

6. Katalogtext John Buffalo Mailer

I Want To Be In The Room When It Happens

Introduction for the 2019 Munich Biennale 6/8/19 By John Buffalo Mailer

“I want to be in the room when it happens. In the room when it happens. The room when it happens.” - Aaron Burr (as depicted by Lin-Manuel Miranda in the Broadway musical *Hamilton*)

These lines from the character of Aaron Burr in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s universally-identified-as-genius musical about the American Revolution as seen through the life of Alexander Hamilton, come at the time when the founding fathers of the United States are writing the new Constitution and various other staple documents of American democracy, and Burr was not invited. This, among several other numbing insults will lead Burr to challenge Hamilton to a duel and ultimately end his life. The point? Being in the room matters.

We are living through strange and uncharted times. A world of multiplying contradictions bombards us every single day as we strive to keep up with our favorite binge-watching addiction, get our news from our Instagram feeds, and debate whether or not we can live without the latest series of iPhone. We are more connected than ever, and the result seems to be much of the world heading toward a nationalistic xenophobic fear of the other not felt since the political climate that culminated with the second World War.

This is why experiencing art from other countries and cultures, not through the screen of our phones, but actually in the room, is perhaps more important now than ever before. The tangible remains essential to communication. Staring at the actual work of art that received the love or fear or pain or triumph of the artist in its molecular structure, cannot be replaced by viewing that same artwork through the screen of one’s phone any more than flipping through someone else’s Instagram vacation in Tahiti can replace the experience of actually breathing that sweet Tahitian air.

It’s possible that America has not been as divided as it presently is since the days of the founding fathers, when the fundamental question, “What do we want our country to be?” was the hot topic of most dinner table conversations. And like then, like all times when powerful forces push for division among the majority of peoples, it is once again up to the artists of our day to penetrate those walls and keep the lines of communication open across all borders.

Watching the world through the lens of our screens is like watching an advertisement for life. As a writer, I felt a certain responsibility to put into words what I find so disturbing about this brave new world we are navigating. So I did what most American writers do in such circumstances, went out drinking with a friend (my colleague David Ambrose). Once we'd had just the right number of drinks to scratch at the core of what it is exactly about this modern trend toward the screen that terrifies us so, we came up with this poem:

#GenerationHashtag

#Hashtags are a simple programming language that the Internet and the human brain both can use. #HashtagsWork because they are simple and intuitive.

#HashtagsBreakDownCommunication

#ToTheLowestCommonDenominator.

#YouHaveATweet #ThatIs140Characters #But140CharactersIsNoLongerSimpleEnough #SoWe AddaBunchofHashtags to the ends of our Tweets #SoOurFollowersDon'tEvenHaveToRead our sentence to interact #TheyCanJustReadOurHashtags #ReleasingUs from the daunting task of having to use an entire 140 characters #ToExpressWhatWeAreTryingToSay #ThusFreeingUs from having to effectively write a coherent thought

#NowWeCanJustPutTheGistAtTheEnd #InAsManyDifferentForms as we can think of

#ThisBecomesDehumanizing

#WhenYouScrollThroughAPageOfTweets #AndYourEyes #AreJustDrawn #ToTheHashtags

#YouCanProcessSoMuchMoreInformation #BecauseYouCanIngestThousandsOfThoughts

#WithoutEverReadingACompleteSentence #TheWayComputersIngestInformation

#ByBreakingDownInformation

#To Its Lowest Common Denominator

#ByLookingAtThese #HundredsOfHashtagsAtOnce #YouAreActuallyBeingProgrammed

#ByYourSocialMediaFeed

With Instagram, instead of letting the #ImagesYouPostBeAStatementOnTheirOwn (which has become too #nuanced for the #people who are #observing hundreds of #images each and every #day) ,

#WeMustUseHashtags so we don't even have to think about what we are #seeing.

If #SalvadorDaliWasOfThis #SocialMediaGenerationAndUsedInstagram
#WhatHashtagsWouldHeUse?

It wouldn't be #TheSubconsciousLivesOutsideTime #No. No one would
#StopToReadThatHashtag or #UseThatHashtagInTheirOwnPosts Because it is too #nuanced.

Instead, Dali would use #TrippingBalls! Because that would get #people's #attention. That would be #SomethingTheyCouldUnderstandByLookingAtForNoMoreThanA #microsecond.

And so, we are left with the uneasy probability that Hashtag culture is in #danger
of #TrainingUsNotToUnderstandAnything unless it is #BrokenDownIntoThisMinimalWay of

#Communicating Like The #GruntsOfAnApe

And so the theme comes full circle. The hashtag grunts of an ape were not enough for Aaron Burr. And they are certainly not enough for Humphrey Bogart's character detective Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*. Marlowe is a man whose very livelihood depends on being in the room where it happened, a man who knows that until he sniffs the air of the crime, he cannot know what transpired. He cannot know what is real.