

My Dear Students,

I must begin with a confession—probably one that is not so surprising. Today I found it difficult to get out of bed. Sleep was difficult, too—but once I had found its solace it was nearly impossible to give up.

I thought about cancelling class today. It certainly would have been a relief for me, because as of 7:00 this morning, I frankly didn't know what I was going to do. To continue on with the day's plan seemed to be a willful glossing over of the important events of last night. On the other hand, to open out the group to a processing session seemed too unfocused—it's usually my style, but this, too, seemed to be an impossibility from the outset. This is not to doubt in any way that there are a lot of strong feelings and thoughts in this room; ones that beg to be heard, absorbed, and synthesized. There is certainly elation, and also, most certainly despair—about many things, not just who won the presidential election. There was a lot on the ballot, and many gains and many losses for each political position.

Perhaps my words would be more effective if I spoke them, extemporaneously, from the heart, as it were. This is certainly how I usually conduct class. I do my homework, internalize the content for the day, and prepare for the barrage of questions and thoughts you have about the day's topic. I always leave class—with few exceptions—feeling buoyant in the wake of your presence. Actually, it strikes me that I'm also usually hungry for food after class—my mind is sated, and my body just needs to be brought up to speed. Because I derive a lot of joy and pleasure, and intellectual edification from this style of teaching, it might be odd that I speak words pre-written, sentiments sealed in the editing process. Well, today is a very different day than yesterday, and the strategies of yesterday might not make sense today. Instead, I have chosen to write—because it is what I do when I don't know what else to do. When there are no other people or video-games, or Netflix, to distract me. I realize, also, that it is a way to enact some control in a moment where I don't feel in control. Because it is a break in how things are normally run in class, I hope you don't feel I'm being too dramatic in my tactics (although I've certainly been accused of it many times before). I hope you know that I write you today, and address you now via reading this letter, because this is the best I can do today.

There are many ways to view, review, dissect and disavow (or avow) the election results from last night. I spent the better part of the morning scrolling through these. There will be more to come. More when Trump takes office. More after his first 100 days. And when the next election cycle begins again in earnest. I have my own thoughts about Trump, informed by my experiences as a queer person in this world, with many friends and family who are also queer, who are also people of color, who are also, or have been, disabled, mentally ill, and/or poor. You can probably tell from that list—a basket of deplorables if there ever was one—that I'm not the biggest Trump fan, not the biggest Mike Pence fan. It is the purpose of this letter to tell you why I believe the way I do and why I do what I do, in the hopes that

you might find it useful—might find solidarity in it, or a foil for your own ideas. This is certainly how I work: in fact, it's what a teaching life is all about.

In that spirit I want to share the words and works of a few artists and thinkers, in the hope that what they've written and made might also be of use to you today, and in the near and distant future. Along the way, I'll address our readings and the topics that we were supposed to cover today. It won't be a full class worth of me talking, we'll probably end early. For today, when I stop talking, class will be over.

I want to begin with a sentiment written by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, from his book of collected essays called *Being Singular Plural*; he writes: "What I have in common with another Frenchman is the fact of *not* being the same Frenchman as him, and the fact that our 'Frenchness' is never, nowhere, in no essence, in no figure, brought to completion."<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgement of an unshared sense of Frenchness, of difference in identity, is a difficult, but I would argue necessary pill to swallow. Nancy expresses this sentiment in an essay about the Bosnian War, funnily, or really, unfunnily enough—a war that raged in Bosnia and Herzegovina for over three years (1992-1995). It was a gruesome civil war that resulted in the ethnic cleansing (a polite phrase for genocide) of Muslim Bosniaks and Catholic Croats by the Bosnian Orthodox Serbs. Because of this charged context, Nancy's words take on a somewhat ominous cast—if we can't all agree to be French together, Bosnian together, American together, then what have we got? It would appear to be a bleak picture. Nancy's work, which is sometimes very difficult for me to read and get through, has consistently offered me an opportunity to rethink the terms of social engagement, both interpersonal and intranational. In the popular imagination we are all bounded by a sense of being of a certain nationality—what unites us is stronger than what separates us, is a common way that this is rendered. As we discussed with the Benetton advertisements a few classes ago, this can wind up ameliorating any differences that structure our lives, be it race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on. Nancy tells us that one's "Frenchness" is not like another's—or if we're going to transit that to our own context—that one's "Americanness" is not like another's, which is in stark contrast to the work that nation purports to do. There are many times in US history where a person or class of person is rendered un-American. In the 1950s it was communists and homosexuals. From the founding of our country it was black and brown people, indigenous people.

Indeed our diverse polity is probably somewhat represented in this class: Some in this class are citizens with full voting rights in the USA, others have come from US territories (Puerto Rico / Guam), where they might have been able to vote in a primary, but had no vote and no electoral college representation on election night. Some do not have ID, and thus could not vote. Some do not have a home, or a reliable way to get to and from the polls. Others in this class are naturalized citizens elsewhere, holding different passports, perhaps watching this event unfold in horror

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 155.

or amusement, or some admixture of both. Some have already drawn connections to leaders in their home countries. To Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, or perhaps Marine Le Pen in France. Both, it should be noted, are happy with last night's election results. The we / the us of this class is not defined by what brings us together (the requirements of a BA/BFA, although on a practical level this might be true), but rather through its differences.

How we consider ourselves in relation to one another is of vital importance to this moment, and to all others that proceed from it. You hold in your hand the thoughts or feelings of someone who is not you. Someone who is not sanctioned to be on your facebook wall, or snapchat, and thus not a selected member of your circle. You might find yourself in accord, or in alliance with the words you hold; you may find yourself in striking opposition to them; or perhaps, even, unmoved, apathetic towards them. Through anonymity the burden of being responsible for this person's feelings and thoughts should be somewhat lifted. You confront another person, whose life experiences in no way identically match your own. Whose differences are deep and meaningful... you are surrounded at all times by this difference. I hope you take comfort in this, because it has the capacity to be liberating...

My dear students,

This is why we spent the first four weeks in this class learning the canon and then augmenting, building, and deeply questioning its foundations, and then the rest of the semester imagining together what another history—or perhaps more accurately histories—might look like. It is why I entrust to you the sacred task of intervening in future versions of this class with your own research, your own ideas... to transform this class, and to insist that its transformation is its constant. Difference can be an engine, and not simply an overdetermination.

**[SLIDE]** I have been thinking and re-reading this work by Zoe Leonard, much shared this campaign cycle. It was read by Mykki Blanco (a performance artist and rapper) in a video produced by Dazed—a video I encourage all of you to watch. Leonard wrote this text in 1992, for a gay magazine that folded before it was ever published. Her text circulated amongst friends and colleagues for years, before being reproduced in LTTR's 5<sup>th</sup> issue "Positively Nasty"... Most recently, it was blown up and wheatpasted on the side of a building adjacent to the High Line in NYC. I had the opportunity to visit this place a couple weeks ago, with a friend, a brother from another mother, and to talk with his students about what they got from it. Their insights were valuable and life-affirming; and I'm hoping you will have your own to think about in relation to this text. I want to read this text for you now: **[SLIDE]**

### **[READ ZOE LEONARD'S TEXT]**

Perhaps the thing that most strikes me about this text, is that it seems like it could have been written only yesterday, ... but it wasn't. It was written almost 25 years ago. Her call for people whose lives have been deprived of rights (a condition that

Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life”) to take up the mantle of presidency is inspiring... but many of the people Leonard writes about: sex workers, people with AIDS, people of color—are far, far away from the presidency, or even more localized halls of power. This could lead one to believe that Leonard’s text is hopelessly naïve; but that’s only true if you read it as a ballot cast rather than as communal imaginary exercise and calling forth; an acknowledgement of the things that mark our daily lives, and the lives of our families and friends.

“And I want to know why this isn’t possible,” seems to me to be the turning point of Leonard’s text. A demand for accountability, followed by an excoriation of power relationships in American politics.

If we believe the fiction of American exceptionalism, carefully countered by Zoe Leonard in her text, we might end up with something close to Herbert Bayer’s Universal Type. [SLIDE] Its story is interesting, and reflects the ideologies that undergirded much of the Bauhaus’ production after 1922... It is a type face composed of sans-serif letter forms (none of that decorative or ornamental stuff), with an entirely lower case alphabet. As you learned in the Mike Mills reading, this was because Bayer noted that we don’t speak in capital letters, and only using a lower case alphabet could save time for the industrious worker. As Mills also relays, this Universal type, with its claims for universality, was eventually picked up and used for corporate identity brands such as ABC and Bloomingdales, even though, ironically, it was never produced en masse as cast type (like so many other typefaces of the early twentieth century and before). Once it became aligned with these corporate identities, its claims to Universality, however flawed in its inception, became a needle too impossible to thread.

It is a blemishless type—vaunted for its clean, sleek, and forward-looking design. It was a failure in pragmatic as well as conceptual terms, and therefore highly instructive. Its creation was informed by an abhorrence of difference. It perpetuates a notion that there can be, or should be, one type for all. But it is not an evil thing, this typeface, it is just a product of the man in the time who created it; his blindspots are its blindspots uncoincidentally. Even within the Bauhaus things were not equitable in the way that an ideology of Universalism purports: Women, for example were usually segregated in textiles and weaving, with a few exceptions. One of these exceptional women was Marianne Brandt, who we mentioned in class last time, and who created this collage [SLIDE] in 1930. In it, a woman is dropped to her knees, arms raised up in praise or surrender, head thrown back. From each of her fingers is drawn a line that leads to the fist of a suited man, holding out his arm. The implication is clear, and a devastating realization for anyone who wants to make of the Bauhaus (or Black Mountain, which we’ll be talking about next time), an uncomplicated utopia. Women, Brandt argues visually, were controlled by the whims of men, like a simple marionette toy.

The exercise you completed for class today is another example of the flawed logic of universalism—Kandinsky believed that there was only one way to complete the

test—**[SLIDE]** a yellow triangle, a red square, a blue circle. Look at your own sheet, and now perhaps steal a peek at your neighbor's. A few of you may have magically aligned with Kandinsky's exercise, but most of you will not have. The question then becomes what to do with all these outliers. Do we teach them to color in these shapes with the right colors, ensuring that they know exactly *WHY* the triangle is yellow, the square is red, and the circle blue like we do. Or are they hopeless, should they just be sent away. Them/us. There are some right now in our polity who take such a view towards society's others.

We repeat these exercises, and rehearse these historical moments in this class because as Saloni Mathur writes, "the real contribution lies in what any self-conscious act of reinscription has the potential to make possible—the new ideas and communities it can activate, the nature of the discussion it can galvanize, and the new frameworks it can help construct for viewership and debate in the present."<sup>2</sup>

**[SLIDE]** Looking at the Kala Bhavan and the Bauhaus in equal measure (on the occasion of a re-staging of a 1922 exhibition of Bauhaus and Kala Bhavan works in Bengal), she insists that no simple equation can be drawn between the two... although both come from and respond to the rise of Nationalism in their respective countries. In Germany this was ended by the Nationalist Socialist ethnic cleansing (there it is again) (which took many students of the Bauhaus with it) and in India, it ended with the civil disobedience and decolonial/independence movements. Mathur teases out how 1922 was a time of transition for Kala Bhavan and for the Bauhaus—how the descriptor of "Indian-ness" pervaded the dissatisfaction of Walter Gropius with Johannes Itten. She makes a case for "The exhibition as argument"—doing important work at an important time—and in some ways, today, it continues its work as we read about it in class.

These exhibitions, these nations, these identities, these schools were "historical constellations that do not stand still for a viewer..." Today, I take lessons from Mathur's research, but also from her incredible gift for words. It is why I address you not once, or twice, but three times.

My dear students,

**[SLIDE]** There is one other artwork I've been thinking about, and don't worry, this letter is almost over – it's longer than I wanted it to be in the first place. It is a video work by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (who I should mention, in light of our current moment, was an immigrant from Cuba, and then lived in Puerto Rico, finally moving to New York, then California). At some point, during his life as an artist, he also seroconverted and became someone living with HIV/AIDS. He eventually died from AIDS, in the way that everyone who dies from AIDS dies, not from the virus itself, but from opportunistic infections overtaking a vulnerable body. I wonder if he is one of the people Leonard imagined as a president, and now I imagine what that

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<sup>2</sup> Mathur, 192.

would have been like...

Anyway, he's not an artist best known for video work – in fact, I think this may be his only one – so it's an outlier... he's better known for piles of candy and stack of paper – strings of lightbulbs and paired forms: mirrors, rings, clocks. His aesthetic is both minimalist and populist, beloved by many, and quickly becoming enshrined as canonical. This video, nearly all his works are untitled, is most closely related to his portraits, lists of events and dates from the sitter's life and larger socio-cultural events. These lists are usually rendered in small Photostats or as text that is painted onto a wall, running around the perimeter of a room, or a house. Oftentimes, these events appear out of order—so they're not normatively biographical in the sense that most people think of a portrait or biography.

In this video, the events are either displayed left justified at the top of the screen or centered at the bottom. Each one holds on the screen for a few seconds before the next replaces it. The events are banal and quixotic: “a rise in unemployment” – could be any rise, from any year. “a temporary truce” could describe an international agreement just as well as an interpersonal one—tenuous, unsure. “a new lesion” – pretty sure what that one is, but which lesion, where? How long had it been there before he noticed?

I feel today that I am somewhere between “a silver sea” and “civil disobedience”—I awoke with new/old worries for my friends and chosen family—I also secretly worry for you (although I almost didn't write that because I think it sounds paternalistic and gross). But I do.

I am grateful for our work together. For your willingness to engage with it. This is really something that cannot be taught, only experienced. Curiosity, vigilance, empathy.

Enjoy the rest of the day, because it is neither lost nor won for you.

Love,

Andy