

You Look at the Sun

February 2019

IN NOVEMBER 2015, Jennifer Higgie at *frieze* asked if I'd write a regular column for the magazine. I chose 'Funny Weather' as the title because I was imagining weather reports sent from the road, my primary address at the time, and because I had a feeling that the political weather, already erratic, was only going to get weirder – though I by no means predicted the particular storms ahead. The first column was about the refugee crisis. Over the next four years I wrote about many of the rapid and alarming changes that followed on its heels, from Brexit to Trump to Charlottesville, taking in the Grenfell Tower fire, racist killings by the American police, and changes in the law on sex and abortion on both sides of the Atlantic.

Frankly, the news was making me crazy. It was happening at such a rate that thinking, the act of making sense, felt permanently balked. Every crisis, every catastrophe, every threat of nuclear war was instantly overridden by the next. There was no possibility of passing through coherent stages of emotion, let alone thinking about responses or alternatives. It seemed as if people were stuck in a spin cycle of terrified paranoia.

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What I wanted most, apart from a different timeline, was a different kind of time frame, in which it might be possible both to feel and to think, to process the intense emotional impact of the news and to consider how to react, perhaps even to imagine other ways of being. The stopped time of a painting, say, or the drawn-out minutes and compressed years of a novel, in which it is possible to see patterns and consequences that are otherwise invisible. The columns I was writing used art – from Poussin and Turner to Ana Mendieta, Wolfgang Tillmans and Philip Guston – as a way of making sense of the political situation, of wringing meaning out of what were becoming increasingly troubled times.

Can art do anything, especially during periods of crisis? In 1967, George Steiner wrote a famous essay in which he observed that a concentration-camp commander could read Goethe and Rilke in the evening and still carry out his duties at Auschwitz in the morning, regarding this as evidence that art had failed in its highest function, to humanise. But this makes art sound like a magic bullet, which should reorganise our critical and moral faculties without effort, while simultaneously obliterating free will. Empathy is not something that happens to us when we read Dickens. It's work. What art does is provide material with which to think: new registers, new spaces. After that, friend, it's up to you.

I don't think art has a duty to be beautiful or uplifting, and some of the work I'm most drawn to refuses to traffic in either of those qualities. What I care about more, and what forms the uniting interest in nearly all the essays and criticism gathered here, are the ways in which it's concerned with resistance and

repair. In this, I'm emphatically informed by an essay the late critic and queer-studies pioneer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote in the early 1990s. Like many people, I've been puzzling over 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You' for years, ever since my friend James first told me about it on a scorching day in the West Village (a piece doing some of that puzzling appears later in this collection).

Though it's written predominantly for an academic audience, 'Paranoid Reading' is about something that affects us all, which is how we make sense of the world, how we approach knowledge and uncertainty, as we are constantly doing in the course of our daily lives, and particularly at times of rapid political or cultural change. Sedgwick begins by describing the paranoid approach, so common and widely practised that we sometimes forget there are alternatives to it. A paranoid reader is concerned with gathering information, tracing links and making the hidden visible. They anticipate and are perennially defended against disaster, catastrophe, disappointment. They are always on the lookout for danger, about which they can never, ever know enough.

Anyone who's spent time on the internet in the past few years will recognise how it feels to be caught up in paranoid reading. During my years on Twitter, I became addicted to the ongoing certainty that the next click, the next link would bring clarity. I believed that if I read every last conspiracy theory and threaded tweet, the reward would be illumination. I would finally be able to understand not only what was happening but what it meant and what consequences it would have. But a

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definitive conclusion never came. I'd taken up residence in a hothouse for paranoia, a factory manufacturing speculation and mistrust.

This, Sedgwick explains, is the problem with paranoia as an approach. Though paranoid readings can be enlightening and grimly revelatory, they also have a tendency to loop towards dead ends, tautology, recursion, to provide comprehensive evidence for hopelessness and dread, to prove what we already feared we knew. While helpful at explaining the state we're in, they're not so useful at envisaging ways out, and the end result of indulging them is often a fatal numbness.

At the very end of the essay she briefly, tantalisingly floats the possibility of an altogether different kind of approach, that isn't so much concerned with avoiding danger as with creativity and survival. A useful analogy for what she calls 'reparative reading' is to be fundamentally more invested in finding nourishment than identifying poison. This doesn't mean being naive or undeceived, unaware of crisis or undamaged by oppression. What it does mean is being driven to find or invent something new and sustaining out of inimical environments.

She suggests several artists whose work she considers reparative, among them Joseph Cornell, John Waters and Jack Smith. To this list I would add nearly all of the artists dealt with in these pages, many of whom came from emotionally or literally impoverished backgrounds, who lived in societies that starved them of sustenance and that frequently legislated against or otherwise attempted to curtail and punish their erotic and intellectual lives. All these artists nevertheless made work that bubbles with generosity, amusement, innovation and creative rage.

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‘It is not only important but *possible* to find ways of attending to such motives and positionalities,’ Sedgwick concludes, in a sort of rallying cry for reparative criticism.

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.

Hope doesn’t mean being blind to the state things are in, or uninterested in how they got that way. Sedgwick was writing at the epicentre of the Aids crisis, at a time when many of her closest friends and colleagues were dying difficult and painful deaths, and she herself was undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Her hope was hard-won, and in part derived from the powerful role art played during the plague years.

A lot of the material dealt with in these essays is distressing, and I can’t blame Trump for all of it. Loneliness, alcoholism, unsatisfactory bodies, harmful gender relations, alarming technology: the usual cheery subject matter. But this isn’t a depressing book, and while I have written plenty of negative criticism over the years, that’s not the predominant tone here either. *Funny Weather* is populated by artists who move and excite me, who look with sharp eyes at the societies they

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inhabit but who also propose new ways of seeing. My primary interest, especially in the Artists' Lives section that forms the first part of this book, has been to understand the context and motivation for what they do – how they came to be artists, what drove them, how they worked, why they made what they did, and how it can expand our own sense of the world. Some of these people are touchstones, with practices so rich, so full of insights and provocations that I am forever drawn back to them. Virginia Woolf, Derek Jarman, Frank O'Hara, David Wojnarowicz, Kathy Acker, Chantal Joffe, Ali Smith: these are the artists who have taught me what it means to be an artist, because of their engagement and generosity, their – to borrow a word from John Berger – hospitality.

What I mean by hospitality is a capacity to enlarge and open, a corrective to the overwhelming political imperative, in ascendance once again this decade, to wall off, separate and reject (the miserable human consequences of which are explored in microcosm in 'The Abandoned Person's Tale', a portrait of a refugee trapped in Britain's indefinite detention system). Much of the work I've focused on was made in the second half of the twentieth century, but I'm not looking backward with nostalgia. I'm going as a scout, hunting for resources and ideas that might be liberating or sustaining now, and in the future. What drives all these essays is a long-standing interest in how a person can be free, and especially in how to find a freedom that is shareable, and not dependent upon the oppression or exclusion of other people.

Gathering together the work of nearly a decade exposes long-term preoccupations, as well as the way ideas morph and

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migrate. Many of the artists who have meant the most to me died of Aids; gauging the scale of that loss would be a lifetime's work. I write more than once about the events of 16 June 2016, when a British MP was murdered and a troubling photograph of Nigel Farage began to circulate on the internet. A small sculpture by Rachel Kneebone crops up twice, as does a talismanic encounter with John Berger. An essay on Philip Guston and the Ku Klux Klan contains a paragraph that became central to my novel *Crudo*, while Ana Mendieta and Agnes Martin have become key figures in *Everybody*, the book that will follow this one.

The earliest piece here, and also the most personal, is not concerned with art at all. It looks back to a period in the 1990s when I lived feral in the Sussex countryside. Before I became a writer I had a strange, roving life, dropping out of university to become involved in the environmental direct-action movement, and then training and practising as a medical herbalist. In 2007 I took a swerve into journalism, and was rapidly and miraculously hired as deputy literary editor of the *Observer*. So I cut my teeth first on activism, then on bodies, and only latterly on writing.

In 2009, in the wake of the financial crash, I lost my beloved newspaper job, and two years later I moved to New York, edging at the same time away from literary journalism and towards visual art. It was so exciting to not be writing about writing, to turn instead to works that existed outside of language. The American avant garde was a revelation too, especially the New York School poets, with their loping, capacious, wholly un-English approach to criticism. Art wasn't rarefied or

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separate; it was as immediate as sex and friendship, a way of orientating yourself in the world. Its impact and meaning needed rigorous thought, absolutely, but it could be done using ordinary, even casual language.

Frank O'Hara was forever filling his poems with names, and I'm struck, reading back through these essays, by how many deaths they record. John Berger, David Bowie, John Ashbery. PJ, Alastair, HB. Death, the bottom line, the thing no amount of paranoid defences can prevent. While I've been writing this introduction, Jonas Mekas and Diana Athill have also died. Both times I knew because I saw a photograph of them on Instagram. The Mekas image had a caption, drawn from 2007's *To New York with Love*. YOU LOOK AT THE SUN. THEN YOU RETURN HOME AND YOU CAN'T WORK, YOU'RE IMPREGNATE WITH ALL THAT LIGHT.

We're so often told that art can't really change anything. But I think it can. It shapes our ethical landscapes; it opens us to the interior lives of others. It is a training ground for possibility. It makes plain inequalities, and it offers other ways of living. Don't you want it, to be impregnate with all that light? And what will happen if you are?