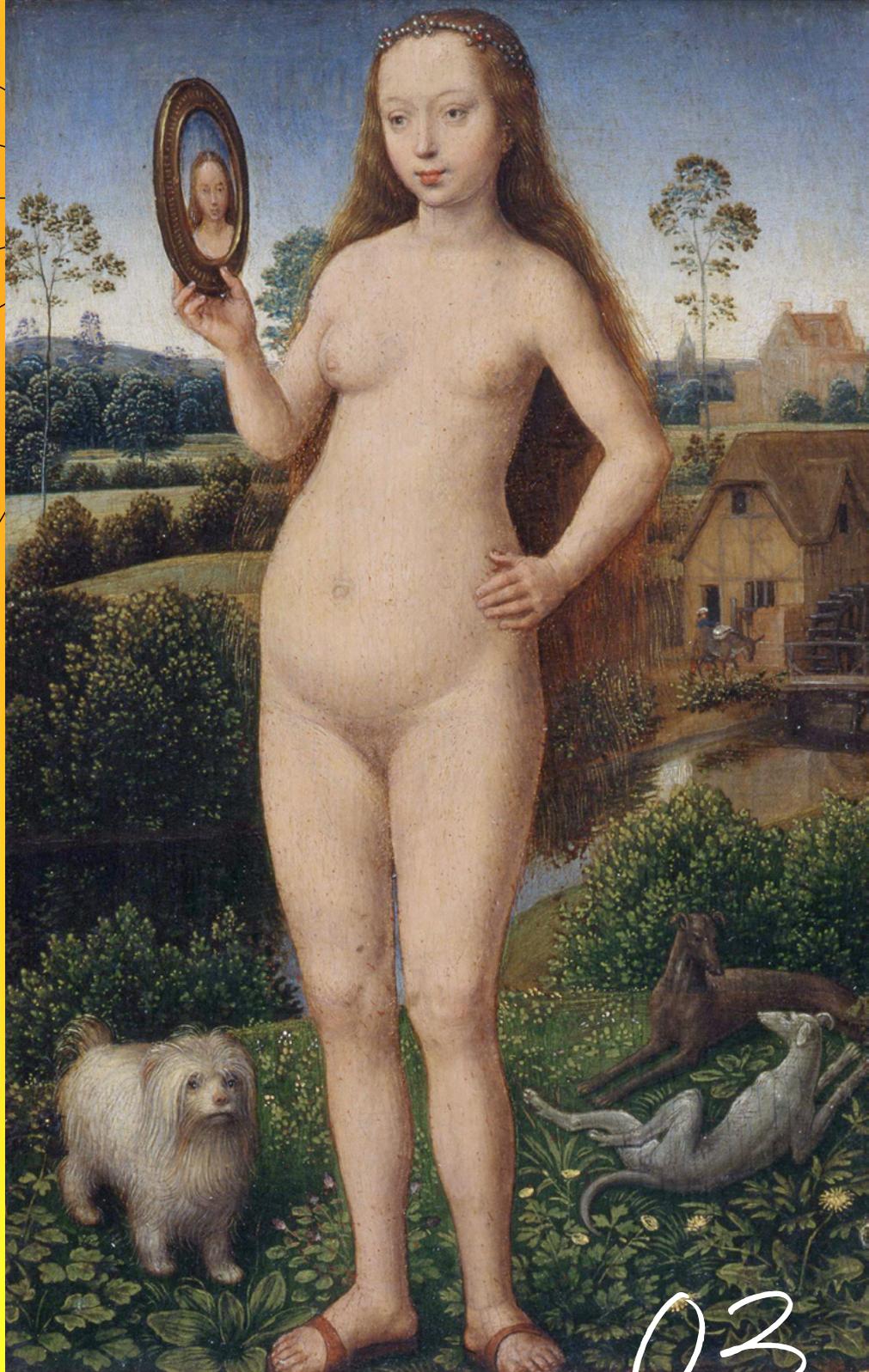


New Year's Revolutions

GIRLFORUM
MONTHLY



03

A Self-Reflective
Reader

NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTIONS

Introduction to Issue 03

This month, we've been following the employment tribunal against the National Gallery. Twenty-seven art lecturers and educators have taken the public institution to court over their employment status as freelancers rather than workers or employees. The group was abruptly dismissed from the gallery last year, after many years of dedication and hard work. Spending time at the tribunal over the last few weeks, we have been struck by the way the gallery's attempts to undermine the value of these particular art workers reflects a wider picture of precarity and under-valued labour across the art world.

Due to the increasing complexities of the case, the verdict has been significantly delayed and may not be reached until the New Year. We've decided to postpone our coverage of the case until the verdict is announced, so we can properly explore the ramifications of the outcome for wider employment in the art world and beyond.

While we wait for the verdict, we wanted to put together a 'reader' for this issue, bringing together three texts that call for continual self-reflection. This is the time of year when we are encouraged to make (often unsustainable) resolutions to go to the gym/ lose weight/ save more money/ quit smoking/ 'live life to the fullest'* – or to put it more cynically, to transform ourselves into better, more efficient subjects of capitalism. We'd like to propose some less superficial self- (or rather, collective) reflection.

In *Tell Me It's Going To Be OK*, Miya Tokumitsu addresses the weaponising and monetising of self-care and self-improvement in the competitive and anxiety inducing context of everyday life under neoliberalism. Taking time for real self-care is, of course, absolutely vital, but it's easy for New Year's resolutions to become a competitive performance of self-improvement rather than an opportunity to quietly ask ourselves how we can improve our relationships with ourselves and others.

In 'Ideology, Confrontation, and Political Self-Awareness', Adrian Piper asks us to undertake the important work of consistently unpicking our ideologies, their effects, and the internal and external ideas that form them. Piper identifies the 'Illusion of Perfectibility' as the assumption that self-scrutiny has an end product – and that once it has been 'accomplished' you have paid your debt to society and can abandon introspection. Rather than making a list of tasks towards self-improvement to be 'completed', we'd like to think about how we can adopt a continually revolutionary rather than resolutionary attitude.

Finally, Audre Lorde's 'Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' recuperates anger as a legitimate, necessary and productive response. Self-reflection is often motivated by guilt, remaining as an internalised dialogue without producing any effect beyond yourself. Anger, however, can be externalised as

a meaningful force in a drive for change. A commitment to anti-racism needs to be fundamental to any efforts towards a much-needed re-structuring of both the art world and wider society. It is also essential to any credible form of feminism. Lorde calls for women to meet 'face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt'. Those of us who have not had to cope with the everyday effects of institutionalised and individual racism have a responsibility to work on ourselves and our surroundings to make that meeting possible.

We have chosen these texts because they all speak to the importance of the collective. New Year's resolutions are so often superficial and personal endeavours made in isolation and played out publicly in an atmosphere of competition and guilt. The resolutions chosen are usually closed-ended tasks to be achieved or failed and forgotten after a couple of months. What's needed here, however, is the understanding that there is no finish line, and we should all adopt a mindset of continued self-reflection and reaction. Our small and sustained personal commitments to change can collectively contribute to an ongoing re-structuring towards an art world and wider society that is less driven by personal profit, more aware of the role we play within our communities, and (above all) more caring.

We are hugely grateful to this month's 'Artists Anonymised' interviewee for her wonderfully considered and honest answers, providing a further reflective text at the end of this issue. Over the holidays we'll be taking some time to reflect on our own approaches and interactions both within GIRLFORUM and in our work and personal lives. It's really important to us that GIRLFORUM as a project remains porous, adaptive, and open to change. We're looking forward to continuing the dialogue in the New Year.

*(all apparently fixtures in the top 10 New Year's resolutions each year).

TELL ME IT'S GOING TO BE OK: Self-care and Social Retreat under Neoliberalism

Miya Tokumitsu

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER, ONE OF THE ELOQUENT THEORISTS of pop-culture associated with the Frankfurt School, frowned upon the cinema with its velvet drapes and plush seats, calling it “distraction raised to the level of culture.” In his dour view of things, the urban working masses were lulled into sitting in the dark and gawping at mesmeric light projections while sinister forces shifted the world under their feet. “In the streets of Berlin, one is struck by the momentary insight that someday all this will suddenly burst apart,” he portended in 1926. The cinema still offers mental vacations from our existence of exploited labor, but capitalism’s more evolved form, neoliberalism, has delivered another, more pernicious sedative to take the edge off: medicinal jargon. The language of self-improvement has shifted its focus slightly but notably from motivation (“Just Do It.”) to amelioration (“radical empathy”). From the peppy *Queer Eye* reboot to Jordan B. Peterson’s angry *Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*—the subtitle speaks volumes—the parlance of reassurance is a flourishing industry. An array of Virgils to suit various tastes stands ready to talk us through the many circles of neoliberal capitalism.

It makes sense that hyped-up “you’re OK” language circulates frantically at a time when the marketization of every aspect of our lives has pitted us against the rest of humanity—whether we’re interviewing, at age four, for a spot in an elite preschool or trying to pick the best mutual funds for our retirement portfolios. And yet, this so-called logic of the free market runs counter to what we comprehend of human nature.

Belonging is an essential human need. (Fascists understand this basic fact; neoliberals don’t.)

We crave hearing that we’re alright, we’re not alone, we’re accepted in spite of our flaws. Belonging is an essential human need. (Fascists understand this basic fact; neoliberals don’t.) Loneliness, it turns out, **negatively affects** not only our psychological well-being, but also our physical health. And yet we have apparently chosen, via liberal democracy, to live according to a system of social organization that requires us to be jumpy paranoids, suspicious of everyone and terrified of our own potential mistakes. Believers in capitalist liberal democracies may cluck at the over-the-top Maoist inquisitions devoted to revolutionary self-criticism, but our society encourages us to practice the same extravagant self-loathing, only privately. That’s why America’s vast therapeutic brain trust has steadily eradicated the language of solidarity and class consciousness, honed through

collective struggle, and replaced it with exhortations to “do what you love” and “live your best life.” Both aphorisms imply that what we’re currently doing is not enough.

Given that we spend most of our waking hours in an alienated, desperate grind to obtain or maintain a life-sustaining job, blaming ourselves for every snag along the way, gospels of reassurance and self-care are precious cargo. We are denied the ability to seek comfort from colleagues, neighbors, or—heaven forbid—comrades, because neoliberalism has turned them into our competition. Instead, disaffected souls are relentlessly steered back into the thrall of a marketplace where we can access, individually, little hits of succor.

The American Jitters

The individual under neoliberalism is atomized, competitive, and above all, anxious. Indeed, as [David Beer](#) and others have pointed out, it’s precisely the gnawing and ever-present sense of anxiety that serves as the neoliberal social order’s psychic motive force. Only when we humans hold each other in paranoid suspicion does the so-called free market work. Only when we’re constantly trying to scoop up each Postmates order or increase our average star rating (on Uber, Goodreads, it doesn’t matter), does the all-important market function properly.

The star rating is a particularly ingenious means of sowing this anxiety. As we all learned in primary school, amounts are nonsense without units. Six, one half, eighty-seven thousand—these numbers do not mean anything unless we know what mutually agreed-upon unit they attach to: fortnights, teaspoons, furlongs, etc. But what is a star? Nobody knows. The star rating average is only meaningful in relative terms: it’s higher or lower than the star ratings other striving workers earn. In other words, user reviews situate our performance not according to some stable benchmark—such as increased production per hour worked—but within an ever-fluctuating hierarchy comprised of our peers.

This all-too-public, shifting performance grid represents but one of many tools that keep the flow of anxiety humming along under neoliberalism. Others abound, and are now such a familiar feature of our working and emotional lives that we scarcely notice how routinely they derange our basic sense of self: there’s the rollback of ongoing employment through the gig economy, the explosion of applications (LinkedIn, for instance, turns its users—even the employed ones—into constant job applicants), zero-sum performance assessments such as Barack Obama’s Race to the Top, just-in-time shift scheduling, entrepreneurial kindergartens, and many more. All of these systems encourage us to view others’ achievements as our own setbacks, to individualize completely all successes and disappointments.

America’s vast therapeutic brain trust has steadily eradicated the language of solidarity and class consciousness, honed through collective struggle, and replaced it with exhortations to “do what you love” and “live your best life.”

We are terrified to make even one tiny mistake, yet at the same time we are faced with a ruling class that makes little effort to hide its flagrant misdeeds: graft, corruption, and perhaps most appalling in our age of so-called meritocracy, sheer incompetence. Miss one parole meeting or court date and your life is plunged into an unending hell of punitive bureaucracy and inescapable debt. CIA deputy director Gina Haspel, on the other hand, [violates](#) the Constitution by running a secret torture

cell, only to be rewarded with a promotion. Despite Hillary Clinton running a ham-fisted and bewilderingly tone-deaf campaign, we had the phrase “most qualified presidential candidate” practically shoved down our gullets. And, of course, Donald Trump is president.



As an individual office worker, you might be terrified that you mishandled one client account. You might spend sleepless nights agonizing that you might have bungled some bureaucratic subroutine that causes your client to complain to your boss. Should such a gruesome fate upend you, you’ll lose your job, then your home, then you and your kids will be living out of your car, and they’ll be condemned to a life of poverty. And it will have been *all your fault*. Then there’s Wells Fargo CEO Tim Sloan, who helped to preside over the

deliberately fraudulent creation of *1.5 million* bank accounts and 565,000 credit cards with virtually zero consequences. Sure, he’s publicly hated, but he’s laughing all the way to the, ahem, bank. What’s the board of Wells Fargo going to do, fire him? After it already paid him untold millions of dollars? **Actually, they gave him a raise.**

Well, so what? We all know that those at the top play by different rules, and that for most people, consequences can be wildly out of proportion to their blunders. At least under feudalism, this discrepancy was out in the open. Yes, it was unjust, but it also couldn’t be denied. What’s special about capitalism, and its neoliberal version in particular, is how most of us must accept that each and any of our individual missteps justifies all calamity that befalls us, no matter how ruinous. The location of all social problems onto individuals has now reached preposterous proportions. It used to be that people’s hardships owed to their not studying hard enough or having a rap sheet for smoking weed in the 7-Eleven parking lot. Now, ordering **avocado toast at brunch** is the vice that justifiably closes someone out of the housing market forever. Meanwhile, today’s glorified feudal lords continue committing fraud and torture—or just go on lying and bumbling their way into greater wealth and political glory.

Pabulum for Sale

But here’s the truly wonderful thing about neoliberalism—as it turns us all into paranoid, jealous schemers, it offers to sell us bromides to ameliorate the very bad feelings of self-doubt and alienation it conjures in our dark nights of the soul. Neoliberalism has not only given us crippling anxiety, but also its apparent remedy. It is no coincidence that as we become more nervous, “wellness” and “self-care” have become mainstream industries. Over the last few decades, workplaces have become ever more oppressive, intensely tracking workers’ bodies, demanding longer hours, and weakening workers’ bargaining rights while also instituting wellness and mentoring programs on an ever greater scale.

Occasionally, the contradiction of punitive, intrusive “wellness” becomes too ridiculous to bear and cracks under its own weight. One oft-mentioned catalyst for the recent teacher strike in West Virginia was a proposal to mandate the monitoring of teachers’ bodily movement via Fitbit just as the state government moved to limit pay raises and school funding. Capitalism will deplete you, while letting you think you have the means to improve your lot. Indeed, it will attempt to force its therapy on you. In the case of West Virginia’s top-down Taylorist wellness crusade, the state authorities clearly overplayed their hand; far more common are employer-sponsored

initiatives, whether packaged as mindfulness training or meditation classes, that have been inserted into our working lives to help us talk ourselves down. Mindfulness—a state of hyper-awareness tempered with disciplined calm—has become the corporate mantra *du jour*. By encouraging increasingly put-upon employees to assume tree poses or retreat into an *om* in the face of frustration, corporate overlords mean to head off any mutinous stirrings before they have a chance to gain momentum. Even if CEOs themselves occasionally adopt these regimes with apparent sincerity, mindfulness serves the companies' bottom lines first and foremost because it is fundamentally anti-revolutionary. "It's hard not to notice how often corporate mindfulness aligns seamlessly with layoffs," Laura Marsh writes. "Employees need a sense of calm too when their employer is flailing. Those productivity gains—an extra sixty-nine minutes of focus per employee per month—count for more when the ranks are thinning."

This mode of psychic self-instruction presents a revealing complement to the anti-union propaganda films that employers may—and frequently do—require workers to view. Silly as all this instructional media may seem, those who circulate it understand that it is worth the investment. They know that language matters. Nothing cuts off self-determination more efficiently than eradicating its language. Replacing it with misdirecting prattle that locates all blame as well as the possible redemption from it back onto the individual is a magnificent coup for those who would like to keep us wary of one another. Corporate feel-goodism has a sick way of twisting the grimmest instances of exploitation and desperation into tales of individual triumph. In 2016, Lyft elevated a nine-months pregnant driver and mentor into a position of corporate celebrity for [accepting a fare during labor](#). Asking for similar "exciting" stories, Lyft cast its employee's story as one of positive enterprise. Like any other company, Lyft knows that workers brimming with good feelings are rarely motivated to organize and demand working conditions that don't require employees who are about to give birth to drive strangers around town.

It's also no coincidence that the politician who presided over the final triumph of neoliberalism as American social and economic common sense was Bill "I Feel Your Pain" Clinton. Clinton threw poor single mothers off of public assistance, but any cost-cutting pol can do that. Clinton's gift was that he could make even self-identified left-liberals feel good about such punitive policy shifts, by making it appear that they were in fact *helping* these women help themselves. In many ways, Clinton's sleight of hand encapsulates neatly the narcissistic feedback loop of neoliberal positivity, which focuses on what feels good, rather than what is gracious and just.

Condition Blue

Such withdrawal into the self was on display by the Clinton political project just after Hillary's 2016 loss to Donald Trump. As the careening emergency that is the Trump presidency was set into motion, Hillary Clinton embarked on a self-care regimen of walks in the woods and alternate nostril breathing. Still, dwelling on her alone leads us into the very trap of individualizing social problems that we should avoid—Hillary was hardly the only person who felt the impulse to check out and focus on personal recovery after the election. All variety of people pledged to [abandon all news media](#) and [leave the country](#) in order to nurse their wounds and turn their attention toward self-discovery. Particularly revealing are the remarks of one voluntary exile from Trump's America traveling across Asia with her family: "I try not to engage . . . We're here to be students, and not talk about terrible things." Such reactions are perhaps sympathetic, but politically, yoga retreats, news blackouts, and glasses of chardonnay only deliver would-be reformers into dead ends.

Two decades after the Clinton White House's neoliberal reign, the same navel-gazing dynamic operates deep within our social media feeds. The main benefit of social media, according to Mark Zuckerberg, is that it provides the infrastructure to "bring the world closer together." Through platforms like Facebook and Facebook-owned Instagram, we can interact more often with more people, and across greater geographical distances than ever before. Nevertheless, thanks to the atomistic social arrangements that dominate the rest of our lives, people tend to dwell mostly within their own little cliques, reinforcing their previously held notions of good politics, taste, etc.

More alarming however, is what might be termed the paradox of neoliberal social retreat: although people gravitate to social media in order to *feel* connected, social media, and Instagram in particular, has a tendency to make people *feel worse about themselves*. Instagram's genius in distributing bad feelings across a vast social network is particularly revealing, as Instagram is typically considered to be the most upbeat social-media venue on offer—not the platform of massive owns and pile-ons. Indeed, the Instagram platform is host to a large crew of wildly popular posters of positive and reassuring content, such as pretty food and easily digestible poetry.

Neoliberalism has not only given us crippling anxiety, but also its apparent remedy.

However, it turns out that this kind of content tends to make viewers feel alienated—by the ever-competitive logic of capitalist emotional display, even the feel-good content featured on Instagram breeds a perverse sort of invidious malaise, with each new post about an excellent meal leaving a powerful residual sense that the onlookers' own lives are acutely lacking in the material to generate similarly celebratory posts. And yet, in another brilliant stroke of cloistral neoliberal mood marketing, the feelings of insufficiency that Instagram fosters in many of its users are exactly what make Instagram positivity all the more appealing to them. Feeling blue? Why not scroll through some non-challenging four-line poems and a pleasing table setting?

Anxiety, and especially depression, as the late social critic Mark Fisher noted, often have social causes, but we are led to believe that we suffer individually and must struggle alone. Fisher's point is that we are prevented from even considering such conditions as social. The treatments on offer, the most common ways to discuss recovery—therapy and pharmaceuticals—are essentially solo journeys that patients undertake. Against this hyper-individualist vision of psychic healing, we do well to highlight Fisher's core insight that the tools we are given skew how we understand the world and our place in it. Language, typically the most essential method by which we articulate our affective life, can be a most insidious means of our own oppression if co-opted by those who would exploit us.

There is a reason why re-emergent words and phrases like "solidarity," "class consciousness," "mass movement," "organize," and "collective struggle," sound old-fashioned and in need of a good dusting-off. They didn't simply fall out of vogue; they were aggressively obsolesced in our everyday lives by a variety of interests—employers, corporations hungrily eyeing public assets—determined to alienate us from each other in the interest in marketizing our souls for their own benefit. In return, they bestowed to us a self-oriented language of supposed care, that was never really meant to liberate us from the sources of our anxiety and depression. It's only there to blunt the pain temporarily—long enough to enable us to move on to the next TaskRabbit assignment, Uber client, or briskly managed election cycle.

IDEOLOGY, CONFRONTATION AND POLITICAL SELF-AWARENESS

Adrian Piper

We started out with beliefs about the world and our place in it that we didn't ask for and didn't question. Only later, when those beliefs were attacked by new experiences that didn't conform to them, did we begin to doubt: e.g., do we and our friends really understand each other? Do we really have nothing in common with blacks/whites/ gays/workers/the middle class/other women/other men/etc.?

Doubt entails self-examination because a check on the plausibility of your beliefs and attitudes is a check on all the constituents of the self. Explanations of why your falsely supposed "X" includes your *motives* for believing "X" (your desire to maintain a relationship, your impulse to be charitable, your goal of becoming a better person); the causes of your believing "X" (your early training, your having drunk too much, your innate disposition to optimism); and your *objective reasons* for believing "X" (it's consistent with your other beliefs, it explains the most data, it's inductively confirmed, people you respect believe it). These reveal the traits and dispositions that individuate one self from another.

So self-examination entails self-awareness, i.e., awareness of the components of the self. But self-awareness is largely a matter of degree. If you've only had a few discordant experiences, or relatively superficial discordant experiences, you don't need to examine yourself very deeply in order to revise your false beliefs. For instance, you happen to have met a considerate, sensitive, nonexploitative person who's into sadism in bed. You think to yourself, "This doesn't show that my beliefs about sadists in general are wrong; after all, think what Krafft-Ebing says! This particular person is merely an exception to the general rule that sexual sadists are demented." Or you think, "My desire to build a friendship with this person is based on the possibility of reforming her/him (and has nothing to do with any curiosity to learn more about my own sexual tastes)." Such purely cosmetic repairs in your belief structure sometimes suffice to maintain your sense of self-consistency. Unless you are confronted with a genuine personal crisis, or freely choose to push deeper and ask yourself more comprehensive and disturbing questions about the genesis and justification of your own beliefs, your actual degree of self-awareness may remain relatively thin.

Usually the beliefs that remain most unexposed to examination are the ones we need to hold in order to maintain a certain conception of ourselves and our relation to the world. These are the ones in which we have the deepest personal investment. Hence these are the ones that are most resistant to revision; e.g., we have to believe that other people are capable of understanding and sympathy, of honorable and responsible behavior, in order not to feel completely alienated and suspicious of those around us.

Or: Some people have to believe that the world of political and social catastrophe is completely outside their control in order to justify their indifference to it.

Some of these beliefs may be true, some may be false. This is difficult to ascertain because we can only confirm or disconfirm the beliefs under examination with reference to other beliefs, which themselves require examination. In any event, the set of false beliefs that a person has a personal investment in maintaining is what I will refer to (following Marx) as a person's *ideology*.

Ideology is pernicious for many reasons. The obvious one is that it makes people behave in stupid, insensitive, self-serving ways, usually at the expense of other individuals or groups. But it is also pernicious because of the mechanisms it uses to protect itself, and its consequent capacity for self-regeneration in the face of the most obvious counterevidence. Some of these mechanisms are:

(1) The False-Identity Mechanism

In order to preserve your ideological beliefs against attack, you identify them as objective facts and not as beliefs at all. For example, you insist that it is just a fact that black people are less intelligent than whites, or that those on the sexual fringes are in fact sick, violent or asocial. By maintaining that these are statements of fact rather than statements of belief compiled from the experiences you personally happen to have had, you avoid having to examine and perhaps revise those beliefs. This denial may be crucial to maintaining your self-conception against attack. If you're white and suspect that you may not be all that smart, to suppose that at least there's a whole race of people you're smarter than may be an important source of self-esteem. Or if you're not entirely successful in coping with your own nonstandard sexual impulses, isolating and identifying the sexual fringe as sick, violent or asocial may serve the very important function of reinforcing your sense of yourself as "normal."

The fallacy of the false-identity mechanism as a defense of one's ideology consists in supposing that there exist objective social facts that are not constructs of beliefs people have about each other.

(2) The Illusion of Perfectibility

Here you defend your ideology by convincing yourself that the hard work of self-scrutiny has an end and a final product, i.e., a set of true, central and uniquely defensible beliefs about some issue; and that you have in fact achieved this end, hence needn't subject your beliefs to further examination. Since there is no such final product, all of the inferences that supposedly follow from this belief are false. Example: You're a veteran of the anti-war movement and have developed a successful and much-lauded system of draft-avoidance counseling, on which your entire sense of self-worth is erected. When it is made clear to you that such services primarily benefit the middle class—that this consequently forces much larger proportions of the poor, the uneducated and blacks to serve and be killed in its place—you resist revising your views in light of this information on the grounds that you've worked on and thought hard about these issues, have developed a sophisticated critique of them, and therefore have no reason to reconsider your opinions or efforts. You thus treat the prior experience of having reflected deeply on some issue as a defense against the self-reflection appropriate now, that might uncover your personal investment in your anti-draft role.

(3) The One-Way Communication Mechanism

You deflect dissents, criticisms or attacks on your cherished beliefs by treating all of your own pronouncements as imparting genuine information, but treating those of other people as mere symptoms of some moral or psychological defect. Say you're committed to feminism, but have difficulty making genuine contact with other women. You dismiss all arguments

advocating greater attention to lesbian and separatist issues within the women's movement on the grounds that they are maintained by frustrated man-haters who just want to get their names in the footlights. By reducing questions concerning the relations of women to each other to pathology or symptoms of excessive self-interest, you avoid confronting the conflict between your intellectual convictions and your actual alienation from other women, and therefore the motives that might explain this conflict. If these motives should include such things as deep-seated feelings of rivalry with other women, or a desire for attention from men, then avoiding recognition of this conflict is crucial to maintaining your self-respect.

The one-way communication mechanism is a form of elitism that ascribes pure, healthy, altruistic political motives only to oneself (or group), while reducing all dissenters to the status of moral defectives or egocentric and self-seeking subhumans, whom it is entirely justified to manipulate or disregard, but with whom the possibility of rational dialogue is not to be taken seriously.

There are many other mechanisms for defending one's personal ideology. These are merely a representative sampling. Together, they all add up to what I will call the *illusion of omniscience*. This illusion consists in being so convinced of the infallibility of your own beliefs about everyone else that you forget that you are perceiving and experiencing other people from a perspective that is, in its own ways, just as subjective and limited as theirs. Thus you confuse your personal experiences with objective reality, and forget that you have a subjective and limited *self* that is selecting, processing and interpreting your experiences in accordance with its own limited capacities. You suppose that your perceptions of someone are truths about her or him; that your understanding of someone is comprehensive and complete. Thus your self-conception is not demarcated by the existence of other people. Rather, you appropriate them into your self-conception as psychologically and metaphysically transparent objects of your consciousness. You ignore their ontological independence, their psychological opacity, and thereby their essential personhood. The illusion of omniscience resolves into the fallacy of solipsism.

The result is blindness to the genuine needs of other people, coupled with the arrogant and dangerous conviction that you understand those needs better than they do; and a consequent inability to respond to those needs politically in genuinely effective ways.

The antidote, I suggest, is confrontation of the sinner with the evidence of the sin: the rationalizations; the subconscious defense mechanisms; the strategies of avoidance, denial, dismissal and withdrawal that signal, on the one hand, the retreat of the self to the protective enclave of ideology, on the other hand, precisely the proof of subjectivity and fallibility that the ideologue is so anxious to ignore. This is the concern of my recent work of the past three years.

The success of the antidote increases with the specificity of the confrontation. And because I don't know you I can't be as specific as I would like. I can only indicate general issues that have specific references in my own experience. But if this discussion has made you in the least degree self-conscious about your political beliefs or about your strategies for preserving them; or even faintly uncomfortable or annoyed at my having discussed them; or has raised just the slightest glimmerings of doubt about the veracity of your opinions, then I will consider this piece a roaring success. If not, then I will just have to try again, for my own sake. For of course I am talking not just about you, but about *us*.

USES OF ANGER: Women Responding to Racism

Audre Lorde

Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism

RACISM. The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied.

WOMEN RESPOND TO RACISM. My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also.

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal and co-option.

My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes. If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth. But for corrective surgery, not guilt.

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Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism

Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures.

Because I do not want this to become a theoretical discussion, I am going to give a few examples of interchanges between women that illustrate these points. In the interest of time, I am going to cut them short. I want you to know there were many more.

For example:

I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.' But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?

The women's studies programme of a southern university invites a Black woman to read following a week-long forum on Black and white women. 'What has this week given to you?' I ask. The most vocal white woman says, 'I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from.' As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem.

After fifteen years of a women's movement which professes to address the life concerns and possible futures of all women, I still hear, on campus after campus, 'How can we address the issues of racism? No women of colour attended.' Or, the other side of that statement, 'We have no one in our department equipped to teach their work.' In other words,

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racism is a Black women's problem, a problem of women of colour, and only we can discuss it.

After I read from my work entitled 'A Poem for Women in Rage' a white woman asks me: 'Are you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with *our* anger? I feel it's so important.' I ask, 'How do you use *your* rage?' And then I have to turn away from the blank look in her eyes, before she can invite me to participate in her own annihilation. I do not exist to feel her anger for her.

White women are beginning to examine their relationships to Black women, yet often I hear them wanting only to deal with little coloured children across the roads of childhood, the beloved nursemaid, the occasional second-grade classmate – those tender memories of what was once mysterious and intriguing or neutral. You avoid the childhood assumptions formed by the raucous laughter at Rastus and Alfalfa, the acute message of your mommy's handkerchief spread upon the park bench because I had just been sitting there, the indelible and dehumanizing portraits of Amos 'n' Andy and your daddy's humorous bedtime stories.

I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, mommy, a baby maid!' And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and disease.

A white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection

by non-Black women of colour. 'It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women,' she says to me.

At an international cultural gathering of women, a well-known white American woman poet interrupts the reading of the work of women of colour to read her own poem, and then dashes off to an 'important panel'.

If women in the academy truly want a dialogue about racism, it will require recognizing the needs and the living contexts of other women. When an academic woman says, 'I can't afford it,' she may mean she is making a choice about how to spend her available money. But when a woman on welfare says 'I can't afford it' she means she is surviving on an amount of money that was barely subsistence in 1972, and she often does not have enough to eat. Yet the National Women's Studies Association here in 1981 holds a conference in which it commits itself to responding to racism, yet refuses to waive the registration fee for poor women and women of colour who wished to present and conduct workshops. This has made it impossible for many women of colour – for instance, Wilmette Brown, of Black Women for Wages for Housework – to participate in this conference.

Is this to be merely another case of the academy discussing life within the closed circuits of the academy?

To the white women present who recognize these attitudes as familiar, but most of all, to all my sisters of colour who live and survive thousands of such encounters – to my sisters of

Audre Lorde

colour who like me still tremble their rage under harness, or who sometimes question the expression of our rage as useless and disruptive (the two most popular accusations) – I want to speak about anger, my anger, and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions.

everything can be used
except what is wasteful
(you will need
to remember this when you are accused of destruction.)
from 'For Each of You'

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.

I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of colour who talks about racism.

But anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this trans-

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lation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.

Anger is loaded with information and energy. When I speak of women of colour, I do not only mean Black women. The woman of colour who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy. And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed.

In this place we speak removed from the more blatant reminders of our embattlement as women. This need not blind us to the size and complexities of the forces mounting against us and all that is most human within our environment. We are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit. Women responding to racism is a topic so dangerous that when the local media attempt to discredit this conference they choose to focus upon the provision of lesbian housing as a diversionary device – as if the *Hartford Courant* dare not mention the topic chosen for discussion here, racism, lest it become apparent that women are in fact attempting to examine and to alter all the repressive conditions of our lives.

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Audre Lorde

Mainstream communication does not want women, particularly white women, responding to racism. It wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like evening time or the common cold.

So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred levelled against all women, people of colour, lesbians and gay men, poor people, against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving towards coalition and effective action.

Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here.

And while we scrutinize the often painful face of each other's anger, please remember that it is not our anger which makes me caution you to lock your doors at night and not to wander the streets of Hartford alone. It is the hatred which lurks in those streets, that urge to destroy us all if we truly work for change rather than merely indulge in academic rhetoric.

This hatred and our anger are very different. Hatred is the

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fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change. But our time is getting shorter. We have been raised to view any difference other than sex as a reason for destruction, and for Black women and white women to face each other's angers without denial or immobility or silence or guilt is in itself a heretical and generative idea. It implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around our difference. For it is those distortions which separate us. And we must ask ourselves: Who profits from all this?

Women of colour in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.

Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change. To those women here who fear the anger of women of colour more than their own unscrutinized racist attitudes, I ask: Is the anger of women of colour more threatening than the woman hatred that tinges all aspects of our lives?

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It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment.

I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.

Most women have not developed tools for facing anger constructively. Consciousness-raising groups in the past, largely white, dealt with how to express anger, usually at the world of men. And these groups were made up of white women who shared the terms of their oppressions. There was usually little attempt to articulate the genuine differences between women, such as those of race, colour, age, class, and sexual identity. There was no apparent need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor. There was work on expressing anger, but very little on anger directed against each other. No tools were developed to deal with other women's anger except to avoid it, deflect it, or flee from it under a blanket of guilt.

I have no creative use for guilt, yours or my own. Guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices, out of the approaching storm that can feed the earth as well as bend the trees. If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your head and shot you down in the street; I have not looked at your bleeding sister's body and asked, 'What did she do to deserve it?' This was the reaction of two white women to Mary Church Terrell's telling of the lynching of a pregnant Black woman whose baby was then torn from her body. That was in 1921, and Alice Paul had just refused to publicly endorse the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment for all women – by refusing to endorse the inclusion of women of colour, although we had worked to help bring about that amendment.

The angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves against the manner of saying. When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar. I have tried to learn my anger's usefulness to me, as well as its limitations.

For women raised to fear, too often anger threatens annihilation. In the male construct of brute force, we were taught that our lives depended upon the goodwill of patriarchal power. The anger of others was to be avoided at all costs because there was nothing to be learned from it but pain, a judgment that we had been bad girls, come up lacking, not

done what we were supposed to do. And if we accept our powerlessness, then of course any anger can destroy us.

But the strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing up to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth.

My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapour. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in my experience and the experience of my people only new reasons for fear or guilt. And my anger is no excuse for not dealing with your blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of your own actions.

When women of colour speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are 'creating a mood of hopelessness', 'preventing white women from getting past guilt', or 'standing in the way of trusting communication and action'. All these quotes come directly from letters to me from members of this organization within the last two years. One woman wrote, 'Because you are Black and Lesbian, you seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering.' Yes, I am Black and lesbian, and what

you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference.

To turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation is to award no one power – it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact. Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning. But that time is over. My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I'm going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity.

What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

I am a lesbian woman of colour whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of colour whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the

woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or for further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of colour remains chained. Nor is any one of you.

I speak here as a woman of colour who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival. No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman. I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter. We are not goddesses or matriarchs or edifices of divine forgiveness; we are not fiery fingers of judgment or instruments of flagellation; we are women forced back always upon our woman's power. We have learned to use anger as we have learned to use the dead flesh of animals, and bruised, battered, and changing, we have survived and grown and, in Angela Wilson's words, we *are* moving on. With or without uncoloured women. We use whatever strengths we have fought for, including anger, to help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman's difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction.

For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends more than sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices.

We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.

ARTISTS ANONYMISED

This month's interviewee is an artist in their late twenties living in London

How do you support your art practice?

Mainly by working as an assistant to an artist. Luckily I really respect and enjoy working for her. Occasionally I pick up ad hoc un-art bits when necessary – bar work or working as an extra in films. I'm only able to maintain this (zero hours situation + art practice)/ London, because of family support.

How much time do you manage to spend making work?

Difficult to say – my practice is quite wide so I consider a lot of different activities to contribute towards 'making work'. In terms of physically making in the studio, this varies to fit around paid work and depending on if I have a deadline coming up, or if I have enough cash/reason to invest in materials. It feels hard to invest without a 'purposeful' end.

What support (either financial or emotional) has helped you sustain your practice so far?

My family and my partner are very understanding. My family is from London, so I have been really privileged to be able to live with them, which is a huge financial relief. Friends and peers have also contributed varied and generous support – from being a network of opportunities to being the sympathetic ear of someone in the same boat.

How has your identity impacted your experience of the art world?

This is tricky to answer as I am mixed race but sometimes(?) white passing. I am still learning and trying to understand where my identity places me in the (art) world as people's perception varies so widely – I think this is something a lot of mixed or white passing POC might find complicated. Sometimes when I do get into situations *under the radar*, it can be sobering to observe attitudes floating around. Sometimes it means there's room to push back from the inside.

With regards to making work, it can feel like a lose-lose. It is an important part of my practice to include biographical elements, which as a mixed race person obviously involve different cultural references. It is always a fear that this allows the work to become exoticised or used to tick a diversity box. However, to omit this part of the work would be an act of self-censorship and a denial of my heritage. I haven't resolved this.

How do you negotiate making within the politics of the art world? (Does it inform your making/ distract you from it?)

It feels increasingly incapacitating – not just the politics of the art world but of the general world. I think a lot of issues of the art world are not necessarily resolvable from the inside – they require wider systematic socio-political change. It can be difficult to concentrate on or prioritise making art, knowing what is happening to people – in this country and abroad. And that's before even starting to consider the environment. Art making can often superficially feel frivolous. It takes a lot of effort to remember that art does have the potential to make things better.

What sustains you as an artist and keeps you making work?

It is the awareness that the work or the process can be a catalyst to make a situation better. I've encountered evidence of this on a personal level, and in the context of a wider community, particularly in relation to coping with trauma, grief and loneliness. Making, facilitating, collaborating, showing and looking at art can make bridges between people.

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