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# CURRENCY



OTHER INFORMATION





# Currency



also by

**Sarah Beck**

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MOTHER

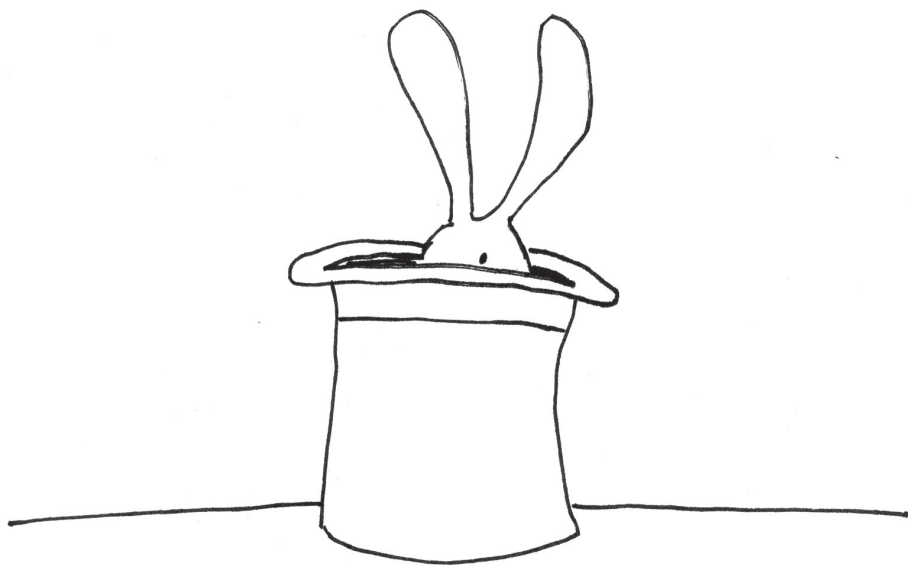
CUR

By

**Sarah Beck**

with drawings by the artist

RENCY







**Currency**  
by Sarah Beck

A thesis supporting paper presented to the  
Ontario College of Art & Design University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design

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Dedicated to Philboyd Studge



All counterfeit is rendered in vain.

-Maurice Blanchot





# Abstract

*Currency* is a novella that seeks true interdisciplinarity not just between mediums but in the search for a plurality of possible ways to express and to approach artistic research. The novella, framed as a gift for the late Kurt Vonnegut, blends his concerns with those of the researcher to examine social economic exchanges both within and outside the art world. Chapter-by-chapter the self-reflexive narrative guides the reader through musings on the experience of the research and the creation of ephemeral artworks using colloquial language, illustrations, jokes and parables.



# Table of Contents

<b>Currency</b>	i
<b>This Document</b>	139
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	177
<b>Illustrations</b>	179



# Preface

I have been thinking about two thesis lately, and wondering how to pluralize the word (thesi? thesis'? theses?). I've relished different answers about the correct spelling from those with the authority of letters behind their name. I share a human fascination with questioning experts, but this is not my point. The simple truth is that truth is relative.

Regarding the theses I have been trying to pluralize, both thesis' authors will play a central role in the story I plan to tell. One thesis I have read, and maybe you have read it too - Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut. Submitted as his anthropology thesis, Cat's Cradle left Vonnegut without his master's degree. After failing, Vonnegut's thesis became a book (and then a film), selling 150,000 copies in six years, was nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Novel, and became assigned reading for North American high schoolers.

In 1971, apparently regretting their decision, Vonnegut's university awarded him his master's for what I can only assume was a result of being popular and commercially successful [1]. Vonnegut's university was not alone in failing to see the value of his work. Cat's Cradle has been banned and burned for obscenity. When asked about this Vonnegut would often reply that war and pollution are obscene [2].

The other thesis, written approximately forty years later is my own. While I harbour no illusion that my humble effort will achieve nearly the success or audience that Vonnegut's did, I feel confident saying that I see the value in what I have done.

I began this thesis with the intention of making Vonnegut a gift of gratitude. Vonnegut died in the spring of 2007 and I had never thanked him properly for interesting me in becoming an artist. He called writers and artists to recognize they can be agents of change. He reminded them through his writing that their work has the ability to do good as well as harm.

Vonnegut often claimed that artists and writers are the canaries in society's coal mines. Historically canaries were brought below ground by coal miners to signal the dangerous build up of noxious gas. The pleasant little canaries would sing and brighten the spirits of the miners...until they died. This signaled that it was time for the miners to flee.

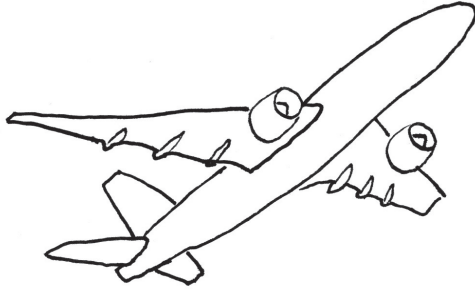
I set off on a journey to make Vonnegut a present not knowing the result would be what you hold in your hands. The thesis I have written is not an anthropology thesis but a fine art thesis. This is also the story of my thesis. It is also the art.

It turned out a little weird.

Like Vonnegut who had written *Breakfast of Champions* for his 50th birthday to empty his head, I would end up doing the same for my 34th birthday. Vonnegut thought this was something that everyone should do - so I did, recycling some of his tricks including his crappy marker style drawings. My gift for Vonnegut would be to take his advice, to free my old ideas and see what came out.

**ii Sarah Beck**

I read recently that true discovery is like a plane trip; that a beginning is made in a grounded concept, that you take off and fly, then land and reflect on the voyage. A plane trip begins like this:



I say the following to Vonnegut as I reflect on the voyage I have taken: Thanks a lot.





# Introduction

When you want to know more about something, you do research. I found all sorts of books about Vonnegut, but one of my favorites was by a Presbyterian minister named Robert Short. His 1978 book was about more than Vonnegut. It was also about the novel *The Exorcist*, the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and the use of cartoons within theory and the church. It turned out a little weird too.

In his book Short addressed Kurt by his first name. He claimed that this was not just because they were friends, but because most people who read his work think of him this way too [1]. Short says that Vonnegut would want them to. He also goes on to say that when the church dialogues with the world, it should do just that - talk to them.

In the spirit of the church then, I will refer to Vonnegut by his christian name: Kurt.

To honour Kurt I had to decide what gift I would make for him.

One day I was up to what Kurt would call farting and what I would call fucking around. I was searching the Internet to see what honours were previously paid him. I should not have been surprised to come across so many tattoos.

The repetition of tattoos was emphasized by the repetition of their subject matter. The most common tattoo was the quote 'So it goes', a line repeated 116 times in the novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. 'So it goes' is repeated each time a death occurs to segue to a new subject. It was slightly poetic to see tattoo upon tattoo repeating the casual *memento mori*.

Poetics aside, I was not prepared to see Kurt's asshole tattooed on the back of some chick's neck. It looked like this:



Below the asshole on her neck, as my illustration demonstrates, the inclusion of 'So it goes' left little doubt that this was a reference to Kurt's asshole. Anyone who can identify this as an asshole, I can only assume, will stare at the back of her neck and think 'She has an asshole on the back of her neck'.

In the case of this tattoo I'm not sure who the joke is on. Now, if you know the joke, you'd know that in his book *Breakfast of Champions* Kurt doodles an asterisk to illustrate exactly what an asshole is. It's a good joke in the context of the story. In fact *Breakfast of Champions* is filled with well told jokes and marker drawings. His poorly executed marker drawings were to demonstrate the level of maturity he intended.

## 2 Sarah Beck

Kurt wrote the book as a gift to himself for his 50th birthday. He wrote it to clear his head of all the junk that had piled up over fifty years, including assholes. The junk filling his head, he claimed, did not fit together nicely. It was sometimes useless or ugly, and certainly out of proportion. Some of Kurt's junk ended up tattooed, permanently, above the collar of a fan. This in some ways makes sense - it is very *au courant* to recycle.

Tattoos make me feel like Teflon. I have no tattoos and can't imagine getting any. Each time I think of a design I might like to look at forever, I wait a year. Usually before that year is over I have tired of the design.

Tattoos were on my mind a lot when I began my thesis. Back then I had a boyfriend who was a tattoo artist. I likely wouldn't know about this stuff otherwise. I learned that it isn't my business why people chose their tattoos. More distressingly I learned that if I ask why they chose their tattoo I am much more likely to get an explanation.

Perhaps my strangest encounter with tattoos was discovering a bloody tampon on a man's torso that was otherwise completely tattooed green. I did not ask him about his tattoo, so I cannot speculate on its history. I noticed the bloody tampon while he was having skulls tattooed into his armpits, the only non-green part of his upper body. When I say green I am not referring to a solid colour, but instead what looked like colouring a large space with overlapping marker.

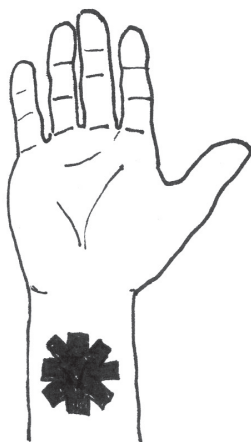
Not kidding.

There is a type of being into this or that which is definitely not kidding. I like things. Some things, or people, I like a lot. Yet, there are those

out there that need to love things the most. They need to own the thing they love. You must know one of these people. These people know all of the lines in all of their favorite movies. Their fondness borders on obsession. These people shame your fondness for things.

The last time I can remember wanting to own something because I liked it I was twelve years old and into The Red Hot Chili Peppers. I eventually stopped liking them when they became popular. It's the earliest memory I have of abandoning something I liked because it became 'mainstream'.

Each Red Hot Chili Pepper has the band's brand tattooed on their right wrist. It looks like this:



I wanted one too.

This is the only tattoo I attempted to act on. At the time I cursed age limits, but now I understand why a thirteen year old kid isn't allowed to get a tattoo, even in Alberta. Yes, it turns out that I almost had what was basically Kurt Vonnegut's asshole tattooed on my right wrist. Yikes.

**4 Sarah Beck**

Having resolved not to commemorate Kurt with a tattoo, even on purpose, I still needed to decide what gift to make for him.

I pondered Kurt's canary in the coal mine theory and recalled that he had been faxing letters repeatedly requesting the following words be carved into the Grand Canyon - "Sorry we fucked up". This way, long after self-destruction it might be possible for visiting aliens to make sense of our extinction.

The Grand Canyon...who the hell could give permission to do that?

And carving into a well-loved landmark to confront tourists with the shame of environmental degradation would prove futile. All of the natural world, including the canyon, is subject to erosion. Not the best way to make sure an apology is delivered to the far flung future.

Having abandoned the Grand Canyon, I retained the message, 'Sorry we fucked up'. But what of the medium?

The more I thought about it, the more obvious the answer seemed. Petroleum is handily harnessed to create plastic. Nothing endures as efficiently as plastic. Without petroleum products we couldn't have FUBARed the planet as badly as we have. If I really wanted Kurt's apology to be delivered all signs pointed to plastic as the perfect package.

Brainstorming about human annihilation led me to the Bible, as I am sure it often does. As it is told, the last time God nearly wiped out the human race He was certain to efficiently preserve His carefully crafted species. Being wise, He outsourced the project to Noah.

I began to think that I too would build an ark, perhaps even outsource

the work. My ark would be built to survive any deluge. Thanks to recent developments in science the ark could go so far as housing the DNA of the planet's species in packaging so compact Noah would be jealous. Having a ship and a message begged being wedged into a bottle, like this:



*N'est ce pas?*

Incidentally, if this isn't a message of hope, perhaps you aren't considering graduate studies. A giant plastic ship in a bottle, sails screaming "Sorry we fucked up", dedicated to the late Kurt Vonnegut, was the proposal that got me into university. This despite having the quote wrong.

When I began in earnest to re-read Kurt's work I rediscovered the message he actually wanted carved into the Grand Canyon. It was "Dear future generations: please accept our apologies. We were roaring drunk on petroleum."

Yikes dude. I suppose I had the gist of Kurt's message, but the tone was my own. My plan seemed flaky, and the idea was abandoned. I

**6 Sarah Beck**

was confronted with my bad memory which my mother assures me is *not* the marijuana but a life long condition. I was additionally confronted with having internalized the message in my own way.





# 1

Still unsure of what to make for Kurt I returned to the beginning. Breakfast of Champions was the first book of his I ever read, so I decided to start there. In the novel Kurt suggests that if people studied their paper money for clues they would discover nonsense that conceals great crimes.

I started with the Canadian \$20 bill because I had one in my wallet. It looks like this:



This wasn't surprising. Canadian paper money has a certain uniformity; face on the left, number on the right. Canadian money is colour coded too. The \$20 bill is the green one. They also come in blue, purple, red and brown. This confuses Americans. Their money confuses me too because it is all green no matter the denomination.

Potato, *potato*.

This expression is not funny when you read it. This is because there are two ways you can pronounce 'potato'. No matter how you say the word potato, it remains a potato.

The woman on the \$20 is Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II of England. She is also the queen of Canada. About two hundred and fifty years ago Canada became a colony of England after the French were beat out for the job. Today Canada is a democracy and Queen Elizabeth remains the head of state. This is also confusing for Americans.

While working in bars I looked at Queen Elizabeth's face a lot. Bank machines dispense \$20 bills which means an abundance of them in the register. In bars I learned all sorts of new ways to make people happy, which sounds far sexier than I mean. My personal schtick is a paltry money trick I picked up like an STD in some bar I have forgotten. Trust me, I've seen a lot of bar tricks and mine is far from impressive. Thank God I'm kind of pretty and funny to the drunk and the lonely.

This is how I do it:



I carefully fold two lines through the middle of the queen's eyes. Between these folds I create a valley, a fold in the opposite

direction. When you tilt the bill back and forth it looks like the queen is alternately smiling and frowning. Happy, sad, happy, sad....

But here's the thing - it's all in the delivery. It's how you deliver a story that gives it life. Without the charm of my goofy face mimicking the queen smiling and frowning, well, it just isn't the same. I make great face.

On the back of the \$20 bill I found this illustration:



It is an illustration of Spirit of the Haida Gwaii. It is an illustration of a sculpture. I can think of two other places I have seen it - in the Vancouver airport and on the lawn of the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C..

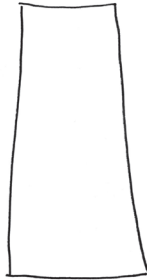
According to Wikipedia Spirit of the Haida Gwaii is meant to represent Native culture. It was made in the 1980s, but looks like what most of us imagine Native art looked like when it was discovered about four hundred years ago.

Back some four hundred years ago, when Canada was discovered, there were already human beings living here having full and productive lives. They were familiar with all of the best real estate and the new arrivals wanted it mostly for themselves.

After the occasional conversation followed by the occasional armed conflict, the new arrivals had waited long enough. The new arrivals, whom Kurt liked to call sea pirates, made a gift to the Natives of infected blankets. These blankets carried smallpox, a disease for which the Natives had developed no immunity. Soon there were half as many Natives, far fewer left to resist eviction.

The remaining Natives were shuffled off the best real estate and scattered into new territories assigned to them. I grew up in one of these territories in a province now called Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan was part of a larger territory called Rupert's Land and was not considered the best real estate.

Saskatchewan is in the middle of Canada and it looks like this:



Kurt once claimed that the only place that was defined with a pencil and a straight edge was Indiana. I beg to differ.

Anyhow, I had my first history lessons in the land formerly known as Rupert's. At school I learned about the arrival of the sea pirates and their subsequent adventures. I didn't learn much at school about what Native people were doing before the arrival of the sea pirates. There was a distinct impression given that the Native people weren't up to much. It turned out that this wasn't the truth.

In the days before Wikipedia if you needed information you couldn't find in books, you asked the adults you knew. Being an inquisitive young lady I started to ask around. Thankfully, the more I asked, the more I was told. Sometimes I was told the same story. Sometimes it was similar with a different ending.

I was hooked.

The reason these stories differed was because they were not written down. These stories had been passed by word of mouth to successive generations. As a kid this reminded me of the telephone game. Each listener repeats their knowledge to the next. Much like the telephone game the message shifts slightly as it passes through.

This is how I first discovered the power of collective cultural memory. This type of memory is truly a system of raconteurs, each teller is retelling what was told before. As I grow older and learn more about history I have become intensely impressed by the tenacity of telling.

Listen. It's not news that the white man came to this continent with dollar signs for eyes. Capital, before it was coined, ventured across oceans searching for purchase. The sight of indigenous arts and crafts inspired visions of international market trade. Before putting their new neighbors to work creating products for export, the sea pirates began by stripping the continent of its existent cultural commodities. Objects created by and belonging to the Natives were stolen and shipped back across the ocean.

One of these objects was rediscovered years later in Sweden. A mortuary pole, known as the G'psgolox pole was cut down in 1929 and summarily sold to the Swedes. A mortuary pole is a type of

totem pole, and this one was created to commemorate the loss of an entire family and the lone survivor's subsequent encounter with a supernatural being - no insignificant theft. After much negotiation the Swedes agreed to repatriate the pole.

Now, if you know anything at all about the history of the Natives, I suspect you are anticipating the plot twist; there would be conditions.

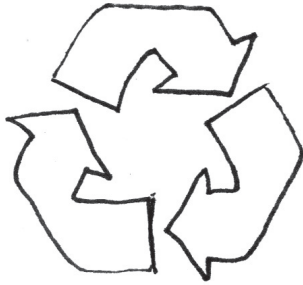
The Natives were obliged by the Swedes to create a museum that would house the pole and protect it from the environment. Perhaps this doesn't seem like such a big deal. Shouldn't our societies work to preserve history for future generations?

But the mortuary pole would never get home if it was trapped under glass. It did not need protection from the environment because it was *part* of the environment. Like the ancestors it honored, the pole was intended to return to the earth, joining the cycle of the living.

These polar approaches to memory have set up a paradigm I wish to explain.

There are a few ways people have been thinking about History - however it is always the victor who writes the story.

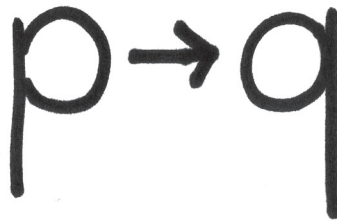
History can be perceived as a cycle with phases repeating themselves as they ebb into the other. The people who lived in Canada first observed History in this way. If cyclical History were a drawing, it would look like this:



The dominant way to view History for the sea pirates was that it built upon itself in a linear fashion. First shit happened and then other shit happened. Other shit happened because of the shit that happened first.

If linear progression were an equation, it would look like this:

CLAIMS;  
P = SHIT HAPPENED  
Q = OTHER SHIT  
HAPPENED



Linear progression frames History as moving constantly towards an 'advanced' state from one that is 'primitive'. Linear progression requires a steady improvement in our moral and material situation as new discoveries advance civilizations. Note how nicely this echoes Christian religion, minding p's and q's by moving from Original Sin towards Salvation. This is the preferred perception of History, a perspective residing in privileging what is perceived as, well,



privilege. This is the version that arrived in Canada with the sea pirates.

At cocktail parties filled with anthropologists and art historians this subject would provoke a conversation about something known as the Salvage Paradigm. The Salvage Paradigm is an approach employed by a more powerful culture to save another culture, deemed weaker or at risk, from perishing. A popular way of doing this is by making a museum to house the 'at risk' culture's stuff to protect it from the environment. This culture then becomes mythologized and distorted and in some cases reappropriated as an awesome way to brand a country.

I began to brainstorm a plan to expose this paradigm and decided I would carve the story of the Natives into the Grand Canyon, metaphorically of course. As an artist with a soapbox I decided to reconstruct Spirit of the Haida Gwaii as it appears on the \$20 bill, but I decided to make it out of plastic and display it in a bottle.

My plastic ship would never disappear or biodegrade. It would be trapped forever, in plastic, to observe.

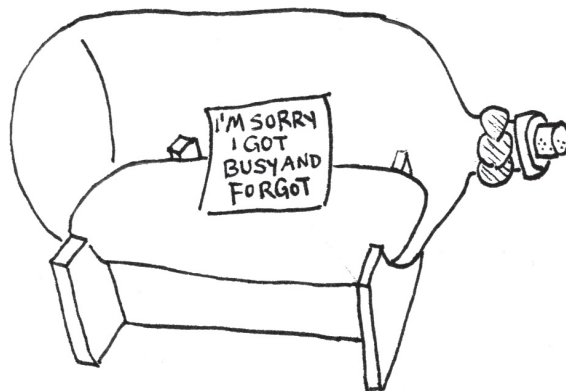
It seems to me that it is necessary for the future to remember the story of the sea pirates and the Natives, the colonizer and the colonized - to be confronted with the preservation of History itself. Viewers would be able to run their hands over the outside of my bottle and stare inside. They'd stare through the plastic looking glass, always confronted with a frozen story, plastic, and mythic in meaning.

Although optimistic, I doubted my plastic ship would evoke forthcoming apologies from the descendants of the sea

pirates. If a true sense of remorse could be provoked we'd already treat each other like human beings and give each other basic human rights. Yes, I said basic human rights. In fact the Natives might even get back the real estate that was theirs, legally. Kurt often said he learned everything he needed to know in grade six Civics class. What he learned is a description of basic playground rules. Rules, sadly, that we should hear again and again until we learn them. Be kind, share, respect others, take turns...and so it goes.

I found a bottle and carefully created what would look like water for my plastic Haida Gwaii to rest on. I planned construction of the ship and master minded how I would get it into the bottle.

Today this bottle is displayed in my workspace, and it looks like this:





# 2

Creativity makes promises that cannot be kept.

The truth is, I didn't have the money to keep my promise. I found myself hearing my dad's voice in my head:

“Don't let your mouth write cheques your ass can't cash.”

My ass was having problems cashing cheques.

I had to switch banks when I began my masters because my previous bank was a very regional credit union. I had banked there for twenty years. Although well an adult, I needed to begin my relationship again with my new bank. I quickly learned that I had been taking access to my own money for granted.

I chose my new bank because it was the closest to my house and they offered Air Miles (TM). While registering they offered me the privilege of a student account, meaning I would pay lower fees and they would mail me credit card offers that were best suited to my lifestyle. My first transaction was depositing my federally issued student loan cheque. I would have to wait two weeks for it to clear.

Living so close to poverty meant I couldn't wait. Having spent the

past few years waiting tables my relationship with money had entirely changed. Each day I left the restaurant with money in my pocket. This money was then dumped in a shoebox when I arrived home. My shoebox looked like this:



No matter how shitty the lunch rush was, I'd bring home my \$7.25 and throw it into the shoe box.

I didn't specifically save money - I used it as I needed it. Each time I opened the box I could see, in plain sight, all the money I had in the world. If it ran low, all I saw was copper and I would pick up an extra shift. I managed to pay down a lot of my debt this way.

It felt like I had more money in the shoebox days so I was surprised at tax time to discover I had earned less waiting tables than I have since then. It didn't seem possible.

I have always lived a fiscally risky life. When I hear figures about how much money you should have stored away for emergencies (two, three months income?) I've always thought 'I wish!'. I have never lived further than one pay cheque from homelessness and have developed creative approaches for survival. My new income, based on student loans and a TAship, was nearly the same amount I had been living on as a waitress. For some reason I no longer had the money to make do.

I examined my personal finances outside of my art practice. I had saved every receipt, no matter how small, mapping my life and needs since returning to school. I could find no place where I was being exorbitant, in fact my spending had gone down considerably. I was no longer paying down my debts, and interest was starting to win. I couldn't find one frivolous purchase, and even failed to make many that were necessary.

My receipts were the story of the past few months. My move to the city. My poor diet. My text books. A second move after my breakup. Where had the money gone? I was certainly spending less, and my health was witness.

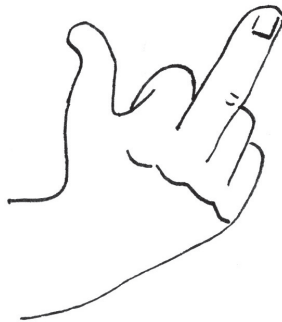
I decided to pour over my bank statements and there was the rub. Service charges. Charges for everything. Charges out of synch with the value of the transactions. \$3.25 for the convenience of using another bank's machine. \$1.50 for the privilege of using my own. Large transactions cost as much as small transactions. These service charges went on and on, adding up to shocking debits against my account. It seemed every bit of business I did with my bank, even if a machine handled it with barely a blink, was an inconvenience to my bank that I was to be billed for. Yikes.

Using the teller incurs no fee, at least the last time I checked. This surprises me because it must cost more to maintain an employee than a machine. When you call your bank, you can't get a hold of a person. I suspect that when I do reach a person, that person gets paid less because they live in a different country.

A Florida man also went into a bank to cash a cheque. He didn't have an account at the bank, so you know they were going to give him a hard time. The bank was very demanding about security,

even asking for a thumb print. The man became annoyed when he was turned away due to strict adherence to company policy. He had been born without arms, leaving him unable to give the required thumbprint. He couldn't even give the teller the finger.

When someone gives you the finger it means 'Fuck you!' and it looks like this:



# 3

About a week later I was knocking off a few personal errands - you know, paying bills, laundry, and I found myself writing a large cheque.

This cheque was so large because the one before it had bounced. The one before it had bounced because it was so large. The reason it was so large was because I hadn't paid this particular bill for some time. The reason I hadn't paid this bill was because I didn't have the money. I had chosen to let this bill slide because I've had a long term relationship with the company who I have found to be very understanding.

This company is Besco Storage in Saskatchewan. The bill totaled \$950, a fortune for me. To illustrate, I had been living off \$400 each month for the entire summer semester - things were tighter than tight. I'd hate to admit my survival strategies for such a lean budget, but I will admit that I seriously considered stripping. Fortunately I not only lacked the time, but was terrified of being a graduate school stereotype.

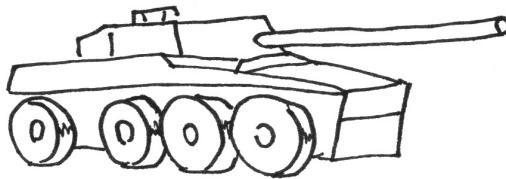
The \$950 cheque represented five months of unpaid storage. So, I began to do some math.



Annually I pay \$2280 for storage. My student loan for this year is \$8,600, well below the poverty line. However I continue to pay my storage bill at often ridiculous cost to my physical health and credit rating. I think nothing of paying this bill. I've been paying it for the past nine years minus a few months here and there.

Some quick accounting determined I have already paid \$18,660 in storage. The item I have in storage initially cost me \$40,000. This means, as of August 4th, 2010 when you are likely reading this, the value of this beast will be \$60,640 and appreciating monthly. I, a young lady of modest means and origins, own a work of art worth a lot of money.

What I am storing at Besco storage is a sculpture I created. It is a life-sized military tank made of MDF. It looks like this [1]:



This Ikea-style tank, my first major artwork, is a mammoth stacked as tightly as possible into an unreasonably small space. I have never questioned my need to save it, but have always questioned my need to keep it. I've tried giving it away for free, and the offer still stands.

This accounting made me curious. Next I opened the carefully maintained books for my second major artwork, also in storage, and tallied my investment to be \$30,954.11.

It turns out I have invested \$91,594.11 into these two works. This is also the current value, it turns out, of 460 shares of Apple Inc. Would it not have been wiser to invest in future financial gain than to run myself into incredible debt?

Previously, I had only ever considered Kurt's assertion that artists and writers are the canaries in the coal mine from a reporting stance. I had never considered the implicit martyrdom involved.

Although my passion for my practice has never been in question, suddenly I found that its sustainability was. The size of my work, both physical and conceptual, does not easily lend itself to the market for emerging artists. This does not improve with an economic downturn and a premium on existing exhibition space.

Inevitably the question of labour gets raised when one begins to examine economic conditions. Notably in my accounting of both projects, labour was not a numerical value I recorded unless it was that of someone else I had hired. It turns out my ass is willing to cash cheques my mouth writes, even if it means my ass ends up broke and naked on a stripper pole. Yikes.

As an artist I feel an obligation to society. This is evidenced by my intense debt. I now have an obligation to Visa who funded my art in the first place.

As a member of a democracy I am free to be in debt. Being free to be in debt seems like an oxymoron.



# 4

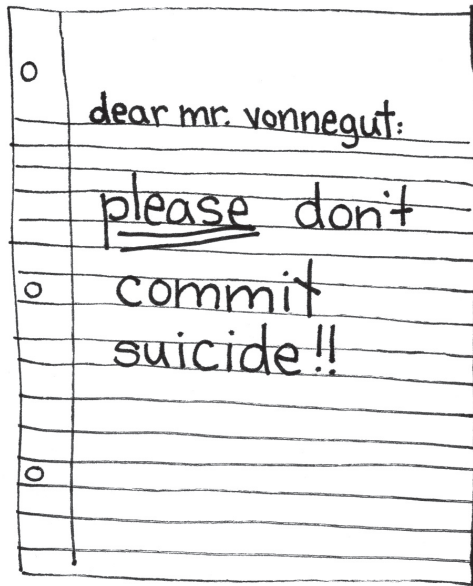
The more I thought about it, the more I knew erecting a costly monument was the wrong choice as my gift for Kurt. Outside of financial matters I had begun to consider a parallel between Kurt's family and mine. Like myself Kurt was raised by wolves. Wolves, also known as atheists, have little concern for, or belief in the afterlife.

The afterlife has troubled my thoughts for years. As a very young girl I would frequently wake up terrified in the night about what would become of me after I died. I'd call for my mother, seeking an answer and some comfort. She gave me the same answer many, many, many times until I stopped asking. She would say:

“When we die we simply stop being.”

This was heavy news for a five year old.

Like most children of atheists, Kurt also thought often about death. Kurt couldn't ask his own mother about the afterlife because she committed suicide when he was a young man. Kurt wrote often about death. After reading one of his books a twelve year old wrote Kurt a note. It said:



In fact Kurt had flirted with suicide privately. He later joked openly that he abandoned the notion one day while smoking.

He claimed to have realized that Americans smoke because it is a sure and honourable way to commit suicide. His commitment to chain smoking was as passionate as his commitment to his readers.

Kurt openly derided the maker of Pall Mall, his favorite brand of cigarettes, and maker of promises they did not keep. He threatened to sue Pall Mall to hold them accountable. They had promised to kill him, and they did not. Instead what killed Kurt was gravity.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt made a variety of promises he did not keep. He promised to shun storytelling for good. He figured what caused America to be dangerous and unhappy was made-up tales. Americans were accustomed to being treated like bit-players by their government because this was how it unfolded in stories.

Because he often used the same characters in different novels, Kurt decided to use Breakfast of Champions to free them from active duty. This was a promise he would not keep, especially for the recurring character Kilgour Trout.

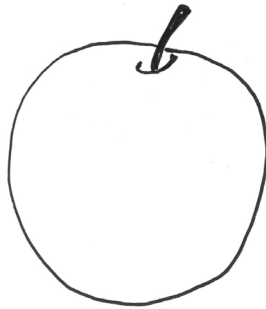
Kurt decided to tell Kilgour, and only Kilgour, that he was freeing him. To do this Kurt entered the narrative of Breakfast of Champions, wearing sunglasses so as to go unnoticed by the other characters. The encounter undoubtedly blew Kilgour's mind, beginning predictably poorly.

To deliver the news, Kurt had to chase the startled Kilgour down. Once Kilgour was cornered, Kurt elaborated on the situation, and went about proving that he was indeed Kilgour's creator and puppet master. Going further, Kurt acknowledged that he was personally responsible for any pain that Kilgour had experienced. He insisted that he wanted to make Kilgour whole again. He wanted to pay him back.

He offered Kilgour the freewill to imagine anything he wanted as the symbol that would bring him healing and completion.

I hold in my hand a symbol of wholeness and harmony and nourishment. It is Oriental in its simplicity, but we are *Americans*, Kilgore, and not Chinamen. We Americans require symbols which are richly colored and three-dimensional and juicy. Most of all, we hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning [1].

Kilgour imagined an apple that looked like this:



Thirty-seven years later an apple continues to be a symbol of wholeness and harmony, yet has been tainted by commercial greed and cunning. Apple, aka Mac, maker of the most millionaires in a single day, twice named the most admired company, and sporting the highest brand repurchase loyalty for computers, is, well, everywhere. Apple is so desired that people will spend \$40 to don the white headphones that signal that they too think differently.

Apple's savvy marketing is as innovative as they would have you believe. Apple Evangelists, preachers for all things Apple, whipped up excitement for the brand. To do this the evangelists got chummy with software developers and the result was passionate users. Desire to be part of the Apple community is about emotional connection to what the brand represents, not the product.

Apple's current logo is an apple with a bite out of it, apparently designed to signal accessibility. It looks like this:



The original Apple logo featured Isaac Newton. He was sitting under the famed apple tree moments before being struck on the head, apple in midair.

Apple has never been shy to associate with genius. Newton wasn't shy to associate with storytelling. It wasn't the exact truth that an apple falling on his head was how he discovered gravity. The story of the apple hitting his head easily illustrated the principles of his discovery, even if it bent the truth. Brands often bend the truth. Apple Jacks cereal, for example, does not in fact taste like apples.

Recently I found myself at the Apple store, a place I hadn't been for some time. A friend who works in tech had recently purchased an iPhone and needed the ubiquitous white headphones replaced for the third time. I waited while he explained his problem to an employee whose only authority was the ability to make us an appointment with a Genius at the Genius Bar. This meant waiting several hours to exchange the headphones which we were assured only a Genius could do.

While eating lunch waiting for my friend's appointment I asked if he didn't think it would be wiser to buy a cheaper and longer lasting pair of headphones. He wanted the white ones.

Being that this friend works in tech, I wanted to know if others found the title 'Genius' to be offensive or presumptuous. He found my intimation offensive and presumptuous. I let it go.

I continued questioning the designers and the artists and the dudes I know. No one seemed offended by the Genius branding.

Branding has a selective way of being negotiated by its audience.

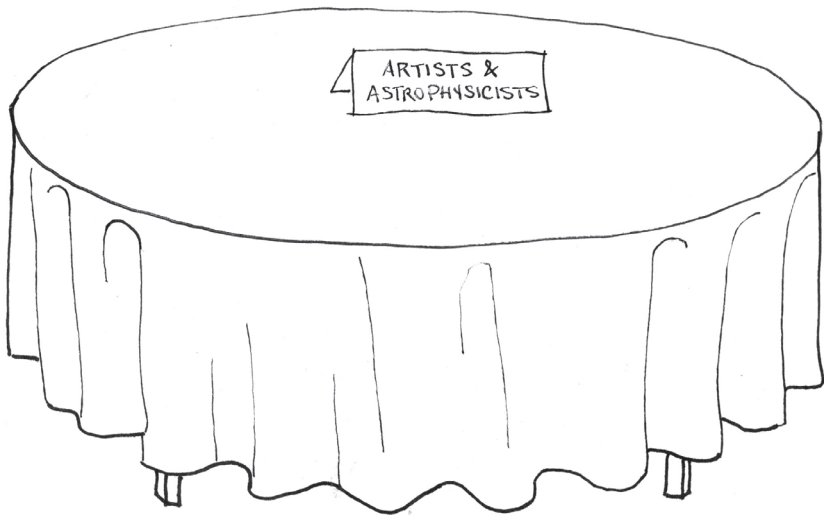


Students will rally against pop machines in universities, yet accept the ubiquity of Apple. As a brand it certainly defines who we are as artists and designers. Apple has carefully fostered a link to righteous outsiderism and rebellion against injustice [2].

Association with the thing we wish to be offers the power to convince others that there are similarities between that thing and us. As Kurt Vonnegut aged and his writing became more popular, he increasingly resembled the embodiment of his idol Mark Twain. Harry Houdini took deliberate steps to tie himself to magic so he would be perceived as more than an escape artist. In the 1950s artist Andy Warhol gave prints to the New York glitterati he was courting. They all sought or copied those whom they wanted to be.

When I began to flirt with being an artist I attended an artist's residency to associate with those I thought I wanted to be. The residency was hosted at a centre that fostered a cornucopia of arts and science, welcoming a new discipline each week. Other than mealtime, everyone worked in their own spaces. Mealtime was when we came together and observed one another.

Seating was segregated by type. Each group had a table with a sign directing you toward your herd. This made for a minimum of interaction between disciplines. Before anyone sat down you could guess which table they would sit at. The writers were reclusive, the ballerina table was empty and the jazz musicians could not sit still. For a reason likely alphabetical the artists were seated with the astrophysicists. The sign looked like this:



We sort of looked the same, except I assume the astrophysicists make more money. I can't say for certain what it was about the artists that made us easy to identify, but I don't have the advantage of standing outside of myself. I should have asked the astrophysicists.

Shared meals did not mean shared experience. Sure I made friends, but the level of quiet competition surprised me. My heart had been full of hope that this, my first real artist powwow, would be the familial experience that shared discipline seemed to promise. It was not. Mapping my own relationship to the desire to be an artist I can identify this as a break, a disenchantment with the experience and an uncertain desire to participate. Why did I want to be an artist and what did I think an artist was?

Kurt Vonnegut liked to remind his readers that we must be careful what we pretend to be. The reason we must be careful is because we *are* what we pretend to be.



# 5

My commitment to betting on being an artist causes me to feel like a caged animal in a cockfight. I was not betting against the odds or the art market or even myself, but in fact seemingly against the careers of other artists, an experience I was finding upsetting and confusing.

I used to have an old man friend. This friend introduced me to gambling. We met when I was twenty and working at Blockbuster. I had just moved to Toronto, and it was my first job. Our film chats lead to swapping books. Eventually we became friends outside work. There was nothing lascivious or inappropriate about our relationship. I missed having older adults in my life, and I think he felt the same way about young people. His friendship was welcome while living so far from my family.

Over coffee I learned that my friend had been a desperate alcoholic. Alcoholism had lost him his wife and many close friends. This was years behind him. He was now enjoying a healthy and active retirement. We didn't talk about this often which surprised me because anyone else I'd met who was a member of AA was evangelical about the organization.

Over time I also learned that my friend was a routine gambler. For

him betting on the horses was a daily activity, and I initially thought he was using this to replace the constancy of alcohol. I didn't know how to frame such a question, so I didn't ask.

One day he invited me to join him at the racetrack, breaking our usual routine. I'd never heard words like 'enabling' before, so I thought nothing of giving in to my curiosity. I love games, but had never gambled, so we were off to the races.

My friend didn't need a program. He brought one along he had studied already. However, he grabbed one for me so we could laugh at the names of the horses while waiting in line to place bets.

He made a series of bets I could not understand. Trifecta. Paramutual. Superfecta.

Bets made, we joined the melee in the coffee shop. I gazed longingly outside at the nice day and the proximity to the horses. I soon learned if you wanted to bet on the races, you needed to linger inside the building. I settled in as close to the window as possible.

I asked my friend to explain the betting and what it meant, but soon felt like I was lost in math class again, and dismissed ever understanding.

Noticing my drifting attention, my friend shifted his focus and began to entertain me. He gestured around the room telling me about behavior he had observed over time. The man to the left of me would slap his knee during the race as if his pamphlet were a riding crop. The folks at the table next to us would stand the whole time. The race was about to begin, and anticipation was growing.

The starting gun was fired sending an echo of thrill through my torso. As predicted when the race began all the characters adopted their persona. Horses with strange names rounded the first bend, moving closer to the long stretch that passed our window. At the second bend the horses became more staggered and winners began to emerge.

The horses raced by, entering the third bend in a flurry of limbs that turned ugly as a horse lost its balance. I reacted physically, making a noise then turning to share my alarm with others. No one in the café or on the track seemed upset and the race finished. Betterers were already lined up while emergency personnel crossed the field to do their jobs. The jockey was soon on his feet, moving slowly, but intact. It was clear the horse had broken a leg.

I found my friend in the line, and pulled on his sleeve.

“Do you think they’ll shoot that horse?”

“Oh no honey. Don’t worry about it.”

I wasn’t sold, feeling poorly pacified, but kept quiet. I excused myself and headed outside to get closer to the track. The horse had been summarily removed and preparations for the next race were underway.

I approached an employee who was sweeping the bleachers.

“What happens to horses that get hurt? That horse that fell, what will they do with it?”

“They’ll dispose of it.” She tried to get back to her work, uninterested in frantic non-regulars. I insisted, not knowing who else to ask.

“You mean shot?”

“Something like that” she hissed, dismissing me with her body and moving away. After a moment or two I sat down, not wanting to return to the café. The weather seemed cooler, and I pulled my sweater from my bag. I couldn’t imagine how such an expensive and well-cared for animal could be destroyed without an attempt to repair it. I hated horse racing.

On our way home my friend was discussing his successes and surprise failures as we cruised the waterfront in his Cadillac. Did I feel OK? I was unusually quiet. I excused myself from our dinner plans and asked to go home. I didn’t feel right. We remained friends for years but I avoided gambling with him. I didn’t want to be confronted with it again.

It wasn’t until years later when I began to learn about the importance of routine in my grandmother’s life that I started to wonder if my friend’s gambling wasn’t somehow more about the social interaction. Driving my grandma to run her errands I noticed how much these rituals shaped and gave sanity and purpose to her days. She developed relationships with everyone. Once in a flower market two twelve year olds ran up to greet her excitedly. They seemed to know one another well, and I couldn’t figure out how. These relationships, I suspect, remain the key to her vitality.

I soon began to line up at the bank to interact with the human teller. I discovered these ladies knew a lot about me because I am Marion’s granddaughter, always remembering to ask questions about

my family and life. I'd sense and even see people lose patience with waiting in line behind me while we chatted. These days we've become so very accustomed to quick service that this type of exchange can wreck a rushed stranger's day.

When I am in a rush, I use an ATM or bank online.

Kurt mused often in his writing about human interaction. He claimed to visit the post office instead of buying a book of stamps so that he could visit with the postmaster. I find myself feeling nostalgic for the normalcy of dealing with the same people on a regular basis. By this I am not discounting the thrill of meeting new people. I miss the random interactions of my waitressing days.

I decided I would strive to generate more contact with people through my art.

Developing relationships even if they involve retail exchange, gives us all a sense of participation. A shared experience, whether agreeable or disagreeable, gives us something in common with other humans.





# 6

As artists our struggle has the potential to unify us but the level of competition, that I suggest is heavily market driven, drives us apart.

Having left waitressing behind to return to school I found myself fully immersed in the competitive world of art with no outside influence for balance. This left me upset and confused. When I am upset and confused I call my mother. This doesn't always help.

I reached out in the middle of the night seeking my mom's comfort. I got my dad's instead. After tolerating a few minutes of whining about how I felt, he was ready to make his diagnosis.

He said:

"Shit or get off the pot."

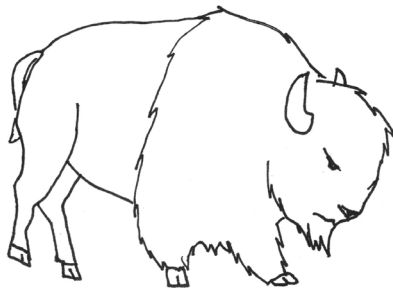
'nuff said.

My parent's still live in the same house they built in Saskatoon thirty-three years ago. Saskatoon is suddenly the fastest growing city in Canada. Renting an apartment has become so difficult that people are devising all types of tent-based solutions. I have major respect for anyone who can survive a Saskatchewan winter in a tent. Winter there is hardcore.

My parents' house is at the edge of town. It used to face a little bower of trees edging a farmer's field. At one end of the street there was a drive-in theatre. At the other end was a zoo. Next to the zoo is the maximum security penitentiary for Western Canada's most criminally insane. No one has ever escaped. Ever. It wasn't exciting.

The zoo is another story.

When I was young the zoo was still being developed. It was kind of a hippy-concept zoo. The idea was that some animals were free ranging while others lived in big, loose pens. The pens were for animals like deer, horses and bison. Bisons are large beasts who were hunted to the brink of extinction when guns arrived with the sea pirates. This is because they taste fantastic. A bison looks like this:



The rest of the animals were loose in the zoo to interact with visitors. These animals, deemed more sociable, included peacocks, bunnies, sheep and goats. Sometimes these animals, not knowing they had left the park, would wander up the road and into the bower of trees across from our house.

Escape however was not limited to those free to roam. Others, such as cougars and wolves, waited for backs to be turned, then high tailed it out of the zoo. Inevitably a park ranger was dispatched to tell local parents to keep their kids inside while the escapee was hunted down.

The local kids thought this was awesome.

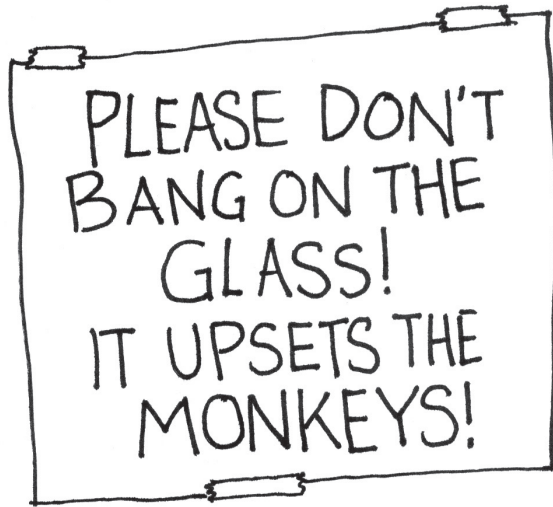
My bedroom window overlooked the trees across the street. These trees, filled with rusty abandoned farm equipment, couches and other junk, was where the local kids played. I knew it intimately. I'd lay in bed at night and imagine all the possible hiding places for an escaped animal to hide in those trees.

I never imagined an animal would travel farther than just outside the immediate confines of the zoo.

As the city developed the zoo developed. More specialized containment accompanied more specialized animals. Increasingly the tenor of the zoo changed. Even the sociable animals were confined. Eventually the zoo grew enough to acquired a monkey house. Large panes of glass framed a shallow play area with wooden carpentry that looked like a rushed make-work project for prisoners.

The monkey house was small.

The monkeys were small, nervous and numerous. They were soon the main attraction. No one could resist staring at them through the signage and knocking on the glass. The sign looked like this:



Children squealed with delight as the monkeys performed their increasing rage and anxiety. This always seemed like monkey hell to me, even though my family didn't believe in that sort of thing.

Things have changed a lot. My first visit home gave me my first adult-like memory. This memory features the wistful image of my mother staring out the front window across the street. Our share of suburbia had been built about the same time I was. I hadn't noticed how much it had changed because as it grew up I was spending less time in the trees and more time in the mall.

My mom stood looking out the window and across the street to where new neighbours had replaced trees. Behind neighbours' houses there was now a church. My mom was staring through all of this at the arches framed by her front room window. Those arches look like this:



When we were kids we never ate at McDonalds unless it was someone's birthday. Now my parents meet friends there for coffee. Things change. My mom has too. When we were young she had been quite outdoorsy, even canoeing pregnant with my brother. Now my parents are into NASCAR.

In case you don't know, NASCAR is a car racing organization. They organize races in which forty-three cars drive around and around an oval. These races can last up to five and an half hours. There are thirty-six races a year in which each car races 500 miles. Without accounting for crashed vehicles or practice runs the distance travelled annually around the racing ovals is 774,000 miles. The average NASCAR burns four to six gallons of gas per mile, meaning annually NASCAR burns (conservatively) about 216,000 gallons of gas.

I don't challenge my parents then they try to share their excitement about NASCAR with me.

Yikes.

A few days after my dad and I spoke I was still trying to decide if I planned to get off the pot or not. One evening I found myself gluing ripped out newspaper stories into my sketchbook. I had been saving stories about animal escapes. I wasn't sure if they were suddenly more frequent or I was more aware. Every time I came across an escape story I would rip it out and tuck it into my sketchbook. The pile had really started to take off and I was afraid I would lose one.

Flipping them over to apply glue I found an advertisement seeking competitors for Canada's art team. More specifically it was to compete at the country's behest in the Vlième Jeux de la Francophonie hosted in Beirut, Lebanon. Looking closer I realized the date had passed for entry. Deadlines for everything from Hospital Home lotteries to when an assignment is due seem mutable these days. I took a risk and called to ask.

Calling to inquire didn't hurt a bit. The guy handling the entries told me that yes, the date had passed, but if I could stick something in the mail the next morning he'd slip my entry in with the others. This didn't leave me a lot of time as the day was already evening. Having decided to apply I printed a CV, assembled a cursory portfolio, and quickly drew my proposed sculpture.

I decided if art was one big competition then I needed to compete openly. Might as well call it like it is.

Anyhow, I ended up being selected.

# 7

Because I was selected to compete on Team Canada, Heritage Canada, the cultural wing of our government, flew me to Prince Edward Island (aka PEI). I was dispatched to PEI to participate in a number of festivals representing French culture.

PEI is a small, small island and is the province that is almost the farthest east in Canada. It looks like this:



Except it is red. Seriously.

PEI was the first place that Jacques Cartier, the famed sea pirate, set up shop for the French. When the French arrived with all of their diseases, the Natives living in PEI having full and productive lives began to die. The island is really small so no blankets were required.



After a spell the English got word of how lovely PEI was and relocated the French. A few tenacious French hung on and formed the Acadian community that is there today.

Heritage Canada invited my teammates and I to three separate Acadian festivals. At each festival they wanted us to create a work of art. The idea was for this trip be a team building exercise - we'd get to meet each other and practice working in front of the public. I learned that I would be working with a painter and a conteur.

I also learned that we would be at each festival for only two to three hours, time easily consumed with set-up and chat.

I was keen to chat with people. This felt like a great opportunity to use my art to interact with people and I wanted to ensure maximum exchange. This way I could also practice my French. It had been a little while.

Other Canadians know that PEI is the home of an imaginary girl named Anne Shirley. Anne of Green Gables, aka Anne Shirley, is an orphan girl with red hair who is a precocious dreamer. Quixotic if you will. Canadian and Japanese children have adored her since she was invented in 1908. This brings a lot of Japanese to PEI.

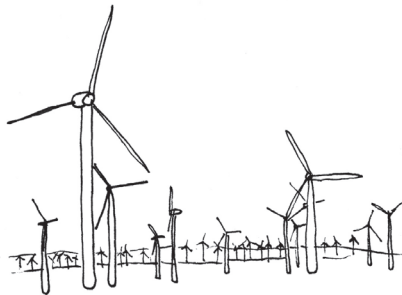
I did not want to talk about Anne Shirley. I'm not sure people in PEI wanted to either. My last trip to PEI she greeted me at the airport ten minutes before I spotted her again downtown. Downtown Anne was inviting me to see a play. Later on I saw her again at the beach, and this time she was selling ice cream. On PEI Anne is ubiquitous.

People from PEI must spend a lot of time talking about Anne Shirley with tourists. Tourism is the one of the major industries that keeps

PEI afloat. The other biggies are fishing and potatoes. While fishing is an increasingly declining profession, potatoes impact almost everyone on the island in some way. Second to the government a local french fry company is the largest employer.

While other Canadians know that potatoes grow on PEI, they do not necessarily know that potatoes aren't native to PEI. They were discovered by Spanish sea pirates in Peru during the 16th century. The sea pirates spread them all over like an STD. The potatoes liked PEI in particular. Potatoes are now old news in PEI.

Wind energy is new news. Wind can be harvested all year long, so the island decided to give wind farming a chance. To trap the wind's energy, a field of giant fans had been planted in the ocean. They look like this:

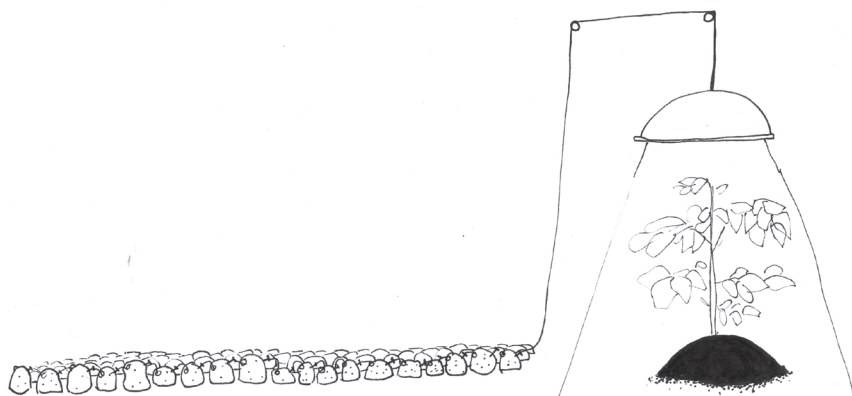


Using wind power is not a new idea. Windmills have been around since very early human times. Wind provides about 15% of PEI's power, the majority of it being exported to other provinces. People in PEI were actually paying the highest energy rates in the country in 2009 in the face of their belief in this new industry.

I decided I wanted to talk to people about harvesting both potatoes and energy.

I began to solder wires and clips together at my studio desk. I had decided I would make a super-sized potato battery for the festival goers in PEI. The potato battery would use a thousand potatoes. The battery posts would be pennies and nails. The energy would travel through the potatoes, the pennies, the nails and the wire towards a grow-light. This grow-light would help one new potato plant grow.

The sculpture would look like this:



I spent several weeks soldering to prepare the thousand potato operation. When I began the soldering I was a novice, but as the project advanced my hand became more deft. I worked day and night to be sure that I not only had enough, but that the clips would be easy on children's fingers who wanted to help. With an electrician friend I tested potatoes, easily creating enough juice to make my grow light glow.

Pleased with my hard work, I packed a suitcase full of items that make red flags go up in airports; 2000 alligator clips soldered to 3000' of copper wire, 1000 pennies, 1000 nails, a voltmeter, a knife, a soldering iron, solder, a bikini and a copy of Das Kapital because

I felt bad-ass. I had a note from Heritage Canada explaining that I was an artist and needed all of this weird swag.

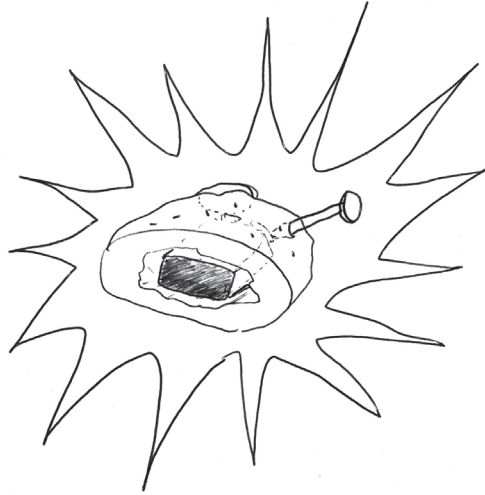
Soon I didn't feel so bad-ass.

My first attempt to assemble my super potato battery encountered a technical malfunction. Wires only channeled enough potato juice to get one of three grow-lights working, intermittently. As visitors hung around my battery I felt the pressure of their disappointment. I soon resorted to showing kids the paltry potato electricity on the voltmeter. This was a hard sell. I had to get really excited when the voltmeter would spring to life in their hands. Most of them weren't buying it. They were, however, easier to entertain than the adults who would make suggestions and then wander away. Yikes.

When the first event was mercifully done I was relieved to say the least. Driving back to the B&B where we were staying I noticed a nine volt battery in the console of the car. The driver wasn't sure if it would work, but told me I could have it.

Back at the B&B I set about making a magic potato. With a knife I hollowed out a potato to make a hiding spot for the battery. I soldered the nail and the penny to the battery's contacts neatly inside the body of the potato. The next two days I used this magic potato to power my sculpture. It worked like a charm. I would hook it up after wiring the 999 other potatoes and no one questioned my methods.

The magic potato looked like this:



The last day, when the conteur had finished her performance, she sat with me to watch me work. As she watched me charm the locals, selling my snake oil, she began to laugh and I worried she would betray my secret. When the event was over for the day she helped me disassemble the battery. Leaning close she asked me if I knew that I was also a conteur.

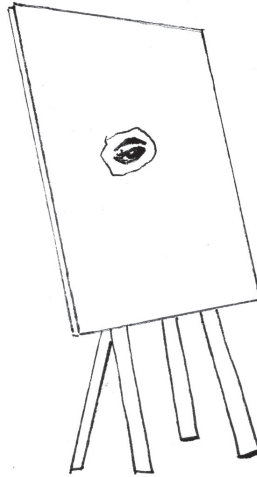
I didn't know what she meant but put it in my pocket to think about later. Conte is a part of francophone culture I had never previously experienced, perhaps being that I am an impostor. French immersion, despite good intention, does not a francophone make.

After our last gig on the island we were all ready to head to our respective homes. While unpacking our equipment for the last time, the painter and I decided to split a beer. We leaned against the car next to his painting which was also leaning against the car drying.

The painter had been using oil paint. Oil paint takes considerably longer to dry than acrylic paint. Some painters put up with this because it allows them to paint very realistic portraits of people.

As you can imagine, this takes a long time.

The painter had faced his own challenges during our three festival tour. For three days he raced desperately to work fast enough so that viewers would know what they were looking at. He had managed to paint a very detailed eye. This still hadn't satisfied festival goers. His canvas turned out like this:



The partially painted canvas stared like a reverse eye patch across the street at the ocean in a disquieting way. We began to chat about the adventure we'd just had.

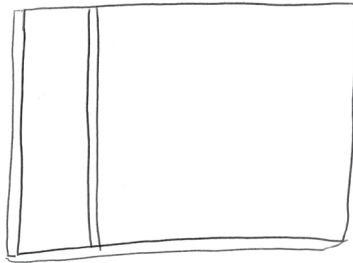
He asked me about my little lie. I told him I didn't feel guilty lying about my potato. It wasn't a science experiment after all and I certainly had no intentions of revolutionizing the potato growing industry in PEI. Viewers understood the potato battery and we both agreed that this was more important than telling the truth.

I asked him if he had read *Breakfast of Champions*. He told me he only read French books. I told him about one of the novel's

characters, painter Rabo Karabekian. He is also in another book by Kurt called Bluebeard. The reason I thought about Rabo was this - Rabo was a painter with one eye.

And I also thought he would like both books.

During what Kurt calls the spiritual climax of Breakfast of Champions he introduces the character of Rabo for the first time. The painter was at the centre of controversy when Midland City, the backdrop for Breakfast of Champions, had paid \$50,000 for one of his paintings. The painting was called The Temptation of Saint Anthony. It looked like this:



It was 20' wide and 16' high. The field was painted avocado green, and the stripe was a DayGlo orange strip of reflective tape.

Everywhere Rabo went in Midland City he was surrounded by people who hated him for getting so much money for so little work. They all thought Rabo had used his meaningless pictures to enter into a conspiracy with millionaires to make poor people feel really stupid.

Yikes.

On the plane ride home I found myself still wondering about how art makes people feel.

# 8

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slapstick* was written on the heels of *Breakfast of Champions* and the tragic death of his sister Alice from cancer. On the eve of Alice's death, she pronounced it all to be 'slapstick' upon hearing that her husband died in a train accident, leaving four orphaned children.

Alice was Kurt's imagined audience. My father is my imagined audience. After Alice's death Kurt increasingly found her fading away.

My father is a smart man. Many of his gifts are now mine thanks to genetics. These gifts form the basis of my predisposition to artmaking. My parents have told me since I was a very young girl that I would grow up to be either an artist or a writer. When I eventually went to art school I learned that other people's parents were not as supportive of their life choices.

Kurt often said that if you didn't have the nerve to be gay, but you wanted to offend your parents, you should become an artist. I can understand this sentiment. Before I came out of the closet, admitting that I too might be art curious, I harbored my own negative stereotypes.



I use my father as a gauge for the success of a project. If he gets it, then I feel I am in good stead. If he doesn't, I head back to the studio. The only catch is that I cannot present it as 'art'. When it is presented as art my dad feels he has no place to comment, after all, what does he know about art?

Kurt also tried his hand at visual art. You can still buy his iconic 'asshole' print on his official website. Google it if you're asshole curious.

Maybe owning an object that someone else made is like owning a piece of them, like stock, but in an abstract artsy way. I often wonder if Kurt found sales of his asshole funny.

Once upon a time I saw a documentary made late in the life of French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. The man seemed grumpy and quirky on the best of days as he hobbled around painting on the banks of the Seine. Cartier-Bresson is not known as a painter, instead he is likely the most famous photographer the world has ever known. You've seen his prints whether you know it or not.

In his last years he had a lucrative career selling his paintings. The documentary has stuck with me for years because I spit soda when he declared that his paintings were totally shitty. They really were. He shamelessly declared that people will buy them because he is, after all, Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson, it turns out, has balls the size of France.

This is funny because France is 3,0390,555,555.6 times bigger than average human testicles.

France was on my mind 3,0390,555,555.6 times more than testicles as I geared up mentally for the Vlième Jeux de la Francophonie. Onsite, as part of the competition, the artists were required to build a new sculpture over four and an half days. This reminded me of my favorite television show, Project Runway.

Project Runway is called 'reality television' because it is supposed to depict unscripted events that actually happened to non-actors. On Project Runway fashion designers are invited to compete with one another for a really great prize. Each week they are given a challenge that stretches their design skills past their comfort level. Each week the weakest designer is eliminated until only the winner remains. This is the general formula for most reality television, whether contestants are competing for money or husbands.

There is also a version of Project Runway for artists called Work of Art. It is brand new. The creators of the show hope that by watching art being criticized in the privacy of their living rooms, the average non-art viewer will become more comfortable expressing their opinions.

I intend to watch it with my dad and hear what he has to say.

I like talking about art. I like talking about it with all sorts of people. I don't however know a lot of people who own art. This is because art is expensive.

Who buys all of that expensive art?



# 9

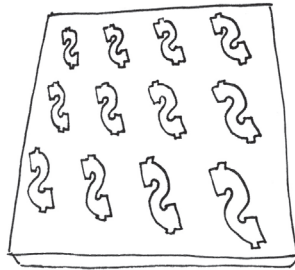
There is a large art gallery adjacent to my university. This gallery survives on government grants, entrance fees and donations. The gallery was in the news recently because it had undergone major layoffs. These cost cutting measures were blamed on poor attendance. Months later the gallery was in the news again when it was reported that the CEO of the gallery collected \$981,000 in salary and taxable benefits last year. Two thirds of his nearly one million dollar income was a bonus. This bonus was awarded for overseeing the completion of the gallery's renovation.

I hope he's using some of his money to buy art.

When buying art, one should make a choice based on the work's price relative to the price of the property it will be displayed in. This is a rule developed by a man named Tobias Meyer. Meyer is an auctioneer at a place called Sotheby's. Sotheby's auctions luxury goods, notably famous and expensive artworks.

The only painting I have in my apartment was free, which likely holds true with Tobias' law of proportion. Curiously my painting is of dollar signs.

It looks like this:

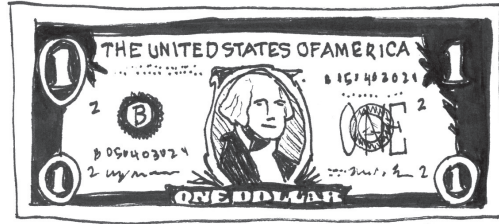


According to Donald Thompson, author of *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, the best sellers on the art market are paintings that feature pretty women or children. The colour red is most saleable, followed by white, then blue, yellow, green then black. Horizontals always sell better than verticals, brights over pales, and flowers over fruit. Water adds value if it is calm, and cows always do poorly [1]. Noted.

Thompson's research reminds me of the Russian painters Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid who used census figures to paint. They decided they would make country-specific paintings, creating a best and a worst for each. Using the census they polled the citizens of various countries. Average people were questioned about what they most wanted and least wanted in a painting for purchase and display in their home.

No rock was left unturned. Citizens were asked questions that included framing, sizing and beloved signifiers. The painting they produced for America was the size of a dishwasher and featured George Washington. George Washington is also on American paper money.

American paper money looks like this:



The following is a list from Thompson's book. It is a list of jobs held by the top twenty active collectors of contemporary art. Below they are listed by their source of income and in order of their purchasing power;

- Luxury goods
- Investment banking
- Financial services
- Retail
- Hedge funds
- Construction
- Financier
- Investments
- Investment banking
- Textiles
- Magazines
- Venture capitalist
- Luxury goods
- Advertising
- Supermarkets
- Stockbroking
- Financial services
- Retail
- Industrialist
- Casinos

A cursory look at this list tells me that the major movers and shakers know how to make an investment. Like all investments there is a need to protect the financial value not just of purchases, but institutions that support the structures that guarantee those values. The advertiser on this list is a person I can readily identify and suggest is in a unique position to promote and increase the value of his collection. In fact I am certain he has been accused of it.

Artist Andy Warhol started his career in the advertising business. In fact he was a commercial illustrator with a penchant for drawing shoes. Warhol knew a thing or two about brands, and changed the art world when he brought brands into the gallery with his Brillo boxes.

Brillo is a brand of scouring pads that were commonly used in American homes when Warhol was alive. Most Americans, particularly housewives, would be able to recognize a Brillo box. A Brillo box used to look like this:



Today the packages look like this:



Warhol's Brillo boxes, according to philosophers, asked the audience to contemplate the following; if two objects are the same, yet one is art and one isn't, what is the difference?

I suggest the difference may in part be financial. Brillo packages cost \$2.99. A Warhol Brillo box costs \$350,000.

Later Warhol started painting money. He said it was because he loved it best. He also suggested that perhaps we should just hang money on the wall instead of art. Warhol suggested that the art market and commerce were having an effect on one another. As the art market became more commercialized, commerce became more artistic [2].

This is old news today.

Artists since Warhol have assumed brand-like personalities, an amusing *détournement* after brands spent decades adopting the tropes of people, carrying personality, value, and distinctness.

Contemporary artists have become brands unto themselves. The British artist Damien Hirst is the richest living artist to date. Unlike the



fools before him he was determined to see financial payoff before he died. Not only is his work commercially popular, it is outsourced like all contemporary management. This means more output. He has been careful to diversify, buying up the work of younger artists. His association with them strengthens their brand and improves his investment.

The Louis Vuitton brand has similarly lent its aura to artists, inviting cutting edge contemporary artists to design purses. These limited edition purses sold very well. Louis Vuitton, aka LV, are designers of luxury goods, most notably purses and luggage. Their product is one of the most counterfeited items in the whole world. Contemporary art and design share overlapping features, certainly when branding substitutes for critical judgment in all culture markets, be it purses or art [3].

A new phenomenon of our decade is the purse rental service. Luxury purses cost in the neighborhood of \$15,000 to buy, so rental services cater to a young woman's desire to participate in the luxury good economy for a fraction of the price. Once she tires of her rental purse, she can exchange it for another.

Recently the news reported that a horde of young ladies had been sleeping in the streets of Toronto. Despite having been there for several nights, they weren't homeless. They were camping outside of H&M to be first in line for the launch of Jimmy Choo's H&M line. Jimmy Choo is a brand of luxury women's shoes. Jimmy Choo shoes can cost between \$400 - \$1500. H&M Jimmy Choo shoes would be cheaper. These young ladies wanted a piece of the action.

I wondered about how these lower priced luxury items would

be differentiated from their more expensive counterparts in the minds of their owners. Physically there are price point markers built into every stage of a brand so higher priced versions can be differentiated from lower ones. Otherwise, who would pay for the more expensive version? A discerning consumer can certainly spot a Gucci bag made illegally or on the cheap. Does it matter if it's the real thing to the person who owns it?

Perhaps the most offensive aspect of luxury goods is their markup. Only the highest of the highest end, and I mean limited runs of perhaps several hundred, were ever made by couture standards.

'Couture' is a word that no longer holds its meaning. Originally, there was a council in France that had to approve and certify an item was couture based on its high standards for workmanship, worker equity and skill. The council allowed only those items deemed couture to make claim to the couture name and the couture price.

These days, unless you are buying an absolute top, top of the line bag from Gucci (after waiting patiently on a list), the purse was produced in China, or a sweatshop in a country far more obscure. This is true of all luxury labels. The majority of their expensive products are produced in factories alongside jeans. Inexpensive jeans and T-shirts. This does not cost a lot of money.

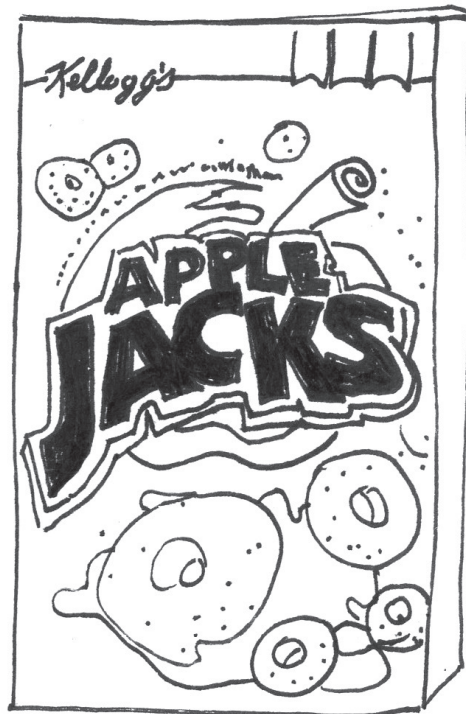
I suggest that the luxury goods market lacks transparency and regulation. Donald Thompson, an economics professor, has similar feelings about the art market. He calls it the largest unregulated and least transparent market in the world [4].

Also in the news recently I read about an organized crime ring in New Jersey. This ring involved multiple mayors, rabbis and a large

network of people from all sectors of society in black market trade. The trading being conducted was in human organs, a rare and exclusive market for those who can afford to pay.

Masquerading as construction workers, the ring demonstrated an expertise in convincing hospitals that organ sellers were concerned relatives eager to donate those same organs to their ailing loved ones. If the organ provider suffered a change of heart they would be held at gun point and convinced anew of their convictions.

Human kidneys were purchased for \$10,000 then sold for \$160,000. This is a 1600% markup. I read that one transaction transpired with the help of a box of Apple Jacks. Apple Jacks is the cereal that does not taste like apples. Its box looks like this:



The prize stuffed inside was \$97,000.

Like most schemes you'd have to be pretty creative to pull it off. You'd also have to be pretty creative to dream it up in the first place. The genius of this particular operation was twofold. Rabbis, one dubbed 'The Matchmaker' convinced Israelis to sell their organs. They would fly to America concealing the black market trade by using their own bodies as delivery envelopes.

The other intelligent thing the ring did was to diversify. This approach is simply good business, especially in a high stakes market. So what else are people willing to buy from Rabbis beside black market organs?

Louis Vuitton purses.

Demand and desire for an object has little relationship to practical reality. A coveted object frequently lies beyond our means and is occasionally rare. In an art market flooded with work of varying caliber, it is the experts who determine which ones are the most desirable, even if these decisions defy logic.

After his death the Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board was created to address an increase in forgeries. But what is a Warhol forgery?

Warhol adopted the tenets of mass production, using hangers-on as labour in the production of his work. He called his studio 'The Factory'. His Factory approach challenged traditional notions of art production. Acting as a type of assembly line for all that bore the Warhol brand, production included such items as silk screens and films. Works were produced *en masse* and used as currency to

reimburse both paid and unpaid workers. His outsourcing helped multiply his output. Some works were signed, some were not, and some were signed by his mother.

The authentication board accepted the absurd task of guaranteeing each Warhol it encountered. This seems like a cruel joke in light of Warhol's intention of questioning art and authenticity. This board, whether evaluating for insurance or sale purposes, marks the back of each piece with a permanent evaluation of its ruling.

When tricked, the board proved inconsistent by contradicting its own judgment. To make matters more complex the board does not provide explanations for, or revisit (without trickery), its decisions. This is additionally complicated by the board's conflict of interest as it is also responsible for selling works in the same market as those it rules on. Yikes.

Remember - without experts there could be no fakes.

# 10

When are the findings of a forensic scientist less dependable than those of art historians?

When a truck driver from California purchased a very large painting for \$5 at a thrift store.

She brought it to a friend's house as a joke. Her friend was depressed, and the truck driver figured her friend would derive pleasure from wrecking something. The truck driver's plan was to have a few drinks and then use the painting for target practice. The ladies started drinking and forgot about the painting.

The painting lingered in the back of her truck and traveled with various cargo until she decided to sell it at a garage sale. A friendly neighbor suggested that it might be a Jackson Pollock.

Because of the size of the painting it was also suggested that it could be an expensive Jackson Pollock.

The truck driver enlisted professional art dealers to sell the painting, but because it didn't have provenance it could not fetch its value on the art market. No one was willing to pay full price for a Pollock that came from a thrift store.

The truck driver hired a forensic scientist to determine conclusively whether or not the painting was a Pollock. The scientist quickly discovered multiple finger prints that matched Pollock's on the back of the painting. As if that wasn't enough, paint chips from the floor of Pollock's studio were matched exactly with the paint on the canvas. In a court of law, if the painting was a murder weapon, it could be conclusively traced back to the hand of Pollock.

This painting is still for sale. From what I understand it is in storage and not being enjoyed by anyone, not even for the pleasure of being destroyed.

Are you wondering what provenance is? Provenance tracks a painting or other work of art through its various owners, appreciating in worth as it passes through the lives of the important and famous. A social guarantee of value, in the case of market artworks, cannot be ascribed by the hand of the maker, only by its association with its financial transactions.

People have provenance too, whether it's real or imaginary. I try hard not to make face when someone tells me their theory about their own reincarnation. Have you ever noticed that when people believe that they have been reincarnated they were never someone boring in a past life? You never hear "I was a farm wife with ten kids and died in childbirth."

Everyone was Cleopatra or some shit.

Unlike art, ancestry can be validated through science. This science has given us daytime television shows like Maury. Maury is a 'talk show' featuring non-actors' real life dramas. The plot of at least half of Maury's episodes involves DNA testing over embattled

paternity, the other half are about poorly behaved teenagers and their distressed single parents.

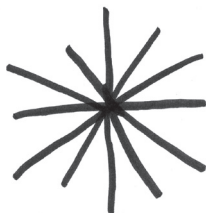
In the 1990s when DNA was still new and exorbitantly pricey, a serious nighttime news show did a feature story on the wonders of DNA. The story began with the introduction of a tribe in Africa. This tribe honors many practices that are Semitic in their origins. They claim to be descendants of Aaron and call themselves Jews.

In Judaism you are generally Jewish through your mother. However, there are Jews who are thought to be direct descendants of Aaron, related to one another through their male parents. This bloodline is special and held in high esteem.

The Jewish descendants of Aaron in Israel donated DNA to the news program for testing. True to their claims the African tribe shared direct ancestry with their Jewish brothers.

It has seemed to me for most of my life that the ancestry of friends and acquaintances involved more impressive relatives. I didn't know much about my bloodline, so I began to search for impressive figures to throw down. I ended up with a famous Irish sheep thief.

I felt like an asshole. Kurt's asshole looks like this:



The asshole I am referring to however is a card game. Do you know it? The players take turns laying down high powered cards.



The loser with the least powerful cards becomes the asshole of the following game. Being the asshole means you are disadvantaged further, having to hand over your two highest cards to other players before the game even begins. Yikes.

The bloodline game would certainly have regional differences. In Saskatchewan many people claim to be related to Gabriel Dumont, whether Métis or not. A Métis is a person whose origins lie in the blending of Native people and voyageurs. Voyageurs, also known as *coureurs des bois*, were French fur traders working outside of the law.

Gabriel Dumont is famous for his association with another Métis named Louis Riel.

Louis Riel was in exile when Dumont went to fetch him from America. Before being exiled Riel had been an elected member of the Canadian House of Commons, notably negotiating the inclusion of the province of Manitoba, formerly part of Rupert's Land, into Confederation. Riel was offered forgiveness by the Prime Minister in exchange for an exile of five years in America. The reason he was exiled was in hopes the territory he had represented might calm down. It didn't.

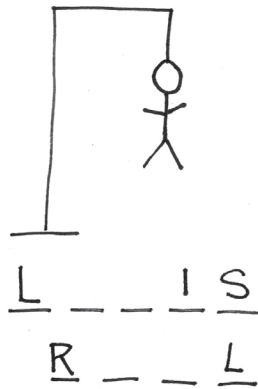
And he had also executed a man.

Riel was deluded, and while exiled his megalomania intensified. He adopted a righteous belief in his own power and omnipotence. Riel came to believe he was the divinely chosen leader and prophet of the Métis. When Dumont showed up Riel was already unhinged.

The unhinged Riel travelled with Dumont back to Manitoba. Once

there they established a provisional government and began the North West Rebellion.

Divine power has a way of making you unreasonably confident in your own decisions. Riel's increasingly impassioned speeches began to drive away support the Métis did have with the French communities. Ultimately this did not end well for Riel who was tried and hung for treason, forever immortalized by his death.



Perhaps it is Louis Riel's delusion that created a preference for being a relation of Dumont. That said, old Gabriel lived a long life. For years Dumont had a rock star roll in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Who knows how many descendants he may actually have? Perhaps in our modern times Dumont would be on Maury denying baby mamas left and right.

One of the reasons the Métis began the Northwest Rebellion was a matter of real estate. The major source of Métis livelihood had become farming. This was being complicated by the Canadian government. The government was increasingly appropriating Métis real estate to sell. This real estate was being sold to new, mostly

eastern European settlers who were not wanted on the best real estate they had already claimed for themselves.

Before farming, hunting bison had been the mainstay of the Métis way of life. The Métis were already suffering before losing their real estate because the bison were dwindling.

Today we would say that the bison were endangered.

# 11

Animals are known as endangered when they are few in numbers or are threatened by changes to their environment. Changes to their environment are often initiated by our species. The common loon, like the bison, is an endangered animal. A loon is a large bird that looks like a duck. You can see the loon on the Loonie.

'Loonie' is what we call our one dollar coin in Canada. We call it a Loonie because it has a loon on it. The Loonie looks like this:



On the back is Queen Elizabeth II.

Loonie was not the coin's given name, but instead a popular nickname that took over. There are far more Loonies than loons in Canada.

Apparently the original design had a voyageur theme. The voyageur

design was scrapped when the Canadian Mint lost the originals in the mail. This created a troubling opportunity for those working outside of the law, like the voyageurs, to make their own copies of the new coin.

When I was a little girl we still had paper \$1 bills. We also used to have paper \$2 bills. Now the \$2 is also a coin. The \$2 coin looks like this:



We call the two dollar coin a Toonie because we are bad at nicknames.

Canada proudly trades in loons and polar bears and Native culture on the international market. We also trade crude. A lot of crude. Alberta Energy proudly touts the province as being the second largest crude oil source in the world after Saudi Arabia. The main source of this oil is the tar sands in Alberta, also formerly part of Rupert's Land.

These sands are hidden deep below ground. To get to the sand, first the forest above must be clear cut. Once the landscape is plucked bare, the top soil needs to be removed. The result is a giant pit. This giant pit is as large as England and visible from space.

It takes between two to four barrels of water to push one barrel of oil out of the sand. This water is then fully polluted.

This waste water forms what are known as tailing ponds. 'Pond' however is not an accurate description. These ponds are so large you can also see them from space. In fact, what is happening in the tar sands is the biggest industrial development on earth.

One of the companies spearheading the Alberta tar sand extraction is British Petroleum.

British Petroleum, AKA BP, meddling about on land may seem safer than their exploits in the Gulf of Mexico. I would like to point out, however, that the Athabasca watershed, source of Canadian drinking water, is desperately close to all this ruckus.

Tailing ponds look like regular water to the tiny red eyes of loons. They aren't. A bird that fishes these waters may end up with a two mouthed fish, the same as a local fisherman pulled from the water a little over a year ago. A bird that makes contact with these waters will be covered in sticky oil. This will ultimately lead to its death.

This happened to 500 ducks in April 2008. To keep this from happening oil companies are supposed to use scarecrows and noise to dissuade the wildlife. The company was billed \$300,000. This means the life of each duck was worth 600 Loonies.

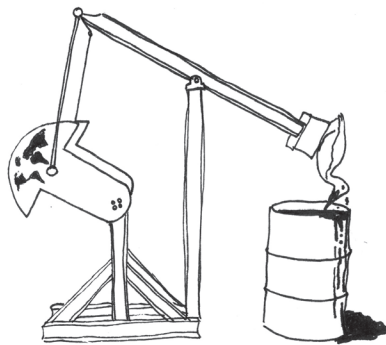
As bad as the birds have it the polar bears have it worse. The polar bear, like the loon, is an endangered animal. The tar sands emit something we know as greenhouse gases. These gases are responsible for heating up our planet. The polar bear needs polar

regions to survive. Polar bears are fucked when their environments melt.

Fucked if you're a polar bear, fucked if you're a loon.

Looking at our money for clues about great crimes was indeed proving fruitful. Knowing I would soon be showing my artwork on an international stage in Beirut, I began to design a sculpture that I felt would best represent Kurt's canary in the coal mine.

It's called Dirty Loonie:



Dirty Loonie appears and functions like an oil derrick. Oil derricks are the machines that litter the prairies pumping oil from below ground.

I assumed securing a stuffed loon would be the most difficult aspect of the project. Because the loon is endangered, killing one for the purpose of taxidermy is illegal. I would need a really old one or a friend willing to commit the crime for me.

For the record, I did have a cousin who was willing.

Luckily, the director of our program found a stuffed loon for me on

Craigslist. The loon had been stuffed by the mayor of some small Ontario town over one hundred years ago. His descendants were now selling the loon for a fraction of what I had anticipated paying for it.

Score.

Dirty Loonie was a first for me as a sculptor. This would be my first artwork that was kinetic. I had only recently learned how to weld and rivet. I knew I had to turn to the support of others.

I found myself wondering if it really mattered who had made the object if the idea was mine.





# 12

Being highly protective of ideas is a trend amongst my peers. Perhaps this is a trait I did not share because I was naïve. Ultimately, if someone chooses to copy, it is their own sad lack of creativity. I never felt threatened by the possibility of stolen ideas until I was burned myself.

The person who burned me had participated in the same artist residency as I had at the arts centre. We were quite familiar with each other's work, and I say this knowing we discussed, at length, my project he recently copied some seven years later.

This seemed like a deeper transgression than stealing my unborn child. I have laid in bed all month wishing desperately that someone else would call him out for this.

Perhaps this is passive aggressive. Yikes.

As I stared at the ceiling I would think about the relatively advanced state of his career. He could clearly get away with stealing from emerging artists, so shouldn't he? What does it mean to steal ideas in our post-modern world anyhow?

Protectionism is slightly easier to understand amongst competitive

peers, but I was heartbroken to experience it with teachers. I once found myself in a room of ninth graders brainstorming ideas for projects they could execute under my tutelage. As ideas were thrown around and excitement grew I'd add my own or tweak those on the table.

When class was done and the students had left the art teacher cautioned me about sharing my ideas. He was horrified that I had given away such precious creative capital to be executed by fourteen year olds. He advised me never to share so they wouldn't ruin or steal my ideas.

I couldn't see how this could be a problem. I told him that I'd simply think of something new. At worst, if I really felt the need to make the piece myself, I wouldn't feel particularly threatened by the work of a fourteen year old. I wondered how he could teach without generosity.

The history of art is a showcase of students who learned from their masters by reproducing, and occasionally producing, the bulk of their master's work. Views of this practice range. It can be denounced as outsourcing or embraced as educational. Writer Hunter S. Thompson, of his own volition, typed both *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms* in their entirety to study their sentence structure [1].

So, does it matter who makes a work if it is essentially the same?

While working on an art project I went through a phase in which I used crime documentaries to keep me company while I worked. I had a window of time between my morning job and my afternoon job, so I was at the mercy of day time television programming.

Having worked in the ad business, I remained interested in what commercials have to say. It tells me who else watches the same program. Based on the ads in this show, I determined it was senior citizens.

This type of program begins by putting the story into context; “In a town like yours, with people like those you know, an unimaginable thing happened”. I found after a few weeks that I began to turn on the basement lights before going down, and to race from the car to the house after shifts at the bar. The more normal the scene of these horrific crimes, the more it seemed possible that they may occur to me. Coincidentally, at the time the odds of being the victim of a homicide were highest for those living in Saskatoon [2]. Yikes.

Mind you, I was 149 times more likely to have a fraud committed in my name [3]. This eventually happened.

I never thought it would happen to me. My credit hardly seemed worth stealing. If I could do nothing with it, I figured neither could anyone else. I got a call from my cell phone provider to inform me that a man had tried to open an account using my Social Insurance Number (SIN). After calling the Credit Bureau I learned that this man had successfully opened three other cell phone accounts with my SIN. I developed new respect for my credit rating.

When a police officer from the fraud division showed up it wasn't long before I realized he would barely pursue my case. He spent the house call looking around my meagre apartment with dull eyes.

Having worked at a bank, I knew what to produce in case of a fraud, and had gathered a lot of evidence. This information included the driver's license number and address used by the perpetrator, who

incidentally paid the bills occasionally. I was told someone would follow up. Despite leaving a few inquiring voice mails, I never heard about it again from the police.

I hear about it all of the time from everyone except the police. Any new bank account, hydro account or any other damn thing that requires my personal information also requires a rigorous background check. Despite this check, and full disclosure on my part, I still must endure heavy restrictions through no fault of my own.

These aren't the only restrictions that continue to define my identity. My timing doing research for an artwork set off a few flags that still haunt me. Perhaps ordering a Nazi tank operator's manual and blueprints for a military tank currently in production, was kind of asking for it. That was predictable, but what I didn't see coming was the events of 9/11.

Generations are often defined by events they share in their collective memory. Any friend of my parents could tell you where they were when John Lennon was shot. I can distinctly remember where I was when Princess Diana died because I was camping on an island that was only accessible by boat. This meant no power or other amenities. My friend and I were cooking breakfast on a campfire when a man from the neighbouring campsite came to ours with the news. I hadn't heard a radio in three days as neighbours, so I was curious how he'd found out. He had been watching TV on his yacht. Go figure.

Although these things are relatably tragic, the only effect this type of news typically has on my personal life is to make news unbearable. The events of 9/11 not only made it increasingly annoying for me to

cross borders, but I also lost my job. At the time I was working in the film business making commercials for advertising firms from New York. Our working season ended early that year.

Losing my job this way wasn't the kind of thing I could complain about. That said, I didn't know what to do.

I turned to one of those job agencies. A test was administered to determine what would be the best job for my skill set and intelligence. This particular aptitude test resulted in being offered a three month contract, precisely long enough to pay my Visa bills until the next film season would resume. When I showed up for work I learned that I would be working for a financial institution, the biggest of its kind: Citifinancial.



# 13

I was trained by Citifinancial to answer phone calls and questions about loans that been made to make purchases from a variety of businesses. Citifinancial eagerly provided the funding for all nature of shopping - mattresses, radio controlled cars, couches, computers, you name it.

The ways that these loans could be repaid were as varied as the items Citifinancial funded. Some payment plans offered three years with no interest. Others required equal monthly payments. No matter the method, the goal was the same - to open as many accounts as possible, for as many people as possible who were the least likely to keep up with payments.

Making minimum payments over the term of a loan will extend its life almost endlessly. If the loan went into arrears, Citifinancial would help you by refinancing it through Citibank. Citibank would pay out the original loan, including the accrued 28.75% interest, then offer lower minimum payments and interest rates. This is a very efficient way to make money.

And we haven't even begun to discuss the penalties yet.



Say you took out one of these loans to buy a sound system. It is interest free if you make equal payments over the life of the loan. You make your payments, confident you've got the system licked. Think again. I spent most of my working day answering calls from people who had been penalized a whole year of interest because their last payment was received hours after the deadline or lost all together.

Employees were pressured to answer between 45 - 50 calls per hour. Customers were rushed off the phone, and certainly never transferred. Most callers would tell me they'd been on hold for up to an hour. Often it was the third time they had called with the same problem.

The same problem.

Having grown up with a close relationship to my grandparents, senior citizens were my Achilles' heel. I have a distinct memory of being about twelve and seeing a Jesus Christ of Later Day Saints commercial that made me heave because I wept so hard.

The commercial unfolds on a quiet, dark and rainy night with an old man walking the seemingly normal city streets. Suddenly a group of teenage thugs appear and begin to kick the shit out of the elderly man. The youths flee with the old man's wallet. The elderly victim, bleeding and helpless on the sidewalk, reaches out to other pedestrians who step over him.

Many years later I was struck by the similarity of an experiment conducted by my favorite magazine. The experiment was designed to determine what urban people would do when confronted with a dead homeless person. The magazine hired an actor to play

the dead homeless man. They set him up in financial districts in a variety of major cities. The scene was surveilled to witness how long it would take for someone to check and see if the fake homeless person was alive.

In most cities, like London and New York, the experiment did not last long. A passerby would bend over to check for vital signs, and the elapsed time was noted. However, in Toronto the experiment was shut down after 24 hours when not one person stopped to check. Since then I at least peek at unmoving bodies to check for subtle hints of life, although it occurs to me that checking for vital signs isn't exactly a gesture of shared humanity.

Because of my sympathy for those in peril, especially senior citizens, I always made time for them on the phone at my new job. Many problems could be solved by putting the caller on hold and walking across the room to the billing department.

This did not make me popular with my supervisor who took me into her office.

My supervisor had been with the institution for some time. Her pay and position were relative to her ability to manage her staff's efficiency. My time wasted on solving customers' problems was not efficient. She asked me to be sympathetic to her and her position. With a photo of the teenage kids she raised as a single mom prominent on the desk behind her, what choice did I have? I started to stay in my cubicle.

A friend from the mailroom appeared at my cubicle one day in a state of giggly that betrayed upset and confusion. He had received a document he needed to show someone, and wanted to know

when my break was. As promised, I met him outside and he pulled the document from the inside pocket of his coat. It was a police report that a bereaved family had faxed. In the case of death a customer's relative must fax a death certificate, so I was familiar with their presence in the mailroom.

I told my friend to call the family and ask for the certificate instead. He insisted I look at the document again.

The man who had died was from rural Alberta. It was a suicide and the fax had been sent by his daughter. I had never seen a police report, and haven't seen one since. The deceased had mounting money problems. He was recently divorced and had lost his job. He had alcohol problems and had been found in his vehicle dead from a single shotgun blast to the head, after a night of drinking.

Every time I hear an ad for furniture store financing I feel culpable.

Yikes.

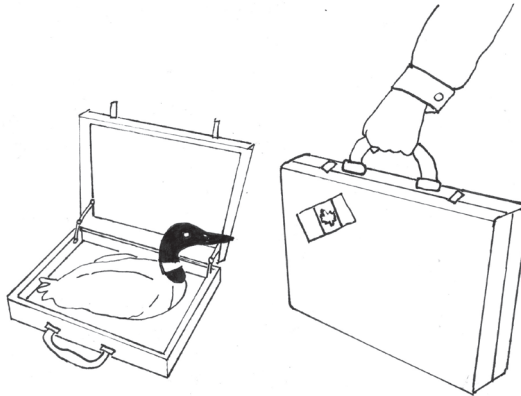
I suppose I understood interest on a basic level before I worked at Citifinancial, but I'd never really thought about it on a physical level. Citifinancial would lend someone a thousand dollars, and at the end of the month the borrower owed \$1000 plus \$287.50 that had never existed in the first place. This is of course assuming payments were made on time.

Citifinancial was inventing money, minting its existence out of hypothetical rules and the stratosphere. Citifinancial was making stuff up.

The only cheaters that can safely be fingered are those bellow a certain strata of power.

Above a certain strata of power, the rules change. To transport Dirty Loonie to Beirut so I could compete in the Vlième Jeux de la Francophonie was going to be difficult. Not because of the sculpture's weight or size, but because moving a stuffed endangered animal across a border is illegal. When you are working directly with the government, moving difficult things across borders is a breeze.

A Canadian diplomat flew with my loon as their luggage. I imagine that it looked like this:



I'm not sure what I would have done otherwise.

It is those bellow that strata of power who end up most desperate for a solution. Seniors are feeling the pressure of our recession, ending up desperate with no one to turn to. An elderly man in San Diego took matters into his own hands. True story. He dressed in a nice suit and headed to the bank to give them a piece of his mind.

The picture of respectability, with an oxygen tank in tow, he headed off to the bank to rob them. May I note that his robbery attempt was successful. So successful that he did it twice.

There was no word on whether he drove or took the bus.

News of this type often has little follow up. I'll likely never hear if the man was caught and forget about it until I read this again. The news story was scarcely longer than my description, although it did indicate the whole thing happened in the suburb of La Jolla, San Diego.

I'm sure folks in La Jolla would say stuff like that doesn't happen in a town like theirs. The neighborhood is a touch upper scale with a beachfront guarantee. A well-dressed senior is not likely to arouse much suspicion. If La Jolla is at all like Toronto, a senior with an oxygen tank is likely to be paid less mind than a senior without one.

# 14

My first job after moving to Toronto was at Blockbuster. This also got me a Blockbuster card, which at the time would have been impossible because membership required a credit card.

To secure the job I had to complete a test to gauge psychological fitness. The questions were dished in threes, meaning reworded and re-asked three times. As an example, I was asked to choose the most honest answer for the following;

Taking something small from work is okay.

Stealing is okay if you are poor.

Stealing, if no one knows, is okay.

Okay, now even if you think stealing is justifiable in some circumstances, you'd have to be really stupid to say so at a job interview.

The only thing you need to be capable of to work at Blockbuster is alphabetizing. It is a bonus if you like movies and can talk to people. To perform a transaction you scanned a laser gun across a variety of barcodes and a computer did all of the work for you. A barcode is a design that turns into information when a laser is shone on it. A barcode looks like this:



Beside alphabetizing and operating laser guns, the focus of the job was theft prevention.

I had not accounted for the morality I would experience involving my personal safety.

On a normal, sunny and pleasant afternoon I was working alone with a very pregnant co-worker. A large, gruff and scary looking dude came to the front with a stack of video games. He told us frankly he wasn't going to pay for them. We looked at one another, shrugged, and offered him a bag.

No words were needed to make such a choice.

Because it was a large corporation, Blockbuster was frequently the target of small organized crime. Employees would get reports of schemes to be aware of, and these were always quite clever. A particularly savvy one involved a shopper filling a basket, then abandoning it near the front door. The accomplice would then enter, bending down pretending to drop off a video, leaving with the basket of goods. Soon after magnetic sensors appeared in the entrance.

When I'd tell people I worked at Blockbuster they'd get all conspiracy on me and say they knew that Blockbuster edited their movies. Not only is this untrue, but betrays a basic misunderstanding of

the behemoth that is Viacom, owner of Blockbuster. Muscle can be applied in other ways.

I'd tell skeptics to flip the video copy they were renting on its side and read the spine. Did it say 'Rated Version'? Viacom own a lot of media, including Paramount Pictures. Paramount owns Dreamworks, MTV movies, Marvel and Nickelodeon, to name a few. Production companies frequently offer two edits on the market, and at Blockbuster it was usually the Rated Version that was available.

'Rated Version' did not mean the film had been classified, ie - G, PG, 14A, 18A, R or A.

Rated Version indicates that it is a second version, one that has been massaged slightly from the theatrical release. Rated Versions include less 'A' to be more competitive on the PG video market. Artistic integrity be damned.





# 15

Convincing others to do your bidding doesn't require muscle if you are charming.

In *Breakfast of Champions* Kurt Vonnegut discusses charm. He claims that charm is a scheme for making strangers like and trust you immediately, no matter what the charmer has in mine.

Kurt claims to have oodles of charm.

I also claim to have oodles of charm.

I value my charm because I am not brave enough to commit my own crimes. This is what boyfriends and the dudes I know are for. I got called out recently when one dude was hauling milk crates to my apartment while I tagged along empty handed. Those empty hands were busy explaining something funny and I was busy being my distracting self.

This job has a high turn over rate.

Incidentally this is the same model I use for downloading music or movies. I wouldn't dare do it myself, but love to receive, even hassle to receive, delicious new music. The mixed tape has been

a token of friendship and affection through my lifetime. There are countless bands I wouldn't have discovered otherwise, and these mixes seemingly let you peer into someone else's tastes and feelings. This doesn't feel illegal.

In the past when a monarch wanted something they didn't want to steal themselves they also turned to boyfriends and the dudes they knew. This held true when people began to mess about in boats that covered great distances. When messing about netted results, especially the discovery of the New World, monarchs wanted a piece of the action. Embarking on these expensive antics required a re-branding, and sea pirates became 'explorers' before being known as 'colonizers'.

To complete the rebranding ships were no longer named the 'Jolly Roger'. Instead they took names like 'Discovery'.

Discovery is a popular name for ships. James Cook, who discovered Australia, Hawaii and Newfoundland, had one. In the film 2001 the space ship controlled by the eerie HAL is also called Discovery. A ship called Discovery was sent to the Antarctic at the start of the 20th Century, and into space near the end of it. Dutchman Henry Hudson, who discovered New York, returned there in a ship called Discovery. This, however, was not as fortuitous as his first trip to the New World. Hudson's crew was sick of traveling, and mutinied. He was set adrift in a small boat with his son and a few supporters who were never heard from again. The crew made it home and rebranded Hudson as a lunatic. They were rebranded as heroes.

Heroes.

The word 'pirate' has since been repurposed to brand those

who download music and movies. These days, before a film starts in the theater, viewers are forced to watch public service announcements (PSAs) with poor production values targeting the mentality of media pirates. The PSA shows someone suitably criminal in appearance committing a crime, like stealing a car. This is then compared to downloading free music and movies. The result of such creative discovery, like that of Henry Hudson, is not fortuitous. Both offenders invariably end up in the backseat of a police car with red and blue lights flashing across their shame and bad luck.

The word 'pirate' does not tend to evoke dudes who steal cars but instead, thanks to Disney, brings movie star Johnny Depp to the mind of females (and a few males) across the New World. His role in *Pirates of the Caribbean* reminds us that chicks dig a bad boy. Depp's pirate - Depp's anything for that matter - is sexy and a bit dangerous, but in a seemingly good-hearted way.

In a similarly dangerous yet seemingly good hearted way the spread of information is perceived as having the ability to enlightens us as humans. Thanks to the Age of Enlightenment, and the invention of the printing press, the spread of information became the foundation of our modern social and cultural order. It also became a source of economic profit. When something is transferred to the domain of commodity, the rules change.

Originally, the notion of piracy revolved around the theft of physical property, not ideas. The concept that knowledge could be *created*, independent of God's charity, was relatively revolutionary at the time. Piracy is upsetting because of what it implies about knowledge and ownership, reflecting the rise of intellectual property and its role as commodity [1]. The vendor, when the commodity is

an idea, is rarely the author of said creation. Do you know how little a band makes on the sale of their albums?

Although it varies from case to case, it is assuredly very little.

In the case of musicians, a band's recordings are owned by their record label who likely paid for the expensive studio time in the first place. The label then promotes the product and keeps the majority of the proceeds. Bands who don't 'make it', already indebted to labels for fronting the cost of studio time and promotion, end up owing labels huge money for repayment of the investment in their creative endeavors.

This relationship between musician and record label is in jeopardy with the advent of the Internet and evolution of software, making it possible for bands to both record and promote themselves independent of this formerly co-dependent relationship. Digital distribution is on the rise as record stores close. iTunes now sells 25% of all music sold in America as of August 2009, a number that is on the rise [2]. Even recording giant EMI are up to their tits in debt to Citigroup, just like your average couch buying joe, owing them \$160 million [3]. I'm not sure if they have any better luck getting Citigroup on the phone, but perhaps they can still afford to hire the dudes they know to hold the line.

This is both refreshing and troubling. Labels in the past have provided legitimacy, much like art critics and art institutions. Labels, despite building fortunes off the backs of the creativity of others, have the chops to sell songs to commercials, TV shows and movies that offer exposure, even with a decline in radio listeners. Labels additionally have legal departments and other experts capable of negotiating the business world, one that is often troubling and difficult for artists.

**100 Sarah Beck**

Control of ideas is mediated by their relationship with our value systems. This control is mediated by those who mind the gates. I remain skeptical about gatekeeping, and find that it needs increasingly to be reevaluated in response to shifting attitudes about the ownership of knowledge. I would not accept surgery from someone without a license, or a kidney from a rabbi, but I intend to suggest that art belongs to us all.

(Pirates, by the way, were the first to use a system of democracy).



# 16

I had thought long and hard about what I would make at the Vlième Jeux de la Francophonie.

The Jeux de la Francophonie is like the Commonwealth Games. Countries who identify as being French-speaking gather every four years to pit their best and brightest against one another. At the Commonwealth Games the competitors are athletes. At the Jeux de la Francophonie there are athletes competing, but the competition has been extended to the arts.

When I explain this to English Canadians they say the following:

“Of *course* the French games include art.”

Countries that speak French that are far away from France speak French because of sea pirates. Sea pirates had at some point discovered the now French-speaking country’s valuable real estate. This is also true of most English-speaking countries.

I started thinking about the sea pirates and the sculpture I would make in Beirut.

When the French sea pirates, or voyageurs, came to Canada they



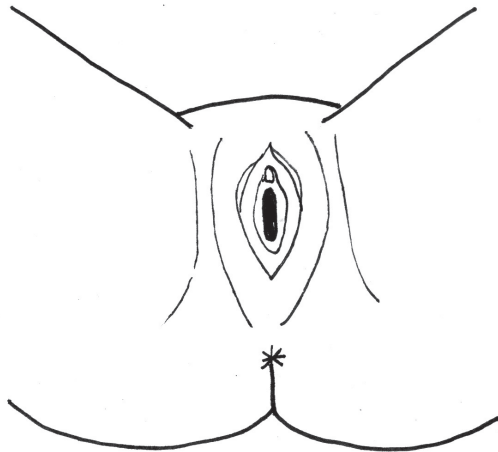
were more interested in beaver than real estate. I mean this both ways.

A beaver is a large rodent that looks like this:



Canada was flush with beaver. Voyageurs would trap them and sell them for a top dollar to Europeans. Beaver is very soft and warm in winter.

The other beaver the voyageurs were interested in looked like this:



Hence the Métis.

Realizing there was a shortage of women for voyageurs to fornicate with, the King of France sent the women we now know as *les filles du roi*. *Les filles du roi* were between 12-25 and meant as presents for the voyageurs. That imported beaver helped populate this country.

Kurt drew a wide open beaver in his novel *Breakfast of Champions*. It looked like this:



Notice the difference, 37 years later, in grooming between my beaver and Kurt's beaver. These days there is a lot of cold beaver in Canada in the winter.

Today the beaver is on the front of the Canadian 5¢ coin. It looks like this:



Queen Elizabeth II is on the back. We call the Canadian 5¢ coin a 'Nickel' because it was once made from nickel.

I decided I wanted to collect a lot of Canadian nickels and bring them with me to Beirut. I wanted to do this because I now had beaver on my mind 3,0390,555,555.6 times more than France which was on my mind 3,0390,555,555.6 times more than testicles.

You see, I had become very interested in how I could turn money into art. Literally.

I enrolled in courses about metal casting to learn how this would work. While there I learned that when jewelers needed raw material for castings they would buy old or foreign coins at the pawn shop. This was apparently legal.

I sought the support of the government to bring a shit tonne of nickels with me to Beirut to cast a sculpture for the competition. I was planning to cast a beaver from all these nickels in a foreign land. To oppose the voyageurs who turned beaver to money by sending it east, I was going to turn money to beaver.

The government was again very supportive. They helped put me in contact with local foundries and offered to arrange transportation. I was dutifully impressed. As I began to contact foundries a few challenges came to light that were critical in my decision not to cast the nickel beaver. Heavy traffic, language barriers and a culturally different perception of time could be negotiated if I was patient and had support.

However, I soon discovered that the nickel was no longer really nickel.

During both the first and second World Wars the Canadian government reduced the nickel in the nickel to redirect it instead to

war efforts. Once the wars were over the nickel was restored to the nickel. Ten years ago the nickel was again removed from the nickel except for the thinnest coat on the front and back.

The nickel is now a nickel sandwich. This was also negotiable.

What was not negotiable was an accidental discovery I made while talking to locals who ran foundries. People in Beirut generally had no idea what a beaver was. I would later discover they didn't know what a loon was either, but that is beside the point. The point is that my money trick would not work for this audience. Yikes.

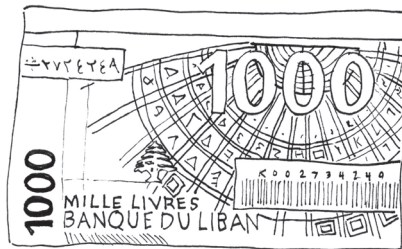
I would need new material.



# 17

I required a symbol that would be easily recognized and understood by visitors to my studio during the competition. This was especially important for locals with whom I shared no language.

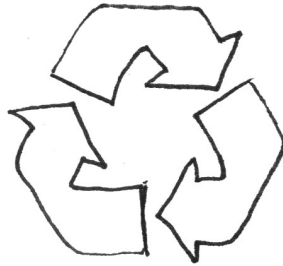
This time I looked at *their* money for clues instead of my own. Their basic unit of paper money looked like this:



It is called 'Mille Livres' which means one thousand pounds in English. This sounds more significant than a Loonie. It isn't.

As I stared at the circular pattern in the upper right corner it began to remind me of Tibetan mandalas.

A Tibetan mandala is a Buddhist tradition. Buddhists believe that when they die they come back to the earth again but in a different form. For a Buddhist, History looks like this:



Tibetan mandalas are large intricate circular paintings made of sand. To make a mandala monks work in large groups to create their designs. These mandalas can take weeks to complete. The monks use no glue or fixative of any kind to make the mandala stay put. The intention is that once they are done the beautiful sand painting it will be swept away. The mandala is a Tibetan Buddhist exercise in non-attachment. This is to remind us that the things of this world, the objects, the commodities, are all transitory.

Money is transitory, like all commodities, if you think about it carefully. Money is simply a piece of paper. It is only worth the monetary value printed on it because we have all agreed that it is worth that amount. This must mark some type of human accomplishment - when was the last time we all agreed on something?

The money we use in the world today is called 'fiat money'. This is Latin for 'faith money'. You cannot take paper money to the bank and get its value in gold. You can buy gold with money, but you can buy anything with money. In fact, I would like to try to buy happiness with money. I have a feeling it is possible.

Before fiat money banks used to back money up. Banks were held responsible for guaranteeing money with reserves of gold. This was called 'credit currency'. Things have changed.

Now the government backs money with their good word. We the

people back money by believing that it is more than a printed piece of paper. This is a universal suspension of disbelief, and I would suggest the largest and most successful magic trick of all time. Money is a physical manifestation of that magic. We need the physical object to conduct transactions. We need to see that which we believe in.

God knows this. He has used sight in all sorts of ways to teach us, even sending Jesus as visible evidence of His existence and power. What we have witnessed with our eyes reinforces our belief that what we have seen is real. When what we have seen tests our ability to believe it is real, we call it a miracle.

Last winter an Airbus landed on the Hudson River next to New York City. Every passenger on board survived. They stepped bewildered onto the slightly submerged wings of the plane to wait for rescue boats to pick them up. As all 155 people waited it appeared as though they were walking on water. It looked like this:



The world watched on TV and declared that this was a miracle.

We believe the images we see in photos, on the Internet and on television. We believe even though we know that these images can lie. There are an abundance of cautionary tales to remind us to question our need for sight as evidence. Bluebeard, for example,



was a mean and scary pirate with many wives who had inexplicably disappeared. With a history like that how he ever found willing wives is beyond me. He must have been rich.

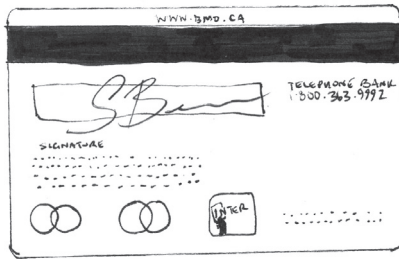
Anyhow, Bluebeard had a new young wife. Once they were married he immediately announced he would be departing on a business trip. He gave her all of the keys to his castle, then departed with a kiss. However, before leaving, he warned her not to enter one specific room. Ever.

Once Bluebeard was out of sight, her curiosity got the better of her. She headed directly for the room curious to see what was inside. What she discovered was all of the pirate's previous wives. They had been brutally murdered and were hanging from hooks like trophies.

Bluebeard's sudden return to check on his young wife revealed she had defied his orders. Domestic violence ensued.

There is an Austrian school of economics that contends that no fiat economy can endure. This is becoming painfully obvious as the world works to put out the fire of recent financial meltdowns. The reason the Lebanese paper money is Mille Livres is because the 1 Livre was no longer worth much. Things had changed, so the paper money did too.

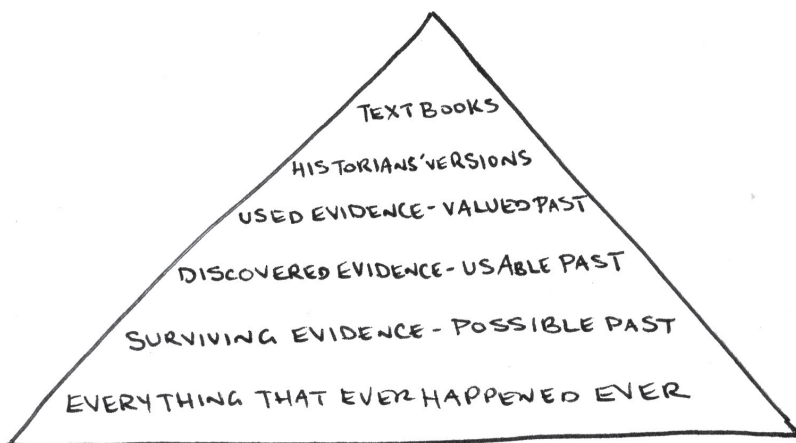
Money continues to change and in fact has begun to vanish right before our eyes. Increasingly transactions occur without physical paper money. Now we use plastic cards with magnetic strips on the back. They look like this:



These plastic cards send 1s and 0s flying through the sky and we believe that transactions have happened. 1s and 0s are how computers communicate. 1s and 0s are the language of computers. Computers speak very fast - they have fewer letters and words to remember than we do.

People developed a written language a long time ago so that they could record the things that happened. These records could do more than record transactions - these records could communicate with people in the future. Over time this changed the way that people thought about History. Now records could be created that would tell future people your side of the story.

A man named Fred Jewell made a drawing to illustrate how History is created. It looks like this [1]:



Before the alphabet people used pictures to communicate. We call this language hieroglyphics or cuneiform. This required hundreds and hundreds of symbols that were very hard to remember. Phoenetic language was born in and around Lebanon. In fact, the circular pattern on the Mille Livres is the very first alphabet of man.

This old alphabet dates back to at least 1000 years before Christ. It had 21 symbols to represent different sounds. 21 symbols were a lot easier to remember than hundreds of pictures. These symbols would make it easier to communicate with the living and with those in the future.

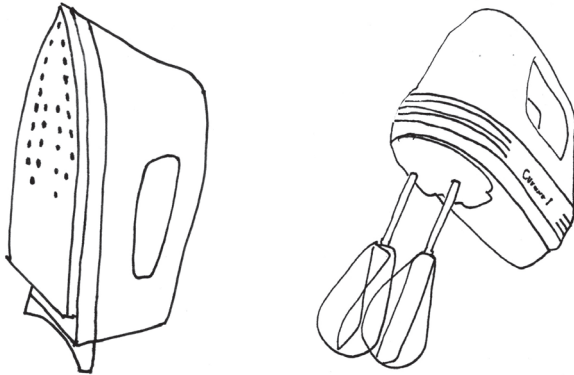
I had hit pay dirt. Lebanese currency alluded to the oldest currency of them all - communication.

I decided then and there that I would make the Mille Livres in sand. I would use no glue or fixative of any kind to make the money stay put. When I was done I would abandon it to be swept away.

I packed my bags and flew with Team Canada to Beirut. This time my baggage was a lot lighter.

# 18

I arrived in Beirut equipped to work, but I needed two tools to complete my task. The government outsourced the job to a local who bought me what I needed to work. They looked like this:



The iron would make my tracing of the Milles Livres flat again after its trip overseas in a tube. The mixer would blend the sand with dyes to create the coloured sand I would need to make the mandala.

There were a couple ladies on the cleaning staff who wandered through during the first day while we were setting up. They smiled, and waved, but spoke no French or English. But, with big smiles they lingered to see what I was doing. They were darker than the Lebanese people I had met, so I assumed that they were guest workers. This I later discovered to be true.

While I was working I noticed the cleaning ladies repeatedly returning to observe me and my activities. I tried to communicate by miming, and they smiled along, all of us nodding and using words the other did not understand.

A few hours later I spilled a bunch of sand and needed to clean it up. I searched all over for a broom, hesitating to ask the very busy studio staff. When I came across the cleaning ladies I tried to explain myself. Fortunately, miming 'broom' was pretty easy. Soon I found myself feeling awkward when they wouldn't let me sweep myself, insisting on doing it for me. I couldn't even thank them properly as there was no specific charade sufficiently translating gratitude.

That evening I thought about these women. I couldn't sleep anyhow because the sound of guns being fired in the night sky was alarming. In the morning I asked the government if, now that I was done with my appliances, I could give them away. They were excited about my idea, and encouraged me to go ahead with my plan.

When I arrived the cleaning ladies were already there. As I approached they called and waved to me from the balcony, all smiles. I felt good about my gift, and excitedly ran up the stairs to join them. After more miming and nodding I managed to convince them that they should take the appliances.

Once certain about what was going on they hopped around and hung from my neck. Charades were over and they were talking as fast as they could at the same time with one another. After a few minutes of this they disappeared.

An hour later they returned and insisted I take a photo with them. My

studio mate obligingly took photo after photo on my camera. They were very happy to be in the photo. This is one of those photos:



These ladies would never see this photo. They would never see any of the photos. They were simply happy to be part of the *idea* of the photos.

I settled into work, and a few moments later was interrupted by the cleaning ladies bringing a third friend to meet me. This time I got a name, Esmi, or so I thought. I later discovered that this means 'my name is', as in 'esmi Sarah'.

Their names turned out to be Salma and Hamida. I had made new friends.

Everywhere I went through the site of the Games I'd hear my name,

and look to see them waving from a balcony I'd never noticed. I felt like I'd done the right thing.

On the third day I showed up to commotion from Salma and Hamida who were trying frantically to explain something to me, always at the same time. My studio mate spoke some Arabic. Salma and Hamida also spoke some Arabic. I soon learned that the gifts had been stolen. We hugged when they knew I finally understood. This seemed to make them happy and they left.

Once they were gone my studio mate told me he thought they were looking for more handouts.

The rest of the day Salma and Hamida returned to contentedly watch me work and we continued our attempts at communicating. I found my friendliness remained, but I was left with a weird feeling about what my studio mate had told me. The ladies seemed so genuine, but maybe it was just to see what I would give them.

Later that evening I joined members of the government for dinner. Our coordinator asked if I'd given the appliances to the cleaning ladies, and I told him what had happened. He said he wasn't surprised. When I had asked him a couple days before if I could give the appliances away, he said he had debated stopping me. His experience with guest workers had been that their supervisor would confiscate all sorts of items from their staff, including tips.

I slept poorly again that night, although I was becoming accustomed to gunfire.

The fourth day when I arrived I had a new set of hands helping me. He had been asked by the jury to give me a hand with my mandala.

Not only did I have a new friend, but I had a translator as well who moved easily between French, English and Arabic.

We quickly began to chat and become friends. I soon learned he was also an artist and in fact a professor at our host university. I also learned more about Salma and Hamida who were as thrilled as I was to have a translator.

I learned they thought I was pretty and quite curious. They were all Bangladeshi and indeed guest workers. I had studied Bangladesh when producing an artwork about sweatshops. Knowing a little about their country gave me talking points.

The ladies wanted to know if I was married, and when they learned I wasn't, tried to set me up. They settled on my new friend. They told me, through our translator, that his name means handsome in Arabic. I also think they found my co-artists snobby and were thrilled by the attention and time my new friend made to speak with them.

I have had very limited exposure to guest workers and was saddened by the way the others treated them. Perhaps they knew something I didn't or perhaps they had learned their place in the class structures in their own communities. I have trouble with class which is a lot more subtle in North America.

I began however to feel like a guest worker myself. The artmaking portion of the Games was open to the public. Locals and dignitaries, as well as competitors from other disciplines toured the studios to watch the artists at work. I began to feel like an animal in a cage, especially when people would stand over me and discuss my work and my person while they watched.



Most of these visitors had cameras, and I was the subject of many peoples' travel photos. More often than not I would find myself posing for photos with groups of people. I spent a lot of my day explaining what I was doing and accommodating requests for photos. I have oodles of charm. I can only imagine how many Facebook pages I ended up on. As I am not a Facebooker, I will never know.

Visitors were only lightly interested in taking photos until I explained what I was doing. Once the mandala was complete, it would be swept away. Visitors were horrified, which resulted in photo taking and a myriad of suggested ways to save it.

I talked for days about the nature of money, the transience of life, and how little it bothered me that I would eventually destroy the work.

The person most upset with the imminent destruction was my new friend. He understood the concept best, but was most attached to the connection we had developed over our time working together. He asked me if it would be alright if he tried to save it. I was interested in his attachment to the work, and encouraged him to do as he wished once I had left.

About a month later my new friend called to say hello. I asked him how the mandala project had gone, and he became quite upset. He had undertaken a series of tests in his own studio and come up with a viable solution to save the mandala. When he returned he discovered that someone had damaged it by touching it.

The mystery person had been curious.

This was just perfect.

**120 Sarah Beck**

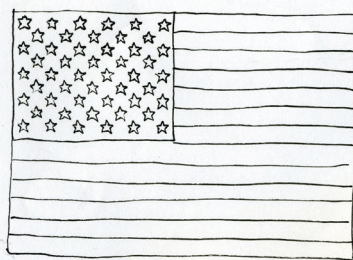
# 19

A few days after I had completed my mandala I learned that I had won a silver medal for Canada.

I always figured if I won an award I'd get to say a few words, you know like get to thank my Godless family, the Academy and whatnot. When the moment came I looked like this:



This is funny because the American flag looks like this:



The uniform looked nothing like the Canadian flag. I felt like an impostor, and not because I speak French like an American in Paris, nor because I was dressed like an American in the Middle East.

The medal I had just won wasn't mine, but that of everyone who had worked with me or even alongside me. It had taken a community of support to lead me to the podium in Beirut, and here I was alone. I debated melting the medal down to make it into a bunch of smaller ones, but couldn't get a grip on how many people I felt had actually helped me. I'd had help with both Dirty Loonie and the mandala, but when I began to track back there were people who had helped me every step along my journey numbering in the thousands.

In all of the excitement, teeth marks eventually revealed that the medal was only silver plated. The medal was a silver sandwich. This quickly dispelled the possibility of breaking it up into tiny medals for the folks who helped.

I spent the plane ride home thinking about the way people helped each other. So many people had blessed me with token actions here and there which added up to a valuable contribution. This made me think of being a waitress, and how small tips led to a larger income at the end of a shift. Was being an artist like being a waiter?

I began to mull over alternate ways to support the arts. I couldn't support myself alone, and although the government has helped me, they couldn't account for the whole tab. During the Great Depression in America certain localities created alternate currencies. These were subsequently outlawed. This also happened in Germany and Austria between World War I and World War II. These currencies continued the flow of goods and services even though regular money was scarce and low in value.

I began to imagine artists being tipped for their contributions. Viewers could acknowledge the services they had received, and could do it in non-monetary ways; photos, rides to the hardware store, a thank you card, a stick of gum, or even cash.

I felt very clever.

This did not last.

I found myself watching South Park while I tried to sleep off the jet lag. At the end of the episode a URL flashed across the screen before the credits rolled. I thought I was seeing things, but when I backtracked it was indeed there. I was curious.

I found myself visiting a website for Stephen Baldwin. Stephen Baldwin is an American actor from a family of other brothers who are actors. Stephen is easily the least successful of the Baldwin brothers.

This website claimed that Stephen Baldwin had been famous but had fallen on bad times. This website insisted that Stephen Baldwin must be restored to fame. You see, Stephen Baldwin had become a Christian, not a Scientologist, after many years in the movie industry. Stephen Baldwin had not created this website. The group that had created this website were also Christians. They felt that Stephen Baldwin was a modern day Job.

In the bible Job was a successful man. God loved him and blessed him with great fortune. While the devil was wandering the earth he noticed God's pet. When the devil encountered God he accused God of playing favourites. He dared God to take away Job's blessings to see if he would then curse His name.

God took the devil's challenge. He then outsourced the work to the devil.

The devil took everything away from Job - material goods, children and physical health. But Job never cursed his master and God won the bet. Feeling magnanimous God decided to restore Job to his former glory. To do this, he would send him money.

This was outsourced to Job's friends.

According to the Stephen Baldwin website Mr. Baldwin had been persecuted in Hollywood for his Christian beliefs. His refusal to appear in films with sinful themes had caused him financial ruin. This website was calling for Stephen Baldwin's restoration. According to the website, if other Christians were willing to support Stephen Baldwin, he could become an influence in Hollywood for their beliefs. He could represent Christians so that non-believers would see the power of God and be transformed.

Did the website advocate for Christians to petition movie studios for roles for Stephen Baldwin? Did they advocate for alternative films to be produced with Christian themes he could star in?

No. They were asking Christians to give Stephen Baldwin money.

Yikes.

# 20

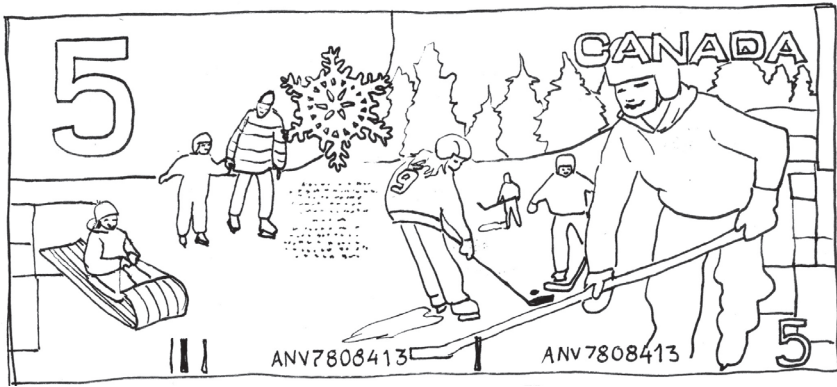
About three months later I found myself again at the site of a major competition. Perhaps the biggest. As a medal winner from the Vlième Jeux de la Francophonie I was invited to participate in the Cultural Olympiad at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. Score.

Vancouver is in British Columbia, a large province and the farthest west in Canada. We call British Columbia 'BC'. BC looks like this:

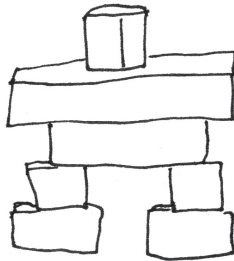


As I began to prepare for my time in residence there, I decided to do a little research. I returned to money for clues.

On the back of the Canadian \$5 bill I found a hockey game that looked like this:



I began to research the Olympics and their monetary relationship to Vancouver. I was not surprised to see Native culture used heavily in promotional materials. The logo for the Olympics included an inukshuk. An inukshuk is a pile of rocks the Natives used to signal their presence to other Natives. An inukshuk looks like this:



According to Wikipedia, the word 'inukshuk' translates as something that acts for or performs the function of a person. To commemorate the Olympics a large one would be built in downtown Vancouver.

A lot of art was being commissioned for downtown Vancouver. I was suitably impressed and began to research how I could also take advantage of these commissions. It turned out that after the Olympics were said and done the government of BC would be cutting cultural funding by 92%. Yikes.

The cost of the Olympics would be \$2.5 billion dollars. This is a lot of money.

In addition to the Olympics, the BC government will spend \$48 million on sports this year [1]. It will spend \$3.7 million on art this year too. This means sports will get 9,600,000 \$5 bills with hockey games on the back. Art will get 740,000 \$5 bills with hockey games on the back.

I decided to make another sand dollar, this time of the Canadian \$5. I wanted to talk with people from all over the world and hear what they thought about money and entertainment.

I arrived in Vancouver and set up a street front studio that I would spend the duration of the Olympics, working in. Passersby were welcome to enter, to chat and watch me work. I was well prepared after my experience in Lebanon.

The ephemeral nature of the project garnered the same reaction as it had before - everyone needed to take a photo and many people wanted to save it. Viewers returned periodically to check on my progress and to tell me about other sights they had seen. They would even bring me coffee and new friends who hadn't yet seen the work.

The same as in Beirut someone, an employee, became attached to the mandala. Although he did not help with its construction, he missed very few moments of it. As a silent observer he would join me in his spare moments and marvel not just at the work, but at the way I would charm the others who came to watch. He decided that I have oodles of charm.



I completed the mandala before the closing ceremonies of the Olympics. It would stand for one day untouched before being swept away with all of the other Olympic refuse. This is the day that the attached employee approached me.

He had been working on solutions to save my mandala and wanted to know if I would let him keep it if he could. I didn't see the harm in letting him try as this had worked so fortuitously in the past.

I needed to catch my plane before the closing ceremonies had begun, so I left the mandala behind as I had before. I later found out that the employee had run home to collect the supplies he needed for his mandala archiving process. While he was gone the government had arranged for a news crew to document the destruction of the mandala live on TV during the closing ceremonies. When I finally saw the video one thing stood out:

How long it took the janitor to muster the courage to sweep the mandala away.

# Conclusion



I have returned now from my adventures to tell you this story and reflect on the voyage.

I have swept through the junk in my head and left it on the curb for recycling. However, I want to suggest that my journey isn't done. I still have junk sitting in storage and costing me money I do not have. Turns out that like Kurt I made promises I couldn't keep. I have held onto objects, so perhaps my gift to Kurt remains incomplete. My junk remains tattooed onto my finances like a bad joke.

Jokes are a funny thing. I can't remember them to save my life. Jokes however disrupt the way we look at the world, if only momentarily. Art can do this too. So can money.

Art is one hell of a commodity.

My motivations have in part been political. Economic and artistic production are surprisingly immaterial when examined. Money and art, it turns out, are cultural fictions with no intrinsic financial value. Both require faith in a world where people only hope they don't believe in magic.

But the truth is that we *need* magic. Magic is an experience we share. We all hold our breath together. We suspend our disbelief together. We need something to believe in to create the currencies that bring us together as people. When Kurt wrote *Breakfast of Champions* to clear his head of all the junk, he decided to hold onto what was sacred. I understand now how to wrap this up. How to hold onto that which is sacred. In fact, I have tried to share that very thing with you.

So as this journey ends I leave you with what I have discovered to be the sacred gift that I can share with you: the experience.

(Thank you).









# End Notes

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# This Document

## **Preface**

To give context, let me explain three events that proceeded and gave rise to the research I have undertaken.

The thrust of my practice has been to bring attention to social and environmental issues. Using artworks as my soapbox, I found a receptive and interested audience and connecting with that audience has been a principal concern. Advertising, in my experience, was a successful language for communication. It worked very well for my first major exhibition ÖDE in 2001 which used the conventions of advertising to increase accessibility for a wide variety of people, and has been exhibited in galleries, museums and on suburban driveways.

ÖDE, Swedish for both 'waste' and 'fate', is a company that designs, markets and produces economically affordable weapons using inexpensive materials. The weapons can be purchased in one of seven seasonal colours and assembled using an allen key. The centrepiece of the exhibition is a life-sized military tank, accompanied by a full colour catalogue, a website ([www.shopode.com](http://www.shopode.com)) and an interactive CD.



*ÖDE, Saskatoon, May 2001.*

ÖDE's sister company was launched In 2008. Named for the acronym, Make Overs To Heal Economic Rifts, MOTHER was an installation that delved into the media savvy fashion world of teens, exposing the abhorrent working conditions of the world's garment industry. MOTHER, like ÖDE, used the language of advertising to communicate, taking up the tropes of contemporary teenage branding and 'conscientious branding'. An example of conscientious branding is Gap's Red label, which donates portions of the label's sales to fighting AIDS. MOTHER's makeover wear, facetiously offered as charity to foreign sweatshop workers, was a combination of clothing fashioned with 'work enhancement' devices and care kits. The clothing's surface was aesthetically beautiful, yet layered within were the devices that help keep the worker working. The garments highlighted the history and poor conditions these workers face.



*MOTHER, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, SK, 2008.*

Through MOTHER I had the opportunity to work closely with teens. The youngest students struggled with their desire to buy the items for themselves, seduced by the beauty of the objects and images, ultimately undermining my message. As the items were not for sale, these youths were missing my point.

These teens taught me that advertising could be too slick, and perhaps too impersonal, to convey my message consistently to the youngest and least media literate. This observation gave me pause, especially when I came across the following quote by American author Kurt Vonnegut: "...any scientist who couldn't explain to an eight-year-old what he was doing was a charlatan" (Cat's Cradle 34).

After mounting these exhibitions I was also confronted with not

only their production expense, but their maintenance and storage. The financial pressure, and a need to keep momentum going in my practice required an exploration of more sustainable approaches.

The third relevant event was the death of Vonnegut in the spring of 2007. I credit my interest in the arts with my teenage encounter with Vonnegut's work. As a youth I was inspired by his insistence that artists and writers are the canaries in the coal mines of our society. I had worked feverishly and at great expense to play my role by using art as my soapbox but now felt I was at a dead end. As his influence inspired my beginning, I decided to return to his work for further advice.

## **Introduction**

*This Document* addresses the rationale for the framework used to construct *Currency*. *Currency* is a new journalistic report on my Master of Fine Art (MFA) research, retold through the combination of writing and visuals. *Currency* seeks true interdisciplinarity not just between mediums but in the search for a plurality of possible ways to express and to approach artistic research.

New journalism is a style developed in the 1960s and legitimized by writers such as Vonnegut, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote and Hunter S. Thompson. It is characterized by a subjective interpretation by the writer of events they themselves have experienced. This technique emphasizes the writer's participation and lends authenticity to the narrative, drawing parallels between the written argument and the author's reflection on their involvement. New journalism reports facts despite its appearance as, and use of narrative.

*This Document* unpacks the rationale for using narrative to express this case study, and illustrates how the method led me to discover sustainable solutions and create a gift for both Vonnegut and for myself.

## **Questions**

The three concerns I brought to my research were finding a new and accessible voice that was more personal; finding sustainable ways to continue my practice; and making a gift of gratitude for Vonnegut. As a researcher I posed my questions in the following ways:

How can the combination of new journalistic writing and studio practice offer an alternative voice to discuss and create artistic research?

How can my practice become more sustainable?

What is the most suitable gift to make for Vonnegut in the context of my practice?

*Currency* is a novella that I created both to report and discover provisional possibilities for my concerns. Chapter-by-chapter the self-reflexive narrative guides the reader through musings on the experience of the research using colloquial language, illustrations, jokes and parables.

*This Document* addresses the rationale that motivated the framework of *Currency*.



## **Brief Discussion of Objectivity, the Avant-Garde and Bourdieu's 'Habitus'**

In their book, *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, the authors discuss the complex nature of cultural studies. The researcher studies culture through cultural means, a difficulty coloured by the researcher's fore-meanings and prejudices (Johnson et al. 45). Nick Coudry, professor of research and communications once remarked that as cultural researchers we are inside the object of study (qtd. in Johnson et al. 44).

Since the emergence of positivism in the 19th Century there has been a commitment to objectivity in research. Positivism emphasized objectivity as required of the researcher, seeking knowledge that was observable through measurable experience. Objectivity seeks detachment from the subject, an untainted observer's view. Research in this vein verges on 'Other making', making the subject of study an 'it' as if were an object (Johnson et al. 46). Objectivity is itself a form of self-Other relations, but is not recognized as such (Johnson et al. 47). This has extended to the impersonality of academic writing's deletion of 'I' and preference for the passive mode (Johnson et al. 46).

The artwork we know as 'avant-garde', an extension of the modernist tradition, sought to act as cultural criticism. Framing this work, theorists discussed the boundaries they exposed, asserting that the artists of the avant-garde were able to critique culture from a position of exteriority.

Since the 1960s critical theorists have been unpacking the notion of unmediated objective research and the impossibility of exteriority. Objectivity was exposed as a flawed framework

that masked issues of the habitus of the researcher. Sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' can be understood as a pattern of actions and dispositions that form a connection between social structures and social actions (Lizardo 6). Political scientist Mika Hannula says acting subjectively is as close as we can get to objectivity (Hannula). Subjectivity carries an inherent habitus, encouraging both the writer and reader to seek context behind the claims of the researcher.

Theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker in her 2005 book *Sweet Dreams* insists that the bulk of critical writing about art is still premised on the oppositional models that were a legacy of the avant-garde (xiv). "Emerging artists don't even know that modernism has a set of proscriptive and prescriptive prohibitions against the conventions of storytelling and personal tales" (Drucker 43). Drucker proposes an alternative to works of art that either resist or reflect contemporary culture - works that embody our perceptions (10). She urges artists to free themselves to re-imagine the landscape, not as an attack on the existent, as it is hard to view power structures clearly in which we are enmeshed, but to discover new possibilities (Drucker 50).

## **Methodology**

Journalism's own *crise de confiance* about objectivity has paralleled the timing of unfolding criticism in the social sciences. New journalism also began to emerge in the 1960s. According to Thomas Meisenhelder it is characterized by fieldwork and observation from within social life, which is then reported closely with factual and descriptive approaches regarding what the journalist has experienced (Meisenhelder 467).

Nancy Zeller argues that new journalism's techniques can be useful for case study reports by researchers. Techniques she identifies as new journalism include scene-by scene reconstruction, characterization through ample dialogue, the researcher's point of view, attention to details, interior monologues and composite characterization (Zeller 211).

*Currency* makes use of new journalism's narrative non-fiction and its use of 'I'. Elspeth Probyn cites cultural critic Lawrence Grossberg's observation that the autobiographical voice is often understood as an individual's quest for identity rather than the use of a critical strategy for cultural interpretation (105). The autobiographical voice can be used to upset stable notions of the subject, opening the possibility of yielding specific instances of struggle against the subject's ideological centering (Probyn 115). For the autobiographical voice to be successful the researcher must illustrate their relationship to the research and their evident power in the situation (Probyn 117). Successful self-reflection is about society, culture and history in addition to biography - it is about others and the self (Johnson et al. 53).

New journalism's emphasis on participant observation as its main method of research, was compared in 1975 by psychology professor Robert Sommer to 'new sociology' (242). He likened new journalist Tom Wolfe to new sociologist Erving Goffman, his contemporaries who were chronicling their cultures.

According to Sommer new journalism added the descriptive phrase to journalism (242). Wolfe makes use of descriptive phrasing to examine the particulars of the people he reports on (Sommer 243). Sommer points out that this descriptive phrasing has also been employed in sociology to illustrate people in their natural settings

(243). Goffman used descriptive phrasing to portray people in their roles to illustrate his systematic dissection of social order (243). As Meisenhelder points out, Wolfe acknowledges his debt to sociology for providing a method to penetrate situations and seek power structures behind their veneer (470).

In their 2000 book *Reflexive Methodology*, Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbörg examine contemporary discussion of qualitative research analysis and methodologies. Qualitative research, defined loosely as encompassing the non-numerical fieldwork done by researchers, is a methodological approach used overwhelmingly by the social sciences. They posit that qualitative research's flaws are its oversight of the ambiguity of language, its dependence on observational skills unmediated by habitus, and its blind eye to the politics of all of the actors and social structures (Alvesson and Sköldbörg 1).

Alvesson and Sköldbörg formulate an interdisciplinary approach called 'reflexive methodology' which proposes a framework of mixed disciplines that values no approach above others. The concept of reflexive methodology, the authors claim, is to break from a frame of reference to see what that frame is not capable of saying (Alvesson and Sköldbörg 270). This approach incorporates the following levels of interpretation (273):

- Interaction with empirical material*      Accounts in interviews, observations of situations and other empirical material.
  
- Interpretation*      Seeking underlying meanings.

*Critical Interpretation*

Focus on ideology, power and social reproduction.

*Reflection on text production*

The researcher's text, their claims and language of use to authority and the selectivity of the voices represented in the text.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg stress that it is not always possible to give the same weight to each level, but that addressing each level will improve the conditions for reflection on the part of the researcher (283).

*Currency*, in combination with new journalistic tactics, makes use of Alvesson and Sköldbberg's reflexive methodology's methods of inquiry to explore the research questions. Reflexive methodology is about assessing practice in the field, or 'experiments', mining the implications, then restructuring the approach and line of questioning. Reflexive methodology concerns the combination of both the empirical and the reflexive to generate new directions.

A theme emphasized in *Currency* is failure. When failure is encountered new questions are raised. As an example in the story of the search for the appropriate gift to make for Vonnegut the researcher's poor memory derails previous research and planning. The gift, a plastic ship in a bottle based on a Vonnegut quote, proves erroneous after revisiting the text in question to discover different phrasing than what had been internalized by the researcher. Realization prompts the researcher's shift in focus, namely to explore the construction of memory, and its remediation by the teller. Further questions are raised about the art object, then further to the construction of History and its relationship to colonial

and capital powers. This line of inquiry leads the researcher away from the creation of objects towards the creation of experiences, echoing shifts in cultural commodities and their delivery. This is then retold by the researcher who has positioned herself as an unreliable narrator.

## **Scope and Limitations**

When discussing artistic practice curator, teacher and art critic Mika Hannula emphasizes that it is not the artist studying themselves but reflecting personal interpretation of research themes in their practice. We all choose to research what interests us on some level for inquiry to begin. The course of this research, while presenting contingencies for the presentation of artworks and artistic research, remains within the domain of my practice. The very definition of artistic research cannot come from outside of itself (Hannula). While *Currency* seeks new ways to discuss and present artistic research, it presents only one possibility in a plurality of possible artistic methodologies. Further explorations could involve the expression of research in purely visual forms without the use of writing, or embrace the abstraction of poetry. Just as there are a plurality of ways of being in the world there are a plurality of methodological approaches (Hannula).

*This Document* addresses the rationale and the framing of *Currency*, which seeks new voices for expressing artistic research. The assertion that this approach has the possibility of connecting with a broader audience through jokes, parables and colloquial language, while possible, continues to exclude certain audience members.

Philosopher Simon Critchley examines jokes in his book *On Humour*. He discovers that jokes and humor, by the power of their

ability to unify, can create a normative claim through consensus (Critchley 14). Normative claims, baring traces of grand narratives, hold the dangerous possibility of creating the 'Other'. Humour is not universal - it is local and context-specific. Humour returns us to locality and custom, our habitus, and situations in which feelings of superiority can reinforce social exclusion. Critchley's conclusions around jokes extend also to parables and colloquial language.

*Currency*, an experiment in new forms of reporting, has only been circulated within a small peer group at this stage. So far the result is that the reader returns to me with stories of their own, creating a currency of dialogue. Broader circulation of *Currency* will lead to future input and raise new questions. Hannula also suggested that artistic research is a slow process intended to last a lifetime (Hannula). *Currency* is a step towards a new form of practice that I will continue to refine based on the successes and significant failures of this experiment. The creation of *Currency* has laid the groundwork for future explorations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic action theorists such as Kenneth Burke and Clifford Geertz advanced the notion of symbolic action theory. This area of study explores the cultural characteristics of activities to unpack what is expressed by their often irrational nature (Alexander and Mast 2). These activities are framed as being more like theatrical performances than economic exchanges, which led to Goffman's contributions being employed more regularly in performance theory (Alexander and Mast 2).

Goffman, seeking to unpack power structures in social institutions, embraced symbolic action theory to advance his

dramaturgical theory. Goffman's interest in the characteristics of cultural activities led him to claim that we recognize one another in roles, calling those roles performances (60). Performance is defined by Goffman as the activity of an individual over a period of continuous presence before observers (61). When expressing a performance, the performer uses a 'front'. Front is what defines the situation for observers - it is the mask, the expressive equipment used during performance whether intentional or not (Goffman 61). Also integral to the performance is the site. Goffman reminds readers that the setting itself is full of signs to be interpreted (62).

The autobiographical voice, the first person of *Currency*, can be framed as a performance in which the 'I' reflects on economic exchange. This tactic facilitates a deconstruction of the role of the performer and that performer's cultural interaction with institutional conventions. According to sociologist Howard S. Becker conventions make art possible by providing a means for its production and understanding (30). In his sociological examination of art worlds, Becker explains that conventions rise from complex interdependent systems (32). These conventions, established socially, form over time based on the success and failures of the past.

Until the 1960s conventions defining art were known as 'Modernism'. Marking a shift away from the representational nature of traditional art towards a self-conscious awareness of art's expressive possibilities - Modernism gave rise to works like the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, which begged the question 'what is art?'. Society was increasingly interested in its own progression, as 'History' itself was an invention of modernity ("Review: Mapping the Postmodern Condition": 2009). Movements within Modernism were created in reaction to those that came before them, creating a developmental narrative of binary relationships woven to a master narrative forming the history of art.



A shift in thinking about the conventions of art was initiated by philosopher Arthur C. Danto in 1964. The art world, writes Danto, enjoys a double citizenship in that it is part of the larger culture, yet there remains a contrast between art works and real objects (The Art World 582). It is the art object's relationship with the art world that defines an object as art (Becker 148).

In Danto's own words, declaring the end of art was a dramatic way of saying that the master narratives that defined traditional art, then modernist art, had ended (The End of Art xiii). This shift, he claims, was marked by the exhibition of Andy Warhol's reproductions of the Brillo box, a product from outside of the culture industry. Instead of asking 'what is art?', according to Danto, Warhol's Brillo boxes confronted viewers with a philosophical problem; given two of the same objects, knowing one is art and one is not, how can the viewer know the difference? (Danto qtd. in Carrier). Without theory, concludes Danto, the viewer is unlikely to see the Brillo boxes as art (The Art World 581). The labour theory of value, according to Danto, did not apply as it was no longer craftsmanship that made an object into art (The Art World 580). Theory makes an object art, preventing it from collapsing into the real (Danto, The Art World 581).

Conventions change over time, and as Becker indicates, change can prove expensive and slow when institutions are constructed around those conventions that already exist (57). Consensus in the art world helps in managing distribution of artworks. As distributors are in business, the work of those marketing art is to integrate it into society's economy by transforming aesthetic value into economic value (Becker 109).

Social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that economic exchange creates and defines value, and that value is embodied

in the commodities that are exchanged (3). Appadurai advocates looking past form and function of exchange to conclude that the link between exchange and value is politics (3). The value inherent in objects is the judgement passed that defines them. It is social demand that imbues an object with value, not its supply or rarity (Appadurai 4).

Objects are neither inert nor mute. Both Arjun Appadurai, and Marcel Mauss suggest we ascribe objects meaning and understand them as having trajectories, even lives. To produce a product that can become a commodity, value must be created, whether use value or social value (Appadurai 8). In the art market there is an excess of available goods, one that oversteps demand, and yet art objects can represent great economic value and be imbued with desire.

The end of art has been called the post-historical moment by Danto as it is no longer necessary for art to respond to specific movements that pre-date it. It has also been called post-modernism to differentiate it from the art that came before it. Post-modern art allows for a radical pluralism in art making, requiring no dialogue with art of the past. Typical of post-modern art, writes cultural critic Laura Kipnis, is an engagement with the experience of popular culture, a shift from a period in which it was only worth denouncing (376).

Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1979 *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979 denounced metanarratives and questioned knowledge and power. He claims there has been a change in the status of knowledge in that it has become mercantiled (Woodward). "In postmodernity, knowledge has become primarily a saleable commodity" (Woodward).

"Late capitalism is not so much a postindustrial society,"

writes Kipnis “as one marked by the complete industrialization of segments of society” (378). The movement of mass cultural items to high culture concerns Kipnis, who examines high art’s reactions to such a shift. Claims that were once the exclusive domain of high culture are now being made by commodities themselves, and distinctions are becoming increasingly difficult to make (Kipnis 383). Kipnis acknowledges there is no privileged space from which to examine capitalist reification (383).

Philosopher and critical theorist Slavoj Žižek claims the central paradox of post-modernism is the process of production, the laying bare of its mechanisms, which acts as a fetish that conceals the the social mode of production (The Plague of Fantasies 102). Žižek explains commodity fetishism as the displacement of relationships between people to objects (The Plague of Fantasies 102).

Žižek explains that it is psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s notion of the *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire, that forms culture through our reactions (5). Lacan claims it is the surplus of the real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology 3). The object does not contain value, but has properties that determine its use-value (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology 18).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Žižek insists that money provides an exact definition of the sublime-object (18). An object’s use-value is postulated during the act of exchange - an individual proceeds as if that commodity is not submitted to physical and material exchange (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology 18). Money is not outside of nature, it is susceptible to time and to change. “It is as if it were made of a special substance over which

time has no power” (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology 18). This is what Žižek refers to as the sublime material of money, not its empirical qualities, but that which persists beyond the corruption of the physical (The Sublime Object of Ideology 18). “[M]oney is in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations....” (The Sublime Object of Ideology 31). Belief is materialized in our effective social activity, and belief supports fantasy that regulates social reality (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology 36).

Money is moving increasingly from the domain of the physical to that of the electronic. In the post-modern age we are witnessing a dissipation of the materiality of the fetish, and that this dematerialization strengthens its hold (Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies 102). Commodity, now viewed as anything intended for exchange, led to propositions for the inclusion of barter and gift exchange systems in the art world.

The past two decades have seen a rise in artists bypassing economic exchange in favour of gifting. As there is an excess of art available, the institution and market cannot accommodate all practices (Miller 131). Grant Kester suggests that relational works challenge assumptions from the avant-garde that art must be difficult or shocking (9). This reading seems insufficient to address the larger challenge of creating works that escape market value.

Art, as it has been known through art history, is commonly an object that is tangible to the audience, something to be beholden. As a form of art that attempts to step outside of the gallery, relational artworks involve the audience in a service exchange, literalizing the question of what art can bring to society (Purves 35). Representing a critical break from the modernist tradition, the artwork becomes a

conversation rather than a display (Purves xi).

This exchange-based art is often referred to as 'relational aesthetics'. A cursory reading of relational aesthetics makes human relations the site of the artwork (Bourriaud 44). Increasingly conclusions around the aesthetics of participation increasingly no longer consider an artwork's viewer as a passive recipient. Artworks that seek to actively engage the viewer, specifically as a recipient, do more than illustrate the gift, they embody it. Generosity, in this case, becomes medium, methodology and subject (Jacob 5). The openness of this form of gift giving, or providing a service for the audience, is itself a challenge in a climate of proscribed notions of what art's form 'should be'. In this role, the artist is shifting patterns, creating new connections to make patterns evident (Jacob 9). To situate work exclusively in the domain of generosity implies a provision of services with a 'good' nature. It remains a popular view that an individual's performance is put on for the benefit of others (Goffman 59).

Although I argue in *Currency* that ultimately art does provide a service, the service provided is morally complex and not easily reduced to an act of generosity. I agree with theorist David Hickey's assertion that "[t]he truth is that everyone is interested and self-interested and should be" (206). Hickey encourages us to abandon all notions of believing in art's intrinsic 'goodness', dismissing this as bad religion (201).

Brands are eminently successful in producing desire for their products. Where previously values were communicated by religion, family and communities, since the Renaissance there has been a shift away from the collective and towards the individual. This leaves the individual seeking value structures as communities have

become increasingly secularized. Brands have stepped in where community is wanting, becoming meaning makers and offering the possibility for consumers to belong to larger social groups (Rushkoff 119).

In the art world it is not aesthetic judgement that defines a hot artist, but careful branding. In his book *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark* Donald N. Thompson observes that for an artist to become financially successful they must be accepted by a mainstream dealer, then move to superstar dealer, be marketed, shown in branded museums, collections and evening auctions (Thompson 228).

Artists are becoming increasingly aware of their complicity in our consumer culture, and finding new ways to participate that include partnering with brands and developing self-aware sales strategies. One of the research challenges I undertook was to find a more sustainable method of production. This search resolved itself in the production of ephemeral works, namely large sand paintings of dollar bills that were swept away after being produced in front of an audience.

Mille Livres, created onsite in Beirut, was made entirely of coloured sand in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of the mandala. According to tradition, monks work in large groups to create intricate designs out of sand using no fixative to hold the sand in place. Once the sand painting has been completed, the mandala is brushed away. Buddhist monks frame the activity as an exercise in non-attachment in a world filled with consumer goods. The mandala reminds both the viewer and the creator that all things of this world are transitory, ephemeral in nature.



*Mille Livres, Beirut, Lebanon,  
October 2009.*

Immaterial art has seen a rise in popularity since the post-modern turn. Immaterial art, that which is ephemeral, parallels the experience economy in that it is the memory that is the commodity (Degen). This type of work proposes an alternative, one that is free from the domain of the object and echoes Žižek's discussion of the increasing dissipation of the materiality of money. Tino Sehgal, a Berlin artist working in the immaterial, claims that the ephemeral moments created for the audience may be as compelling and lasting as an encounter with an object (Degen). Sehgal creates staged situations for his audiences in which they may engage. His point is not to protest the market - in fact his works are made available for sale and his practice functions within the art world's conventions (Midgett).

## **Discussion**

Revisiting the inquiries this research has been concerned with, these are the questions *Currency* addressed:

How can the combination of new journalistic writing and studio practice offer an alternative voice to discuss and create artistic research?

How can my practice become more sustainable?

What is the most suitable gift to make for Vonnegut in the context of my practice?

Beginning with the search for an alternative voice in artistic research, I refer to the work of literature and cultural studies Anna Poletti. She created a zine to demystify the academic process for the subjects of her research, the zine subculture. Titled 'Trade Entrance', the zine acted as a journal for her research. Poletti's rationale for using language that differed from traditional academic style was a hope that "...my zine would contribute to the zine community while my academic work reflected upon it" (Poletti 188).

The physicality of *Currency*, presented in the form of a paperback novel, and the language, that of the colloquial urban Canadian youth, creates a setting that hails those with shared experience. A subcultural positioning assumes a like-minded audience, this affirms the reader as being part of that subculture (Poletti 188). *Currency's* paperback format carries with it the signifiers of being inexpensive and intended for easy consumption, transportation and trade. Hardcover are generally purchased for collection and display. Unlike the hardcover, paperbacks are easily marked by use.

Vonnegut began his own publishing career in paperbacks, only having his works re-released as hardcover, in response to his unexpected popularity. The enduring popularity of Vonnegut's work is rarely addressed by his critics. His entire canon remains in print,



impressive by any standard. The few that have acknowledged his popularity always link it directly to his voice, which creates "...an environment of intimacy, of familiarity" (Davis 2).

Vonnegut's issues, as they are of significance, require that he be understood. His background in journalism informed his style, reporting on the condition of the world (Davis 12). "...[H]e is not willing to allow theoretical debates to overshadow our need for action in our attempts to alleviate the suffering of others" (Davis 7). Vonnegut's style embraces American colloquial, like Mark Twain, using shorter sentences and popular slang (Schatt 103). *Currency's* use of personal narrative to express the case study results in a more accessible read for audiences not familiar with the theories that surround art. Although, as Danto claims, art needs theory, that same theory can exclude a large segment of the viewing audience.

Vonnegut does not speak down to his audience, which makes him relatable. "...[Y]ou can hear Vonnegut the person shouting over the voice of Vonnegut the writer" (Hildebrand 132). The most 'realized' character in his writing is often Vonnegut himself (Hildebrand 132). Readers, like myself, often think of Vonnegut as a relative who tells funny stories that make you laugh and think.

It is as if a favorite uncle had just driven 1200 miles non-stop from Indianapolis, slugged down two stiff drinks, and collapsed on the sofa, body becalmed but mind still blasting along at 80 MPH, voice spinning on and on, talking of horrors with rumpled brilliance (Skow 73).

Following the example of Robert Short who addresses Vonnegut as 'Kurt' in his book *Something to Believe in, is Kurt Vonnegut The*

*Exorcist of Jesus Christ Superstar?*, I also call Kurt by his Christian name in *Currency*. Short made this choice because he thinks of Vonnegut as a friend. "I think almost anyone would" (Short 31). In another example, from the world of criticism, Carl Wilson prefers calling Céline Dion, the subject of his study, by her first name; "As a goodwill gesture, let's proceed on a first-name basis, the way her fans do: Hi there, Céline" (Wilson 19). This example differs in that Wilson does not know or admire Céline.

The subject of Short's book, *Something to Believe in...*, is what he views as the Church's problem with communication. Short, a theologian, wrote his book as a plea to other theologians for clarity, offering Vonnegut as a model. Martin Luther, Short reminds us, "... was a bull in a theological china shop. Much of his vocabulary came fresh from the barnyard, if not the gutter" (8). Short insists that being 'down to earth' is like relating to God (16). Short's view is that the Church should always be fluent in the language of the popular so as to be attractive (30).

Short also encourages the use of illustrations in teaching, likening their use to the parables of Jesus. Writing that the parable involves 'a placing beside', Short insists the use of illustration improves understanding for the reader and holds their attention (23). *Currency* makes use of illustrations, like *Breakfast of Champions*, to challenge the tradition of writing, in this case academic writing, and add humour to the narrative. Poorly executed drawings enhance the intimacy of the narrative, allowing the reader access to a form of artistic research not commonly included; the sketch. In a culture increasingly inundated by images, this echoes the habitus of the researcher pointing to sight as our dominant way of experiencing our environment.

To be popular is to be something or someone that many people like and understand. Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love; A Journey to the End of Taste*, examines the popularity of Dion to explore taste and its role in criticism. An ever-present gap between critical and general taste is not sustainable as it becomes a war of position (Wilson 13). "An academic might be able to dismiss public taste completely in favor of the weird and challenging, but a working pop critic who did so would be (rightly) out of a job..." (Wilson 13). *Currency*, sited in the habitus of the researcher, uses the colloquial voice to report observations of both popular culture and the art world.

The combination of artistic studio practice and writing created a sight for self-reflexivity. Reporting experiences from the studio created a critical distance between the experience and the retelling. By revisiting small instances, especially in works that were not successful, new avenues were discovered and dead ends were examined. When presenting a final artwork, the process, especially the failures, are not often laid bare for the viewer. The retelling involved in reporting this process created a heightened awareness of what I was experiencing in the field. Increasingly the artworks began to involve storytelling, creating a future site for further artistic exploration that will focus on narrative.

The second research problem, the quest for sustainable practice, is retold in *Currency*. As illustrated, the financial weight of my practice involved researching the economics and exchanges that happen in the art world. As Becker states, conventions do change in the art world, but the artist must participate to be included (59).

The ephemeral works I created allowed viewers to interact with the production of the work and the artist herself. Viewers lingered,

discussed and photographed the sand dollars, often returning with friends to share the experience. After the creation of the first sand dollar I was invited to create a second one, affirming that the work had a place within the conventional art world.

These works, brushed away once completed, left no object behind for new audiences. While the original viewers could share photos or reflect on their experience, additional viewings were not possible once the work was destroyed. While this remains in keeping with the changes outlined by Žižek of capital's shift from the commodification of goods to desires, I still wished to share the experience. The retelling in *Currency* invites the reader into the researcher's experience, yet continues to exclude the photograph. This is because of photography's continued perception as evidence, its life in the domain of objects. "Credence is given to them [photographs] before you dwell on the true power of the image; this agency of power transforms the photographs from a conceit into a state altogether synonymous with the truth; that which pretends to be truth in fact becomes truth" (Petrovic) No historical fact is in the 'real', instead the audience and actor, or the reader and narrator, together make the performance that is History (Denning 83).

In terms of what gift to make for Vonnegut, *Currency* begins with this question, then quickly changes course once it is determined through research and reflection that making an object is not the most suitable gift. Researching and reflecting on the work of Vonnegut brought his concerns to the fore, specifically his commitment to humanism. The most suitable gift was to take Vonnegut's advice - to extend his message to new readers and use my own practice as a site for activism.

Vonnegut speaks openly about his commitment to his readers, a

commitment he feels extends to all artists (Davis 4). He called often for artists to recognize that they can be agents of change, and that their work has the ability to do good as well as harm. His own work fights against our inaction, using fiction as a vehicle for activism (Davis 13). His writing embodies "...his desire to enact change, to establish patterns for humanity that will lead to the construction of better realities for the world...." (Davis 5).

Todd F. Davis calls Vonnegut a postmodern humanist, claiming that any evaluation of his work by modernist standards are "...certain to find aspects of his work lacking...." (Davis 6). Vonnegut's writing embraced a new kind of fiction, one that allowed him to struggle with philosophical ideas in a format that reflects this very struggle (Davis 6). As Becker notes, artists develop their innovations that become their conventions over time (64). *Currency* continues this struggle, embracing the conventions used by Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions* to explore his successes and mine them for new applications and possibilities.

*Breakfast of Champions*, published in 1973, explored the symbolic role of the artist. Kilgour Trout, a recurring character, is confronted by the narrator with his own fictional existence. This narrator, assumed to be Vonnegut, is also presented as a possible construction. A careful reader will find clues through the narrative that the narrator is possibly fictional, or at least unreliable. This is in keeping with his theme of social construction of reality. Vonnegut acknowledges how successfully society turns art into a commodity, and explores the complete immersion into our mutually consoling fantasies.

I will reiterate the words of feminist Carol Hanish and state that the personal is political. Like Hanish, I do not mean my personal problems are political, but that as an artist and a member of society I

am part of a larger group struggle. The autobiographical voice is the lived personal as political (Probyn 106). My self-reflexive musings that comprise *Currency* are not a form of personal therapy, but an attempt to move away from solitary struggle, to share my failures and begin to differentiate between systematic versus personal failure. In *Currency* the narrator draws attention to personal failures, marking each with the expression 'Yikes' to signal a change of approach.

## **Conclusion**

In the process of making art and being a scholar, I have discovered a successful model for my art practice that allows an ongoing cycle of creation and reflection and creation. Once an artwork has been created the process does not end at the exhibition. Through observation and interaction with the audience, new questions can be raised that can and should then be pondered, investigated and explained in both the process of writing and art making. The deep literatures of social investigation and commentary can provide a powerful point of departure permitting me to build on the backs of giants. Indeed, it is the intergenerational nature of scholarship and creativity where legacies endow future generations that informs my work. In turn, in making my research accessible, I am, in real ways, contributing to an ongoing conversation and providing building blocks for society. Thus, my practice and my understanding of obligations as an artist and a citizen extend Kurt Vonnegut's message that writers and artists must do work to help improve the conditions of humanity.

In this way, I am reminded of Vonnegut's declaration in an interview when questioned about his beliefs - "I am a Humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without expectations of rewards or punishment after I am dead", and as

he went on to note “Humanists are skeptical of religious claims, particularly claims of prophecy and revelation” (Vonnegut qtd. in Niose 22). The globalizing view of progress valued by humanism lends a postmodernist reading to conclude that Humanism values the grand narrative. A grand narrative, or meta-narrative, theorizes our human experience and discovery of knowledge within parameters too narrow or absolute for postmodern acceptance. Postmodernism holds that claims to objectivity and neutrality are not useful, rejecting modernist historical narratives. In a postmodern society reverence for a narrative is based on faith alone, without the validity of now questionable meta-narratives as confirmation. With faith, whether in money, religion, gender or a litany of other social constructions, we create currencies through which we interact with one another. Can there be a system of morals and ethics with no objective centre on which currencies can be based?

Douglas Kellner addresses the paradox of postmodern humanism, arguing we need both postmodernism’s critique of meta-narratives, and modernity’s hopeful attempts to create infinite new unities or reassociations (qtd. in Davis 29). In the absence of an essential central value, postmodern humanism embraces a position that reveres all life and acknowledges its nature as one of construction (Davis 32). Embracing a postmodern humanist outlook, acknowledging that moralizing is absurd, as an artist I can continue to critique and examine social conventions in an attempt to improve their conditions. Without these conventions our currencies fail, so their rejection is futile but their questioning is critical.

Social conventions, such as those of the art world, are frequently targeted by artists in an effort to unpack or expose their inner workings. Cultural critic Lewis Hyde, through etymological lineage, links the artist to the trickster. Word play with the ancient Latin root

'ar', meaning 'joiner' or 'maker of things', is linked by Hyde to 'ars', a noun meaning 'the arts' (Jacob 8). Both art and jokes play with our social symbolic forms making the familiar seem defamiliarized. Their critical function is to expose the underpinnings of our social structures. (Critchley 10).

To subvert and question these underpinnings, *Currency* replaces the art object with a narrative, a narrative that is performed by the teller and the reader. Without the object that the novella replaces, the reader's view of the object is now framed by the writer. The framing of the experience, that of the artist who made the artwork and witnessed its reception, is couched in humour and crude jokes that act as metaphors to emphasize the critical analysis of the situation. The choice to abandon the polite is encouraged by the writing of Vonnegut who saw its power to transform society.

The novel *Breakfast of Champions* is dedicated to Phoebe Hurty, who Vonnegut claims taught him to be impolite. According to Vonnegut she taught him to be "...impolite in conversation not only about sexual matters, but about American history and famous heroes, about the distribution of wealth, about school, about everything" (*Breakfast of Champions* 2). It seems like there is nothing like a little comedy to discover an institution's limits Bruner notes "...as Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Terry Eagleton have each pointed out in different ways, it is only through transgressions that social limits are revealed" (140). The reason Hurty taught Vonnegut to be impolite was because she believed that this was how to improve the societies in which we live (*Breakfast of Champions* 2). As a goodwill gesture, the use of humour to expose institutional limits differs from confrontational protest in that institutions can sometimes be transformed by this approach, a notion supported by M. Lane Bruner (137).



In *Carnavalesque Protest and the Humorless State*, Bruner examines how it is possible for the impolite and the humourous to result in positive political change (136). States display a range of humours and Bruner argues that an institution's sense of humour is "...proportionate to the strength of citizens' rights and freedoms against [it]...the breadth and depth of political dialogue, and the degree to which [they]...tolerate public criticism" (137). Healthy institutions allow for forms of parodic and critical public entertainment, forms Bruner calls 'carnavalesque protest' (137). This form of protest, he continues, is different than confrontational protests which are easily suppressed (137). Carnavalesque protest has the following characteristics; it is a populist inversion of official words and hierarchies; it suspends privileges and prohibitions; involves creative disrespect, and allows for a temporary retextualization of social structures to expose 'fictive' foundations (139 Bruner).

*Currency* exposes the fictive and transitory natures of money, artistic research and the institutions that surround art. Placing itself in the realm of the constructed, the experience created anew for the reader, *Currency* dwells in the carnivalesque adopting its masks and fronts. *Currency* replaces the traditional object, tricking the reader into performing the experience. Suspending the tradition of the exhibition, embracing the popular in its use of language, and siting the art in the performance of the reader.

Performance studies of the carnivalesque contend that when the performer adopts a front it signifies a shift in temporal time to one that is sacred or fictive (Leach qtd. in Bruner 139). The setting then is unifying and a conclusion signals a return to the real for the audience (Leach qtd. in Bruner). *Currency* can be observed from this vantage - as a form of carnivalesque protest. My research interest in the economic mechanisms of the art market led me to

a rejection of the physical object that could be exchanged. While an object was created to be beheld by the viewer in the form of a sand painting, its physicality dissolved once the object was disturbed - resisting its transfer to the domain of the economic. This experience, retold in writing with humour, becomes the exchange. This retelling is the domain of the teller, one that resists traditional framing within institutional structures for the course of its narrative. *Currency* challenges the health of the institution by asking that the performed experience of the narrative be considered by the reader to be art.

Through studio research, writing and academic study, I have engaged in rethinking the complexities of art making that advocates social change. In conclusion, as an artist I know that I should bear in mind Vonnegut's warning to be careful with what falsity, pretense and pretending to be something or someone we are not. Although artists can be cultural critics, the artist's participation in society does not easily facilitate an objective stance. The use of the autobiographical voice signals the privileged position of the speaker and acknowledges the habitus inherent in the framing of the research. This acknowledgement does not limit the discoveries of the process but instead creates a guide for other users to properly interface the research with the larger body of knowledge. The use of colloquial language broadens the possible users of the material, creating possibilities for dialogues between fields with different terminology and facilitating interdisciplinary research. The artist as researcher role holds immense possibilities that carry vast responsibility, and can offer wider frameworks to other disciplines by being integrated into interdisciplinary explorations.



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# List of Illustrations

## **Dirty Loonie**

Cultural Olympiad, Vancouver 2010 Olympics.

## **Mille Livres**

Beirut, Lebanon, October 2009.

## **Canadian \$5**

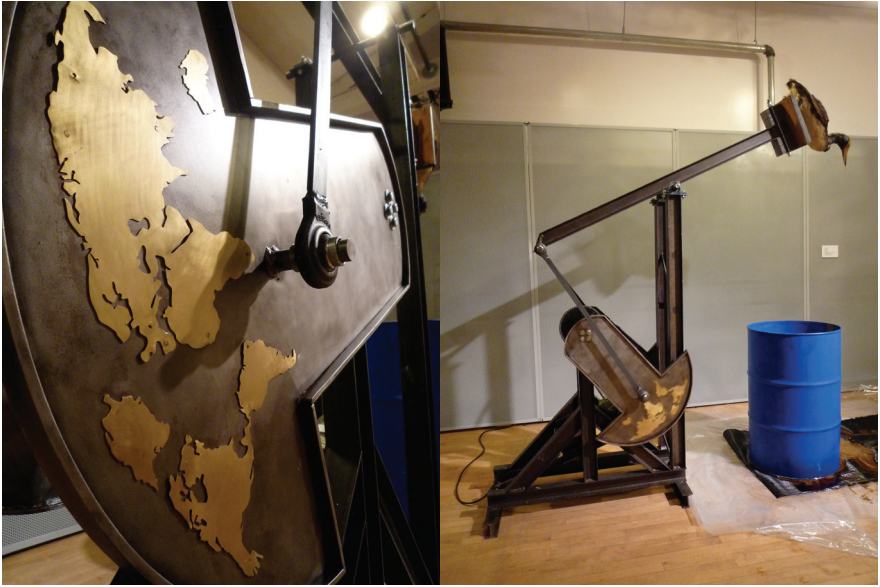
Cultural Olympiad, Vancouver 2010 Olympics.

## **Master's Mandala**

XPACE, Toronto, July 2010.



# Illustrations



*Dirty Loonie*, Cultural Olympiad, Vancouver 2010 Olympics.





*Mille Livres, Beirut, Lebanon, October 2009.*



*Canadian \$5, Cultural Olympiad, Vancouver 2010 Olympics.*





*Master's Mandala, XPACE, Toronto, July 2010.*





# About the Artist

Sarah Beck received her BFA in Photography from Ryerson, subsequently working as an electrician in Toronto's film industry. She won the Joseph S. Stauffer prize in 2004 awarded to 'encourage young Canadians of outstanding promise or potential' from the Canada Council for the Arts. Sarah spent 2008 as artist in residence at a high school for troubled youth, working intensively to encourage them to raise their voices in the community. She uses her art practice to act as a social barometer and cultural activist. September 2009 Sarah represented Canada at the Jeux de la Francophonie in Beirut, bringing home a silver medal in sculpture. Sarah's most recent residency was at the Cultural Olympiad during the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. Now that Sarah has completed *Currency*, she looks forward to her next adventure.



# (Sorry & Thanks)

I have been fortunate enough to have close friends, family and supporters who contributed greatly to my humble effort. Trying to properly acknowledge all the help received in this endeavor is overwhelming. I looked at what other people had written when they wanted to acknowledge the support they had been blessed with, and found Chuck Klosterman had already said it best; "...I want to publicly apologize to anyone who ended up getting mentioned in this book simply because they had the misfortune of knowing me..." Those people can see themselves in these pages and I hope that occasionally you will glimpse yourself too. Instead of making a list of my blessed supporters I've decided instead to buy them a beer over which I promise to discuss anything but this thesis. I am sorry and I couldn't have done it without you.







**“I was disappointed by the lack of cock and fart jokes.”**

**-Best Friend**

**“Before Sarah went to preschool when she couldn’t write very fast, she would draw pictures as fast as she could and send them flying off the table and start another one. When I asked her why she didn’t take more time on each picture, she said; ‘my brain has too many pictures and I have to get them made before the next one comes’.”**

**-Mother**

**“I would steal this book in a heartbeat.”**

**-Colleague**

**“It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that Ms. Beck's observations of the art world are tremendously apt... proof positive that she...says [important]...things.”**

**-Classmate**

**“She's fucking crazy, and if you've met her, you love her.”**

**-Ex-Boyfriend**

**“Sarah's destiny has always been off the beaten path. I knew this in elementary school when most wrote a 5 page book report, whereas Sarah fully illustrated over 30 pages for the same assignment.”**

**-Childhood Friend**

**“Thank God she’s done. Time for a real job.”**

**-Roommate**

**Sarah Beck was born in Saskatoon in 1976. She is regarded as a Master of Fine Art by OCADU.**