[GROUNDINGS]

FIRE AND FIRE AND FIRE: NOTES FROM A BURNT-OUT AGE

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

I. Looking up

In the before, I was never much one for skygazing. Our rented house in Cardiff, into which we moved mid-pandemic, has a garden studio with a roof which invites you to lie down on it and look up. Looking up from here, which I do frequently, you could swear that you were seeing the whole sky, all of it. I feel entirely insignificant, barely even peripheral to anything that has ever happened or existed. This became a welcome soothing sensation in a time of hysterical slowing-down and speeding-up, of grief and disruption and opening in every direction.

I regret now that it took the pandemic to force me to seriously consider, for the first time, my relationship with the air, with beauty, with finitude. Now, in our moment of permachaos, the sky cannot help but code possibility. It has become an empty screen onto which experiments in imagination and elsewhere-thinking are projected.

Sometimes, I smell fire from here. I could be imagining it. Often I think about what the flames are doing, where they will go, what they mean. And sometimes, exhausted, I fall asleep on this roof, and my boyfriend has to wake me from nightmares of some heightened but eerily familiar scenarios involving wildfires, depleted habitats, burning buildings.

I have been occupied by questions, questions, circling around the multiple meanings of fire in this hazy mid-to-late pandemic contemporary. The scale of fire-based ecological destruction, the ubiquitous allure of its imaging, the language of burning out, burning out, everywhere. What does it mean to gaze up at the sky, to gaze into the future, when all there is is fire, everywhere, all the time?

As the decimations — and new burning possibilities — of the last two years continue to collapse orthodoxies about the ways in which we look and work together to produce art and knowledge, our conditions of permanent crisis have intensified, and made so

much of the globalised artworkforce burn out, and lose faith. Still, many are playing dumb when it comes to the existential fork in the road at which the art world now finds itself. A sense of collective fatigue, of numbed overwhelm, dominates. Fatigue with thankless and precarious labour conditions, fatigue with the incoherence of our industries' power structures, fatigue with the suffocating seeming impossibility of meaningful redefinition of what justice and devolution of resources look like in the contexts of the 'art' 'world' on all its varying scales. Everyone I know is exhausted and grieving, has had enough, is worn out and weary, burning out, burning. It would be irresponsible, if not impossible, now to speak of the future of art — its making, its circulation, its discourses — without recognising that it is engulfed in the last of these burnout flames.

How can it be possible to imagine any kind of future — much less for contemporary art and the knotty transnational infrastructures which uphold it — when so many of those who would be doing the imagining are impossibly burnt out (on fire) or barely staying afloat (lost at sea), or both? Laying here on my roof these incoherent associations between fire and fire and fire are bound together by fantasies of burning it all down and starting again, that ubiquitous refrain.

II. Collective depletions

A little under a year before the pandemic swept the globe, the World Health Organisation released a report redefining 'burnout' as a 'syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.'[1] Its three main symptoms were defined as: 'feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion'; 'increased mental distance from one's job or feelings negative towards one's career'; and 'reduced professional productivity.' The WHO's new definition of burnout categorises it as a distinctly

1 World Health Organization, 2019.

individual phenomenon, and thus one which has individualised solutions; that is, bluntly put, improving the relationship between an individual and their work. I'd seek to contextualise the burnout of which I speak in very different terms.

As the art historian Pamela M. Lee articulates as part of a recent *October* dossier on burnout, 'an ambience of mass fatigue — an atmosphere of collective depletion — has descended everywhere... you live the syndrome, feel it at the cellular level as your daily habitus.'[2] Burnout, then, must not be conceived as simply a medical or social phenomenon, and certainly not an individual one — as what happens when you (the individual) work(s) too hard — but a collective condition which is an omnipresent feature of art-work practices in the contemporary, coloured by specific forces tied to the dwarfing scales of inequity and precarity by which arts industries are increasingly defined. Lee writes of 'the devastating knot of global crises and revolutionary insurgencies around which burnout syndrome now assumes an alternately structural and parasitic role,' and it is difficult to imagine the force of these devastations alleviating any time soon.

That this *knot* is coinciding with an age of very literal fire devastation as a consistent feature of many people's lived reality and our global news and media economy, can stimulate, provoke, and guide. Though towards what exactly I continue to work through. It would be easy to collapse the relationship between the mass burnout instigated or exacerbated by pandemic conditions and the increasing attention afforded the framework of the Pyrocene, the geological age of fire,[3] to the level of pun. But how might one elucidate our understanding of the other? How are the conditions of living in

2 Pamela M. Lee, 2021.

3 Scholars such as Stephen J. Pyne have written extensively about the Pyrocene as a proposed geological epoch defined primarily by the relationship between humans and fire, and which is roughly synonymous with the Anthropocene.

an age in which everything seems to be burning down, in so many different senses, illuminative of each other?

More questions: What if burnout could also be generative, could orient us towards more equitable and charitable and sustainable ways of sharing and circulating art? What if we rethought burning out as but one of many semi-permanent conditions of living in a Pyrocene, here to stay?

What if hitting a brick wall and giving up was not such a bad thing?

III. Fire paralysis

Earth scientists and Pyrocene scholars speak of 'good fire' and 'bad fire', the former of which is dwindingly scarce and the latter increasingly defining the conditions of life on earth for large swathes of its (human and non-human) inhabitants. *Bad fire* refers to the headline-news kind; burning rainforests, vanishing habitats, fire which is unambiguously unruly and ruinous. *Good fire*, meanwhile, refers to the natural elemental link we all have with fire; fire as caregiver, fire as provider, fire as a source of life and energy. Fire is full of contradiction: it is beautiful and difficult to look away from, and it also destroys, can be murderous. It gives and takes away. Our forests are intensely vulnerable to enormous fire destruction, more rapid every day, and we are hyper-aware of this. Still, we cannot look away.

Fire has also come to feel like an ever more ubiquitous feature of the *aesthetic* ecology of our everyday. New fires on world-historical scales appear daily, bright and destined to burn forever — a hundred-thousand fires now burn through the Amazon *yearly* — leaving only ruin, and in turn, more and more media images of ruin. If unspeakable and hyper-visible devastation of land is one of our times' defining issues, what aesthetic paradigms can possibly be fit for a world aflame?

The art historian T. J. Demos articulated a kind of response to this question using the framework of 'burning aesthetics' in a 2019 *e-flux Journal* essay, 'The Agency of Fire.'[4] We live in a time that forces constant confrontation with images of world-ending, on ungraspable scales, everywhere we turn, and this inconceivability is the burning aesthetic's defining characteristic. Such images 'present a misleading visual field of aesthetic contemplation… offer[ing] only a privileged sort of distanced voyeurism, a reassuring domination of disaster, but also a failure to capture the momentousness of loss.' The unreal intensity of burning aesthetics both placate and enrage their viewer, which is everyone, all the time. In the unceasing images of fire-based loss and ruination which populate our overwhelmingly digital, algorithmic visual fields, 'we face the insufficiency of the image,' forcing us to 'face the un/meaning of visual evidence.'[5] Though intense like nothing else, these images which reflect our burning world back to us ultimately constitute an aesthetic paradigm whose main characteristic is *paralysis*.

This paralysis of looking shares a lot in common with the numbed overwhelm and fatigue identified previously in this essay as a dominant condition of work/life in the age of burnout. Perhaps this is a key to understanding why I am so consistently lured by fire of both literal and metaphorical kinds as vehicles for rethinking the contemporary, for looking into the future with purpose and co-intention. Perhaps this is why, even though I feel as if I am collapsing under the weight of everything everyday, it is still the future that dominates my mind. The numbness propels forward in spite of itself.

IV. Good fires

My main memories of the Covid era will be of being surrounded by everybody being busy, functioning at impossible speed, juggling,

4 T. J. Demos, 2019.
5 T. J. Demos, 2019.

crying, tap-dancing, in freefall, on fire. In a mid-pandemic talk on 'wearing out' as part of *Art Criticism and the Pandemic*, a series of events organised by Chris McCormack for the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, the artist Oreet Ashery notes the generative distinction between jadedness, which is almost a form of currency in the art world, and the condition of being worn (or burnt) out, which is at least in part 'earned.'[6] When is wearing out productive? How could acknowledging, naming, and contextualising the condition of having had enough, of tapping out, of reaching breaking point, guide us towards some strategies of alleviating the collective psychic toll of being burnt out? How, from the fogginess and the confusion and the overstimulation of pandemic-time, could we carve out space for rationality, sensitivity, and imagination amidst the moment's fiery collisions?

The Friends of Attention, an informal coalition of artists, scholars, and activists which emerged from the 2018 São Paulo Biennial, write incisively on 'a dialectic of attentional freedom,'[7] in ways which shed some light on what we might be talking about when we speak of fire fire and fire and fire in an age which calls for burning it all down. They argue that true attention is an increasing impossibility, despite the fact that market structures are designed to foster the illusion that our attention is free and without limits. 'Our attention has never been more free,' they write, 'or more continuously entrapped.' Their response to the contradictions wrapped up in 'attention' under late technocapitalism is to argue for the organisation of new ecologies where astonishment and mutual care can thrive.

This is to say, they see the paucity of space for meaningful attention-giving as an opening: a world-building exercise, 'the carving out of spaces in the world where it can survive and thrive.' This fundamentally political work is the work of generative burnout;

6 Oreet Ashery, online talk, 2021.
7 The Friends of Attention, 2019.

acknowledging the impossibility of the present and yet willing ourselves to work around it, with it, to work together through the shared grief and exhaustion of our time in ways that create space for new possibilities.

And what of those burning possibilities? I would find it impossible to speak of fire and its visual culture, of fatigue and furious burnout and the making of the future in the context of the last two years, without being direct about the resonances of the explosions which spurned the summer of 2020 into being. Minneapolis' Third Precinct, on fire; the Market House, a nexus of slave trading in North Carolina, on fire; these are defining images of our moment, of a future that, perhaps, began to be born on those streets in that summer, calling for new kinds of understandings of the way that history exists in the present, and for the right of all to be allowed to breathe. As Tobi Haslett wrote in his seminal year-on reflection on the 2020 uprisings in the US, of the Third Precinct fire, 'The event felt like a fulcrum. The whole country seemed to tilt ...This was open black revolt: simultaneous but uncoordinated, a vivid fixture of American history sprung to life with startling speed.'[8] These events, and the global uprisings they ignited, too, were a kind of burnout, tangled up in the burning rage and exhaustion of pandemic-time as well as a mass reckoning with the brutalities of history, of now. The end of a tether; the beginning of something new. The future in motion, exploding, as the world gazes into its flames and sees, perhaps, the possibility of a new version of itself.

That question again: When we look to the sky, in Cardiff or in Minneapolis or anywhere, what do we see? Potential or ruin or some impossible – some wondrous, even – synthesis of both?

Fire ensues when the burnout fuse exceeds its capacity. And when that happens — and it will inevitably happen in what was formerly known as the 'international' 'art' 'world', as it will inevitably

8 Tobi Haslett, 2021.

happen everywhere else — everything (everything, everything) burns to the ground. It is there in the way images of fire circulate and hypnotise. It is there in the beautiful blazing possibility of a symbol of murderously carceral logic burning to the ground, seen around the world. It is there in the nightmares and the fantasies of burning and burning which possess me as I lie down gazing at that Cardiff sky. May the good fire burn forever.

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Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

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