Pictures, Things:
Metaphor, Experience

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A picture of a thing is not a thing. A painting is a thing. The glass plates, celluloid negatives, and paper prints of photographs are things. Silicon computer chips are things. An object can be a picture. Rodin was a picture maker. *The Age of Bronze* is an organised hollow lump of metal consisting of an alloy of copper and tin; it is also a picture of a man. A picture of a thing is information about the appearance or characteristics of the physical thing, captured in however many appropriate dimensions, and by a variety of types of processes as well as the perception of that information by an observer. The data of an image are separate from what it may be made of at any one time and are the intangible information that are transferable between media, regardless of how the data is stored.

A picture is a metaphor. This is because, at its most basic, much like language, the closest approximation to experienced reality that image can approach, is a metaphorical approximation. It can point to a thing, but it is not that thing in itself. Words and pictures are partial constructs that one uses to interpret and point at the world. Human thought, and culture are impossible without these gestures, but it must always be remembered that they are inherently incomplete, and thus false. A metaphor can never fully replicate experience.

> There's a theorem, [Mathematician, Richard] Askey says, that states that no finite number of images can be used to reconstruct a three-dimensional object, such as a face, exactly.[1]

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Is anything not a metaphor? It seems simple enough to state that a thing is not a metaphor: it does not point to anything else other than its relationship to the world. The *thing* is that which is not a referential or representational image (it can at times be the stuff that makes up an image). A thing is an experiential object, in that it is possible to consider the experience *of* the thing, in addition to our experience of it. The thing's experience is not metaphor; it is based on evidence, and empirically a physical thing in the world. Heidegger said that a thing 'is a thing insofar as it things. The presence of something present such as the (thing) comes into its own, appropriatively manifests and determines itself, only from the thinging of the thing.'[2]

Is it reasonable then to talk about art practitioners making non-metaphoric things, and would there be value in that? Insomuch as art practice can be said to have a goal, would this be a worthy one? This paper will attempt to be a non-ideological view into what practice is capable of in terms of

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[1] Robert Schneider and Benjamin Phelan, 'Encounter with the Infinite', *Believer*, 111 (2015)
[2] Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *The Object Reader*. Ed. Fiona Candlin and Railford Guins (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009), 115

avoiding metaphor and will examine historical and contemporary attempts to move beyond representational metaphor. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière positions art images within what he calls an Aesthetic Regime, which dominates discourse on what is qualified as art.[3] Rancière distinguishes between the aesthetic regime and a previous representative regime but both hinge heavily on representational power, and rest on a conflation of art making with image making. Éric Alliez and others in response to this order have tried to locate a variety of works that have undone this aesthetic regime, by undoing the image.[4] Earlier writings on this can be found in my paper 'Thingmaker' (2012),[5] and we will keep 'undoing image' in mind while considering strategies of dealing with metaphorical representation.

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Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries artists continually questioned the empirical truth of the image, of pictorial representation. This questioning can roughly be traced back to the spread of chemical, and later digital, photography capture processes, which caused painting to respond by gradually abstracting the representational image to the eventual point of supposed completely non-representational Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 50s. This abstraction though not directly tasked with representing the visual information of an image of something, was inextricably linked to the idea of the painted image, and the singular elevated status of the autonomous *Art* object. This process of image questioning continued in the years following and culminated in the 1960s around American Minimalism, the 'Specific Objects' of Donald Judd, and the Conceptualisms of Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth.

Kosuth puts forward his methodology of Conceptual Art as non-representational through the work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) and the essay 'Art After Philosophy' (1969). Famously, the artwork consists of a chair, a photograph of the chair on the wall, and a printout of the dictionary definition of the word 'chair,' also on the wall. The chair is interchangeable each time the work is installed, and the photograph is taken of the chair where it will be seen. Kosuth continually claims that his is an art solely of ideas, that is, an art akin to Mathematics and not about anything outside of itself,[6] it would therefore presumably be devoid of metaphorical representation. This conceptualism is the basis of 'Art After Philosophy,' yet his standout work of Conceptualism, *One and Three Chairs*, continues to use a variety of forms of representation of physical things, and it does no more, in actuality, than expand the methodology of art representation beyond picture making to multiple metaphorical and linguistic picture making, which we are familiar with from literature. In some ways, this does address the problem of representation in art, but it does not attempt to resolve it, dismissing it as unimportant and possibly seeing it as unresolvable.

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[3] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 81

[4] Éric Alliez, 'Body Without Image', *Radical Philosophy*, 156 (2009): 23

[5] This paper can be found at my website: http://lukehart.co.uk

[6] Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Studio International*, (October 1969): 6-7

'Being an artist now means questioning the nature of art,'[7] so questioning the nature of art is the nature of art in this circular tautological framework and *Art* becomes only self-referential, apparently freeing the artist of the burden of representational metaphor making. In fact, though, the work is not questioning the nature of art, it relies on a singular nature of *Art,* rather, the work is questioning the nature of things, and the ways in which we metaphorically represent them. While Kosuth may dismiss this categorization of him, as one who questions the nature of things, and the representations of things, as it may link him to artists who merely questions the nature of painting,[8] *One and Three Chairs* is at base an examination of chairs, pictures, and words. The alternative is to become completely caught in self-referential tautology and one in which a notion of art is held as dear and as falsely as Modernism holds purity and autonomy, a Glass Bead Game. Without this grand faith in the nature of a singular *Art*, espousing an art of only ideas would be impossible. Kosuth is actually espousing an art of linguistics, of verbal metaphorical representations of ideas, which he claims do not point at all to empirical fact.[9] The claim of Conceptualism is that the work exists only as the idea and that the installation is merely manifestation of the idea, but in fact the idea is unknowable without the manifestation, and a chair is a thing, an empirical fact, a very simple and changing (in this instance) one, but empirical nonetheless.

To further the claim of an analytical *Art,* Kosuth compares his notion to those of Logic and Mathematics. Mathematics is arguably tautological in the manner that he describes. His method, though it is a useful way to break down conceptions of the inherent power of images, suggests no alternative beyond alternate methods of expressing pictorial (metaphorical) ideas. Conceptualism may not be *direct* synthesis of the world, and Kosuth's comparison with Logic and Mathematics could be apt if it worked (a debate on the empiricism of Mathematics and its relationship to the world is too big for this paper), but in terms of art, this worldly relationship still seems to rest on pictorial, or metaphorical, questions related to, if not taking part in, image/metaphor making, and he gives no reason as to why art should, can, or indeed does, aspire to such tautological claims.

While there are formal differences in types of representation, they are all inherent falsehoods, capable only of pointing at experience. Conceptualism tries to frame itself as completely analytical, yet while it may not be Conceptualism's goal to express experience synthetically, it seems capable of little else, unless it entails the same problems of modernistic autonomy.

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[7] Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International*, (October 1969), 4
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 7

Have any practitioners since tried to address anything about this question of representation in a way that moves beyond Kosuth and Conceptualism? And is it reasonable to think that there may be a method by which to think about resolution of the representational question? Much has been made recently of the emergence in some art circles of a type of making referred to as Post-Internet.[10] In a 2010 essay titled 'The Image Object Post-Internet,' which 'sparked much of the recent conversation surrounding art after the Internet,'[11] Artie Vierkant lays out how this type of making differs from the Conceptualism of Kosuth and attempts to move beyond the metaphorical paradigm.

In response to the Internet, these practices seek to deal with representational issues by tackling them in a similar manner as Kosuth (variety of representational method), adding the further technological data set of digital imagery, online storage, image manipulation, and avoiding thingness in favour of *picture objects* and their online pictorial manifestations. The important qualifier for how Vierkant situates the various versions of images that make up Post-Internet art is that 'even if an image or object is able to be traced back to a source, the substance (substance in the sense of both is materiality and its importance) of the source can no longer be regarded as inherently greater than any of its copies.'[12] This is because the stratagem involves 'pointing to a lack of representational fixity is that of taking an object to be represented (to be more direct, presented) as another type of object entirely, without reference to the "original." For objects after the Internet there can be no "original copy."'[13] However, this seems to confuse 'source' with 'original copy.' What metaphor points to at source, is not a 'copy' but, as we have seen, a thing.

Vierkant's series of works *Image Objects* (2011-ongoing) consists of photographs in gallery space in which abstract colour forms are installed. These photographs are manipulated and changed as prints are installed, further photographed, and exhibited in various spaces and online. As layers of metaphorical distance, and there are certainly many, are accrued, the works are meant no longer to refer back to a source. While there may be many of these layers, to claim that they refer back to nothing is to deny the pictorial metaphorical nature of all of these various copies of thing and space inherent to every manifestation pointing back at source, however distantly.

Vierkant states that Kosuth's Conceptualism is limited by the tautological argument of Conceptualism outlined above,[14] and that the Post-Internet moves beyond this tautology. Somehow due to repetition and a further technological distribution method, the Post-Internet is then claimed to position itself beyond the representational, even though the pictures produced

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[10] Scott Reyburn, 'Post-Internet Art Waits its Turn', *New York Times*. (September 26, 2014)

[11] Ian Wallace, 'What is Post-Internet Art?' *Artspace*, (March 18, 2014)

[12] Artie Vierkant, 'The Image Object Post-Internet' (2010): 3

[13] Ibid., 3

[14] Ibid., 2-3

represent things, albeit altered time and time again, by digital manipulation and further dissemination, and still point back to the world. The work may not attempt to describe empirical facts about the world, but even in a fully digital generated image/metaphor, we are still dealing with a metaphor, whose action is to point. Stating that there is 'no original copy' is fine, but there hasn't been an original copy of the image since at least before the spread of chemical photography. The further copy is always an image metaphor; there is no original metaphor; all have always been equally valid, and equally false.

> For us to receive a piece of art and determine from it some piece of empirical
> information about the world at large would seem almost a bewildering proposition,
> even in a cultural climate where we have accepted that the singular moniker "art" is
> the intention of any one individual to label it as such.[15]

Of course it seems bewildering to think of empiricism from metaphorical representation, because representation allows only the image metaphor as a manifestation of art. With metaphor, experiential empiricism is impossible.

Because Vierkant claims that the various images/pictures and methods of producing them are more important than the things pointed to, he claims not to be pointing to them at all. Were this the case, the metaphor would now be merely a metaphor for itself, in an ironic recasting of Clement Greenberg's ideas of Modernism's notions of purity,[16] the autonomy of the aesthetic *Art* ideal. He accuses Kosuth of failing to address the singular notion of *Art,* yet the Post-Internet would fall victim to much the same problem, substituting a concept of *Representation of Nothing over a Network* for Kosuth's singular *Art*, if it were in fact non-metaphorical. Or, as is more likely, the representation, regardless of whether or not there is an original copy, still at base points to a thing, or an experience.

I fail to see how this methodology steps any further than do the works that Vierkant cites as predecessors of the Post-Internet, which 'are emblematic as Post-Internet gestures and have surely been influential in different ways, but step only lightly away from the tautological rationale of Conceptual Art,'[17] citing Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*. It seems more likely that in a rush to move beyond, what is dubbed 'new media' art, the so-called Post-Internet is seduced by the same technological trap of newness that it accuses 'new-media' of, and that it does not iterate anything beyond metaphorical representation, albeit with the added technological advancement of the Internet and its distribution model.

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[15] Artie Vierkant, 'The Image Object Post-Internet' (2010): 3
[16] Ibid., 3
[17] Ibid., 2-3

Further claims made in 'The Image Object Post-Internet' hinge upon the new distribution models that the Internet provides, 'Ubiquitous authorship… [which] challenges notions of …the "original copy."'[18] Acknowledging that more people now have the ability to make copies does not change the system of copy production, when the wider variety of copies is simply that, a wider variety. The Post-Internet claim of non-representation fails for the same reason that Conceptualism fails: it simply adds a new type of image. This network distribution model claim fails for similar reasons. All that is invoked that is new is that the Post-Internet can continue to express representational and metaphorical ideas and pictures but with a better distribution model and the potential of shared authorship.

> Culture and Language are fundamentally changed by the ability for anyone to gain free access to the same image-creation tools used by mass-media workers, utilize the same or better structures to disseminate those images, and gain free access to the majority of canonical writings and concepts offered by institutions of higher learning.[19]

Culture is not changed by it, it is expanded by it; the means of producing culture are changed. This is a socio-economic point, an enfranchising one, and while valid and important, it does little to alter cultural relationships to the image metaphor. The claims about distribution models and revolutionary means of image production that the digital methodology and the Internet bring are largely true. It can be said that the access provided to more people via the non-hierarchical digital networks does make the monolithic mass media culture obsolete, but this is a distributional model issue, which does little to address the fundamental questions of representation dealt with here.

Perhaps the claim is that the model itself, or the network of connected people, is the output, an output that could aspire to non-representation. 'The methods of transmission these artists use become imbricated with the work they create, who accesses it, and the spaces they ultimately show in.'[20] It seems as though the notion of the network becoming embedded in the work itself could potentially be capable of de-linking the output of the work from the reference of metaphor. A network of people can perhaps be an experiential, non-referential thing that doesn't necessarily have to rely on image or language to communicate, but thus far it seems that artists are not moving towards this aspect of working with the Internet, outside of networked self-promotion.[21]

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[18] Artie Vierkant, 'The Image Object Post Internet' (2010): 5

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 7

[21] Artie Vierkant, Brad Troemel, and Ben Vickers, "Club Kids: The Social Lives of Artists on Facebook," *DIS Magazine* (2012)

As far back as the 1960s, and certainly as summed up with relation to sculpture by Rosalind Krauss's 1979 essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field,' medium fixity has been seen as antiquated for practitioners. In particular, Krauss examines how sculpture in the 1970s challenged the notion of an artist having an individual medium, and the artistic cachet surrounding this, with regards to a type of sculpture.[22] This was perhaps a brief moment during which there was a corner of sculpture making that was allowed to not be pre-occupied with the consideration of the image. Probably starting with Judd's *Specific Objects* in the 1960s, sculpture was concerned with art objects, purposefully non-metaphorical, but still concerned with the same tautological remove as that of Conceptualism. At the end of her paper Krauss suggests that a similar examination was necessary for painting. In 2004 Gustavo Fares published 'Painting in the Expanded Field,' which examines painting given the consideration of photography, film, digital image making, and other methods, and focusing on what to do specifically with painting as a formal medium. He concludes that painting would continue to be done, and that new methods of painting could lead to a 'second wave of freedom for painting (the first one being the advent of photography and the movies).'[23] Given the prevalence of painting in current practice, perhaps what appeals to painters is a method of painting that can use, yet does not have to rely on, images?

Lev Manovitch's 2001 paper 'Post-Media Aesthetics' examines representational media and the technological and distributional changes brought by non-hierarchical digital and social media overwhelming mass media, and it sets out the ways in which these changes change the nature of how images are produced, organised, distributed, and seen.[24] In the context of this paper, though, it would seem none of these distinctions are very important, and that the only meaningful distinction one could make would be between one who makes image metaphors, and one who makes things or experience. In contemporary culture there seems to be an implicit continued assumption of image superiority, without any questioning of the nature of images or of this superiority.

Social media and digital technology do grant further access to methodologies of both image making and distribution models as representational options expand, and practitioners are gaining access to further distribution models provided by a potentially non-hierarchical model of social and digital media. If there has been a breakdown of the mediums of sculpture and painting, and later of mass media film and video, as digital culture overwhelms all of these things, then this is just another distribution system of further representational and metaphorical images, seemingly further and further divorced from the things that they point to, yet unable to stop pointing back at them.

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[22] Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October* 8 (Spring 1979)
[23] Gustavo Fares, 'Painting in the Expanded Field', *Janus Head* 7(2) (2004): 484
[24] Lev Manovitch, 'Post Media Aesthetics', (2001): 3

I am not claiming that this technological shift is not a very large or important one, but that fundamentally it does little to alter the false relationship we have to representational and metaphorical information. There are a broad number of shifts in how we may use new metaphors to talk about representational information, organise that information, and consider the role of the viewer/user in accessing and generating that information,[25] but it all remains representational information.

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In an essay published in Art Journal (26 January 2015) Mike Maizels writes of Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner:

> Early in their careers, Smithson and his close friend Mel Bochner collaborated on a singular, strange publication that contained the germ of many ideas that would animate their practices for several years. 'The Domain of the Great Bear,' published in the Fall 1966 issue of Art Voices, was part imaginative fiction, part philosophical treatise, and part event proposal. It used the Hayden Planetarium in New York as a ground for complex, metaphorical speculation about the nature of infinity, the limits of comprehension, and the possibility of perfect maps. It also proposed the planetarium as an arena in which to enact a *gesamkunstwerk* production involving an educational lecture and a demonstration of the orbiting planetary models.[26]

This work is nearly contemporaneous with Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* and it echoes aspects of Kosuth's work. Both prefigure current trends of multi-type representation and distribution, without using all of the available technology of the time, largely because at that time mass media was still in the dominant position and wide distribution models were not available to artists. However, it also tackles the problems inherent with 'metaphorical speculation … of infinity' as well as the representational issues surrounding the 'possibility of perfect maps.' It is fitting that the article mentioned is opened by a quote from Jorge Luis Borges, who summed up these issues perfectly in 'On Exactitude in Science' in which an imagined Empire is so obsessed with map-making as to strike 'a map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided with it point for point.'[27] This attempt to circumvent the representational metaphor by means of exactitude, and including as much information as possible, of course proves itself to be completely useless, and subsequent generations of this Empire realise this, delivering the map 'up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters.'[28]

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[25] Lev Manovitch, 'Post Media Aesthetics', (2001): 5-7

[26] Mike Maizels, 'The New Geography', *Art Journal* (January 26, 2015)

[27] Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science', in *The Aleph* (London and New York: Penguin Classics 1998) : 181

[28] Ibid.

In 1969 Smithson abandoned galleries and attempts at representation in order to work in the world, making a thing that doesn't represent another thing but merely exists as *Spiral Jetty*. Indeed the film representations of *Spiral Jetty*, which obviously do have to deal with representation, consist in large part of Smithson's voiceover listing the cardinal directions from the center of the work, naming the simple materials of which the work and landscape are made in each direction. He states in text about the work: 'No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence'[29]

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At the beginning of this paper I asked: Is anything not a metaphor? I then answered: a thing is not a metaphor. The questions now, given what we have seen, are: Is it desirable to make work in this manner? Is it possible to *make* a *thing* that we call an art work? We are not looking to establish an overarching goal for art, that it embody empirical truth, but we are looking into whether or not empirical truth is possible in contemporary practice.

Some sculpture attempts to resolve this question of representation by avoiding it, or suggestions of it, completely, making functional objects that do not represent the things of their content, but are those things. If we use the term sculpture it is out of convenience, as we do not mean the sculpture of representation (Rodin) or the sculpture of expression (Modernism), but neither do we mean the building of use-value architecture. It is merely a broad term in which to group one type of experiential thingmaking, closer to Krauss's expanded field, but perhaps further expanded.

Thingmaking is a way for a practitioner to consider what she makes as a thing of the world. A thing of the world is not a picture or an image of something else, and it is a thing that exists with a *functional* relationship to the world. It interacts with the world; perhaps it performs an action, perhaps it does not. A functional object is of the world via the ways that it acts, is used, and is placed in carrying out that function. It is important not to conflate use-value with function, but it is worth considering use-value objects. A work as thing should be generative, as defined by Joanna Drucker in a recent article 'After After' (2014). It does not seek to reference or point; it does not seek to critique. If it is working in this manner then it can aim to be a thing that 'calls us to attention and calls our attention to us. It provides experience and shows what categories of experience might be.'[30] It is networked with the rest of the world, by physical location, by action, by personal interaction.

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[29] Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1970)
[30] Joanna Drucker, 'After After', *White Review*, No. 12 (November 2014): 104

Crucially, it is not an autonomous art object or a critique of image making, but a functional thing, experiencing and being experienced in, and in physical relation to, the world. It is also not a use-value object per se. Though it can flirt with use value, it is not architecture, and it is not tool making; however, it is functional in its relationships to gravity, to weather, to landscape, at times *to* architecture, and also to images, though it is not an image in itself. Networked to the whole of culture, and to the world, it, and our relationships to it, are functionally experiential of the world, not pointing to it. It is not an 'original copy' in any sense that one can make sense of the concept of it being a copy or a representation at all; it is merely a thing, and there are a multitude of ways of thus representing it in various copies.

More of this methodology of functional making and examples of practice are explored in my paper 'Thingmaker'[31] as well as its relationship to the notion of undoing the aesthetic image as defined by Rancière,[32] which may be taken as part of the impetus of examining metaphorical image making in this paper.

I would posit that a work as a thing in the world, in its experiential and existed relationship to the world, *can* in fact make a claim at a type of empirical truth. It is not an aesthetic discussion of opinions on the world in general;[33] it is merely a thing in the world in general. The world is, thus far, unavoidable. It seems abhorrent to think of the world as anything other than unavoidable. We have no way not to be things and have experiences within the world, and the things and experiences that we engineer can do the same. All the technology and metaphor piled on top of that experience is fine as long as it is recognized as simply pointing back at the world, and with the possible exception of Mathematics, it can do nothing other than that. Art practice attempts to do otherwise have failed. This simple experiential truth is one that we are capable of in terms of empirical truth.

None of this paper should be taken as a denigration of metaphorical, image, or language based work of any kind; it is merely an examination of whether or not there are alternate possibilities. If it says anything about metaphorical making, it is that it should be done knowingly with regards to the falsity inherent to all metaphor. In fact, this is not to say that practitioners working in a thingmaking manner would even avoid working in metaphorical image making, and I imagine that nearly all would do so. The work would simply involve an acknowledgement of the falsehood of metaphor and representation, an attempt at an honest use of the lie. There should be no avoidance of the synthetic, as long as it points out the fallacy of the synthetic.

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[31] Examples of my work's attempts at this, and this mentioned paper can be found at: http://lukehart.co.uk

[32] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 81

[33] Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Studio International*, (October 1969): 3

I have said before that art has been historically conflated with image making. If this continues, then we will have to question whether or not we need the idea of art? We cling to the word 'art,' because firstly it is a catchall term to organize not just fine art-practitioners, but also a huge number of cultural practitioners and performers, and even at times industrial practices such as design and commercial architecture. If this broadness has not made the term irrelevant, then overuse in further other fields perhaps has. It does not seem possible to continue to use the word without falling into elevating it to the singular concept that is seemingly shared by generation after generation, from Modernism to Conceptualism to the Post-Internet. But really we cling to art because the financial system set up around the notion of art and its various markets is what provides us with a living, not because the notion is important to what we do. With the right support network, is this term still necessary? With the right engagement with the world, and with other aspects of culture, is it still desirable? The goal wouldn't be to get rid of the *idea* that art means to practice, just the metaphor of the word that points to it.

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