
Highlights 2014 – Dan Fox

DECEMBER 17, 2014 *by Dan Fox*



As far as disgraceful social injustice and disgusting political corruption go, 2014 was a vintage year. So for me, two of the most significant works made by artists in 2014 were not artworks. The first of these, Laura Poitras's film *CITIZENFOUR*, is an astonishing historical document, recording the days and weeks during which Edward Snowden's revelations about electronic government surveillance became one of the defining political stories of our age. Whether or not *CITIZENFOUR* is a 'good' documentary in the aesthetic sense is neither here nor there. Since the film's release in October, I've had numerous arguments with people who think that Poitras could have 'done more' with her footage. I think they are missing the point. (What do you want? A nine-channel HD video installation featuring the complexities of electronic surveillance explained

through a Judson Church-influenced dance sequence, sound-tracked by Miley Cyrus, and accompanied by a collateral programme of talks and film screenings?) What *CITIZENFOUR* makes clear is how few documentary films actually record a story of global proportions unfolding in front of the director's camera. Here is a subject that needs no embellishment, no artistic lace doilies. *CITIZENFOUR* will be seen in the future as an exceptional piece of primary historical evidence. I left the cinema stunned by the courage of those involved in breaking the story, and in the production of this film.

Perhaps *CITIZENFOUR* felt all the more urgent because 2014 was a miserably grim year in world news, and Poitras's film was just one particularly explicit expression of our frustration at the current shape of power. Which brings me to the second notable non-artwork by artists this year: The W.A.G.E. Certification campaign by New York-based artist group Working Artists for the Greater Economy. In the organization's own words, 'Certification is a voluntary program initiated and operated by W.A.G.E. that publicly recognizes non-profit arts organizations demonstrating a history of, and commitment to, voluntarily paying artist fees that meet a minimum payment standard.' In October, New York's Artists Space was the first non-profit gallery to sign up to the scheme, an important gesture in a town held in the vice-grip of unchecked real estate greed and increasing economic disparity. ('People like you lose all claim to respect the first time they pay anybody rent,' remarks Crocker Fenway, a ruthless businessman in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice*. Both the film and the Thomas Pynchon novel it is based on are set in 1970, but that's a line aimed right between the eyes of 2014.)

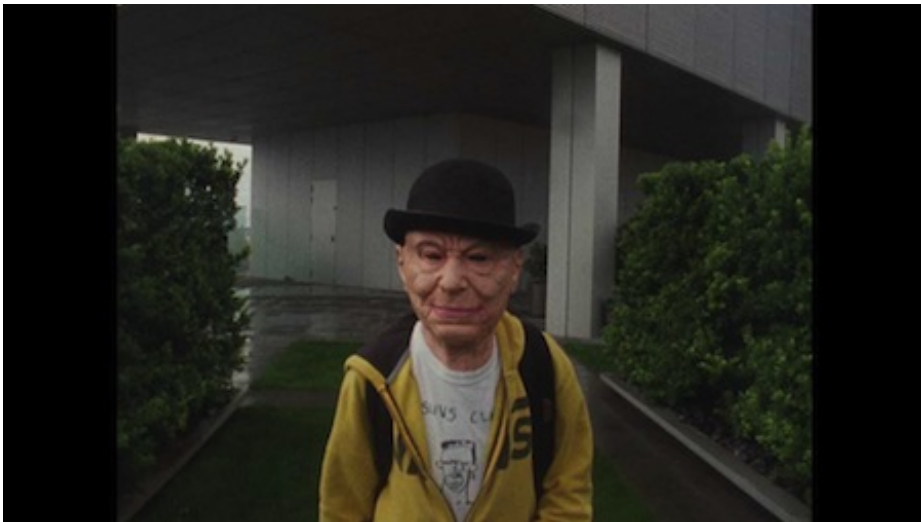


Chris Ofili, 'Confession (Lady Chancellor)', 2012. Installation view at the New Museum, New York, 2014

'But c'mon Fox,' I hear you cry, 'we're here to read about art not the price of eggs!' OK, fair enough. 2014, for me, often seemed to have its gaze fixed on the past rather than the present, and notable retrospectives and surveys were thick on the ground. 'The Heart is Not a Metaphor', Robert Gober's 'this is your life' moment at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, may not have been quite the immersive experience as his 2007 career

overview at Basel's Schaulager was, but I rarely tire of seeing his sculptures and installations. Gober's work serves as a gentle and often moving reminder that Surrealism is the one art movement that never really disappeared or lost its power to disturb and entrance. I was taken aback by how much I enjoyed 'Night and Day', Chris Ofili's victory lap at the New Museum, New York. In Britain during the 1990s heyday of Young British Art, Ofili's work was so often reproduced in the media that it lost some of its pizzazz through overfamiliarity, so perhaps absence has made the heart grow fonder. (Protests erupted in New York when his 1996 painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. In 2014, we've got far bigger problems to worry about than offending the sensibilities of a few iconodule Catholics.) Amy Sillman's survey show 'One Lump or Two' at the Hessel Museum of Art/CCS Bard (which toured from the ICA Boston) was not just funny and imaginative, but a testament to the possibilities of painting, and 'The Production Line of Happiness' – a wonderfully titled retrospective of Christopher Williams' photography at the Art Institute of Chicago and MoMA, New York – was as crisply milled as the glass on a Leica lens.

Many of the past year's retrospectives were dedicated to the sadly departed. We had Sigmar Polke's inventive mischief at MoMA, New York and Tate Modern, London; Sturtevant's pioneering work in the field of appropriation – also at MoMA – and a moving exhibition of painting by Leonilsson at the Pinacoteca do Estado São Paulo. And I mustn't forget the small but knockout selection of small paintings by US artist Albert York at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York; bucolic landscapes, still lifes and allegorical works suggesting what Giorgio Morandi and Odilon Redon might have painted had they lived on Long Island.



Beatrice Gibson, 'F is for Fibonacci', 2014. Film still

Back in the land of the living, my other indelible exhibition memories from 2014 include, in no particular order: Camille Henrot's exhibitions at Chisenhale, London and the New Museum, New York (without doubt one of the most compelling young artists working today), Scott Reeder's deranged DIY science-fiction film *Moon Dust* (which received its New York premiere at Anthology Film Archive), Nathaniel Mellors' equally far-out sci-fi short *The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Beatrice Gibson's unsettling, funny and erudite new film *F is for Fibonacci* at Laura Bartlett Gallery, London (which involved European serialist music, the finance industry, and a tour of a virtual city in Minecraft given by an entertainingly precocious child dressed as a banker.) In New York there was a superb season of work dedicated to Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie at The Artists Institute, (technically speaking this began in 2013,

but this constantly-mutating show crossed over to the early months of 2014), and other highlights of the year in the city included Tim Braden's homage to Cornwallian modernism at Ryan Lee; Sanya Kantarovsky's Saul-Steinberg-goes-Fauvist solo exhibition at Casey Kaplan; new works by Gary Panter at Fredericks and Freiser and by Jim Shaw at Metro Pictures. I was taken by Sara Cwynar's richly coloured explorations of photographic representation and still lifes at Foxy Production, and it was nice to see artist-cum-garden-shed-inventor Steven Pippin resurface at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. 'Project LSD', a set of artist-designed acid blotter sheets curated by Rob Tufnell for White Columns, surely had to be one of the more witty, original and zeitgeisty ideas for a show this year, given the resurgence of interest in psychotropic drugs today. As for art in 2015, I am curious as to what Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin will pull together for the New Museum Triennial, and what the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art's new director Anthony Huberman has in store for the San Francisco venue. The opening of The Whitney Museum of American Art's new premises open on the west side of Manhattan in May is sure to spark all kinds of fun debates for and against, and it's a dead cert that the Venice Biennale will be the usual mixture of duds and delights.



Scott Reeder, 'Moon Dust', 2014. Film still

With record attendance for this year's Printed Matter Art Book Fair at MoMAPS1, New York – it was absolutely mobbed – I feel compelled to mention a few of my favourite art books of 2014. Firstly, I was unsure whether to categorize novelist, art critic and *frieze* columnist Lynne Tillman's collection of essays *What Would Lynne Tillman Do?* (published by Red Lemonade) as an 'art book' or not, given its dizzying scope of topics. But this is my end of year roundup, so I'll do whatever I please and put it top of the list. Aside from carrying possibly the wittiest title of any essay collection this year, it stands as a testament to the insistent clarity, intelligence, and integrity of this singular New York writer. The catalogue to Mark Leckey's mid-career survey show at WIELS, Brussels, 'Lending Enchantment to Vulgar Materials', was also a beautifully designed hardback by Sara de Bondt, featuring sumptuous layout, crystal clear navigability and a deluxe gold cover typeset after a packet of Benson & Hedges cigarettes. (Full disclosure: I contributed an

interview with the artist to this publication.) Lucas Blalock's monograph *Windows Mirrors Tabletops*, published by Mörel Books, provided a playful and wide-ranging introduction to this US photographer's work, along with an illuminating interview by David Company. A dense variety of source material relating to one of Los Angeles' most influential artists could be found in *Allen Ruppersberg Sourcebook: Reanimating the 20th Century*, published by Independent Curators International. (Special mention should also go to his solo exhibition of new work at Greene Naftali, New York, which opened near the end of 2014.) Another doozy for the archive nerds was *The George Kuchar Reader*, published by the consistently on-point Primary Information. This collection of archival images and correspondence from the late lamented Kuchar is worth the price of the book alone for his wildly funny and generous 'Letters of Recommendation', written for his ex-students at the San Francisco Art Institute. Celine Condorelli's book *The Company She Keeps* (produced by Book Works, and elegantly designed by An Endless Supply on the occasion of her solo exhibition at Chisenhale, London) features rich conversations on the topic of artists and friendships. Raphael Rubenstein's short book *The Miraculous* (Paper Monument) describes 50 canonical works of modern and contemporary art, but not by name, and nor, really as works of art, resulting in a dreamlike art history with echoes of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* (1965) or *Invisible Cities* (1972). Finally, the catalogue to the exhibition 'What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art 1960 to the Present' at the RISD Museum, Providence, edited by Dan Nadel, should be made compulsory reading for every primer course on postwar US art history; a necessary corrective to the idea that New York-centric Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art were the only games worth watching. However, little of the above would ever even reach our bookshelves at home without the near-heroic work of those running small independent booksellers dedicated to visual art and culture. I've not the space nor knowledge to give a comprehensive list, but in the cities I'm most familiar with, shout outs go to: Artwords, Claire de Rouen, Donlon Books, Foyles, ICA, November Books and X Marks the Bökship in London; 192, 6 Decades, Brazenhead, Dashwood, Karma, Mast Books, McNally Jackson, Printed Matter and Strand Books in New York.



Sleaford Mods, 2014

The music section of these end-of-year roundups is often the part I enjoy writing the most, but I found 2014 to be an uneven year in terms of record releases. Try as I might to get inside FKA Twigs' *LP1* – her debut already tops a number of 2014 'best of' lists – or Sleaford Mods' angry and funny *Divide and Exit* (for me, a band whose lyrical wit – like a potty-mouthed John Cooper Clarke – outstrips the sticky-ness of their most

recent music), and much as I wanted to like Scott Walker and Sunno)))’s collaboration *Soused* – a pairing that made everyone do a double-take when it was announced – there was little that really wormed its way into my ears this year. I was happy to see that the ever-unpredictable Dean Blunt released a new LP with the surprisingly gentle-sounding *Black Metal* (which came on black labelled black vinyl, in black inner sleeves, in a black gatefold album cover, inside a black plastic bag, in case you missed the title). James Hoff’s *Blaster* was a bracing experiment with sound and computer viruses, and the impressive *Unflesh*, by Gazelle Twin – the project of Elizabeth Bernholz – was a serious and unsettling album of sparse vocals and electronics about subjects such as euthanasia, bodily horror, feral children, and gender politics. Russell Haswell – one of the most prolific electronic artists at work – produced the bullish *37 Minute Workout*, which was made with a synthesizer, bass drum, hi-hat and clap module. It features one of the most nervy, anxious dance tracks of the year, with its opener ‘Spring Break (Extended Freestyle Playlist Edit)’. Both Einstürzende Neubauten and Tindersticks this year produced tough and evocative responses to the centenary of World War One (*Lament*, and *Ypres*, respectively) that I admired for the ambition as much as anything. At risk of repeating one of my picks of 2013, I got hooked by *Preternaturals*, the latest album by Grumbling Fur; no great step forward since 2013’s *Glynnaestra*, but I’m a sucker for their Eno-esque pop melodies. Daniel Patrick Quinn – a musician based in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland – released *Acting the Rubber Pig Redux*, one of the most unique sounding albums of 2014: a mixture of field recordings made in the local countryside, looping rhythms, droning strings and pipes, plaintive brass and half-spoken observations about memory, landscape and travel. New albums by Ghostface Killah and Wu-Tang Clan (*36 Seasons* and *A Better Tomorrow*) were hugely enjoyable even though both sounded like hip-hop suspended in amber since the 1990s.



V/Vm, ‘The Death of Rave (A Partial Flashback)’, 2014. Album cover

In fact, the 1990s kept coming back to haunt me this year; the first band I obsessed over as a teenager, Ride, announced a comeback tour for 2015, and Suede re-issued *Dog Man Star*, a 1994 album I can't help loving for its over-reaching and often hammy ambition. Well worth the trip down nostalgia lane was the box set *Suburban Base Records: The History of Hardcore, Jungle, Drum'n'Bass 1991–1997*, a tendentious but great reminder of that point in the 1990s when dance music seemed to evolve at an almost weekly rate, and still carried a subversive, underground charge. (A good companion to this compilation was *The Death of Rave (A Partial Flashback)*, a haunting, bittersweet record about the ghosts of rave and British dance culture, by V/Vm aka Leyland James Kirby.) This year we were also reminded of the unsung genius of Annette Peacock, with the reissue of her album *Revenge* (1968), made in collaboration with Paul Bley. Accompanying the publication of *Different Every Time*, Marcus O'Dair's authorised biography of Robert Wyatt, Domino Records put out a two-volume compilation of Wyatt's work. The first disc, *Ex Machina*, is a small but perfect group of tracks selected by Wyatt himself, reaching right back to The Soft Machine and Matching Mole in the 1960s. The second volume – titled with tongue firmly in cheek, *Benign Dictatorships* – collects together Wyatt's collaborations and appearances on other musician's recordings. If you've never before explored Wyatt's work – and, given he is one of the most original musicians to emerge since the 1960s, you really must – these compilations aren't half bad as a place to start.



Paul Thomas Anderson, 'Inherent Vice', 2014. Film still

In cinema, the buzz this year was all about Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, a film shot over a period of eleven years and tracing the coming-of-age of one Mason Evans Jr. (Ellar Coltrane) from ages six to 17. It was, in many senses, an extraordinary achievement, although outstanding performances from Patricia Arquette and Ethan Hawke as Mason's parents were reminders that youth isn't always as compelling to watch or listen to as maturity. I was initially blown away by the horror and claustrophobia found in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* – its scenes of alien carnivorousness, evoked by little more than shots of a vast black pool of oil, were striking, and the film shared much of the dislocated atmosphere of Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). But on further reflection, the way Glazer's camera drooled over Scarlett Johansson, and the ambiguous class subtext of his shooting methods, left a bitter taste in the mouth. (It was hard to tell whether the film was laughing at the Glaswegians unwittingly caught by his hidden cameras, or aiming for a gruesome 'eat the poor' satire.) Although much more heavy-handed with its social allegory, I enjoyed *Snowpiercer*, directed by Bong Joon-ho (originally released in 2013 in South Korea, it only got its US release in summer

2014). This tense tale of class war and ecological catastrophe, set aboard a perpetually moving train where the poor live in cramped quarters at the back of the train whilst the rich live it up near the front, was the most visually impressive science fiction film of the year, even with its clear nods to Terry Gilliam's 1985 masterpiece *Brazil*, and the early films of Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro. (*Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* gets the Best Summer Multiplex Popcorn prize from me.) It may not be cool to admit, but my opinion of Wes Anderson turned around with *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. After the early delights of *Rushmore* (1998) and *The Royal Tennenbaums* (2001), I had presumed Anderson was lost forever to cloyingly twee tales about self-consciously quirky and over-privileged families, recycling the same stylistic licks and shots of Bill Murray looking all world-weary. What *The Grand Budapest Hotel* made me realise is that Anderson's leading actor is his art direction. Forget the cast of people speaking lines, who have all the roundedness of characters in a Tintin adventure. (The fictional Balkan states of Hergé's imagination must surely have been an influence on this film.) These actors are just there to animate his delightful sets and costumes, which dominate *The Grand Budapest Hotel* to such a degree that it almost seems like a witty avant-garde move. However my film of the year was by the other Anderson – Paul Thomas – for *Inherent Vice*. No director could ever hope to replicate the labyrinthine complexities of Pynchon's writing, but drenched in warm Californian light and featuring compelling comic performances by Joaquin Phoenix and Josh Brolin, Anderson managed to create something that doesn't match, but certainly parallels the stoned paranoia, conspiracy theories, maze-like plots, language games and slapstick action of Pynchon's universe. *Inherent Vice* tells a tale of police corruption, racist gangs, rapacious property development, government conspiracies, the drug trade, and of paranoia both to the political left and to the right. Which is another way of saying that this movie is a heart-warming slapstick comedy for our miserable times. As the Wu-Tang Clan put it, here's to a better tomorrow.

About the author



Dan Fox is co-editor of *frieze* and is based in New York.

His book *Pretentiousness: Why It Matters* will be published by Fitzcarraldo Editions in 2015.

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