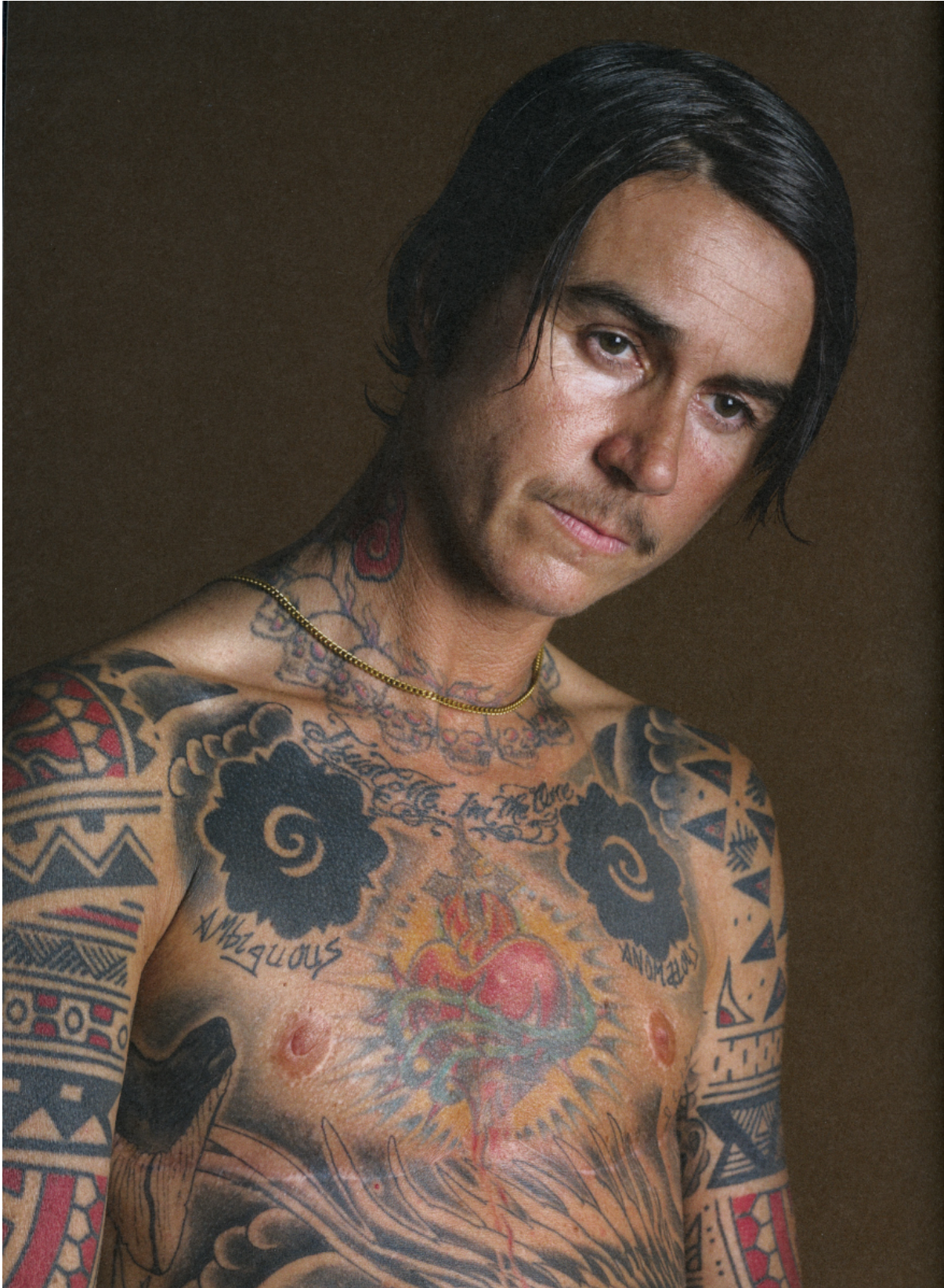


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Nelson, Maggie. "Burning Down the House." *Aperture* (Winter 2017) pp. 104 – 111 [ill.]

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Burning Down the House

Catherine Opie in Conversation with Maggie Nelson

Since her searing debut at the 1995 Whitney Biennial, Catherine Opie has deployed photography to make the LGBT community visible. At times, she has focused on S&M practices—her signature *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) will still make some viewers wince. Opie, though, insists that she not be defined by a single identity; her gaze is generous. Over the years, she has photographed the sinewy forms of Los Angeles highways, young surfers and football players, quaint ice-fishing houses—a catholic output of Americana that defies easy categorization.

For *The Modernist* (2017), a new short film made of still images, Opie has cast her longtime friend and photographic subject, Stosh Fila, also known as Pig Pen, as a person who seeks to burn down some of the most important modernist houses in Los Angeles, destroying what can never be attained. The film, which debuts in January 2018, at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, delves into the shape of desire through modernist architecture, and is intended to be in conversation with *La Fêtée*, Chris Marker's classic *photo-roman* from 1962. Last spring, Opie and writer Maggie Nelson met at Opie's downtown Los Angeles studio to discuss *The Modernist*, the arc of Opie's career, and what it means to feel the reverberation of history.

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Maggie Nelson: Your *New Yorker* profile from earlier this year was titled “All-American Subversive.” In your new film, *The Modernist*, the tensions between “all-American” and “subversive” are writ large, especially in the political context in which we’re living, where the right wing, via Donald Trump, is doing both an “America first!” and a “Let’s burn this shit DOWN” thing. In your film, you have a genderqueer person—Pig Pen—who seems both a hero and a villain. The character and film run on a longing for blowing up beautiful, iconic, American things (in this case, modernist architecture).

Catherine Opie: One of the things that I’m trying to do as an artist is push my own relationship to the discourse that I’ve created about community, and ideas of architecture as well. Making a piece that kind of blows that up, but also questions it.

Let’s go back to a time before many of my friends transitioned from F to M, and to the generation of tomboys that I belong to. We did burn shit down. Because that’s what boys did. We burned shit. We made rockets and blew them up in the middle of cornfields. We destroyed houses that were being built. When I told Pig Pen what the story was, Pig Pen was just like, “Opie, you know that I always burn shit up.” I’m like, “We all burned shit up; that’s what we did in wanting to be boys.” So there’s this interesting, odd thing, because arsonists aren’t really equated with women that much.

MN: It’s very interesting to feature, or even heroize, this mentality of, “Oh, I’m going to get into the house of art,” or “I’m going to get into the house of gender,” or “I’m going to get into the house of the Man and blow it up from the inside,” against the backdrop of this particular Trumpian moment, which is so nihilistic, so criminal, so “Let’s set fire to the planet and watch it burn.”

CO: Also, how are we going to be seen within this? We’ve forgotten what it is to really look, to be involved. We’ve become this image-based society where we are no longer looking.

MN: When the film first started, I felt like it was too fast. I wanted to see each picture for a long time. I had to surrender. Within two minutes you’re completely fluid in the speed and the language.

CO: It’s a piece that allows you to go into it a number of times, and I would hope that the audience wants to sit through it more than once. It’s meant to loop. I’m not going to have a beginning sequence of credits for the piece. The film has a definite narrative structure, but the inclusion of any kind of opening or closing credits creates too much of a language that is based in the ideas of cinema.

MN: Did you say you shot it during the 2016 election season? I just wondered how, after having been invited by the Obamas to work inside the halls of power during Obama’s 2009 inauguration, you’re currently thinking of all this inside-the-halls-of-power, outside-the-halls-of-power stuff.

CO: Most of the film was shot in August 2016, and then after the November election as well. We’re really living in frickin’ interesting times.

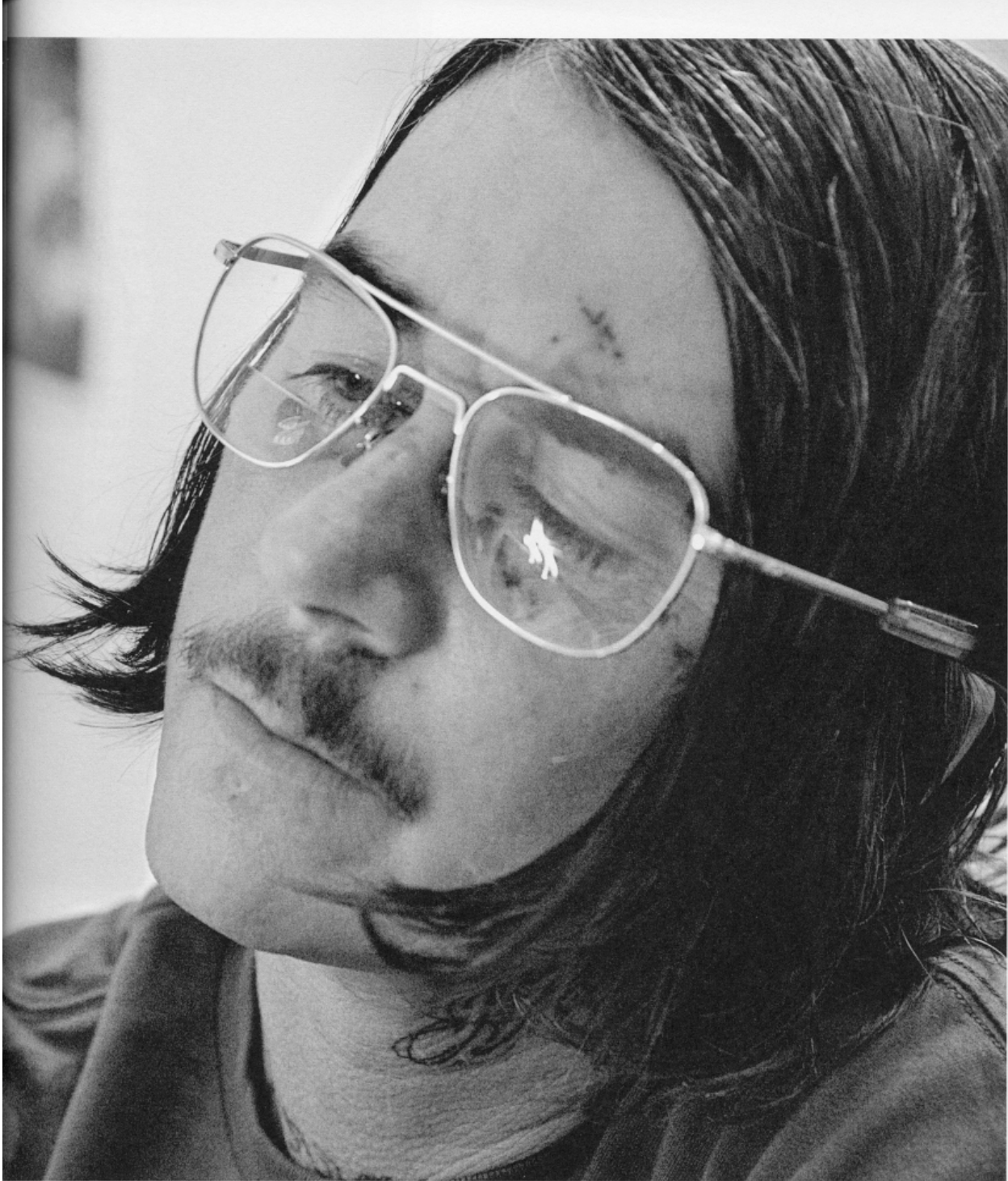
MN: I think everybody lives in history, but there are certain moments when you feel the vibration of living in history.

CO: This is a big vibration.

MN: That feeling when you just don’t know what’s going to happen next. That’s what living in history often feels like.



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Page 104:
Pig Pen (Tattoos), 2009,
from the series *Girlfriends*

This spread:
Still from *The Modernist*,
2017

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CO: I've never wanted fear to rule my life. I think the time that it most ruled my life was in 2008, when I was getting ready for my exhibition, my four floors of the Guggenheim, and it was when Obama was getting elected, and there was another kind of uprise of incredible homophobia happening—and I felt very, very vulnerable.

MN: **One part of your *New Yorker* profile that I really loved, and which is obviously related to your work as a teacher, was when Ariel Levy quoted you as saying to a student whose work was being criticized heavily by other students, “Stand up for your work! Open it up! Don’t shut it down, man.”**

CO: Criticality is really important, and that's part of education, and that's what we do. We hopefully are teaching our students the ability to truly and critically explore their work from all sides.

MN: **How have things changed over the course of your time making work? It's funny to think back to the '90s, which people thought of back then as an incredibly PC moment, and see it now as more of a complete and total playpen, like a sex-positive free-for-all. I don't know if I'm remembering it correctly.**

CO: No, no, you are remembering correctly. Now it's different, because as soon as your work goes out into the world, it's out in the world. When I made *Pervert*, the first place that it ever showed was the 1995 Whitney Biennial. It had never been hung before that.

MN: **God, Cathy, you've really been through some rings of fire.**

CO: It was like, “Whoa!” So the thing is, I was just responding to what you described as the playpen. I'm hanging out with all these incredible thinkers. Harry and Silas are running Red Dora's Bearded Lady, an incredible community coffeehouse, performance space, and art gallery, in the '90s. That's where I'm going to find people to sit for me for the early portraits. I'm going to a lot of play parties. In LA, I'm heavy into what Ron Athey is doing with performance work and that community. Now that I've been doing this for so long, I think about what exhibitions mean, but I certainly wasn't thinking about what exhibitions meant. I was thinking about how I could die tomorrow. I never actually thought that I would live past my thirties, because I was watching all my friends die of AIDS.

MN: **Do you regret that imposition of having to think so much about what an exhibition means—when you have to deal with what the world thinks about your work?**

CO: It changes your relationship to how you make work, in a way. You have to realize that, potentially, the audience isn't as complicated as you are. You almost have to reevaluate and recognize yourself in relationship to your own process as an artist. You are constantly recalibrating the place that you want your audience to begin to think, potentially a little deeper, about issues of politics and identity. So you try to create that language through the way that you're making work.

I became very aware of the audience as soon as I started showing in a major platform. But that wasn't what I was thinking before. Then it's just like, Oh, okay, I don't want to be a singular identity; I don't want to be just the leather dyke artist, and that's all I'm going to be. So, guess what? You guys are going to look at little platinum prints of freeways now. You're going to look at mini-malls. You're going to look at Beverly Hills houses. You're going to look at domestic scenes of traveling around in an RV. You have to serve yourself first as an artist, but you also have to think about the relationship to the audience.

MN: **I feel, at least personally, like I have only ever been able to work by really repressing the idea of audience, and I don't really want to change that, and yet I see through others—like you—how that could possibly be a productive force. It gives me a lot to admire, to see the kind of strength and wisdom and intuitiveness, in the way you've gone about doing it.**

CO: So when you work, it's really a singular voice for you? It's an internal process?

MN: **For me to imagine readers that I don't know and project onto them, while I'm writing, what they might think, seems to me like a very deep psychological fool's errand. It engages a version of projection that actually still only represents myself.**

CO: I would say that I only think with myself in the room. I'm not trying to serve an audience in relationship to what their desires might be of me. I am trying to serve my own desires in relationship to thinking about a broader read, I suppose.

MN: **That's really smartly put. Sometimes what greets work in the moment sticks to it, as an immediate reaction can have a certain adhesive quality that's hard to shake. On the other hand, time changes the work so much.**

CO: When I lecture now and I'm showing the earlier work, it just looks kind of sweet and easy for the most part.

MN: **You think so? You think that's what it looks like now?**

CO: When those images were first made, they were radical. But they do not look radical anymore. I mean, maybe *Self-Portrait/Pervert* and maybe *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993). Blood is still radical. That's why I'm making sure there's some blood. Not in this film piece, but there's the body. The body is utterly important. The body is a transformative space, as in the portraits that I'm making now of David Hockney, John Baldessari, Frank Gehry, and Kerry James Marshall.

MN: **You're photographing them?**

CO: Yeah. Being fifty-six, there is the transformation of my body in relationship to menopause. I really am interested in the fluidity of that space, and how people also fear that space, fear age, fear ideas of gender.

Oliver, my fifteen-year-old son, has me watching *Survivor*, which is the last thing I want to watch. But the other night, we're watching *Survivor*, and there are three gay men in the tribe, or whatever it's called. During the kind of tribal council where they vote somebody out, one of the gay men, Jeff Varner, outed one of the other gay men, Zeke Smith, as being trans. Smith had been playing already for two seasons of *Survivor*, and hadn't been outed as trans. Varner got voted off, and then he's sobbing at the end, saying, “I can't believe I just did that.” All of a sudden, this is part of popular culture as well, and we're talking about these issues on *Survivor*?

MN: **High drama.**

CO: Oliver is just like, “Can you believe it, Mom?” He's grown up in the queer community. I was just sitting there thinking, We've gotten to this point now, where this is represented on *Survivor*? Oh, hmm.

History, time, everything is transformative, and I think that's one of the reasons why I've always been attached to photography. It can be kind of the zeitgeist of the specificity of a moment in time, and that's what photography has always done really well. You click a shutter. It's a record.

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Page 108:
Oliver in a Tutu, 2004,
from the series *In and
Around Home*

This page:
Ron, 2013, from the series
Portraits and Landscapes

Opposite:
Self-Portrait/Pervert,
1994, from the series
Self-Portraits

All photographs © the artist
and courtesy Regen Projects,
Los Angeles, and Lehmann
Maupin, New York and
Hong Kong



I don't want to be a singular identity. I don't want to be just the leather dyke artist.

MN: When there are new terms of visibility, there can be a very intense stratification that goes on; you can lose a lot of fluidity in the effort to make certain things visible. Like, when the *New York Times* was doing its transgender visibility campaign in 2015, they were kind of saying, "There's a new minority in town: the transgender American," and I just kept being floored by this phrase, "the transgender American," the way it sews together nationalism and gender identity. I literally just lay down in my bed and tried to breathe for a few minutes.

CO: Or the title of my Guggenheim show, *American Photographer*. I'm perfectly happy that Jennifer Blessing, the curator, came up with that title. I thought it was really interesting, especially in relation to a male history of photography, thinking about Robert Frank, and Walker Evans, and so on.

MN: As we both know, not only is identity not fixed over time, but there are also speech acts of reclamation, or of disobedience, that make sense in one moment but aren't necessarily meant to mean the same over time. You may want to be an American photographer for the rest of your life, but, also, we speak the language of gestures—we try to make what we think will be the most interesting gesture for any given moment. There may be a moment at which *American* or *lesbian* or whatever is the right word, the right gesture. But it's not like one word is going to be the most provocative or best word forever. Things change.

CO: Oliver was schooling me on that the other night. We were on the couch and we were watching something—

MN: More reality TV?

CO: Well, he's obsessed with *RuPaul's Drag Race*. But there was something else happening on the news, and I said, "She's a tranny." Oliver said, "Mom, you're not allowed to use *tranny*. That's derogatory. Mom, you know, it's like LGBTQI. We're adding letters every day."

MN: There's always this intergenerational conversation/conflict. Everyone is playing these prescribed roles, like, "You don't know how it was to come up in a different time," or, "You weren't in these trenches," or, "You don't know the history of this," and the youth say, "We don't care how it was for you because it's different for us and we've got something to tell you." I try to think: How can we not play these same roles, while at the same time understanding that there are certain structural—maybe even neurological—reasons why the roles are what they are, and that's also okay?

CO: One of the greatest things about being a teacher is that you also learn. I might have the language of my young, queer self of my twenties and thirties, but I'm in my fifties now, and it has changed. I'm not trying to define my students' experience. All I can do is teach from my experience. I've never claimed to be any kind of person except for my own voice within my work. I'm not trying to create a universal experience whatsoever. I'm just trying to create my own experience of this time that I live in.

Maggie Nelson is the author, most recently, of *The Argonauts* (2015) and *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2016).

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