Dark offices of reverie:

Romanticism in the work of Josef Strau

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A thesis submitted to

the faculty of the graduate program at the

Center for Curatorial Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Curatorial Studies

Bard College

2016

Such changes of light exposure, especially when in a diminishing trajectory, often come with a sensation of excitement, even an illusionary presentiment of something…Something, yes, but what that smooth sensation felt like, within the deeper levels of one's interior, is so difficult to say…

– Josef Strau, *Dreaming Turtle*

I.

Viewers of *Don't Climb the Pyramids*, Josef Strau's 2006 exhibition at Greene Naftali Gallery in New York, would have found themselves in the midst of fifteen floor lamps congregating, herd-like, in an otherwise bare space. [Plate 1] These "reading lamps," as Strau terms them, are constructed from second-hand and store-bought lamps in styles ranging from classic brass frames with waffled shades, to utilitarian office lamps and knock-off Noguchi lanterns. Each has been altered slightly, granted minor adjustments that usher them from the realm of the readymade and assist them, so to speak, into the idiosyncratic syntax of Strau's practice. Some have been haphazardly spliced together, others painted with white-out or adorned with coils of wire. Ribbons tether and trail many, like so many leashes, and power cords trace knotted paths. Significantly, all incorporate language: texts are sutured to lampshades or slipped beneath bases; brief messages—"THE (non-profit) IDIOT" reads one—dangle on paper tags; in some cases, small speakers emit tinny recordings of these texts, spoken in a computer's monotone. In the aptly titled "JS," an exposed light bulb cranes over a table-like construction bearing the artist's initials. In this coy take on self-presentation, Strau literally illuminates artistic subjectivity while registering it as trademark, impressing the marker of authorship upon the very surface of the object it yields. [Plate 2] The overall effect of the exhibition is one of encountering a surplus of substance that has been composed with the lightest of touch: the productive fervor of accumulation—culling, scribbling, piling—tempered by the insouciance of its construction and presentation, which is haphazard, drifting, lyrical. In the precarious symbiosis between object

and language that results, the dual notions of "reading lamp" and "illuminated text" take on new meaning.

In one work, *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp* (2006), a sheet of handwritten text is secured to the lamp's metal arm, fastened by a plastic hair clip. [Plate 3] Scripted messily on the reverse of the exhibition's poster, it suggests its own harried, last minute execution—a penchant for illegibility and procrastination that is deeply embedded in Strau's approach to production. The first of two texts recorded on this page recounts a rupture in Strau's writing that occurred in the early 2000s, reading:

> One day I was typing an article. I did it as usual comparing others searching reference, trying to be accurate without talent for it. I wanted to be theoretical…I had not done any diary experience other before. Just a few hours were left to send my article I started to think maybe it is time to do the opposite of what I expected myself to do, the essaistic thing. I just started to move my fingers over the keys and I wrote whatever things It was dark and freezing in room… that night I stared writing fast into the keys. Like escape forever. It wrote like…the robins whisper…[1]

As he narrates this shift from a theoretically-inclined art writing he had practiced professionally in the 1990s as a critic, gallerist, and sometimes-artist (the "essaistic thing") to a first-person, confessional mode (the "diary experience"), he performs the transition within the text that here explains its emergence. His tone becomes increasingly poetic and obtuse; the tempo of his labor quickens, precisely as it sheds its measured editorial rigor. In his telling, this shift—what we might call a poetic break—descended *upon* him, mythically and unannounced, to release him from analytical demands. Here, he passes this dual experience of emancipation and bewilderment along to his reader.

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[1] Josef Strau, "Chapter 4 Lamp," *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp*, 2006, Mixed media lamp, 60 x 18 x 24 inches.

Beneath this passage, Strau continues into "The mirror," an account of glimpsing his reflection after a debaucherous night and being confronted with an "unknown face," that of a "bohemian." He writes: "…never I thought, I myself would ever experience the vie de boheme or anything like that, and for less, it's certain, did I think then, that this myself would suddenly assume the uncanny form of a bohemian in the mirror…"[2] This happens to be extracted from "The Eye of Decay," an essay written five years earlier to accompany an exhibition by Josephine Pryde.[3] "The Eye of Decay" is in fact the exact essay to which he refers in *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp*; intended to be a standard theoretical text, it instead precipitated a descent into the rabbit hole of his inner voice. The streams of language that have since sprung forth from it—unrevised and decidedly unpolished—have formed the heart of Strau's practice of the last fifteen years. Reams of typed or handwritten passages are pasted to canvas, placed inside rickety cardboard structures, stacked into piles, and, in a signature move, adhered to or dangled from unassuming lamps. Habitually repeated within and between exhibitions, so that present and past tenses become difficult to parse, they crescendo into what critic Joanna Fiduccia has called a "logorrheic din," dizzying in its sheer quantity and acutely, even embarrassingly, intimate in the sincere and poetic tone of its component passages.[4] In these, the mystical and theoretical are filtered through the silt of personal memory: turning on a lamp, boarding a train, walking home from school. In exposing typically private anxieties and commonplaces, they display unusual transparency; nevertheless, his practice is opaque, rife with contradiction and ambiguity. It overwhelms, gives pause.

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[2] Josef Strau, "The mirror," *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp*, 2006, Mixed media lamp, 60 x 18 x 24 inches.
[3] Josef Strau,"Das Auge der Verswesung/The Eye of Decay," in *Josephine Pryde, Serena* (Braunschweig: Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2001), 50-55.
[4] Joanna Fiduccia, "Josef Strau," *Artforum 47* (December 2008), n. pag.

For instance, in this one exhibition we have an abundance of lamps, ribbons, and text. We have a conflicted but persistent first-person voice—a subjectivity that illuminates its own initials but cannot identify its face in the mirror. In turn, we have the unrecognizable "bohemian" who peers back at Strau—a bohemian detectable as such precisely because of his abstraction as a stereotype whose contours determine, but, unrecognizable, don't quite match Strau's. We have production that is copious but precarious, dilatory. In the texts, we have extreme specificity and extensive redundancy. And, we have a dialectic between darkness and light, both literally and metaphorically. It appears literally in the strict on/off allowed by the lamps, which exist always in anticipation of either darkness or light, as well as references to the night—partying, working, dreaming—and the interstitial moments of dawn, dusk, and shadow that appear in his texts. Metaphorically, the night arises as a sustained tension between the dim depths of the inner realm and Strau's protracted efforts to illuminate them. I'd offer that this exhibition encapsulates not only the visual proclivities of Strau's practice, but distills his most significant concerns: artistic production and subjectivity, the two core issues around and through which Strau constellates his material.

Strau's position on these two problematics is vague. As evidenced in *Don't Climb the Pyramids*, he often bounces between the outer limits of binaries between productivity and non-productivity, a centered authorial voice and one threatened by material and psychological displacement. Even more habitually, he occupies a puzzling grey area in between. Touching on vast questions regarding what it means to "make" art or "be" an artist, these binaries are not only steeped in a legacy of Western art, but also intersect with capitalist imperatives towards productivity and atomized individuality, or, alternatively, attempts at their subversion. They found pointed expression in the artistic milieu of Cologne, Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, of

which Strau was a central figure. There, these binaries underwrote efforts towards critical action by means of *inaction*—what Strau termed a "non-productive attitude"—and concurrent endeavors to undermine the figure of the unique, heroic artist. This essay first revisits his "non-productive" activities in Cologne before turning to consider his subsequent transformation as an artist—a transformation that scrambles these binaries for the simple fact that, as recounted in *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp*, he began reintroducing both production and subjectivity. The first surfaces in his immense linguistic and material output, the second in his persistent use of what I'd like to suggest as a Romantic paradigm of artistic subjectivity. In effect, Strau methodically unravels the critical work of his early years, to beguiling if nebulous ends.

The final section inquires into the Romantic nature of Strau's work and is motivated by the following question: how might Strau's invocation of Romanticism be understood not as a nostalgic capitulation to past aesthetic paradigms, but instead as a tool for surpassing the very binaries between productivity and passivity, stable subjectivity and its dissolution, which have become the defining interpretive parameters of his work? I'd offer that the "night," itself a Romantic thematic, aids in this task. Read broadly to encompass metaphors of light and dark, modalities of dreaming or sleeplessness, and the roles of the visionary poet-prophet and dreamer (whom we first glimpse as the bohemian in the mirror), the night assists in rethinking these binaries as dialectics, which, eschewing final synthesis, offer Strau's liminal position itself as a way out.

II.

O, Laziness, mother of the arts and the noble virtues…!
– Paul Lafargue, *The Right To Be Lazy*

From the late 1980s through the 1990s, Cologne housed several conflicting artistic tendencies, split by fissures between established artists such as Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, Georg Herold and Martin Kippenberger, and a younger generation that, updating strategies of dematerialization inherited from conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s, shifted focus from the construction of objects towards the theoretical and socioeconomic frameworks through which artistic subjectivity and artworks accrue value. Overlapping approaches coincide within this second generation, which is roughly divisible by factions of artists such as Christian Phillip Müller and Andrea Fraser who practiced a "Kontext Kunst" involved in the critique of institutions; others such as Michael Krebber who interrogated artistic taste and agency through so-called "provisional" or "bad" painting; or those such as Jutta Koether who, influenced by Kippenberger, inscribed their work into social matrices, and vice versa."[5] These artists congregated around Galeries Christian Nagel, Daniel Buchholz, and Friesenwall 120, an artist-run space helmed by Strau, along with Stephen Dillemuth, Nils Norman, and Merlin Carpenter, from 1990 to 1994.[6]

Despite their differences, a common investment in the Marxist-tinged critique of extant models of artistic practice—models most urgently evidenced by the fiercely individualistic, romanticized, and largely male neo-expressionist painters that dominated the 1980s art world—

[5] For a discussion of "networked painting," and its presence in Cologne, see David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (2009), 125-34.
[6] Bennett Simpson, "Make Your Own Life," in *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Philadelphia, 2006), 12.

subtends these activities.[7] From this stance followed what curator Bennett Simpson notes as a persistent concern with "critical self-construction," which he elaborates in an essay accompanying the 2006 exhibition *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* at the ICA Philadelphia, writing, "each of these artists carve out space for exploring the decisions and assumptions entailed by the words 'artist' and 'art work'" and therefore, "Cologne, in this sense, provides us with a model context for reflecting on the possibilities of artistic agency. It is a context created by artists creating themselves."[8] In other words, there was an attempt to remake the artist's role along new ideological fault lines, while glancing self-critically at the performance of subjectivity this effort engendered.

One such strategy was to relinquish the unit of the individual artist and production of discreet artworks altogether, by means of what Strau has termed the "non-productive attitude," in which the solitary construction of objects was supplanted by the public performance of lived social narratives. Strau described this attitude in a 2006 essay, writing:

> It was maybe a kind of transformed fetishism attitude to live the social life of an artist without actually producing any art, or at least without presenting any art. On the one hand, the motives of this attitude could have been simple fear of representation; but on the other, they could have announced a desire to practice in a radical consequence what many theories suggested by the death of an author- or producer-subjectivity.[9]

The achievement of this non-productivity arose through "laziness, indecisiveness, inability or refusal of production as a result of talking too much before doing."[10] Iconoclastic, this tactical deferral displays a suspicion towards the material in favor of an ephemeral, post-studio, theatre

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[7] This critical perspective of this scene was simultaneously crystallized into a discursive framework by the newly founded *Texte zur Kunst*.
[8] Simpson, "Make Your Own Life," 11.
[9] Josef Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," in *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Philadelphia, 2006), 28.
[10] Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," 30.

of life—Bartleby's famous "I would prefer not to" transferred to the social settings of Cologne and recast into, as critic Stephanie Kleefeld notes, a vague distrust towards, even "non-belief" in, art itself.[11]

This non-productive tendency arises throughout Strau's fluid shifts amongst the roles of artist, critic, and gallerist, during the period in question, but is most aptly revealed by his involvement in Friesenwall 120. This space, which founder Stephen Dillemuth describes as a "bohemian research laboratory," refused standard gallery practices (nothing was for sale, they did not represent artists) in order to rethink those of the artist, by "creating confusing situations, without authorship or art objects playing any role in that."[12] In Strau's words, it was an arena for playing with "non-productive oral statements and fragments of work," and welcoming "chaos, vagueness, indifference."[13] Collective or anonymous authorship prevailed. One early exhibition consisted simply of new car tires; unattributed to any individual artist, it was less a tactic of appropriation (à la Richard Prince), than an incongruous presentation of goods. Others displayed archival material, much of it fictional; largely, it functioned as a place "for just hanging out."[14]

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[11] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: a Story of Wall Street," in *Melville's Short Novels,* edited by Dan McCall (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001): 3-33.
Stefanie Kleefeld, "On credit: notes on the vogue for the 'artists's artist' phenomenon," *Texte zur Kunst* 71 (September 2008), 181.

[12] Quoted in Martin Beck and Stephen Dillemuth, "Different Experiences. Different Socialization: Martin Beck in Conversation with Stephan Dillemuth," in *To Expose, to Show, to Demonstrate, to Inform, to Offer. Künstlerische Praktiken Um 1990 Mumok, Wien*, edited by Matthias Michalka (Köln: König, Walther, 2015), 213.

[13] Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," 29, 31.

[14] Quoted in Martin Beck and Stephen Dillemuth, "Different Experiences. Different Socialization: Martin Beck in Conversation with Stephen Dillemuth," 213.

Eliding production with leisure within a dialogical register—often without concrete result—placed pressure on notions of work and authorship.[15] By thus expanding the artistic frame to include everyday interactions, this *non-productive attitude* faintly resembles avant-garde aspirations to meld art and life.[16] But, lacking utopian inclinations, its temperament more deeply resonates with a lineage of artistic disengagement, ("dropping out"), in order to question the problem of artistic labor itself.[17] In its flirtation with the blasé and a desire for the margin nonetheless expressed squarely from the center, the *non-productive attitude* aligns with the Baudelairean *flâneur* or dandy, who embodies the artistic impulse while casting a wary eye at the exertion required to manifest it concretely. In an odd turn, one bequest of Romanticism supplants another—the lone genius switched out for a bohemian who is nevertheless collectively authored, dubiously authentic, laundered through conceptualism, and never without the caveat that its role is just that: a *role* to rehearse, put on and take off at will.[18]

This bohemian non-productivity additionally parallels strains of Marxism seeking to dethrone what Jean Baudrillard terms "the sanctification of work"—a position espoused in Paul

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[15] I would argue that this lack of "result" points to an important difference between this mode of dematerialization and that of many conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, where the nomination and documentation of the occurrence was paramount.

[16] And therefore also displays certain parallels to the roughly contemporaneous Relational Aesthetics, and finds precedent in the earlier Fluxus movement.

[17] For an in depth look at modalities of artistic labor in relation to shifting work environments, specifically in the American context, see Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, edited by Helen Molesworth (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2003). Molesworth's discussion of Duchamp's foray into art dealing as a means of sustaining artistic non-productivity finds specific parallels with Strau's activities.

[18] To "put something on" or "take it up" connotes a performativity verging on the parodic, and is obviously quite different from having something visited *upon* you. It is in this sense that we can distinguish Strau's earlier involvement with bohemianism from the bohemian who confronts him, to his professed surprise, in the mirror.

Lafargue's 1883 "The Right To Be Lazy," and later among Marxist Autonomists.[19] For these thinkers, non-productivism surfaces as the horizon at which capital's logic might break; in light of this history, Strau's material withdrawal emerges as potentially oppositional. That said, production did occur—though casually and with disregard for conventions of quality or taste. Strau's object-based works during this time are seldom and always sliding away from constancy or positivity of gesture. For example, Strau collaborated with Cosima von Bonin on a 1990 exhibition for which they filled a gallery with thirty-two helium balloons, each emblazoned with the name of a prominent conceptual artist—such as Joseph Kosuth and Michael Asher—alongside their dates of birth and first solo show.[20] By literally inflating these names, Strau and von Bonin highlight the singular and fêted artist; in equal measure, they unsettle their own authorial positions, deflecting attention outwards towards networks of influence and affinity, while using provisional material form to do so. Balloons, of course, inevitably deflate.

The following year, Strau exhibited a suite of starry nightscapes cropped from Thomas Ruff photographs—themselves lifted from scientific telescopes—at Christian Nagel. [Plate 4] As Strau tells it, the pinpricks of light in these images visually echoed specks of caviar adhered to canvas in an earlier series by Georg Herold, for whom Strau had worked as an assistant. In this role, Strau was tasked with numbering, in miniscule hand-written numerals, each fish egg. The appropriated labor evidenced in the Nagel exhibition seems a rejoinder to the exacting

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[19] Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (Candor, NY: Telos Press Ltd., 1975), 36. For a broader history of anti-productivist thought, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[20] This was von Bonin's first solo exhibition, held at Ausstellungsraun Munzstrasse 10 in Hamburg. Into this canon of conceptual artists Strau and von Bonin also inserted entries for then lesser-known artists such as Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holzer. For further discussion, see Ann Goldstein, "All Birds Evacuate Horizontally," in *Cosima von Bonin: Roger and Out* (Los Angeles and Cologne: MOCA, Verlag der Buccandlung Walther Konig, 2007), 14.

fabrication Strau performed for Herold.[21] Nevertheless, the contemplative, even sublime, content of the images recuperates self-expression as patina. This push-pull between servility and production on the one hand, and authorship and passivity on the other, reverberates throughout Strau's ensuing practice. Both of these early exhibitions temper the hardline refusal with which Strau is often associated, elucidating a facet of the *non-productive attitude* shared by artists such as Krebber, Carpenter, and von Bonin, in which production and authorship occur, but languidly and by means of cascading semantic displacements or networked exchanges.

In sum, we find Strau practicing in this period an active (in his material inactivity) rejection of conventional modes of artistic production and authorship—situating himself more or less cleanly on the far side of binaries between productivity and non-productivity, individual subjectivity and its suspension, with which we started. It bears noting that, despite ostensible gestures towards autonomy from capitalist determination (by abstaining from making salable objects, or clouding their authorship), Strau's *non-productive attitude,* and the Cologne scene more broadly, mirrored a neoliberal agenda that was itself shifting the terms of production from the material to the immaterial, infiltrating not only the physical, but affective and linguistic registers.[22] Whether or not one understands the *non-productive attitude* as symptomatic, prescient, or cunningly complicit in these developments, attempts at foiling the socioeconomic status quo by emphasizing ephemerality or posture echoed the processes of commodification

[21] Conversation with the artist, January 2016.
[22] For further discussion, see Isabelle Graw, "Seen from here. On Mythos of Cologne, Heteronomy and Scenarios of Withdrawing and Dropping Out in the Face of the Increased Significance of Life," *Texte zur Kunst* 63 (September 2006). On the limits of critique in this context, see Merlin Carpenter, "The Tail that Wags the Dog," 2008, http://www.merlincarpenter.com/tail.htm.

they bucked. [23] Following this biopolitical turn, even bohemian idleness is rendered profitable. Strau himself addresses a related shortcoming, writing, "As usual, a liberating movement turned into a repressive force," and noting that the strategic performance of artistic persona cohered neatly into a path towards career legitimization.[24] It is this historical context—one in which relations of opposition between production and non-production, individual artistic subjectivity and its dissolution, were installed as the coordinates of a critical position that was itself slipping away—against which Strau's subsequent work, and its affiliations with Romanticism, should be considered.

III.

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom…
- William Blake*, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Strau relocated to Berlin in the late 1990s, where he ran the Galerie Meerrettich from 2002 to 2006 in a glass pavilion tucked in the former box office of a theatre. Of this he states: "In the beginning, the idea was that Galerie Meerrettich would be a public vitrine without gallerist: a glass box just for the passerby. There were already enough art spaces with a social function, so I pictured it more like a 'cold' object display."[25] Distance from his earlier activities is clearly implied. Concurrently, his use of language shifted on several fronts. It moved from a theoretical

[23] In the words of art historian Lane Relyea, "they seem to not oppose the dominant system but 'surf' its leading edge…." For an extended critique of the Cologne scene, see Lane Relyea, "Your Art World: Or, The Limits of Connectivity," *Afterall*, Issue 14 (Autumn/Winter 2006), 73.
[24] Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," 29. One need only look to the institutional and market successes of many artists involved, and the dissemination of the *non-productive attitude* through commercially competitive New York-based galleries such as Reena Spaulings, Greene Naftali, and Real Fine Arts, in order to grasp these claims.
[25] Quoted in: Martin van Nieuwenhuyzen, "Interview with Josef Strau," *Stedelijk Museum Bulletin 6* (December 2006), 28-31.

to largely diaristic register; and, where the *non-productive attitude* emphasized the ephemeral conversation of social interaction, we begin to see this affective register instead materialized, tethered to the physical page and expanded into a multi-dimensional practice straddling the textual on the one hand and exactly that which he had previously avoided, on the other: objects. In 2004, he exhibited his first "reading lamp" at Meerrettich; another, titled "lamp for a Baudelaire-day in Berlin," appeared that same year at Daniel Buchholz. In 2006, he held his initial solo exhibitions of lamps at the apartment-gallery of Anna-Catharina Gebbers in Berlin. [Plate 5] Since 2000, and accelerating after 2006, he's held approximately twenty-four solo exhibitions; in sheer quantity alone, productivity was quite obviously reintroduced.

This productivity is dual in nature: it is material and linguistic, with these aspects combined—rather than opposed, as they were in Cologne—into loosely choreographed environments with marked accents on the cumulative and aggregative rather than the condensed or revised. Take, for example, the myriad elements that converge in *18INIQITIES,* a 2008 exhibition at Greene Naftali: letter-shaped cardboard tunnels wind throughout, small speakers project spoken texts, typed posters form messy piles, "reading lamps" dot the space, and white canvases line the walls—some pasted with text, others with fake pearls, or littered with small, shakily painted letters. [Plate 6] Several works are recycled from a show presented just prior at Malmö Konsthall, in some cases revised or amended. According to the press release, the exhibition endeavors to redeem the "iniquity" of Strau's Malmö show; within the exhibited texts themselves, notions of lamentation and confession abound.[26]

This feverish productivity recurs frequently. For instance, in "*the,,why does this all happen to me?" experience,* a 2010 exhibition at House of Gaga in Mexico City, accumulation is

[26] Greene Naftali Gallery, Josef Strau, *18INIQITIES* (New York, NY: Greene Naftali Gallery, 2008), Press release.

concentrated on the gallery's perimeter: posters alternate with canvases dotted with color; just in front of these, Strau has shepherded remnants of ironwork fencing and lamps fused with metal scraps, draped with chains, and adorned with tags of text. [Plate 7] A swath of black mesh sits, isolated, in the center of the gallery, displaying pieces from Strau's ongoing jewelry-making project: necklaces assembled from store-bought chains, collars, and clasps, spliced together with dog tags. [Plate 8] No matter how humble the origins, in the gleam of this metal and the weight of its symbolic charge (jewelry being, of course, a premier luxury commodity), Strau seems to dissociate himself, definitively, from any former material withdrawal. Several of the necklaces are inscribed with the following message: "If you don't know where to go follow the footsteps of your sheep even if they pasture in a faraway land." This reads as meta-commentary on Strau's practice itself, which balances following with leading, corruption with redemption, and most definitely finds itself, by means of a semi-conscious decision predicated on poetic revelation rather than analytic maneuvering (a proverbial following of his sheep), in new territory, or a "faraway land."

Both of these exhibitions, and countless others, are premised on material generosity: they *give* rather than refuse, to the point of excess—excess here suggesting that which doubles back on, even overflows itself. In its excess, this production is precarious, uneven, occasionally redundant, and more connected to an attitude of non-productivity than the sheer amount of *stuff* employed would suggest. Firstly, the deluge of language presented in these exhibitions, let alone his practice as a whole, poses a Sisyphean challenge to any reader (myself included) attempting to grasp its entirety; the intensification of Strau's output correlates to that of his viewer/reader's labor. Yet, as texts echo between and layer over one another, their narratives splintering, you might find yourself falling behind or reading in circles. In this sense, the effort he solicits absorbs

notes of non-productivity—despite being, I would argue, highly rewarding. Paradoxical, considering its habitually diaristic content, this linguistic excess performs as a defensive barrier of sorts—assuring that his writings, and in turn Strau himself, can only ever be known partially, in fragments.

Secondly, Strau's exhibitions are often conceived and constructed rapidly and at the last minute, a physical *écriture automatique* that undoes capitalist associations between the pre-meditated, rationalized implementation of production and its outcome. This procrastination extends the tactical deferral so central to the non-productive attitude, though action here *does* eventually occur. Like the pregnant pause before a note played, delay in fact amplifies the drama of the action it cedes to. Thirdly, many materials Strau employs—paper, cardboard, flea-market lamps, fake pearls, costume jewelry—are literally cheap and barely, if at all, altered. These coalesce into what one critic has called Strau's "throwaway economy," channeled into compositions providing singularity (and monetary value) to the texts for which they form the substrate. [27] Select texts are tethered to lamps, blemished with pen, adhered to canvases, or garlanded with pearls—in an offhand manner not unlike the casual maneuvers of his earlier "non-productive" works—distinguishing them from copies of the *same* text often available to take away.

In an interview with Dominic Eichler, he states: "...I think very much about the strange relationships between my life, my works and economics. I have explained works in economic terms, like I make texts, but I organize a trade system for it, which maintains the practice and writing financially, like transforming flea market lamps into a system of meaning and narratives

[27] David Everett Howe, "Josef Strau's Throwaway Economy," *Afterall*, May 17, 2012, http://www.afterall.org/online/josef-strau-s-throwaway-economy.

and producing financial value through this."[28] This strategic use of artistic "touch" (the fabled transformation of straw into gold) squarely fulfills his "refusal of production values" while sustaining his writing practice monetarily, however precariously.[29] Strau's material production is in this respect born from a marriage of necessity, as text *needs* object (expression needs production) as vehicle.[30] Yet, the rapport between material and linguistic production that Strau establishes exceeds straightforward economic explanation. It is not simply the *non-productive attitude* evolving, making begrudging concessions to financial reality; in fact, the surplus of Strau's material production would appear to disregard the logic of supply and demand—undercutting, to some extent, his own market.

Rather, his recent work demands new rubrics upon which to judge its merits, and Strau himself expresses frustration that non-productivity remains the predominant lens through with his work is read.[31] Upon finding lingering notes of inactivity, many critics in turn laud these as saving critical graces, and the irony of this incentive to produce non-productively in order to garner a stamp of "criticality" is not lost on Strau.[32] He cuts to the heart of this misconception in a 2012 text titled, with a hint of lament, "The Spirit of the Non Productive Attitude is

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[28] Dominic Eichler, "Out of Inconvenience: Josef Strau," *Mousse* 23 (May 2010), 35.
[29] Though Strau's market is not heightened to the extent of some of his Cologne peers, he is represented at multiple galleries including Greene Naftali (New York), House of Gaga (Mexico City), Vilma Gold (London), and Galerie Buchholz (Berlin, Cologne, New York).
[30] This codependence between the material and linguistic demonstrates that, despite capital's professed permeation of the linguistic realm, objects still incite compensation with a force that language itself cannot.
[31] Conversation with the artist, October 2015.
[32] For an example, see Domenic Ammirati, "Josef Strau at Greene Naftali," *Modern Painters* (September 2006), 101-102. Perhaps in response to this kind of interpretation, Strau recently wrote, with unusual acidity: "I have not done any of the things that seem to be my only legitimation in the exterior contemporary art world. To present such a text, it should be *self-reflexive* and reflect on the problems of production that it accompanies, and make transparent many of the often hidden issues of art production…" In Josef Strau, "Double-bar line," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 40.

Reappearing," writing, "The one thing I mostly wanted to say and what seemed to me was quite much lacking in the interpretations, good or bad, that I almost always meant it in a very spiritual or maybe better to except in a poetic way."[33] To (retrospectively) "mean" non-productivity *spiritually* and *poetically* suggests a reorientation of perspective, a turn from a stance of material withdrawal towards a murkier approach grounded in mystical frameworks and aesthetic paradigms of expressivity. As he states, "The non-productive attitude should be seen as a refusal of production values, but not as a refusal of expression as such."[34] This revision and attendant shift away from the *non-productive attitude* deposits us in a zone caught between production and refusal, authorship and its complication.

As evidenced in his Green Naftali and House of Gaga exhibitions, allusions to Judeo-Christian cycles of iniquity and absolution—as well as biblical figures such as Abraham, David and Joseph—abound.[35] Needless to say, these religious undertones resist the grain of much contemporary art discourse which, steeped in a historical materialism, is averse to idealism—explaining, perhaps, critics' recurrent desires to re-situate Strau's recent work under the banner of a critical non-productivity. Strau fuses these legacies, employing the divine metaphorically, though earnestly, to rethink the conditions of his own artistic production and subjectivity vis-a-vis the material world. Sin, confession, and redemption surface explicitly in a 2013 series in

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[33] Strau, "The Spirit of the Non Productive Attitude is Reappearing," http://gngallery.tumblr.com/post/26147948944/the-spririt-of-the-non-prodcutive-attitude-is, text accompanying the exhibition *Exercises ab Initio*, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2012.
[34] Strau, "The Non-Productive Attitude," 30.
[35] For example, a poster exhibited at Disjecta in Portland (2013) recalls how Strau's therapist once suggested he revisit the biblical stories of his Christian upbringing; by coincidence, he opened to the story of Joseph. He recounts the influence of that story in this work, writing: "Here the main point is the 17 year old josef wearing the special jacket and dreaming and walking down to meet his brothers…But he did not go the straight way he walked so strange, so long way around, just winning time for dreaming, not working, detours which made some pedestrians suspicious." Quite obvious parallels between Strau's biblical namesake and his own meandering, dilatory production—that of a dreamer—arise.

which textual fragments float atop a white background, composed, like concrete poems, into diverse shapes. Jewelry hardware (chains, hoops, clasps, aluminum rosettes) embellish their surfaces. In one, titled "Redemption, Fragments and Materials" [Plate 9] Strau writes:

> It might be asked if it is not true for at least certain artist or a certain art productions that the artist already aims before or during the production aims not the final perfect object or result or the product or production but the artist aims the redemption of the production. Plus that way of course understanding production as a necessary condition or necessary mediation of the great aim which is the redemption.[36]

This passage typifies Strau's manner of resituating theoretical concerns within a practice of poetic, automatic writing—merging the two, so that statements about his work become, in tone and presentation, its embodiment. On the level of content, it elucidates a shift of mindset in which material production is neither proscribed, nor tolerated as a necessary economic evil, but rather retooled as a means to a specific end, however ephemeral: redemption.

Recast as a constant working through, or "mediation," production is required in order to sublimate and redeem *itself*—as exemplified in the use of his 2008 show at Greene Naftali to pardon, so to speak, that at Malmö Konsthall. As he explains, the true source of this redemption is language:

> …I secretly believe, again in an almost biblical way, that the person who deals with writing, etc., is a very different one than the one who produces objects or images, if they are objects of idolatry. But only secretly, a contemporary 21st-centery translation of the heresies addressing problems strictly related to iconoclasm is quite significant again, describing newly and mysteriously how these objects of idolatry can sometimes, in a very indirect way, corrupt the life of the producer and owner and how the text is instead a medium for true redemption.[37]

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[36] Strau, "Redemption, Fragments and Materials," 2013, Mounted C-print, medium gel and various metal objects, 16 ½ x 12 inches.

[37] Dominic Eichler, "Out of Inconvenience: Josef Strau," *Mousse* 23 (May 2010), 35. Elsewhere Strau states: "When one of the memories is going to be determined as text, recorded for the offices of diary, according to the aims of the imaginary offices of redemption, its aim should be

This outlook finds clear roots in the iconoclasm of the *non-productive attitude*, but also partakes of a Judeo-Christian tradition stemming from the Old Testament, in which words, deemed holier, take precedence over images.[38] While aligned with a Calvinist refutation of imagery, Strau's practice is a far cry from any Protestant work ethic. Rather, Strau's n*on-productive attitude* is recast along the lines of a Catholic body/soul divide, and its attendant renunciation of the sensual in favor of the illocutionary and evanescent.[39] If, in the Catholic tradition, it is the spoken confession that absolves the sinner, we might see Strau's physical objects as confessional booths—vehicles through which to proliferate a confessional language. Regarding Rousseau's *Confessions,* Paul de Man posits confession as mode of *excuse*; Strau's language likewise reaches back to "excuse" his own material production.[40] Never completely attaining that goal, this effort self-perpetuates, and any stable binary between "productivity" (as bad) and "non-productivity" (as good) is set adrift amidst a circular logic that turns on the vicissitudes of the confessional and expressive subject: the persistent, drifting "I."

As shown thus far, Strau typically employs a first-person voice that offers itself as an unedited transcription of the vagaries of passing thoughts, which come to him without

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redemption." Josef Strau, "Only One," in *The New World 1: The Application* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2014), 25.

[38] Josef Strau, "The Dream Exhibition," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 87.

[39] At the risk of psychologizing, it seems important to note that, having been born in 1957 in a post-war Vienna, Strau's fascination with Judeo-Christian mythology and cycles of sin and redemption–coupled with an ongoing tale of a emancipatory America versus a stifling Europe–might be seen as working through lingering trauma and guilt over the atrocities of a war to which his parents' generation was witness. This emerges explicitly in a series titled "Nazis of Suburbia," shown at Greene Naftali in 2002.

[40] Paul de Man, "Excuses (Confessions)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 281.

premeditation, by "coincidence."[41] His texts testify to the momentary overlap of various translucent planes: inspiration, mind, and paper crossing each other, briefly, to strike a tone intensely personal, digressive, and often peculiarly humorous. In one work he might jump, for example, from the story of a prior meeting, to the present tenor of light entering his bedroom, to city meanderings—all before alighting upon the memory of a friendly cat.[42] In this sense, they closely approximate a psychoanalytic practice of associative speech and the Surrealist *écriture automatique* it inspired—both of which unite, without judgment, the real and imaginary, familiar and uncanny, to unearth the unconscious self through which those connections form. As Michel Foucault famously argues in *The History of Sexuality*, Freud's talking cure transferred the Catholic confessional from the church to the analyst's couch, as both pose (supposedly) uninhibited speech as the means of drawing a forbidden and authentic self to the surface, in order to remedy or cleanse it.[43]

This attempt to offer unfettered access to subjectivity emerges in the intimate content of Strau's texts, as well as structurally, in his interdiction against revision and his almost exclusive use of English, rather than his native German. These self-inflicted impediments extend his former "non-productivity" (by simply making it harder to produce "well") and ensure he avoids the luxuries of correction or fluency, which might artificially refine his expression. Roland Barthes' notion of *gauche*, as introduced in reference to Cy Twombly, offers insight. He writes that Twombly's work "looks as if it had been drawn by his left hand. The French language is right-handed: what moves with a certain vacillation, what makes detours, which is clumsy,

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[41] Jacob Fabricius, "The Dissident Bible of Ethics – Die Krankheit zum Tode – An Interview," *Josef Strau: A Dissidence Coincidence but W.H.C.T.L.J.S.* (Malmo: Malmo Konsthall, 2008), 5.
[42] Josef Strau, "Encapsulated Spaces," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015).
[43] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988).

embarrassed, it calls *gauche*…"[44] We might see Twombly's metaphorical left handedness reflected in Strau's imprecise English. If Strau strips himself of advantages, it is not due to any confidence in the perfection of the authentic self that will be unveiled. Rather, he aims to expose, even amplify, the *gauche* irrationality and humiliation that results. In other words, there is more than a hint of penitence involved.

The penitence of confession emerges in "Diary," published alongside his 2015 exhibition at the Renaissance Society. In a characteristic doubling of genre, it is a journal entry that muses on diaristic writing; he writes:

> If it is true that modern art is not much more than a successful marketing strategy I still keep selling myself even to the diary, my ultimate father of confession, keep selling myself, even if the diary was an empty confession box only, in case it was the last possible chance to redeem and to be saved, or I rather should be there as an aestheticizing dandy and intellectual snob, a betraying trickster of me and my identity and cheat of the modern art strategy.[45]

Strau tepidly accepts success as premised on self-promotion and engages this exact game by placing his own subjectivity centrally: he is the author, subject and, frequently, the content of his works, in some instances venturing so far as to highlight his initials physically.[46] This might appear as the cynical exaggeration of contemporary habits of collecting and appraising art, in which an object's purchase doubles as symbolic acquisition of is producer—you buy "a Twombly," or see "a great Baselitz." Yet, Strau redirects this "marketing strategy" towards redemption by reframing it as confession, delivered with untiring sincerity of tone: his authorial

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[44] Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (Berkeley: U of California, 1991), 163.
[45] Strau, "Diary," in *The New World 1: The Application* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2014), 46.
[46] For example painting them on his sculptures, as in "JS" (2006) or building large tunnels or walls in the shape of the letters of his name.

voice is not deceptive or ironic, but candid, self-effacing. If he builds himself up, you can be sure it is on shaky foundations.

In the passage of "Diary" quoted above, sincerity transpires not only in the tone of the writing itself, but emerges explicitly as an effort to distance himself from the "betraying trickster" or "cheat"—modes of dandyism whose affectation was so central to the *non-productive attitude*. To be sure, Strau's work retains notes of a bohemian dandyism, evidenced in its emphasis on strolling and daydreaming. But, where his prior dandyism was premised on the performance of subjectivity, his new self-presentation is an exposure of self reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of *parrhesia,* which designates a transparent form of speech that is true because it is sincere (and vice versa) and therefore stands in diametrical opposition to the persuasive powers of the rhetorical.[47] If this essay seems to take Strau too readily at his word, it is because his work poses a distinct methodological dilemma stemming from exactly this profound candor. There is neither an externally verifiable or hidden truth to his work, nor any hint of critical slippage or negation. What remains is an internal, almost maddeningly idiosyncratic logic based in the divine, expressive, and poetic, which reflects, like a hall of mirrors, back upon itself.

In this sense, his works read as condensations of a voice that, like a vapor, flows between them, collapsing the space between internal and external speech, thought and enunciation. When reading Strau's work, one has the impression of reading *him*, or reading him read himself—an assumption of contiguity, like two sides of a sheet of paper, between the source of artistic voice and that which emerges from it. This appears as the exaggerated resurrection of what I'd like to suggest as a distinctly Romantic artistic subject, one who bears a metonymic relationship to the

[47] Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2008), 3.

work he or she creates—work that in turn stands as a trace, expression, or symbolic substitute of its author. This is the authorial subject that structuralist and post-structuralist theory, along with much art of the late twentieth century, threw into doubt: it is the subject that Roland Barthes declared dead, Jacques Lacan reframed as the sign of a lack, and Louis Althusser understood as interpellated, hailed into being by forces exceeding itself.[48] The Romantic subject—singular, heroic—is also that which Strau himself agitated against with his *non-productive attitude*, bringing us to a centered authorial subject situated on precisely the opposite side of the binary between subjectivity and its erasure with which we started.

As is often the case with Strau, it is not quite so cut and dry. He occasionally intimates the potentially fictional quality of his works, or likens himself to a messenger or conduit through which external voices filter. Even in "Diary," Strau equivocates on the authorial implications of his confessional position, stating that:

> …there is no I in this text there is actually not even one I who has written these sentences, it is maybe a typical I, the I which is projected from one subjectivity to the space of the city, echoed through it across them, returning to its own subjectivity, yes, sure…but it would all be completely useless…if it would…not include the investigation of dark other presences, like in this case the inclusion and following description of the dark offices of the angels and the demons who are drawn to involvement with anyone who is trying to write…[49]

Though Strau displaces authorship onto these "dark other presences," this disavowal is nevertheless delivered in the Romantic first-person voice against which it appears to sit so uncomfortably.[50] Critic Jay Sanders notes this conflicted authorship—one "administered in

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[48] These assaults each proclaim the subject as constructed laterally via the socioeconomic and ideological structures that surround it. In this counter-model, the subject never precedes, but is rather performed *through*, its own expression.

[49] Strau, "Diary," 56.

[50] In an interview with Martin van Nieuwenhuyzen, he states that his works "should not be perceived as purely personal," but rather understood within a larger conversation around authorship, "or what is the source of writing, before the theories of unconsciousness were

degrees"—writing that, "redemption…comes in the glimpses of relief when someone else takes the wheel. Other voices. Assistant efforts. Not quite transcendence, or even avoidance, but aid."[51] Mention of "aid" harkens back to Strau's time as an assistant in Cologne, and resonates throughout his recent work.

Strau has on occasion pondered the desire to "become one's own assistant,"[52] and this impulse finds literal manifestation in a 2008 series, in which he instructed a temporary assistant to paint the first letter of each word of a poem, as he dictated it aloud, atop grounds of dust and glue he had meticulously applied prior.[53] [Plate 10] In this reversal of role, the transmission of individual authorship is made arduous, shot through with inevitable absences. Elsewhere, he refers to himself—and the role of the artist more generally—as an assistant in a "greater imaginary or metaphysical office," or "bureaucrat of the labor of redemption."[54] The office of anonymous bureaucrats who monotonously transcribe, copy, and stamp has long stood as the symbolic opposite of a vision of the artist's studio (or desk) inherited from Romanticism—secluded, and from which expression emerges passionately, ex nihilo. We might see Strau's work as straddling these symbolic legacies, merging the bohemian poet with the petit-bourgeois paper-shuffler.[55]

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developed," and names Rousseau's *Confessions* as one such point of reference. Interestingly, *Confessions* is often considered a seminal work in the development of exactly the kind of Romantic literary subjectivity that Strau troubles by claiming his work as impersonal. See Martin van Nieuwenhuyzen, "Interview with Josef Strau," *Stedelijk Museum Bulletin 6* (December 2006), 28-31.

[51] Jay Sanders, "The New World Receiver," in *The New World 2: Travels in Turtle Island* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2015), 29.

[52] For example, see: Rowley Kennerk Gallery, Josef Strau, *Iniquities Suspend* (Chicago: Rowley Kennerk, 2009) Press release.

[53] Sanders, "The New World Receiver," 29.

[54] Josef Strau, "Diary," 57.

[55] It bears noting that this assimilation of office into studio, and vice versa, is reflected in the historical climate in the 1990s and early 2000s, during which office work was recast along the

Interestingly, our contemporary conceptions of both take initial hold in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, at the onset of modern capitalism and Romanticism. Just as the Romantic idea of the singular and solitary artist was blossoming, the unassuming "clerk"—as immortalized in "Bartleby, the Scrivener"—became a fixture of the office and cultural imaginary.[56] These are, conventionally, oppositional figures; yet, it is at this juncture that we might, following Strau's own logic, locate a model for his conflicted production and artistic subjectivity. It arises in the Romantic figure of the poet-prophet or dreamer, who is neither purely artist nor office worker, but encompasses aspects of both. Channeling voices and inspiration transmitted to them in the "dark offices" of the mind, they unite visionary and scribe, creator and assistant who simply passes along.

IV.

When will we have sleeping logicians, sleeping philosophers? I would like to sleep, in order to surrender myself to the dreamers, the way I surrender myself to those who read me with eye wide open.

– André Breton, *The Surrealist Manifesto*

Romanticism emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in Germany, in the writings of authors such as Novalis, Friedrich Hölderlin, and the Schlegel brothers; it surfaced slightly later in England, in the work of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

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lines of creative labor. Simultaneously, as part of a larger "post-studio" turn, many artists were turning to archival, informational, and document-based practices in an effort to dispel the myth of the Romantic genius and highlight, instead, the entrenchment of the artist in institutional networks of power and knowledge. This is by no means a suggestion that Strau's work is symptomatic of these developments, though it seems likely he would be aware of their occurrence and theorization, especially considering the extent of his own organizational capacities at Friesenwall 120 and later Meerrettich. Rather, I'd offer that his work harkens back to the earlier intersection between the roles of the artist and office worker at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

[56] Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace* (New York: Doubleday, 2014), 13, 31.

among others.[57] Countless and often contradictory accounts of Romanticism abound, but one can locate several fundamental tendencies: a resistance to Enlightenment rationality in favor of the poetic, dialectical, and relative; a penchant towards the imagined and mystical rather than the scientific or materially evident; an emphasis on flux and fragmentation rather than fixity or tranquility; a newfound self-reflexivity, in which imagination and creativity themselves become objects of inquiry[58]; and, perhaps most significantly, the introduction of a worldview—and a distinct ideological framework, as literary historian Jerome McGann argues[59]—fixated on and grounded in the unique and willful individual, which remains with us today.[60]

The poet Novalis sums up this endemic Promethean individualism, stating: "Poetry is creation. Every poetic work must be a living individual."[61] Friedrich Schlegel portrays the "romantic art" as "a perpetual becoming without ever attaining to perfection. Nothing can plumb its depths…It alone is infinite, alone free; its first law is the will of the creator, the will of the creator that knows no law."[62] This egoism extends far beyond the poetic—the French Revolution is roughly contemporaneous, as is the onset of modern capitalism—but a specific aesthetic

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[57] Though largely a philosophical and literary, specifically poetic, movement, it also made its mark in the works of painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Caspar David Friedrich, both of whom rejected a prevailing Apollonian classicism in favor of the expressionistic, dramatic, and sublime.

[58] Leslie A. Wilson, preface to *German Romantic Criticism: Novalis, Shlegel, Schleiermacher, and others* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), xii.

[59] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1985).

[60] These are crude generalizations, but then this is by no means the time or place to attempt a thorough historical accounting. In fact, it could be argued that it is Strau's deployment of these Romantic tendencies as they have trickled down to us today, typecast, that holds interest. To the extent that his work is idiosyncratic, it nonetheless savors and traffics in clichés, turning them around until again disoriented.

[61] Novalis, "Aphorisms and Fragments," in *German Romantic Criticism: Novalis, Shlegel, Schleiermacher, and others,* edited by Leslie A. Wilson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 69.

[62] Friedrich Schlegel, as quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, edited by Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001), 122.

paradigm based upon the distinctive essence and personal proclivities of the authorial subject, does arise.[63] This accent on artistic disposition, even ontology, becomes the seed from which the bohemian and *flâneur* develop in the nineteenth century, and from which the artist/poet attains the position of a genius, visionary, or rebel, rather than a laborer or chronicler of an inherited reality. The work of art becomes, in turn, the imprint of this inspired spirit; it is always the expression *of* someone and always "a voice speaking."[64] McGann charges sincerity (and a certain determined naïveté) with the role of connecting this voice to its speaker; sincerity, as he writes, binds "the poetic Subject to the poetic subject, the speaking voice to the matter being addressed."[65] At the same time, Romantic irony, defined by Friedrich Schlegel as the "constant alternation between self-creation and self-destruction," surfaces in the notion of a self-questioning subjectivity replete with opposing impulses.[66]

In a seminal text titled *The Mirror and the Lamp,* Romantic scholar M. H. Abrams offers these titular figures as metaphors for this paradigm shift, the first "comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives."[67] If the mirror descends from a Platonic tradition of discreet and ideal forms, the Romantic lamp initiates a dramatic interweaving of self and world, in which reality comes in and out of focus with the ebbs and flows of a mercurial subject. The lamp is also, of

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[63] As Sven Lütticken points out, "the artist's personality and biography were promoted from contingent factors that helped him reach the essence of art to *being the work's essence*." See Sven Lutticken, "Liberation Through Laziness. Some Chronopolitical Remarks." *Mousse* 42 (2014), 137.
[64] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 59.
[65] Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 38.
[66] Quoted in Leslie A. Wilson, preface to *German Romantic Criticism: Novalis, Shlegel, Schleiermacher, and others*, x.
[67] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford UP, 1971), n. pag.

course, a premier figure of Strau's work—his own form, perhaps, of designating an illuminated and illuminating, but fragile, subjectivity.

Strau's work embodies, stopping just shy of exaggerating, this Romantic paradigm. The Romantic shows itself, strikingly, in the metonymic relationship between subjectivity and confessional expression he constructs, in which self, voice, and work become interchangeable, affixed to each other with sincerity as the glue that binds. Other parallels abound. Blake, a staunch critic of the Enlightenment and early capitalist prerogatives, writes in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement, are roads of Genius."[68] Here, he epitomizes a Romantic tendency towards the irrational and melancholically flawed that resonates in Strau's meandering, circuitous production—which misses perfection to better chronicle the "crooked" mental paths of creation itself.[69] This doubled subjectivity—caught between the expressive and the reflective, in which a voice speaks while speaking *of* itself—stands as a further parallel.[70] Strau's texts rehearse this twofold motion, projecting subjectivity outwards and reeling it back in.

Literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman characterizes Romanticism as "spilt religion," due to spirituality's relocation (inspired by German pietism) from the religious establishment into a personal and aestheticized mysticism.[71] "Spilt religion" aptly describes Strau's own appropriation of Judeo-Christian models of sin, confession, and redemption—in which the

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[68] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 10; for a discussion of Romanticism as an anti-capitalist movement, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
[69] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism,* 5.
[70] As Geoffrey Hartman writes, "To explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination, and to achieve that transition while exploring it…is the Romantic purpose I find most crucial." Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), 53.
[71] Hartman, "Romanticism and "Anti-Self-Consciousness," 52.

spiritual becomes a diffuse approach or tone. And, finally, we might even see Strau's suspicion toward the material as Romantic. As literary historian Mario Praz writes, "The Romantic exalts the artist who does not give a material form to his dreams—the poet ecstatic in front of a forever blank page, the musician who listens to the prodigious concerts of his soul without attempting to translate them into notes. It is romantic to consider concrete expression as a decadence, a contamination."[72] We see this in John Keats' "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter," but also, nearly two hundred years later, in Strau's deferred, tentative production and the elaborate framework of moral checks and balances within which it is inscribed.

Without doubt, Romanticism inaugurated a novel rapport between individual subject and expression, but the nature of this creative subjectivity itself is rife with contradictory impulses and interpretations. These are concentrated on competing, often entangled, conceptions of the mind as a willful and productive ego on the one hand, and a passive conduit for external forces on the other; a consciousness split from nature, and one striving for undifferentiated unity; one who is contoured, and one whose borders are porous; one who is self-possessed, even severely self-aware, and one whose focus is oriented radically outwards. As Harold Bloom writes, the Romantic "revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity," even as that subjectivity seeks to dissolve the borders of individuality. [73] This dialectical tension itself compels melancholic quests and lyrical outpourings; it surfaces in Coleridge's fraught fascination with his "daemonic" imagination, reemerges in Baudelaire's "*un moi avide du non-*

[72] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1985).
[73] Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, 8.

moi," and echoes in Strau's vacillation between solipsistic Promethean creator on the one hand, and receptive assistant, on the other.[74]

If Romanticism encompasses these two seemingly incongruent understandings of the artistic subject, it also offers potential resolution in the guise of the Romantic "night," and its modalities of dreaming, daydreaming, even sleeplessness. In each of these receptive states, the poetic subject communes with, is "possessed" by, and in turn channels external voices and visions—alternately divine, hallucinatory, and imaginary.[75] Simultaneously, the night allows rare access to the purest, innermost self (what Freud will later call the unconscious), and in this sense *enhances* individuality.[76] Thus balancing dilution with distillation, the night fluctuates between the suspension and unveiling of the self, its obscurity and illumination. Novalis asks "…does not everything that inspires us wear the color of night?"[77]—and this query resonates in works such as Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, a divinely motivated poem tracking the course of nine sleepless nights, and subsequently illustrated by Blake. It carries over into Blake's *The Four Zoas*—a "prophetic" poem divided into "nights," like Young's poem, and written during evenings throughout the period he was employed engraving Young's poem by day—and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment*, which transcribes verses overheard in a opium-induced dream.[78] Blake visualizes this relay between dream and expression in his *Illustrations to Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso."* In "The Youthful Poet's Dream"

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[74] "un moi avide du non-moi" translates as "a self avid for non-self." Quoted in Anita Brookner, *Romanticism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 10.
[75] Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21; David Coxhead and Susan Hiller, *Dreams: Visions of the Night* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 16.
[76] Matthew Beaumont, *Nightwalking a Nocturnal History of London Chaucer to Dickens* (New York: Verso, 2015), 175.
[77] Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*, edited by Dick Higgins (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1988).
[78] Guinn Batten, *The Orphaned Imagination* (Durham, NH: Duke University Press, 1998), 86.

we see Milton (or Blake—it has also inspired autobiographical readings) prone, eyes closed, with pen poised over paper ready to transcribe the visions that might alight upon him. A low sun hovers over the scene, suggesting a Romantic separation of the creative night from actual darkness. [Plate 11]

This Romantic dreamer appears as the moderate iteration of the divine prophet—a religious visionary laundered through the aesthetic to satisfy a modernizing and secularizing world that could no longer sustain "large numbers of individuals who believed in the value or potency of their own internal visions or voices."[79] Blake, in his self-proclaimed role as poet-prophet, perhaps most forcefully exemplifies this amalgamated artistic subjectivity. His expressive outpourings are deeply personal, divinely inspired, and often radically political—using an idiosyncratic mystical world to critique society and celebrate the role of artistic imagination within it.[80] Blake was deeply impacted by Emmanuel Swedenborg, a philosopher, theologian, and mystic who endeavored to reform Christianity using the visions and voices that spoke to him as guide.[81] Swedenborg's influence is evidenced in Blake's conflicted—or what Blake terms his "consciously…inspired"—authorship. McGann writes, in reference to Blake's *Jerusalem*, that "…it is a deliberate work of art…but equally a piece of unpremeditated verse—inspired work, 'dictated' to its 'printer' William Blake; and…it comes from the same 'God' who years before had dictated *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*…whose voice is not easily distinguished from Blake's own mind and conscience."[82] This "God" doubles as the "Poetic

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[79] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 105.
[80] For example, within his oeuvre, the character of Los represents both a generalized creative spirit and Blake *himself*. Los is pitted against Urizen, the embodiment of law, rationality, and prescribed religion.
[81] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism,* 50.
[82] Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 10.

Genius" who is Blake, but simultaneously exceeds him.[83] Night, both literal and metaphorical, surfaces as the habitus of this poet-prophet and dreamer, as exemplified in "The Youthful Poet's Dream," or the following line from his *Song*: "And when night comes, I'll go / To places fit for woe; / Walking along the darken'd valley, / With silent Melancholy."[84]

Following a larger Romantic upset of diurnal logic, this Romantic night emerges as, in Foucault's words, "the negative of the transparency and visibility" of the Enlightenment—but doubles as an attempt to uncover "the darkness that rules at the very heart of what is excessive in light's radiance."[85] Uncoupled from literal darkness, the night itself becomes a means of illumination. If this seems rather backwards, it is because, as Romantic scholar Isaiah Berlin argues, a purposeful dissolution of the night/day binary was central to the Romantic imagination; he writes: "The point of it is to try…to break down the barrier between illusion and reality, between dreams and waking, between night and day, between the conscious and the unconscious, in order to produce a sense of the absolutely unbarred universe, of the wall-less universe, and of perpetual change…"[86] Therefore, dreaming doesn't cease with dawn; in a radical leveling, the night is rendered as productive as day, and the day as obscure and labyrinthine as the night. André Breton, highly influenced by the Romantic night, recounts the following in his *Surrealist Manifesto*: "A story is told according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by, used to have a

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[83] Hartman, "Romanticism and "Anti-Self-Consciousness," 52.
[84] Quoted in Matthew Beaumont, *Nightwalking a Nocturnal History of London Chaucer to Dickens* (New York: Verso, 2015), 264. Here, Blake nods to what Beaumont terms the "nightwalker," a Romantic figure related to that of the poet-prophet and dreamer, whose aimless nocturnal wanderings tender creative inspiration. As Beaumont writes, "Nightwalking, like writing poetry or taking opium, was one of the means by which Romantics…fostered a second self—a silent, shadowy, mysterious other. It collapsed the dark recesses of the psyche into the labyrinthine spaces of the city."
[85] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1989), 108.
[86] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism,* 116.

notice posted on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: THE POET IS WORKING."[87] Dreaming becomes work, and vice versa, and it is in this sense that the Romantic night, with its poet-prophet and dreamer, disrupts, even as it extends, the productive logic of a nascent capitalism. This diffuse productivity emerges as the irrational flip side of a historical moment in which cities were newly illuminated nightlong, and factories—those "dark satanic mills," in Blake's words—never paused. In short, a Romantic interest in the night coincided with its colonization by efficiency.[88]

Inquiring into Blake's legacy, Hartman asked, some fifty years ago, if "visionary poetry is a thing of the past, or can it coexist with the modern temper?"[89] This question sustains itself in Strau's practice as a perpetual echo whose volume, it seems, has steadily risen in recent exhibitions. In "Montezuma Ordained," published alongside *The New World, Application for Turtle Island*—a 2015 exhibition at the Renaissance Society that posed as an alternative visa application for "North American" citizenship—Strau recounts a dream in which a voice instructs him to title his exhibition "Montezuma."[90] The text tracks his anxious deliberation about whether to heed this voice, because, as he writes, "if you read enough of the texts which tells about similar experiences of inner voices, presences and mysterious artists following orders than you might know that the only way to deal with it is to make yourself small and humble and become a

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[87] André Robert Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* translated by Helen R. Lane and Richard Seaver (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1974) 14.
[88] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 105.
[89] Hartman, "Romanticism and "Anti-Self-Consciousness," 56.
[90] This exhibition is interesting for the fact that the included works in fact display high production values and were fabricated with help from assistants. In this sense, it seems both an aberration from his typical approach to production, and an attempt to take the idea of a "redemptive" production to its extreme. In his subsequent exhibition at Secession, in Vienna, he retreats from this position into more familiar territory.

pious servant or assistant."[91] As we have seen, similar statements—in which Strau counsels himself to listen, like a "humble assistant," to the voices of the night, to the angels and demons of the dark offices—abound. But here Strau goes on to say, with typical reticence and buried amidst a sea of text: "one day i stupidly made a tiny reference to William blake and made a comment on a general similarity between him and me…"[92] It would seem these similarities aren't quite as "stupid" as Strau so bashfully suggests. Both join the visual and linguistic to fashion "illuminated texts"; like Blake, Strau bears the influence of Swedenborg ("And the Swedenborg organ / It playz behind you / Each moment and any time"); and each merges the roles of poet, dreamer, and prophet to account for an authorship that is simultaneously individual, servile, and multiply located, visited upon them from afar. [93]

If the Renaissance Society exhibition narrated an "exterior" voyage, his subsequent 2015 exhibition at Secession, titled *A Turtle Dreaming (…Echoes from an Encapsulated Space Exiled Sounds of Letters Requiring Symphonic Treatment)*, took an interior journey. In it, Strau gathered text posters culled from previous exhibitions, sculptures of turtles, photographs of ice floes on the Hudson, descriptions of aleatory wanderings through New York, musical compositions, and four wooden structures in which Robert Bresson's *Four Nights of a Dreamer* screened. [Plate 12] References to Romanticism, alongside allusions to prophetic and ethereal production, recur throughout. In the supplementary publication, he states: "The motive of the turtle returns again as motive here but now representing the romantic vision of production in the dreamer and poet

[91] Josef Strau, "Montezuma Ordained," in *The New World 1: The Application* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2014), 84.
[92] Strau, "Montezuma Ordained," 85.
[93] Josef Strau, "The Swedenborg Organ is Playing," http://gngallery.tumblr.com/page/2, text accompanying *Exercises ab Initio*, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2012.

life..."[94] He confesses that, "…as I am working in the same room as I am sleeping in at night, at times the daydreaming power is superior to any professional aims..."[95] and elsewhere states, "The cat reminded me of the word *prophecy*, the word I forgot to consider, but the word that I had carried like a key word with me some time ago…"[96] If Strau often displays a Romantic sensibility in the tone and structure of his writing, this exhibition comments on exactly that rapport by inscribing it within a framework of historical models. He exposes himself as poet, prophet, and dreamer, but simultaneously stands beside himself, observant, taking notes. We see this in the way he steps in as the "traditional secretary of such messengers," rather than the prophet *per se*.[97] Or, how he offers the turtle and Bresson's film as instantiations of the dreamer, in addition to dreaming himself. Authorial voice is doubly displaced, even as Strau points to its historical location.

Strau's titular "dreaming" turtle and Bresson's *Four Nights of a Dreamer* share a common literary source: *White Nights,* a 1848 short story by Fyodor Dostoevsky, which tells the story of a man, who, lost in reverie during a late-night walk, meets a young woman with whom he falls into a profound, largely unrequited, and ultimately illusory love. Like several of Dostoevsky's narrators, that of *White Nights* is anonymous, dull, and presumably a lowly bureaucrat. Yet, this one is nonetheless a self-professed dreamer, defined as, "a creature of an intermediate sort," who, "…settles in some inaccessible corner, as though hiding from the light of day; once he slips into his corner, he grows to it like a snail… he is in that respect very much like that remarkable creature, which is an animal and a house both at once, and is called a

[94] Josef Strau, "Turtle Rhapsody," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 76.
[95] Strau, "Double Bar Line," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 42.
[96] Strau, "Encapsulated Spaces," in *Dreaming Turtle* (Berlin: Revolver, 2015), 26.
[97] Strau, "Encapsulated Spaces," 26.

tortoise."[98] Unfolding over four sleepless nights, the entire story designates an internal collapse between dream and reality, night and day—hence the "white" nights.

Strau adopts Dostoevsky's dreaming office-worker, who is humble, perambulatory, and positioned always between night and day, but never firmly situated in either.[99] He not only references the story obliquely in the Secession exhibition, but actually borrowed the title, structure, and narrative of *White Nights* for a text of his own, which, published in 2003, just after his poetic break, brings us full circle. In it, Strau dictates a story of wandering a nocturnal Berlin and becoming infatuated with the vagrant "S," who comes to him always at night and as "almost this non-form dream."[100] This narrator Strau shares with Dostoevsky—who speaks in the first person, but both *is* and is *not* Strau—reveals the roots of Strau's knotted, conflicted approach to artistic subjectivity and production. The assistant, prophet, and dreamer are folded together, simultaneously speaking and transcribing voices that emerge from a night which, like that of Romanticism, is eternally verging on day—a white night that confuses dream with reality.

If Strau's lamps are vehicles for his language, they double as physical testament to this Romantic night. As he writes, the lamp is "the last object before darkness and it remained as strange afterimage once in darkness…the last object of reality is disappearing and is the first of

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[98] Fyodor Dostoevsky, "White Nights," *White Nights and Other Stories*, translated by Constance Garnett, Mar 5, 2011, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36034/36034-h/36034-h.htm.

[99] The trope of the dreaming clerk or assistant can also be seen in Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, as well as works by Franz Kafka and Robert Walser. Walser's treatment of the intersection of servility and reverie, as evidenced in *The Assistant* and *Jakob von Gunten*, displays striking similarities to Strau's work—both in subject matter and tone. See Robert Walser, *Jakob von Gunten*, translated by Christopher Middleton (New York: New York Review Books, 1999) and Robert Walser, *The Assistant*, translated by Susan Bernofsky (New York: New Directions Paperback, 2007).

[100] Josef Strau, *Dear Little Tiger* (Cologne: Galerie Daniel Buchholz, 2004).

the more comfortable world of dreaming."[101] The ribbons that trail them stand as "an effort…to make a kind of imaginary, but still physical ladder to this in between space of dream and reality."[102] We might see Strau's entire practice as an extension of this effort, and it is in this sense that Romanticism—with its servile dreamers and nocturnal inspirations—accounts for Strau's fraught positions towards subjectivity and production. It is not only the historic source of the centered artistic voice projected in his works, but also aids in illuminating the "dark other presences" that emerge between reverie and reality, those which escort and even usurp the confessional "I."

V.

We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Is it simply a form of escapism to pursue the moment at which dreams permeate reality? Sleep has long been deployed as a metaphor for the somnambulance of "false consciousness," inspiring calls to wake up and face the daylight head on. Yet, as Jonathan Crary contends in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, this dualism has since been flipped on its head by contemporary imperatives towards constant optimization and wakefulness.[103] If we inhabit a moment "in which a state of permanent illumination is inseparable from the non-stop operation of global exchange and circulation," the night is rendered oppositional at precisely the point of

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[101] Strau, "The Lamp and the Ribbon," in *The Object Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Antony Hudek (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2014), 87.
[102] Strau, "The Lamp and the Ribbon," 87.
[103] For extensive discussion of this problematic, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013); or, Alexei Penzin, *Rex Exsomnis: Sleep and Subjectivity in Capitalist Modernity = Rex Exsomnis. Schlaf Und Subjektivität in Der Kapitalistischen Moderne*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

its passivity.[104] Though Crary tends towards materialism, his perspective nonetheless clarifies the subtleties of Strau's.[105] Read through Romanticism, we see Strau set adrift the diurnal logic upon which Crary's argument (and that which he overturns) is premised. Rather than advocate wholesale passivity, Strau instead lingers in the crepuscular moment where purposeful action and thought are obfuscated while nevertheless remaining discernible, like afterimages. The import arises in the *falling*, rather than *being*, asleep. In this respect, his work exists as perpetual threshold.

Yet, any return to Romanticism today must be considered against a backdrop of twentieth century artistic practice and philosophical thought—from conceptualism and post-structuralism to the Cologne art world from which Strau emerged—seeking to dethrone the Romantic artistic subject and dispel its aura of creative autonomy. These assaults shape a lineage of critical practice that still informs, I would argue, the dominant discourse of contemporary art today. They are not without validity. If Romanticism unleashed artistic voice, it also restricted this privilege to a select demographic, so that to dispense with it was to open opportunity to others.[106] From the Romantic celebration of individualism, over and against the Enlightenment's universalizing rationality and the factory's dehumanizing efficiency, we receive the position of artistic rebellion and, in fact, that of artistic critique itself. Yet, this individualism eventually

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[104] Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 5. This reasoning resonates, of course, with Strau's earlier *non-productive attitude*.

[105] Crary is invested in literally quantifying hours of sleep, wakefulness, or artificial illumination; in contrast, the Romantic night, and Strau's return to it, exist largely in the metaphorical arena, though it spills over into the material realm, at times manifesting literally in practices of production.

[106] Regarding Strau's exhibition at Secession, Nuit Banai raises this significant point. See Nuit Banai, "Retrospective Radicalism," *Texte zur Kunst* no. 99 (September 2015), 192.

aligned all too well with neoliberalism's entrepreneurial self-determination.[107] For such reasons, Romanticism is clouded with suspicion, often designating the negative ground of positive critical action. This is perhaps increasingly the case considering the proliferation of anti-humanist approaches asking us to look always forward, not back, and beyond the human subject.

Yet, a lacuna haunts this rejection. A certain crisis can occur when one must always be in opposition to, or interfering with, subjectivity and expressive production, especially when critique itself is rendered marketable.[108] Of course, one can invoke strategic immanence and work from within—as Strau, to some extent, does. Nevertheless, this crisis reveals itself as a foreclosure of options (a pessimism born from having one's back in a corner) and it could be argued that this foreclosure is both the impetus behind, and undoing of, the *non-productive attitude*.[109] In light of this history, Strau's shift into a spiritual and expressive paradigm, where voice and materiality emerge, can be seen as the disclosure of possibilities. Rather than appeal via mere sentimentality—as many contemporary revivals of Romanticism have been rightfully reproached for—his work extends far beyond initial empathic impact.[110] Instead, having reached into Romanticism's night, he unveils the multiple and conflicted historical models of artistic

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[107] Latent for much of the nineteenth century, this collusion revealed itself in the middle of the twentieth, at which point the Romantic subject enlisted to combat capitalist drudgery was absorbed into a post-Fordist economy as fodder for capital's expansion into the affective realms, and premier model for flexible, immaterial labor. For extended discussion on this point, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2005).

[108] Merlin Carpenter addresses this dilemma in "The Tail that Wags the Dog," writing: "It is critique, paradoxically, that is most useful to the market as a source of differentiation. It provides the key discriminatory knowledge whilst and because it retains the power to explain the way out of the market." Or, see Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-248.

[109] In the sense that a dearth of options led to doing "nothing" as a critical position.

[110] For a discussion of the dangers of a Romantic return on a purely emotional, melancholic level, see "Powered by Emotion? A roundtable discussion on Romanticism, art and melancholy with Felix Ensslin, Jorg Heiser, Juliane Rebentisch, Andre Rottmann and Jan Verwoert," *Texte zur Kunst* No. 65 (March 2007).

subjectivity hidden within those we believe we know so well—well enough to forget. He suggests, as did the Romantics, that the destabilization of centered individuality might best be found *within* the confessional subject, in the multiple voices it channels, and that an oppositional passivity might in certain cases haunt the very act of work. In other words, he reminds us that critical positions reside in places we might least expect them.[111] If reading his work through Romanticism assists in breaking through binaries between subjectivity and its dissolution, productivity and withdrawal, he in turn incites a more subtle understanding of Romanticism itself. Nostalgia, in this sense, leads beyond itself.

[111] This intersection of critical and sentimental or personal tendencies appears in the practices of certain younger artists working today, such as Dena Yago, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, Win McCarthy, and Anna Sophie-Berger. In each of these cases, first-person language is motivated towards highly sincere and Romantic ends, while nevertheless complicating that voice. I would argue that many of this generation bears the influence of Strau, and the mythos of Cologne more generally. This influence might also be seen, on a more general level, in the prevalence of press releases written in first-person and poetic tones, in which emotional "work" is transferred from the visual to linguistic realms.

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Appendix A : Plates

Plate 1
Installation view, Josef Strau, *Don't Climb the Pyramids*, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, NY, 2006

Plate 2
Josef Strau
JS, 2006
Mixed media lamp
51 x 17 x 16 inches

Plate 3
Josef Strau
Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp, 2006
Mixed media lamp
60 x 18 x 24 inches

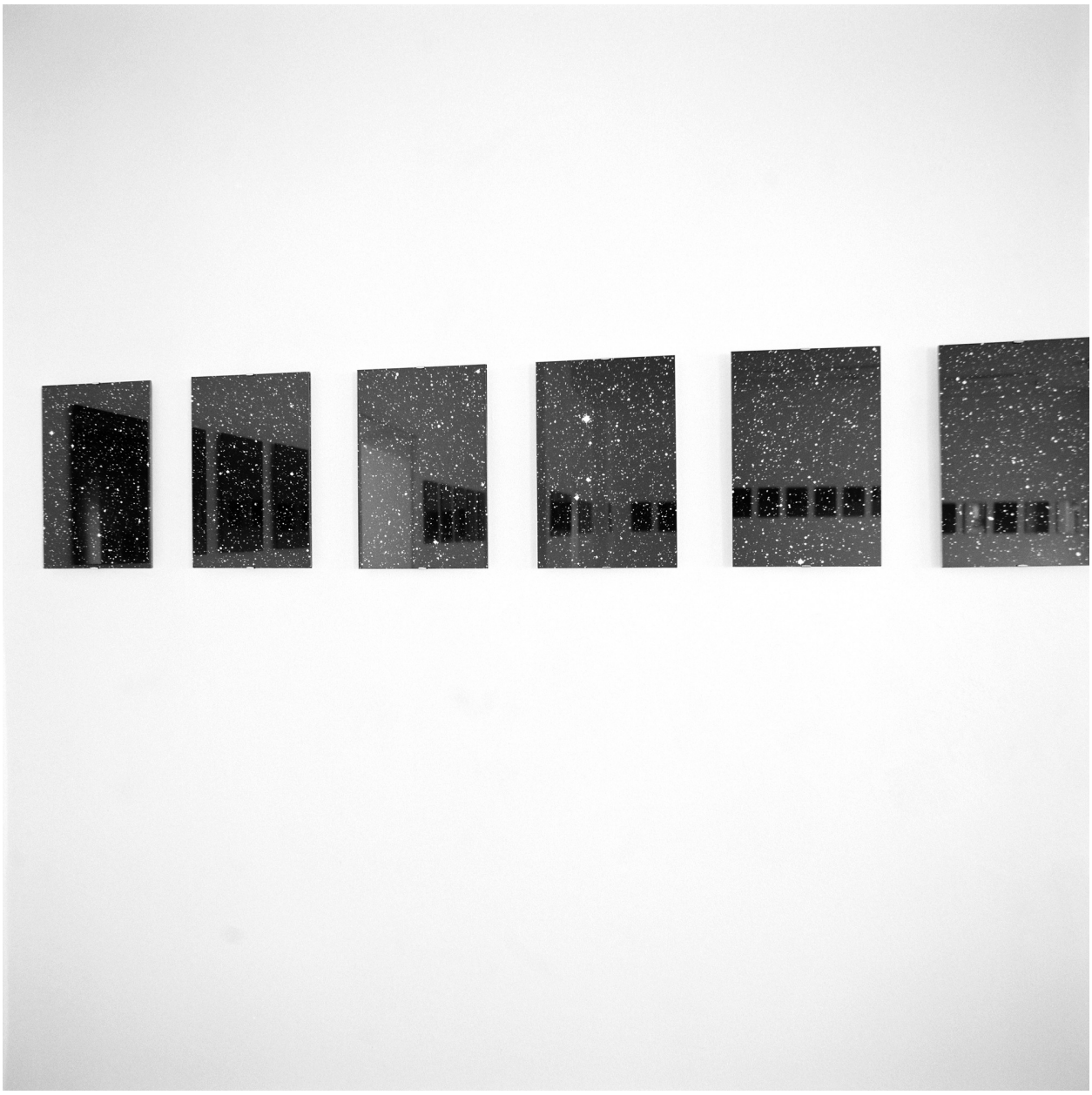


Plate 4
Installation view, Josef Strau, Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, DE, 1991

Plate 5
Installation view, Josef Strau, apartment of Anna-Catharina Gebbers, Berlin, DE, 2006

Plate 6
Installation view, Josef Strau, *18INIQITIES*, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, NY, 2008

Plate 7
Installation view, Josef Strau, "*the,,why does this all happen to me?" experience*, House of Gaga, Mexico City, MX, 2010

Plate 8
Installation view, Josef Strau, "*the,,why does this all happen to me?" experience*, House of Gaga, Mexico City, MX, 2010

Plate 9
Josef Strau
Redemption, Fragments and Materials, 2013
Mounted C-print, medium gel and various metal objects
16 ½ x 12 inches

Plate 10
Josef Strau
The Assistant (2), 2008
Ink letters, dust, adhesive on canvas
24 x 18 inches

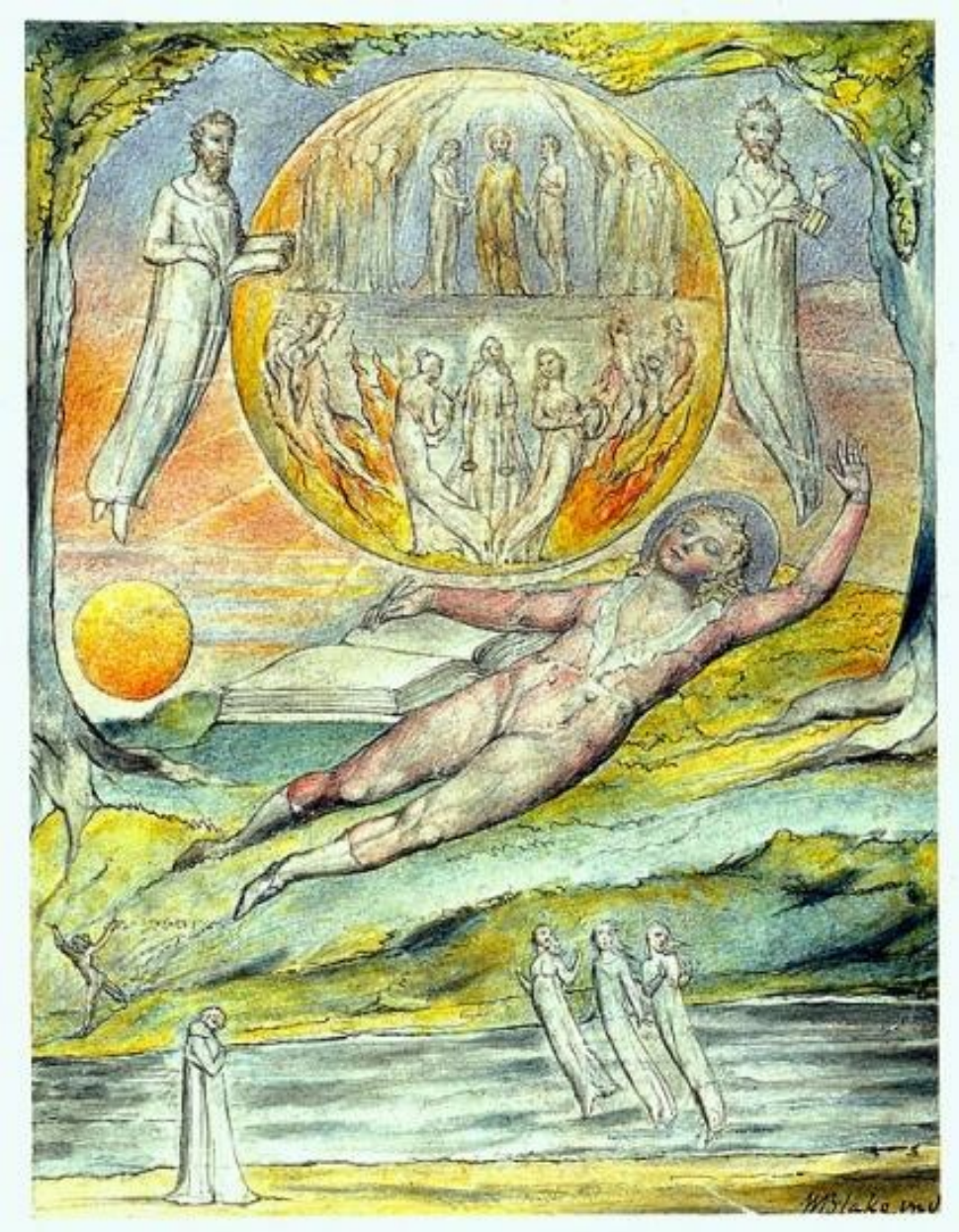


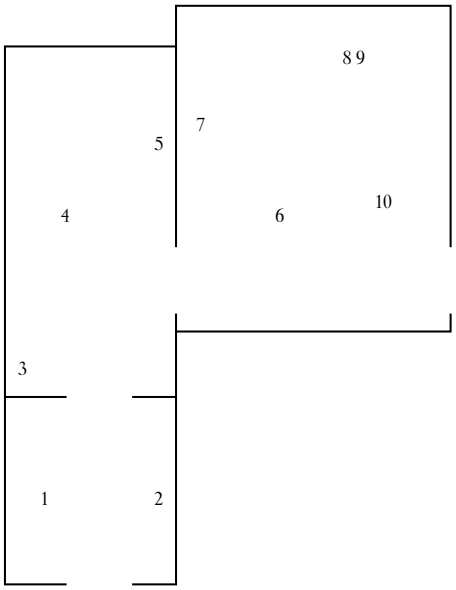
Plate 11
William Blake
The Youthful Poet's Dream, from *Illustrations to Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso*
1816-20
Watercolor, over traces of black chalk

Plate 12
Installation view, Josef Strau, *A Turtle Dreaming (...Echoes from an Encapsulated Space Exiled Sounds of Letters Requiring Symphonic Treatment)*, Secession, Vienna, AT, 2015

Appendix B: Thesis exhibition checklist and mediation

Night Thoughts

Curated by Jody Graf
Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College
April 3 – 24, 2016



1. Edward Young
The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality
Designed and engraved by William Blake
c. 1795-97
Engraving and letterpress on paper
16 x 12 ¼ x 1 inches
Private collection

2. Josef Strau
text bubbles appearing on poster
Offset printed poster
36 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

3. Sadie Benning
Living Inside
1989
Video
5:10
Courtesy of the artist and Video Data Bank, Chicago

4. Win McCarthy
Some Cheap Mask
2015
Steel, polyvinyl plastic sheeting, transparency, glass
85 x 73 x 24 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Off Vendome, New York

5. Win McCarthy
To Contort Itself
2015
Plasticine, resin, inkjet printed acetate, lag bolts
63 x 15 x 2 ½ inches
Private collection; Courtesy Off Vendome, New York

6. Win McCarthy
Presence of a Stranger
2015
Steel, polyvinyl plastic sheeting, transparency, glass, rag
85 x 73 x 24 ½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Off Vendome, New York

7. Win McCarthy
Hard Enough
2015
Plasticine, resin, inkjet printed acetate, lag bolts, hydrocal
15 ½ x 61 x 2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Off Vendome, New York

8. Josef Strau
The Tea Pot
2006
Lamp with glassine, wire, and sound
14 x 54 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

9. Josef Strau
Watercolors Appearing on Tile
2016
Watercolors burnt on tiles
15 tiles, each 6 x 8 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

10. Josef Strau
Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp
2006
Mixed media lamp
60 x 18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

Night Thoughts

Sadie Benning
William Blake & Edward Young
Win McCarthy
Josef Strau

Curated by Jody Graf

April 3 – 24, 2016

Romanticism inaugurated a lasting, if embattled, understanding of artistic subjectivity as a singular voice. *Night Thoughts* coaxes this paradigm out of the shadows of contemporary discourse by locating its critical potential in a metaphorical night, itself inherited from Romanticism. This is a night eternally verging on day, in which distinctions between interiority and exposure, passivity and productivity, scribe and author, are dissolved, and the figures of the dreamer and critic circle each other, moving ever closer. Artistic subjectivity is displaced even as it proclaims itself, its waking contours faded.

In the 1740s, the British "Graveyard" poet Edward Young published *The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, a proto-Romantic poem that reflects upon his mortality over the course of nine nights caught between dreaming and sleeplessness. Due to the poem's popularity, the poet and artist William Blake was commissioned to illustrate Young's *Night Thoughts* fifty years after its initial publication, surreptitiously inserting his own idiosyncratic mysticism into the images accompanying the Christian text. Young's poem, as illustrated by Blake, reveals two significant and at times contradictory aspects of Romanticism: the willful projection of an expressive voice, and its location within a metaphorical night that erodes the contours of its individuality. Here, the poem serves as a historical cipher through which to approach works by contemporary artists Sadie Benning, Win McCarthy, and Josef Strau.

Romanticism emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in Germany, in the writings of authors such as Novalis, Friedrich Hölderlin, and the Schlegel brothers; it also surfaced slightly later in England, in the work of poets and artists William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, among others. Countless and often contradictory accounts of Romanticism abound, but one can locate several fundamental tendencies: a resistance to Enlightenment rationality in favor of the poetic and relative; a penchant for the imagined rather than the materially evident; an emphasis on flux and fragmentation rather than fixity or tranquility; a newfound self-reflexivity, in which creativity itself becomes an object of inquiry; and, perhaps most significantly, the introduction of a worldview fixated on and grounded in the unit of the unique and creative individual.[1]

This nascent egoism extended far beyond the poetic—the French Revolution is contemporaneous with Romanticism, as is the onset of modern capitalism. Yet, a specific aesthetic paradigm based upon the proclivities of the creative subject

did arise, from which the artist or poet was elevated to the position of a genius, visionary, or rebel, rather than a laborer or chronicler of an inherited reality. The work of art became, in turn, the autobiographical imprint of this inspired spirit–always the expression *of* someone, and always, in the words of historian Jerome McGann, "a voice speaking."[2] In this sense, artistic voice was rendered in the first-person, no matter how abstracted its incarnation.

This Romantic paradigm remains with us today, if in practice more than theory, and despite much recent artistic and philosophic thought seeking to dethrone the willful and expressive Romantic subject and replace it with one belatedly and collectively authored, who emerges through the conditioning of social or economic forces. The exhibition speaks to and from this intellectual unraveling of artistic voice–from the dissonance between the experience of individuality (the voice in one's head), the critical histories that challenge it, and the contemporary forces that, by posing voice as commodity, usher it towards exchange. The included works by Benning, McCarthy and Strau—here understood as condensations of voice made material—reprise a Romantic first-person trope by drawing it out of the depths and inscribing it (at times quite literally) on the surface, to in turn perform it as a problematic.

Sadie Benning's *Living Inside* (1989) begins with a close-up shot of one eye, open and unblinking, before panning to the upper half of the artist's face, lit in a sharp chiaroscuro; a diaristic monologue narrates this disjointed portrait throughout. *Living Inside* is one of Benning's earliest works, filmed on a toy Fisher-Price PXL-2000 camera in the artist's darkened teenage bedroom while skipping school. As critic Faye Hirsch notes, this setting is one of "transitional states and off-hour activities: coming of age, coming out; boredom; the do-nothing period between waking and heading out to some low-level job." We might see this physical and psychological interior—

in which Benning's voice finds initial expression—as a metaphorical night brought in and out of illumination. Benning is not beheld to Romanticism, but rather seizes its confessional voice to render it both increasingly confrontational and fragmented–suggesting the stakes involved in who exactly is allowed to speak, or listen.

This fragmentation echoes across Win McCarthy's *Hard Enough* and *To Contort Itself* (both 2015), which pair malleable materials such as Plasticine and resin with poetic text to form splintered self-portraits addressing the tenuousness of artistic subjectivity. In these–as in much of McCarthy's practice–a singular voice coagulates, at times assertively, even while disclosing its own fragility and dislocation. In *Hard Enough* the artist's own name is typed out, only to be overwritten by a succession of question marks. In this sense, subjectivity is distended to the brink of transparency, its illumination resulting in an over-exposure that is itself a form of obscurity. Two freestanding scrims stretched with plastic sheeting paradoxically solidify this transparency. Subjectivity becomes a filter or sieve–inescapable, but barely there.

In the work of Josef Strau, the productive fervor of accumulation–culling, scribbling, taping, piling–is tempered by a cool insouciance of construction and presentation that is haphazard, drifting, and lyrical. As evidenced in *Blueprint for Chapter 4 Lamp* (2006), Strau constructs a precarious symbiosis between object and language in which the dual notions of "reading lamp" and "illuminated text" take on new meaning. His texts are grounded in a poetic, confessional, and unedited first-person voice that for these reasons promises a sincere expression of self that is profoundly Romantic.

Yet, Strau locates this surplus of voice within reverie, at the intersection of dreams and reality, night and day–much like how the lamp exists always in anticipation of

either darkness or light. Harkening back to the trope of the Romantic night and the dreamers or poet-prophets, such as Young or Blake, who inhabit it, Strau scrambles divisions between productivity and non-productivity, a centered subjectivity and one that acts as a medium or assistant for the transmission of outside voices—be they unconscious, divine, or even that of an ego cleaved from itself. In this sense, Strau's work, like McCarthy's and Benning's, amplifies a destabilization of artistic subjectivity already latent, though perhaps under recognized, in the Romantic night. Strau expands on these connections in a new sculptural work and text poster, which respond to Young's poem.

This Romantic night is uncoupled from actual darkness. Rather, it exists as a mercurial flux between illumination and obscurity that extends to the creative subject and its productivity. Authorial voice is concentrated while simultaneously untethered from the individual, rerouted through dreams or visited upon the author from afar. Production is at once fervent and dilatory, almost unconscious. In light of contemporary imperatives towards constant activity and exposure on the one hand, and critical withdrawal on the other, this night offers a final bastion of the interior self whose resistance is premised not on the wholesale passivity of sleep or silence, but rather, paradoxically, on its elision with artistic production. Here, the coordinates of accepted 'criticality' become harder to locate and its binary (and diurnal) logic scrambled. It is from this liminal position that *Night Thoughts* suggests that the projection, rather than abstention, of voice can perform defiantly, and in reverie, at once.

[1] Leslie A. Wilson (ed.), "Preface," *German Romantic Criticism: Novalis, Shlegel, Schleiermacher, and others* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002) xii; Jerome J. M Gann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1985).
[2] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001) 59.
[3] Faye Hirsch, "A Day in the Life," *Art in America* (September 2007) 150.

Sadie Benning was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1973 and currently lives in Brooklyn. Benning received an MFA from Bard College and served as co-chair of the film and video department there. Benning's work was included in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2016); *The Carnegie International*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2013); *NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, New Museum, New York (2013); Annual Report: 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008); Whitney Biennial, New York (2000 and 1993); and the Venice Biennale (1993). Solo exhibitions include Callicoon Fine Arts, New York; Susanne Vielmetter Projects Los Angeles; Participant, INC., New York; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus; Orchard Gallery, New York; Dia: Chelsea, New York; and The Power Plant, Toronto.

William Blake (1757-1827) was born and lived in London. Blake made his living as a commercial engraver and printer, but also produced numerous poems, illuminated texts and works on paper. Blake was largely unrecognized during his lifetime, but is now considered a seminal figure in the development of Romantic poetry and visual arts. His works include *Songs of Innocence* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), *Songs of Experience* (1794), and *Milton* (c.1804 – c.1811), among others.

Win McCarthy was born in 1986 in Brooklyn, New York and received his BA from Bard College. He has held two solo exhibitions at Off Vendome, New York (2015) and Düsseldorf (2013), and participated in exhibitions at SculptureCenter, Long Island City; White Flag Projects, St. Louis; and Murray Guy, New York; among others. He will be featured in *Mirror Cells* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in May 2016. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn.

Josef Strau was born in Vienna, Austria in 1957, and lives and works in Berlin and New York. His recent solo exhibitions include Secession, Vienna (2015); The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago (2014); Greene Naftali,

New York (2012); and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2007). Select group exhibitions include the Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2014); MoMA PS1, Long Island City (2010); and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2009). He recently released the publication, *Dreaming Turtle*, which accompanied his exhibition at Secession, Vienna (2015); as well as *The New World I* and *The New World II* which were published in conjunction with his exhibition at The Renaissance Society, Chicago (2015).

Edward Young (1683-1765) was a British poet, playwright, and chaplain. In addition to *The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (1742-45) his writings include *The Force of Religion: or Vanquished Love* (1714), *Revenge* (1721), *Love of Fame, the Universal Passion* (1728), and *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). In their attention to the melancholic, spiritual, and sublime, his works were influential to the Romantic poets of the late eighteenth century.

Night Thoughts is curated by Jody Graf as part of the requirements for the masters of arts degree at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

I'd like to thank Sadie Benning, Win McCarthy, Josef Strau, as well as Pooh Kaye, Kristofer Kraus, Matt Moravec, Tara Ramadan, Photi Giovanis, and the William Blake Archive. Special thanks to the students, faculty and staff at CCS Bard—especially Alex Kitnick, for his sustained dialogue.