OTOH Randy Lee Cutler

OTOH — on the other hand



Theory Island Press

www.randyleecutler.com © Randy Lee Cutler 2022 ISBN 978-0-9936283-2-0 First Edition: March 2022

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For Bobbie

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ESSAY | unsettled feelings



OVERTURE -

fragments. pandemic isolation. zoonotic origins. formation. fictions of the archive. that past not yet past. collage as magical thinking.hand washing.visual syntax. ciphers, sigils, cryptograms and hieroglyphics. National Geographic. Black Lives Matter. amplitude of emotions. #SayHerName. archive as a troubled tomb. The Race Issue. hauntology. "wellness check". Queer Ashkenazi Jewish Feminist. multidirectional memory. Minor Feelings. Ugly Feelings. Unsettled Feelings. time doesn't pass but accumulates. aesthetic archaeology. Jetztzeit. planetary reveries of globalization. longstanding structural injustices and racism. make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. scrambles values, beliefs and hierarchies. to think otherwise. irony and ellipsis. the visceral register. alternative corporeality. knowing and not knowing, simultaneously. differential consciousness. future magic. speculative configurations. If not now, when?

The text is skewed by my own formation, but it means to document what can be and must be done with one's own formation, how it must be repeated in new ways, and where a departure from formation becomes ethically and politically obligatory...¹

MARCH 2020

On March 13 Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman is fatally shot in her Louisville, Kentucky apartment by white plainclothes officers who forced their way into her home holding a warrant with a no-knock provision. This is followed by protests around the world but no justice for Breonna and her family.

Also, on Friday the 13th the pandemic is declared. Within a week I am teaching my university classes online. I wear a mask everywhere while learning about pangolins, bats and the zoonotic origins of COVID-19. Alone at home for the foreseeable future, I turn to collaging images on my living room floor and dining room table. This is motivated by a desire to get away from too much screen time but also to check in with my unconscious. I embrace the virus and its RNA code, seeking to communicate with this spikey pathogen. A stack of gifted National Geographic magazines from the 70s and 80s have been sitting in my closet since the previous December. I work with what I have so I don't have to leave home. I vaguely remember seeing some of these magazine covers when I was a girl as my father had a regular subscription. Steeped in familiarity, every cover includes the iconic yellow border on a glossy image representing celebratory stories from across the globe with a focus on geography, natural science, history, and culture.

I am interested in how we imagine ways of knowing the past, in excess of the fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present.²

> I seem to be channeling something, a message from the past, the future, ... or both? It's a slow process. I listen to podcasts responding to current events related to the pandemic. Words and phrases enter my everyday vocabulary: pandemic, quarantine, social distance, herd immunity, flattening the curve, support bubble... Thoughts turn to hand washing, fear of touching surfaces and a general lack of physical intimacy. My hands tear, cut and compose fragments: I follow my impulses. Attracted to a range and flow of hand gestures, I amass a pile of imagery that develop into lyrical configurations. I conjure what looks like a visual syntax, a language system that embraces a surreal hybrid of ciphers, sigils, cryptograms and hieroglyphics. This isn't really surprising. In the 90s I wrote a cultural





history dissertation on the Surrealist enterprise titled *The Songs of Science:* making the familiar strange has skewed my aesthetic formation ever since.

I compose each collage not as a discrete image but in relation to what will become the series as a whole. Like the surrealist practice of psychic automatism, reason is not necessarily guiding my hands or thought processes. I am responding to the moment, this historical moment and the materials at hand. While the way forward isn't entirely clear, I see this activity as a form of magical thinking that queers both the surrealist influence and this strange archive. I wonder about how the process of rearranging fragments might relate to the pandemic at a microcellular level but also how my consciousness is shifting to imagine things that may not have been imaginable before this moment.

I alternate between listening to news of unfolding events, making the collages and finding distractions from quarantine isolation. I watch a miniseries called *Freud*, a far-fetched gothic fiction. What stays with me is the storyline of the Hungarian supernatural figure Táltos, unleashed by secret Magyar nationalists seeking to wreak havoc on the Austro-Hungarian union.

Everything reads as metaphor.

APRIL 2020

Sheltering in place, I work with what I have, the magazines, watercolour paper and glue stick. I wash my hands multiple times a day and refrain from touching surfaces or my face. I am drawn to hands, their beautifully suggestive gestures and range of skin tones. The scissor work focuses my gaze on my own hands which increasingly look like my mother's hands. Tearing out pages that catch my attention and then cutting into specific elements, my body and psyche is responsive to the world, and the world comes rushing in. It feels like an archeological dig into the past but also the present...and maybe the future. As I excavate, I am also digging into my own unconscious. What do these compositions reveal of my own inchoate feelings? Lingering on individual images, selecting, isolating and cutting, I experience an amplitude of emotions; wonder, awe, confusion, disbelief...

During every pandemic, a group has been assigned the scapegoat role, the poor, the landless, and infamously during the Black Plague — the Jews.³

> COVID-19 is fuelling Anti-Asian racism, violence, discrimination, and scapegoating worldwide. Many government leaders are directly encouraging xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric and advancing anti-immigrant, ultra nationalist, white supremacist conspiracy theories. Anti-immigrant and specifically Anti-Chinese incidents are reported in Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, India, Italy, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia, Russia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom and United States.

> On Apr 17, 2020 I listen to the CBC Ideas radio podcast "The Terrors of the Time: Lessons from historic plagues". COVID-19 feels especially real this evening, as I apprehend a deep connection to human civilizations across time and marvel that living in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we have thus far escaped a pandemic. The magazine images take me back to my childhood when a plague was something only read about. It seems inconceivable to have escaped one until now.



Spending too much time online, I learn more about SARS-CoV-2, an RNA virus that crosses species barriers, purportedly transmitting from animals to humans. All this information has me thinking about bodies and boundaries in both personal and public spaces. The virus and its code infect every conversation, observation, thought and gesture. The phenomenology of masking and zooming, the choreography of social distancing contrast with the intimacy and ease of making these collages.

MAY 2020

On May 25, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man is killed by Minneapolis police officers after being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. A white police officer knelt on Floyd's neck for nine and a half minutes after he was handcuffed and lying face down. This was captured on cell phone video by 17 year-old Darnella Frazier.

From this moment forward discourse around the pandemic becomes enmeshed with a social movement and reckoning against police brutality, racially motivated violence and racism more generally. As Black Lives Matter protests fill the streets, the mainstream imagination is fragmenting: the centralization of white narratives are breaking apart. Lockdown measures and anti-racism are entwined, further intensifying the complex immersion in the world-wide pandemic. Not everyone is affected equally as the virus reveals widening social and economic divisions. I wonder why Breonna Taylor's death did not spark the same outrage as George Floyd's murder. Is it because Floyd's death was recorded and therefore more visible? I read about the 2015 social movement #SayHerName which seeks to raise awareness for Black female victims of anti-Black violence in the United States and change the public perception that victims are predominantly male.

At this point, the archive of images from National Geographic feels like a troubled tomb. In part because they offer insight into another time, when the violence of racial hierarchies was embedded in its editorial worldview and infected the unconscious of its readers. Its imperialist approach coupled with self-justifying "scientific" racism constructed and distributed visual tropes of "uncivilized" Brown and Black people for more than 130 years, a brutal ideology that fed on and propagated racial stereotypes and clichés. The colonizing space of popular culture and mainstream imagination in the 20th century has maintained and controlled the conditions of possibility for this particular way of imagining the world.

National Geographic came into existence in 1888, at the height of colonialism. Its images reflect a view of the world that privileges the colonizer.⁴ The magazine's shaping of colonialist narratives and upholding an imperialist worldview was a form of armchair travel fueling planetary reveries of globalization up to our own historical moment. I connect this reality to the thought that the diffusion of people across borders has directly contributed to the accelerated rate of COVID infection and its variants. At the height of this mental absorption, I wonder how the health inequities across the globe inform one's exposure to the virus and how access to medical support services reflect residual and longstanding structural injustices and racisms.

...archives have the capacity to produce and to reproduce social justice and injustice through their constructions of the past, engagements in the present and shaping of possible futures.⁵ I learn that in 2018, with the first Jewish woman editor at the helm, National Geographic magazine marks the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination with The Race Issue, exploring what race means in the 21st century. Chapters titles include: "There's No Scientific Basis for Race — It's a Made-Up Label"; "From Birth to School to Old Age: Inequality by the Numbers"; "As America Changes, Some Anxious Whites Feel Left Behind..." While compelling, the articles don't go nearly far enough to exhume the magazine's problematic past. As a Jewish woman myself I am intrigued that this woman, Susan Goldberg is leading the complicated work of critiquing the magazine from the inside. It's a kind of hauntology⁶, a return of the repressed and oppressed, that won't go away.

The process of working with this archive reveals something of my own state of mind, my unconscious and unsettled settler anxieties: how I have benefited from this historical trajectory. I watch the protests of Black Lives Matter after George Floyd's murder and wonder how I am implicated in this historical time. How do I inhabit this moment? Is staying informed through the news and social media enough? I feel compelled to have a position on every news event. But I can't keep up. Are these images I am making an unconscious response to what is being witnessed? I feel so much — and maybe not enough. I feel my own formation being shifted and brought into focus like the image fragments that I am rearranging.

When I studied Hebrew in elementary school, I learned that the vowels or niqqud marks are below the letters. As one matures with the language, the vowels are no longer written as each word's pronunciation is understood. So I borrow the idea of the niqqud - formative to my own entry into language - as a compositional strategy and fold them into the collage's visual syntax. These horizontal and vertical sentences seem to queer my own orientation and intimacies.

Finishing the first album of collages, I see these sparse, abstract images as a kind of writing, open to interpretation while resonating experiences of adversity and uncertainty. I return to the magazines for a second excavation, sifting through the material again with the hope that something else will reveal itself. Spending so much time alone at home, having few encounters with other people, the collages are companions, keeping me company during the day and into the night. I am not sure what they are telling me as their compositions challenge the surface meanings of rational thought, but they do afford a radical openness. While the first album focused on finding the syntax, so to speak, the second album seems to be extending the vocabulary into a colour taxonomy of objects that holds the message differently.

JUNE 2020

I apply to the City of Vancouver's call for public artwork and intuitively come up with a title for the series, On the Other Hand or OTOH for short. Visually, OTOH looks like one of the cryptograms I am composing with the image fragments. Writing the application and artist statement, I describe the series as a speculative reordering of bodily gestures through the medium of collage. By bringing disparate elements together into new configurations, an emergent lexicon is cast of human gestures and cultural artifacts.

Returning to research undertaken more than 20 years ago, I reread James Clifford's 1981 essay "Ethnographic Surrealism" and pull out words and phrases: reshuffle, scramble and rearrange, stripped of their original context, render the unfamiliar comprehensible, making the familiar strange, the unconscious of artist and viewer, and beneath the dull veneer of the real another, more miraculous world based on radically different principles of classification and order. I wonder about the role of ethnography and how it contributed to the appropriation of ideas and images of non-European cultures. I am also mindful of how the Surrealist white male gaze contained and constrained its engagements with gender, race and sexuality. To remedy this, I channel surrealist artists Remedios Varos, Meret Oppenheim, Leonora Carrington and Wilfredo Lam.

On June 23, one of three officers involved in Breonna Taylor's killing loses his badge. The others are placed on administrative leave.

Cultural decolonisation is the perpetual struggle to make both Indigenous and settler peoples aware of the complexity of our shared colonial condition, and how this legacy informs every person and institution in these territories.⁷

> International conversations and protests on anti-racism often led by Indigenous peoples build on the momentum of Black Lives Matter both to show solidarity and to bring attention to similar issues in their own countries. The Indigenous Environmental Network in the US stands with Black Lives, tens of thousands of Australians defy COVID-19 restrictions to take to the streets in cities across the country, New Zealanders march at BLM rallies and in England and Belgium protesters tear down statues of slave traders. In Canada, an outpouring of frustration and protests is fueled by a fraught history between



law enforcement and Indigenous populations. Between April and June, Canadian police shot and killed six Indigenous people, including Chantel Moore, 26, a Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation woman killed during a "wellness check". On May 27, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, 29, an Indigenous-Ukrainian-Black Canadian woman died after she fell 24 storeys from her apartment balcony. Her family accused the Toronto Police Service of playing a role in her death. In response, Black and Indigenous activists call to defund the police and redistribute funding towards community support services.

JULY 2020

We can't rewrite history. But we can create a lens to look anew ...or see from the future into the past.

The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn't yet exist is considerable, but there's no need to exaggerate it. The past, after all, can be quite as obscure as the future.^s

AUG. 2020

Continued protests against police brutality worldwide puts the pandemic in sharp relief.

My head is reeling from living these historic events and how to make sense of my relation to them. I consider Judith Butler's reflections on ethical responsibility and how "...being a Jew implies taking up an ethical relation to the non-Jew..."⁹ She invokes the famous formulation of Hillel, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?" A friend of mixed heritage posits the idea of intersectional whiteness which unsettles my understanding of intersectionality. The term intersectionality, coined in 1989 by American lawyer, civil rights advocate, and leading scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes how race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. intersect, highlighting interdependent systems of discrimination and/or disadvantage. Intersectionality helps to clarify and nuance differences in opportunities; by proxy, it is also informing, albeit uncomfortably, a deeper awareness of my own embodiment. As a Queer Ashkenazi Jewish Feminist, I want to take up what an ethical relation to the non-Jew might mean. I discover American literature and memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg's book Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization which helps me think through the genocides and dispossessions of Jews alongside Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples. Rothberg states that "This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory." He continues, "...pursuing memory multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction."¹⁰ Reflecting on the many conversations I am having with friends near and far, I think about what it means to reconfigure one's formation through interactions that are charged, difficult, and life changing.

Rothberg's book leads me to W.E.B. Du Bois' essay "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" where he writes:

I have seen something of human upheaval in this world: the scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949.¹¹

Du Bois' insights point to a kind of interracial fellowship and deepens my own sense of solidarity. He also acknowledges what he calls his own social provincialism. "I was astonished. It had never occurred to me until then that any exhibition of race prejudice could be anything but color prejudice." I feel myself propelled, multidirectionally into multiple pasts and potential futures.

Cathy Park Hong's book *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* articulates a brave response to racism. The minor feelings of the title describe "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric and therefore untelegenic (shame, guilt, depression) built from the sediments of everyday racial experience..."¹² Hong acknowledges her indebtedness to Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* and the articulation of negative affects such as irritation, envy, and disgust. Unsettled Feelings might begin to describe my own emotional response to the pandemic coupled with the anti-racist reckoning that permeates everything I read and discuss with friends and colleagues. I am unsettled by emotions I have yet to find words for, unsettled by the brutal visuality of violence and the haunting of violence that cannot be imagined.

Addressing anti-racism as a white person is complicated — and absolutely necessary. Drawing on very different experiences, I am inspired by Audre Lorde who writes "...the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger."¹³ Compelled to explore my apprehensions and commitments through my own intersecting axes of identity, I am nonetheless uncomfortable using the word intersectional to describe my positionality given the terms origins and history. And yet I am Queer, Jewish and Feminist which tangibly informs my perspective on marginalized and racialized violence.

> So, although we might say there is no such thing as race as the intrinsic property of bodies, this does not mean that race does not exist, as an effect of the very way in which we think, know and inhabit the world.¹⁴

SEPT. 2020

On September 15, the city of Louisville agrees to pay Breonna Taylor's family \$12 million and reform police practices. And on September 23, one of the three officers is indicted for wanton endangerment for endangering Taylor's neighbors with his shots. None of those involved in the raid has been charged in Taylor's death.

Peaceful protests across Canada continue to call for defunding the police and doing more to tackle deep-rooted racism including the removal of all monuments of any person who promoted slavery, anti-Black or anti-Indigenous racism.

How can art be a form of social justice work? In what ways might newly configured images reconstitute the violent imagery of an archive? Can these collaged hieroglyphics reassemble as a cogent message of interracial alliance?

Twenty posters of the OTOH collages go up on Vancouver bus shelters for the month. It's strange to see these images that were strewn across my dining room table and living room



floor now scaled up in these urban spaces. The civic interface has me thinking further about the publicness of COVID, race and representation.

OCT. 2021

Now that the collages are finished and finding public venues, the problematics of the National Geographic archive set against the realities of contemporary racism haunt the work. Each new day adds to my reflections on what these images might be doing. For me, the collages signal different tenses, a grammar of time that includes past, present and future. Time frames slide over and across this archive, multi-directionally. The past rises from the proverbial ashes to speak a new language of the present moment. Perhaps the future will help to decipher their meaning. These images seem to inhabit a temporal vortex where time doesn't pass but accumulates into an aesthetic archaeology, taking us back in time so as to reimagine the future.

Ruminations on time resonate with Walter Benjamin's concept of Jetztzeit or the "now-time", those moments where shards, sparks and energies from another time can break through and transform the present. In his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History", he writes "The transformation of history does not occur in homogeneous empty time. It occurs in moments of immediacy (Jetztzeit). It blasts particular moments of the present and past, out of the linear sequence (and presumably the order of fate)."¹⁵ Not only is the past always present but its struggles and aspirations are potentially always available for us to reignite and reimagine. Benjamin's time-bending idea of Jetztzeit suggests that the artist and/or revolutionary can initiate a new order of time

with our present actions. We can reclaim the past from homogeneous empty time which only covers over the history of the oppressed past.¹⁶ The Jetztzeit allows the history and memory of suffering to flash up from another time, granting an opportunity to repair the politics of our own time.

So, with their cut outs and syntactical fragments, perhaps these images are shards from the past, congealed yet abundant with possible readings. Detached from the continuum of history, I wonder how these collaged hieroglyphs, filled with the energies of deep pasts and deep futures, might blast themselves free from the ceaseless flow of images. Can they make the convergence of time perceptible?

Art is the site of intolerable research, the laboratory of odd ideas, of sensual and intuitive study, and of production that exceeds the boundaries of conventional disciplines, protocols and imaginaries.¹⁷

NOV. 2020

Collage is an artistic strategy that bursts the surfeit of images free of their original context, too often imbued with colonial narratives and myths of capitalist progress. Rather than a distraction from our lived realities, rearranging mediated imagery scrambles meaning. Collage can make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This continuous play of familiar and strange is disorientating and revelatory. Beneath the veneer of the given is the possibility of another world informed by radically different principles of justice, order and value. This is a reshuffling of the unconscious of the artist, the viewer and



time itself. An emergent paradigm of the now-time is upon us; a reckoning, an accounting, a reworlding of deep pasts toward deep futures.

I am attracted to this disorientated unknowing that scrambles values, beliefs and hierarchies. A reverie that purposefully undermines legibility creates ruptures in homogenous time as well as default mental and social constructs. These collages with their visual confoundments introduce a rip in the fabric of time and meaning where we are invited to think otherwise, in part through inhabiting the tension and insecurities of not knowing.

DEC. 2020

A narrative invariably proceeds by way of figures, and these might include irony and ellipsis. The moment of ellipsis is precisely one in which something is not told, a moment of withdrawal or lapse within the narrative, but also part of narrative, a formal feature of its possible trajectory...What is unspoken is nevertheless relayed or conveyed in some way, suggesting that the narrative has to be understood as well as a mode of address, one that makes a bid for our understanding.¹⁸

JAN. 2021

I write a proposal for a research grant at my university to produce this artist book. It's good to shift modalities from the process of experimental image making to finding the potential meanings within the collages through writing. At this point, working with the National Geographic magazines as archive demands a critical reevaluation of how it has reproduced racial hierarchies. I want to explore how these collages rearrange the presumed pictorial stability of their source. And I am compelled to understand my own apprehensions and commitments of this unfolding now-time.

> Works that are fuelled by an extra-rational aesthetic that endeavors through visceral and intuitive means to provoke change in other bodies — to alter moods, attitudes, dispositions and sensibilities first, in the hope that arguments, reason, judgement and minds will follow.¹⁹

Through sharing the work with friends and colleagues I see that there is a visceral register of the collages. In her essay "Aesthetic inhumanisms: toward an erotics of otherworlding" Rizvana Bradley examines "... affective entanglements of anonymous figures as extended montages that reconceptualize subjectivity and seize upon an alternative corporeality". Examining the tension between art and identity, Bradley writes, "Identity and form then become mutually implicated: They both constitute the generative site for the reinvention of form."²⁰ I am aware that my own works expressive forms are a vital zone of research and experimentation. There is something about the collages that recognize the human form without necessarily fully understanding what is going on in this alternative corporeality.

FEB. 2022

OTOH represents a continual striving toward knowing and not knowing, simultaneously. This willingness to sift, over and over again, initially a huge mass of images fragments and now to what the work might mean or might be doing, is infinitely compelling. Perhaps these collages offer something that the official language can't achieve. I hope that they strike chords deep in the viewer's unconsciousness, reverberating, vibrating and making the strange familiar through their endless variety and repetition.

MARCH 2020

I am invested in alternative human and more than human histories, future magic, speculative configurations, and interactions between found fragments. The purpose is a redeployment of possible meanings even as each component acts upon those nearby. What is the relationship of a flawed archive with emergent understandings? And how do these juxtapositions open up the ways in which we experience social forces in the world? This is a practice engaged with history and intimacy through spatial and pictorial possibility; a brutal, dreamy world creating space for all bodies where the past is present and the future is still possible. The now-time constitutes a break with history; the inauguration of a new order of time.

If not now, when?

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отон was typeset using Brando & Brando Sans by Mike Abbink & Aleksandra Samuļenkova from Bold Monday (2012–2020).

PRINTING BY Hemlock Printers Ltd. with 100% PCW FSC recycled paper.

HEARTFELT THANKS to Francisco-Fernando Granados for his generous observations and critical comments on a draft of the essay and to Mercedes Eng for her astute feedback on the writing. Also deep appreciation for Chloe Brumwell's endless enthusiasm during the design process.

THIS RESEARCH was supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through funds made possible by a SSHRC Institutional Grant and Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, BC. ECU is situated on the unceded territories of the x^wmə0k^wəýəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Selílwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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