

Are You Hung Up?

By G. Alonso Oeuf

(With contributions from Nurse Fang)

‘Exemption, baby. Walk among the diseased with Immunity. A little knowledge-in-the-abstract is all. With any luck, a vision every seventh day or so.’ The sage words of Gnosso Papadopoulos. You dig? Gnosso—Paps to his *compañeros*—is the fast-burning sun around which orbits Richard Fariña’s novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*. Published two days before Fariña’s own untimely death in 1966—the year of Ken Kesey’s first Acid Tests, Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls*, and John Lennon’s declaration that the Beatles were ‘more popular than Jesus’—*Been Down So Long ...* satirized the happening counter-culture as it was happening.

Gnosso is a post-Beatnik proto-Hippie trying not to get kicked out of an Ivy League university (loosely based on Cornell). Recently returned from life-changing adventures that he never goes into much detail about—witnessing an atom bomb test near Las Vegas, hunting a wolf in the snowy Adirondacks—Gnosso is into free love, pick-n-mix selections from the Eastern religion sweet counter, jazz and good dope. He’s attractive and charismatic, endearingly funny in some ways, an unreconstructed sexist pig in others. Crucially, in his personal quest to find meaning—to find the authentic and the real (sound familiar, art fans?)—Gnosso’s behaviour is driven by his own sense of moral elitism, a lofty state of remove from the mores of society. As Thomas Pynchon, writing about Fariña’s novel, put it, Gnosso believes in his own Exemption ‘not only from time and death, but somehow from the demands of life as well.’ It’s what allows him to do as he pleases, no matter who gets hurt: his well-meaning friend Fitzgore, for example, whom he embarrasses drunkenly at a frat house lunch. Or worse, Pamela, the emotionally fragile student he virtually forces himself on, and whose fiancé commits suicide on discovering the infidelity. Gnosso goes to great lengths throughout the novel to maintain his state of Exemption, dabbling in religion, travel, drugs, sex. ‘All turn out to have a flaw of some kind’, writes Pynchon. ‘What he’s left with to de-

pend on is his own coherence, an extended version of 1950s Cool. “Immunity has been granted to me,” thinks Gnosso, “for I do not lose my cool.”

If Gnosso is what Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* may have turned into when he outgrew adolescence, what would Gnosso have turned into when he left university? At the end of the novel Fariña served him with his Vietnam draft papers. Supposing he survived the war or dodged the draft, my guess is that Gnosso may have become a kind of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs figure. (The question remains; if Paps was so Exempt from the square life, why did he persist in studying for an Ivy League degree?) I could see him as a blinged-out hippie entrepreneur, one of those who smoked up the 1960s dreams of individual freedom and self-realization in a late-20th century capitalist-shaped bong: selling personal salvation and betterment at the axis of consumerism and technology, one of the first for whom the word ‘creative’ stopped being an adjective and became a job title.

But if the Silicon Valley hustle didn’t work out, Paps might well have cut it in the art world of today. How so? With his state of Exemption, that’s how: ‘Exemption, baby. Walk among the diseased with Immunity. A little knowledge-in-the-abstract is all. With any luck, a vision every seventh day or so.’ You dig? Gnosso would’ve known how to hold the meta-position, how to regard the rest of the world as being somehow *over there*—something to be pointed at, prodded at, picked up, turned over and examined in the light, then perhaps photographed, screenprinted onto aluminium and sold as an examination of THE REAL. He’d have known how to draw a *cordon sanitaire* around himself, how to treat the rest of the world as material, so long as nobody tries the same on with him.

Still not getting it? OK, a few observational chasers might help.

Rate each of the following contemporary art epiphenomena using the International Casual Recognition Scale of ‘No idea what you’re talking about’ through ‘Yeah that rings a bell’ to ‘Dang! That one’s straight from the fridge, Daddy-O!’:

1. An artwork whose subject is described with a unnecessary degree of removal, such as being ‘interested in the idea of ...’ or ‘interested in notions of ...’, as if to reinforce a nebulous sense of intellectual distance/superiority (Eg. ‘X is *interested in the idea of* television’, as opposed to being simply ‘interested in television’.)—*Walk among the diseased with Immunity*. (Gnossos Papadopoulos)
2. An artwork whose form or means of production are described in dry, pseudo-objective yet coy, non-committal terms. (Eg. ‘X is a portable, text-based print-oriented publication ...’ as opposed to ‘X is a book’.)
3. An artist or artwork that ‘uses’, ‘deploys’, ‘employs’ etc one or more disciplines from outside the visual arts in their work. (Eg. ‘X uses dance, macramé and Keynesian economic theory in order to ...’)
4. An artist or artwork that ‘uses’, ‘deploys’, ‘employs’ etc one or more disciplines from within the visual arts in their work. (Eg. ‘X employs NeoGeo, appropriation and minimalist sculpture in order to ...’)
5. An artwork that so heavily references other artworks, disciplines, or indeed anything, in order to generate meaning that you wonder in what sense the artwork in question actually exists. (Eg. ‘X references Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend*, the legacy of 1960s performance art, Le Corbusier’s *Unite d’Habitation*, the Mayan pyramids of Teotihuacan, Martin Heidegger’s theory of dasein, Shulameth Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Shellac’s 1998 album *Terraform* in order to ...’)—*A little knowledge-in-the-abstract is all*. (GP)
6. An artist or artwork that makes claims for ‘criticality’ and ‘discourse’ without necessarily having to engage in them. (Eg. ‘X’s installation creates a *critical dialogue* around issues concerning the failure of contemporary anti-capitalist protest movements.’)
7. An artist or artwork that makes claims for ‘criticality’ and ‘discourse’ within a framework that patently obviates it. (Eg. ‘For her solo presentation at Art Basel Statements, X critically examines the structures of capitalism and the economy of desire as it relates to object production. Champagne reception: 6 pm, Tuesday 12th’)
8. An artwork for which claims of agency within a political or socially-engaged context are made, yet directly imitates a pre-existent art form, activity or form of social organization outside the art world. (Eg. ‘X Collective have created a vegetable allotment and car wash service for use by members of the local community’ or ‘Y has created an interactive artwork with which the user can ‘search’ the Internet for web pages relating to a topic of their choice’ or ‘Z has created a narrative-based story which is relayed live to the audience by the artists’ friends, each of whom represents a character from the story as if they were that person by imitating their words and actions on a site-specific, purpose-built raised platform within a specially designed environment that symbolically represents rather than literally recreates the locations mentioned in the narrative ...’)
9. Descriptions of artworks that assume to know everything about what its audience believes, or how they understand the world. (Eg. ‘X *challenges audience preconceptions* of Y’)
10. The barely sublimated language of combativeness used to talk about art. (Eg. ‘challenge’, ‘interrogate’, ‘confront’, ‘break down’, ‘shatter’, ‘destroy boundaries’.)—*With any luck, a vision every seventh day or so*. (GP)

OK, OK, I can tell some of you are giving me a mental shrug right now. ‘So what, Oeuf?’ ‘Yeah, what are you so hung up about Alonso?’ ‘Art’s cool with us baby, let it be ...’ I’ll explain.

A defining characteristic of much contemporary art today is its self-awarded state of Exemption. As the list above suggests, this state of Exemption exists as much, if not more, in the language surrounding art than in art itself. All the above illustrate ways in which art

always takes the meta-seat. Of course, you can dismiss it all as press release nonsense—that pernicious language borrowed from management speak and politics that we can all knowingly laugh about over a dry sherry at a gallery dinner at St John. But language defines art just as much as it defines any part of our lives; like clever interior décor, it can set the mood, or, like a clever politician, coax you into believing something you'd never otherwise believe. It's the power of suggestion. ('Well, honey, Stefan told me that the artist is transcending time and space, and you know, I did feel a bit dizzy in front of that photograph, so perhaps he's right and we should buy all three of them.') This language gives art its lift, those extra couple of feet that allow it to look down on the rest of the world and pick-n-mix whichever bits it likes. It's what allows art to rummage around in the dressing up box and put on whatever costume takes its fancy.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not arguing for some kind of purity of the arts here. The problem is with mistaking a magpie gaze for critical authority; the idea that just 'cos you noticed something it means you've critically addressed it. It could also be characterized as a *droit de seigneur* attitude to other cultural forms. ('Of course I can appropriate wholesale your life's work and claim credit for merely having noticed it, for I am an *artiste*, and I have read the catalogue for the 'Pictures Generation' show at the Met, have been favourably reviewed in *Texte zur Kunst!*') Naturally, that this *droit de seigneur* arrogance with which art treats the world can be taken to an extreme is not necessarily reason to tar everyone with the same brush. It's a position or strategy that gives art some power, some degree of self-awareness and self-criticism; valuable intellectual assets in this world. It gives art a certain resemblance to the person who doesn't dance at a gig but nods coolly at the back of the venue, well aware of the lineage of all the guitarists' licks, but enjoying them nonetheless, and in this sense it's also what gives art an edge. But the absence in other branches of the arts of this need to assert distance complicates art's so-called criticality. When was the last time you saw a film on general release—'mainstream', 'indie', 'art house', whatever—that claimed it used the legacy of 1960s New Wave cinema and contemporary ballet whilst referencing the

work of Marshall McLuhan and the novels of John Le Carré in order to do X, Y and Z? Didn't it just do its thing and leave you to do the maths? Can you recall the last book you bought that listed all the author's points of reference on the dust jacket? Probably not. Which suggests what?

It may have something to do with the fact that, arguably, cinema never had a urinal-shaped, Marcel Duchamp moment of cataclysmic change. (Rudolf Arnheim may have held that the introduction of 'talkies', with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, forever changed cinema by binding it to the narrative demands of theatre, but cinema is too young an art form to really have experienced any significant rift with its past.) It could also be said that although literature certainly had epiphanic moments of recognition about its means of production, none did so in a way that permanently changed the game in the way that Andy Warhol did for art. It certainly had a few startling spins beneath the self-reflexive disco ball of Modernism, but no one—not Woolf, Joyce, Beckett—managed to break all that followed in their wake from the basic rules of storytelling that still govern most novels. (Are our bookshops filled with best-selling works of experimental prose, in the same way the big tourist attraction museums—MoMA, Tate Modern, Guggenheim Bilbao—are filled with works born from the ashes of Modernism?) The means by which cinema, and, say, postwar popular music, achieved cultural authority were never predicated on the word of the academy—on the word of critics and historians and theoreticians—to the same extent as art was. Their cultural legitimacy was evidenced by bums-on-seats and units shifted. By being called back by popular demand.

In not asserting their states of Exemption, music, films and books have never quite had to fret about critical exteriority in the same way that art has—be it a self-critical exteriority from themselves, or a kind of intense examination of what every other art is up to. Art has historically worried about its integrity as a cultural form to the point of inaction; it worries about who is looking, why they are looking, what colour shoes the person who is looking is wearing, where they are looking, at what time they started looking, and who let this person

do all this looking in the first instance anyway. But art has also congratulated itself for this anxiety. It pats itself on the back for its self-awareness. It has become so adept at self-auditing that it may as well set up shop as a firm of accountants. Whilst this critical distance is valuable, it also allows art to wallow in a comfy, consequence-free, zero-value-stakes state of Exemption. (So your new video very bravely criticizes capitalism. Well done! How about next time you ditch the soft-left art making, sack your gallerist and go and volunteer to rebuild houses in Haiti? No? Doesn't appeal? Free dinners more appealing? Yeah, thought so ...) Art can be like students on campus, in a world of perpetually-deferred responsibility.

Its state of Exemption, its appropriations of other art forms is what allows us to exclaim 'X artist has made a play! How clever of her! Because she's an artist, her play must be much more profoundly self-aware and thus woven from ethically finer cloth than those of people who have been writing plays all their lives!' It allows us to gaze in admiration as an artist asserts a patently obvious truth about the world as if no one had ever noticed it before. To gasp with masochistic pleasure as we are shocked and scolded into getting rid of all those preconceptions we never knew we had. To enjoy those ironically detached games of 'you-know-that-I-know-that-she-knows' referentiality, to look at the ever-decreasing circles of specialist in-jokes. To be able to look back at ourselves in 30 years time, surveying all the coy little artworks about other artworks, the teasing little games of institutional critique, and wonder what was really ours, to wonder what images or objects were made that were of 2010, rather than funhouse mirrors of 1968, 1976, 1989 or 2001? To convince ourselves that there is nothing greater at stake in the world than, say, the framing device of the institution, or displaying to others our familiarity with the literature of art and articulate criticality. To convince ourselves that we're not running with the poor deluded herds, that we are the self-aware elite, that we're not subject to the rules of the system. To write sweeping polemics under an assumed name. Immunity has been granted to us, for we do not lose our cool. But, as Gnosso's friend Grün observes: 'We share a dissipating current [...] Like transformer coils, you see, we mistake induction for generation.

Vicarious sampling is all that remains; the sour evening game of the academies.'

One day we're going to realize that the system has been date-raping us with our own hype for years.

It's time to put down our drinks.

Our state of Exemption has expired.

Our draft papers have been served.

You dig?