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Oh, the Humanities

The cultural criticism of Mark Greif

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AGAINST EVERYTHING BY MARK GREIF. KNOPF. . $.



In a 2005 essay for the *New York Times Magazine*, the critic A. O. Scott considered two recent and rather quixotic decisions, made in parallel by rival camps of young writers, to devise print magazines. One was *The Believer*, inaugurated in 2003 by Dave Eggers's independent San Francisco publishing house McSweeney's, and the other was *n+1*. Where *The Believer* gave itself over to historical whimsy, *n+1* self-consciously styled itself the heir, in its mandarin ambition, to the little politics-and-culture magazines of midcentury. Its founders' model was the later *Partisan Review*, a magazine they admired for its droll, caustic attitude, and for the flexible liberal intelligence exemplified by its successful reconstitution after its break with Stalinism. The editors of *n+1* looked backward, as Scott put it, to "organize a generational struggle against laziness and cynicism, to raise once again the banners of creative enthusiasm and intellectual engagement." Keith Gessen, one of *n+1*'s founders, proposed to Scott his own origin myth with deliberate understatement: "Here I am with all this fiction no one would want to publish, and here's Mark with these essays no one's going to publish, and after a while we felt like we had this critical mass of stuff that nobody would want to publish."

Mark is Gessen's colleague and friend Mark Greif, and those strange, uncategorizable essays "nobody would want to publish" remain, along with the early writing of Elif Batuman, the most distinguished, original, and consequential body of work to have come out of *n+1*'s first decade. They have now been collected in a volume called *Against Everything*. The individual pieces have been grouped into five sections: one on the basic necessities of food, sex, and exercise; another on varieties of pop music; a third on reality television, YouTube, and the evolution of the epithet *hipster*; a fourth on police and war; and one loose, interpolated sequence on Stanley Cavell and Thoreau and the "Meaning of Life." Most of the essays appeared in *n+1* and reflect the journal's general complexion—academically current but free of jargon; discontented but free of resignation; gladiatorial but free of truculence; sincere but free of gentility.

This tone emerged from the founders' attempt to expand and enliven commerce between the academy and mainstream intellectual life. Greif, and his colleague Marco Roth, always stood in for the more explicitly academic wing of the enterprise: Greif earned his Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale, in 2007, and has since been a professor of literature at the New School. He spent the decade following the magazine's origin working simultaneously on two projects that seem, at least prima facie, to occupy very different places on the academic-mainstream spectrum: the essays of *Against Everything* and a book based on his doctoral dissertation, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*.

Crisis of Man is a remarkable narrative synthesis of transatlantic intellectual history between the rise of Hitler and the oil shocks. By Greif's lights, this midcentury interval might best be characterized by an array of earnest thinkers attempting to develop a definition of something called "man," whom they sought to protect by providing him with a deep and permanent philosophical foundation. His abiding interest is less in what they came up with—the book's tl;dr version is that they might have saved themselves the effort—than in what these pursuits reveal about the twentieth century's relationship with philosophical certitude and moral decline. We once, the Crisis story went, enjoyed surety and moral order; that order was weakened by Enlightenment hubris, or technology, or the decenterings of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, or relativism, or Hitler; this belated epoch, beset on all sides by threats to man's status, may have represented our last chance to restore an underlying unity. Greif's own narrative inverts this arc: In his account, pre-Depression

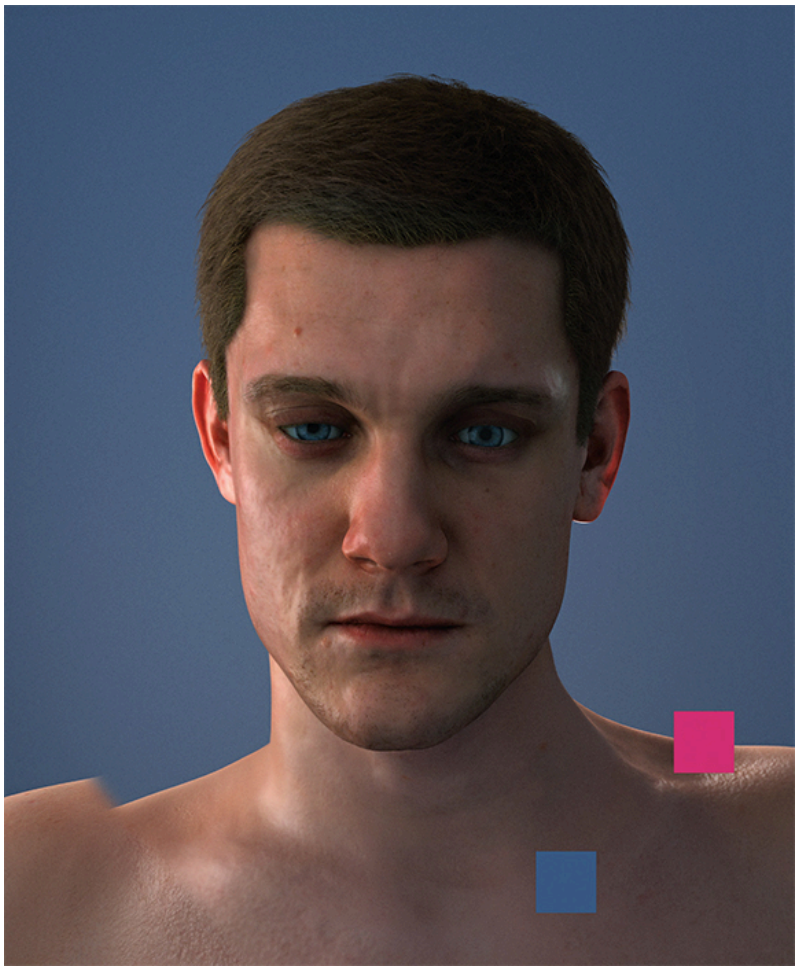
America, operating under the improvisatory, experimental influence of pragmatists like William James and John Dewey, was getting along perfectly well without a philosophical consensus about man's essence. After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, we lost that adventurous confidence and drifted fretfully into what Dewey called "the quest for certainty"; it was only toward the end of the 1960s, with the help of that decade's novelistic imagination, political activism, inclusionary aspirations, and innovative Francophone theory, that we abandoned that quest. We found we could assemble a newly continuous and newly coherent intellectual and political community without arguing to no end about man's natural estate. (Greif has studied enough of such Francophone theory to know that any story with this degree of sweep and vigor must perforce be a little tendentious; he elides the various American schools, like the ethnographic tradition in sociology, that kept the makeshift spirit of pragmatism alive.)

Two figures, in Greif's account, resisted their time in thought. One is Lionel Trilling; Greif's account owes a lot to Trilling's reverence for the novel as a vessel for a concrete humanism. But the real hero of Greif's story is Hannah Arendt. While the other figures in *Crisis of Man* worked to rehabilitate one lost certainty or another, Arendt instead described what our political life might look like in the wake of such fruitless activity. It comes as little surprise that it is Arendt, both a student of Heidegger and a *New Yorker* writer, whose work links Greif's academic production with his writing for a larger audience. Though she is almost never explicitly invoked, her spirit presides over *Against Everything*, which extends her inquiry into life lived under conditions of material abundance and displaced authority. It is as if Greif's long, dense, footnoted academic text were simply an extended preface to his dark, wonderful meditations on contemporary derangement.

The title *Against Everything* announces a revision of Susan Sontag's project, or a completion of it. Sontag's "Against Interpretation" concluded, in 1966, that we ought to replace our hermeneutic drive with an erotics of art. Greif sees eros, however, as just one of the instinctive drives whose possibilities for pleasure and rebellion have been captured by the powerful, packaged by the inventive, and sold back to us not only with our consent but with our gratitude. Greif's sentences themselves can sound, at times, like Sontag's, especially in his admonitory mode, but they can also echo with the placid alienation of

Joan Didion, or the commonsensical modesty of Richard Rorty. Greif's work is almost overpopulated with relevant antecedents. Though his prose is often handsome, and always funny, it never feels effortless; *n+1* is known, even now, for the rigor of its editorial apparatus, and his paragraphs bear signs of the labor that must have gone into the smooth consolidation of such diverse debts.

The intellectual frame, however, owes a debt primarily to Arendt. Though her name comes up only once, almost everything contained in *Against Everything* emerges as an extended elaboration of Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958). That book, as Greif describes it in *Crisis of Man*, draws on the Greek-classical tradition to discuss three types of human activity: action, work, and labor. Greif explains that action "was the interaction that goes on among free men in speech and politics, deciding in common what their life and world will be like . . . it is the highest form of human activity, because it creates a shared world." Work denotes the artisanal creation of "permanent objects . . . which makes up a lasting, common, physical world between men." The lowest form of exertion is labor, "because it responds to mere bodily necessity, set by mortal nature and not by reason. Labor betokens the effort that has to be invested to keep the body happy: fed, clothed, and maintained. It keeps the body 'not dead,' essentially, rather than vividly alive."



Artie Vierkant, *Reflection (Profile)*, 2016, dye sublimation print on aluminum, 20 × 16″. Courtesy the artist and New Galerie.

The likeliest setting for dehumanization, for Arendt and Greif, is not a totalitarian regime but an America of plenty where, Greif writes in a *Crisis of Man* passage that directly prefigures the essays, "a continuous surplus labor was developed in which everyone would labor only for *more* and *more* instant consumption in their own bodily health, grooming, self-maintenance, 'standard of living,' and waste—forms of fake necessity not dictated by nature and totally hostile to traditional hopes for philosophical liberation into higher human values." This criticism of animalistic retreat, Greif points out, was often articulated by an émigré generation of high modernists against the orgiastic "revolution" of the 1960s; it appeared again, in somewhat more withering form, in Herbert Marcuse's concept of "repressive desublimation"—the idea, common to conservative readers of Freud, that the libidinal reserves that were once channeled into artistic creation and other "higher"

activities now saw routine depletion in so-called free love. A generation of minds who had survived fascism, war, and displacement couldn't help but look to a spoiled bunch of dropouts and say, "We saved democracy so that you could roll naked in the mud?"

Greif takes up Arendt's insight—that, freed from basic want, humans have a tendency to redouble their attention to the increasingly mannered fulfillment of those wants—but concedes that he himself, unlike her, can't reasonably claim to be above the fray. As he puts it in the preface to *Against Everything*: "This is not a book of critique of things I don't do. It's a book of critique of things I do. Habits in which I am joined by a class of people, call them the middle classes, or people in the rich nations, or Americans and Europeans and their peers the world over. Call them us, or call them you. I want to talk about you." The first four of the book's essays, which to a reader of my generation have taken on the finish of classics, make up a quartet of *n+1* pieces published at two-year intervals between 2004 and 2010: "Against Exercise," "Afternoon of the Sex Children," "On Food," and "Octomom and the Market in Babies." They are the book's kernel; the best of the subsequent pieces, an exposition of the phenomenon of the "hipster" as an expression of racialized whiteness in an era of identity politics, might have been included in this first section as a meditation on clothing or style. Though Greif claims to be writing about things he himself does, the pieces on exercise and hipsterdom operate at a level of anthropological remove that to an extent insulates his essayistic persona from their criticism. Greif is also known for his penetrating writing about music, and it's these essays —on Radiohead and rap—that more successfully self-implicate.

The twilight of the old idols led not to anarchy and widespread moral panic but a reversion to the fetishized basics of corporeal struggle. Contemporary leisure time has been almost entirely devoted to those pursuits to which earlier generations longed to devote *less* time and energy, not more. On exercise: "Nothing can make you believe we harbor nostalgia for factory work but a modern gym. The lever of the die press no longer commands us at work. But with the gym we import vestiges of the leftover equipment of industry to our leisure. We leave the office, and put the conveyor belt under our feet, and run as if chased by devils. We willingly submit our legs to the mangle, and put our stiffening arms to the press." On food as fetish: "The foodie wades out and swims in possibility. And then, surprisingly, many a foodie will deliberately restrict his range. He

begins to set rules or laws for himself that make the quest for food harder and the thinking more complex. Undiscovered foods only; 'authentic' restaurants only, or kitsch diners, or barbecue joints; organic food only; local or farmers' market food; historically reconstructed food; raw food or slow food only." Our forms of self-indulgence, which seemed to Arendt patently mindless, have become not only mindful but branded, strenuous, and expensive: "Original liberators are ogres in the aesthetic symbolism of liberalization. They don't shave their legs! They're content to be fat! They have no fun. To say that a bodily impulse is something all of us have, and no regimentation or expertise or purchases can make one have it any more, is to become filthy and disgusting. It is to be nonproductive waste in an economy of markets."

The operative disorder is no longer a hedonism begat by uncertainty. It is a hedonism rigidly structured by the newest version of the natural laws. Freed from metaphysical certainty, we find ourselves in thrall to the logic of the market: not to ultimate-seeming ends but to the ultimate-seeming means that produce ends of staggering banality.

Greif graduated from Harvard, in 1997, with what he has described as a certain intellectual audacity: He had been taught that the activity of "critical theory," the dismantling of our metaphysical pretensions, was itself politically effectual, as if the only thing standing between contemporary America and justice was the legibility of Foucault. But he soon discovered that no one outside the academy was interested in the vocabulary he'd learned, or in his facility with textual deconstruction. The founders of *n+1* did not see this as necessarily a bad thing; as Greif put it in an essay in the *American Prospect* in 2004, perhaps "the end of theory could force academics to resume speaking a common political language with the broader public."

For a moment, Greif told Scott in the *Times Magazine* piece, it seemed like there was a new set of literary institutions that might host such a common political language. "'Coming out of college, it felt like there were people who were really going to be there for you,' Greif said, referring to the journals and webzines that seemed to be flourishing in the late '90s, including *The Baffler*, *McSweeney's*, *Lingua Franca*, and *Feed*. 'Then . . . the Internet economy burst'—taking with it some of the most interesting Web-based

publications—'and you discovered that these things, which had been the intellectual hope of a generation, were based on venture capital.'"

The possibility of a rich and politically relevant literary culture, in the form of those late-'90s magazines, had come to be staked on the financial bubbles that had been created by the financial deregulation, free-market faith, and "end of history" triumphalism that marked the milieu of the *n+1* founders' childhood, adolescence, and secondary education. The lesson drawn by the *n+1* crowd was that any "common political language" would now be determined not by English professors but by their colleagues in economics. The signal innovation of Greif's essays—along with those of his cofounder Benjamin Kunkel, who has even more explicitly refashioned himself as a Marxist political economist—might be described as their economic method. *Against Everything* may well be suffused not just with the thought of such obvious candidates as Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Habermas but with such far-flung influences as Mary Douglas (on purity), René Girard (on desire), and even the radical ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (on social regulation). Figures such as these, however, have been submerged; they are almost never cited explicitly. The prose at the surface sounds more like a belletristic treatise on game theory, informational asymmetry, and market inefficiency. Here is Greif in the essay on sex:

> How should a system convince people that they do not possess their sex properly? Teach them that in their possession it is shapeless and unconditioned. Only once it has been modified, layered with experts, honeycombed with norms, overlaid with pictorial representations and sold back to them, can it fulfill itself as what its possessors "always wanted." . . . How to convince them that what appears plentiful and free—even those goods that in fact are universally distributed—is scarce? . . . Yet youth is naturally evanescent, in fact vanishing every single day that one lives. It can be made the fundamental experience of a vanishing commodity, the ur-experience of obsolescence.

This dates to 2006. If writing like this had come about in reaction to the sunset of critical theory and the dot-com bust, Greif's ongoing efforts were only intensified by the implosion of the subprime bubble, the subsequent financial crisis, and the debates about the bailout

and putative recovery. By 2010, he had added to these original economic metaphors (scarcity, competitive effectiveness, universal distribution, and commoditization) increasingly arcane and evocative analogies to assets, leverage, audits, collateral.

This in and of itself was not a new rhetorical device; Nietzsche and Freud were both spendthrift with metaphors of coinage and investment. Greif's employment of an economic idiom reflects his acknowledgment that this is the way the contemporary clerisy speaks. Tonally, it uses these words, and these extended analogies, in a mode of dark comic heresy, as if he'd borrowed priestly vestments for a lewd Halloween party. Ultimately, though, the style derives its full power from the way Greif uses the language of market rationality to describe phenomena that neoclassical economists simply wished away: power, violence, resentment, existential terror, social differentiation, the ambiguity of desire.

The organizing economic metaphor of all of *Against Everything* is artificial scarcity. The concept usually refers to the way that monopolistic sellers exploit their excessive market power to restrict supply so they can raise prices. Greif's view is more capacious and idiosyncratic: He describes a culture where the affluent, at sea in a world of abundance, engage in the elaborate restriction of their own demand (to kitsch diners, ethnic food, inappropriately youthful sexual partners). This turns what could be unfussy gratification into resource-intensive performance. On one level, this is about making a technically meaningless life more diverting, but it also gives our atomized selves the comfort of belonging. It serves to differentiate "people like me" from those other, worse people—those without access to the most current information, say, or simply the economic means to act on it. What gives *n+1*'s economistic turn its authority and novelty is the way Greif and his colleagues show that the market is not, as someone like Gary Becker had it, a bazaar untainted by sinister, irrational notions (discrimination, exploitation, class prejudice), but a site where those things are given free play under cover of neutral utility-maximizing exchange. They have taught us to speak the softer insights of theory (with its sensitivity to symbolic difference and its hermeneutics of suspicion) in the hardheaded but incantatory vernacular of the powerful.

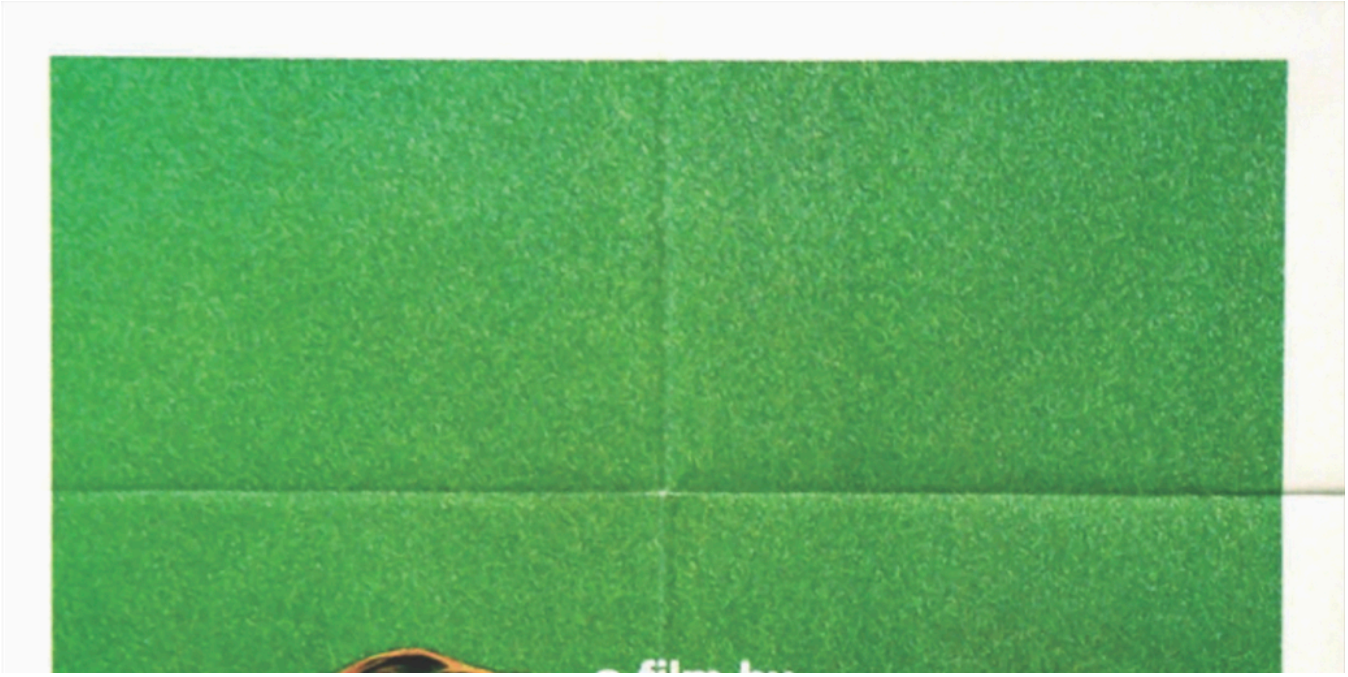
n+1, more than a decade on, has gone from upstart to institution. The economic style pioneered by Greif and his colleagues has degenerated, in the work of some of their acolytes, into something of a tic. But there's comfort in this. It certainly speaks to the moment. This election cycle has taught us that so-called millennials—the sort of young people who might have spent their adolescence reading essays like these—have decisively added "the market" to the catalogue raisonné of failed gods. *n+1*'s founders chose their magazine's name because they hoped it would represent their commitment to progress—but not in its Whiggish, arrogant form. It would come like this, one short, sure-footed stride in front of the other.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is the author of *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful* (Riverhead, 2012) and the Kindle Single *No Exit* (2014).

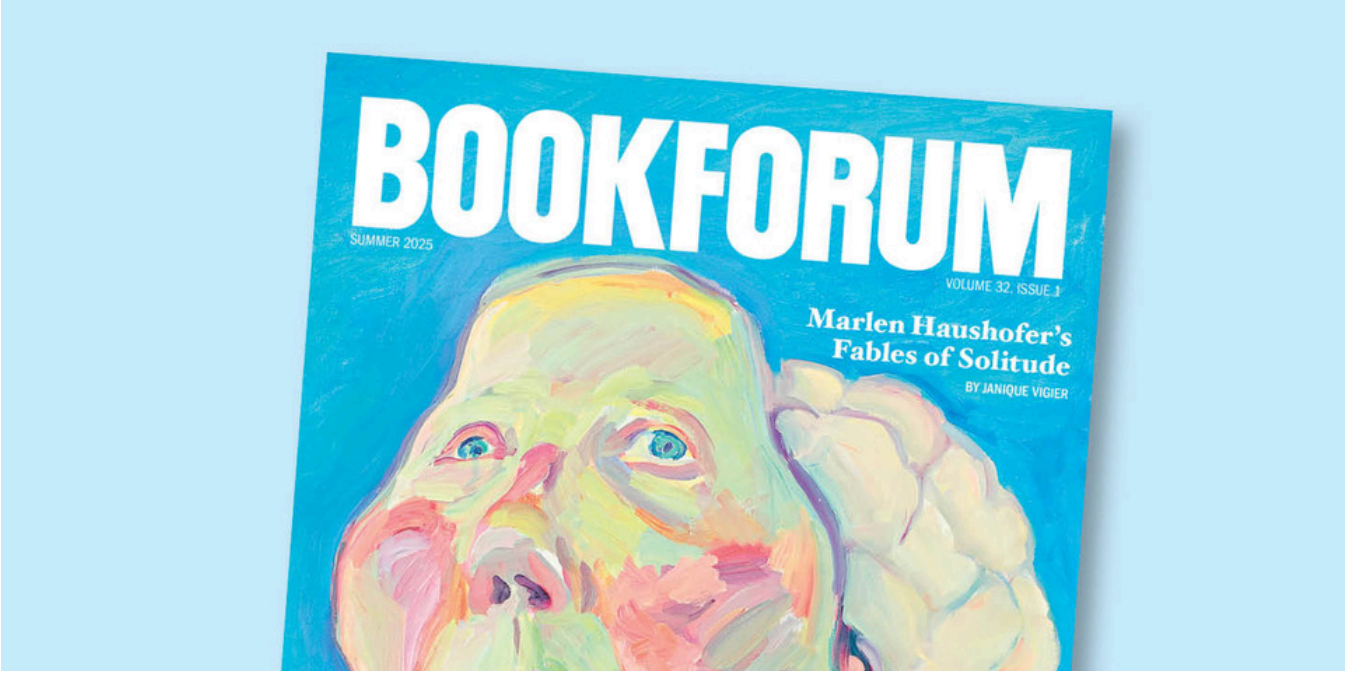
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