the signal house *edition*

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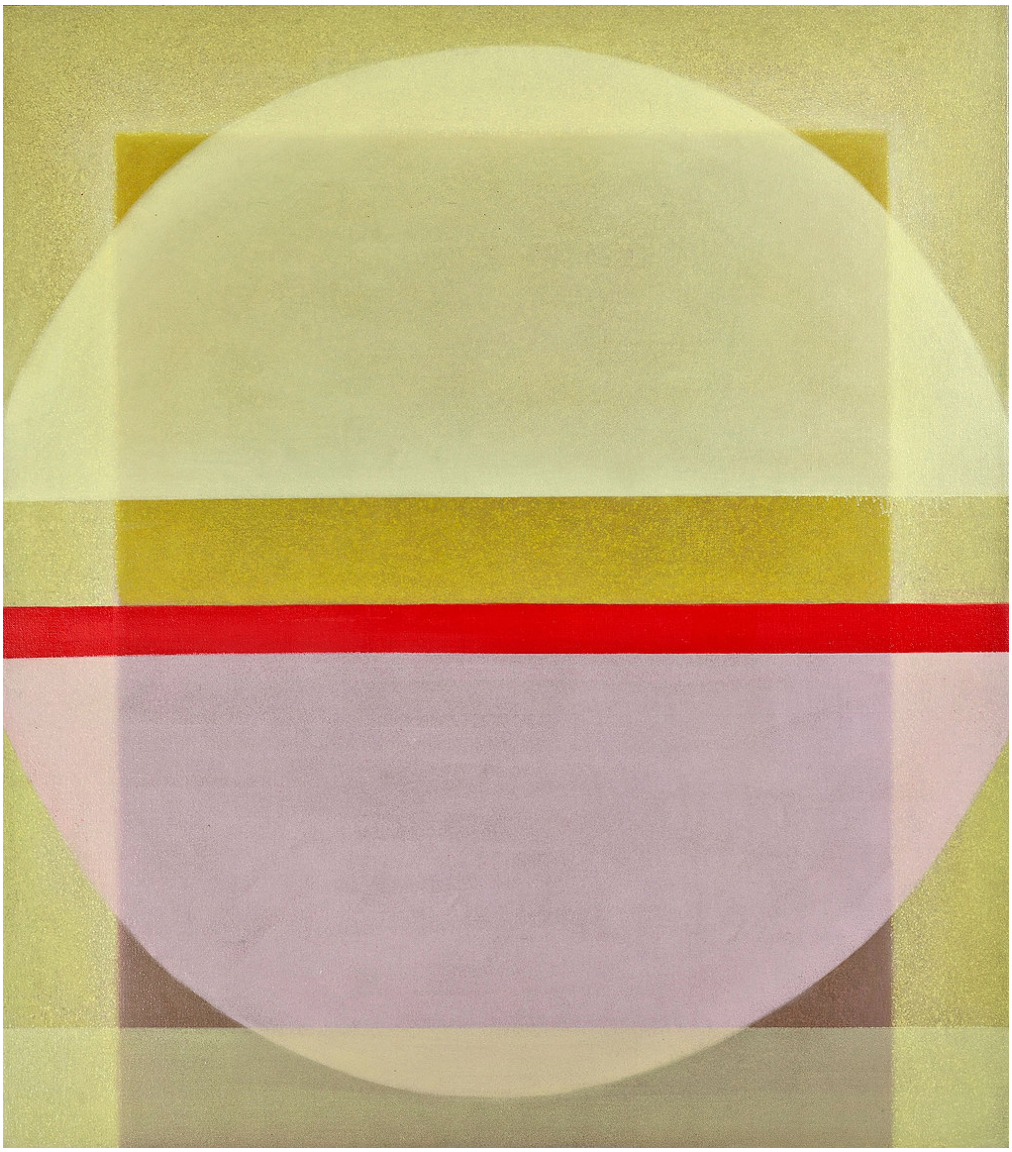

suspension 1
oil on linen, 2019

margie sheppard

october 2020 | the signal house edition

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contents

welcome

Fascination is a word that is hard to bottle up and label with one meaning only.

Thankfully, like all great words and concepts, it resists such an action. How interesting though, to learn the etymology, that the common consensus on the root of the word stems from the Latin fascinus (charm, spell, witchcraft) and fascinare (bewitch, enchant). The root word encompasses both acts of speech and the supernatural.

The pieces in October's issue speak to the fascination that a subject can exert on its author. The particularity of the worlds explored in each piece, from dams to glam to falling stars, created a kind of irresistible attraction for their authors—a spell or enchantment that compelled them to look closer, and closer, and closer. We hope, in turn, that the pieces they have created will fascinate you.

The Editors

waking in the temple

POETRY

axel kacoutié

Let them in, let them in.

All that's dirty and freaky,
all that's nasty and filthy.
Let them in, let them in.

All that's drunk and high,
All that's sexy and clots.
All that's loose and tight, all that withers and rots,
Let them in, let them in.

With the stains and the sin
All that's sad and bad and mad and wild.
All that's dark and stark and never smiles,
Let them in, let them in.

Let her and him and they, go all the way.
Let them in, let them stay—we look for God in many ways so let them in.

Let the devil and the angel,
the shadow and the light,
the ugly and the naked,
In this vault, give them flight.

Bring the fire and let them in.

Let them in.

Let them in.

Let them in.

click here to listen to axel read '*walking in the temple*'

(Image credit: Chichén Itzá, Mexico, 2016, Jezael Melgoza)

men are half women:

notes on ecofeminism

ESSAY

tara londi

Men are actually half women. Not only are men a make up of chromosomes X and Y, X being women's, but Y is a degeneration of chromosome X that only appeared much later in the pre-historic oceanic soup that was the inception of human life on Earth, 3 hundred million years ago. Y is the weaker chromosome, becoming weaker by the day. So much so, that scientists call it the 'Curse of Adam' and don't exclude a future where we, humans, will revert, once again, to being just females (XX). Amen.

This simple scientific fact can disprove a lifetime's worth of misunderstandings (about the 'weaker sex') and I, after years

prejudice to get to their source, have only become too weary of "history's misuse to lower expectations", as warned by the brilliantly sage Toni Morrison.

So, when in 2018, I was asked to curate an exhibition in Tehran, under the proposed title, All About Eve, Women As Nature, I somehow had to laugh. You don't need to be fluent in feminist theory to see the paradox here: the bias identification of woman as nature, and man as culture, is one of the most sinister, powerful prejudices against women's emancipation. Barbara Kruger's We Won't Play Nature To Your Culture (1983) testifies against centuries of subjugation. And through Eve herself—the first woman, fictitiously born out of Adam's rib (with her old friend the snake), the embodiment of the wicked temptation that all women are, to this day and in different measures, still seeking redemption for. The original sin indeed, but the sin against women.

At the time, however, I had just curated a feminist group show, Mademoiselle (CRAC, Sète); 37 women artists exploring feminist art's heritage in contemporary art, and therein the paradoxes of being a woman today with an unforgiving sense of humour. Hence, I thought that appointing me for an exhibition in Iran, consciously hid a wicked, subversive agenda in the organizers and that I, of all curators, was being hired to outsmart Islamic censorship. I accepted. This show would provide me with the opportunity to confront the concurrent controversy surrounding the 'relevance today of women only' exhibitions like Mademoiselle—a debate I deemed precipitate and unfair. After all, Iran, and many western countries too, are proof that women's emancipation is directly linked to nationality, race and class, and that the feminist project is far from being accomplished. Would Iranian censorship detect any subversive agenda if I presented Romana Londi's colour changing snakeskin canvases addressing both colour and gender as evolving cultural constructions? And Conrad Shawcross's dancing tribute to 19th century computer programmer Ada Lovelace, The ADA Project (2013–) a she-robot that dances to music: would Iranian officials arrest it/her for dancing? I wondered.

Artists, like all women in history, have had to avail themselves of all sorts of tricks and allegories to express themselves in totalitarian regimes. This is an artform in itself that is missing in museums

and in books. Moreover, discussing nature and the environmental crisis has become, in Teheran and elsewhere, as dangerous as discussing feminism itself.

So, dwelling on feminism, the role of nature, and Iran's repressive regime, I started to wonder why am I so radically against the identification of women and nature? What is wrong with nature? And why and how did we, women, become associated with it? But also, turning the debate to the present tense: what are the consequences of women's and nature's association for mankind at large? What lessons can we learn from it today? This is how and why, from being a feminist curator, I 'evolved' into an her-storian, an her-cheologist, and a so-called eco-feminist art theorist. The story I discovered is not only long, but as old as time itself, and rather than providing an exhaustive answer, it raises multiple other questions, which are windows into different worlds. This brief article offers only a glimpse into some of these windows, yet, hopefully, it can provide an introduction into ecofeminism and ecofeminist art.

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Beginning from the beginning, you only need to look up Gaia, (Gaea), the primordial Greek goddess of Earth, 'the Mother of All', and you will see that She has a thousand feminine names. In ancient Anatolia she was Cybele, in Babylon Anat, in Egypt Isis and Hathor, in Celtic Ireland Dana, in India Anapurma 'the provider'. Continents—Asia, Africa and Europe—were named after manifestations of the Goddess and every nation gave its territory the name of its own Mother Earth—Lybia, Lydia, Russia, Anatolia, Latium, Holland, China, Ionia, Akkad, Chaldea, Scotland (Scotia), Ireland (Eriu, Hera) were but a few.

Planet Earth, Nature, appears throughout 30,000 years of ancient history as a female divinity, the Great Goddess, source of all human, animal and plant life. Art proves to be a great advantage in tracing this unintelligible evolution, and most importantly, in recognizing the lasting ethos of our ancestral Earth-based spirituality in the present day collective subconscious.

Much of my research is based on archaeologist Marija Gimbutas' extensive and widely accepted theories on prehistoric people.

Gimbutas reinterprets European prehistory in light of her knowledge of linguistics, ethnology and the history of religions. She challenges several received ideas regarding the premises of European civilization and human nature itself. Her research in Anatolia, (Turkey), and all across what is today Europe, reveals the existence of a sophisticated matrilocal pre-Indo-European civilization she called the "prehistoric culture of the goddess". Beginning in the Palaeolithic, and ending only with the patriarchal culture of the Bronze Age, it lasted up to 160,000 years. According to her interpretation, matrilocal societies were not only peaceful and equal, but venerated homosexuals and favoured the sharing of property. It is undeniable that the value of this debate reaches beyond historical interest, for Gimbutas' theories cut to the heart of basic questions about human nature and possibilities. Are humans innately aggressive and dominating, condemned to destroy each other and the Earth? Or, as her theories suggest, are we capable of creating cultures based on cooperation and peace?

None of Gimbutas' work on the civilization of the goddess appears in school curricula, but is hidden away instead in the niche corners of so-called Women's Studies departments of the more progressive libraries (often with self-help books, as if, indeed, women's depressions may be closely linked to their exclusion from mainstream history).

Yet, the value of Gimbutas' revelation concerns all—not only women—exposing as it does our 'primordial war-raging human instinct' rhetoric as niche male fiction.

Feminist artist Judy Chicago's 2019 work If Women Ruled the World (conceived, but not executed, as Inflatable Mother Goddess in 1977) contributes to the series of questions about the consequences of women's exclusion from decision-making roles in history. In this work, Chicago seated an audience inside a gigantic goddess figure on the Rodin Museum grounds, presenting inside it an installation The Female Divine, a multitude of flagging tapestries raising questions such as: "Would Buildings Resemble Wombs?" "Would God Be Female?" "Would There Be Violence?" "Would Both Women and Men Be Gentle?" but also "Would The Earth be protected"?

In On the Concept of History (1942), Walter Benjamin warned us that writing History is switching on and off the light in the room, and since 'it is written by the victors', it is undeniably one sided; this is why feminists speak of 'His-tory'. However (and thanks to Marija's interpretation), if, as Walter Benjamin also argues, 'the miserable fifty millennia of Homo sapiens represents something like the last two seconds of a twenty-four hour day' and 'The entire history of civilized humanity, on this scale, takes up only one fifth of the last second of the last hour', ecofeminist art testifies that the millennia's worth of silent knowledge survived in the sagacity passed on (and written off as myth) by (wise) women (also known as witches).

∞

Immanence, animism, holism, the power of magic through ritual, sacred geometry, the respect of mystery and the faith in the endless cycle of life: Eco-feminist art reaffirms, or is resting upon the primordial pagan worldview that there is no distinction between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular.

Feminist artist Ana Mendieta's Silueta Series (1973–1980), inspired by Cuban voodoo rituals and beliefs, are not so different from ancestral ceremonies of communion with the Earth. Judy Chicago's depictions of vulvas honour the matriarch's body, just like the very first engraving on rock did 37,000 years ago at France's Abri Castanet. Mary Beth Edelson's collages of women with animal heads resonate with the ancient Venus

figurines, like the Bird Headed Snake Goddess from predynastic Egypt (4,000 BCE), which beautifully combines two powerful totems, the Bird and the Serpent, ancient symbols of birth, death and rebirth.

These are not isolated artists, and theirs not merely a homage to prehistoric art. The aesthetic, symbolic, and multisensory undercurrent of much of feminist art carries in itself a powerful shift of consciousness with respect to human bodies, the natural world, and human's position in the web of life: that is what we call eco-feminist art.

Luchita Hurtado's self-portraits as mountainous landscapes; Pipilotti Rist's overlapping videos inside the human body and then deep into the jungle (cleverly juxtaposed so that you don't know which is which); Donna Huanca's movements, embodying the animist belief that all forms of existence have an affective life force within them and that all the elements—body and objects—are impregnated with cosmic pigments, unifying and stabilizing the animate with the inanimate, the human with the mineral, the organic with the synthetic.

The list of artists goes on and multiplies in the younger generation, who, more and more, avail themselves of advanced scientific knowledge as an integral part of their work to resurrect our most ancient knowledge of the world.

∞

Archaeology is itself a modern science. Only in 2013 were we able to identify 75% of hand stencils in the Lascaux caves as women's (and adolescents') hands and many theories suggest that, it was prehistoric women who (through their menstrual cycle and childbearing experience) attempted to understand the concept of 'time' and 'repetition', inventing artful ceremonies to exorcise their fear and communicate with the living energy of the world; a mother Earth they believed to be a part of, and whose children—born miraculously out of the natural elements, rather than intercourse—they magically delivered. In fact, research has suggested that neither women nor men realised the male role in procreation until the Upper Neolithic period

The first women artists, as Marija Gimbutas understood, were high priestesses that shared across Europe a common system of sym-

bols, systematized enough that one may assume that the symbol-system is a kind of early, sacred writing:

"The multiple categories, functions and symbols used by prehistoric peoples to express the Great Mystery are all aspects of the unbroken unity of a deity, a goddess who is ultimately nature itself." [1]

Thus, the most accomplished book by Georges Bataille, *Lascaux: Or, the Birth Of Art* (1955) should read from beginning to read end as 'She' instead of 'He' (prehistoric artist), just like Barnett Newman's quote from 1947: "the first man was an artist" should exact "the first artist was a woman". Linda Nochlin, author of *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) would have exulted, since women were probably the first artists, and hereby we could easily revert to the bias identification of women as nature and men as culture. If we are correct: women are the inventors of culture, and a culture that is not the opposite of nature, as the western school of thought teaches, but one with it. In the 1960s, when the Second Wave feminist movement challenged the iron grip of biological determinism that had been used historically to justify men's control over women, they soon began to understand how culture's devaluation of natural processes was a product of masculine consciousness per se. A consciousness that denigrated and manipulated everything that was other: nature, women, or third world cultures.

Their 'intuition' proves premonitory today when the impact of human activity on the Earth threatens an environmental crisis. The Anthropocene is nothing more than the result of capitalism, (an era in which all of nature is transformed by the focus on accumulation of capital, hence Jason W. Moore calls it Capitalocene [2]), and capitalism is itself the brainchild of patriarchy. The term Ecofeminism was invented by french author Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Since the 1970s it has spiraled into many different branches of studies and perspectives, yet, all channel a critique on the effects of patriarchal capitalism on the environment, not to radicalize women's supreme closeness to nature, nor to overturn women's identification with it—as the binary opposition for men and culture—but to resurrect a primeval understanding of the world as a living organism, and encour-

age ecological sustainability. The ancient sacred writing, then, beginning in the beginning and reaching far beyond the dualistic dialectic of Western civilization (men, women, nature, culture, animate, inanimate) may prove our only way forward.

With the advent of monotheistic religions and then the scientific revolution, Western culture increasingly set itself above and apart from all that was symbolized by nature and the feminine [3]. Capitalism, writes Silvia Federici, started as a war on women [4]. It systematically required a flight away from the feminine, far from the memory of union with the maternal world, and a rejection of all the values associated with femininity and motherhood, including our body. René Descartes' *A Discourse on Method* (1637) single handedly reduced the body to be distinct and beneath the soul, providing a kind of automatism and mechanistic view of the world that is the prerequisite for the capitalist project of exploitation: the invention of 'dead matter' [5]. The word matter itself is etymologically linked to mater, meaning 'origin, source, mother'.

The witch-hunts (a genocide) have been strategic to this project. Naming and persecuting women as "witches" paved the way to the confinement of women in Europe to unpaid domestic labor. But also, arresting the witches, usually old women (the word witch itself shares the root with 'wit' and 'wisdom') eradicated the ancient animist understanding of nature as a living organism. Similarly, in colonial history, the cult of civilization helped justify the continuing exploitation of nature's resources and control over indigenous inhabitants.

Feminists have always been at the forefront of environmental activism, and women the pioneers in the fight against ecological destruction. American scientist Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* (1962) set the stage for the environmental movement that led to the creation in 1970 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Artist Agnes Denes's Wheatfield - a Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill (1982), is widely regarded as the first artwork to denounce the ecological crisis and inequality. Today its value is more relevant than ever, in the wake of both climate change and the increasing divide between the 1% and the rest of the planet's population.

It is widely argued that women's social experience of caretaking

and nurturing, and their unique role in the biological regeneration of the species, means that they are often the first to spot and experience signs of distress. In the industrialized world, women, often uneducated housewives, felt compelled to revolt against the mindless spraying of chemicals, toxic waste, radiation seepage from nuclear power plants, weapons testing, and the ultimate extinction of life on Earth. Their intuitions were, (inevitably and unfortunately), always proved to be right.

Meanwhile in developing countries, women's struggle to survive in a rural environment is directly linked to an ecological struggle, as women are intimately involved in sustaining and conserving water, land and forests they depend on. Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva theorized women's increasing subjugation in the midst of what she calls 'mal-development', by questioning what we consider and value as Progress and Wealth. It turns out that the battle against the environmental crisis is also, and again, played out on the grounds of gender, race and class. This is especially apparent when we consider that economically-challenged countries have become the dumping lot of wealthier ones, and available cures against its effects (illness), depends on the (at times spine-chilling) limited knowledge and focus on women's bodies and health. The taboo surrounding women's bodies and sexuality is one of the most acute consequences of the denigration of Mother Earth, nature and natural processes, and the flight from the feminine. Yet, it does not affect only women, but men too.

My journey in the realm of eco-feminism, took me exactly here, today: realizing that the same machine that kills women (capitalism) does not spare anyone. Female bodies went from being worshipped to being fatally neglected by medical and technological progress, animals have become extinct at an incredible rate, vitally important forests disappear, and humanity as a whole is threatened by a level of pollution that is our own making. It is a world made by and for men that in the very end is killing us all, men included.

Feminism always seems, to me at least, an inaccurate (and unfair) word for it, when the feminist project for equality so often expands beyond granting women human rights, and, as in the case of ecofeminism, highlights the effects of literally 'toxic' masculin-

ity on men's health too. Animals, plants, all living beings under the sun are concerned.

∞

In the end because of the ongoing political conflict in Iran, I never managed to curate my (secretly eco-feminist) exhibition there. Yet, in 2019, I gathered my research and presented it in Gaia has a Thousand Names, An Eco-Feminist Exhibition at the Elgiz Museum in Istanbul. Despite its universal relevance the show only received a small mention in an art magazine's column dedicated to a list of feminist exhibitions. It reminded me of when, in the 1960s, geo-scientist luminary James Lovelock proposed to call geo-scientists 'Gaia-scientists' instead, resurrecting the goddess figure to grant planet Earth the dignity of a life of its own, geoscientists refused, embarrassed and belittled to work for Gaia—Mother Earth.

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At present, I am working towards creating an overview of the many ways and forms in which women artists have, often unwittingly, perpetuated ancient beliefs and rituals that date back to the olden goddess religion and their relevance today. Apart from discovering many great women artists the book may also provide a parallel history of the Earth (a second Earth by the second sex), as told by those wise women (witches) whose beliefs, scientific advancement has proved to be true. In fact, quoting Starhawk, a theorist of Neopaganism:

"Modern physics no longer speaks of separate atoms, and isolates from a dead matter, but of energy flows, probabilities, phenomena that change when we observe it, and recognizes what shamans and witches have always known, that energy and matter are not separate forces, but different forms of the same thing." [6]

We humans are only a part of a great beyond, a living organism, and ecology, Eco being House in Greek, may as well be another rather inaccurate term for what is certainly not a human construction, nor should be regarded as such.

I hope that the book I am working on, will reach a few mixed classrooms, opening up windows into different worlds, and questioning historical narratives for the next generations, and one day even

go as far as being translated for the people in Iran I never got to meet, at least for now. It wouldn't merely be a feminist victory if it did, or the book just another feminist art anthology, but represent instead a steppingstone towards making the world, Mother Earth, a better place for all, and our re-education ultimately, a quest for Hers and Our own survival.

Image credits:

Tragic Magic, Oil on Linen 2020 by Ambera Wellman

If Women Ruled the World, copyright Judy Chicago, Christian Dior SE, 2019

Starhawk (Witch, and Neo pagan theorist) by Suzanne Husky, 2019, still from Earth Cycle Trance, led by Starhawk, Istanbul Biennial, 2019

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[2] Moore, Jason W. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism.* Oakland: PM Press, 2016.

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[6] https://starhawk.org/

fallen star

AUDIO
anna-helena mclean
click here to listen

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Hangover Day on Costinela's Balcony in Bucharest,
Vicktor Hübner, 2014

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We read all the work sent to us and aim to respond within two months if we feel there is a place for it in the journal. As we are a small team, we do not respond to each individual submission.

submit work

justin quirk

interviewed by henry martin

The Signal House meets writer and publisher Justin Quirk, whose latest book is a cultural history of glam metal.

Henry Martin: You regularly DJ and your musical taste is eclectic. What are you listening to right now, and if it's possible to answer: why?

Justin Quirk: I'm actually having a bit of a palate cleanser after being immersed in glam metal for six months while I wrote the book. I love that stuff, but it's a bit like eating candy floss after a while. I'm a huge dub fan, so I tend to listen to a lot of that when I'm working as it's got a nice hypnotic quality—King Tubby, Keith Hudson, Scientist, Prince

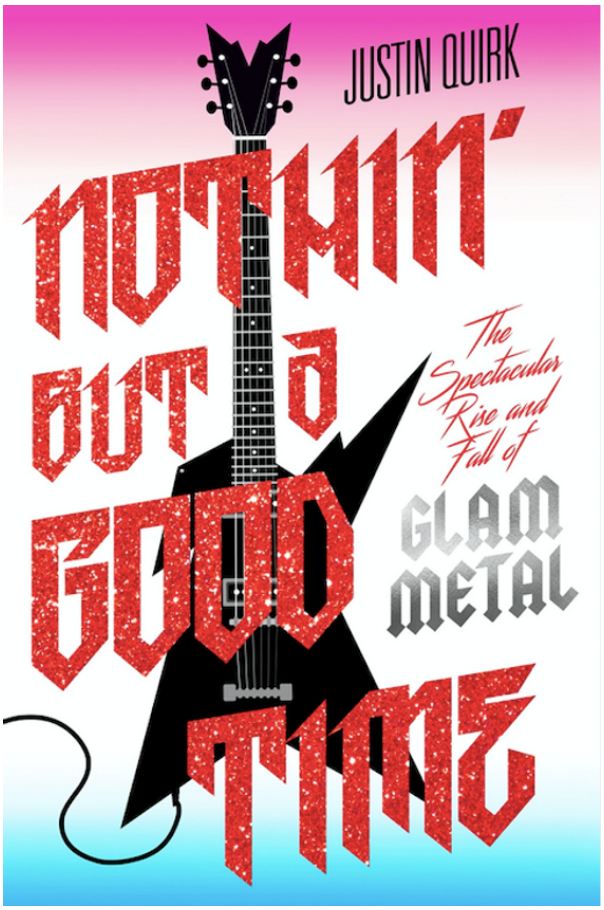
Jammy, that kind of thing. And during lockdown I've listened through pretty much all of Fela Kuti's output—again, long, repetitive, hypnotic stuff is good for concentrating when you work.

Henry: Introduce us to *Nothin' But a Good Time* and explain the impetus for the book, but before you do that: what three exemplary glam metal songs should our readers listen to as they continue reading?

Justin: If you stick on Motley Crue, *Kickstart My Heart*; WASP, *I Wanna Be Somebody* and Def Leppard's *Armageddon* It you're not going to go far wrong.

The book was partly rooted in my own adolescent tastes—I loved this music when I was a teenager. And it was so commercially huge. But I couldn't work out why nobody was seriously reassessing this stuff. We have a really great tradition in this country [UK] of writing and thinking very seriously about quite trashy pop culture and working out how it was a reflection of its environment. Mark Kermode on horror films and video nasties, Simon Reynolds on the really bargain basement end of glam rock, Stewart Home on skinhead and oi! music, Jeremy Deller on the provincial, grass-roots end of rave culture etc. All these things were sneered at or dismissed at the time, but they all tell you something profound about the time and place that produced them and the best writing draws that out. And the more I thought about glam metal, it felt like you could do the same thing there—it was this huge commercial force which shaped the industry and embodied the American spirit from 1983–1991, it built MTV, broke open new markets in Eastern Europe and Japan, created genuine pop hits, revolutionised music production etc., but if it was ever discussed—which was pretty rare—it got boiled down to 'spandex and pyrotechnics, LOL'. And, obviously, that stuff is is entertaining, but I couldn't help feel that there was a better way of telling this story.

Henry: In researching and writing any book there are a lot of unforeseen challenges and rewards. I'm interested in finding out what these might have been for you, and in the case of the former, how you overcame them?



Justin: My main one was the logistics of getting the project going—I worked with Unbound, who are a crowdfunding platform. It's an interesting model and they've done some great books on fairly niche bits of popular culture (Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone who wrote all those million selling *Choose Your Own Adventure* books in the 80s did their book through it). We got 70% of the money in really quickly which lured me into a false sense of security, but I underestimated how tricky getting the rest of the money would be. I think part of the issue is that crowdfunding is easier when you have a really narrow focus to a book—just one band, or one label or one club etc. I think the end result is better from it being an overview, but if I was going to crowdfund anything again, I'd definitely tighten the focus.

Henry: Music is a product of its time and place, but it can also transcend both and adopt new meanings for contemporary audiences. Do you think glam metal has a contemporary resonance? Too often I see metal and rock as signifiers of a time period (in their use on movie or

TV soundtracks, for instance) rather than as 'living', 'breathing' genres. In short, is the genre just dated and dead?

Justin: That's a really good question, and a very difficult one to answer. There's odd places that it crops up—it was used in the second series of *Stranger Things* as a real shorthand for those years. It's on the soundtrack to the new *Trolls* film, and friends' children seem to respond to it. But what dates the music isn't so much the age, but a very important cultural shift which occurred with grunge—from that point, music developed a very strong sense of irony, and everything started coming with quotation marks around it. Everything functions on a few different levels, everything means 'something else'. Glam metal doesn't have that quality at all—it's very surface, everything's quite one dimensional. It clearly had a ridiculous edge to it, but the bands were very serious about what they did. But if you saw a band dressed like WASP nowadays, you'd assume it was a joke, right? I think it's why older bands still make sense today if they had that sense of irony—I think a Talking Heads or the B-52s, or Blondie wouldn't look out of place today, even though they're older than glam metal. Whereas glam is so on-the-nose it looks as anachronistic as skiffle or something.

Henry: Sometimes I feel that popular culture is becoming more conservative. Harry Styles putting on nail varnish counts as risqué and performers are 'brands' rather than 'personalities'; that, and so much of popular music seems glib and joyless. Where did it all go wrong?

Justin: I don't know if it did. Music generally seems somewhat less important nowadays—there's so many other things competing for people's attention. Computer games and those sort of virtual worlds seem to consume people's attention and identities in the way that music did for my generation. And I can't honestly say that's any better or worse. Where I think you do have a close analogue for glam metal is in that really crass end of EDM, the kind of music which plays at things like Tomorrowland—there's something about the supersize quality of that, the way it's so self-consciously obnoxious, the way it turns these rather dull provincial people into these cartoonish megastars and the way

that tasteful people hate it, that it really makes me feel like there's parallel there.

Henry: If I could wave a magic wand and transport you to any live performance of your choosing, where would be and who would you see? Time travel is not permitted.

Justin: There's not that many glam bands I'd still want to see today—I find that whole idea of nostalgia in music slightly depressing when bands are still trudging around with one remaining member and not quite what they were. One of the bands who are still sounding as good as they were are Def Leppard. If lockdown could lift tomorrow and I could go somewhere really crass—Vegas, LA, Miami, anywhere like—and see them play *Hysteria* in its entirety, I'd be very happy.

Henry: What was the most surprising thing you learned about glam metal, whether that's an anecdote from your research, or something you came to through your own musings?

Justin: Just how big the music was. It cultivated this air of outsider status, but as soon as I started digging and actually going through old charts and looking at tour schedules you realise how vast it was. There was one week I found in 1987 when U2's *The Joshua Tree* was number one, and something like seven of the other albums in the billboard top ten were all glam metal releases. And when MTV was really taking off in 1983, the only track getting played more than Michael Jackson's '*Billie Jean*' was Def Leppard's '*Photograph*'. That's the level they were operating at.

Henry: You also write about visual art and artists. I'm interested in finding out how—or if—these strands in your writing practice intersect? Does knowing and writing about one, help or hinder your thoughts on the other? Or do you feel they require independent sensibilities?

Justin: I don't think you can really separate it off. The more I write about culture, the more I find that my primary interest is in why and how something happened, and less in 'what it was'. And a lot of that is

joining up the dots between things that were happening separately but were being shaped by the same forces. And that's the real fun in writing a book like this—using the music as your main peg, but then joining those dots up between that, MTV, WWF, Andy Warhol, video nasties, the crack epidemic, the end of communism, Siegfried and Roy, Desert Storm etc. I wanted the book to appeal to someone who probably doesn't even like the music, but wanted to read something more about the culture and the feeling of the time in America—and I just don't think you can tell that story without looking at glam metal. That was the perfect vehicle for the narrative.

(Image credits: *Nothin' But A Good Time* courtesy of the author; Guitarist portrait, unknown)

frankly, my dear

NON-FICTION
ansa khan

I have a fear of dams. (I also have a fear of pandemics, but now doesn't feel like the time.) Yet for a brief period in the early days of lockdown, for reasons that aren't entirely clear to me, I found myself watching video after video about dams and dam construction.

I'm scared of dams because I'm scared of impending disaster, and that has always seemed pretty sensible. I grew up on

the bad American disaster movies of the 1990s and, as anyone familiar with this genre will tell you, there is always that moment at the beginning when everything is still fine, before the sulphur has made the lake acidic, before the meteor has been detected, when the doors to the lab housing the deadly virus are still locked. Loosely speaking, it's the brief period in which the technician can carry on making out with his girlfriend, or the scientist listens to music with her earphones on; it's the moment just before the traffic light moves from red to amber. This is what I think of when I look at a dam.

The first dam I remember recognizing from television or films was the Hoover Dam, which lies on the border of Nevada and Arizona in the U.S. Built in between the walls of the Black Canyon, it cuts off the flow of the Colorado River, one of the longest rivers in North America. It's obvious even to a child that this is something more suited to the American continent than our small set of islands: the scale is all wrong.

Originally known as Boulder Dam until it was renamed in 1947, construction took place between 1931 and 1936, during the Great Depression. We are so far from my area of expertise that it seemed important to come armed with facts, including that six million tonnes of concrete were used in its construction. This is my favourite one: the process by which concrete hardens is an exothermic reaction, meaning that it gives off heat as it happens. The heat generated as all the concrete used in the Hoover Dam hardened would have taken 125 years to cool if engineers hadn't devised a way of cooling the dam by pumping water through it. In the event, it only took twenty-two months. Another fact: It is a 'concrete arch-gravity dam', and while I know what all of those words mean individually, I can only guess at their meaning here. I mostly just imagine all that concrete succumbing to gravity

and collapsing onto my head.

The reservoir formed by the dam is called Lake Mead and can hold up to 35 billion cubic metres of water (though this figure differs elsewhere: other sources cite 32.236 km3). Because of the extremely high demand for water in the area, it hasn't been full since 1983, and may never be full again. When you consider that the growth of Las Vegas was in part made possible by the infrastructure, water and power that the dam supplied, and when you imagine all those lights, you start to get an idea of just how large demand might be.

The dam is named after the president who definitely – to use overly simplified language – emerged from our GCSE History syllabus as the bad guy (F.D.R. being the requisite good guy). If you're thinking that interpreting the U.S.'s descent into the Great Depression through good guy/bad guy optics is reductive, you're not wrong. I'm just saying, the associations aren't good.

I've tried to intellectualize my fear of dams by suggesting that I'm disturbed by the terrifying confrontation between human engineering and the natural world implied by their existence. They appear in the landscape like a painful abbreviation, as if nature was about to say something and we shoved a sock in her throat. But maybe I just saw the dam scene in The Fugitive at an inappropriately young age.

Did you know that in order to build the Hoover Dam they had to temporarily divert the Colorado River, which has been flowing across the United States long enough to have carved out the Grand Canyon? It established its present course 5 million years ago, before us humans took it upon ourselves to divert it, that is.

A river is dammed, and in revenge spreads out to flood any settlements it finds on hand. The water has to go somewhere, so the cities, towns and villages that lie in the path of where a new reservoir will form are sacrificed, offered up to the God of Progress.

I fell down a bit of a rabbit hole of watching videos about dams online; I'd recommend this to anyone looking to confuse search algorithms: YouTube now doesn't know whether to offer me outtakes from *Pitch Perfect* or documentaries about super tankers. I clicked link after link, until I finally found myself drawn into an episode of National Geographic's *Big, Bigger, Biggest* devoted to dams. It's there that I am introduced to the mother of all dams: the Three Gorges Dam, which spans the Yangtze River in China, now officially the largest hydroelectric dam in the world. As with so many things from childhood, it turns out the Hoover Dam is not the towering colossus I once thought it was.

The statistics I have for you here are gleaned from an episode of the series *Megaprojects* that was devoted to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Where figures from different sources were inconsistent, I've tried to give a range. The Three Gorges Dam contains either eight or ten times as much concrete as the Hoover Dam; it's 175 metres high and 2.4km long. Its reservoir holds 39.3 cubic kilometres of water. According to some news outlets, NASA scientists think that the elevation above sea level of such a large collection of water has slowed the rotation of the Earth. Earth days are now, apparently, 0.06 microseconds longer than they were before the dam was built. So, if you've ever felt like there weren't enough hours in the day, the builders of the Three Gorges Dam have sort of done you a solid. It's also visible from space.

The figures on the number of settlements that the reservoir flooded seem to vary, but around a dozen cities, over one hundred towns, and over one thousand villages were inundated when the dam was built. The figure for the number of people uprooted also varies according to the source; the Chinese news site China.com.cn cited 1.4 million as the number of people uprooted. That's a lot of people in need of new homes.

There seems to be a counter-intuitive amount of destruction involved in dam construction. The term 'cofferdam' refers to a temporary dam—or two—built to cordon off the river at various stages, to allow building to take place on a dry, exposed riverbed. These warm-up dams (a prelude to the main event if you will) are later either flooded or blown up. An augury of their destruction is in fact built into the cofferdams: engineers include spaces for the demolition charges in their structure. Thus, they fulfil their destiny.

Yet let it not be said that there isn't a great deal of beauty in dam design. Hear the poetry in the following description from *Big, Bigger, Biggest*: 'This sends the water shooting down the spillway into a tumbling vortex, which dissipates its energy. As the water cascades off the ramp, it loses much of its destructive power.' Dissipation, tumbling vortexes, cascades . . . It reminds me of Stéphane Mallarmé's description of a dancer in his poem *Billet à Whistler* as a 'tourbillon de mousseline ou/Fureur éparse en écumes' (a whirlwind of muslin or/A furious scattering of spray).

There's also something beautiful about the human ingenuity on display. For every obstacle there's a solution: rivers can be diverted, concrete can be cooled, a giant 'shiplift' can raise shipping containers (and the water they're floating in)

113 metres into the air and over the dam. Dams are also, themselves, an ingenious solution not only to the problem of how to generate enough power to satisfy mankind's thirst for electricity, but also as a way of controlling flooding. That's what the builders of the Three Gorges Dam had in mind: trying to put an end to the regular and often catastrophic floods caused by the Yangtze bursting its banks.

That was also the motivation behind the construction of the Aswan Dam across the Nile in Egypt. The unforeseen consequence of that, however, was a failure of harvests downstream from the dam, as soil was no longer enriched by the plant nutrients of nitrogen, phosphorus, magnesium and potassium that were previously carried in the floodwater. Silt is no longer mixed-up and carried with the water down-river. Instead, it sinks to the bottom and builds up in front of the dam. Engineers at the Three Gorges have designed sluice gates that they open periodically to move the silt on. It turns out there's no solution to moving all the silt downstream, but the view seems to be that on balance, this is a price worth paying.

That's maybe my big take-away from this immersion in dam history: the risk of disaster is worth it. I've excised the section I had on dam failures, but they are as devastating as you might expect. Modern engineers have apparently found solutions to the problems that caused dams to collapse in the past (if they're going to build a dam near you, ask what shape the spillway is), but we've always been a bit over-confident as a species, haven't we? I suppose it's part of our charm. To its credit, the Three Gorges Dam looks pretty solid; if I stood underneath it, I'm not sure I'd feel like it would topple onto my head. However, two months of heavy rainfall meant that earlier this year, the level of water in the dam approached

capacity, so let's all agree to keep an eye on it.

To be honest, the whole thing sort of makes me wish I'd been an engineer, not because I think I'd be any good at it—I dropped Maths at school like a hot potato—but because I worry about how future-proof my current (home) office job is, and they must always be in need of people to keep a structure as complex as a dam up and running. I wouldn't want too much responsibility; maybe I could drive the little boat that scoops up the rubbish that also gathers behind the dam, and in that way make myself useful.

Perhaps my favourite among all the things I watched were the videos of water being purposefully, and in a controlled manner, released by dams. In these videos, the water escapes at such high pressure, it looks more like smoke. When you watch these, you're literally watching disaster being averted: the releases control the level of water behind the dam and prevent the reservoir from exceeding its capacity. In these stressful times, it is a very cathartic and oddly reassuring viewing experience. I highly recommend it.

(Image credit: The Damn Dam (Glen Canyon Dam), 2017, by John Gibbons)

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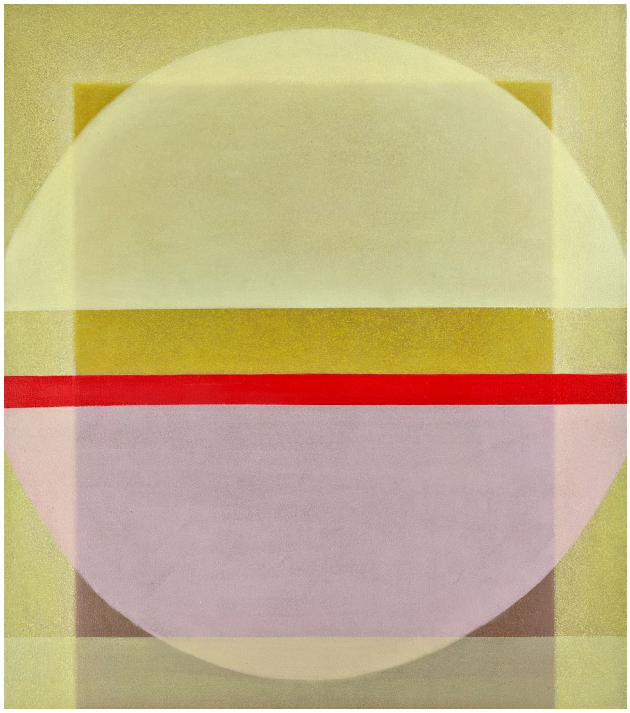

COVER ART I ***MAGGIE SHEPPARD*** *our featured artist in Issue 5, is a painter and printmaker. She lives at Kangarilla, in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia. Her practice now spans 30 years; in recent years she has returned to oil painting and she is currently dividing her time between painting and printmaking. She also runs West Gallery, Thebarton.*

artist's website | gallery website

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