, "I don't think the world owes anyone anything. I think we owe the world more stewardship and vision and respect than we currently are giving it, and as fellow humans we owe each other more care than our current system impels us to give."

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Great to Watch

In her moving, influential anti–capital punishment memoir, *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen Prejean asserts, "I know that it is not a question of malice or ill will or meaness of spirit that prompts our citizens to support executions. It is, quite simply, that people don't know the truth of what is going on." Prejean is convinced that if executions were made public, "the torture and violence would be unmasked, and we would be shamed into abolishing executions."

Alas, if only it were so. For if the bad news from Abu Ghraib made anything clear in recent years, it is that this model of shaming-us-into-action-by-unmasking-the-truth-of-our-actions cannot hold a candle to our capacity to assimilate horrific images, and to justify or shrug off horrific behavior. Not to mention the fact that the United States has a long history—as do many countries and individuals—of reveling in the spectacle of public executions and gruesome torture. (On this account, I unhappily recommend to you the 2000 book of documentary photography *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.*)

Prejean's conviction that it is simple, blameless ignorance that prompts so many Americans to support executions (or the torture of detainees in the so-called war on terror, and so on) may be goodhearted. But unfortunately it leaves us but one option: know the truth, and ye shall be redeemed. But "knowing the truth" does not come with redemption as a guarantee, nor does a feeling of redemption guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing. Some would even say it is key to maintaining it, insofar as it can work as a reset button—a purge that cleans the slate, without any guarantee of change at the root. Placing all one's eggs in "the logic of exposure," as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it (in *Touching Feeling*), may also simply further the logic of paranoia. "Paranoia places its faith in exposure," Sedgwick observes—which is to say that the exposure of a disturbing fact or situation does not necessarily alter it, but in fact may further the circular conviction that *one can never be paranoid enough.*

Prejean's logic relies on the hope that shame, guilt, and even simple embarrassment are still operative principles in American cultural and political life—and that such principles can fairly trump the forces of desensitization and self-justification. Such a presumption is sorely challenged by the seeming unembarrassability of the military, the government, corporate CEOs, and others repetitively caught in

monstrous acts of irresponsibility and malfeasance. This unembarrassability has proved difficult to contend with, as it has had a literally stunning effect on the citizenry. *They ought to be ashamed of themselves!* we cry, over and over again, to no avail. But they are not ashamed, and they are not going to become so.

Also difficult to contend with: the fact that we ourselves have ample and wily reserves of malice, power-mongering, self-centeredness, fear, sadism, or simple meanness of spirit that we ourselves, our loved ones, our enemies, skillful preachers, politicians, and rhetoricians of all stripes can whip into a hysterical, destructive froth at any given moment, if we allow for it.

To this list, one should surely add television producers. In 1982, Stephen King published a sci-fi novel called *The Running Man,* set in the not-so-distant future. In the novel, "The Running Man" is the country's most popular TV game show, and features a contestant who agrees to run for his life while being trailed by a group of "Hunters" charged with killing him. The network engages the populace by paying civilians for confirmed sightings of the runner, which it then passes along to the Hunters. If the runner survives for thirty days, he gets a billion dollars. If he is caught, he is killed by the Hunters on live TV.

As others have noted, the dystopic plot of *The Running Man* turned out to be more prophetic than dissuasive. So-called reality television has been foraying into this territory for over a decade now, churning out show after show that draws on some combination of surveillance; self-surveillance; "interactivity" with the home audience; techniques associated with torture, interrogation, or incarceration; and rituals of humiliation, sadism, and masochism (of the I'll-do-anything-for-fame-or-money variety, not the I-do-this-because-it-gives-me-pleasure variety: outing one's pleasures, it seems, remains more taboo than outing one's ambition or avarice).

The international craze for reality programming has, to date, given us shows such as the United Kingdom's *Shattered* (2004), in which contestants are deprived of sleep for many days in a row, and *Unbreakable* (2008), in which contestants undergo various forms of torture (including being waterboarded, buried alive, or made to cross the Sahara Desert while wearing suffocating gas masks), and whose motto is "Pain Is Glory, Pain Is Pride, Pain Is Great to Watch." In the United States, reality TV has at times joined forces with soft-core journalism and law enforcement to produce shows like Dateline/NBC's *To Catch a Predator. To Catch a Predator*—which operates in questionable legal conjunction with not only the police but also a vigilante "anti-predator" group called "Perverted Justice"—hires decoys who pretend to be underage teens. These decoys attempt to entice adults into online sex chats; if and when one of the adults agrees to meet his online pen pal at the "decoy house," he (and it is always a he) is there greeted by the show's host, Chris Hansen, who first verbally humiliates him by reading him the most tawdry excerpts of his online sex chatter, then turns him over to the police, who are waiting nearby with handcuffs.

The legal, ethical, and psychological ramifications of such shows have occasioned quite a bit of debate, as these effects have often proved unmanageable. On November 5, 2006, for example, after a SWAT team trailed by TV cameras forced its way into the home of Louis Conradt Jr., a longtime county prosecutor

in Murphy, Texas, Conradt said, "I'm not going to hurt anybody," before firing a single bullet from a semiautomatic handgun into his brain, thereby ending his life. (There had been no pressing reason to break into Conradt's home—Conradt had, in fact, refused to meet the decoy at the decoy house—but the show's producers were anxious to capture the arrest of a prominent public figure on tape, as it promised to make compelling TV. In the end, Dateline refrained from airing the death itself, but it did run a segment on the case.) As one newspaper columnist writing about the incident acidly put it, "When a TV show makes you feel sorry for potential child rapists, you know it's doing something wrong." (Or right, depending on your point of view; *To Catch a Predator* was one of NBC's hit shows for some time.)

As if a test were needed of how much sadism reality television participants, audiences, and producers are willing to indulge, on March 17, 2010, French TV broadcast something called *Le jeu de la mort*, or *The Game of Death*, a faux game show which re-performed the Milgram experiment on eighty unknowing contestants. The contestants had been told that they were taking part in a game-show pilot, in which they were to administer electric shocks to other contestants when they answered questions incorrectly. A smiling host and vociferous studio audience, rather than a taciturn guy in a lab coat (as was the case in Stanley Milgram's experiment), urged the behavior on, but the results were remarkably similar: sixty-four of the eighty contestants were willing to deliver shocks that could have killed their recipients, had there been any actual receivers.

But beyond prime time, which the digital age may be rendering a quaint outpost, more literal renditions of the Running Man scenario—and ones that offer their viewers slightly more participation than that of armchair schadenfreude—are now available via a few strokes of your computer keyboard. Consider, for example, the Texas Virtual Border Watch Program, in which "The Texas Border Sheriff's Coalition (TBSC) has joined BlueServo^{SM} in a public-private partnership to deploy the Virtual Community Watch, an innovative real-time surveillance program designed to empower the public to proactively participate in fighting border crime." In other words, the TBSC has placed cameras along the U.S.-Mexican border in Texas at so-called high-threat spots for border crossing or drug trafficking, and now invites the home viewer to log on, pick a spot, and start "directly monitoring suspicious criminal activity via this virtual fence^{SM}." Viewers can watch the live feed from one of the "virtual stake outs" for as long as they like—the *New York Times* recently interviewed a housewife from Rochester, New York, who reported watching for at least four hours a day.

While controversial, the BlueServo^{SM} project should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the Minutemen and its offshoots, whose volunteers have been (non-virtually) patrolling the U.S.-Mexican border, looking for "illegals," since 1995. "It's just like hunting," explained Chuck Stonex, a prominent member. "If you're going out hunting deer, you want to scout around and get an idea what their pattern is, what trails they use." Stonex, along with Minuteman founder Jim Gilchrist and other leading figures, has since taken a more defensive stance, after one of their principal associates, Shawna Forde, was arrested in June 2009 in connection with the murder of two members of a Hispanic family in

their home in Arivaca, Arizona; one of those killed was a nine-year-old girl. But the chilling new anti-immigration law signed by Governor Jan Brewer of Arizona on April 23, 2010, which authorizes police to demand proof of any person's immigration status should "reasonable suspicion exist that the person is an alien," has breathed new life into the "hunt 'em down" mindset, in both Arizona and the nation at large.

With BlueServo^{SM}, the condition of spectatorship is not so much abolished as it is recast as a form of empowerment: you, too, can defend the homeland, without ever having to leave your home! The project eerily combines the appeal of a spectator sport with language more typically reserved for left wing–sounding community activism: *Innovative. Proactive. Participation. Partnership. Coalition. Community. Empowerment.* (Especially poignant: "public-private partnership"—in the age of Blackwater [now called Xe] or the Tea Party, every vigilante need be prepared for a trademark!) Last time I visited the BlueServo^{SM} site, there were fifteen cameras rolling on scenes of bucolic calm. My favorites were Camera 5, which featured a still patch of golden weeds with the directive, "During the day watch for subjects on foot carrying large bags," and Camera 10, which featured a swiftly moving river alongside the directive, "During the day if you see four or five men in a boat report this activity. At night if you see vehicle, boat, or people movement report this activity." The static, unending nature of the footage bears a weird resemblance to the endurance-based, art house aesthetic of, say, Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964)—a film that consists of eight hours and five minutes of continuous footage of the Empire State Building—or that of a virtual yule log, albeit one of a more sinister variety.

On the flip side of such a "if you see something, say something" policing projects lies a human rights organization such as the Hub, which describes itself as "the world's first participatory media site for human rights." I'm thinking in particular of the Hub's Witness project, whose motto is "See It, Film It, Change It," and which aims to use "video and online technologies to open the eyes of the world to human rights violations." The operation of Witness is twofold: one, to give people cameras and train them to videotape atrocities or injustices they may be suffering or witnessing; two, to invent a circuitry by which one can upload one's own videos and view those of others, presumably as a prelude to taking a form of action after viewing. For convenience, one can scroll through the videos by category (armed conflict, children's rights, discrimination, violence, women's rights, and so on), or by "most viewed" (Japanese sexual slavery during World War II has occupied this slot for some time now).

As the creators of the Hub well know, the employment of image or moving image in service of mobilizing an individual or a populace is tricky business. For this reason, the Hub aims to zero in on the little window of time between an upsurge of outrage or sympathy and the onset of apathy—to hurl an otherwise fleeting emotion into action before it dissolves. (What action consists of is a difficult, debatable question—right now the "take action" tab on the Hub's Web site links to "a growing portfolio of advocacy tools to help allies and users call for action," ranging from signing email petitions to writing members of Congress to sending money to a variety of organizations to creating "offline events.")

I mean it as no slight to the Hub when I say that I find the smorgasbord of human suffering offered on its site repellent. Not because "it is difficult to look" (though sometimes, of course, it is), but because the physical and mental activity of Web surfing, which consists of rapid image flow, the distillation of long, complex stories and situations to 2-inch-high, four-minute snippets, one-click decision-making, happenstance isolations, juxtapositions, and linkages that have an eerily leveling effect on content and context, is, in my experience, an exceptionally poor means by which to contemplate the horrors of human trafficking, child prostitution, landmines, and the like. For better or worse, one's experience of surfing the Hub is shaped by the do-I-or-don't-I-want-to-watch-this question, as in: Do I or don't I want to watch a Tibetan pilgrim being shot dead by the Chinese police at Nangpa La Pass? How about cell phone footage of a man being hung upside down and sodomized with a rod in an Egyptian prison? Or the testimony of women in Bangladesh whose faces have been disfigured by acid? Well-intentioned and effective as the operation may be, scrolling through such choices makes me feel as though I've arrived at the hub of a problem rather than its solution.

Insofar as "image flow" isn't going away any time soon, it certainly makes sense to try to harness the powers of YouTube for all kinds of social causes as well as for entertainment. But there are also perils. And one is that in a cultural moment defined (by some, for some) by image flow, the question of what one should look at, along with attendant inquiries into the nature and effect of the images blowing by, has a creepy way of overtaking almost all other questions. This may in fact be part of the so-called image regime's raison d'etre, rather than a puzzling side effect. In any case, it can lead to cul-de-sacs, red herrings, or distractions fatal to the primary issue at hand.

For example, in a director's statement about his Abu Ghraib documentary, *Standard Operating Procedure,* filmmaker Errol Morris names the principal question posed by his film as, "Is it possible for a photograph to change the world?" But what could the answer to this question—be it in the negative or the affirmative—really mean? As Sontag puts it in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* "The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence"—a notion that partially explains how the iconic image of the hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib forced to hold a foreboding wire in each hand could literally sicken one's stomach when first viewed, then move on to become a much-parodied image (e.g., on the satirical posters that appeared throughout the New York subways not long after the Abu Ghraib story broke, posters that borrowed the distinctive design of Apple's iPod campaign, but substituted the word "iRaq" for "iPod," and featured the silhouette of the hooded man in lieu of the iPod's silhouetted dancer). It isn't that this photograph played no role in the unfolding of human events—clearly, it did. But after nearly 200 years of photography, it may be that we are closer than ever to understanding that an image—be it circulated in a newspaper, on YouTube, or in an art gallery—is an exceptionally poor platform on which to place the unending, arduous, multifaceted, and circuitous process of "changing the world."

In his April 2008 *Artforum* review of *Standard Operating Procedure,* critic Paul Arthur noted something of the same. In thinking about Morris's focus on the revelation that the man who identified himself publicly as the hooded prisoner turned out *not* to be the actual victim, Arthur writes, "Morris finds this revelation telling because it shows how massively disseminated pictures can mask their own provenance or 'attract false beliefs.' Really? I thought the images under consideration, especially when supplemented by salient verbal contexts, revealed more about policy than about epistemology, more about state-sponsored barbarity than about media deception." In other words, one need not immerse oneself in horrific images or a debate about their epistemological status in order to apprehend and protest barbarities wherever they are to be found. Nor does one need to distract oneself with rehashings of the Milgram experiment, which uselessly reiterate what we already know about our capacity to cause harm under pressure (or, as the case may be, at simple invitation).

One does, however, need to know what barbarities have taken place: there's the rub. Enter President Obama, speaking about his administration's May 2009 decision to suppress the release of a new spate of photographs that depict the abuse, rape, and torture of Afghan and Iraqi prisoners in American custody. "The most direct consequence of releasing [these photos]," Obama said, "would be to further inflame anti-American opinion and to put our troops in greater danger." Mark down one vote for the idea that images have the power to cause injury—though to warn against such a thing in this case smells pretty rotten, given that the suppressed photos presumably depict our troops injuring others.

Obama also skips over the most obvious direct consequence of releasing the photos: that Americans would see—along with the rest of the world—more evidence of the barbarities that have been committed in their name, on their supposed behalf, and on their dime. To state the obvious but oft-repressed or denied point, it isn't the act of releasing photos that inflames anti-American sentiment; it's the behavior captured by the photos. In the age of "the torturer with the Toshiba," as art historian T.J. Clark has put it, no image flow can be fully marshaled. Nor can survivors and witnesses be unilaterally silenced. If you don't want to inflame via images of the behavior, then you have to stop the behavior.

Of course, it isn't entirely clear that the United States meant to keep the news of its use of torture a secret. No regime hoping to gain power from its use of such violence (an impossibility, according to Hannah Arendt) ever has. Certainly the revelations from Abu Ghraib appeared as a mistake, a rip in the fabric; certainly the U.S. government has employed intense secrecy, censorship, and denial about everything from the Red Cross Torture Report to the exact interrogation methods used to the operations of "black sites" around the world. Certainly journalists from Seymour Hersh to Jane Mayer to Mark Danner to Scott Horton have had an enormously difficult time obtaining the information they need to inform the public about what, exactly, has gone on; certainly the CIA has classified and egregiously destroyed pivotal evidence, such as the videotapes depicting the 2002 interrogations of several terrorism suspects—tapes the CIA outrageously destroyed in 2005, in the midst of a federal investigation.

And yet. On a parallel track run the monologues of Dick Cheney, who, since leaving office, has toured the talk shows, speaking with candor and pride about his role in "The Program." Then there's the ongoing consideration of the

topic in the bright glare of television and the blogosphere, in which everyone from Bill O'Reilly to Andrew Sullivan to Christopher Hitchens to Elisabeth Hasselbeck openly debates the efficacy of torture, and the effect its use has had on our country—not whether or not we have done it. The Bush/Cheney dyad of denial/justification represents two sides of a single coin: Bush spoke the voice of delusion (it never happened, it will never happen); Cheney, the voice of justification (we had to do it, we should still be doing it). The average citizen can then ricochet between these two irreconcilable, collaborative poles until desensitization sets in, and with it, a begrudging (or, for some, an enthusiastic) acceptance of the practice.

Back in 1965, Sontag declared that we live in "an age of extremity," characterized by "the continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." Much of the art produced under the influence of [Antonin] Artaud—such as [Hermann] Nitsch's—proceeds from this premise, and attempts to replace the crush of banality with some form of brutal, sensory overload. Even quieter works such as [Alfredo] Jaar's *Untitled (Newsweek)* depend on this by-now familiar dichotomy—one that places benumbing banality on one side, and unthinkable, rupturing calamity on the other.

The moral of this dichotomy is that distraction by the banal obviates a necessary focus on the all-too-real-calamitous. This equation became ubiquitous in the weeks and months after 9/11, when media commentator after commentator lamented the fact that instead of focusing on the real threat from Al Qaeda, Americans spent the summer of 2001 unforgivably obsessing over the latest incarnation of Britney Spears. But really this is a self-flagellating, essentially nonsensical diagnosis, especially in its supposition that Americans would have been better off spending more of their time worrying about an impending terrorist attack, the shape of which they could have had no foreknowledge. (The next seven years and four months of the Bush administration provided a good picture of what a populace in thrall to such anxiety might look like—and what it might tolerate from its leaders—and it wasn't pretty.)

After 9/11, Sontag's formulation would seem to have more adherents than ever, on both the right and the left. See, for example, the leftist collective RETORT's *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005), which repeatedly pits the eviscerating "false depth" of consumerism (i.e., unremitting banality) against claims that "we have never been closer to hell on earth" (i.e., inconceivable terror). But is it true? Or more precisely, for whom is it true, and who presumes it to be true for others? Do we really live under the aegis of these opposing threats, or is it the very reiteration of them as our two primary ontological options (and our unthinking acquiescence to such a formulation) that acts as a truer threat to our enlivenment, to our full experience of the vast space between these two poles—a space which, after all, is where the great majority of many of our lives takes place? And if, as David Graeber has suggested, revolutionary action is "not a form of grim self-sacrifice," but rather "the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free," what good does it do us to charge those who refuse to live under the aegis of these two grim choices with false consciousness, with not truly understanding the stakes of the age?

Compare, for example, the "troughs of blood and wine," the "extreme noise from the orchestras" of Nitsch's *Six-Day Play* with John Cage's Zen-inspired *4′33″*, first composed in 1952, in which Cage famously asks audience members to sit in complete silence for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, in order to awaken to the sounds going on around them, to hear all the ambient noise of which they would have otherwise been unaware. In light of the heightened state of perception conjured by Cage's piece—its profound capacity to "return us to our senses" via an emptying out of input rather than an overload of it—one may begin to wonder whose interests it serves to keep us believing in, and riveted by, the mythos of this "age of extremity," which focuses on knocking oneself out rather than tuning in.

Perhaps more controversially still, given our inarguable complicity in all kinds of systemic forms of global injustice: is there any space left for *not* watching, *not* focusing, *not* keeping abreast of all the events and atrocities unfolding in the world, as an ethically viable option? "Why are we watching the news, reading the news, keeping up with the news?" asks Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being*, a book that sets forth the deeply unfashionable argument that our times are not uniquely grievous—that they are, in fact, not unique at all—and further, that their vicissitudes may make no intrinsic demand on our attention, or on our conscience. That enlivenment may consist of quiet, even monastic retreat, rather than bombardment or disembowelment. "Who can bear to hear this, or who will consider it?" Dillard wonders.

In completely disparate circles—such as those of leftist political philosophy, for example—a distinct but not wholly unrelated idea of "engaged withdrawal" has also begun to hold sway. Rather than fixate on revolution, this strategy privileges orchestrated and unorchestrated acts of exodus. As Italian political philosopher Paolo Virno has put it, "Nothing is less passive that the act of fleeing, of exiting." In anarchist circles, this withdrawal bears a relationship to the idea of the "TAZ," or "temporary autonomous zones" (as elaborated by writer Hakim Bey; Graeber prefers the term "provisional autonomous zones"): ephemeral but crucial gaps in an otherwise suffocating global capitalist order, gaps that, at the very least, make other forms of social organization and perception seem momentarily possible.

In short, after decades of critical focus on the evils of spectatorship, the gaze, and the presumably passive role of the audience, an increasing chorus of critical voices is currently arguing that we have somehow gotten wildly off course by treating the condition of spectatorship as a problem, or at least as *the* problem. There's Jacques Rancière, who argues in 2009's *The Emancipated Spectator* that spectatorship is not "the passivity that has to be turned into activity," but rather "our normal situation." Then, of course, there's Sontag, whose final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, argues that to impugn the sense of sight for allowing us to "stand back from the aggressiveness of the world" and to free us up "for observation and for elective attention" is to impugn the function of the mind itself. Sontag concludes, "There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: 'Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time.'" In a culture obsessed with pitting thought against action (in order to privilege the latter), not to mention a culture perpetually dubious of the cash value of rumination, these are fighting words. In 2006, T.J. Clark—who is known as much for his fierce political convictions as his insights into Picasso (he is, in fact, a

member of RETORT)—published *The Sight of Death*, a 242-page meditation on two works by seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin, in which Clark aims to honor the slow work of "this focusing, this staying still, this allowing oneself to respond to the *picture's* stillness—everything hidden and travestied, in short, by the current word 'gaze.'" Clark also rebukes those scholars of "visual culture" who, in his words, are "chained to their image-displacement machines like lab animals to dispensers of morphine," and whose knee-jerk response to an expansive, devoted, patient contemplation of classical painting (such as his) would be to dismiss it as nostalgic, or elitist, or "some such canting parrot-cry."

The above-mentioned writers have dedicated their lives to slow seeing, slow thinking, measured articulation, and radical dissent or defection from any *doxa* that stifles existence or adds injustice to it. I am inclined to listen to them. Rather than lambast that which mediates as our enemy, each makes a concerted effort to reclaim the value of the "third term." "In the logic of emancipation," Rancière writes, "there is always a third thing—a book or some other piece of writing—alien to both [teacher and student] and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks about it." The emancipatory value of this third thing, as Rancière sees it, lies in the fact that no one can own it; no one can own its meaning. Its function is to mediate, but not in the sense of imitating or representing a reality from which spectators are barred. Here, "the mediate" relates people to each other, with *relation* signifying the process of being brought together and given a measure of space from each other at the same time.

This is essentially a spatial construct—a diagram, or, as [Francis] Bacon might have it, a ring of action—that constructs both distance and association (or, if you like, individuality and collectivity). Its construction demarcates some sort of boundary, but it does not follow that the function of that boundary need be a constrictive or restrictive one. In fact, the function of the boundary may be wildly variable and even liberating, especially insofar as it creates sub-spaces, and guarantees that there can be a game. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it, "If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for." Given that "breaking down boundaries" has come to act as a synonym for innovative or progressive action, be it in art, social justice, or beyond, Wittgenstein's distinctions bear some repeating. Not all boundaries or mediating forces are created equal; not all serve the same purpose. Neither politics nor art is served if and when the distinctions between them are willingly or unthinkingly smeared out.

Rancière's veneration of this third term also echoes certain remarks Hannah Arendt made over fifty years ago, in speaking about the importance of the public realm (which, Arendt makes clear, is definitively *not* the same as the social realm). "The public realm, as the common world," Arendt wrote, "gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them. The weirdness of this situation

resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered round a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible."

For Arendt, this collapse signifies a deep and dangerous failure in human relations. (God only knows what she would have made of the vast social realm of the Internet, and its creation of a wholly different type of séance—one in which the table remains, but the human bodies are disappeared.) For others, this collapse serves as the gateway to ecstatic, unmediated union. Others still, seeing this fantasized union as utopian nonsense, but who are equally troubled by the forms of alienation that ostensibly prohibit it, offer up satirical or cynical dystopias in its place. And others—especially younger others—simply ignore both the promises and the perils of the whole communion/alienation dyad, as one typically ignores any binaries that no longer speak to the defining conditions and possibilities of one's time. The mind-bending work of an artist such as Ryan Trecartin offers a particularly gripping example of the latter.

Trecartin's 2007 feature-length video, *I-Be Area*, while nominally based on the concept of "virtual reality," is a riotous exploration of what kinds of space, identity, physicality, language, sexuality, and consciousness might be possible once one leaves the dichotomy of the virtual and the real behind, along with a whole host of other need-not-apply binaries (the everyday and the apocalyptic, the public and the private, the utopic and the dystopic, male and female, gay and straight, among them). The hyperactive cloning, frenetic strobing of characters, and post-identity verbiage of *I-Be Area* make James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) or the Internet game Second Life look like relics from the Stone Age. "I love the idea of technology and culture moving faster than the understanding of those mediums by people," Trecartin has said, and his works aim to immerse viewers in this failed-to-upload state. The disorientation of this state is not that of grandpa befuddled by a fistful of printer cables, but rather the sort of psychological and physiological stupefaction more often associated with acid overdoses and schizoid breakdowns.

I-Be Area takes incapacity—to absorb, to make sense, to cohere, to sort, to concentrate—as its starting point. ("It's like the jumper being jumped before the onset of 'jump,'" Trecartin explains, both helpfully and unhelpfully.) Then it amplifies this incapacity by turning up the speed, the color, the hysteria, the flicker. Image or speech overflow is no longer a problem, and certainly not one that art could or should aid in solving. It is where we live, at least while watching Trecartin; it is our "abstract plot of now," as he calls it. Trecartin's ability to sustain us here for some real time often feels like a miracle, in that such an ability seems as if it should be, by definition, also beyond the artist. That is to say, the art often feels as if it is moving faster than Trecartin himself could be—which is likely why his films, when combined with his youth (*I-Be Area* was finished when he was twenty-six), have had something of an awe-inducing effect on the art world. "All I can do is generalize about this world and point to it with a yearning, stumped pleasure," writes Wayne Koestenbaum about Trecartin's work. "My pointing finger is the gesture of an outsider, a tourist, gawking at a radioactive carnival I can't domesticate or quarantine."

Koestenbaum notes that Trecartin's work is about radical distraction—that dreaded, proliferate state that leads to dazzlingly high numbers of cell phone–related car crashes each day, or that leads otherwise progressive professors to shake their heads in despair as their students text each other under the classroom table. But Trecartin's brand of distraction doesn't rely on any simple use of the imitative fallacy—that is, "contemporary life is mind-scrambling, fragmented, and distracted, so my art must be mind-scrambling, fragmented, and distracted, too." It is too tightly orchestrated for that—too layered, too well-performed, too purposefully edited, too intelligently perverse. However bawdy and hysterical, Trecartin's videos draw tight rings of actions: they are condensed, fast-moving world creations that make an intense demand on our attention. And the animating paradox of this world, as Koestenbaum has put it, is that "*Trecartin's characters concentrate on distraction.*" However frenetic *I-Be Area* may be, its distraction is not of the same order as that of, say, the idiotic pop-up balloons and crawling tickers that have become staples of the television screen. To stay with *I-Be Area* all the way through—to listen to every word, to follow every decision and cut—requires a keen effort. You'll get the most out of it if you, too, can concentrate on distraction.

Of course, you may not remember much of what happened; you may not remember any of the characters; you may not even be left with an image. If your experience resembles mine, you'll be left with something far more amorphous—a kind of vibrating memory of the unnerving psychic state the work induced, or captured, or invented (and, perhaps, a notebook full of scrawled lines that sounded great at the time, such as, "My personal really concise pussy is developing a very inner monologue which I will not reveal to you as I become dynamic"). In his lucid, compelling book on craft, *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theater,* famed avant-garde dramatist Richard Foreman articulates this aesthetics-of-amnesia quite well: "The image of the Marlboro man riding his horse and smoking his cigarette has stuck with me for many years—and so what? It's garbage. It's kitsch. All it means is that the image seduced me, that it pushed a button that was ready to be pushed, and I responded. It didn't widen my sensibilities, compassion, or intuition. Whereas an art that affects you in the moment, but which you then find hard to remember, is straining to bring you to another level. It offers images or ideas from that other level, that other way of being, which is why you find them hard to remember. But it has opened you to the possibility of growing into what you are not yet, which is exactly what art should do."

Foreman is a bit more sanguine about the possibility of "growing into what you are not yet" than Trecartin, whose enthusiasm about new technologies and their relationship to human consciousness has a decidedly who-cares-where-we're-headed-let's-party vibe. I don't think, for example, that Trecartin is explicitly setting out to make work that offers his viewers "artistic structures—models of consciousness—that might evolve into a new kind of lucidity and self-possession, which would enable us to navigate the rapids of our times," as Foreman says he has been trying to do for upward of forty years now. In short, critics and viewers who look to Trecartin as an idiot savant emissary from the next generation who has come to answer the question *Are we going to be alright?* are not likely to feel reassured.

But in the end, it may not matter. Both Foreman and Trecartin work from a conception of the human, or the "real," borne out of contradiction, fluctuation, incoherence, and perversity; both offer immersion in their vision without rehashing the avant-garde fetish of terrorizing the audience or the mainstream one of chaperoning it. "We abide by cultural directives that urge us: clarify each thought, each experience, so you can cull from them their single, dominant meaning and, in the process, become a responsible adult who knows what he or she thinks," Foreman has said. "But what I try to show is the opposite: how at every moment, the world presents us with a composition in which a multitude of meanings and realities are available, and you are able to swim, lucid and self-contained, in that turbulent sea of multiplicity." After an hour or so of watching *I-Be Area,* or of watching a Foreman play, you start to swim in such a sea. The experience seems to me at least a start on a worthwhile sense of human freedom.

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QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE READING

1. When you read Nelson, you might feel like a stranger who has entered a room full of unfamiliar people, all of whom have known one another for years and are eager to discuss subjects you know little about. But the truth is that few of Nelson's readers will understand all her references. Why, then, does she add so many? Assuming Nelson's game is something other than parading her erudition, what purpose might her many references serve? What is Nelson trying to do by drawing together so many different ideas from so many different thinkers? Is she trying to dramatize how it feels to live in the information age? Or would you say that she is simply thinking—learning new things and then following connections to see wherever they might lead?
2. *Dead Man Walking,* Abu Ghraib, the Milgram experiment, black sites, Blackwater, RETORT, Zen, *4′33″*—these are just some of Nelson's references, along with a long list of people that includes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Stephen King, Susan Sontag, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, Seymour Hersh, and Wayne Koestenbaum. Pick one name from the essay and do some online research which you can later report to the class, explaining how the person and his or her work connect to Nelson's larger argument. After everyone in the class has made a presentation, collectively try to identify the common interests and agendas that might tie these different people together. If the names weren't chosen at random—and they weren't—how do they intersect?
3. Nelson quotes Susan Sontag who famously described her time as an "age of extremity." According to Sontag, living in such an age provides only "two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." What might Sontag have meant when she made this declaration—in particular, what "extremities" could she have had in mind? In what ways does the term *banality* describe the media environment today? Think, for example, about the latest coverage of figures like Lady Gaga or Beyoncé. In what ways does "terror" also play a role, and what is the relation between terror and banality? Does Nelson agree with Sontag's claim that only two "destinies" are now available to us? Could slowing down and staying still offer an alternative to both banality and terror? How?

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Nelson begins her essay by arguing that Sister Helen Prejean was naive to think "that it is simple, blameless ignorance that prompts so many Americans to support executions (or the torture of detainees in the so called war on terror, and so on)." If our entanglement with violence were just a matter of "simple, blameless ignorance," then new knowledge should indeed be an adequate solution. But Nelson seems to doubt that knowledge by itself has the power to set us free. For her, *how* we know may be even more important than *what* we know. What is the relation between violence and "watching"—between violence and the habit of spectatorship created by the constant presence of the media? Are we so busy watching violence that we neglect to act in ways that might bring it to an end? Do we need to change the things we watch? Do we need to watch more critically?
2. At one moment in her essay Nelson asks us to compare the work of two artists: the Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Hermann Nitsch, whose multimedia creations routinely include scenes of mutilated humans and animals, and John Cage's Zen-inspired *4′33″*. Examples of the work of both artists are available online. On YouTube, for example, you can listen to Cage's *Dream* or *In a Landscape,* and you can hear some of Nitsch's work—but you should do an image search as well. Prepare to be surprised and possibly revulsed. Using Cage and Nitsch as a starting point, discuss the dangers and the possibilities offered by the arts in our time. In what ways are Cage and Nitsch in opposition? What objectives and methods do they share despite their differences? Can art point the way beyond our current dilemmas, or does it simply mirror our confusions?

QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READINGS

1. Like Cathy Davidson, Nelson asks us to explore how our attention is influenced by contemporary culture, including the new media. Of the two writers, which of them seems to be more receptive to the possibilities of technology? How does Nelson's thinking complicate Davidson's optimism about the uses of attention in our times? What role does distraction play in the ideas of each writer? In what ways might Nelson's essay be said to inject an ethical dimension into the debate over the influence of new media? That is, in what ways does she urge us to consider the "dark side" as well as the positives? Would Nelson agree with Davidson's critics, who allege that she is naively optimistic?
2. Nelson's subject is a violence that often goes unnoticed because it has become so ubiquitous. Few Americans, apparently, think it strange that people should enjoy watching real or simulated torture on their TVs and computer screens. We often say we want a less violent society, but we find violence fascinating, stimulating, liberating, beautiful—or so Nelson's evidence would suggest. In what ways does the violence at the Citadel compare to the violence Nelson describes? Do they meet different needs or provide different forms of satisfaction? When the violence at the Citadel is so open, oppressive, and brutal, why don't the cadets revolt? What clues to their behavior does Nelson's essay provide? Does violence become most powerful when we have failed to find other ways of "being in the world"? Do Nelson and Faludi provide any sense of what those other "ways of being" might involve?