

NOISE ONE: *THINGS THAT AREN'T* (2016)

works that are more and less than the sum of their parts

James Payne

In the spring of 2011, I went on a short tour reading poetry. Earlier that week, my partner had left me. I arrived in Minneapolis for the first time to read at a punk house. Before the show, I went on a walk. At the riverbank, I wrote lines in a paperback copy of Ivy Compton-Burnett's 1925 novel *Pastors and Masters*, which I had purchased the previous day in Madison, Wisconsin, for a dollar.

Pastors and Masters's plot turns on one Nicholas Herrick, an aged schoolmaster and thwarted writer, who finds a manuscript of a short novel among a dead school don's belongings. Herrick filches the text and promptly lets the members of his small community know inspiration has finally found him - he's written his long-awaited novel after all. After his announcement, Herrick's friend, a don named Richard Bumpus, informs him that he too has a new work: a complete revision of a novel he had written as a young man. Bumpus had been dissatisfied with his early work and had given it to a friend, William Masson, to bury in a grave, never to be read by the public.

The two authors decide, like I was to do that night in Minneapolis, to give a reading of their respective new works. At the reading, Masson surprises the crowd by sharing that he had kept Bumpus's original manuscript, and is excited to compare the initial version to its new revision. When Bumpus and Herrick both begin their readings with the same first line as in the manuscript Masson now holds, it becomes clear that no new novel exists at all. Like all the projects left unrealized due to depression, immiseration, and a lack of social support, the two new novels were things that just weren't.

At that time, April 2011, mired as we were in our Great Recession malaise, an understandable nostalgia for the 1990s boom economy had taken the form of an ambient but insistent enthusiasm within the US media for the person of Bill Clinton. Endless paeans hawked a vision of the 90s seen through green-colored glasses. A White House press conference the prior December had even seen Barack Obama ceding the bully pulpit to Clinton in order to better sell the Obama Administration's tax plan. A year later, Clinton would be given credit, as the "Explainer-in-Chief" at the 2012 DNC, for sealing Obama's victory over Mitt Romney.

The poem I wrote that night by the riverbank was titled "Things Just Are(n't) They," and was later styled as "Things Just Aren't They." It later served as the title of my first book of poetry. The poem is about misremembering a political reality as the media narrative that has overtaken it, and instead of correcting the mistake, wishing one could escape into it fabrication:



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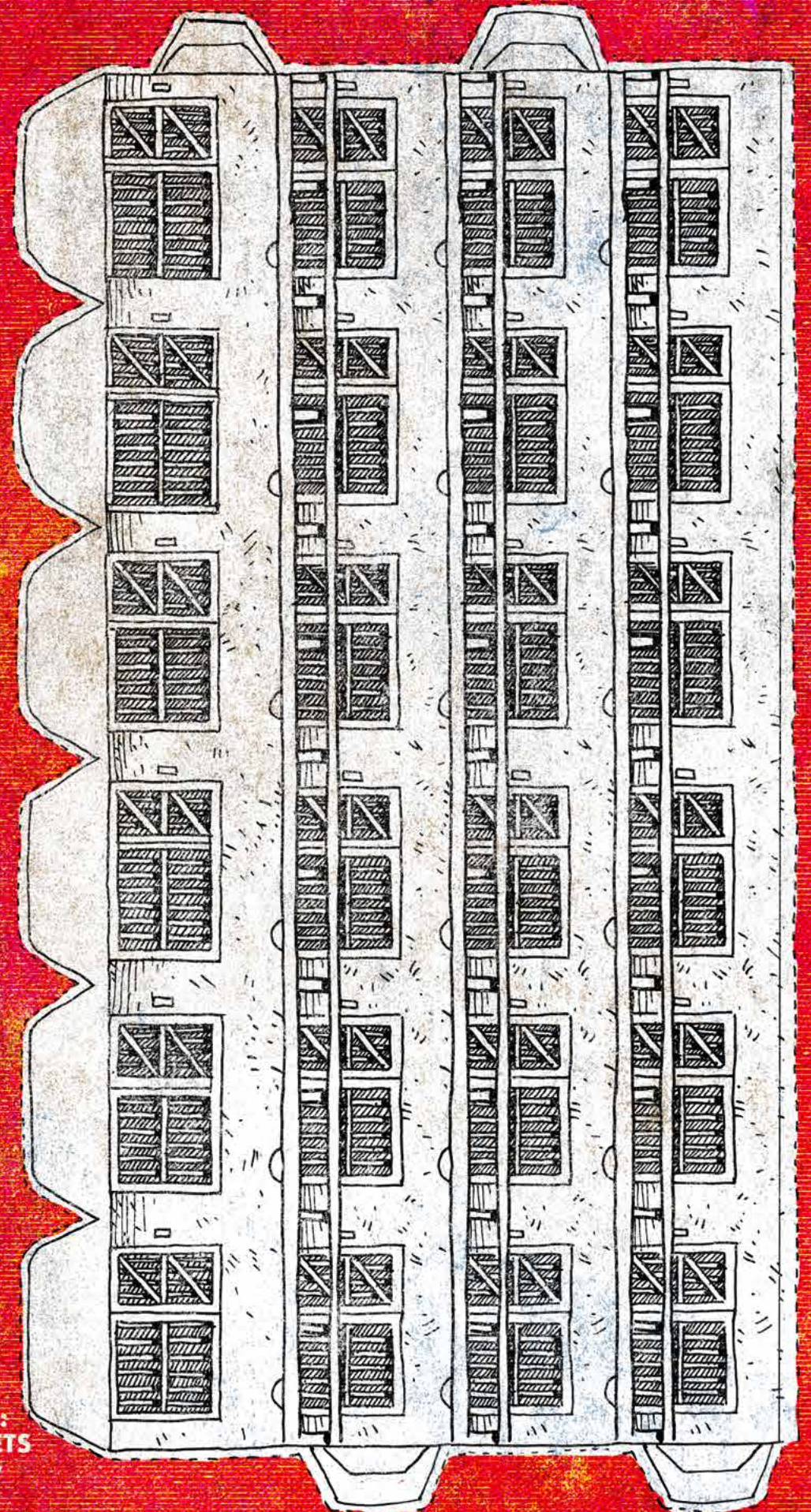
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Things Just Aren't They

Townsfolk talk about Bill Clinton
like they reminisce on their parents before the divorce.

Not who they were as the proceedings drew to a close
nor in the period thereafter, which they claim not to know.

Not in the shining lights of Oklahoma City,
Theodore Kaczynski, but in a selective, collective memory

corroborated by the skyscrapers ran aground
that only stay on to recall the *fin-de-siècle* matrimony of this town.

Like the Hyatt's sign, it's so childhood vacation:
airport fonts, early-nineties neon

the color of the Christmas we got the PlayStation,
Sega CD, 32X, or Nintendo 64,

I'm not sure which was which,
but those consoles were all before.

If only our coffers were full again—
just for a redesign. I can't stand the pastels
in this personal-is-political-era skyline.

I want it to look outside of my time;
I want out of *my*.



In retrospect, the poem was less about Bill Clinton and Alan Greenspan's bubble seen through the Great Recession, than it was about my own break-up, written through my parents' divorce in the 1990s. A break-up in any long-term relationship can be a psychic cleaving. It's not just adapting to a new social reality when your emotions haven't transitioned in real time, it's also the destabilizing effect it exerts on your conception of your own lived past. As a novel crescendos to its ending, it re-inscribes layers of new meaning onto its beginning. First-person protagonists turn out to be unreliable narrators. When this happens internally during a break-up, on your own unreliable lived experience, the process can seem close to enduring a psychotic break, a crack-up. Who are you if you aren't who you were? Who will you be if you do not know who you are now?

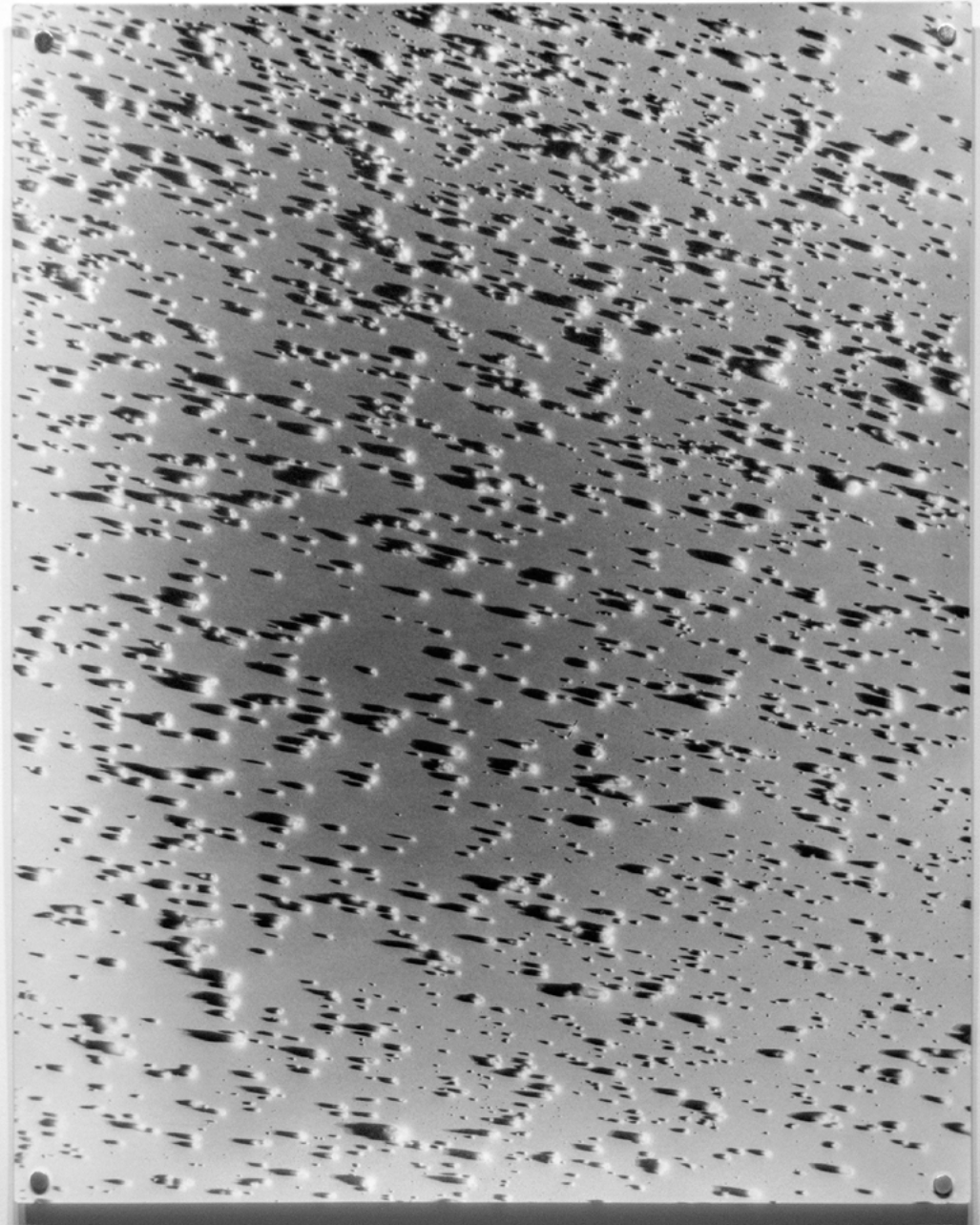
In 2008, reality's torrid break-up with the American Dream, the door-slamming close on the American Century, ripped through our body politic in much the same way. And like many unhealthy relationships, it was only at the end that its flawed totality finally became clear to the majority of those involved. If the artificial economic boom of the 1990s had depended on welfare reform, mass incarceration, privatizing public assets, outsourcing US manufacturing, deregulating media conglomerates, repealing Glass-Steagall, the manic tech bubble, and the failure of international state Communism under the military and economic pressure of the West - then why should we hold it in such esteem? If we were actually engineering our misery then, why am I nostalgic about it now?

Seeming paradoxes like this litter our politics. They are reflected formally in our artwork because it's our remarkable social ability to withstand and internalize cognitive dissonance that allows our broken social formation to move forward. We're intrigued by *things that aren't* because they reflect the contradictions of our lives *and* show us a way out. The contradictions are glaring. Even as we imprison a higher percentage of ourselves than any other nation, we insist Americans are exceptionally free. Even as neo-liberalism has torn us asunder, we recuperate its Clintonian past as positive.

The pragmatic centrist would quip, quoting from F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up," that the "...test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to

hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." We're repeatedly asked by the centrist technocratic overseers of Capitalist Realism to live with - as a sign of a first-rate intelligence - both sides of their paradoxes, simultaneously. Paradoxes, like, as they say, that fascism and anti-fascism are equally bad. That Sanderism and Trumpism are two sides of the same coin. That monuments to the Confederacy are morally equivalent to monuments to Marx. That a figure like Mark Lilla, who says Black Lives Matter activists use "Mau-Mau tactics" is, nevertheless, a liberal. These impossible logical formulations - impossible to hold in the mind at the same time - are passed on as conventional wisdom to allow our societal bender to proceed unabated. However, the context of Fitzgerald's remark, that he is describing about a depressive's coping mechanism, that one must learn to live with a schizophrenic cognitive dissonance to maintain a semblance of sanity, is seldom acknowledged. Fitzgerald's next sentence is: "One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." But Fitzgerald could not. The point of his essay is that he cracked-up under this regime.

The post-recession crack-up can be seen in trends in US artwork, even with formal works primarily concerned with process and exploring mediums. The ubiquity of a tricky optics-oriented still-life photography in this period is one example. Another is the Post-Internet sensibility that favored either sculptural objects that looked like they had been digitally manipulated but weren't, or had been digitally manipulated but looked as if they hadn't. Two photographers who first came to awareness in the 1980s and prefigured this turn were resurrected in these years: Barbara Kasten, whose dazzling in-camera effects seem to the Photoshop-age viewer to be obviously digital, but aren't, and Jan Groover's large-format, platinum prints that approximate the effect a cloying, sentimental Instagram filter gives a photo. In *Things That Aren't*, NOISE's first exhibition, Timothy Briner (b.1981; Indiana, US) takes up a similar tack. At first look, one of Briner's photographs looks like a Vija Celmins's black and white pencil drawing of rocks on a beach. But then it could also be a photograph of a drawing. Or a photograph of a piece of paper that had been repeatedly stabbed. Or of a drawing of that. It could also be a digital print of a digital image. Still, it could be a photograph of a printed-out digital image - it's endless. At a certain point, the "abstraction" is no longer in what's pictured,



but in our unstable categorizations of the real and unreal, of the is and is not. Briner's ambiguity of process draws us into a netherworld we can't perceptually navigate.

The other distinctive tendency in photography in the past decade is an overreliance on repeating objects on flat, bright backgrounds. This style, which Everything is Collective occasionally utilizes, has pervaded commercial photography. Both tendencies, the mix of the digital and the real to trick and represent impossibility; and that of a flat, graphic repetition; speak to the psychological and social dead end we find ourselves in. The first intimates the slippage between the lives we lead on social media and the oppression we experience in real life. In real life, we retain our interior Internet selves, and the endless understanding we find there: "it me," "same," "tfw," "relatable," but are forced to live, undercover, among an outmoded, aged, economically stratified social hierarchy that brutalizes and others us. But on the Internet, our URL selves are similarly constrained by remnants of IRL society that colonized our young minds in the 1990s & 2000s with its noxious sexism, racism, classism, etc. Flat repetition, on the other hand, is a formal metaphor for our flattened lives under Capitalist Realism, which are more like 2-D paper representations of being human, than lives in all their 3-D volumetric complexity. We're laid out, by social type, and not allowed to develop in an economy that doesn't allow us to engage a career, buy a house, have a family, or take a vacation.

Even if they don't point toward paradox, all representations are already *things that aren't*. That's true whether it's a painting of a pipe, a novel of a schoolmaster's frustrations, a name taken upon marriage, a political narrative that claims to explain the past, or a poem that limns those disjunctions. Representations weakly point at the *thing that is*, while also becoming a new *thing that is* separate from what they ostensibly describe. And the afterlife of the representation, once it is delaminated from the thing it describes, informs real things that will be. Compton-Burnett's novel informs this essay and the media narrative of the 1990s informs the fevered split between Democrats over the direction of their party. The failure of a long-term relationship overshadows all else in its retrospective retelling and has an anxious influence on the course of future relationships. The stories we tell ourselves become the stories we live, and live to tell ourselves again. In this way, *things that aren't* do, in fact, become

things that are. That is why one must reject the endless injunction that utopias are simply “no places,” places that cannot and will never be. Nothing that can be imagined and put into play in representation remains out of the realm of possibility, not really.

When Richard Spencer describes the Alt-Right as being “memed into existence,” he is precisely correct. So, too, were Health Goth, Norm Core, Sea Punk, the Sanders campaign, and half of my vocabulary, from “binch” to “volcel” to “doggo.” Our reality is now riddled with online memes. The cultural cycle begins in image-sharing communities, where images of the future are built, images of *things that aren’t*, but will be. The social democratic revolution in the US will either be catalyzed through representations put into actions, or it will not happen, regardless of what Fredrik deBoer says. It’s incumbent on us to keep producing *things that aren’t*, to keep writing new poems overtop old books, and curating new exhibitions, or we will be like Herrick, reading lines from a book that’s already been written, sure to die without having intervened in culture, soothing ourselves with unreliable narratives of better days we never experienced.

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