



# Dead Roots: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

The *Tree of Life* is Terrence Malick's most ambitious, most experimental, most personal film. It is also, in many ways, his worst. In the previous issue of *Machete*, Nathan Brown framed the film's philosophical explorations in numerous fascinating ways. However, without calling into question the validity of Brown's reading, I'd like to investigate the reasons why the film remains, for me, a deeply flawed and unsatisfying work. It's hard to think of a film in which such interesting and impressive moments exist side by side with such cringe-inducing material. While this bizarre erraticness is new for Malick, I think the problems relate to the shifting but always present tension in his work between his narrative and philosophic impulses, and *The Tree of Life* exposes, in a particularly stark way, the limitations of Malick's aesthetic strategies in working out this tension.

Much is often made of Malick's early training as a philosopher, and his small body of work certainly has a legitimate philosophic scope. All of Malick's films deal with people's limited capacity to grapple with the sublime natural world, the confusions of love and desire, the enigmas of violence and death – and the problems of meaning and morality that stem from this limited capacity. However, that said, Malick's masterful early films are more interested in mining the rich dramatic possibilities of innocence and ignorance than in pursuing philosophical inquiries directly. In *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, philosophical questions emerge implicitly from the mode of narration, meaning not only Malick's unique use of voice-over but also the way the voice-over opens up possibilities for departures from the story proper, which are nonetheless still contained within its parameters. In both films, the seemingly 'limited' perspective of the adolescent girl narrator actually makes the narrative itself more expansive, allowing it to include peripheral elements that would seem inconsequential or unrelated if the story had been filtered through the more focused, self-aware consciousness of an adult narrator. It is this expansive quality that gives philosophic dimensions to the generic narratives (*Badlands'* tale of lovers on the run, *Days of Heaven's* tragic period romance).

When Malick returned to filmmaking after a 20-year hiatus, he began to search more aggressively for ways of utilizing and subverting narrative conventions in order to philosophize more directly, with decidedly mixed results. In *The Thin Red Line*, Malick seems to be bluntly squaring off two seemingly incompatible approaches – direct philosophic inquiry, and conventional genre storytelling. The poetic tension generated between the overt philosophizing indulged in by the multiple narrators ("What is this war at the heart of nature?" etc) and the war-story narrative is responsible for some of the film's most interesting moments, as

well as its most awkward. This was repeated in *The New World*, except that there both the philosophizing and the storytelling were significantly less compelling, and the attempts at poetry more hackneyed.

When Malick's narrators were adolescent girls, as in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, he could use them to raise questions without having to pursue these in any serious way. Malick's girl-narrators could muse about their confounding experiences without being expected to try too hard to seek out any answers. This might seem like something of a philosophic sleight of hand (allowing Malick to engage in complex terrain without having to explicitly pursue matters beyond the limited capacity of his narrators), but it was also a brilliantly effective dramatic device that led to rich aesthetic achievements. When Malick starts using adult (and mostly male) narrators in his later work, they have to grapple more directly with the difficult questions that they raise; remaining in a state of child-like awe and bafflement is not an acceptable response for soldiers at war (*The Thin Red Line*), explorers on a colonial mission (*The New World*), or



anguished Texans (*The Tree of Life*). Malick's desire to push his philosophic explorations further into the forefront of his work is certainly understandable, but in many ways his mode of filmmaking does not seem up to the task. It is no backhanded compliment to say that Malick's cinema is perfectly suited to poetically capturing the depths of innocence, confusion and awe – brilliant at raising questions but decidedly less well-suited to actually addressing them in any satisfying way.

I think the problem with *The Tree of Life* has partly to do with the fact that Malick is no longer filtering his philosophic interests through the microcosm of any kind of recognizable narrative genre. Malick's dialectical method seems to require a solid narrative foundation for him to be able subvert and undermine and overwhelm with sounds and images and digressions that veer off into broader philosophic territory. Stripping himself of this dynamic leaves Malick floundering. He has to invent his own structures to support the weight of his philosophic inquiries, and he does not always succeed in pulling this off. *Tree of Life* is constructed out of six basic sections, which are intercut in various ways throughout the film: 1) the section depicting the birth of the cosmos and the early development of life on Earth; 2) the section

depicting the blessed early years in the life of the O'Brien family; 3) the section depicting the O'Briens troubled period, in which the eldest son Jack enters thorny adolescence as the father struggles with his failures and regrets; 4) the section depicting the torturous days immediately following the death of the middle son R.L.; 5) the contemporary section depicting Jack as an adult, still haunted by the loss of his brother; and, 6) the metaphoric fantasy sequence that concludes the film. Each section suggests a different conception of Life. With admitted oversimplification, we could break it down crudely like this: 1) depicts the scientific view of life; 2) depicts the religious view of life as miracle; 3) depicts the psychological view of life as a vortex of never-fully-conscious impulses and desires; 4) depicts life in the face of death as a confounding void; 5) depicts the anguish of living in the aftermath of this void (represented by Malick as godless postmodern existence); 6) presents a metaphoric vision of life that attempts to reconcile these unreconcilable perspectives.

This is certainly an ambitious undertaking, but Malick's success varies wildly.

The birth of the cosmos/early life section has undeniable moments of beauty and power, but its execution is uneven. The section depicting the early years in the O'Brien family features inventive narrative verve, energetically skimming through a decade of happy moments; yet, ultimately, this seems to be in the service of little more than a nostalgic romanticization of banal suburban family life. The contemporary scenes featuring Sean Penn as adult-

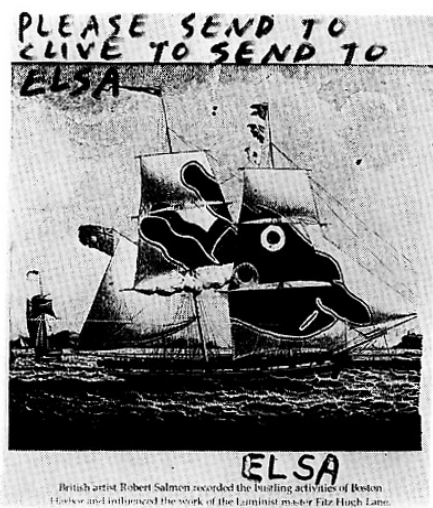
Jack gazing ruefully out of sterile skyscrapers exists blatantly as a structural device that gives Malick an excuse for the insertion of ponderous voice-over throughout the film; as a sequence in its own right it is embarrassingly inept. The section concerning the news and aftermath of R.L.'s death is appropriately disorienting and also contains the film's best line, which nicely summarizes Malick's ambivalence toward God: "He sends flies to wounds he should heal." However, this section is brief and exists mainly as a jumping-off point for the rest of the film.

For all Malick's formal and structural experimentations and his bold philosophical explorations, the most effective section (#3 above) of *The Tree of Life* is the most concrete and narrative. The film's most sustained achievement is the dramatization of the eldest son Jack's budding adolescent angst and his ensuing moral/existential crisis. Without much dialogue, Malick and his young non-actor manage to powerfully communicate the gradual (but sudden) revelation of life's many troubling complexities and ambiguities: Jack discovers sexuality and death; perceives the hypocrisies and limitations of his father; senses the erotic charge of his mother; intuits the destructive potential of the family unit;

*(continued on last page)*

# The Present, Tense

Ray Johnson is the great master of mail-art, arguably its creator, and it reached its apotheosis in his hands. His letters were inventive drawings and wordplays, often with instructions to modify or add to the contents and send them on to a third party. Not everyone followed his directives, but many wrote back or carried out their charges, keeping the game alive. This activity became known as the New York Correspondence School, and it is the reason there was a Ray Johnson show at Arcadia University this year.



If you corresponded faithfully with Johnson, there was a remote chance he would suddenly show up with a load of cardboard boxes of his work for you to store. This happened one day in 1990 to collage artist Robert Warner, who dutifully preserved his trove of thirteen boxes. Even after Johnson died in 1995, Warner did not open them. This past summer Warner finally unpacked the boxes and cataloged their contents at the Esopus Foundation's gallery in New York's West Village. It is Philadelphia's great fortune to have this archive temporarily available at Arcadia, along with a selection of Johnson's masterful collages lent by his Estate. Because Johnson eschewed art world norms, exhibits of his work are hard to come by, making this exhibit an especially valuable opportunity. Moving through the show's idiosyncratic drawings and objects, I felt warmed by Johnson's particular form of engagement; it runs through his work like an underground stream.

The warmth in Johnson's art can be understood, at least in part, in terms of gift exchange. Let me emphasize that I am saying *in part*, because Johnson, like all great artists, made work of enormous complexity that cannot be exhausted by a single conceptual frame. Yet it's clear that Johnson thought about the nature of gifts in relation to his art, a topic discussed by the critic Ina Blom. In her essay, "Ray Johnson: The Present of Mail Art", Blom highlights one of Johnson's punning statements, "Mail Art has no history, only a present," a joke that cuts Johnson free from the weight of art's canon by situating him in an ahistorical *now*, but also directs our attention to his work as a gift.

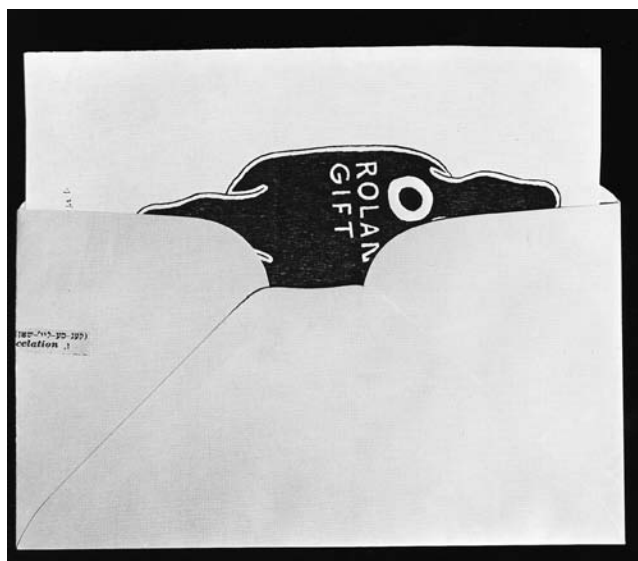
*The Gift*, Lewis Hyde's investigation of creativity and gift exchange, offers numerous examples of gift economies, many bearing similarities to Johnson's mail art. In an essay for a 1991 exhibition at Philadelphia's Moore College, Clive Phillpot wrote: "When one receives mail art from Ray Johnson, one is receiving a gift of art. An ongoing practice based on gifts, or gift exchange, is rather

extraordinary in developed countries in the late twentieth century."

Phillpot's specific indication that developed countries lack formalized gift systems relates directly to *The Gift*. In the very first chapter, Hyde describes the Kula, a ceremonial gift system of the Massim who populate the islands off the eastern tip of New Guinea. Two different types of ritual gift objects, armshells and necklaces, are transferred from person to person through the islands in an infinite ring. One does not give a gift to the person from whom a gift was received, but rather to someone else, on the next island along the chain.

Hyde characterizes the Kula's circular path as necessitating three points because two points merely make a line, but three points also describe a triangle. The triangle figures prominently as a motif in Johnson's drawings, and it's also key to the operation of his mail-art. Warner likes to imagine Johnson's method as a three-sided ping-pong table in which each player hits the ball to their neighbor, rather than only two people playing back and forth. Johnson would mail an item to Warner with instructions such as "bring this to Chuck Close," or "slip this under Jasper Johns' door." Johnson's letters would frequently include the directive "please send to" thus roping a third person into Johnson's machinations.

Hyde points out that as with the Kula, "most of the stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people." A third person enlarges gift-giving beyond the confines of binary reciprocity. This expanded dynamic avoids a quid pro quo and thus stands in stark contrast to the movement of commodities, which change hands only to generate a calculated profit. Johnson was notoriously difficult to buy from, and while part of the challenge arose from his penchant for playing the trickster, there is evidence suggesting that Johnson was uncomfortable with his artwork being treated as an object to be purchased.



The documentary *How To Draw A Bunny* provides numerous examples of the mischief Johnson made around the sale of his work. In one case, famed literary agent Morton Janklow describes his efforts, beginning in 1981, to buy 26 collage portraits Johnson had made of him. Johnson offered the 26 for a total of \$42,400, to which Janklow responded with an offer of \$13,000. Hyde cites the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski's detailing of Kula gift exchange ethics, the first of which "prohibits discussion...with the equivalence of the two objects discussed, bargained about and

computed." The Kula sharply distinguish gift exchange from barter. Janklow's \$13,000 counter-offer resulted in an endless series of letters between him and Johnson involving continuous permutations of the price, and even of the portraits themselves. With each passing year, the portraits of Janklow were transformed and increasingly inscrutable, taking on images of Paloma Picasso and more deeply obscuring Janklow's visible presence. This byzantine process not only dissolved Janklow into a larger communal collective including Picasso and others, it turned price-negotiation into an absurd caricature. It did not end until some twenty years later, after Johnson's death, when Janklow managed to buy the full set from Feigen Contemporary for, as he told the *New York Times*, "considerably more than originally asked."

*How To Draw A Bunny* provides another excellent example of Johnson's reaction to people bargaining over his art. The artist Peter Schuyff relates how he asked to buy a collage portrait of Andy Warhol, for which Johnson named a price of \$2,000. Schuyff replied with an offer of \$1,500. Johnson delivered the piece to Schuyff with the bottom-right quarter of the collage cut out: the full artwork less 25%. "I learned my lesson," Schuyff dryly concludes.

Hyde points out that while gifts create bonds, commodity exchange prevents intimate involvement or lasting obligation: market value is precisely determined and the commodity is traded for currency or an object of equal value. Upon the transaction's completion the two parties no longer have a connection. We typically know nothing about the clerk from whom we buy an item at a store, and we don't think about the clerk two weeks later. Johnson's absurd and sometimes endless machinations around the sale of his work may have been a means of struggling with the intersection of his art and the market, of forcibly disturbing the cold calculation of commodity exchange. Without the third party inherent in a gift-economy, Johnson needed another means to subvert the quid pro quo of commerce.

Schuyff does not explain the lesson he learned, but I'd like to hazard a guess. Though Johnson maintained continuous contact with others through the phone and the mail, he kept himself relatively isolated. Johnson seems to have been exquisitely, perhaps even painfully sensitive to the tensions between gift and commodity, intimate relationships and isolation, and community and individuality. His mail art and his life balanced these opposing forces in a shifting and finely calibrated performance.

*How To Draw A Bunny* includes a brief story told by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. When they asked Johnson if they could buy something, he named a price and they immediately got their checkbook. Johnson tried to tempt them into haggling over the price, but they insisted on simply giving him what he'd asked. In a separate incident, Johnson had expressed interest in buying their work but admitted he had little money. They mailed him their work as a gift.

By Daniel Gerwin

# Open Letter to Labor Servicing the Culture Industry

I've worked as an art handler in New York, both as a freelancer and on the payroll with benefits. The two modes of handling art both share the constant threat of losing one's job if any mistakes are made or if any hesitation to accommodate what is requested—or more often expected—is revealed. Freelancing is less and more stressful. Freelancing allows for a lifestyle where literally 10–14 hour days (like many others, I've done 16ers, some overnights) can be packed into a week during an exhibition change, with weeks off to “focus on one's own work.” Constantly flirting with poverty, as most freelancers are, a seemingly large chunk of money is obtained that vanishes rather quickly after coping with the realities of New York rent. A pattern emerges after freelancing for a while where the free time is often spent worrying and networking for the next job. Cultures develop over a period of time amongst crews. They get to know each other and the people who staff the gallery fulltime, but when the gig is over, so is the connection to the gallery or the museum. God forbid a freelancer come down with the flu or something worse; if you don't work, you don't get paid. The freelancer also has to be always accommodating and ready to work when the phone rings. If not, the phone may not ring again. Freelancers are constantly juggling the phone ringing too much, overbooking and having to say no; or more often, the phone doesn't ring enough. Freelancers expend a lot of time and energy (labor) in a constant hustle when they are not presently working. A certain degree of satisfaction and camaraderie can come from working on a crew to pull off an insanely large installation under pressure in a short period of time, but at the end of the day, in spite of his/her specialized skill, in spite of the fact that most hold MFAs (that they've taken on a lifetime of debt for), the freelance art handler is the lowest rung on the ladder of the art world, barely worthy of eye contact.

The next lowest rung is probably the gallery attendant, or rather, the receptionist at the front desk. They have the thankless tasks of answering phones, sitting at the front desk, on display themselves, dealing with the public all day, tolerating lechy tailored old men wearing too much cologne, and taking whatever kind of abuse the director gives them for whatever reason he or she feels a whim to dole out. In all of the galleries I've worked for and most I visit, women usually hold this job. Obviously, I can't speak from experience but only by what I've observed. Leaving Chelsea one

night this past February, I overheard a conversation between two receptionists from a gallery on my street sharing a smoke. One woman was talking about how a friend of hers had to quit another gallery without giving notice because she couldn't deal with the abuse she was getting, and how she was under constant scrutiny about how she was dressed. The other woman said, “Yeah, it's usually not like that here, but sometimes it is. I'm really not looking forward to the Armory.” I can't count how many times I've heard some version of that conversation in New York. Both of these women, like most I'm aware of who work reception in New York galleries, were attractive and dressed very well. Most likely at about 17.9% APR. I've rarely worked more than a few weeks in a gallery without seeing a receptionist brought to tears by the abuse of a director. Many of these receptionists hold Master's degrees in art history. They tend to make salaries in the mid 30's with dental and health benefits. They are all one forgotten phone message or bad outfit away from getting on someone's last nerve and either having their shitty job become a total living hell or simply taken away.

Debatable for that same low spot on the ladder as the receptionist, is the full-time art handler. The full-time art handler actually has quite a lot of administrative responsibility as well as the physical tasks of hanging and installing art, patching and painting walls, changing light bulbs and tubes, trouble shooting electronic equipment, emptying trash, sweeping the floor, and cleaning trash from the front of the gallery in the morning. The art handler also has to manage the crates. They have to be opened and have their contents inspected. Theoretically, if a damaged work is received from a truck and the driver has left before the crate has been opened and inspected, the art handler is responsible for the damage. The contents of the crates, the art works, have to be entered into the database, and the status of the works—sold, on site, or in storage—has to be accurately maintained. The lines between registrar and art handler get blurred with these tasks. In most large galleries, there are viewing rooms where installations and hangings have to be made at very short notice when a director arranges a meeting with a collector to view something from the inventory. It's all quite high pressure, and when the pressure dies down, there are plenty of menial janitorial tasks to make sure no one should become idle. Full-time art handlers also usually have MFAs. They tend to make in the mid

30's to low 40's with health and dental benefits. They're all a misplaced crate, a damaged work, a dead light bulb, or a dealer's forgetting to take his Welbutrin for a few days away from being fired.

There are also warehouses and museums, which depend on such workers to carry out their business. Some museums are—or at least they have been—mindful to hire more equal amounts of men and women to conduct the exhibition changes. Breaks and lunches are scheduled at a consistent time. Overtime is presented as an option to take, but there are no benefits. I've worked with guys who have done this long enough to go grey; some have limps or other ailments. The skills they have are a very specialized form of labor developed over a significant period of time. They've built a career out of working show change to show change. There is no 401k or any other type of safety net waiting for these folks. And what about the receptionist? How long can she go on sitting behind the desk? It seems she either finds some way to move up to an assistant director position, or she goes back to school or back to wherever she came from.

zzAnd then there are the TAs and the adjuncts. Earning more “cultural capital” within the realm of the arts than those working in the institutions of exhibition and sale but obscenely lower wages. I was a TA in an Ivy League institution and made 9 bucks an hour. I got very lucky and landed a year-long visiting assistant professor gig at a private university right out of school for an academic year and earned just over 5 grand a semester. I taught in a really fantastic sculpture program at a state university and earned under \$1,900 dollars for each semester. While I was teaching, I would juggle freelance work to survive. I also would make a point to stay late on days of my classes to make time for every student. I would conduct independent study courses with some, primarily out of my love for the work but also in an attempt to gain more experience to better position myself for the elusive tenure-track job. I do have a few colleagues who have somehow managed to secure a tenure-track position complete with benefits, but most who continue to adjunct are constantly hustling, juggling other jobs, and constantly looking beyond the semester they are working in, trying to sniff out the next job and vying for it against enormous competition.

In art school, primarily during the course of my undergraduate work, I got two messages regarding the professional life outside of school. One was a Romantic

sort of ideal about staying focused on my work. Just keep my head down, keep cranking it out, no matter what life hands me (in spite of financial need or the need for medical care), just keep working and I would find myself able to support myself autonomously. Basically I would learn how to shit gold. On the other hand, I was told I would probably be hungry a lot, that it would be difficult for a long, long time, that there are no teaching jobs (which is mostly true), and that I better develop some skills I could live on. Graduate school was presented as a must-do for an artist but also as the place where one would “figure it all out.” When I got to graduate school, I did make a lot of work at the time. Some of it I felt good about, but there was no guidance or real discussion as to how to survive once we got out. By the end of the first year, I was noticing a hyper-awareness as to who was getting “picked up” by which gallery and who was showing in what group show. While no one would admit it at the time (many of my friends have since fessed up to it), it created a greater sense of neurotic competition and anxiety. By the end of my second year of graduate school, expressions of disappointment over awards were being vocalized (along with sentiments bordering on despair) of not knowing what to do to survive and still have the time and means to focus on one’s work. It was around this time that I became aware of and started participating in attempting to organize for GESO (Graduate Employees and Student Organization), which aimed to organize all of the graduate students of the university and secure a union contract. While there were strikes and walkouts, the union was ultimately, narrowly voted down and did not secure a contract for graduate student/employees to be able to bargain collectively for better pay, benefits and a real position, as it was the graduate students who were taking on the largest teaching loads, outside of the school of art. I started imagining what a labor union in the art world, and greater culture industry might look like (as it does in the film, television, and theater industries) as I was being organized and attempting to organize other students around the vision of what a university with unionized graduate employees might look like.

I left school and came to New York—along with pretty much everyone else from my program and every other MFA program on the east coast—and hunkered down to figure out how to survive. The thought of a union for artists and/or art workers quickly faded. When I would score jobs, I would just feel grateful to be working (no matter how insane or abusive the person or organization I was working for) at a rate of 15 to 20 bucks an hour. The people I worked next to were all in the same boat I was. I landed what I thought was a nice job as a gallery

attendant/security guard for a small private collection. Three days a week, 24 dollars an hour. At first it was great; no one ever came in, allowing me plenty of time for reading, writing, and working in my sketchbook. After about six months of no one coming in, the managing director decided it would be a good idea for us to start cleaning and moving books and boxes around in the basement storage, just to keep us busy. I missed being able to read, but I didn’t mind pushing a broom around or scrubbing elevator doors because the pay seemed good and it was only three days a week. The menial tasks became more frequent, and the director grew more and more erratic, condescending, and manipulative. I felt hooked on the job because, while it was deadly boring—as was the collection—and the managing director was becoming a full-blown psychotic, I was just getting by on three days a week. My co-workers were all a decade or so older than I, and they had been in New York for a long time. There was always shared bitching between us about how boring the job was or what an unjust prick the director had become (he’d taken to reminding each and everyone of us we’d be fired if mistakes were made), but my coworkers kept repeating that there were very few opportunities this good for artists, and most places were “so much worse” (which I’d found to be at least partly true). There were two people I worked with whom I liked and learned from a lot; one got out after just over a year, the other ended up sticking around another three after my three years. There was, after all no better job for an artist in New York.

And the truth is, when I would talk to my other peers about what I did for my rent money, it was often met with a reaction of jealousy. “Dude, you should never quit that job!” While it was true that the hourly wage was close to double what some people I knew were making, when I would talk about the job over beers or whatever with friends, I wouldn’t talk about the parts where I was scrubbing a freight elevator door that was never used. I never talked about how I didn’t have health insurance, and how one trip to the ER put me in more serious debt. I wouldn’t talk about having to sweep up condoms in front of the building in the morning or washing the windows, and I never talked about what a moody, constantly insulting prick I was taking orders from. The prick that held my ability to pay rent over my head. He made the half-joke of “You’ll get fired” all the time. In spite of my being able to make rent in only three days a week, I was still scrambling all the time. I had a studio but rarely had the money to make the work I wanted to, so I still had to hustle for freelance work to get my own work done. In 2006, an opportunity to do a residency and teach in Europe for a few months

came up, and I took it. While there, I was treated well financially speaking, but I also was treated with basic respect that I had not found since trying to make a living in New York. That gave me some perspective.

Just looking at auction results alone will tell you there is an enormous amount of money that moves in the art world. The figures have nearly recovered from the recent crash, and the fairs are churning along at a robust pace. In spite of those large amounts of money that do move around, it takes most artists years to get access to it through their own work. Very few get to a point in their lives where they are able to fully support their lives with their own work, and most have to augment their practice through a series of jobs, flexible skills, and schedules. The adjunct jobs are hard to get, and when they are obtained, there’s never enough money with them to live on. The tenure-track job is quite rare, and usually parallels the development of one’s own work. An artist is usually supporting him/herself with their own work, and that contributes a great deal to what makes an artist eligible for a tenure-track job. Most artists and most art scholars usually have to spend some years in the industry that services the art world—that of the art handler, the receptionist, the crater, the warehouse worker, or the adjunct. Some stay there. Though most who take these jobs are very educated, at least with master’s degrees, there is an expectation that the jobs are temporary. The artist or scholar believes that he or she is in a transition and won’t be at the job or in the state of needing a job for very long. Generations of artists and scholars coming to New York and other cities in droves with the same belief has set up an ideal situation for gallerists, warehouses, and academic art and art history departments who need labor but don’t want to invest in it like businesses in other industries do. They know there are plenty of smart, skilled workers here and plenty more coming right behind them. The reality of needing a job for most artists is not something they are inherently proud of. Artists in need of a job are on their own. As it stands right now, the collective trait amongst artists and scholars in the industry which services the art world is a shared low self-esteem with regards to what work is done to survive.

No one who has developed a career out of being an art handler or a receptionist sought out to do that. It just sort of happens. Whether or not someone is just passing through those jobs on to the next thing or they sprout roots into those jobs, there is no reason the conditions of those jobs should not be much better than they are. Much better meaning a basic standard of respect, in the form of rules against abuse. Better in the form of decent wages, and overtime presented as an option with

the guarantee of increased compensation. And better in the form of healthcare, vacation time, and some sort of pension.

These improved conditions don't and won't just suddenly happen. They need to be fought for and secured through the formation of a union. It's high time art-workers—especially art handlers and receptionists—unionized. It seems there is currently an attempt by TAs and adjuncts to unionize which comes and goes, but a lot more consistent, even militant, effort should be put into that, as well. Art workers are among the few remaining sources of educated indentured servants in America. But you're renting your labor; they don't own you. You should be treated with respect. The abuse you—many of you with advanced degrees—endure is considered “paying your dues.” That bullshit comes out of the collective low self-esteem for the work you do that allows things to keep moving in and out the door—the work that, if it were suddenly halted, would bring everything to a stop. Galleries could not operate without their administrators and laborers. Some recognize this, but most don't. They need to be reminded. I've felt the fear of needing to endure the shit in order to survive and I know it's not easy to make happen, but having a union-secured contract protects against the requirement for long hours, verbal and other forms of abuse, being fired without proven just cause, and benefits for those who don't get them.

Galleries seem to think that their administrative staff and art handlers are insignificant and easily replaced. This is largely because it's true. Art workers have no structure in place to protect themselves. Unionizing art-workers and adjuncts seems almost impossible. It's a steep enough hill that it's constantly tempting to revert to apathy and cynicism before we even start. It's important to keep in mind that the notion of a 40 hour week, weekends, health and dental benefits, elimination of child labor, women's rights, the establishment of auto workers unions, garment-workers unions, plumbers unions, carpenters unions, all looked like impossible hills to climb as well.

Why is working in the realms of “culture” and academia so undervalued? Not only by the institutions that hire, but also by the good, committed workers themselves who will step on each other for the next available job? It's equally worth organizing adjuncts as it is art-workers. The work doesn't get done without us. Some institutions know this and act on it. When workers in any field collectivize and strategize to confront management, management listens and attempts to compromise. This is just the first step, that often rewards it's participants with euphoria. It gets more

difficult after that, but a necessary step to make. It is worthwhile to at least imagine what labor unions for art workers and adjuncts might look like. It's worthwhile to imagine how good things could possibly be, as there are more than enough examples to point to as examples of what is bad.

What if there was a union for gallery receptionists? Perhaps if there were a dress code, it would be made explicit in a contract and not enforced through passive aggressive cues and insults. There could be a budget for the clothes the gallery wanted its receptionists to dress in. Terms of what was expected from the receptionists would be made explicit, and they wouldn't be expected to anticipate what was needed to be done. What if, instead of hiring whomever for an exhibition change, a gallery had to contact the union for a team of men and women to execute that change under specified terms that included the scope of the work, how many hours would be expected per shift, what the terms of (optional) overtime would be, while these freelancers enjoyed benefits? Adjuncts and TAs who carry out most of the university's work of teaching undergraduates would be able to negotiate class sizes, compensation, health benefits, as well as time and space for research.

Since I have been working in the art world, the subject of an art workers union very rarely comes up, and when it does, it's usually in the form of a joke, like “Can we take a union break?” or it's met with utter ridicule. The difficulty, even perhaps improbability, of forming a union is perceived as impossibility, and a silly delusion. Everyone needs the job they have. Everyone had to hustle and struggle to get it, and they're all aware of how many people are hustling and struggling, waiting to move into their spot. A union will not come about in a form of being granted to art workers. It will have to be developed, as will the solidarity amongst those who are doing the work. There is the Freelancers Union, which has nice ads on the subway, but no one I've ever worked with in the art world has been a member. They have an interesting website, and appear to be an organization with mostly potential at the moment. That is one model in tact, which can be looked to and built upon, but perhaps another organization can be formed specifically for art workers. Just imagine if everyone who serviced the art world organized and suddenly and abruptly refused to work in the days leading up to Miami. What if everyone refused to move crates, refused to show up and answer phones, hang work, and patch and paint walls? It's really worthwhile to consider what that might look like, what solidarity required to make such a strike a serious one, and how you would ensure your own protection and that of your fellow worker. The skills you have, which they

depend on in a very real way, become a powerful weapon when they are withheld, or threatened to be withheld, collectively, in solidarity.

It's definitely easier to remain disengaged, keep your head down, and bide your time. The truth is, you're juggling these jobs in order to get to your own work. It is your own work, after all, that is going to allow you to produce yourself and allow you to make the kind of life you want for yourself. Or maybe it won't. And what if it doesn't? How long can you keep scraping by as an adjunct having to hustle other jobs to make rent and get to your own work? How long can you keep humping crates off of a back of a truck? How long can you sit on display at a desk answering phones? Just in case it doesn't work out, are you going to take on another \$40,000 in debt for another degree?

We all run the risk of mortifying ourselves discussing such matters; I think I'm running that risk here, now. I don't know where to begin, apart from starting a conversation. I just think the desires many of us share for some sense of being our own masters are very well understood, exploited and taken advantage of. I sense that most of us realize this but just don't want to say anything about it. I think our refusal to say anything about it, our refusal to organize and do anything about it is actually quite conservative—a survival reflex in response to the equally conservative impulses of a corporate ethos which adheres to the fluctuations of the market. I'm just finding this to be tiresome, and I hope if you do also, you'll start talking about it more, thinking about what might be done to make it better, thinking about what “better” might look like, imagining how good things could possibly become real.

by Chris Kasper

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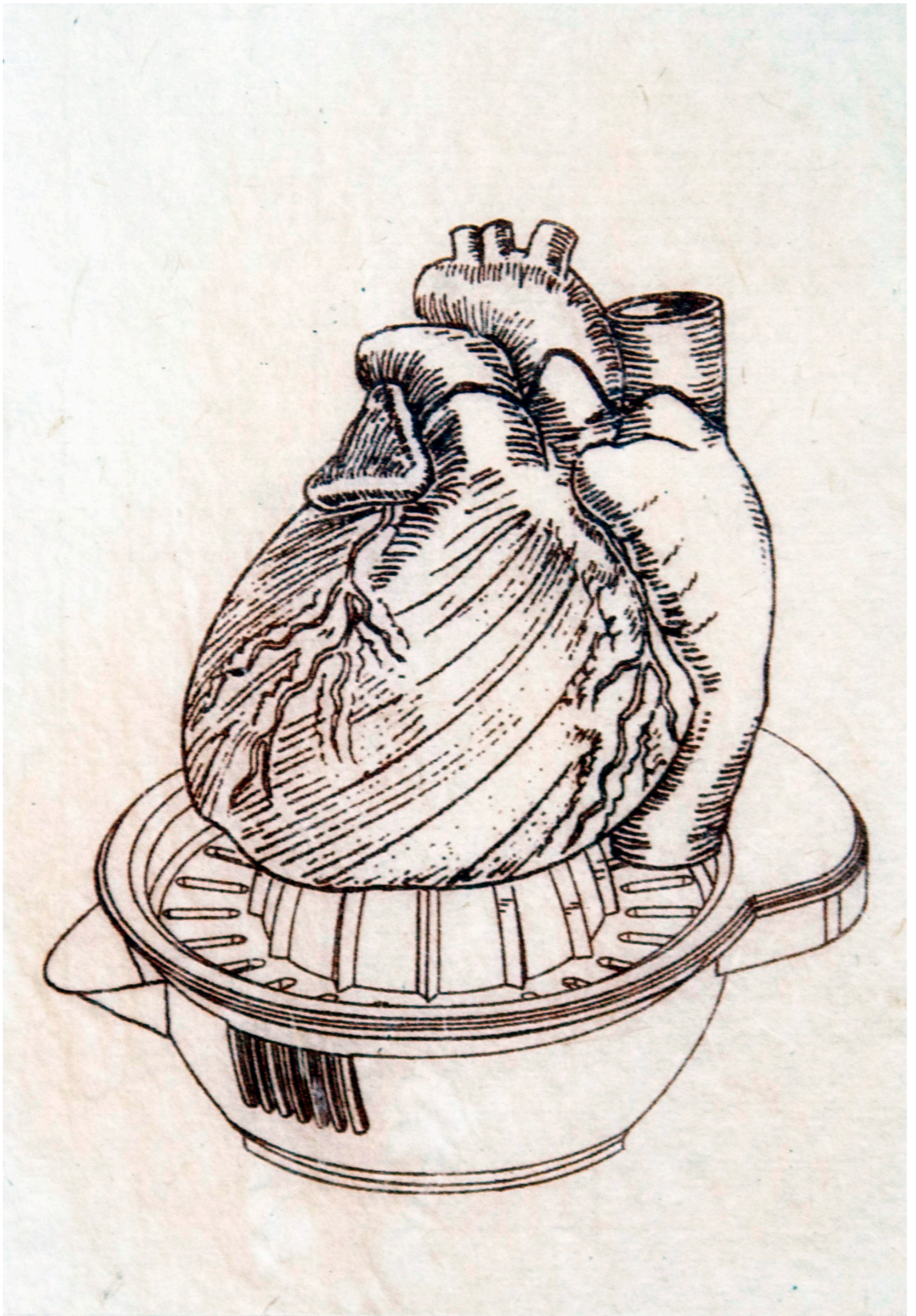
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# Reflections on What Might Be

“Revolt, yes, if revolt is understood as the demand of a turning point where time changes, where the extreme of patience is linked in a relation with the extreme of responsibility.”

- Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

A well-known slogan from 1968 ran, “Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible.” The slogan is highly relevant to our current conjuncture, where the relation of the triad ‘realism, demands and impossibility’ has become a focal question for the Occupy Movement. On the one hand, the Movement is faced with calls to specify our aims, make concrete demands and occupy only until such a moment as those demands are met. On the other hand is the position that we should hold out to see what this movement becomes. In other words, the demand is simply that people come and take their place against unequal systems of distribution and decision-making.

In both cases, it is precisely the impossible that is being demanded: that 99% of the world stop what they are doing, refuse to allow a system to speak for them, and occupy spaces until lasting changes are made. There are two ways to understand the realism of this demand. This impossibility first becomes realistic in a linguistic register. That is, we are realistic here so long as “stopping” is understood as a fundamental change in the situation, not as literal cessation. We are approaching this crossroads where we must at once continue the stopping,

continue to be patient for others to join, while at the same time calling on everyone – even the 1%! – to be responsible, to *make changes*. The 99 vs. 1 must become 100 together. That is impossible, but it is only so *today*.

Hence, second, the impossibility becomes realistic in a temporal register. Because something cannot happen today, it is impossible. But our realism resides in the fact that we know that it can come to pass tomorrow, that time itself can change. What is impossible today – that the war should end – is possible tomorrow. What is unheard of today – that there should be health care for all – is a fact tomorrow. What we can hardly imagine today – that social equality and economic equality will be the foundation of our society – is the *only* thing that structures our lives tomorrow. That we will not succeed in an instant is not a failure, it is the condition by which we mark our approximation to the truth of equality.



Our time will change only so long as we heed this double injunction to patience and responsibility. The slogan of 2011 began in Tunisia: “The people demand the end of the regime.” The focused goal in Tunisia, in Egypt, later became the demands for the end of austerity measures in Greece. It mutated slightly in Palestine: “The people demand the end of the division.” In Spain “the indignant” had a banner at the front of their march to Brussels, “We are going slowly because we are going far.” In each instance, the balance is struck between patience and responsibility. Slowly, yet far. We will be here until the oppression ends. This balance in the Occupy Movement has been pushed to the extremes – our patience is indefinite, our demands are infinite.

The responsibility remains with us, to form the movement into a political force. We must unveil the impossible as illusion, we must show its reality over time. There

is no purity of the movement that will be sullied by engaging with systems of power. There is only a force of the movement that must exercise *its power over power*. Demand the impossible: demand that you will not be corrupted by power, by bribes, by greed. Demand the tenacity to equality that has brought you the streets. Demand that this movement will not rise up and then fade silently. Demand *actual, specific changes for which you will be responsible, for which you will be patient enough to see them to their end.*

by Avi Alpert

## Dead Roots: (continued from page 2)

glimpses the fragile, fraudulent edifice of human meaning in general. He peers into the void and realizes the darkness in his own heart, and it leads him to question the seemingly arbitrary construct of human morality. But then, at the depths of his turmoil, after betraying the trust of his younger brother, Jack senses that his love for his brother is more powerful than all of his dark desires and destructive impulses. Essentially, he realizes that love, whatever it’s source and purpose (Darwin? Freud? God?), is the only sustainable form of meaning. This realization enables him to reintegrate into his family and to affirm a meaningful existence. A similar arc is also traced in the father character during this section.

Needless to say, this is not an easy process to communicate, and Malick does it with extraordinary complexity and nuance. But then right after he has accomplished this he adds an unnecessary, unmotivated voice-over from the mother that explicitly states what he has just so subtly dramatized (“Unless you love, your life will flash by”). And then Malick underlines the point further with the concluding fantasy sequence, which has to rank among the worst endings in the history of the cinema, an interminable eruption of insipid, sentimental kitsch that attempts, against all good judgment, to portray this

realm of love that Jack glimpsed as a child and then (presumably) lost touch with after the death of his younger brother. In a sequence filled with beatific New-Age dream imagery, Malick symbolically illustrates the decision to affirm the fragile transcendent meaning founded on love by having adult-Jack walk through an empty doorframe in the desert and then find himself on a heavenly beach surrounded by the people that populated his childhood.

This sequence reminds us that, for all his philosophic inclinations, Malick’s most prominent gifts have always been rooted in filming real locations, natural light, concrete situations, inexperienced young actors, haphazard naturalistic dialogue, etc. His talent is for uncovering uncanny and sublime poetry within existing reality, and he’s at his worst when he veers away from the actual world and attempts to construct more subjective or phantasmagorical images from scratch. This was apparent in *The Thin Red Line*’s sentimental flashbacks to the soldier’s wife, and it tainted the entirety of *The New World*, which was poised uncomfortably (and worse, uninterestingly) between fable and history. The birth of the cosmos sequence in *Tree of Life* probably represents Malick’s most successful foray into abstraction, but perhaps this is because the sequence is still grounded in a

kind scientific objectivism. Even before arriving at the disastrous concluding sequence, *The Tree of Life* already contains several misguided attempts at symbolic, poetic imagery (the underwater house, the mother as *Sleeping Beauty*, etc).

While *The Tree of Life* has been the subject of some hyperbolic critical praise, it has also been savaged in other quarters. Most of the criticism revolves around complaints about a supposedly incoherent structure, the absence of any conventional narrative, over-indulgent ponderousness, etc. In and of themselves, I don’t think any of these criticism really apply. These critics seem to be objecting to the type of film Malick is attempting to make. But, of course, there are many examples of filmmakers who successfully utilize, subvert, or jettison narrative conventions in order to create more abstract, poetic images through which they can pursue philosophic explorations more directly (Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Straub-Huillet, etc). In *The Tree of Life*, the problem is simply that Malick’s images fall short of his ideas.

by Mike Vass