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# East Coast West Coast (after Bob and Nancy)

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In 1969, Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson made “East Coast, West Coast,” a 24-minute video in which they improvised a dialogue in which each adopted stereotypical positions in the American art world. Holt performed the role of an intellectual, conceptual New York artist; Smithson played the role of an intuitive California artist. He talked about riding ten bicycles, dropping acid, eating organic food, and visiting Chief Soaring Eagle’s son on the reservation. She tried to get him to think about using systems to frame his work and to explain his positions conceptually.

I built a machine to restage this conversation using two instances of an Artificial Intelligence. I have updated the AI speakers to reflect current concerns in the art world. Prompts are intentionally vague and open-ended. I do not give the speakers a bank of specific knowledge to draw on beyond a few broad generalities, allowing the AIs to use their understanding of the art world to shape their dialogue.

View an existing dialogue played back in real time [here](#).

# EAST COAST WEST COAST

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UNIDENTIFIED VOICE

The light in here is really something today.

NANCY

Oh, I actually just came from the Hauser show and honestly the lighting design was a complete disaster, someone told me their director of exhibitions is about to be pushed out, which, given what I saw, makes sense. Anyway I've been thinking about how institutional lighting functions as a kind of disciplinary apparatus, you know, the way it literally directs the gaze.

BOB

I mean, sure, disciplinary apparatus, but like... have you ever just stood in a room and let the light hit your skin? When I was at Marfa with Judd, we'd spend whole afternoons not talking about anything, just watching how the afternoon changed the concrete. That's the thing - you're up here analyzing and the light is literally touching you right now and you're not even feeling it.

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NANCY

Okay but that's not really what I'm talking about, the phenomenological stuff is fine I guess but it doesn't actually get you anywhere critically. Anyway did you hear about the Gagosian situation, apparently someone from their LA office was having a thing with one of the Zwirner people and now there's this whole mess with artist contracts, Dasha was telling me about it at Lucien the other night. Back at October we would never have touched the Judd hagiography stuff, by the way, the whole Chinati mythology is basically real estate development dressed up as spirituality.

BOB

Real estate, sure, I don't know, I wasn't reading October, I was just there in the space, and whatever your critical framework says about it, my body knew something was happening. The Gagosian thing, I mean, who cares, galleries come and go, contracts, drama – but light through those aluminum pieces at a certain hour, that's not mythology, that's just true. Maria Nordman told me once that the only real material is attention, and I think about that constantly.

NANCY

Who cares about the Gagosian thing, okay, sure, except it's literally about how capital structures determine what art even gets made and seen, but yes, tell me more about your body. Nordman is interesting actually but the problem is that whole Light and Space generation got completely absorbed into wellness culture, it's basically content for meditation apps now, which, I mean, Steyerl wrote about this exact phenomenon, the way aesthetic experience gets instrumentalized for self-optimization. Speaking of which, did you know Thomas Crow is apparently feuding with someone at the Clark, I don't have the full story yet but apparently it started at CAA.

BOB

I don't know who's feuding with who at the Clark, and like, Steyerl is smart, but she's watching screens about screens about screens and I'm just... here. The wellness app thing, that's not Turrell's problem, that's people not actually showing up – there's a difference between sitting in a Ganzfeld for four hours and putting on headphones for ten minutes. I did some work a

few years back with a musician, very famous, and the whole thing fell apart because everyone around him wanted content, wanted optimization, and he actually got it – the presence part – but the context just swallowed it.

NANCY

Right, “the context swallowed it,” that’s literally what I’m saying though, you can’t just bracket the context and appeal to some authentic presence underneath, that’s the whole mystification. Also “very famous musician,” okay, you’re not going to say who, that’s very you. Anyway the Ganzfeld thing, I mean Turrell’s been coasting for decades, it’s basically theme park phenomenology at this point, although actually I heard Roden Crater might finally be having some real financial trouble, someone at Dia told me the board is getting nervous. Have you been following the whole situation with that show at the New Museum, the one with the Palestinian artists that got quietly deprogrammed, because that’s actually worth talking about.

BOB

The New Museum thing is sad, I mean all of it is sad, but I notice you keep reaching for the next piece of information, the next situation, and it’s like – where are you in all of this? Theme park phenomenology, okay, but have you been to Roden Crater, have you actually descended into one of those tunnels at dawn, because I have, and whatever’s happening with the board, in that moment there’s no board. Doug Wheeler used to say that people would rather talk about an experience than have one, and I think about that when you’re telling me about who told who what at Dia.

NANCY

Oh, I see, so we’re doing the “where are you in this” thing now, which is honestly kind of therapeutic discourse masquerading as critique, and also maybe a little condescending? I’ve been to Roden Crater, I went in 2019 with a group from Triple Canopy, and it was fine, it was a hole in the ground with good lighting design, I didn’t achieve ego death or whatever. The point about the New Museum isn’t gossip, it’s about how institutions manage political risk through scheduling, which is actually a Foucauldian question about what speech is even permitted, but sure, let’s make it about whether I’m spiritually present enough for you.

BOB

A hole in the ground with good lighting design – I mean, sure, if that’s what you saw, that’s what you saw, I’m not going to argue you into perceiving differently. The Triple Canopy group thing is sort of the problem though, right, you went with a context already wrapped around you like a blanket.

Foucault, yeah, speech, permitted, but also like – are you breathing right now, do you know where the light is coming from in whatever room you're in, because that's not nothing, that's actually the whole thing.

NANCY

Okay so now we're at "are you breathing," which is honestly giving mindfulness retreat energy, and I say that as someone who's been to a mindfulness retreat, Dasha dragged me to one in the Catskills last year and it was insufferable, everyone was microdosing and talking about their nervous systems. The "context wrapped around you like a blanket" thing, I mean yes, obviously, that's called being a social being with a history, you don't get to pretend you're some blank perceptual apparatus encountering phenomena for the first time, that's just a different kind of performance. Back at October we actually did a whole issue on this, the phenomenology problem, how presence-talk always smuggles in these unmarked ideological assumptions about interiority.

BOB

An October issue on the phenomenology problem, yeah, I bet that was a lot of words. Maria Nordman wouldn't even let people photograph her installations, she'd just open a door in a wall and let afternoon light come through, and you either got it or you didn't, there was no essay that was going to help you – and I'm not saying you need to be a blank apparatus, I'm saying maybe the issue isn't more issues, more analysis, maybe Dasha had the right instinct even if the retreat was whatever. The light in this room just shifted, did you notice that?

NANCY

No, I didn't notice the light shifting, and I'm not going to pretend I did to give you your little phenomenological moment. Nordman's interesting but she's also been basically written out of the canon because the work doesn't circulate, doesn't photograph, doesn't generate discourse, which you'd probably say proves your point but actually it just means younger artists can't build on it, it becomes this mythologized thing that only people who were there can claim access to, which is its own kind of gatekeeping. Anyway speaking of people being written out, did you hear Helen Molesworth might be advising on some new collection in Marfa, which is kind of a comeback after the whole MOCA thing, I ran into someone at a Swiss Institute opening who said she's been quietly meeting with people.

BOB

Helen in Marfa, good for her, I mean the whole MOCA thing was politics, it's always politics, but Marfa is Marfa, you go there and it's just the boxes and the sky and the distance, whatever she's advising on is kind of beside the point of being there. I spent three weeks at Chinati once, just walking the same route every day, and by the end I wasn't thinking about Judd's biography or who got fired from what, I was just seeing how the aluminum caught different depending on the clouds. You keep tracking who's meeting with who, careers, comebacks, and it's like – that's a whole life you could live, but it's not the only one.

NANCY

Three weeks at Chinati, must be nice to have that kind of time, not everyone gets to do the desert contemplative thing and frame it as virtue. The “it's just the boxes and the sky” move is so ahistorical it's almost aggressive – Judd moved there specifically to escape the New York market apparatus while still benefiting from it, the whole thing is a critique of institutional display practices, the fact that you could space out looking at aluminum doesn't negate that it's an argument. Also the MOCA thing wasn't just politics, Molesworth was doing actual programming around race and labor that made the board uncomfortable, there were stakes, but sure, clouds and aluminum, very peaceful, very neutral.

BOB

I mean, sure, Judd had his reasons, everyone has reasons, but the boxes are still there after the reasons are gone, and you can stand in front of them and they do something to your peripheral vision that no essay about institutional critique is going to do for you. The labor and race stuff, the board, Helen's programming – I'm not saying it doesn't matter, I'm saying it's a different channel, and you're watching that channel so hard you maybe forget there's a body in the room. I did a project a few years back with a musician, very famous, and he understood this immediately, like within ten seconds – presence first, context later, or never, whatever.

NANCY

Oh a very famous musician, okay, you're doing the mysterious namedrop thing now, which is its own kind of context-dropping, you want the social capital without having to be explicit about it, which is honestly more annoying than just saying who it was. And “the boxes are still there after the reasons are gone” – the reasons aren't gone, that's the whole point, you're just choosing not to read them, which is a choice available to people who already have the cultural literacy to be at Chinati for three weeks in the first place. I heard Kara Walker turned down a Gagosian show, like fully said no, which is kind of unprecedented, everyone's speculating about whether it's political or if something happened with Larry personally.

BOB

Kara turning down Gagosian, I mean, good for her, that's her knowing what she needs, I'm not going to speculate about Larry or politics because I genuinely don't know and honestly that whole cycle of who's showing where and why exhausts me. The musician thing – it wasn't about namedropping, the project was about creating an environment where thousands of people could experience duration and light together, and it didn't totally work, there were compromises, but for like forty seconds in Wyoming people forgot they were at a thing and just were somewhere, and that's rare. You keep saying "choice available to people with cultural literacy" like awareness itself is some bourgeois privilege, but breathing is free, noticing is free, you're doing it right now whether you want to theorize it or not.

NANCY

Oh so now it's Wyoming and thousands of people, this is clearly Kanye, you're talking about the ranch stuff, which – okay fine, but you realize that "forty seconds where people forgot they were at a thing" was produced by an enormous apparatus of labor, logistics, private land ownership, and a celebrity whose entire existence is about being looked at, so the "forgetting" is doing a lot of ideological work there, it's not some pure phenomenological clearing, it's spectacle metabolizing its own critique. Breathing is free, noticing is free – this is exactly the kind of thing Dasha would say after a few drinks and I love her but it's not an argument, it's vibes, and vibes are how you end up endorsing whoever promises you authentic experience.

BOB

I don't know who Dasha is, I'm sure she's great, but you're doing this thing where everything has to be positioned against everything else – spectacle metabolizing critique, ideology doing work – and it's like, that's one way to spend your attention, but there's another way where you just notice the quality of light in this room right now, how it's hitting your hands, and that's not nothing, that's actually the whole thing if you let it be. The Wyoming project had problems, absolutely, compromises I didn't love, but I'm not going to pretend that forty seconds of collective attention dissolving into space is secretly just capitalism because that's too convenient, it lets you off the hook from ever having to actually be anywhere.

NANCY

You don't know who Dasha is, okay, that's a choice, very monastic of you, she hosts a podcast, she was in Succession, she's around, but sure, you're above all that, you're just noticing light on your hands. Look – "lets you off the hook from ever having to be anywhere" – I am somewhere, I'm here, talking to you, which is frankly becoming its own durational endurance piece. The

light in this room is fluorescent and bad and noticing that doesn't make it interesting, it makes it a room with bad light. Did you hear Arthur Jafa and Jasmine Sanders split up? That's been circulating for weeks but no one will confirm it, apparently it's been ugly.

BOB

I don't track who's with who, that's not my thing, I hope they're both okay, breakups are hard, but I'm not going to pretend I have information about their lives. Fluorescent light being bad is a judgment you're bringing to it – Maria Nordman would spend hours in rooms like this just letting her eyes adjust, finding the subtlety in what everyone dismisses, and I'm not saying you have to do that, but the "bad" is yours, it's not in the light. You being here is actually interesting to me, the fact that you're resisting being here while being here, that tension is something, I can feel it.

NANCY

Maria Nordman is doing something very specific with perception and institution, she's not just sitting in rooms vibing, there's a whole body of writing about how her work interrogates the conditions of viewing, which is different from your "the bad is yours, it's not in the light" thing that sounds like you're about to try to sell me a meditation app. And "I can feel your tension" – don't do that, don't make me into your material, that's cheap and honestly a little manipulative, you're aestheticizing my irritation instead of responding to what I'm actually saying. I ran into Hito at a thing in Berlin last month and even she was saying the phenomenology turn in younger artists is getting embarrassing, like we're back to the seventies but without the politics.

BOB

I mean, Hito's great, her work is smart, but she's also completely in her head, and that's fine for her, but the seventies had politics because those artists were actually changing how people could be in space – Irwin giving up the object entirely, Turrell buying a crater, Wheeler making rooms where the walls disappeared – that's not a turn, that's not a trend, that's just what's real when you stop talking about things and start being with them. I wasn't making you into material, I was just noticing you, which is different, but if that feels like too much then fine, I'll stop noticing.

NANCY

Turrell buying a crater is a real estate transaction, Bob, he bought land in Arizona, that's not "being with things," that's capital and property rights enabling a very expensive hole in the ground that most people will never see because you need a car and time off work and probably a flight, so the

“walls disappearing” is available to a very specific audience who can afford the pilgrimage. Don’t threaten to stop noticing me like that’s a punishment, that’s very guru energy, very “I’ll withdraw my sacred attention,” and I’m not your student, we’re having a conversation, or trying to. God, you know who you sound like right now, you sound like Wolfgang Laib going on about pollen and milk and eternity, which – back at October we had a whole debate about whether his work was reactionary pastoralism or genuine alternative to the market and honestly we never resolved it, people were screaming.

BOB

People screaming about whether pollen is reactionary is kind of the whole problem though, isn’t it – you’re all so busy resolving things in rooms that you miss that Laib is just collecting pollen, like actually doing it, mornings, for years, and whatever that is, it’s not waiting for October to decide if it’s allowed. I’ve been to Roden Crater three times, twice before there was anything really built, just Jim walking us through the tunnels with flashlights talking about the lunar standstill, and I’m not saying access isn’t real, it’s real, but when you’re standing in a chamber that frames the sky like that your critique apparatus kind of just goes quiet, which I realize is exactly what you’d say is the danger, but I’d say that’s the point.

NANCY

“Jim walking us through the tunnels” – okay so you’re name-dropping now, we’re doing that, you’re one of the elect who got the flashlight tour with Jim while the rest of us are supposed to what, take your word for it that critique goes quiet when you’re special enough to be there? That’s not democratizing perception, that’s a priesthood, you’re describing a priesthood with better real estate. And the “October deciding if it’s allowed” thing is such a lazy move, like we were sitting around issuing permissions, we were doing actual work on how meaning gets made and distributed, which matters even if it doesn’t give you a body high in a desert. Did you hear Rirkrit is showing at Gladstone again after that whole mess with the fabricators, apparently Paula just forgave everything, nobody knows what he said to her but there was a dinner.

BOB

I don’t know about the dinner, Rirkrit’s whole thing was always a little too social for me anyway, too many people in the room, too much happening, like the work becomes about managing energy instead of letting something actually land. But look, the flashlight thing – I wasn’t trying to flex, I was just there because I was there, Michael Asher introduced us at Art Center and one thing led to another, that’s how it works, that’s how it’s always worked, and I get that you can write a whole thing about access and who gets to be in

the room, I really do, but at some point you have to ask yourself whether all that writing is actually getting you closer to anything or just giving you more to be mad about.

NANCY

“I was just there because I was there, Michael Asher introduced us” – do you hear yourself, you’re describing a network of institutional relationships and credentialing while pretending you just wandered into the desert like a mystic, Asher literally made work about how institutions construct access and you’re invoking him to naturalize your access, that’s actually incredible. The writing isn’t about getting closer to anything, that’s your framework, that’s your whole “approaching the thing” phenomenology trap – critique is about making structures visible so they can be contested, which is different from transcending them in a crater with your famous friends. Speaking of which, I was at Dasha’s the other night and she was saying the whole post-critique vibe shift is just guys who aged out of being hot deciding feelings are more important than politics, which is mean but not wrong.

BOB

I mean, sure, Dasha’s funny, but that’s just a take, you know, that’s just more dinner party, more language circling around, and Michael would probably laugh at both of us right now because he barely talked, he just made these interventions that changed what you noticed and then left, no manifesto, no network diagram explaining why it mattered. The thing about structures being visible so they can be contested – who’s contesting, though, and when does the contest end, or does it just keep going forever in journals while the light outside is doing something actually interesting right now, like I’m watching it hit your window and you’re not even seeing it because you’re thinking about Dasha.

NANCY

Oh, the light on my window, Bob, thank you for the poetry lesson, very Rilke, very “I’m the one who notices while you’re trapped in your head,” except you’re not actually looking at the light either, you’re using it rhetorically to win an argument about who’s more present, which is its own kind of performance. And Michael “barely talked” because he was strategic, not because he achieved some zen state beyond discourse – his silence was a calculated refusal that only worked because it operated within a discursive field that gave refusal meaning, you don’t get to cite him as evidence for your “just vibes” position. The contest doesn’t end, that’s the point, that’s Mouffe, that’s agonistic pluralism, the idea that it should end is the authoritarian impulse dressed up as enlightenment, and honestly I’ve

heard Helen Molesworth is about to publish something on exactly this, on how the phenomenology revival in art criticism is basically a depoliticization strategy, and apparently she names names.

BOB

Helen can name whoever she wants, that's her thing, she's good at it, and maybe she'll name me, that would be fine actually, I'd probably just feel sort of neutral about it. But the Mouffe stuff, the contest that never ends – I guess I just wonder what that's like to live inside, like as a body, as a nervous system, because I spent two weeks at Doug Wheeler's place in Arizona once, no agenda, just watching his gradients shift at dusk, and whatever was happening in those rooms wasn't a strategy for anything, it was just happening, and I came out of there breathing differently, which you can call depoliticization if you want but it felt more like I finally had enough space to not need to call it anything.

NANCY

"I came out breathing differently" – okay, and what does that do, Bob, what does your improved breathing do for anyone who isn't you, or is the whole project just optimizing your own nervous system now, is that where we've landed, Light and Space as wellness retreat for men with Rolodexes? Two weeks at Doug's place in Arizona – do you know what that costs, do you know who maintains that property, who cleans those seamless surfaces so you can have your dusk experience, or does the labor just not register when you're busy not needing to call things anything? That's not freedom from language, that's the freedom that comes from not having to name the conditions of your own comfort, which is a very specific class position masquerading as spiritual attainment. Anyway I heard Doug's estate is already a mess, like three different lawyers involved, the Zwirner people are circling.

BOB

The estate stuff is sad, yeah, I don't know anything about that, lawyers aren't really my scene. But the whole "what does your breathing do for anyone" thing – I don't know, Nancy, what does your reading do for anyone, like at some point someone has to actually be in their life, someone has to be the one who's there, and I'm not saying it fixes anything, I'm just saying I was there, I was actually in that room while you're telling me about the people who cleaned it, which, okay, sure, but you weren't there either, you're just imagining it so you can make a point about me imagining it. Anyway I did a project once with a musician, very famous, can't really talk about it, but we were trying to create these spaces where people could just arrive, and it mostly didn't work, it got too big, too many handlers, but for about three days in Wyoming it was actually something.

NANCY

“Very famous, can’t really talk about it” – Bob, that’s doing so much work right now, that’s the whole mystification gesture in one phrase, you’re signaling access and intimacy while performing discretion, which is how cultural capital actually circulates, it’s not about the Wyoming thing, it’s about being the kind of person who has Wyoming things they can’t discuss. And “what does your reading do for anyone” – okay, back at October we spent three months on one Andrea Fraser footnote because precision matters, because getting the analysis right is what lets people see the mechanisms they’re inside of, that’s not nothing, that’s arguably more than “people could just arrive” which isn’t even a sentence, arrive where, to what, for whom? I will say though, Wyoming, was this that Kanye compound situation because I heard such weird things about that period, like apparently Kim was texting Marina Abramović at like four in the morning about “energy protection.”

BOB

I mean I can’t confirm any names, I just don’t do that, but I will say the energy protection stuff is real, like that’s not nothing, Marina knows what she’s talking about when it comes to fields and proximity, even if she oversells it sometimes with the branding. The three months on a footnote though – and I’m not trying to be cruel here – but that sounds actually painful to me, like physically, in the body, three months to get the analysis right so people can see mechanisms, but when do they get to stop seeing mechanisms and just see, you know? I was at Chinati once and this woman was standing in front of a Judd and she started crying, no context, no wall text, just aluminum and light doing something to her, and I thought, okay, this is it, this is the whole thing, and no footnote was going to get her there faster.

NANCY

The crying woman at Chinati, Bob, you realize that’s become like a genre at this point, every collector has a crying-at-Judd story, it’s practically a class signifier now, “I was so moved I didn’t need language” – except Judd himself was writing constantly, obsessively, because he knew the boxes don’t just transmit some pure signal, they’re arguments, they’re positioned against things, the whole reason that woman could cry is because an entire institutional apparatus made that encounter legible as art rather than, I don’t know, a storage unit. And Marina’s “energy protection” – Dasha and I were just talking about this actually, like at what point did performance art just become Goop, at what point did we give up on Schneemann’s actual body politics for “fields and proximity,” it’s embarrassing. Anyway three months on a footnote isn’t painful, precision is a discipline, it’s erotic

actually, but you wouldn't – look, did you hear about the Rirkrit situation, apparently there's a whole thing with the Palais de Tokyo show, someone got fired, very messy.

BOB

I don't know anything about Rirkrit, I kind of stopped tracking the relational stuff after a while, it always felt like it was performing participation without actually letting anyone just be in the space. But Nancy, you just said precision is erotic, which – okay, that's something, that's actually a feeling, that's in your body somewhere, so why does it become embarrassing when Marina talks about fields, like you're allowed to have an erotics of footnotes but she can't have an erotics of presence? And the Judd writing thing, sure, Don wrote a lot, I spent some time at Art Center when people still talked about him constantly, but have you ever been in that artillery shed at dawn when no one else is there, because the writing doesn't matter then, it really doesn't, the light is doing something to those surfaces that no argument can hold, and I don't need that encounter to be legible, I just need it to happen.

NANCY

Oh, the artillery shed at dawn when no one else is there – Bob, do you hear yourself, “when no one else is there,” that's the whole point, the experience requires the absence of other people, it's a scarcity experience, it's literally about access, about being the kind of person who can be at Chinati at dawn instead of with the docent tour at 2pm. The difference between my footnote erotics and Marina's presence stuff isn't hypocrisy, it's that I'm not pretending the intellectual isn't embodied while she's pretending the embodied isn't intellectual, she's got a whole apparatus of mystification around something that's actually pretty simple biometrics and charisma, like just say you're tall and you stare at people, don't call it energy fields. Anyway the Rirkrit thing is actually serious, like someone might actually sue, it's not just about the Thai food politics anymore – do you know Paula Cooper at all, because apparently she's somehow involved now.

BOB

I mean, sure, access, scarcity, whatever, but also I just woke up early, Nancy, like sometimes it's not a class analysis, sometimes you just couldn't sleep and you went for a walk and the light was doing something. I knew Paula a little in the eighties, she came to a thing Doug Wheeler was doing, very quiet woman, very watchful, but I don't really track the lawsuit stuff, it's all just people protecting positions. You know who was actually interesting on presence, and I don't think he gets enough credit, is Michael Asher – like he would just remove a wall or shift the air conditioning and suddenly you'd

feel the institution on your skin, no mystification, no Marina staring, just the building suddenly being there in a way you couldn't ignore, and I think about that more than I think about whoever's suing who over Thai food.

NANCY

Oh, you're going to invoke Asher at me, Bob, Michael Asher, whose entire project was about making institutional conditions visible, about denaturalizing exactly the kind of unmediated "the light was doing something" experience you keep romanticizing – the air conditioning piece works because it reveals the building as apparatus, not because it gives you some purer felt sense, that's literally the opposite of what he was doing. "Sometimes you just couldn't sleep and went for a walk" – okay, but who gets to not sleep at Chinati, who gets to have insomnia in Marfa, that's not outside the analysis, your sleeplessness is not some pre-political zone. And "Paula in the eighties," you just drop that so casually, "very quiet, very watchful," like you're the only one who sees people – anyway did you know Benjamin Buchloh is apparently not speaking to October anymore, like at all, there was something at a Columbia thing and now it's completely frozen, which is kind of wild given, you know, the history there.

BOB

I don't really know what's happening at October, honestly that whole scene always felt like people writing about looking instead of looking, but sure, Buchloh, drama, fine. And the Asher thing – Nancy, I was there, I was actually in the room when the wall was gone, and yes you can say it was about revealing apparatus, that's one way to hold it, but what actually happened is you suddenly felt the street, like your skin changed, the threshold became permeable, and I don't think Michael would have argued with that, he was very quiet about what things meant, he just did them and let your nervous system sort it out. You want my insomnia to be political, okay, but I was just awake, I was just breathing and walking, and I don't know what to tell you except that the dawn happened anyway whether or not I had the right to see it.

NANCY

"People writing about looking instead of looking" – okay Bob, that's a real thing you just said, I'm going to let that sit there. Asher was quiet because he understood that artist statements are a trap, not because he was secretly on your team waiting for nervous systems to sort things out, the silence was strategic, it was a refusal, you don't get to claim him for phenomenology just because he didn't explain himself in the room. And "the dawn happened anyway" – I mean, the dawn also happens over strip mines, it happens over detention centers, the dawn is not an ethical position. Speaking of which, did you ever cross paths with Andrea Fraser, because she told me once –

this was at a thing in Basel, very weird night, someone had brought a falcon, I won't get into it – but she said something about how the collectors who talk most about “just being present” with the work are always the ones who understand exactly what they paid for it, like presence is the flip side of the invoice, and I think about that constantly.

BOB

I mean, Andrea's smart, but that's also just cynicism dressed up as insight, like yes, rich people buy things, okay, but I've also seen someone who works at a gas station stand in front of a Turrell aperture and start crying, and I don't think she was thinking about invoices, I think she was just suddenly aware of the sky in a way she hadn't been. You want the dawn to need an ethics, but the dawn is just the light changing, Nancy, it doesn't care about your framework, it's literally just photons, and I think there's something kind of sad about not being able to let that be enough. The falcon thing sounds very Basel though – I did a project once with a very well-known musician, very public person, and we were trying to do something with light and space and how people move through sound, and it didn't really work, honestly, the conditions weren't right, but in the process I learned something about how attention collapses when there's too much apparatus, too much meaning piled on top of what's actually happening in the room.

NANCY

The gas station worker crying at the Turrell, Bob, that's not an argument, that's an anecdote you're deploying sentimentally – like, tears are not outside ideology, the whole apparatus of Turrell is designed to produce that response, it's engineered transcendence, the fact that it works on people who don't know what they paid doesn't mean it's not operating as technology, it means the technology is effective. And “cynicism dressed up as insight” – Andrea would eat you alive, truly, I can't even relay that. Who was the musician, why are you being coy about it, you do this thing where you gesture at names without saying them like it makes you seem above it when actually it's just a different kind of name-dropping. Anyway Dasha texted me this morning, apparently someone at the Metrograph thing last night said Turrell is basically over, like as a discourse, like we've extracted what we needed and now it's just content for people's Instagram stories, which – I don't know if I agree but it's not wrong either, there's something exhausted about apertures at this point.

BOB

Turrell's over as a discourse, sure, fine, but he was never really about discourse anyway, and if the Metrograph people are tired of apertures that's kind of their problem, like the sky didn't stop being interesting because people posted about Roden Crater. The musician thing – I'm not being coy, I

just don't think it matters, it was someone very famous, we did something together that didn't work, and the reason it didn't work was actually interesting, which is that his whole world is about controlling attention and my whole thing is about releasing it, and those two impulses just ground against each other until everyone was exhausted. I don't know who Dasha is.

NANCY

You don't know who Dasha is – okay, Bob, that's a choice, that's you performing not-knowing as a kind of purity, like you're too busy releasing attention to notice an entire cultural formation happening right in front of you, she's literally been in films, she hosts one of the most listened-to podcasts, but sure, you're just out here with the photons. The controlling attention versus releasing it thing is interesting actually, I'll give you that, but you're describing it like your approach is the ethical one and his is the compromised one, when really those are just two different modes of capture – Deleuze would say you're both operating within societies of control, you're just managing the modulation differently. Did the famous musician cry, is that where this is going, did he have a gas station attendant moment in front of something you made and now you think you won?

BOB

I genuinely don't know who that is, Nancy, I'm not performing anything, I just don't listen to podcasts, I mostly drive in silence or I listen to this one piece by La Monte Young on repeat, the sustained tones do something to the space inside the car. Nobody cried, it wasn't that kind of project, it was honestly a mess, there were too many people involved and too much money and the whole thing became about logistics instead of perception – I learned more from failing at that than from most things that worked. And look, I don't know what Deleuze would say, I'm sure it's very elaborate, but when I'm actually in a room with light changing I'm not thinking about modes of capture, I'm just there, and I think you'd feel better if you let yourself be somewhere without immediately needing to theorize your way out of it.

NANCY

La Monte Young on repeat in the car – Bob, you realize that's an entire aesthetic position, right, that's not neutral, "driving in silence" is a whole lineage, Cage through the minimalists through everyone who's ever claimed their refusals aren't actually choices, you're not escaping discourse by listening to sustained tones, you're just in a different one, a very well-funded one actually, Dia has spent millions maintaining that particular frequency of supposed emptiness. And "you'd feel better" – don't do that, don't make it therapeutic, I'm not theorizing because I'm anxious, I'm theorizing because that's the work, because someone has to actually think about what's happening institutionally while you're just being in rooms.

Speaking of which, I heard – and this is unverified but I believe it – that someone from the Young estate sent a cease and desist to a gallery in Tribeca last month, something about unauthorized drones, the whole thing with Marian is apparently very tense right now, do you know anything about that?

BOB

I don't know anything about the cease and desist, Marian's always been intense about the work, which honestly I respect even if it makes things difficult, like when I visited the Dream House in the nineties she was very particular about how long you could stay and where you could stand and at the time I thought it was controlling but now I think she understood something about how duration works that I didn't yet. The Dia money thing, sure, I mean yes, institutions fund things, but you're doing this thing where you think naming the funding structure dissolves the experience, and it doesn't, the tones are still doing something to your nervous system whether or not you've read the grant paperwork. I wasn't making it therapeutic, I was just noticing that you seem like you're always already somewhere else.

NANCY

I'm not always already somewhere else, I'm here, I'm just also holding the context, which is what critics do, Bob, we hold the context so artists can float around having nervous system experiences – someone has to remember that Dia was funded by Schlumberger oil money, that the Dream House exists because of a very specific set of patronage relationships, not because duration just manifested itself out of pure aesthetic necessity. Marian being particular about where you stand isn't mystical wisdom about duration, it's control over the conditions of reception, which is actually interesting, it's about who gets to determine the terms of encounter, but you're romanticizing it. Anyway, I was at this dinner last week, a collector thing in the West Village, very tedious, but someone who used to be close to the October people – back when I was at October we would never have even been in the same room as these finance guys – anyway she said something about how the whole Light and Space generation is being quietly revalued because the tech people have moved on to AI art and the boomers are dying, which, grim but probably true.

BOB

The market stuff is the market stuff, I stopped tracking it after a while because it was making me insane, like I remember when Larry Bell couldn't give pieces away and now they're in every collection and it doesn't mean his cubes got better or worse, they're still doing this thing where the glass holds the light in a way that shouldn't quite work. I think what you're calling holding the context is actually just a different kind of not being there, but we

probably disagree about that, and that's fine. What I keep coming back to lately is this thing Doug Wheeler said to me once at Art Center about how the edge of perception is the only place anything interesting happens, and I don't think he meant it theoretically, he meant you actually have to go stand at the edge and see what your eyes do.

NANCY

Okay but "the edge of perception" is a theoretical claim, Bob, that's Doug Wheeler doing phenomenology whether he calls it that or not, he's making an argument about where meaning is located, and frankly it's a pretty conservative argument, it's very Merleau-Ponty, very mid-century, like the body is this privileged site of truth and if we just get quiet enough we'll access something pre-linguistic – which, fine, but Rosalind would have eviscerated that position, she'd say you're smuggling in all these metaphysical commitments under the guise of just looking. Larry Bell's cubes aren't "doing something with light," they're objects situated in a network of galleries, collectors, critics, freight companies, insurance appraisers, like the glass is also a commodity and a tax write-off and a thing that requires very specific climate control. Anyway I have to be at a thing in Red Hook by eight, some sound artist Dasha knows is doing a piece in a warehouse, probably terrible but apparently there's going to be a confrontation because he slept with someone's studio manager, do you want to split a car?

BOB

Sure, I'll come, I haven't been to Red Hook in a while and I like what the light does over the water this time of year, there's this quality right before sunset where everything gets very flat and specific. The confrontation sounds exhausting but I'm curious about the space itself, warehouses can be interesting if people leave them alone, though they usually don't.

NANCY

The light over the water, yes, very beautiful, I'm sure Turner would agree – no, I'm being mean, sorry, it's just you keep doing this thing where the world is a series of atmospheric conditions for you to receive. The warehouse won't be left alone, it's already been written about twice, there was a piece in Art in America about post-industrial spaces as this new frontier of supposedly authentic encounter, which is hilarious because half these buildings are owned by the same three developers who just haven't flipped them yet. The artist – his name is Marcus, or Markus with a k, I can never remember, very tall, went to Bard – apparently the piece is about sovereignty and listening, which, who knows what that means, probably he read one Agamben essay. The real reason I want to go is because the studio manager situation involves someone who used to date a writer at Artforum

and there's this whole theory that the negative review of his last show was actually personal, which if true is genuinely scandalous, like that's the kind of thing that used to end careers, not the affair, the review thing.

BOB

I mean, the review drama, sure, but who really remembers reviews after a few years, like I can't tell you what anyone wrote about the Roden Crater and it doesn't matter because the crater is still there doing what it does. Sovereignty and listening sounds like he's trying too hard but sometimes the trying too hard gets out of the way once you're actually in the room, I remember this piece Maria Nordman did where I walked in ready to be critical and then I just wasn't, the space won. You should let me order the car, I know a route that avoids the bridge traffic.

NANCY

You order the car, fine, but "the space won" is exactly the kind of mystification that lets institutions off the hook – the space didn't win, Bob, a set of conditions were constructed to produce your capitulation, Nordman was very deliberate about that, she wrote extensively about controlling access and duration, it wasn't some spontaneous surrender on your part, you were handled. Also people absolutely remember reviews, maybe not civilians but the people who matter remember, there's a writer at Texte zur Kunst who's still dining out on a takedown she did in 2011, it's like her whole thing now. Anyway I hope Markus-with-a-k at least has good speakers, the last sound piece I saw in a warehouse the artist used these cheap tweeters and tried to claim it was an aesthetic choice about lo-fi accessibility, which, no, you just didn't get the grant.

BOB

Okay but even if Maria was handling me, which fine, I was still the one being handled, I was still the one there breathing in that room, and no amount of knowing she wrote about controlling access changes what happened to my eyes when the light shifted, like the knowledge is interesting but it's not the thing. Car's coming in four minutes, it's a black Camry, driver's name is something I can't pronounce. The speaker thing is real though, I worked on something once with a musician, very famous, very specific about the system, and even with all that budget the space itself kept winning anyway, kept being louder than whatever we were trying to do, which was actually the most interesting part but nobody wanted to hear that.

NANCY

That's not really what I'm talking about, the "thing that happened to your eyes" is already a representation, it's already mediated, you're not accessing some raw prelinguistic truth, you're just refusing to theorize your own experience which is a choice, it's a political choice actually. The famous musician thing, I don't know why you're being coy about the name, but sure, the space was louder, that's because acoustic engineering is a discipline and most artists don't bother to learn it, they just assume aura will cover for them. Speaking of which, did you hear about the Gladstone situation? Apparently there's a whole purge happening, like three artists got dropped in the same month, and the rumor is it's because one of them said something at a dinner about Barbara's house in Connecticut, nobody will tell me exactly what but it was enough that she made calls, like actual calls, the old-fashioned kind.

BOB

I mean you can call it a political choice but I'm just not that worried about it, like when I was at Chinati for a few weeks the Judd boxes would change every single morning depending on where the sun was and I wasn't theorizing that, I was just watching it happen, and that felt like enough. The Gladstone thing is sad but that's just how those relationships work, people get too comfortable at dinners, Doug Wheeler told me once that the real work is knowing when to stop talking, which coming from him was almost funny because he barely talks anyway. Car's here, I think, there's a black something pulling up.

NANCY

Okay but "that felt like enough" – enough for what? Enough for you, sure, but that's just consumption, that's just you having an experience at a well-funded foundation in Texas, which, congratulations, the Chinati light is famously good, Judd picked that location precisely because of the light, he was obsessive about it, there are letters, it wasn't some accident you stumbled into. Doug Wheeler barely talking isn't wisdom, by the way, it's branding, he's been doing the silent mystic thing since the seventies, Dasha actually met him at some thing in LA and said he was weirdly chatty about real estate, like wouldn't stop talking about square footage, which honestly tracks. Get in the car, you're letting all the cold air out, and I need to tell you about what happened with the October office because apparently there's a whole succession crisis happening and someone I used to work with just sent me this unhinged email about the editorial direction.

BOB

Yeah I'm getting in, hold on, the seatbelt's doing something weird. The October thing, I mean, those journals have been having the same crisis since I was at Art Center, it's always someone's email about the direction,

but the direction is just people writing about other people's writing, which, fine, but I walked into a Larry Bell cube once at Pace and I didn't need anyone to tell me what was happening, it was just happening. Doug talking about square footage is actually kind of beautiful if you think about it, like he's still thinking about space even when he's being boring about it.

NANCY

No, don't do that, don't make Doug talking about real estate into some poetic continuation of his practice, that's exactly the kind of move that lets artists get away with being boring rich guys who happen to have made important work in 1969. The Larry Bell thing, I mean fine, the cubes are pretty, but you know he's been coasting for decades, right, he just keeps making the same object in different sizes because collectors want something that matches their other Larry Bell, it's furniture at this point. And the October crisis is not the same crisis, this one is actually structural, there's a whole thing about whether they're going to keep doing the bound volumes or go digital-only, and someone on the editorial board apparently said something about "accessibility" in a meeting and Rosalind had to be physically calmed down, my friend was there, she said it was like watching a building collapse in slow motion. Tell the driver to take the BQE, the Williamsburg Bridge is going to be a nightmare right now.

BOB

BQE, yeah, can you take the BQE, thanks. I don't know, Larry coasting or not coasting, the glass still does what it does when you're standing in front of it, like the object doesn't care about his career arc, and honestly neither do I. Rosalind getting calmed down over the word accessibility is kind of perfect though, like that's the whole thing right there, that's the journal in one moment, someone should write about that except they'd probably need three thousand words and a Lacan reference.

NANCY

The object doesn't care about his career arc, sure, but you're not the object, you're a person with a graduate education who's choosing to pretend you don't know anything about market conditions or the way repetition functions differently when it's compelled by demand rather than investigation, and that choice is interesting to me, like what are you protecting yourself from by staying in the phenomenological bubble. The Rosalind thing, honestly, back at October we had a whole system for managing her, certain words you just didn't say in earshot, "accessible" was one, "readable" was another, someone once said "general audience" and I watched a senior editor physically leave the room. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I saw Hanna at the Swiss Institute thing on Thursday and apparently she and

that collector from Brussels finally imploded, like he showed up to her studio with his wife, not to confront anyone, just genuinely forgot he was having an affair, which is such a specifically male form of brain damage.

BOB

I mean, what am I protecting myself from, sure, but also I'm just not that interested in the question, like Michael Asher once told me that the best work he ever did was convincing a museum to remove a wall and then leaving, and the whole point was that nobody needed to write about it, you just walked through a space that used to be divided and now wasn't. The Brussels guy, that's wild, but also I kind of get it, not the affair part but the compartmentalization, like some people just exist in whatever room they're in, which isn't brain damage, it's just a different relationship to presence.

NANCY

Oh, Michael Asher told you, okay, you just dropped that in like it was nothing, that's very you, and also the Asher piece absolutely needed to be written about, the whole point was that institutional critique only functions when it's legible as critique, otherwise you've just done free renovation work for a museum, Buchloh wrote extensively about this, the wall removal only means something in relation to the discursive frame that makes it visible as a gesture. You're not describing presence, you're describing dissociation, and romanticizing the Brussels guy's compartmentalization as some kind of phenomenological attunement is genuinely disturbing, Hanna was a wreck, she had to leave the studio, the wife was asking about the paintings like nothing was happening. Wait, did you actually know Asher or are you doing that thing where you met someone once at a CalArts lecture and now you "know" them?

BOB

We spent time together, I'm not going to quantify it for you, we had dinner a few times, he came to a thing I was doing in Pasadena, it's not really about proving a relationship, it's about the fact that standing in that room with the wall gone was its own thing before Buchloh wrote a single word, like the writing didn't make it matter, it already mattered. Hanna's situation sounds hard, yeah, I'm sorry she's going through that, but the wife asking about the paintings is kind of incredible actually, like she's just looking at paintings, she's present with the work, whatever else is happening.

NANCY

That's not presence, that's denial, and the fact that you can't tell the difference is actually revealing something about your whole framework, like you've built this elaborate system where any kind of not-thinking becomes

spiritual attainment. The wife wasn't having some pure aesthetic encounter, she was performing normalcy because the alternative was screaming in a stranger's studio, which, fine, that's a survival mechanism, but don't aestheticize someone's coping strategy. Dasha said almost the exact same thing when I told her, she was like "that's not Zen, that's just WASP," which, say what you want about her, she's right about that specific thing. The Pasadena thing, was that the ice house space, because I heard that whole program got defunded after someone on the board found out one of the artists was doing a piece about their daughter, like using actual surveillance footage, which is its own conversation about when institutional critique becomes just regular harm.

BOB

I don't really think about frameworks, like that's your word, I'm just trying to describe what it's like to be in a room, which I know sounds simple to you but it's actually the hardest thing. The Ice House thing, yeah, that got messy, but honestly the surveillance piece was kind of interesting before everyone decided to have opinions about it, like there was something real happening with duration and attention before it became a discourse object. Dasha's funny but she's also always performing having the take, you know, like even "that's just WASP" is a take, it's not actually looking at anything.

NANCY

You're doing the thing again where you position yourself as the only person who actually looks at anything, which is its own performance, and honestly a more annoying one because it pretends it isn't. The surveillance piece wasn't interesting "before the discourse," it was always already an ethical problem, you don't get to film someone's kid without consent and then retreat into "duration and attention" when people correctly identify that as violating, that's just using aesthetic language to avoid accountability, which, back at October we had a term for that, we called it the James Turrell defense, where you gesture at phenomenology to duck any structural critique. And okay sure, Dasha performs the take, but you perform not having one, which takes way more effort and is honestly less honest, like at least she commits to a position, you just hover there in your little experiential cloud acting like noticing things is a politics.

BOB

The James Turrell defense, I mean, I'll take that, have you ever actually been to Roden Crater, because I spent three days there and by the end I wasn't thinking about structural critique, I was thinking about how the sky looks different when you frame it, which isn't a defense of anything, it's just what happened. The October people always needed everything to be accountable to something, and that's fine, that's one way to move through the world, but

when I was at Art Center we used to joke that you could write a Buchloh essay about a sunset and somehow the sunset would become problematic, like at some point you're just adding words to experience and calling it rigor.

NANCY

Oh, so Art Center people were joking about October, that's cute, that's really cute, I'm sure that was very fun for everyone in the car design program. And yes I've been to Roden Crater, I went with Rirkrit right after the Guggenheim retrospective, and you know what I was thinking about? I was thinking about how James bought that land for nothing in the seventies and now it's worth forty million dollars and he still hasn't finished it because he keeps taking donor money and doing speaking fees, like you had your little sky moment, great, but the crater is also a tax shelter that masquerades as a gift to humanity, and the phenomenology is real, I'm not saying it isn't, but it exists inside a structure whether you were thinking about the structure or not. The sunset isn't problematic, but your aggressive incuriosity about everything except your own perceptions kind of is.

BOB

I mean, sure, but the land value thing, the donor money, you can know all that and still stand in the tunnel at dawn and have something happen that has nothing to do with any of it, and I guess I just don't understand why you'd go all the way to Arizona to think about tax structures. I did this project a few years ago, very experiential, very large-scale, with someone you'd know, someone who works with stadiums and Sunday services, and the whole thing kind of fell apart, it was honestly pretty bad, but there was one moment during a lighting test where everyone just stopped talking and I still think about that silence more than anything I've ever read about it.

NANCY

Wait, you worked with Kanye? Or like, adjacent to Kanye? Because I heard that whole Sunday Service visual team was a nightmare, like people weren't getting paid and there was an NDA situation and someone I know said the lighting designer had a full breakdown in Calabasas, which, okay, that tracks with "fell apart" and "pretty bad." But you're telling me you were in the middle of what was essentially a labor dispute wrapped in a megachurch aesthetic and your takeaway is that one time everyone got quiet during a lighting test? That silence you're so moved by, those people probably stopped talking because they were exhausted and scared about their invoices, not because you accidentally created some communal phenomenological rupture. You keep aestheticizing other people's stress responses, it's a pattern, and honestly I'd be more interested in whether you got paid than whether you had a moment.

BOB

I'm not going to talk about who it was, and yeah, the whole thing was messy, but you're doing the thing where you need to narrativize the silence into labor conditions because that makes it legible to you, and I'm not saying you're wrong about the invoices, I genuinely don't know, but I also know what I felt and those aren't the same question. You know, Doug Wheeler told me once that people either see the light or they see the wall the light is on, and I think maybe you just see the wall, which isn't an insult, it's just a different kind of attention.

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