

Kings of wishful thinking: internet irony and its illusionary critics

Olivia Bennett

Feature

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Jaakko Pallasvuo, *Untitled (Improving Discourse)*, 1 January 2022. Instagram carousel post with 10 black and white, digital cartoon images. Images retrieved from @avocado_ibuprofen Instagram. Courtesy of the author.

In a 2015 *Spike Art Magazine* article, the Finnish artist and novelist Jaakko Pallasvuo declared that he would stop posting on social media, claiming that since the advent of Instagram in 2010, the online ‘dialogue’ of the art world had become ‘a relentless and repetitive mode of (self-)promotion’. Despite his position, Pallasvuo re-entered the online space in 2017 with his cult Instagram @avocado_ibuprofen.^[1] The account’s ongoing series of slack-lined, black and white comics use meme-like figuration and nihilistic prose to criticise the anxiety-inducing contradictions of the global art world.

The article’s bitter, irony-laden diatribe is referential of the internet’s dialectical turn. The accelerated circulation of ‘the same five group shows [...]’, online, offline and through institutionally respected channels of discourse, ‘a hundred times with minor differences’ saw artists turn away from the internet as a project for a dynamic commons and toward another vehicle for market-driven individuation. Australian cultural theorist McKenzie Wark best describes the virtuality of this turn as a post-modern dialectic as both ‘the best quality of a person’ and ‘a reflected image of a thing’.^[2]

For Wark, the writer of a text, whether a photograph of an artwork posted on Facebook or the comments section of an art reviewer’s blogspot, should not be considered ‘a great authority or great artist’ but instead ‘a virtual friend’.^[3] The strained dialogue of Wark’s ‘virtual friendship’ is exemplified by Charles Broskoski, co-creator of *Are.na*, a networking platform self-described as ‘a toolkit for assembling new worlds from the scraps of old’, and internet artist Constant Dullaart’s conversation about Web 1.0’s Surf Clubs.

Surf Clubs developed as a space to exchange images, hyperlinks, sounds and random materials found inside search engines. These blogs offered an instant sense of community, a positive ‘abundance mindset’, and a convenient naivety around copyright.^[4] They operated as a virtual commons, a collective market of exchange wherein the anonymity of the individual members, relative to today’s hyper-networked internet landscape, resisted the traditional responsibilities of the artist, curator and critic. Contemporary examples are Instagram meme accounts @freeze_magazine, @jerry_gogosian, @thewhitpube, or recently, the emergence of ‘the cat boy’, a moniker for a slew of young Instagram account holders that push post-left commentary through nihilistic humour and philosophical shitposting.^[5]

Similar to Web 2.0 networking today, browsing and ‘collecting’ digital objects became valuable to online surfers who formed personal identities that did not hinge directly on the judgements of others. The provenance of a found object was understood as the journey of one’s personal growth rather than an ascription of the self to the object (cue Duchamp’s urinal). It wasn’t the beauty of a text, (whether that was a harmonious collection of rubbish photographed on the street or a low-resolution meme criticising the emptiness at ‘the intersection of art and technology’), but rather how transformative the journey of discovery was. Dullaart believed this ‘enabled thinking about an entire conversation as an artwork’, but what he failed to consider was the parasocial nature of this conversation.^[6]

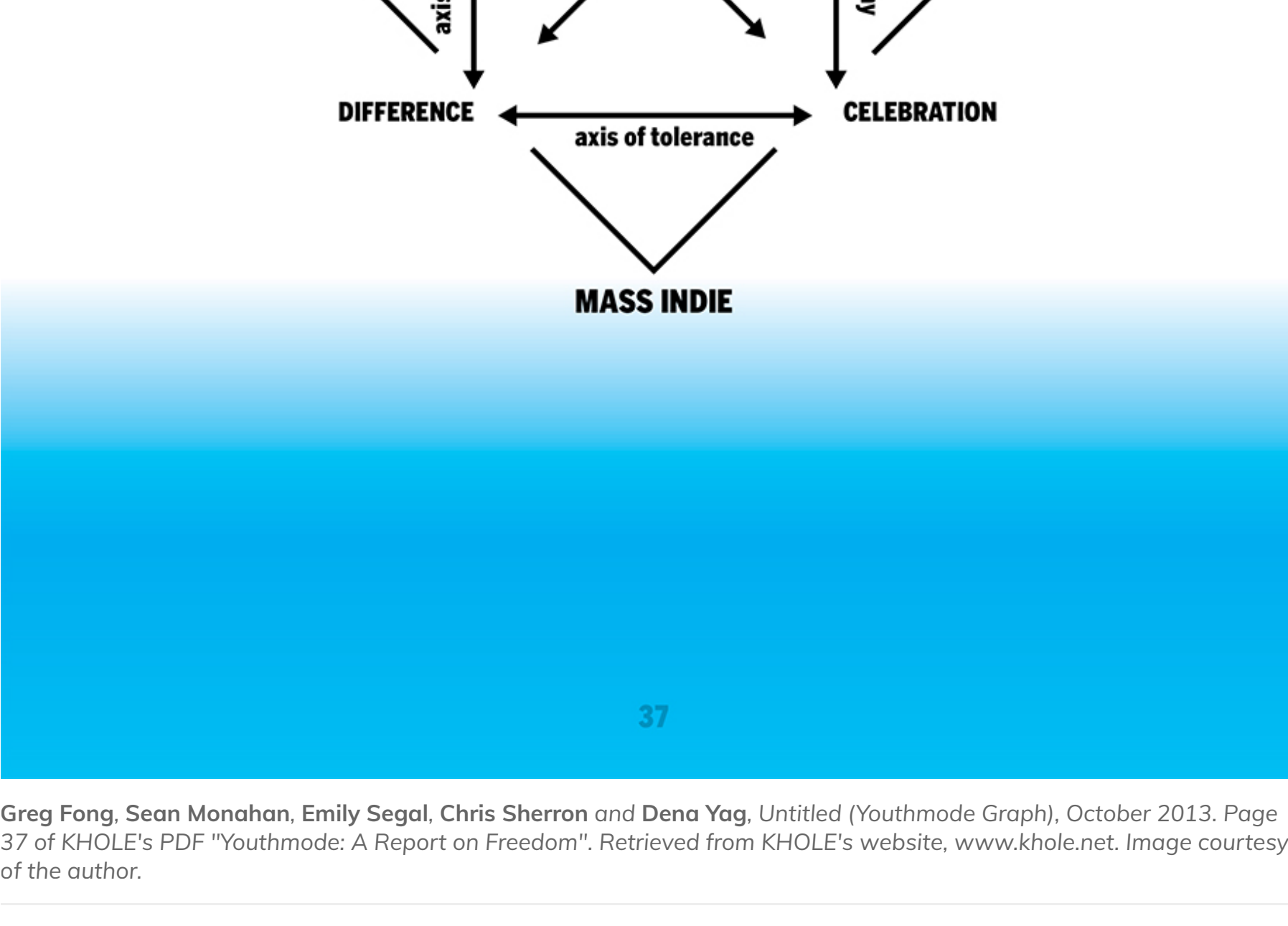
It’s worth remembering that Facebook as we know it didn’t exist until 2006, and organisations couldn’t create promotional pages until 2009. The platform didn’t take off until 2010, when Pallasvuo declared the relentless repetition of self-promotion online. ‘We no longer have roots, we have aeriels,’ Wark described of the internet’s explosion of online texts, ‘we no longer have origins, we have terminals’.^[7] Pallasvuo saw these aeriels and terminals as a condition of what German filmmaker and artist Hito Steyerl explained in 2013: the internet zombified, its apparitions bled offline, and their slipperiness further ripped the sign from signifier. This ‘circulationism’, which spurred Web 2.0’s dialectical irony and wherein Steyerl saw a channel for productive sociopolitical transgression, ‘is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible’.^[8]

Broskoski described the beginnings of this circulationism in 2010, when he observed attempts to make online surfing activity ‘more formal than the rest of the casual bookmarking that went on’, to ‘figure out where the line was between research and Curation (with a capital C)’.^[9] Dullaart added that, ‘the whole premise was that a work should be stumbled upon’.^[10] But as algorithms began to control the accelerated circulation of online texts, this stumbling became a simulated strategy for stroking the ‘suave vacuity’ Steyerl spoke of. Time slows when scrutinising a text explains Wark, so it follows that artists, curators and critics sought the impressive speed of circulation to escape criticism themselves, and the algorithm became an aesthetic tool for passive engagement.^[11]

Mark Fisher’s once-controversial essay “Exiting the vampire castle” argued against this fevered emergence of cancel culture and for the organisation of the commons around economic class instead of identity.^[12] Against the spirit of Fisher, Pallasvuo believed the answer to circulationism would be to cut through ‘all the other people trying to do the same thing’.^[13] “The same thing” being the individual urge to prove one’s virtue by placing their stake, big or small, in the commons.

Surfing the wave with your virtual friends wasn’t enough for Broskoski and Dullaart; fictitious valuation structures needed to be put into place to prove your virtue over that of others, but these structures became too obvious for Pallasvuo. An ‘online practice’ had to engage with a dialectical irony similar to virtue signalling, wherein the presence of a text is shielded from criticism (or cancel culture) because it is too ambiguous or unhinged. Put another way, dodging the critic as an artist, curator or critic means you become the critic first; you anticipate the criticism before you create, which imbues the work with a self-referentiality that is infinitely defensible—provided that the creator has enough bravura.

Unlike the abundance mindset of the early professional internet surfers, this scarcity mindset and its anxious lethargy was understood as a form of behavioural economics by KHOLE, an American group of artists and business strategists. Starting in 2010, the same year as WikiLeaks, the first pandemic flu in 40 years, the invention of Instagram and Mark Zuckerberg’s unsettling pronouncement by *Time* magazine as Person of The Year, the collective created open-access PDF reports that forecast relational trends and their potential impact on cultural texts. KHOLE’s work consolidated the art object and cultural criticism by disjoining the signs and signifiers of marketing in a way almost too obvious to be satire, but like many blog-based, online projects of their time, their work ended abruptly when Instagram appeared.



Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, Chris Sherran and Dena Yag, *Untitled (Youthmode Graph)*, October 2013. Page 37 of KHOLE’s PDF “Youthmode: A Report on Freedom”. Retrieved from KHOLE’s website, www.khole.net. Image courtesy of the author.

KHOLE’s *Youthmode: Report on Freedom* speculated a specific low and high culture collapse in 2013. ‘Mass indie culture mixe[d] weirdness with normalness until it level[ed] out... In this scenario, mastering difference is a way of neutralising threats and accruing status within a peer group’.^[14] This was arguably the strategy behind Pallasvuo’s attempt to cheat popular culture’s death of the ‘individual’ by becoming ‘unseen by design’. Though known for his video works, it’s @avocado_ibuprofen’s uncanny comics that have captured a generation of insecure millennials, who nihilistically ruminate on selfhood (particularly of the artist) under capitalism.

KHOLE’s work is the perfect example of late Web 2.0’s move away from an ironic to a post-ironic dialectic. In a piece for *Rhizome*, Huw Lemmey described the group’s work as walking a ‘fine line between blunt parody and genuine identification’. His article struggled with the temporal aspect of their work. First, they were ‘models to conceptualise and contextualise the effects of technological explosion’ and not ‘predictive or speculative visions of what is to come’.^[15] Then a form of consumer fiction, not science fiction, which was an ‘imaginative response to help us understand the present through speculative future scenarios’. As Wark said about the Australian culture wars of the 1990s ‘there has been a vast expansion of [texts] that have the ability to traverse space, from the telegraph to the internet. But what about time?’.^[16] All of this circulation, over mining and post-ironic pontification by the artist- curator-critic has become a collective effort to cheat time by exploding space.

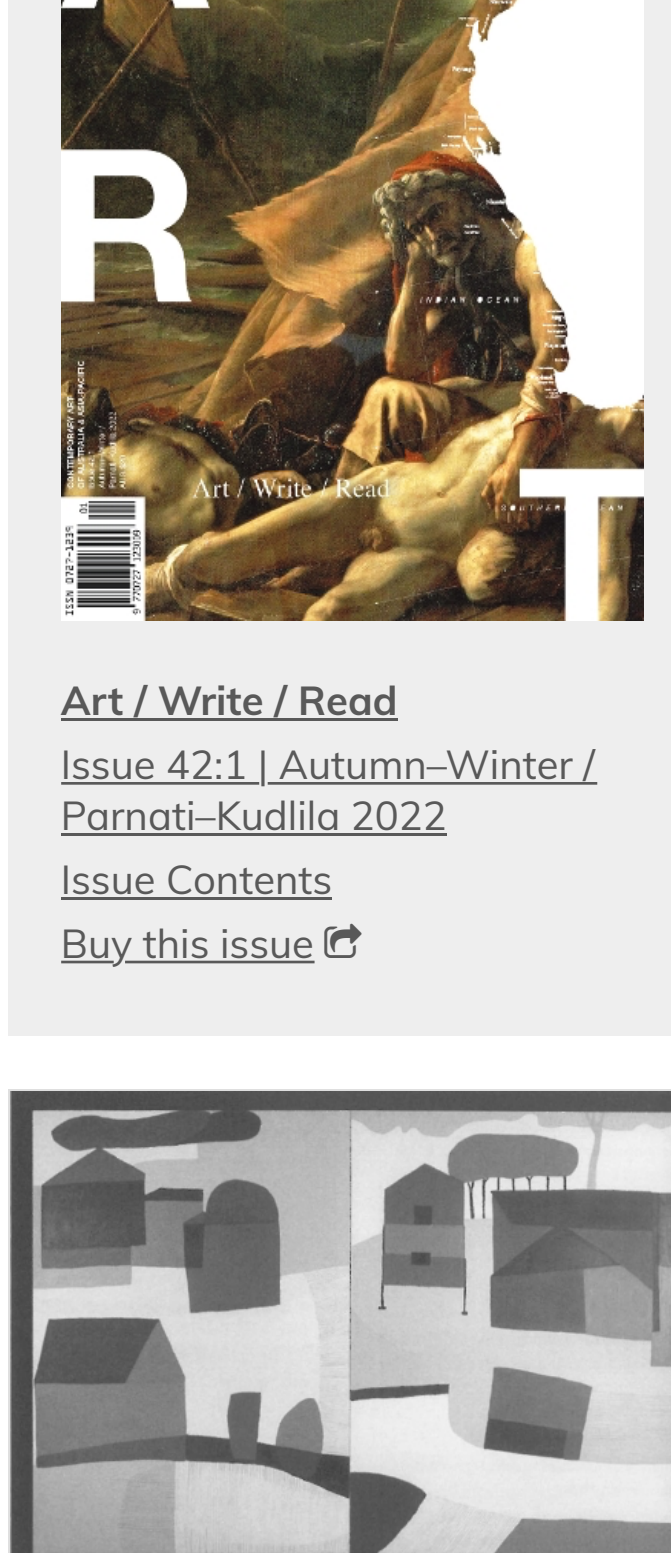
Pallasvuo joins a burgeoning group of these artists turned curators turned critics or blanketed ‘content creators’, spiteful of the institutions that dare to govern them while pathologically averse to the criticism they bestow, taking to networking platforms to soothe their insecurity through memesis and mimesis; memesis due to the texts’ constant death, and rebirth through speed; mimesis in that the ‘memetic’ character of the text perpetually re-represents the self within the virtual commons.

These references have become infinite, continually washing over us, and ultimately, as Dean Kissick explains in his *Downward Spiral* anniversary column, they are boring.^[17] At times, the post-ironic and newly sincere discourse around crypto, NFTs and the Metaverse as a new virtual commons is more delusional than wishful. The speed at which this dialogue continues to circulate is baffling. For Wark, the commons is only graspable through figures of speech, not a figure’s speech as is the case for memetic online texts. That is why it’s the agency and choices behind figures of speech that are important.^[18] It is time for artists, curators and critics to be clear and confident in their choice of both ‘figure’ and ‘speech’, to slow and scale down a text so that it doesn’t obliterate beyond meaning.

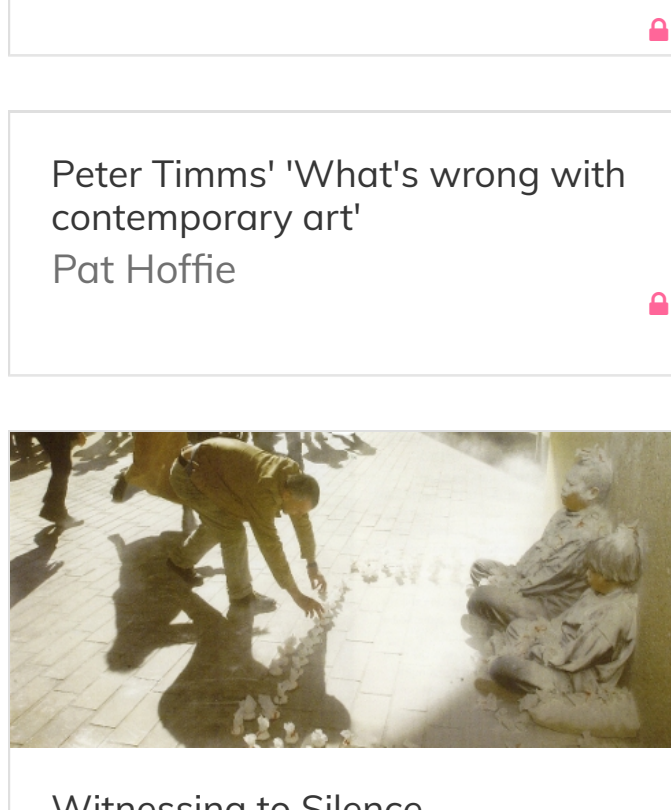
1. Jaakko Pallasvuo, “The Nausea of Uploading”, *Spike Art Magazine*, 9 May 2015. <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/nausea-uploading> accessed 1 December 2021.
2. McKenzie Wark, “The Virtual Republic: The Australian Culture Wars of the 1990s” (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), xvi.
3. Wark, xix.
4. Charles Broskoski and Constant Dullaart, “Surf Clubs (2003-),” *Spike Magazine* 70, (Winter 2021-2022): 38-47.
5. Günseli Yalcinkaya, “From 4chan to Theorygram: how catboys became a symbol for the post-left,” *Dazed*, 9 December 2021. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/54881/1/deleuzian-cat-boys-the-post-left-and-philosophical-shitposting> accessed January 2022.
6. Broskoski and Dullaart, 47.
7. Wark, xx.
8. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?”, e-flux, 49, (November 2013): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/> accessed December 2021.
9. Broskoski and Dullaart, 45.
10. Broskoski and Dullaart, 47.
11. Wark, xxi.
12. Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *openDemocracy*, 24 November 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/> accessed 1 December 2021.
13. Pallasvuo, “The Nausea of Uploading”.
14. Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, Chris Sherran and Dena Yag, KHOLE #4, *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, (October 2013): 15.
15. Huw Lemmey, “Mission Creep: K-Hole and Trend Forecasting as Creative Practice”, *Rhizome*, 25 March 2013. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/mar/26/mission-creep/> accessed 1 December 2021.
16. Wark, 28.
17. Dean Kissick, “The Downward Spiral: Five Years”, *Spike Art Magazine*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/downward-spiral-five-years>: accessed 1 January 2022.
18. Wark, 6.

Olivia Bennett is a Melbourne-based writer and critic.

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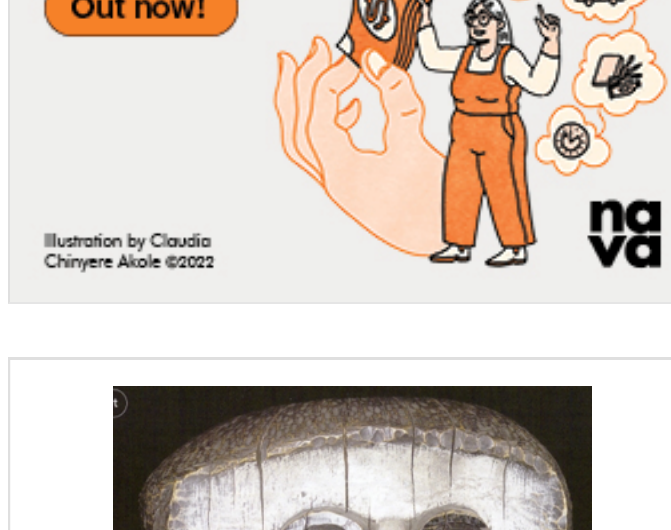


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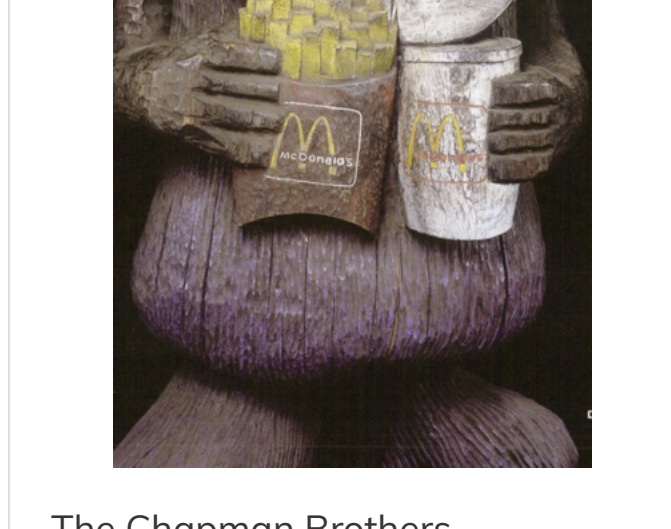


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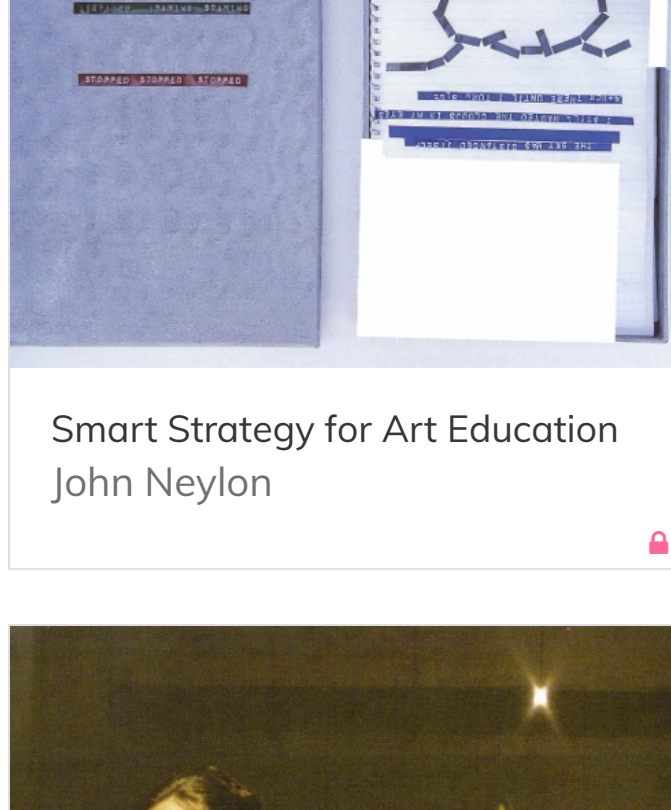


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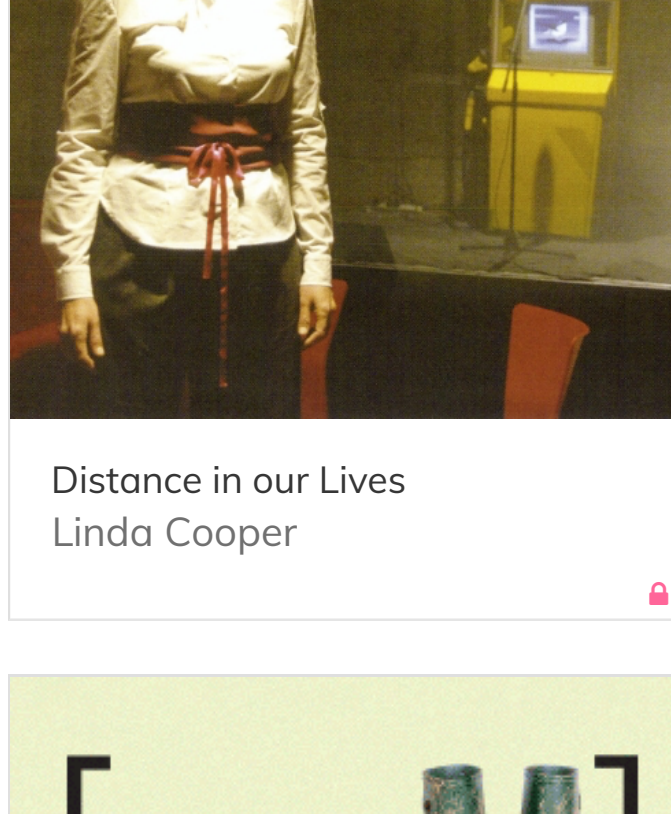


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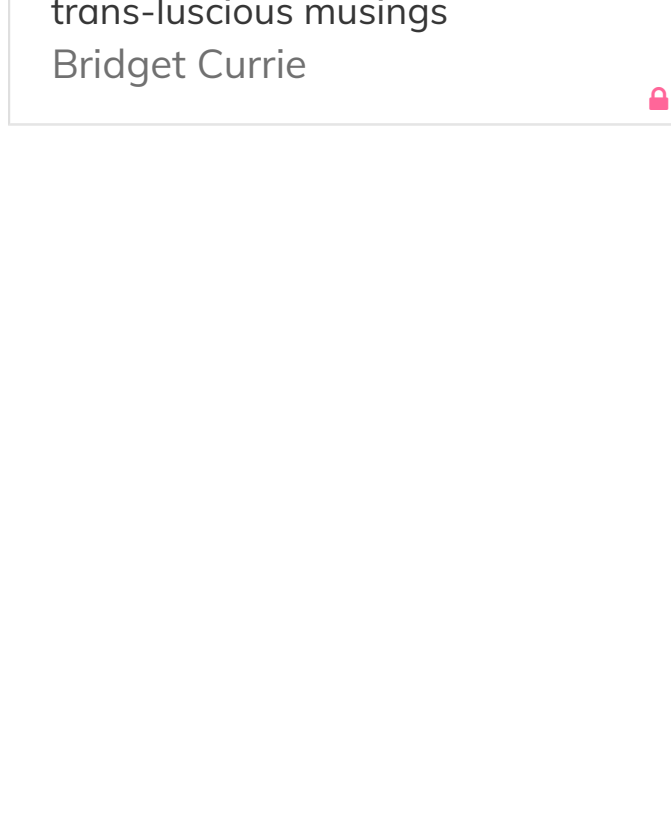


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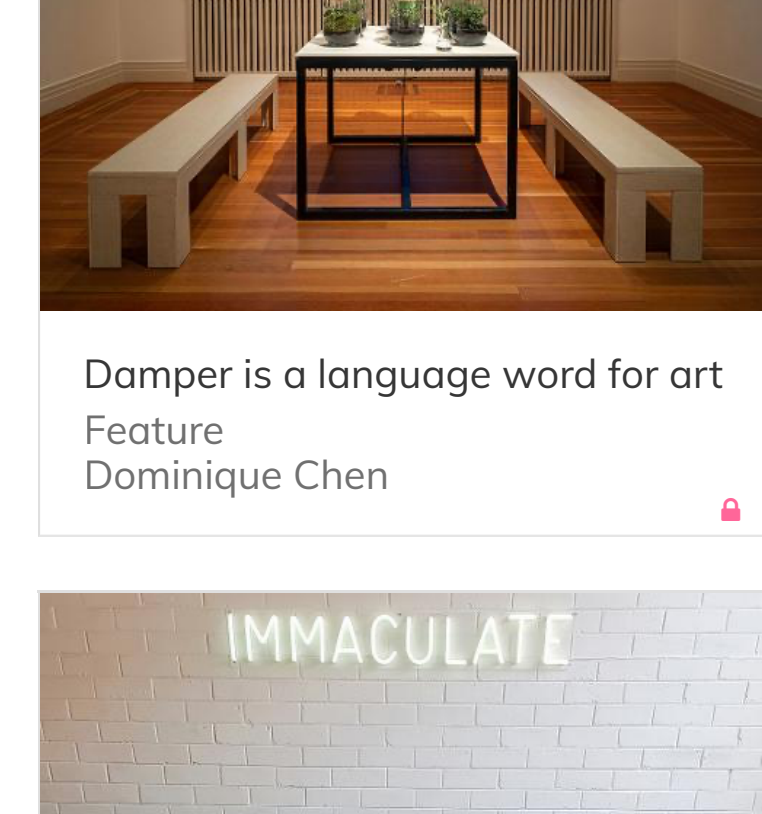


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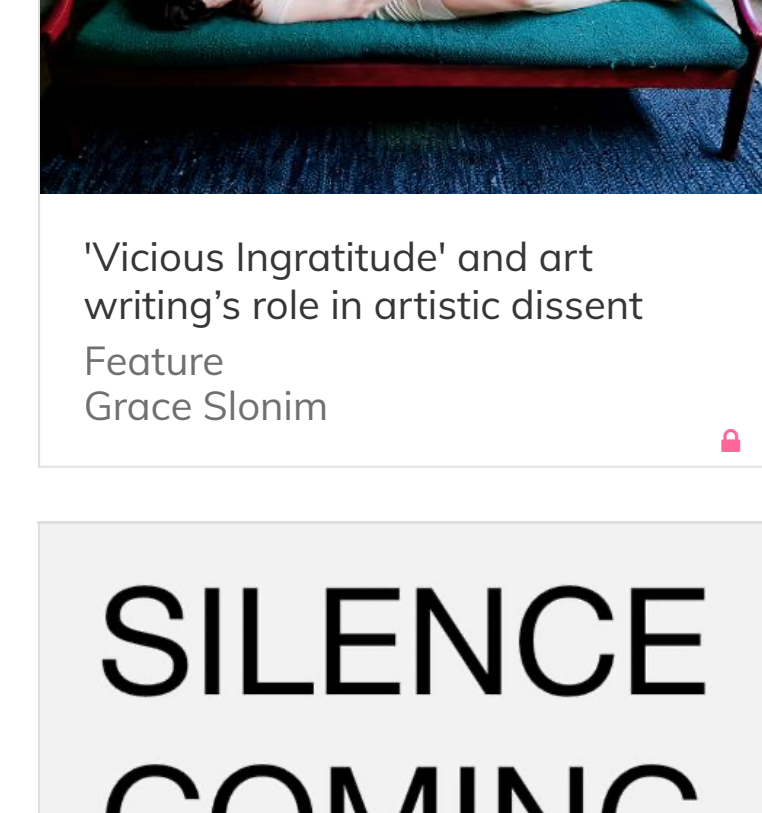


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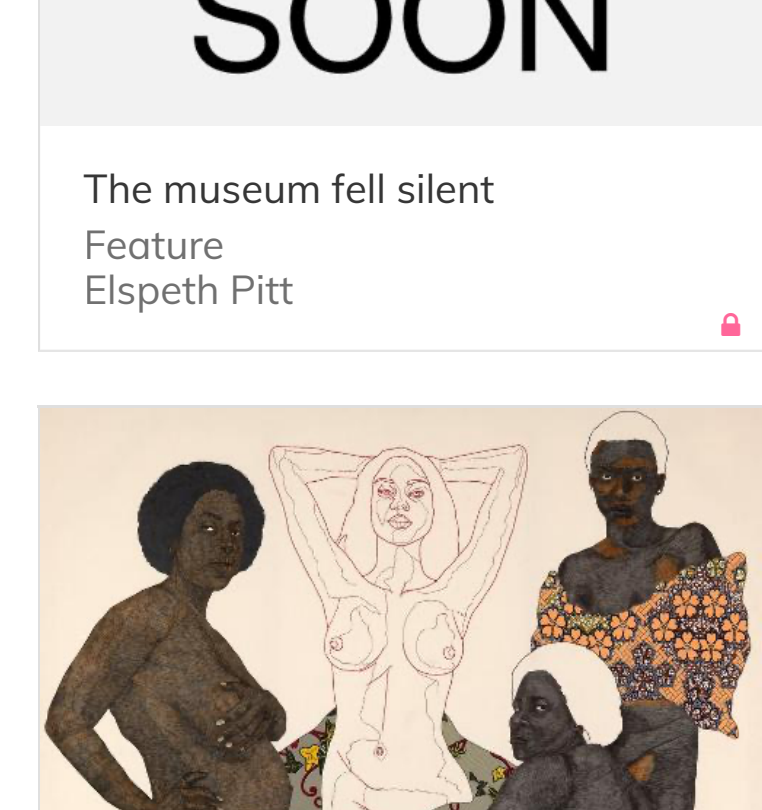
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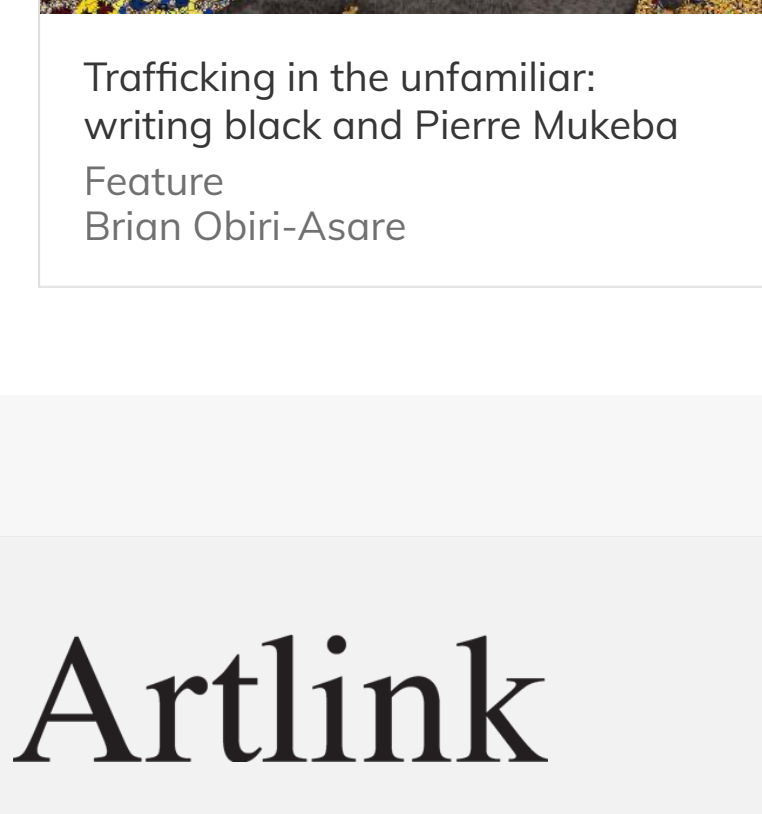
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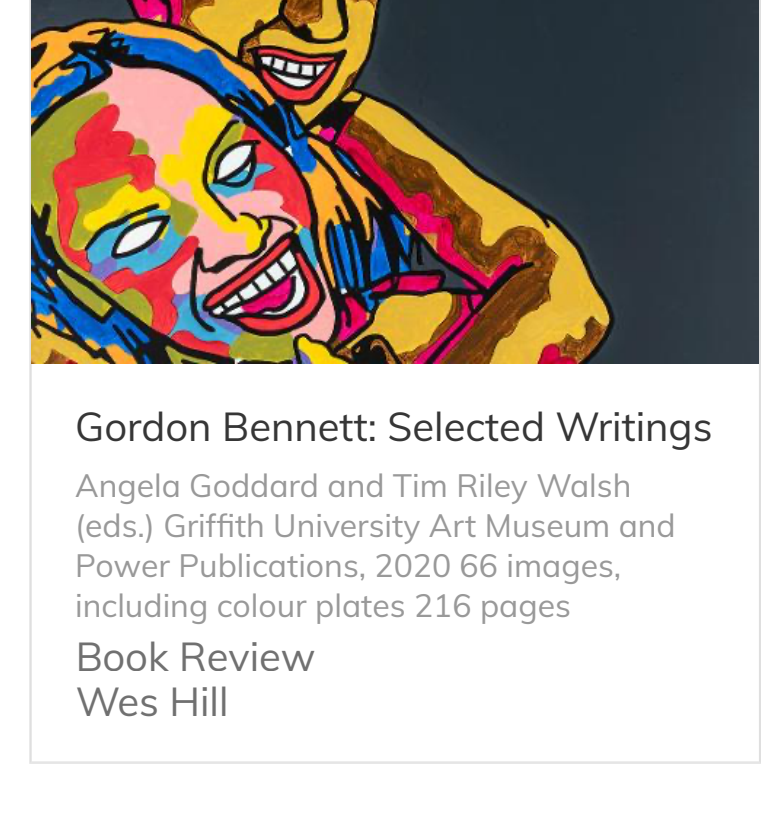
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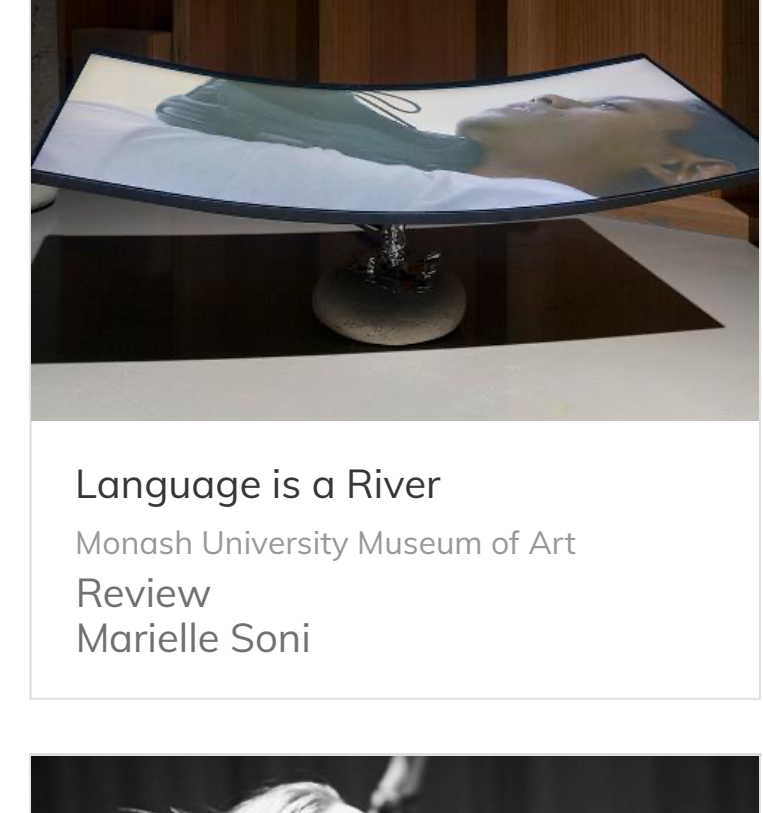
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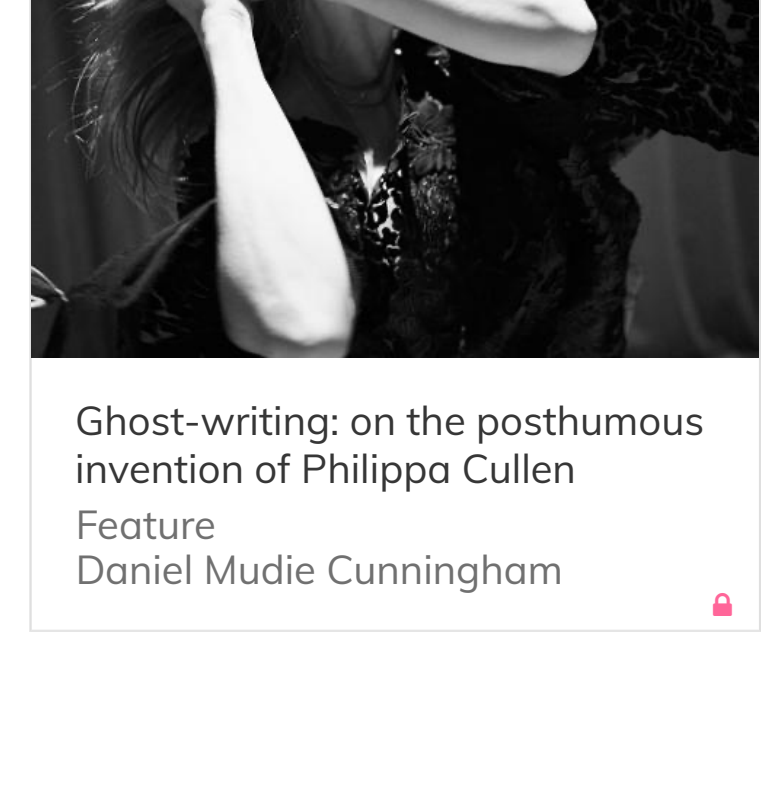
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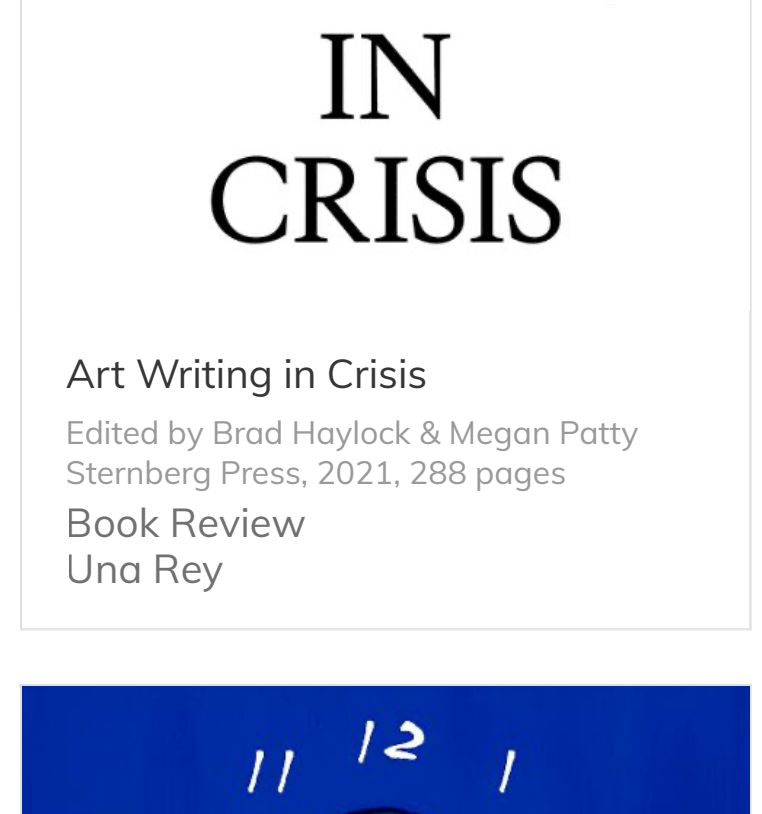
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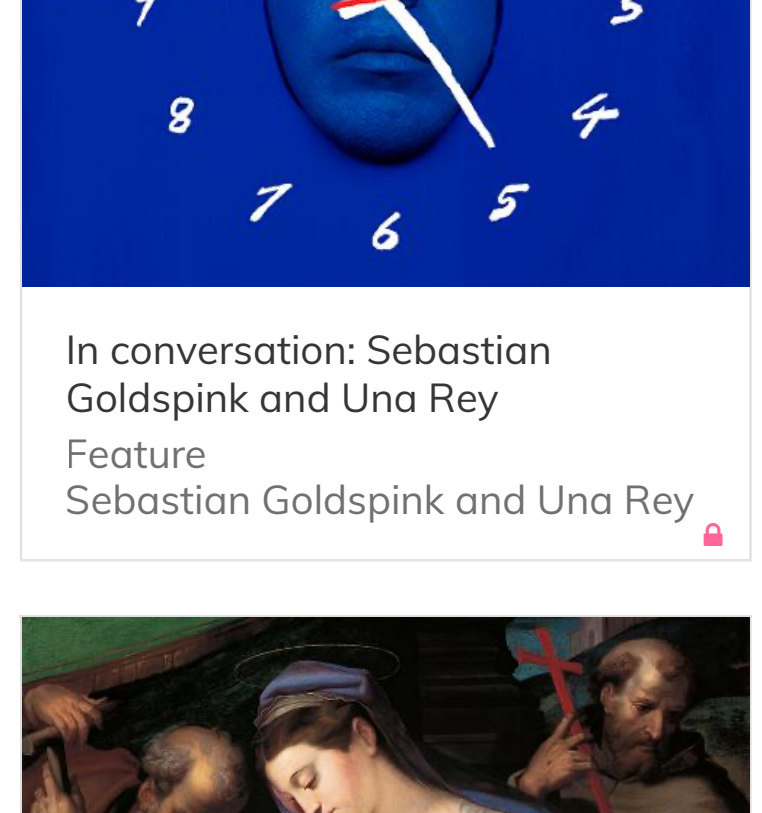
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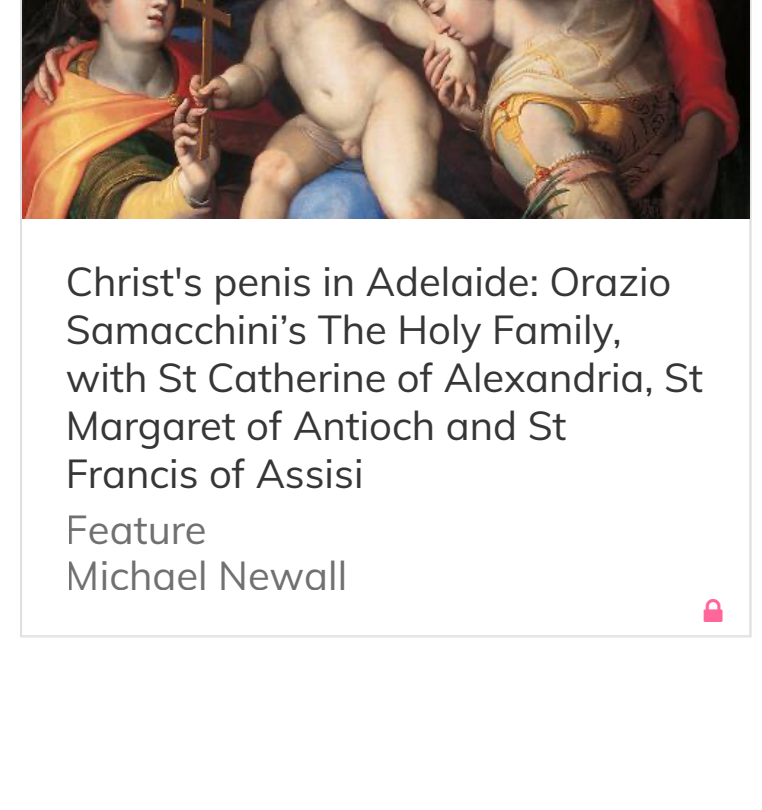
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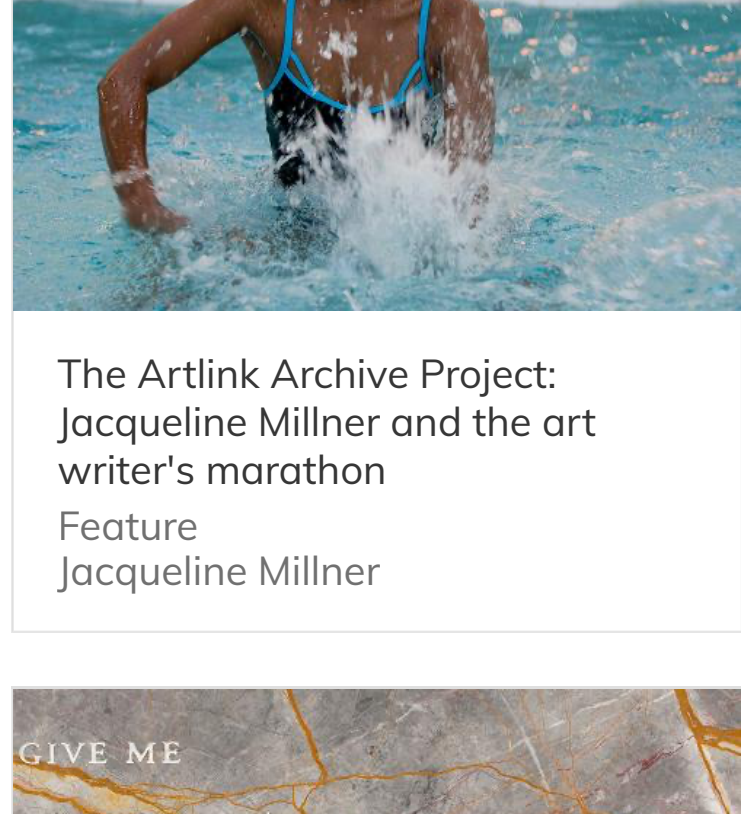
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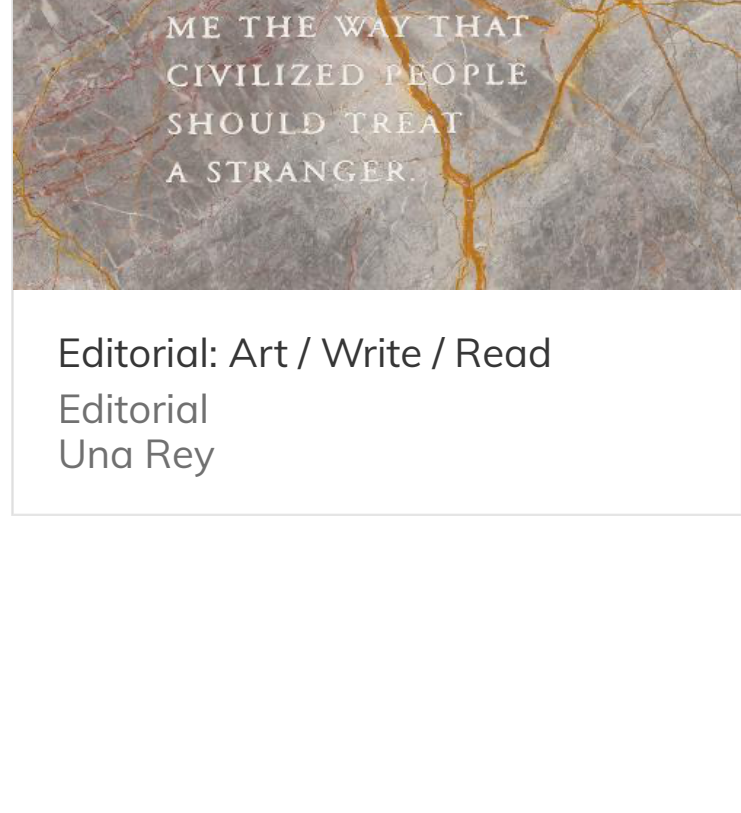
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