

REGEN PROJECTS

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Eighteen Theses on Rachel Harrison

By Maggie Nelson March 16, 2020

LOOK

The following essay is the poet and critic Maggie Nelson's response to "Rachel Harrison Life Hack," the first full-scale survey of Harrison's work, which appeared at the Whitney Museum of American Art from October 25, 2019, to January 12, 2020.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "RACHEL HARRISON LIFE HACK" (WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, OCTOBER 25, 2019–JANUARY 12, 2020). FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: *DINNER*, 1991; *I LIKE WHAT'S NICE*, CA. 1995; *LEAKTITE LUCK*, 1995. PHOTO: RON AMSTUTZ.

1.

Look, you're going to be confronted with the remains of a dinner Rachel Harrison had twenty-eight years ago at Flamingo East in the East Village. (No, the restaurant isn't there anymore.) First the dinner became leftovers in ziplock baggies and then it became leftovers spawning maggots in ziplock baggies and then, after complaints about flies, the baggies went into Ball jars. And here they are.

It's pretty gross, without a doubt. You might be forgiven for feeling as though the crudeness were at your expense in some way, but I would encourage you to let go of this feeling. (The feeling that some kind of joke is being played, but with no clear object or vector, may recur; my advice is to float in this feeling, allow a degree of surrender to it.) For *Dinner* surely started, like all of Harrison's work, as a gesture or experiment of interest to her, one whose reasons may have been inscrutable even to herself. Think about it: she bagged this food one night twenty-eight years ago, with no foreknowledge of this moment we now share together. It was, you might say, an intuition.

REGEN PROJECTS

2.

Harrison's work doesn't just rely on intuition. It showcases it, elevates it to a category of ontological fascination. Why, why, why? you might ask, in front of a Harrison sculpture; eventually your own questioning may turn into a kind of music—the music of thinking—playing alongside hers. Your thinking may or may not have content; it is unlikely to land upon answers. Indeed, Harrison's sculptures are remarkable for their capacity to stir up the primal agitation at the root of cognition and analysis, the whirl of thinking.



RACHEL HARRISON, *CINDY* (DETAIL), 2004, WOOD, POLYSTYRENE, CEMENT, ACRYLIC, DRYWALL, AND WIG, 72" X 37" X 31". COLLECTION OF MARTIN AND REBECCA EISENBERG; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: TIM NIGHSWANDER / IMAGING4ART.

3.

A big exhibition of Harrison's work fruitfully showcases, over and over again, the force of intuition exposed to the force of time. No doubt *Dinner* has meant many different things over the past twenty-eight years, and will mean altogether different things in twenty-eight more. Dadaist stunt gives way to meditation on the longevity of plastic, or to the tendency of all organic matter to break down into repellent murky strands. Eventually some other species may note that a species called human beings once ate something called food, which they preserved for unknowable reasons in plastic and glass. "This one was arugula," the person guiding me through the show says, face straight as a horse.

4.

Re: *I Like What's Nice* (ca. 1995)—we've all probably mucked up a nice lady from an advertisement at some point or another, even Martha Rosler. As with any standard Barbie decapitation or *détournement*, there's some sadism in the house. It looks like Harrison reprinted the photo, then lobbed a big piece of mud or shit at the vaginal area, though I've been told it's "a very old baked potato," in which case it may have been more

REGEN PROJECTS

placed or arranged. The piece reminds me of Sarah Lucas's *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), but it feels more like a violation than a revelation or distillation—like, maybe this nice lady doesn't even know the blob is there; maybe the joke is at her expense. Or maybe she's in on it, and her serenity is a form of bravado: This is my big brown mound, so what? The piece feels hostile and breezy, if something can feel breezy and hostile. I think Harrison's sculptures can.

Elsewhere, a young John Davidson comes in for similar treatment. This time it's as if someone's thrown a mop from afar and speared his forehead: artist as Zeus, pop-cultural figure as mortal plaything.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "RACHEL HARRISON LIFE HACK" (WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, OCTOBER 25, 2019–JANUARY 12, 2020). *SHOULD HOME WINDOWS OR SHUTTERS BE REQUIRED TO WITHSTAND A DIRECT HIT FROM AN EIGHT-FOOT-LONG TWO-BY-FOUR SHOT FROM A CANNON AT 34 MILES AN HOUR, WITHOUT CREATING A HOLE BIG ENOUGH TO LET THROUGH A THREE INCH SPHERE?*, 1996/2019. PHOTO: RON AMSTUTZ.

5.

"Part ridicule and part homage," [a critic once wrote](#) about Harrison's relation to Willem de Kooning. I'm thinking about this phrase while looking at *Circle Jerk* (1989). At first I feel like an idiot because I realize that I never really thought of Dan Flavin's light sticks as phallic before, even when he installed a yellow fluorescent at a forty-five-degree angle and dedicated it to Constantin Brancusi and his "endless column." But for some reason I've always found critiques of phallic imagery kind of cheap. Why does the phallus own certain shapes, certain angles? Maybe Harrison feels this way, too; maybe that's why her title both summons an invisible circle and also names her own sculpture as a jerk.

I like Harrison's claim on jerks of all kinds, including the jerk of abruptness. Abruptness makes up part of the rhythm of thinking, especially Harrison's.

6.

Circle Jerk. I end up thinking for some time, as I often do, about Harrison's title. Can one jerk make a circle? Is art the phantasmagorical circle? If a circle jerk is a closed unit of homosociality, what does it do to its circuitry to make a sculpture that both disrupts it and

REGEN PROJECTS

also makes its own contribution to the ritual? How does the ritual of art, its inner cycles of scorn and praise, satire and homage, change when the jig is up, the inner sanctum disturbed? “Women can’t have heroes,” Harrison says. I agree.



RACHEL HARRISON, DETAIL OF *VOYAGE OF THE BEAGLE*, 2007, FIFTY-SEVEN PIGMENTED INKJET PRINTS, 16" X 12" EACH. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK.

7.

When Harrison made the “Voyage of the Beagle” series (2007), she also made boxes of postcards of the images. For some reason I ended up with several of these boxes, with which I lived vividly and strangely for years. They sat in my front desk drawer, ready to be deployed as missives with gifts or as stand-alone thank-you cards, but whenever I went to use one, it felt radioactive, unsendable. Its meaning, once untethered from the pack, seemed to fall somewhere between indecipherable and offensive. A carved Indian bust outside a shop, a cartoonish head asphyxiated in plastic wrap, a Statue of Liberty replica with purple lipstick who looks like she’s just swallowed a worm, a Jesus mannequin with puffs of dark hair adhesived to its chest—each seemed to herald a messy and bewildering significance that fell apart in isolation. They belong all together, I would end up thinking, putting the box back in the drawer. I still think that.

8.

Many elements of Harrison’s practice are not communicable, save in concert. This is true of much art that, like Harrison’s, depends so profoundly on the genius and originality of its tone, and on the total trust the artist puts in it, and that we in turn put in her.

Tone, in art, is no small thing. In fact there are days on which I think it is everything. Eileen Myles once said that poetry is where “lots of citizens get the real and irregular

REGEN PROJECTS

news of how others around them think and feel.” How we get this irregular news has a lot to do with our apprehension of others’ tone.



RACHEL HARRISON, *ALEXANDER THE GREAT*, 2007, WOOD, CHICKEN WIRE, POLYSTYRENE, CEMENT, ACRYLIC, MANNEQUIN, JEFF GORDON WASTE BASKET, PLASTIC ABRAHAM LINCOLN MASK, SUNGLASSES, FABRIC, NECKLACE, AND TWO UNIDENTIFIED ITEMS, 87" X 91" X 40". THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK; COMMITTEE ON PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FUNDS, 2007; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JEAN VONG.

9.

Harrison’s tone feels utterly idiosyncratic—some improbable combination of jaunty, caustic, rangy, and rapt, running asymptotic to the more usual sounds of satire, insubordination, insouciance, and absurdity. Often I feel as though she’s driving a car—a pretty fast car—right alongside these categories, but somehow she remains in an outer lane, a fugitive from their certainty or recognizability.

10.

I don’t know how into *Dogville* (2003) or Lars von Trier’s films more generally Harrison is, but its summoning here feels exactly right, and has illuminated some things about Harrison’s work, or at least my response to it, that might otherwise have remained muddy to me. The first is the Brechtian quality of Harrison’s sculptures, which I might have otherwise described as having a certain coldness. But *cold* isn’t, wasn’t, the right word, just as Brechtian distance isn’t really chilly. Her emphasis on presentation, artifice, plinth, packaging, and palette returns everyday objects to us in a way that inspires analytical thought. But—and this is key, I think—Harrison’s sculptures don’t think for us. They are more like an allegory, or a theater, of thinking.

REGEN PROJECTS



RACHEL HARRISON, *2 A.M. 2ND AVE.*, 1996, WOOD, PAPIER-MÂCHÉ, ACRYLIC, THREE BROOMSTICKS, AND FIVE LAMINATED BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS OF JOHNNY CARSON, CARROLL O'CONNOR, AND A PRIEST, 73" X 41" X 29". COLLECTION OF PATRICIA AND FRANK KOLODNY; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: OREN SLOR.

11.

Harrison: “[My work] is often about directing my thought process externally, because in my head the thoughts are going so fast. At what point can I see them? At what point can I have a conversation with forms and myself and the objects that I make that is *without* language?”

Does a conversation without language inherit the formal qualities of speech (syntax, rhythm, intonation, the simultaneous delivery of sound and meaning), or does it, can it, move into another realm entirely? In Harrison’s case, no matter how literary or literary-ish the gesture, I tend to think it’s the latter. She says she likes William Carlos Williams’s edict “No ideas but in things.” I do, too. But what it means to find an idea in a thing, or to find ideas only in things, has never been self-evident.

This is one of the reasons I find Harrison’s work captivating: she may focus on things and ideas, but she preserves a quality of puzzlement—maybe even secrecy—about their relationship, or their potential relationships. Because when we see a thought, it may become something else entirely.

12.

Dogville is a brutal movie and von Trier is known as a brutal director. I don’t know enough about Harrison’s feelings about her own work to know if she would disavow or welcome the apprehension of brutality in it, but I feel it there decidedly. I feel it in its aggressive ugliness, its diffuse mockery, its employment of cultural figures as props, its impulse to deface, distort, or otherwise render gruesome (cf. Amy Winehouse), its

REGEN PROJECTS

refusal to give its audience what they want, to even pretend to reckon with what they want.

I like this aspect of Harrison's work. I like brutal edges in work by women who don't feel compelled to apologize for or justify them as there solely to critique a brutal society or species that could be otherwise.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF "RACHEL HARRISON LIFE HACK" (WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, OCTOBER 25, 2019–JANUARY 12, 2020). FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: *GRAY OR ROAN COLT*, 2004; *CINDY*, 2004; *NICE RACK*, 2006; *VALID LIKE SALAD*, 2012; *20 x 24" (FOR CDL)*, 1999; *UNTITLED*, 2012; *BROWNIE*, 2005; *HOARDERS*, 2012; *HUFFY HOWLER*, 2004; *ALEXANDER THE GREAT*, 2007; *WARREN BEATTY*, 2007; *SPRINGS*, 2017. PHOTO: RON AMSTUTZ.

13.

Dogville, like many von Trier films, opts to focus this brutality on women. By re-creating *Dogville's* streets to use as a staging ground for her sculpture in her 2019 survey at the Whitney, Harrison defangs von Trier's alleged misogyny in a most unusual way: she out-Brechts him, stages her own show on his stage, and returns the question of brutality to the province of the abstract. She moves us into Sculpture Town.

14.

"Are you a feminist?" asks an interviewer. "Woof," answers Harrison.

15.

As the history of Dada makes clear, brutality, especially abstract brutality, has tremendous energy. Often it is the energy of collision. Mary Ann Caws (among others) has noted that while surrealism focuses on swinging doors, communicating vessels, and bridges stretched across the abyss, Dada has more to do with a simple, abrupt encounter, "the point where the yes and the no and all the opposites meet, not solemnly in the castles of human philosophy, but very simply at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers," as Tristan Tzara put it. Harrison's use of juxtaposition seems more in touch with this unsolemn meeting of yes and no on the corner than almost any contemporary artist I can think of. In *Dogville*, that street corner is literalized. Woof.

REGEN PROJECTS



RACHEL HARRISON, *ALL IN THE FAMILY*, 2012, WOOD, POLYSTYRENE, CHICKEN WIRE, CEMENT, ACRYLIC, AND HOOVER VACUUM CLEANER, 93" X 34" X 34". SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK; PURCHASED WITH FUNDS CONTRIBUTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR'S COUNCIL, 2012; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOHN BERENS.

16.

Despite, or alongside, the Zen-like quality of Dada, there often runs a current of nihilism, including of the homicidal or suicidal variety. Sometimes this nihilism has to do with guns. Think of the Dadaist Jacques Rigaut's meticulously planned (and executed) self-administered bullet to the heart; think also of André Breton's contention (unrealized) that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd." ("Anyone," Breton adds in "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," "who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd with his belly at barrel-level.")

This current of nihilism or violence has been present in Harrison's work for some time, via its excavation of America and Americana; in 2015, it became literalized, when actual bullets were fired into her work at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, by an ex-security guard who spray-painted and shot several pieces of art in the *After Picasso: 80 Contemporary Artists* exhibit before taking his own life. After defacing the art—including sending a bullet into the forehead of a framed drawing of Al Pacino in Harrison's 2012 sculpture *Valid Like Salad* (a new, tragic echo of Davidson's mop in the head)—the ex-guard, Dean Sturgis, sat in a folding chair and shot himself in the head (a new, tragic link to *Circle Jerk*).

Whatever urge toward defacement, whatever hostility toward art qua art, whatever exploration, however lighthearted, of American breeds of masculinity, celebrity, and

REGEN PROJECTS

sociopathy may have been at play in Harrison's work (in 2007, she titled a show "If I Did It," after O.J. Simpson's much-maligned memoir)—all must now sit uneasily with the legacy of Sturgis, whose bullet holes serve to remind us that our everyday includes mortal threat and terror as much as it does remote controls and air fresheners.



RACHEL HARRISON, *UNTITLED*, 2012, COLORED PENCIL ON PAPER, PAPER, 19" X 24". PRIVATE COLLECTION; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JOHN BERENS.

17.

The pathos and beauty of much Dada writing, such as Tzara's, was that it wanted to access the energy of collision and violence—to enact it, even—without being bogged down by language's representational, argumentative, and communicative burdens. But language does not shed such burdens easily. In this sense there is a kinship between Harrison's desire to stage a conversation between forms, herself, and the objects she makes "without language" and Tzara's lauding of art as "the only construction complete unto itself, about which nothing more can be said."

In the face of such aspirations, I sometimes wonder, as a writer, what the hell I'm doing here. "Language is forced on art," Harrison [has said](#). "Is that really best for art? Is that really good for art? Does that make art happy?" Probably not; so often, the errand seems designed for fools. But then I remember Harrison saying "I'm not afraid of stupid," and I smile.

18.

Part of not being afraid of stupid is staying interested in the stupidity, or the gullibility, or just the plain humanity, of ourselves and others, which brings me to Perth Amboy. Perth Amboy is the town in New Jersey where, in 2000, Ramona and Marcelino Collado said they saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary appear in their second-story thermal-pane window. Hundreds of people subsequently pilgrimaged to the site to see and touch the spot, suddenly made holy. Harrison was among them: she photographed the window from below, capturing the rainbow constellation of handprints left behind on the glass.

REGEN PROJECTS

A *Wall Street Journal* article from the time quotes a nun who made the journey: “I went to see for myself. I didn’t see Our Lady’s image in the glass. But what moved me was the people’s desire to be attuned to God’s presence in their lives.” Amid all its comedy and shrewdness, Harrison’s work feels to me motivated by a related desire: to be attuned, not to God per se, but to possibility, wormholes, collisions of spheres, profound eccentricity, the seam between farce and enigma, all of which permeate our mental and physical landscape, if and when we let them.

To find these qualities in thermal panes, pinups, bullet holes, olive cans, velvet pants, the disintegrating scraps of a dinner from long ago—to work relentlessly, over many decades, to find innovative ways to stage them for us, so that we, too, might go along for the ride—what can I say? I went to see for myself, and it moved me.



RACHEL HARRISON, *HUFFY HOWLER*, 2004, WOOD, POLYSTYRENE, CEMENT, ACRYLIC, HUFFY HOWLER BICYCLE, HANDBAGS, ROCKS, STONES, GRAVEL, BRICK, ONE SHEEPSKIN, TWO FOX TAILS, METAL POLE, WIRE, PIGMENTED INKJET PRINT, AND BINDER CLIPS, 84" X 84" X 30" INCHES. WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS; T.B. WALKER ACQUISITION FUND, 2008; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK. PHOTO: JEAN VONG.

Maggie Nelson is the author of nine books of poetry and prose, including the National Book Critics Circle Award winner The Argonauts. Her next book, The Myth of Freedom, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. She lives in Los Angeles.

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