



Creative Fellow 

## Charlie Squire

### Slouching: A Field Guide to Art and (un-)Belonging in Europe

## Creative Impact Research Centre Europe, Final Report: Charlie Squire

### A. Main Argument

To summarize the insights these last six months of research have produced is a difficult task. Many key points feel evasive, vague, intangible, affective, experiential... but nonetheless, throughout the process I continued to ask myself, *What are you trying to say?* And each time I returned to my little red Moleskine notebook, I returned to the same few ideas. The true final result of this project is a collection of essays, much longer than this report, detailing my observations with the creative world, the political economy of artistry, and meditations on movement embedded in an autoethnography.

The first observation: so many programs that claim to uplift the “creative economies” focus much more on the “economies” than they do on the creatives. Certain institutions and initiatives (to be detailed later in this report) center the *value* of the artist in the context of the marketplace rather than the context of the community or the artistic spirit; artists create value because their presence is good for business, artists create value because the neighborhoods they inhabit and decorate see their property values increase, artists create value because the semiotic, abstract notion of “the artist” is a liberalizing force. And of course, plenty of this is true. *Artists* can be a key aspect of creating commercial and political value.

But what of the artist as someone who makes things, rather than a body attracting future capital? The artist as a freak, as a failure, as a stranger, as an idiot. Where is the space for people to be value-less? From my perspective (as a freak, a failure, a stranger, an idiot), we ought not to encourage artists because they offer something to the community, but instead because human beings seek self-expression *regardless* of how “successful” it is to external assessment.

The second observation: public space is deeply politicized, a fact that many people choose not to be aware of. In speaking with people from many different backgrounds in public spaces (art museums, historical sites, public transit, bars, cafes, street corners, etc.), every person is very aware of their lives and the things that impact their day-to-day functioning. Yet, when entering cultural spaces, people want to trust that what is in front of them is real and true, removed from ideology.

A tertiary observation, a meta-endeavor into the project itself, had to do with the formal qualities of art and report-making. So often, discourses about creativity and art center an artist’s biography or broad moral claims. How can we write about the world in a way that is both informative of its political and historical realities while also maintaining a tone and style that feels real, meaty, and alive? In this way, I suppose this inquiry isn’t too far off from the first. I don’t think there’s any valuable way to write about art and creativity that is clinical or dry.

Can I reveal that, at this current moment, the coronavirus has taken over my body and brain? I hope (if anything positive is to come out of it), it will keep my prose looser. The worst part is in the eardrums, where I’m unbalanced and hard of hearing and experiencing this strange crunching noise every time I adjust my jaw. I couldn’t enter my research questions

without first marinating in them, living as an artist. Over the last four months, I visited fourteen countries (Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and the United States) and spoke with every person I could. I have a background in 20th century history, but wanted to prepare further by reading literature and non-fiction that embodied placeliness in Europe and watching films and listening to music from the places I was in. Calvino in Northern Italy, Claude McKay in France, Bohumil Hrabal in rural central Europe... writers who were writing books about people, which were really about places, which were really (truly) about people. I made sure to venture out of the big cities, sleeping in a greenhouse in Sweden or next to two beautiful, brown horses an hour outside Saint-Etienne.

And, when thinking about “creative economies in Europe,” I had to begin not with my cynicism over economies, but with my cynicism over the idea of Europe itself. A place that presents itself as a progressive, united continent with a deep history and culture. And in many ways this is true, and in many more ways I want to believe in the utopian, post-border dreams of European governing bodies. But half the “countries” in Europe aren’t as old as the United States (depending on how you define country, state, nation, border, Europe, United States--you get the point...), and Europe isn’t this solid, un-changing institution. So to examine self-expression in Europe, I first needed to examine self-identification: where people got their ideas about their history and culture, and how they defined themselves. In Hungary, I met an ambitious young Finnish woman living in Budapest who described herself as “quintessentially European.” The next day, I spoke to another young woman living in Budapest who described herself as “fundamentally Hungarian.” What makes one person see themselves as “European” and another as the country they are from? Where do people get their notions of regional, national, and supranational identity? How does this impact their creative output, and how is that creative output then used by structures of governance, NGOs, and the private sector? Through my project, I attempted to unwind the Möbius strip of identity, geography, artistry, and policy.

## B. Research Problem / Creative Endeavor

I'm eating my first meal of the day, around ten o'clock at night in the Latin Quarter. I want oysters. Big ones, that smell like the ocean and look yonic and alien. I'm seated outdoors at a restaurant situated between the back end of a Greek Orthodox church and a piano bar, accompanied by my notebook and my copy of *Camera Obscura* whose margins I've defiled with chicken-scratch musings about imagery and taxidermy. I order six oysters in "gourmand" size, and the waiter swears he's seen me at this restaurant before. I don't want to tell him the last time I was in Paris I was twelve years old with an un-chic low ponytail and a pre-chic hot pink streak in my hair and criminally sweat-stinky canvas Toms I never wore with socks, so I don't correct him. When I ask for a second glass of wine, he asks through his thick French accent: *So, you want to see Paris in color tonight?* I half-laugh, partly out of embarrassment and partly out of convention, and respond. "Perhaps just sepia." The joke doesn't translate, he smiles out of politeness anyway, but I hear a chuckle from the next table. A mother and daughter, with expensive diplomatic accents, who speak only about yoga and orange juice. There's a piano bar next door, a wooden building painted dark green, and the drunken patrons sing along and unselfconsciously off-key to "Hey Jude."

I know far more French than I thought I did, enough to read mostly everything at the Immigration Museum. The aquarium is in the same building, which feels a bit strange--the fish inside are described as tropical and exotic, an equatorial spectacle at which Parisians are invited to impart their gaze. It's an art deco masterpiece of architecture, this grand stone building whose face is covered in bas-relief sculptures of the French and their colonial subjects in the jungle, originally built for the 1931 Colonialism Exposition. Repurposing the building for the Immigration Museum seems like the best use of the space, allowing for the preservation of this testament to the labor and the capital and the aesthetics that were utilized for the celebration of colonialism, but the space is not completely divorced from its past. The entrance to the museum is lined with palm trees and tropical plants and a tiki-bar style restaurant, signs advertise museum tours and mai tai cocktails. Regardless of how the building has been repurposed or re-imagined, it still seems like a place to ogle at The Other, an enclosure for the un-French.

I receive free tickets to the museum thanks to a youth discount, and repeatedly misname the space as the Museum of Immigration and Colonialism. But it is solely the Museum of Immigration; there is an almost complete non-existence of colonialism within the museum. There is a passive acknowledgement that it was happening elsewhere, but no description of *how* it happened, the processes and actions undertaken by individuals and sanctioned by both the Crown and the Republic. There *was colonialism* in places like the Caribbean and North Africa, but there were no colonizers and certainly no colonized. On a section on "The Saint-Domingue Revolution" (the Haitian revolution), the gallery text reads: "In hopes of winning the revolting slaves over to the Republican cause, slavery was abolished in Saint-Domingue in 1783." France established colonies across Africa and Asia, and still maintains the outpost of French Guiana in South America. Yet there is no mention of Vietnam or Cambodia, once known as Indochina, until the museum's chronology reaches 1962. The museum describes why people immigrate to France: its reputation for freedom and opportunity, its safety, its stability, things

their home countries lack. The museum does not describe *why* its former colonies are politically unstable or *where* inequality in these semi-feudal states came from, power vacuums and political violence as endemic or momentary characteristics belonging to these once-occupied countries, rather than ricocheting responses to French presence. France must be aspirational, something people *want*, a state, but also a representation and dream of righteousness.

As the museum continues through the twentieth and eventually the twenty-first century, it takes a more active role in acknowledging the functions of racism and xenophobia. The Vichy regime and the National Front are criticized as instigators of racist violence. The establishment of the European Union created a “more flexible and mobility [sic] formidable engine of integration,” while also “strengthening external borders.” Migrants’ narratives and art fill the walls of the final room, the museum mourns the lives lost during dangerous Mediterranean crossings. At first these conflicting reflections on racism seem contradictory--how is the museum so ready to accept a liberal critique of France and the European Union in the present and so unwilling to contend with the colonial history of its past? But the answer lies in the museum’s repeated emphasis on “French values”: liberty, equality, fraternity. The section of the museum on the 1970s is entitled “The Politicization of Immigration,” its title standing in direct contrast to the “Republican legality” that allowed for the expansion of immigration in the 1940s.

The French Revolution is omnipresent, sometimes screaming and sometimes spectral, throughout the museum; it is foreshadowed before it happened and it is echoed after it happened, an omnipresent and unbreakable thread woven into the fabric of “French History.” Therefore, if racism occurs in the present, it is a failure by unjust individuals to uphold these revolutionary values and thus can be resolved with *Frenchness*. But if it was an active aspect of the country’s nascence, that would require a reckoning over the inherent just-ness of the French nation. Therefore, the Haitian revolution *happened*; it was not *fought*, it was not *struggled for*; it was a switch that once flipped led to the abolition of slavery. So long as the existential underpinning of France is just, the injustice of today is simply a deviation from Frenchness, an issue that can be resolved simply by Being French.

Determined to sink my fingernails into the decaying corpse of the French Revolution, I travel forty minutes southwest for an autopsy of Versailles.

Versailles is full of *stuff*. Rooms of stuff. Mostly, really, bedrooms full of stuff. Upon arrival, I ask if the audio guide contains any French history. The answer is no. I ask if there is writing on French history within the Palace. Again I am told no. I say thank you and begin the tour. The very first object inside Versailles, just past the entrance to the palace, is a statue of John D. Rockefeller. It is a thank-you for his continual donations to the maintenance of Versailles, an American ally to the French cause. The first stop on the tour is a view of the chapel, where a sign reminds visitors that selfie sticks are not allowed. Beyond that, guests mosey down a very long hallway with stone-engraved thank-yous to Versailles’s most prolific donors. In 1965, you have the *Société Coca-Cola*, two years later enter *Studios Paramount*. Some familiar names dot the mid-century listings: a Vanderbilt here, a Getty there, a 1974 recognition of *Madame et Monsieur Henry Ford II*. 1977 saw donations from Jack Heinz, heir to the Heinz Ketchup fortune, and the Princess of Monaco, better known as Grace Kelly. Twenty-first donations spill in from L’Oreal, Philips, Swarovski, Chanel, Cartier, Google, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Möet, Hennessy,

and, redundantly, L.V.M.H. The pharmaceutical company Astrazeneca makes its first appearance on the donors list in 2020. For a while, I'm the only person stopping to look at these lists, but as I reach our current decade, an American couple stands behind me. I can hear the man's smile as he turns to the woman and says with a contented, wistful sigh: "Rolex."

Across from the donor lists, there's a roped-off room that says *Afrique - Crimée - Italie*. No signage or plaques indicate what this room, elevated at the top of a set of marble stairs with a gold-plated door frame, contains. The feet of life-sized marble statues are visible lining the stairwell, as are two winged women surrounded by laurel leaves carved into the wall. I am itching to know more. There is nothing more to know. I move on. A later search of the Versailles website will inform me that the Crimean room was originally called the Moroccan room, and "the 13 Empire rooms retrace year after year, campaign after campaign, the incredible destiny of a young artillery officer," (Napoleon) "who became one of the masters of Europe in a few short years." The Empire Rooms are now used for temporary exhibitions and special events, "and the large paintings they contain are protected and thus invisible most of the time."

Most of the Versailles tour is bedrooms, interspersed with a few libraries and ballrooms. Everything is beautiful and quickly turns into a stew of ornate sameness. Crowds pile in narrow walkways, tourists line up to take pictures of bedspreads and wallpapers, their gazes always mediated through their phone screens. I try to look for things that relate to my interests, evidence of empire and colonialism and exchange, but the only satisfying sight before the middle of the tour is a painting whose bottom-left corner depicts an ornate Persian rug. It's a suffocating journey to the Hall of Mirrors, which appears to be serving mostly as a photo backdrop for beautiful young women in white cotton dresses and ribbons. I walk quickly, but steal a photograph of myself on the way out.

The empire reveals itself mostly in minutiae, largely unnoticed by patrons. Oil paintings comprised of carefully-glazed layers give the impression of rich, steaming meals made from New World crops so tenderly represented that you could almost carry their silver platters off the canvas. Desks keep the company of knee-high globes, the whole Earth now the size of a femur and ownable, buyable, and sellable. A small painting sits in a nearly empty room depicting French colonists settled in a forest clearing, a teepee bathed in sunlight at the right corner of the canvas and a group of women halfway into the woods at the left. At the composition's focal point, a gunshot drives a stag out of the woods while a pack of two-dozen spaniels wait to tear it apart. Its title, *L'Hallali*, has no direct English translation, but is a word used by hunters to rile their dogs for the kill or describe royal trumpet fanfare.

*Bataille d'Aboukir* should be an exception to the invisibility of the empire. It is a painting that stretches almost from floor to ceiling, five-hundred-seventy-eight centimeters tall and nine-hundred-sixty-eight centimeters wide. Painted in 1806 and brought to Versailles by Louis-Philippe I in 1835, it depicts Napoleon seated on a leopard skin atop a white horse as it tramples Ottomans and Egyptians. A divine gust of wind befalls the undulating, muscled bodies of the dead and soon-to-be-dead, men and horses reflecting the evening light in their armor and corneas. Napoleon's horse is trepidatious, he is not. The wall to the left holds a similarly sized Napoleonic scene, a Jacques-Louis David painting of Napoleon presenting golden eagles to his troops with all the heroism of Germanicus returning from the Teutoburg Forest. Guests keep their backs to both paintings as they compete to photograph the painting of Empress Josephine's coronation. The Versailles website, despite displaying both of the David paintings,

does not show *Bataille d'Aboukir*. Past this room is the Angelina Tea Room, serving beautiful, expensive pastries at Versailles and their secondary locations in Doha, Manhattan, Hafei, Tokyo, Dubai, and Singapore.

There is no idea of life at Versailles. The sun beats down on visitors as they enter and exit. The building is surrounded by a moat of car parking and a front lawn of beige gravel. If you'd like to see anything living, you'll have to pay extra to visit the gardens and their well-manicured topiaries. There are no bathrooms on display, no kitchens to observe, no servants quarters to study. Its occupants are reduced to characters and puppets, imagined icons stuck in porcelain dioramas. Marie Antoinette's face fills the gift shop: she appears on tote bags, children's books, business card holders, coasters, and sneakers retailing for three-hundred-fifty euro. I withhold myself from a deep, overwhelming urge to shoplift. By the exit, I ask a pair of American women around my age what they thought of their visit to Versailles. "It was cool," one says. The other cocks her head and asks, "Who lived there?"

I take the metro to the sixteenth arrondissement for dinner. Someone yells something at me and throws a firecracker at my feet. It is an all-uphill walk to another beautiful dinner with a beautiful waiter, miso mackerel and risotto with smoked cheese. I ask him what I should do in Paris, he recommends the usual, I'm not interested in the usual. I mention my visit to the Immigration Museum and he shakes his head, we share an eye roll as I say *C'était terrible!* He recommends that instead I go to the Institute of the Arab World and the bar next door. I oblige and visit the next day.

## C. Research Process

I love taxidermy. I find taxidermy strange, uncanny, unsettling. I don't know how taxidermy is *supposed* to make you feel, if the taxidermists of the world have a single unified intention. I suppose the hunting trophies are supposed to impress upon you a sense of victory over the natural world or masculine dominance or decadent violence. It is both an act of preservation and transformation, capturing the image of something that was once alive and reconstructing it without its liveliness. Botched taxidermy is my favorite, the impossible expressions and contorted bodies, in part for its humor and in part for its artistry. We know what living animals look like. To deviate from the living form of a body is to create something entirely new, an imagined being realized in the (preserved) flesh.

The Hungarian Museum of Agriculture is flush with taxidermy of highly variable success. They've managed to taxidermy everything: goats, sheep, insects, and in the basement several varieties of grape now sit preserved in formaldehyde on backlit shelves, like in an old science fiction movie. Everything is preservable. Upstairs, they're running a special exhibit on *Hungarikum*, which was legally defined in 2012 as "a collective term indicating a value worthy of distinction and highlighting within a unified system of qualification, classification, and registry and which represents the high performance of the Hungarian people thanks to its typically Hungarian attribute, uniqueness, specialty, and quality, which are considered the work and outstanding value of the Hungarian people both within Hungary and abroad." Interactive exhibition design allows museumgoers to smell the smells of Hungary--lemon balm, bay leaf, linden flower--and watch Soviet-era cartoons about Hungarian Christian mythology. It's a strange, beautiful, informative museum; there's a room of stag skulls and stained glass that is empty, silent, and fragile. I've always struggled to get an intellectual hold on the constant border shifts in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; looking at a map of racetracks in 1878 across the continent where the racehorse Kincsem emerged victorious provides the most grounded and contextualizing visual of these borders I've ever seen (winning championships in Berlin, Bécs, Hannover, Poszony, Hamburg, Deauville, Frankfurt, and Doberan). As I take two steps backwards to photograph the map, I bump into a glass box containing Kincsem's fully intact skeleton. In the next room, I can hear a Hungarian-language cover of *West Side Story*'s "America," the soundtrack to a dressage routine captured on VHS tape.

Kincsem's equine heart and sinewy, now forever-frozen legs moved through a Europe that no longer exists. He, and all of the dead horses in this room, raced for the Austro-Hungarian empire. The memory of the Austro-Hungarian empire is perhaps the largest taxidermy project in Budapest, the *memento mori* of its bloody death at the hands of the Treaty of Trianon present in gallery text and tour guide digressions. The post-war Soviet influence and establishment of the Hungarian People's Republic are treated as the sacrilegious mutilation of this Hapsburg corpse, and as I stand in the shadow of Kincsem's bones I read about how Soviet nationalization of the thoroughbred industry presented insurmountable struggles to the nation's equestrian success.

The day before, I visited the House of Terror--a museum covering the Nazi and Socialist occupations of Hungary. The building's eaves are extended out a few feet, with the word **TERROR** carved out along with the Hungarian socialist and Nazi party insignias, so to enter the building you must walk atop the penumbra of politics. Signs inside inform visitors they must not



take pictures and they must not request refunds. My request for the discounted European Union youth ticket is denied, and I am informed that across the city these discounts are only available to citizens and not permanent residents. The content of the museum is not too different from what I had seen in Poland and Lithuania, personal narratives of paranoia and repression inscribed on the wall, a country quietly attempting to resist a repressive regime bent on destroying *Hungarikum* and Christian values. I learn a fair bit from the museum, but once again content is secondary to the narrativization and mythologization the museum attempts to cultivate. Even information on the 1956 uprising is sparse, and I learn more from the Museum of Agriculture--a large inset display showcases a sixty-seven-year-old bottle of Tokaji, noting that while the atmosphere of defeat that year has left it in mournful memory, it also produced some of the country's finest wines. While Budapest sat in tension and defeat, a quiet resistance took place in the chloroplast of the grapevines and the minerals of the soil. On my way out of the House of Terror, I browse the gift shop to see a large library of biographies, mostly on Viktor Orban and George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. Chatting with a barista who works next door, who recently returned from five years living in Scotland, he tells me every nation has its own bloody and shameful history, that we're all walking and living amongst ghosts no matter where we are. "In Edinburgh," he tells me, pouring a coffee, "they used to kill witches in the middle of the city."

I tell Ira that Budapest, along with Vienna and Prague, strike me as the sort of great, historic Intellectuals' Cities. I note that this is how I feel, but I know that's probably not the result of inherent *truth*, just reading old books and movies, thinking of these places as places people *go to*, to think and write and talk and wander by the river, even though I know that Budapest is a place that plenty of people *are from*. In Budapest, and in Riga and Nice and Como and Croatia, I find myself bonding with strangers over the phenomenon of living in a tourist town, a place that seems to exist more in the public imagination as an abstract destination before being a real place where people live and work and walk dogs and have babies and birthdays and wait in line at the grocery store. On the journey from Budapest to Zadar, our train breaks down in the middle of very rural Hungary and we strike up a conversation with a grad student now living in Budapest on her way to visit her parents in a nearby village. We talk of true crime television and transpacific travel, the unjust premature cancellation of *Mind Hunter* and the natural beauty of Cambodia. I find myself embarrassingly charmed as she rolls her Rs when she introduces herself as Ramona. She wants to work at the International Criminal Court, and I note that her aspirations seem far nobler than my own, and Ira and I are momentarily stumped when she asks us where she should visit when she comes to America one day. Ira says New York while I simultaneously say not New York, I explain that it is an amazing place but certainly an *International city* before an American one, like London or Berlin or Milan. We then take turns suggesting places that feel uniquely American (Charleston, Nashville) before we come to the shared suggestion of New Orleans. Ramona and Ira and I talk about Hungarian food and American regional food and how there really is no bad local cuisine, except the places where they eat too much ham.

What did I *do*? Wander, mostly. Read a lot. I guess that undersells it. I filled two notebooks with hand-written notes, collected every scrap of paper I could, spoke with every

stranger that would speak back to me. I read novels about places, essays about images and eroticism, sat at lectures and museum openings and watched what was being said and watched what was being heard. There was a great deal of rhetorical analysis, in gallery text and metro safety instructions and Wikipedia articles. I struggle to take things as they are while also considering them within their own history, I struggle to keep my observations and opinions out of my interviews with others.

Strangers are always stopping me on the street. Usually to ask for directions, or how to use the bus, or where they can find a drugstore nearby. Within my first twelve hours in Budapest, a man asks me how to buy a single-trip ticket for the subway, then, on the walk back from dinner, someone else asks for help paying for parking. We inspect the meter together, crouching with our hands on our knees, and decide that, despite being unfamiliar with Hungarian, it *seems* like parking is free on weekends. When we're a block away from the parked motorist, Ira turns to me and says, "no one has ever just stopped me and asked a question like that." Charles, too, didn't believe me when I told him of the frequency of questions and requests I get out on the street. It happens everywhere. The first of these encounters (or at least the first that I can remember) took place when I was twelve years old, visiting Paris for the first time, and I was stopped and asked for directions in rapid French. In some sort of public school miracle, I gave them with a smile and a sturdy Quebecois inflection. Why me?

## D. Analysis & Main Insights

The first and only time I have cried in an art exhibition was on my twenty-third birthday. It was June and it was balmy and it was at Fotografiska Stockholm, a repurposed industrial-building-turned-art-museum sitting on the wharf over the sea. I was on a tour of the Baltics as part of a six-month research fellowship, conducting an autoethnography on art and geography across Europe, and my dear Charles was with me. Before we entered the museum, a very kind stranger took a very fabulous photo of us with our big stupid birthday grins and thrift-store vintage outfits, and after we entered a very kind staff member pointed us towards the exhibitions. It was Diana Markosian's *Santa Barbara*, a dioramic exhibition recreating her childhood as the daughter of a mail-order bride, leaving post-Soviet Russia in 1996 at the age of seven to move into the California home of a man neither she nor her mother had ever met. Markosian displays her own, real childhood photos alongside an autobiographical film recreation of her childhood through the perspective of her mother. Along with the film and the photographs are hand-edited scripts and headshots of the actors she auditioned to play her own family. Marokisian's photographs are precise, cutting, surreal, and evocative of an emotion somewhere in between nostalgia and melancholy; the artifice and confession of *Santa Barbara* simultaneously on display. The next exhibition's only memorable trait was its mediocrity in the shadow of the art that came before it, marble sculptures of distorted and contorted bodies failing to do in stone what Egon Schiele could do in a twenty-minute, two dimensional study.

After the exhibition and the necessary decompressive silence that followed, Charles and I headed to the top floor for a set-course menu of local, seasonal dishes at Fotografiska's Michelin green-star restaurant. It was a lavish and thoughtful meal in a powerful and thought-provoking space, it was an altogether perfect birthday. Fotografiska is an impressive museum. Fotografiska is, simultaneously, a harbinger for the dismantlement and financialization of creativity as we know it.

Fotografiska is the name of a chain of photography-based museums, originating with the opening of their Stockholm location in 2010. Branches of the museum exist in Tallinn, New York City, and--as of September 14, 2023--Berlin. A Shanghai location is set to open later in 2023. The Stockholm, Berlin, Tallinn, and eventual Shanghai locations also operate restaurants and bars, and all Fotografiska locations maintain a relatively typical museum store selling artists' books, posters from exhibitions, and apparel branded with the Fotografiska logo.

But Fotografiska is an outlier in the art world, beyond its global presence. Unlike most other esteemed art institutions, which receive public funding (or, less commonly, private funding as non-profits), Fotografiska operates under Fotografiska Holdings as a for-profit venture. In 2021, Fotografiska merged with the New York-based coworking startup NeueHouse under the ownership of parent company CultureWorks. Privately owned museums aren't uncommon--their predecessors are often found as museums dedicated to an individual's personal collection like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston or the Sir John Soane Museum in London, both of which are housed in the former residences of their namesakes--but are mostly relegated to the collections of barons and socialites of years' past. The private *contemporary* art museum is

a newer phenomenon, perhaps taking root with the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao in 1997 and institutions including the Broad Museum in Los Angeles and the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art in Cape Town, South Africa. Unlike Fotografiska, all of the aforementioned private museums legally operate under not-for-profit statuses.

On a pleasantly crisp Thursday night, I ducked my beehive through the doors of a south-bound tram headed towards Mitte for the Fotografiska Berlin grand opening. Attendees were divided into two lines: ticket-holders and those “on the list.” I queued with the latter group, though both consisted of similar crowds: forty-something men with backpacks and broken-in mesh sneakers, young women in platform shoes with editorial makeup with a tasteful amount of lip filler, attractive young professionals sporting all black outfits and mass quantities of hair gel. Despite a decade of vacancy and a very expensive renovation, the building carried a deeply embedded smell of stale cigarettes and vintage leather; I found this unshakable trace of grit to be very charming.

What sets Fotografiska apart from the handful of for-profit “museums” that exist (the likes of The Museum of Illusions and the Van Gogh Immersive Experience), allowing it to compete with prestigious non-profit cultural institutions is that the art in Fotografiska is *good*. Not always, of course, but consistently. The Berlin location opened with three exhibitions: *Nude*, a group show on the building’s third floor; *-USSYPHILLIA*, a high-energy mixed-media showcase by Juliana Huxtable on the fourth floor; and *Whiteface*, Candice Breitz’s meditation on discussions of whiteness from within white communities.

Huxtable’s installation was the best of the three, though my fondness for her work is at least in part a result of my personal biases: born and raised in Texas and educated at Bard College, Huxtable has a rare true artistic inertia that makes *-USSYPHILLIA* feel both eminently contemporary and colored with an eternal creative character. The space opens with Cookie Mueller-style wall text narrating a Southern Gothic desert acid trip, and follows down the rabbit hole into painting, photography, and video art. Her work has a refreshing strangeness and intangibility, and I wonder what the men in the backpacks and sneakers think, and I watch as an instillation at the back of the exhibition serves as a photo backdrop for a lithe young man in a factory-new Diesel outfit.

The group show, *Nude*, is of varying quality, as group shows tend to be. It is the first exhibition that visitors will see on their upward journey through the building, a collection of over two-hundred works by thirty “female-identifying” artists from across the world. In its curation and text description, the formal qualities of the art seem marginal when compared to the diversity of artists assembled for the show--a decision that feels both tokenizing and condescending to the artists whose work does more than represent whatever checkboxes the museum is trying to add to its list of “groups represented.” The works of Yushi Li, Jenevieve Aken, Momo Okabe, and Leah Schragar are the exhibition’s high points, culminating in a beautiful, sultry, velvety video piece by Denisse Ariana Pérez. Other works (Elinor Carucci, Lotte van Raalte, Lina Scheynius) feel deeply boring and cliché, the same pictures of areolas and cellulite that fill Tumblr and intro-level photography courses in any university, though none as deserving of a thundering eye roll as Angélica Dass’s *Humanæ*. The exhibition’s physically largest piece, it is politically (and aesthetically) a recapitulation of “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.” Around 180 faces, deadpan as passport photos, are paired with the Pantone® shade matching their skin tone. The exhibition is an “[attempt] to document humanity’s true colors rather than untrue labels such as

'white', 'red', 'black' and 'yellow'. It's a project in constant evolution seeking to demonstrate that what defines the human being is its inescapably uniqueness and, therefore, its diversity. The background for each portrait is tinted with a color tone identical to a sample of 11 × 11 pixels taken from the nose of the subject and matched with the industrial palette Pantone®, which, in its neutrality, calls into question the contradictions and stereotypes related to the race issue."

But the Fotografiska Berlin opening's aspirations were not solely to present its inaugural exhibitions. Fotografiska Berlin--and its opening--intend to create a new social space for the creative class. *Who is Fotografiska Berlin for?* is the central question on the minds of politicians, curators, artists, and community members as the space finally opens its doors. The art is too well-curated to be simply passive wall decor. It is too rambunctious and high-energy for an older crowd, too overpriced to capture a youth used to €2 Späti beers and Calvin Klein key bumps. The staff, from gallery monitors to curators, struck me as deeply passionate, serious people who cared about the quality of the art and the wellbeing of the community (a Sisyphousian task, to say the least). The suits, from the real estate development team to the highest-ups at Fotografiska Holding, seemed largely undeterred by the concerns of any Berliners without a well-diversified stock portfolio. This central question might best be answered not with a who, but with a what: it is a space for capital to inhabit.

The art market should be a paradoxical term. It isn't. Art exists in whichever environment--and therefore market--it is born into, existing on the spectrum of commercial and speculative value no matter its politics. In the essay collection *Ways of Seeing*, the late, great Marxist art historian John Berger argued that the development of the oil painting (in contrast to the egg-based tempera paintings previously standard in European fine art) serves as the definitive example for capitalist exchange. With oil painting came the rise of secular painting in Europe, including paintings of objects and, in particular, paintings of paintings. In this way "oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity. Oil painting conveyed a vision of total exteriority." And thus, not only must art be valorized but so must the artist--if one can own the work of a "genius," then a commodity is imbued with a higher value both morally and economically justifiable. As Berger puts it, "oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth - which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money."

Fotografiska isn't in the business of showcasing paintings, but it is in the business (in the most literal sense) of valorizing the legitimacy and potential of the art market and, more broadly, the "creative economy." In this way, it has less in common with the Metropolitan Museum of Art than it does with Soho House Berlin or even the Geneva Freeport, a 435,000 square foot storage facility in Switzerland. If you tour the Geneva Freeport, you will see cigars, gold bars, luxury cars, and some of the building's estimated three million bottles of luxury and vintage wines. What you won't see are any of the 1.2 million works of art held in storage and valued at over \$100 billion United States Dollars--by keeping Rothkos, Modiglianis, imperial Roman sarcophagi, and over one-thousand works by Pablo Picasso at a freeport, they are legally classed as "in transit," exempting owners from customs duties and tax liabilities as long as the art is stored. And much like Soho House Berlin (whose massive Mitte building on Torstrasse went from Jewish-owned department store to Hitler Youth headquarters to Stassi office building to Marxist-Lenninst archives to a dozen years of unoccupied vacancy to clubhouse for creatives

over the course of the last century), Fotografiska Berlin lives on a controversial piece of property.

In the creative economy, being an “artist” is no longer about being observant or thoughtful or sharp or witty or confrontational or confessional. The role of the artist is now to generate profit--not only for themselves or their institution or their patrons, as has been the case for hundreds of years--but for real estate speculators and venture capitalists. In my own experience as a fellow for a project on “creative economies,” I have attended meeting after meeting and conference after conference about the “value” of creativity to governments, NGOs, and venture capital organizations. I feel out of place as a neurotic, a writer, an artist, amongst “creatives” who do not in fact create anything but more meetings and “networking events.”

The scene is familiar. Cafés populated by MacBooks, piloted by bespeckled expats with “creative director” in their Instagram bio, the venture creative class may bear no spiritual or philosophical resemblance to old definitions of “artists.” Their social purpose, too, may be entirely different. But from an economic perspective, they are as much artists as are the next generation of Krasners, Kirchners, and Kandinskys. Their role *and* the role of the artist are now one in the same: to indicate to developers which properties will make for good investments and which aesthetics will sell those properties. In a murky scramble to capitalize off the creative economies, its goal the total conflation of “artist” with “speculative value maker,” Roth’s photography begins to make sense. How much of this desire to compartmentalize and profit off “creative capital” is the work of creative capitalists--many of whom are failed artists? Is it Roth’s inability to make meaningful art that has driven him to redefine the role of the artist itself?

In an essay on Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire wrote of “the phosphorescence of decay.” In an evening at Fotografiska Berlin, I am now convinced of the acrid sterility of growth. At the opening, I spoke with a young woman around my age who thought the event was “cool” but that the art, while interesting, meant little to her as someone “not from this kind of community.” In at least three separate locations across the museum, gallery text notes that the art displayed is “provocative” and “confrontational,” yet no one seemed particularly provoked or confronted as they held one hand to a glass of wine and another to their chins. The opening of Fotografiska is a unique symptom of a metastasizing disease: a libertarian, financialized desire to reduce creativity to a system of metric transactions. And for all criticism of Fotografiska Berlin, it may be the best embodiment of the spirit of today’s Berlin. What else can serve as a physical embodiment of a city whose name is synonymous with the radicals and freaks and provocateurs, evicted and reduced to spectral wafts of stale cigarettes, their very presence creating “value” in real estate we can no longer afford?

## E. Returning to CIRCE and Final Conclusions

I had a really transformative experience taking part in this fellowship with CIRCE. My greatest takeaway comes as an artist: there is a unique power in allowing people to spend their time listening, reflecting, and moving with intention. Beyond the specific goals of CIRCE (and all other funding bodies), providing emotional and financial security allows young people to pursue ambitious artistic projects, developing their portfolios and creative confidence. If anything, I think funding bodies should be aware that a desire for immediate reciprocity can be less meaningful than an abstract trust in “the artist” as a communal (rather than economic) role.

In the way we present art and artists, I’ve found that the form and content and text of art are often portrayed as secondary when compared to their semiotic value within a discourse or ambition. In my full-length essay collection, I wrote extensively about museums covering 20th century political history and nationalism in former Warsaw Pact countries. These museums were often sensationalist and simplistic, reducing complex histories to easily digestible narratives. In doing so, not only were facts and historic truths lost (allegations of Holocaust denial being chief among them), but even the dominating narratives being shared lacked depth, failing to fully account how particular individuals and movements empowered greater social change. They lacked actual political substance, leaning on the abstract over specific policy demands. And even in many art museums, a similarly reductive approach to history was taken. The Museum of 20th Century Art in Milan opened with a show on Futurism, a movement led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, focusing on a rapid, technologically-oriented, violent fracturing of present images to make way for a new future. In 1909, Marinetti authored *The Futurist Manifesto*. A decade later, he co-authored *The Fascist Manifesto*. Yet throughout the first floor of the museum, the word “fascist” was never mentioned, even as Marinetti’s aesthetic explorations formed the basis of his political explorations. On the second floor of the museum, covering the inter-war years and World War II, many of the artists featured were active supporters of Mussolini. The museum notes this, while also maintaining that their artistic output was unrelated to their political affiliations—despite heavily featuring motifs of urban dissatisfaction, palingenesis, the perversion of cosmopolitanism.

As broad of a leap as it is, the rejection of formalism by the creative world seems to unite the Lithuanian Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, the Italian Museum of 20th Century Art, and the new Fotografiska down the road. All three represent a shift away from creativity-for-creativity’s sake, and towards a view of human thought not as the expansion of ideas, but as a stand-in for “innovation” or “potential” in service of a larger national (or supranational) identity.

So perhaps the way to resolve this anti-formalism in culture is to meet the formal needs of artists: food, housing, transportation. My experience as a CIRCE participant allowed for much greater formal exploration and artistic “play” because I knew the success of my project was largely dependent on my artistic output, rather than my economic output. There are so many wonderful, funded opportunities for artists that require them to propose “community-oriented” projects, but can we not also appreciate the fundamentally communal value of simply being a creative? The intangible, immaterial value of going to the theater, having the time and energy to discuss art and politics with friends, to socialize, to try new things, to fail and hold the confidence to move forward?

Like many of the great European novels, my six-month fellowship ended in the United States. First in New York, then back to the place I grew up--the beautiful (and sometimes very boring--state of Maine. No one needs yet another meditation on the differences between Europe and the United States, no one needs yet another meditation on these differences that presumes both places are monolithic or homogenous. But every time I return to Portland, I worry that no one can understand who I am if they don't understand where I'm from. Briny air, early morning bicycle rides alongside the bakers and the fishermen, dry humor and clam chowder, a sarcastic tone and an earnest disposition. We're closed off people. I'm a closed-off person. I suppose that's why I write: to extend myself, intimately, in ways I could not otherwise share. I suppose that's why anyone makes art. To say something, to themselves or to others or to no one at all.