

Dear Lisa,

Was it Charles Nelson Reilly or Rip Taylor who hypothesised that 'only the real negation of culture can preserve its meaning'?

Not sure about the 'real' in that statement (would it be more or less real than the 'real' in Hellmann's Real Mayonnaise?), i.e., what any 'real negation' still conveys in a moment when so much culture arrives already as a (or in the) negative, but whoever it was (CNR or Rip) went on to express, feelingly, that only then, negated, can it 'no longer be *cultural*. Thus it is what in some way remains at the level of culture, but with a completely different meaning'. Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine, collaborating as *A Picture Is No Substitute For Anything*, the Cagney & Lacey of the so-called Pictures Generation, used that bit of difference-making as a contributor's note for at least one of their outings. When *A Picture Is No Substitute For Anything* appeared at the James Turcotte Gallery, Los Angeles (was it in 1982, at 10812 1/2 Magnolia Blvd., in Hollywood?), the white envelope for the announcement had printed, in a small black all-caps sans serif font, centered on the seal flap,

A PICTURE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ANYTHING

and within a robin's-egg- (or powder-?) blue card (index-sized, neither business card, postcard or carte de visite) that declared, italicised, in bold,

His gesture moved us to tears

and, picas smaller, all in small non-italicised bold caps, along the card's bottom edge, instead of a business address, their collaboration's moniker, printed one more time above each of their names separated by an interpunct. No explicit word about whose gesture it was that so moved them or what degree of irony, if any, as well as what kind of tears (joy? sadness?) were involved in the sentiment. Morgan Fisher alerted me to the fact that Levine said the work was instigated by seeing the studio of a Tachiste painter that his widow kept just as he'd left it. Others say the point of their gesture or action was to question what was then seen as the return of Frat house

pong to painting, with Julian Schnabel as hazing- and keg-meister. Whatever the case, Larry told me, point-blank, 'The exhibition was the card'.

This isn't what I meant to write. I was going to begin by asking you a question about time: Can you stop and smell the roses with temporal psychosis? I almost wrote *temporal psoriasis*, which made me think of our first studio visit whenever it was – long, long ago or yesterday – the work you were then making and the tears involved. This made me think of Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*, and its conflation of (or fall into) fever, fantasy and flashback – Philip E. Marlow's agony in his hospital bed, the dance hall razzmatazz of the noir he's trying to write, memories of his home and his mother's suicide, all merging in Marlow's mind, so that 'fictional' and 'actual' characters interact, like 'then' and 'now', and the whole shebang referring not quite allegorically (by a narrator unreliably lifelike) to Potter's own biography; his chronic, dire psoriatic arthritis ... Which made me think about my friend Anthony, who died two years ago, having decided to go off his HIV meds.

Which made me think that one of the gestures that might have moved Lawler & Levine, if not quite to tears (if not quite then, perhaps tears or melancholy now, when they think about then or when someone asks about their collaboration), was James Turcotte's. Born in Massachusetts in 1945, Turcotte, after studies in New York, Arizona and Spain, became a writer; around 1969, in New York, he married a 'college friend from Los Angeles', who returned there while he stayed in New York, although they had a son, 'born at UCLA Hospital on the 30th of May 1977'. Turcotte returned to L.A. a few months before the birth. In the account of his life that he left to contextualise his archive, which is held by the New York Public Library, he states: 'In Los Angeles, I worked for the Internal Revenue Service, and eventually opened an art gallery and ran a successful tax practice out of the gallery office. The practice supported the gallery and, to the extent of the law, my son David. His mother and I separated after he was born. In February 1988, I moved back to New York with my lover Andre. By August, I was diagnosed with AIDS. At this point I began to print and bind my own books and give them to friends. In this way I believed they would live – even if outside the enigmatic monolith of the publishing world'. The brief autobiography concludes with a note: 'Around 1968, I began writing in a stream

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of conscious style that concealed my homosexuality. Eventually, I moved to fiction, changing the names and genders of the people I was and knew. And finally, after my diagnosis, I switched to clear and concise journal story telling of actual people and events in my life'. There is too much to say about that note for me to get into right now, but you'll have already noticed I didn't put a *sic* after any of the prose's idiosyncrasies (did he mean stream of *consciousness* or, as I prefer to assume, due to the deflections involved, that he did, indeed, write in a stream of conscious style, rather than a stream-of-consciousness style, a flow of conscious stylisation, fully cognisant of the only apparent misprision). Turcotte died of AIDS-related causes on the 11th of May 1993.

When does anything begin to refer? seems both connected to but different from *How* does anything refer *at all*? What of either of those questions, or of Turcotte's story, adheres in Larry's *Untitled (Moved to Tears)* (2010), which is ostensibly a camera-ready paste-up for Lawler & Levine's announcement? Is it another ghost story? (I always want to use *proleptic* to describe it, despite the fact that it was made almost thirty years after *A Picture Is No Substitute For Anything's* blue card.) Larry's pictures are always more photographic than photographs, and in all of his work he points out the intensive switch or choice he made, not unlike Lawler & Levine made when they didn't call their project *A Photograph Is No Substitute For Anything*. Needless to say, Larry's gesture moves me to tears, the graph paper and careful paste-up. Phototypesetting's obsolescence is revoked and yet simultaneously somehow more than acknowledged. Before and after do-si-do, since, as Larry informed Morgan, folded into the many moving gestures converging is a pointed bit of, call it, genealogy: in 1982, as Morgan put it, when still a student, Larry was in a group show at James Turcotte Gallery. And, get this, the gallery's next show was the stern but sentimental outing by *A Picture Is No Substitute For Anything*. Paste-up artistry can involve 'cold type'. Cold type can describe a prickly personality, one that bristles. Cold types might dote on winter landscapes. Not all cold types are cool, but some are. Some cold types are cold to protect a big heart. Are Larry's movements entropic, as you observe, or are they in the drag of entropy, the way Charles Pierce (not *that* Charles Pierce, not Charles 'Sandy' P., logician as well as father [mother?] of pragmatism) is known best in the drag of Bette Davis or Carol

Channing? When the most famous Dolly saw Pierce impersonate her, she exclaimed, backstage, '*Chee-yaarles*, you do me better than I do!'

I've been thinking a lot about the boy with the errant Nietzsche on his arm as a figure for the hope in cause and effect *in or of* reality – a TV show formula that I almost can't bother with anymore – and how the eternal return tampers with that hope. Larry's albatross nest is both a booby trap and cuckoo's nest: as much as the eggs remain albatrosses waiting to be hatched – eventually to burden someone's, some unwary mariner's, neck – some of them are also swapped-out eggs of the Lizard King, ready to scramble time or any sure understanding of it. The burdens, of course, already exist, for the eggs to have been laid. The photographic alive in its future perfect perfection.

Here's a chronology:

pre-Wilde/post-Wilde → pre-Stonewall/post-Stonewall → pre-AIDS ...

I was going to juxtapose the last entry with 'post-AIDS' or, rather, "'post'-AIDS', but even with Truvada – a pill which isn't quite robin's-egg or powder blue, perhaps *Blueboy* blue? – I am skeptical about or, bluntly, not sanguine with, cavalierly invoking a 'post'-AIDS era. A better if bitter juxtaposition and continuation of the chronology (in no small part due to AIDS):

pre-AIDS/post-gay →

At least that's how it feels, AIDS having 86'd homosexuality as an identity – if it ever was one, since Gore Vidal always insisted it never really was and that there were only homosexualist acts or actions, and maybe acting out, adjectivally. But he might have felt differently about faggotry – a mode of being recalcitrant, misaligned to any mainstreamed or mainstreamable so-called homosexuality or queerness. Supercaliforniafaggotexpialidocious. As my friend Siobhan noted, there is only pre-AIDS, in a way, an era in which AIDS is not yet (again) on the scene and/or part of the seen. Already another ghost story.

You do me better than I do. Ghostwriterly. When people appear (are depicted or portrayed?) in Larry's work, they almost always

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appear as proper names. John-John is not John Belushi. He's not John Sex either, although both could be described as sexy Johns. Judy to many thinking men is only ever Judy Garland. Which is what makes the pictures of animals in Larry's work so funny; animals can appear as proper names (Bambi), but they also can be drawn into his photographic stable. A pencil is his carrot – and, as it turns out, his Johnson. In two works of what could be taken as a kind of triptych or a menagerie à trois – one in which both Larry's hands Lucky Pierre a cartoon giraffe with two different brown draughtsman's pencils, another in which his right hand tests or teases an Eeyore-ish ass' ass with the eraser end of a Ticonderoga No. 2 – the artist's photographed hands, lifelike, and illustrated art are digitally composited together, wickedly manipulated, manipulative and manual situations of pleasure. But in some kind of denouement, in the third picture of the series, the (as you pointed out, Mickey Mouse-ish-looking) kangaroo, well, sister's doin' it for herself, no handjob from the artist needed, she's gripping that tool, knowing the contours of her own desire, the look on her face difficult to read. 'Pleasuring herself' might not be the surest way to proceed to describe it. Sergei Eisenstein wrote of Disney's animations that they are 'beyond any image, without an image, beyond tangibility – like a pure sensation'. The threesome's relation to sensation, desire and pleasure is as complicated as the pictures' relation is, in the cold bright light of the digital, to the handmade and to photography as the so-called 'pencil of nature', an implement Larry turns into a joystick and tracing device that tracks so many of his movements, erotically theoretical. I keep calling the animals a threesome, but Larry handily makes it at least a foursome (any viewer would be a fifth). Your thoughts on Larry's predestined backstories make clear that something more than any mere self-reflexive three-ring circus meditation on the various media of Tinseltown is going on, and that one way to grasp the sensations would be to imagine something like the Cheshire Cat smiling at oblivion's orgy before disappearing completely.

I'm pretty sure male marsupials don't have pouches, and there's an eraser more than implied at the end of Kanga's pencil, although it can't be seen. Kangaroo pouches (marsupia!) aren't genitalia. Any of 'her' *jouissance*, if that's what to call it, would be connected to the erasure of her offspring, her joey, which is perhaps the cause of her potential rue. Larry's creature (a strangely maternal self-portrait?)

is an image of time, not unlike the dinosaur eating the clock at Ripley's. With the kangaroo, Larry would seem to be responding to Daniel Mendel-Black's reading of the Ripley's signage with a picture that, rather than representing any possible continuum with the past, becomes a picture of the imponderable discontinuity of the future. Ripley's T-Rex devours the clock, which is a sign for everything, semiotically and otherwise, that would allow the entire spectacle to be; Kangaroo rubs one out, rubs something out, 'within' her, and the erasure's consequences remain unknown and unknowable (there is no way to tell what 'she' is doing, and she is, in some sense, doing nothing, erasing it into being, while simultaneously eliding every line and lineage that led and will lead to and from her) and somehow, for that reason, more devastating. Why should something so flat (and if the interpolation of the giraffe between, and the ass next to, pictures of the artist's hands or hand only make drawing itself seem even flatter, then the sketch of the kangaroo is the flattest thing ever photographed), how should something so flat project and involve such a strong sense of an interior (her pouchness), much less of an interiority, however psychologically freaked or devil-may-care? Pleasures imply politics; the politics here are empowering, feminist – and queerly erasing the givens of any temporal order. The ménage of his menagerie corrals avatars (stand-ins for the artist as well as anyone witnessing such trans-species fucking around [photography is as much as a kind of *species* as a giraffe, one that can interbreed with drawing]) who grope for ways 'outside' of, while being groped by and coming to grips with and 'within', the feedback loop of our Photoshopped instant and 'reality'. Animating the creatures' sensations, even more, perhaps, than Larry's animating pictures of their 'nature' – arousals beyond any image, beyond tangibility and easy name – no one, no one feeling, may any longer have a choice in already having become implicated in what Larry's done and continues to do to and with photography. His probings cause the picture's *petite mort* – while animating its repeatedly endless (erased) nevermore.

How did he long ago already put it? Oh, right: 'Heh. Heh, heh ... Ah yes ... HA, HA ... HA, HA, HA.'

xo Bruce