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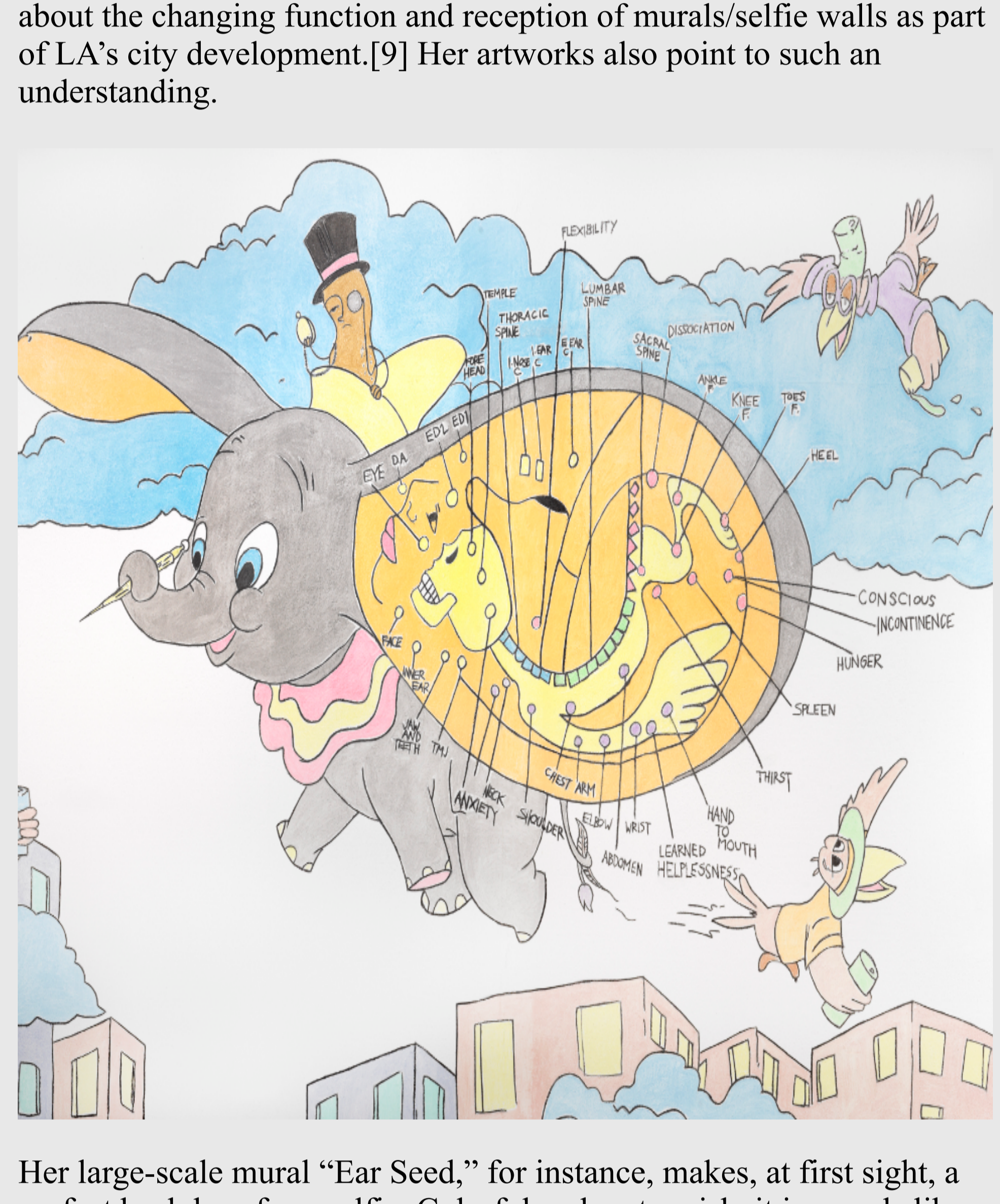
TORTURED DISNEY, FALSE TRUTHS AND CONFLICTED MEMES

Institutional critique in the age of networked capitalism.

Up is Down and Down is Up.[1]*I have no more questions about gallery walls. The kind of academic understanding I used to have about institutional critique led to a dead end. It ate its own tail in its formalism.*[2]

Institutional critique is commonly defined as an art practice that questions, comments on, and criticizes the *institutions* involved in the production, display and commerce of art (e.g. museums, galleries, auction houses, artists' studios, the art market, and art criticism). Increasingly, however, it has become hard to define just what constitutes an art institution. Both in the Netherlands and internationally, museums have been forced (and stimulated) [3] to become increasingly attuned to a commercial rationale, measuring success in visitor numbers, ticket sales and rentals.[4] As public money has been disappearing, they have become part of a competitive cultural industry vying for attention in the pastime activity pool. In an age of selfie walls and museum hashtags, museums as institutions are incorporated into the mechanisms of online marketing and exhibitions relegated to "content farms" for social media.[5] As part of this setting, images have become much more important (and consequential) and branding and marketing strategies determine how language is used. The communications frameworks [6] have changed: the dry, elitist and academic tone of exhibitions has given way to more approachable forms of talking to and engaging with visitors that often take their cues from PR and marketing. If we follow Habermas in framing this shift, one can argue that the space of the museum, seen as a public space that facilitates rational-critical debate and as such produces culture, has become a space that aligns itself increasingly with the culture industry. A culture industry that addresses its visitors as customers and provides 'services' and 'experiences'.

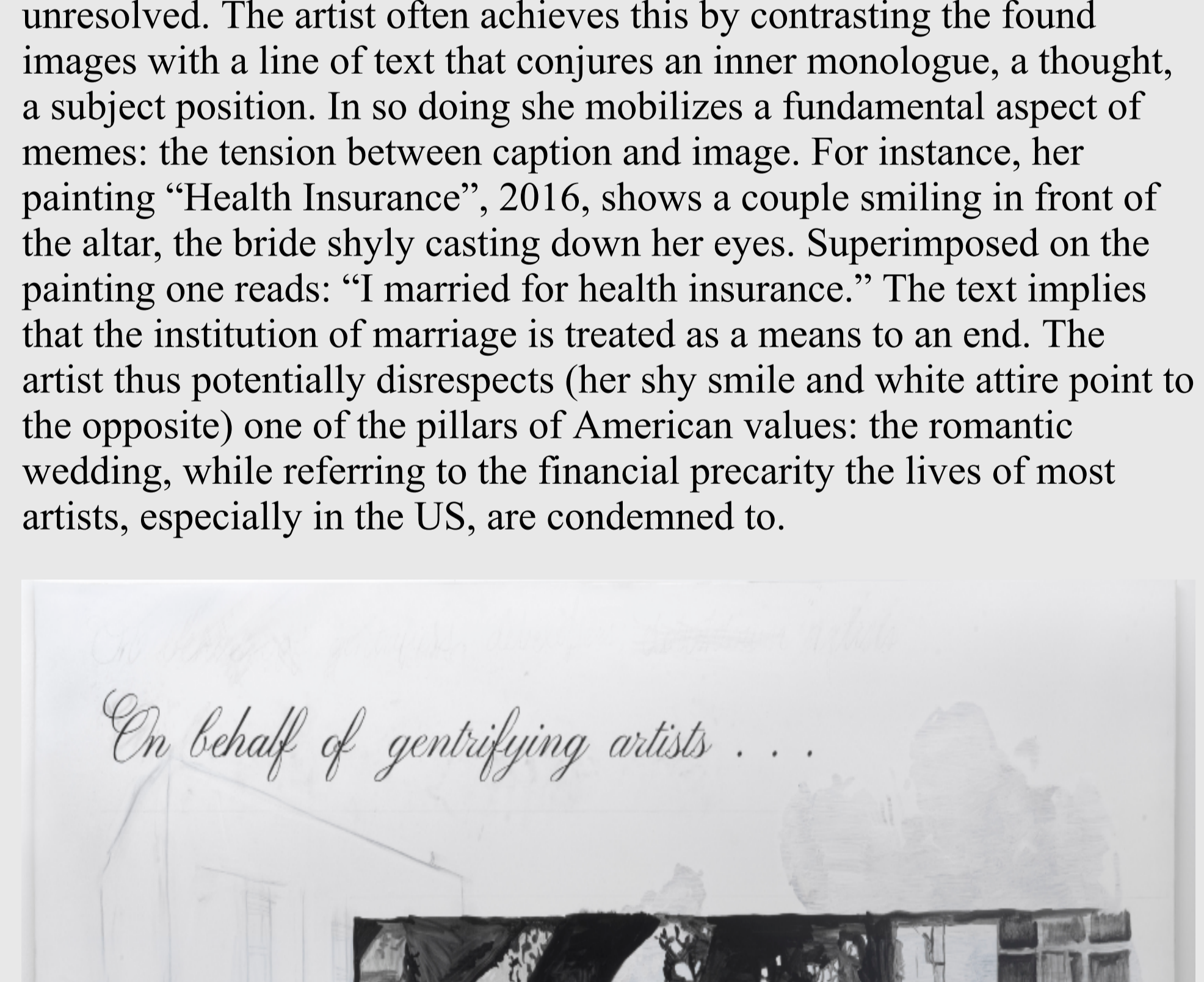
Terry Eagleton wrote that critique "is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from inside, in order to elicit those 'valid' features of that experience which point beyond the subject's present condition." [7] That is, if a critical idea is gripping, it needs to speak to somebody's horizon of experience. How can such a connection with the culture-consuming public be made in the current context of the museum? One that speaks to the advertised experience, while also going beyond? And how can artistic critiques, presented in the exhibition space, be linked to the current tactics of critique that manifest themselves in society more broadly (BLM, #MeToo etc.), in a moment in which an acute critique of institutions clashes with the aspiration of museums to be part of the experience economy? One thing is clear: the extended institutional landscape of art calls for an extended notion of institutional critique, one that looks beyond the prototypical white walls of the museum. In contrast to historical practices of institutional critique that dissected the vocabulary of the exhibition space as ivory tower, new forms of institutional critique have emerged that speak to the current, art cum entertainment climate. As such, Dena Yago's work is concerned with the conditions and image of creative labor that has its roots in the art world but manifests itself beyond it. Next to producing artworks, Yago writes poetry, cultural criticism and works in brand consulting (her LinkedIn profiles her as "Senior Strategist," and more recently as the Co-Founder of an agency for "Creative Strategy, Placements and Production"). Yago was part of K-Hole, a collective of artists that issued a series of trend reports on fashion, lifestyle and cultural phenomena between 2010 and 2016. This is not to say that all of these activities happen on the same level, or to label all of them as "art". Yago herself repeatedly commented on the dreadfulness of her corporate jobs, while contrasting them with a sense of self that she was desperate not to lose (for instance by bringing home-cooked lunches to these corporate environments, or writing poems on her phone on her commute to work).[8] What they do point to, however, is a fluidity in the languages Yago is able to pull from, and a reality of artistic life in which the studio is but one "creative" space. Her cultural criticism speaks of a condition that takes into account an extended notion of cultural production. Most recently, Yago wrote about the changing function and reception of murals/selfie walls as part of L.A.'s city development.[9] Her artworks also point to such an understanding.



Her large-scale mural "Ear Seed," for instance, makes, at first sight, a perfect backdrop for a selfie. Colorful and cartoonish, it is murals like these that have become destination magnets for selfie tourism. On further inspection, its content has more subversive and dark undertones: the ludic, to borrow from Rancière, turns critical.[10] The mural depicts Disney hero Dumbo with an auricular acupuncture diagram at the heart of which, eerily, figures a skull. In Dumbo's ear, the pressure points used in ear acupuncture are marked. Ear acupuncture is a method that stems from traditional Eastern medicine, but it has recently been picked up by self-optimizing wellness culture. In Yago's image, Dumbo embodies the precarious millennial worker, thirsty for self-actualization and optimization as a means of coping with volatile and uncertain futures. He is representative of a hip "creative" workforce largely dependent on short-term projects. Criticism of working "nine-to-five" grew in the late sixties, of which the counterpoint was the figure of "the artist," defined by an anti-authoritarian streak and a longing for creative self-actualization. The mainstreaming of artistic modes of working has been accelerated by new media technology and now defines a new working class: that of creative, "entrepreneurial" freelancers who are sold a notion of "freedom" and self-determination, in exchange for a social infrastructure and employer accountability. Her mural visualizes that ideas from the art field have become influential for a creative class that goes beyond the art world proper. Pulling from the lexicon of popular mass-imagery that Yago updates with signifiers of urban lifestyle, Yago's critique of the current state of creative labor paints a bleak picture: the allegory on creativity finds its form in a ready-made Disney template. What's at stake here is the sell-out of creative labor: artistic values have been integrated into a capitalistic system that capitalizes on the aspirations connected to an artistic life.

"I have a fiscal relationship with this establishment, which I developed by buying a coffee which makes me a patron." [11] Nora Turato works with appropriated language. Harvesting the most poignant punch lines, quotes and clichés from news feed headlines, Instagram captions, Netflix shows, and literature, Turato crafts a seductive, overwhelming stream of consciousness that she throws back at her audience in her performances. Hal Foster might call this "mimetic exacerbation." [12] Like an internet mumblecore or a generational Cassandra, Turato's truth-telling feels urgent, but it is also fragmented, disjointed and, at times, overbearing. Her most recent video is shot in the Frans Hals Museum, in areas of the museum that visitors usually don't see: its depot, storage facilities and office spaces. Filmed in one seamless take, it is modeled after the final scene in the recent Netflix movie *The Laundromat* starring Meryl Streep. Streep plays the role of John Doe, the still-anonymous whistleblower who exposed the Panama Papers Scandal in 2016. Resembling the final moments of the movie, in which Streep performs a monologue while peeling off the layers of her costume and leaving the illusion of the set, the video shows Turato performing a monologue as she moves through the back spaces of the institution. The work speaks to a desire for the unveiling of the operational side of an institution to be accompanied by a moment of truth. [13] Ultimately the work alludes to the question of how the critique of institutions, along with specific ways of "speaking truth to power", has been captured by the popular imagination as a formal device. Moreover, "speaking truth to power" with Turato becomes a form of address, a series of affective punch lines enacted by the artist persona, who captures your attention with an intensity that feels gripping yet leaves you with an empty aftertaste. Formally and affectively, this is the perfect delivery of an institutional takedown. The artist protagonist, however, speaks in such a multiplicity of voices that there is no clear message, point of view or concise critique. Turato pulls from a broad set of references. There is a high density of confessional, emotional statements – "I love museums so much, and libraries and bookshops and cultural centers and cities and I love walking around cities for days." These speak of an engagement with culture that is of the everyday, veering between profound and deeply shallow – "There is a whole backside of what I do, I have a face, but I also have a brain", leaving one confused, yet also seduced. "Somewhere down the scale, I can't decide if I am enlightened, demoralized or empowered" Turato at one point proclaims into the camera.

Another example is carried by Christine Wang, who paints memes, photos, and screenshots of online videos. Her images conjure contradictions. Selfishness, moral dilemmas and hypocrisies linger unresolved. The artist often achieves this by contrasting the found images with a line of text that conjures an inner monologue, a thought, a subject position. In so doing she mobilizes a fundamental aspect of memes: the tension between caption and image. For instance, her painting "Health Insurance", 2016, shows a couple smiling in front of the altar, the bride shyly casting down her eyes. Superimposed on the painting one reads: "I married for health insurance." The text implies that the institution of marriage is treated as a means to an end. The artist thus potentially disrespects (her shy smile and white attire point to the opposite) one of the pillars of American values: the romantic wedding, while referring to the financial precarity the lives of most artists, especially in the US, are condemned to.



"Death" displays an even more jarring juxtaposition. The work shows material pulled from the online reporting around a 2015 incident in which an African-American man, Charley "Africa" Keunang, was beaten and eventually shot to death by the LA police. The videos of the event went viral. Wang overlaid a screengrab that shows the deadly incident with "on behalf of the gentrifying artists" in calligraphic writing. This cynically implies that the death of a homeless man further helps the cause of gentrification, which artists often are fostering. The figure of the artist, again part of the artwork, becomes part of an unjust, flawed and even deadly system that is cynically mirrored in the snappy, effective and jokey format of memes.

Key to these contemporary practices is an understanding of culture – and following from this a cultural critique – that doesn't draw a line between "art" proper and the creative entertainment industry, and between pop cultural irony and serious critique. They are concerned with what David Joselit – in an early attempt to theorize networked art – called "buzz". [14] and what we now simply call memes. They build on content and formats that are highly recognizable on the internet and social media with a strong potential for "likes" and future circulation. Critiquing the art world here means critiquing the creative industry, of which the art world has inevitably become part. It means addressing the forms and formats through which critique is performed today, in the broader popular context of internet culture. These are critiques that always throw into relief the medium that they employ and the material they appropriate: the mural/selfie wall, Hollywood tropes, internet lingo, memes. Their critiques relate to the current ways that critique is performed in a larger socioeconomic context as they acknowledge the importance of the same tactics: the use of irony and humor, their emotional appeal, the centrality of hashtags, short lines and evocative images. There is a link to art world phenomena: "creativity", the artist as a "truth-teller", precarity and gentrification, but these art world phenomena no longer present themselves in isolation, as they have effects beyond "the art world proper." They are highly entertaining and engage the viewer in a jarringly 'fun' game. They draw the visitor in, with a vocabulary that speaks of leisure, free time, relaxation. As such they relate to the current ways museums and art institutions present themselves as they position themselves as approachable, fun and light-hearted in their attempts to draw in visitors to spend their free time within their walls. The question then becomes: if these works succeed in their critiques by setting out mimetic traps to point out the many ways art and capitalism are entangled, how can we move beyond to disentangle these alliances? Or, to put it differently, how do we move from the realm of representation to a space of action?

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FOOTNOTES

- [1] Frankly, from this point onward, Up is Down and Down is Up. Who Knows What to Believe Anyway? Quote from Nora Turato, pool#4, Museum of Modern Art, forthcoming 2020.
- [2] Frazier, Ward, "A Conversation Between Douglas Crimp and Gregg Bordowitz, January 9, 1989", in Jan Zita Grover, AIDS: The Artist Response, ex. Cat (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1989), 8.
- [3] Often, a condition to be considered for public grants is a museum's ability to prove its "profitability" which is measured in self-generated income, stemming from ticket sales, rentals and merchandise.
- [4] A brilliant study that documents the changes that occurred in policy making of Dutch art museums since WWII concludes that, especially since the 1980s, the attention has shifted from research and expertise to presentation and an increased focus on visitor numbers. Visitor numbers, that have become the most important marker for prestige and success, since the 1980s were increasingly to be attained with business, financial and managerial tools, such as PR and marketing, resulting in museums becoming icons for city marketing first and institutions for art and culture in the second place only. The 2016 study concludes that today, museums in the Netherlands are characterized by their focus on their clients (audience), their reliance on marketing strategies, a close relation to collectors and, through their boards, a close relation to the world of business. Douwe J. Elshout, De Moderne Museumwereld in Nederland: Sociale Dynamiek in Beleid, Erfgoed, Markt, Wetenschap En Media, Dissertatie Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2016. Print.
- [5] Dena Yago, "Content Industrial Complex", e-flux journal #89 (March 2018): 3.
- [6] Frazier, Ward, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," October, vol. 73, 1995, 72. In reference to Habermas, Ward describes different communication frameworks that provide the conditions for various forms of publics.
- [7] Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory, London: Verso, 1992.
- [8] See Dena Yago, "What Affective Labour Has to Do with Reddit's Corporate Cafeteria," Frieze (August 2019): <https://www.frieze.com/article/what-affective-labour-has-to-do-with-reddits-corporate-cafeteria>
- [9] Dena Yago, "The Wall Stays in the Picture: Destination Murals in Los Angeles", e-flux journal #89 (March 2018): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/104/299339/the-wall-stays-in-the-picture-destination-murals-in-los-angeles/>
- [10] Jacques Rancière and Steven Corcoran, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 54.
- [11] Quote from Nora Turato, "It's good to be critical but even better to be on point LOL.", 2020, 15 min, video.
- [12] Foster, Hal, "Dada Mime," October, no. 105 (Summer 2003): 167–176.
- [13] <https://www.insider.com/how-1917-was-filmed-like-one-continuous-hot-wwi-2020-1>
- [14] David Joselit, After Art, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

IMAGE CREDITS

Nora Turato, It's good to be critical but even better to be on point LOL., 2020, video, courtesy of the artist; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zürich and LambdaLambdA.Lambda, Pristina.

Dena Yago, Ear Seed, 2020, colored chalk on wall, courtesy of the artist; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; High Art, Paris and Hodega, New York.

Christine Wang, Death, 2015, acrylic on canvas, courtesy of Christine Wang; Galerie Nagel Draxler, private collection Frankfurt am Main.

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is the curator of contemporary art at the Frans Hals Museum Haarlem, the Netherlands. This text evolved in tandem with her project The Art of Critique, consisting of a symposium, an exhibition, a canceled exhibition, artist commissions, a publication (to be released in spring 2022) and a public program in collaboration with Rietveld Academy Amsterdam. <https://theartofcritique.rietveldacademie.nl/>