

I Shit on Your Graves

16

I've been carrying around Gary Indiana's *Vile Days* since September. The book is the size of a Bible, and contains chapter and verse of the art criticism Indiana wrote for the *Village Voice* from 1985 to 1988. Every now and then I crack it open to a random page, and—like the Bible again—the answer is always right there. A couple days ago, for instance, as I sat down to write this piece, I opened to page 524: an essay from February 9, 1988 titled “Secrets of the Rothko Chapel.” Indiana performs a juking, multi-denominational survey of that edifice—a modernist octagon inside a Greek cross-shaped floorplan. But he pays special attention to where the chapel stands: ground purchased by first-generation oil-rich Texans, the de Menils, who staked out several square blocks for their foundation in a tony oak tree'd part of Houston. In the chapel, you can pray to anyone, or anything, and nobody, not even Indiana, will judge. Inside the Menil Collection galleries, it's a different story. That Warhol *Shadows* painting (1978–79), for instance—a marching, multi-panel installation of high contrast blobs of ink. “Are the Warhols good,” Indiana asks, “or are they bad?”¹ A chapel is a meditative space. A museum, though, is forever a critical one.

Is judgment good, or is it bad? The Rothko Chapel is an apt occasion to grok such moral maximums. In fact, as Indiana sees it, the very question of goodness and badness is a sham—because questions of quality are always also questions of class. Ultimately, the de Menils could afford all those Warhols and Twomblys and Duchamps and, sorry, you never will.

“History is the consensus of the empowered,” he writes.² In other words, there are no bad or good Warhols, and there's no reason to trust whoever's so invested in phrasing criticism as a litmus test. Indiana puts forth the fact that such binary questions forced into a world of analog morals only distract from the totally self-serving relativism that is power's one true creed. Indiana has a flair for snubbing the obvious.

This is not to say that Indiana doesn't judge. He does. He constantly seethes. He inhaled the septic air of the 1980s, fragranced by the breath of white-toothed bigots and ideologues and trickle-downers, and declared it vile. In Indiana's *Village Voice* column, he modulates his exhalations into a knife's edge eloquence that cuts through art and into the world, deflating the pretensions of both. Thus he indicts the economy of misery that continues to thrive to this day. In 1985, for instance, the New Museum presumed to remind the nation of the Vietnam War with a photography exhibition called *The Art of Memory / The Loss of History*. “These photo pieces,” Indiana writes, “do revive important historical memories, as if with a sledgehammer. But who, exactly, is supposed to have forgotten these things?”³ Another article from that year, “Paradigms of Dysfunction,” splay open Jeff Koons with professional ease. Of the artist's perfectly floating basketballs and dire bronze aqualungs, “Koons's marvelously skeptical show was a cogent reminder that we are really all in the same boat,” Indiana writes, “even though the steerage passengers are likely to drown first.”⁴ What does it mean that Indiana damns and absolves the artist with one flick, lancing him for being such a cynic while rescuing his genius?

I bet Indiana could do brain surgery with Twitter. More than that, I would love to see Indiana's little knife go to work on all the self-serious declarations and moralizing squabbles that flavor that particular discursive platform. Artists, especially artists, should know better than to speak in

1. Gary Indiana, *Vile Days: The Village Voice Art Columns, 1985–1988*, ed. by Bruce Hainley (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018), 525.

2. *Ibid.*, 525.

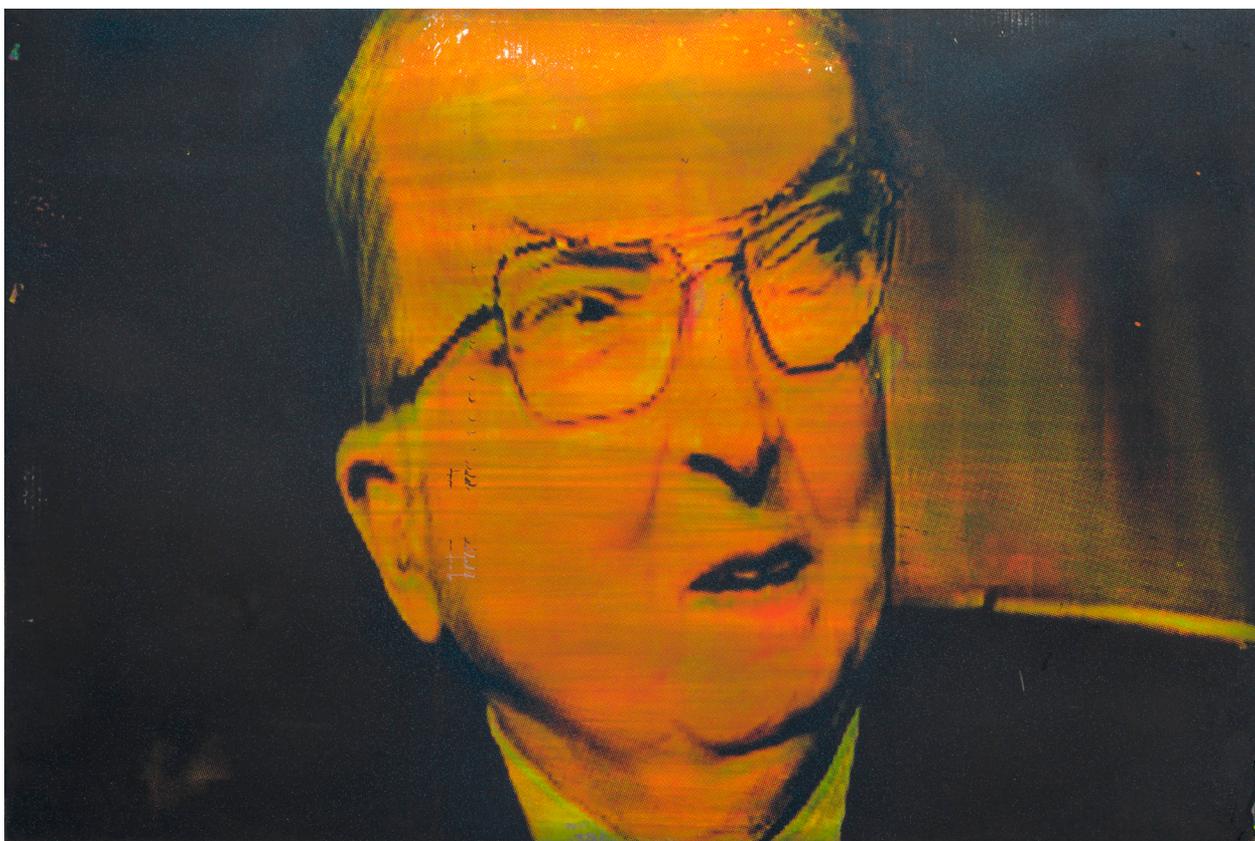
3. *Ibid.*, 184.



Mathieu Malouf, *Deep Fried Portrait of Jesse Helms* (2019). 4 color silkscreen process, plastisol, diamond dust on silver chromed epoxy resin on linen on wood, 60 x 40 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles. Photo: Ed Mumford.



18



Both images: Mathieu Malouf, *Deep Fried Portrait of Jesse Helms* (2019). 4 color silkscreen process, plastisol, diamond dust on silver chromed epoxy resin on linen on wood, 40 x 60 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles. Photo: Ed Mumford.



Mathieu Malouf, *#luketurnerisretarded*
(installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of
the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles.
Photo: Ed Mumford.

binary, but in such a zero-sum format, no matter how many crying poop crystal ball emojis you use, nearly anything you say can spiral into a clash of civilizations. There's even a name for this: it's called Poe's Law, and it says that, online, statements of extreme belief are impossible to distinguish from their parody. (Fittingly, the term originated on a creationist message board.) To stay sane under these conditions, it helps to entertain a full spectrum of eventualities. Otherwise, you might tear into someone who basically shares your politics with your blunt, meaty fingers. Which is more or less what got Mathieu Malouf.

§

I've struggled to describe just what it is Malouf did, to himself and to others, with his just-closed exhibition at Jenny's in Los Angeles, titled *#luketurnerisretarded*.⁵ Brain surgery it wasn't. Nor do the terms "trolling" or "call-out culture" convey the appropriate tang of self-immolation. It's like Malouf rubbed himself with dollar bills and honey and strolled down Wall Street during lunch: he *wanted* the bears to take a swipe, and the artist named in his flagrantly problematic title obliged. Luke Turner (@Luke_Turner) struck back with a tweet spectacularly headlined "ANTISEMITISM IN THE ART WORLD."⁶ In digest: Turner, who is Jewish, took issue with a statue in the show called *Tankie Meme (Blacked)* (2018–19) that Malouf based on a KAWS character that appeared to Turner like a Jewish stereotype wearing his (*his!*) signature black pants, shirt, and fedora. When a few artists suggested that anti-Semitism is seriously, agelessly pernicious and the label should be reserved for things that, unlike this statue, are actually anti-Semitic, Turner turned on them too. This is what the culture wars look like now. Mathieu Malouf sees this. Luke Turner does not. Luke Turner, of course, was born into a textile fortune, so even if he got the joke he might prefer not to. Instead of the X's KAWS

applies to the eyes of whatever cartoon characters he "subverts," from the Michelin Man to Homer Simpson, Malouf's 19th century pro-labor riff on the nouveau-riche street artist sees hammers and sickles.

In many ways, Malouf's 2019 show follows up one in 2017 at Greene Naftali titled *Toxic Masculinity Fallout Shelter*, which featured overcooked Warhol-style portraits of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Most of the pieces at Jenny's were paintings titled *Deep Fried Portrait of Jesse Helms* (all works 2019) and followed a certain formula: four-color silkscreens processed in a range of neon inks, sprinkled with diamond dust, printed on chromed resin on canvas. Through this sprinkling of sparkles, as well as in the same-but-different iterations, *Death and Disaster* style, of a single grisly theme, Malouf summons the passively aggressive capitalist Andy Warhol. One canvas shows Helms himself, eyebrows slanted in bigotry inside large '80s eyeglass frames, mouth slack, possibly mid-hate speech, printed in a strained, scan-lined orange. Others, though, provide cathartic views of Helms' grave in Raleigh, North Carolina, the headstone and plot he now shares with his wife Dorothy "Dot" Helms. Like the title says, these pictures have been deep fried, as in intentionally degraded in an internet kind of way. With his diamond-dusted, cum-battered Jesse Helmses, Malouf is egging on Warhol's uber-consumerist and relatively apolitical ghost. Yet, instead of a news item about an electric chair, Malouf appropriates a 1982 Robert Mapplethorpe photograph descriptively titled *Cock and Gun*. Two silkscreens of the image—these, too, are called *Deep Fried Portrait of Jesse Helms*—sparkling like Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shadows* (1979), flank a canvas dotted with AR15 bullets and a skull mask, all chromed, titled *THE SCREAM* (2019), in age-appropriate all caps.

Late in the 1980s, Senator Jesse Helms, R–North Carolina, was

4. Ibid, 91.

5. Midway through the exhibition's run, Malouf redacted the show title to *#luketurnerisr****ded* after Luke Turner spelled it that way on Twitter, presumably to avoid saying the r-word himself.

6. See https://twitter.com/Luke_Turner/status/1106154064944029696.



Mathieu Malouf, *THE SCREAM* (2019).
Silver chroming process, AR15 bullets, and
mixed media on linen on wood, 60 × 60 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Jenny's,
Los Angeles. Photo: Ed Mumford.

the culture wars. Helms was the kind of guy who thought everyone with HIV deserved it. It was he who tried to pass a law prohibiting NEA funding of Mapplethorpe's retrospective, *The Perfect Moment*, which the deeply devout senator deemed obscene (and which opened months before the artist died of AIDS). I have the privilege of having been born and raised in the state he represented, while he was representing it. I can't help but think that our clear and present shitstorm originated in that decade, too—when righties like Helms and Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich decided they hated gays and loved money so much they would demonize poor folks and pander to fundamentalist Christian folks and dog-whistle at rich white folks until they won. I will set aside Malouf's casual stereotyping of the American South. It feels wonderful that something other than chicken drumsticks or pig skin can be crisped into its final, consumable form. The Helms' gravestones look sucked on, and a little shaken.

A few more turns of the screw: Luke Turner, a British artist born under Margaret Thatcher, is most famous for his artistic collaborations (along with Nastja Säde Rönkkö) with *Transformers* (2007) star Shia LaBeouf. You may remember 2017's immortal *HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US*, where people could recite the titular phrase into a security camera mounted on various walls. This piece is so earnest, and so naive, that you could almost forget about *#IAMSORRY* (2014), the trio's first outing, which consisted of LaBeouf sitting penitently in a gallery for six days with a paper bag on his head while visitors inflicted various abuses. LaBeouf was genuinely *#SORRY* for plagiarizing a short story in his first short film and, while casting despondently around the internet, found Luke Turner's "Metamodernist Manifesto," a list of proclamations like, "Movement shall henceforth be enabled by way of an oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the

pulsating polarities of a colossal electric machine."⁷ Never mind that, as a tiny footnote reveals, the "Manifesto" is nothing more than an overexcited paraphrase of a 2010 article in the *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*.⁸ "Metamodernism," Turner writes, "shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt." Luke Turner was Shia LaBeouf's guy. Just like that, his ironic apology tour became *their* sincere performance art. And yet, in 2019, would it not have been more metamodern for Turner to demonize Mathieu Malouf while also thanking him for the occasion to oscillate? The vicissitudes of contemporary art have broken him.

§

Gary Indiana spent most of Reagan's second term and half of Helms' third as an art critic at the *Village Voice*. In a piece from November 1987, as the U.S. economy tanked, he noted a new enthusiasm for "the critic's role" in the art world—meaning that newly-frugal collectors might have to put more thought into their purchases. Indiana is quick to say that this restored relevance boils down to closer attention to how many times an artist's name appears in the press (of which, it's been said, there's no such thing as bad). In the spirit of these quantitative times, therefore, I analyzed the index of *Vile Days*. Indiana wrote 127 individual pieces for his column. Of these 127, the person most frequently mentioned is Andy Warhol, who appears in 20. Rating a distant second, mentioned in 16 different articles (or 13%), is Ronald Reagan. After him come Barbara Kruger (15), Richard Prince (13), Cindy Sherman (11); then Sarah Charlesworth, Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, and Marcel Duchamp (10). As ironic as this method is, I think the overlapping interests of this elite bunch are a pretty fair description of the art of the 1980s: appearance

7. See www.metamodernism.org.

8. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2:1 (2010), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>.

9. Indiana, 61.

(acting), appropriation (theft), speculation (finance), consumption (optimism), and politics (the art of). It would be a grave mistake to think things have qualitatively changed—per the critic’s role or per the artist’s. It would be graver still to accept the Manichean vision of (art) history that such contests promote. Because if there *must* be losers, Indiana writes, mentioning the senator just this once, guys like Helms are happy to pick them, and in the process foreclose “the window of vulnerability” through which we encounter “things that are alien . . . that carry seeds of large, incalculable changes.”⁹ Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable. Repeat.

Travis Diehl has lived in Los Angeles since 2009. He is a 2013 recipient of the Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant and a winner of the 2018 Rabkin Prize in Visual Arts Journalism.