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Post-Digital Strategies of Appropriation

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Easy is the New Difficult

Kenneth Goldsmith

Easy is the new difficult. It is difficult to be difficult, but it is even more difficult to be easy. Easy is not easy. Easy takes effort, just as difficulty takes effort. I want an easy art, an art of pure pleasure, an art that is completely understandable by anyone viewing it, an art that doesn't leave you puzzled, an art that ties up every loose end, dots every *i* and crosses every *t*, an art that leaves nothing to chance, ensuring that the experience of engaging in this art will be the one that is desired by the artist. I want an art that leaves no nagging questions, is insanely simple in its goals, and meets everyone of them unequivocally. I want an art where the philosophical questions posed in the work are answered in the experience of the work itself. I want an art that my mother can understand.

Sisyphus's uphill struggles are consumed with brute physicality, but downhill, there is time for contemplation. Sisyphus's travails, then, are bifurcated between easy and difficult, between body and mind. Camus proposed that the downhill interval was the apotheosis and salvation of Sisyphus's torment, a recurrent moment in which he was able to philosophically to reconcile his eternal damnation before proceeding uphill once more. With reconciliation comes peace; after that, difficulty is less difficult—ease and difficulty collapse into one. "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable," wrote Camus, for which we might substitute the words easy and difficult.

Sisyphus's difficulty, legendarily remarked upon, is quantifiable; his interval, less so. Ease is vanquished because it's too internalized; few sweat when they think. The depiction of thought is difficult. The depiction of difficulty is easy, making for compelling images: images of muscle, sweat, exhaustion, struggle, and damnation are easily rendered. I'm thinking of the sculpture of Atlas bearing his globe in Rockefeller Center, as opposed to Rodin's *The Thinker*, one of the few sculptures dedicated specifically to depiction of cognition. Atlas is an empathetic figure: looking at him, we are reminded of how light by comparison our own burdens are. Like Sisyphus, Atlas carries a warning about crime and punishment; we might be well advised to behave in a certain way so as to avoid ending up in such a situation. In both narrative and depiction, Atlas reaches out to us and in this way, his struggles sets the stage for an empathetic, relational, and social art. Atlas's condition is couched in narrative; there's a reason why he's burdened and there's a potential escape from it. We know, for instance, that Atlas tried to trick Heracles into bearing his burden for a moment while he went to pick some apples. Heracles obliged for a moment, then quickly caught on, throwing the ball back to Atlas who, to this day, continues to bear the burden. But the story is not over: he's still on the lookout for someone else to take over. Difficulty is ever-evolving; there's always another chapter to be written.

The Thinker, on the other hand, has no narrative or mythological basis to which we may relate. As a result, he is static, expressing a state rather than a story. This is the condition of easy. In comparison to Atlas, his is a metaphysical stasis. Whereas difficulty is related, ease is singular, detached, self-absorbed, and onanistic. The isolated gesture is still relatable—who among us has not been lost in deep thought?—but it's non-specific; we haven't a clue what he's thinking about. *The Thinker* is reflective; the sculpture reproduces a similar contemplative state in the viewer. But thinking exists for one, making his—and our—gesture isolated. Nor will there be any resolution because, unlike difficulty, the problem is not articulated. Easy is mute, vague, and ambiguous, lacking in emotional temperature. Is *The Thinker*'s situation easier than Atlas's? Absolutely. But does *The Thinker* have it easy? We don't know.

Although compared to difficulty, easy is less visible (often invisible), there are cases in which difficulty is rendered equally indiscernible, as in the case of virtuosity, where one is so good at what they do that they make difficulty look easy. In virtuosity, any trace of difficulty is eliminated, entirely eclipsed by easy. Think of the seemingly ease with which George Harrison played guitar: what didn't show was the difficulty, the proverbial ten-thousand hours and the resultant bloodied fingers. Professionalism eradicates difficulty, rendering skill as anti-skill, a machine that seamlessly transforms difficult into easy. Hollywood as dream machine, industrial magic and light. The professional athlete's playing field or the rock band's stage are frictionless venues. The only place that such frictionlessness allegedly exists is in Heaven. In this way, easy is a window, a glimpse on to the divine. Difficult and easy as two sides of a coin. Sometimes you get to easy by going through difficult. Difficult is the foundation upon which easy is built, reminding us that, easy is or was, in fact, difficult to attain. But easy can also just as easily be difficult to maintain. The state of easy is fragile: with one small wisp, the bottom drops out, throwing easy back into difficult. In this way, easy is a portal to difficult, which then is, in turn, a portal back to easy. The endless cycles of difficult and easy are, in fact, truly Sisyphian.

If easy makes things difficult, and difficulty makes things easy, where is value located: in ease or difficulty? If one is codependent upon the other, the moment we try to name one as such, we must also name the other. Therefore, sayings like "that was easy," or "taking the easy way out" is another way of valuating difficulty. Operating in each other's negative space, easy and difficult are like optical illusions flickering back and forth on an eternally rotating Sisyphian Ferris wheel. When the wheel stops spinning, pausing long enough to load new passengers, only then can we evaluate it as being either easy or difficult, a snapshot of a moment. Difficulty, as a narrative, is time-based. Easy, as a state, is atemporal.

Traditional valuation claims that difficulty is more valuable than ease. Deskilling skews value because it collapses difference, articulating a singular state that we had presumed to be divided: skilled or unskilled. That was easy. No it wasn't. I am skilled but I refuse to put these skills into play. I will confound value. The denial of value is perverse and unthinkable. However, that is my strategy. In that, I side with magic, a practice with similar unaccountability, one that confounds value by emphasizing easy over difficult. *Voilà!* Magic and easy are both viewed with a skeptical eye (there's little magic in difficulty except in its escape). Both are dismissed as sleight of hand, as shams, as tricks, as jokes. Easy is muttered in the same breath as stock market bubbles and real estate scams, so easy that they're 'like printing money.' Somewhere somebody is getting rich off of easy and it's not me: 'He's on Easy Street.'

Our twenty-first century villains make their fortunes on easy. The odor of easy reeks of imperiousness, power, and authority. The white-collar criminal wraps himself in the mantle of easy but under the surface, is anything but easy. Like most easy, he got here through difficult and can re-enable difficult at will. Easy can turn difficult very quickly—and show the teeth to enforce it. Speaking loudly and punishingly, in the infamous words of one reality television star: ‘This one’s easy for me. You’re fired!’ With a snap of the fingers, easy can demolish difficult, hard-won achievements. We admired the London cabbie for his mastery of *The Knowledge*, often cited as the most difficult test in the world. But easy—Uber and GPS—deskilled the cabbie, rendering *The Knowledge* into a quaint relic, an artifact from the age of difficult. But it’s not all easy. Someone still has to drive that Uber, a truly difficult job, done without *The Knowledge*, which at least had the benefit of positioning the cabbie as an intellectual. This is easy playing its sleight of hand, both sides of Camus’s coin—pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Capital’s frictionless movements appear to be easy, sliding across the globe in micro-seconds, yet labor—mostly invisible manual labor, traditionally difficult labor, in some cases monstrously torturous labor—gives capital its appearance of easy.

But easy is also resistant, jamming engines, disturbing logic, and challenging the order of things. In a world hungry for the new and an insatiable thirst for expansion, easy stalls. Easy is unambitious. The bum, the idler, the scavenger, the observer, the intellectual, the welfare mother, the unemployed, the dropout, the drifter, the observer, the poet, the underutilized, the decommissioned, and the dreamer are all reviled for taking easy handouts, leeching off of difficult. While those around him toiled furiously, Bartleby chose easy: “I would prefer not to.” Easy is both the aspiration and antithesis of capitalism. In its refusal to reconcile contradictions, easy is perverse—purposely contradictory and illogical—in ways that difficult is not. Difficult is mono-dimensional, single-minded, productive, ambitious, and motion-filled; it’s singular goal is to overcome its condition by whatever means are at its disposal. In this way, difficult is productive and ambitious, except for when it stalls—wrapping itself like fog, blinding its victim to ever seeing a way out—difficult is in motion, presumably barreling toward easy, or at least trying to find a way out of difficult. You can die of difficulty, but you might also be able to extract yourself from it. In this way, difficulty is admired as much as easy is reviled. While difficult is heroic, easy is anti-heroic.

Most try to imagine an easy life for themselves, but then what role does difficult play? When we overcome difficulty and eradicate it from our lives, do we also give up the fight, so to speak? Is easy too easy? Does difficulty give our lives meaning? Difficulty’s investment in narrative lends a semblance of progress to one’s life story. But when lives stall, becoming easy, difficulty is imbued with nostalgia. War veterans, who fought in the most horrific of situations, often look fondly back on those days as being the most meaningful of their lives. Incredibly, we hear this from kidnapping victims and prisoners of war. Retirees, slathered in languor, long for difficulty. When we finally reach a state of easy that we’ve so long desired, does easy become impotent, inevitably rejoined by ennui?

Like most people, artists aspire to easy: a successful career, admired by an adoring public. But artists, the most tenacious of creatures, are willing to sacrifice everything for their art. Sadly, most aren’t successful, so they seek reconciliation, the same sort that Sisyphus found in his downhill interval, recasting their punishing exertions as heroic performances. Tehching Hsieh’s imprisonment of himself in a cage for a year, William Pope.L’s crawling across city sidewalks on his belly, or Chris Burden’s cramming himself into a tiny gym locker for five days, are examples that come to mind. Surely these tasks are the easiest things in the world—it takes no skill to squeeze oneself into a gym locker—and at the same time the most difficult: why would someone want to squeeze themselves into a gym locker? That was easy. No it wasn’t. Both Sisyphus’s and Burden’s conditions flicker between the physical and the conceptual, between the punishing and the ecstatically absurd.

Much contemporary art is often dismissed as easy, eliciting the stereotypical remarks of the mother standing in front of a Pollock, ‘My child could do that.’ The easiest musical composition ever written—Cage’s ‘4’33”’, four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence—took the composer years to reconcile. He claimed it was the most difficult piece he ever wrote because of the courage he needed to summon in order to present it to the world. This, Cage, claimed, took years. In his case, the courage and thought was Sisyphus’s uphill journey. But what if Cage didn’t wrap easy in difficult? What if he simply said, yes, it was easy? Value attaches itself to difficulty in ways that it eschews easy. Value makes for a better story. I think Cage knew that.

While I want an art that’s easy, it’s hard to find an artist who actually embraced easy. But I can think of one museum show that did this exact thing—albeit accidentally—and it was one of the most challenging exhibitions I’d ever seen. It was by the graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister called *The Happy Show*. Its goal was to elicit nothing but happiness in the viewer. All impediments were removed in the service of easy. As an expert graphic designer, Sagmeister treated the space as if it were a brochure. Never have I witnessed a floor-to-ceiling vision of an architectural space so seamlessly integrated into its content as Sagmeister covered every inch of the institution in compelling, engaging, and understandable graphics. Like New Yorker cartoons, each sexy chart and graphic had a punch line. Gliding from one display to another felt more like amusement park enticements than a museum, encountering graphical renderings that equated the relationship between happiness and one’s time off from their job, happiness and the number of sexual partners one has, happiness and education, and so forth. No detail in the institution was spared: even the elevator buttons were re-labeled: UP with Adderall, Ritalin, and cocaine; DOWN with Xanax, Valium, and Percocet. There’s no way you couldn’t understand this. The show was, not surprisingly, enormously popular. Finally, people could actually understand what they were seeing in a contemporary art space, a place notoriously known for being difficult.

Sagmeister’s denial of difficult transmuted into clever. Clever makes connections, is warm and accordant; clever is good business. Like easy, clever doesn’t have to do much work; its outcome is predictable and pre-ordained. Clever is a strategy of reification, one that unites minds already in agreement. Clever has little conversion, reverberation, or afterlife. It resonates for a moment, then quickly vanishes. Like easy, clever has little narrative or past; it lives almost wholly in the present. More ephemeral than easy, clever doesn’t even plateau—it evaporates instantaneously. Comedy’s *métier* is clever. If you get the joke, you are already primed to get the joke. Jokes don’t linger: one is quickly replaced by another. Resonance—a durational attribute—is antithetical to oneness. Fraught with discord and friction, difficult has little truck in clever. Difficulty is ripe with resonance.

Sagmeister gives us a glimpse of what art would look like if it adopted the *métier* of the comedic, an art not for the ages, but for the interval, an evaporatory art with the lifespan of inbetweenness, more trade fair than biennial, free of ambiguity, friction,

or division. *The Happy Show*. Sagmeister was actuating what countless artists pay lip-service to: while many claim to be easy, few actually are. From Duchamp ('saying yes is always easier than saying no') to Fluxus ('the fusion of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games, and Duchamp'), such claims have been made, but there's nothing particularly easy or even fun, as most people would define it, about either Duchamp or Fluxus. Andy Warhol often said that he liked things that were easy and that he wanted his art to be easy. But we all know that while Warhol may appear to be eye candy, under the effortless surface lay a tangle of contradictions and enigmas, so much so that armies of critics are still—nearly three decades after his death—unraveling the knotty depths of his sprawling oeuvre. Likewise, Jeff Koons spouts easy, yet there are subtle perversities in his work that deny him this. Occluded by double-entendre and laced with theory-based irony, no Koons is innocent. When Koons appears on morning talk shows spouting about how lovable his *Flower Puppy* is and how he wants his art to make the world a happier place, it's really a deconstruction of media on the site of media itself, making it a terribly complicated and self-reflexive gesture. In doing so he breaks the fourth wall of television. What's easy about that? Keith Haring emanated easy in the form of loveable cartoon figures, but when it came right down to it, the subtexts of gayness, graffiti, hip hop, street culture, and AIDS made Haring a populist of underground subcultures, ones that only later—after these things ceased to be difficult—became mainstream and easy.

Another category—and I think this begins to touch on what I'm getting at—are the highly 'commercial' artists who straddle the line between graphic design and fine art like Norman Rockwell, LeRoy Neiman, Andrew Wyeth, and Peter Max. Even though Peter Max was born of the counterculture, there was nothing insurgent or abrasive about *Yellow Submarine*. Rockwell is closer to Sagmeister: an illustrator who never claimed to be a fine artist. And Wyeth, maintaining that he was a painter, made works that functioned as unambiguously as any illustration.

Of all these, LeRoy Neiman came closest to easy because easy was his subject. While he often painted sports heroes performing spectacular feats of difficulty, they were wrapped in the guise of easy, both in terms of style and the market in which they circulated: his sports prints hang in country club locker rooms and snack bars. There's a harmony of form, content, and reception that gets pretty close to Sagmeister. Neiman began doing easy from the start, when he hooked up with Playboy founder Hugh Hefner in 1958. For the next decade-and-a-half, he churned out depictions of easy in his *Man at his Leisure* series published monthly in the magazine, not to mention his *Femlins*, illustrated depictions of 'easy' women. Yet, as little resistance as there was in Neiman's work—and no apparent desire on his part for it—Hefner had to claim difficulty by swathing the erotic in the mantle of art in order to legally legitimize his publication: "You couldn't run nude pictures without some kind of rationale that they were art." In the end, it was Hefner who was more the artist than Neiman. But if asked, neither Neiman nor Hefner wouldn't have disavowed easy like Cage did. They'd have embraced it. That's avant-garde.

In popular culture, the only way to legitimize easy is through magic. A decade ago, Staples ran a series of ads that featured a big red Easy button which one could push as a magical solution when things got too hard. One ad features a guy who runs out of printer ink. A woman asks him, "Out of ink?" to which he sarcastically replies, "Yeah, the ink fairy will come tonight and leave us three dollars." The woman rejoins, "Or you could just use the Easy button," and points to a big red button emblazoned with the word Easy on a nearby desk. The guy chuckles and says, "Yeah, like that's real." What is real and what is not? The ink fairy is a jet-black tooth fairy: when you put your expired ink cartridge under your pillow at night, the fairy leaves you three dollars, referring to the very un-magical mail-in rebate you exchange for your empty cartridge. The ads—proposing imaginary solutions to imaginary problems—wished a 'pataphysical object into being. There was so much demand for a 'real' Easy button that the company began actually manufacturing them. Now, when you find yourself in difficulty, you push the button and a voice says, "That was easy!" The easy utopia is the forthcoming internet. Not the one we have now, but one that actually works. It's so close we can taste it: Amazon's one-click shopping. That was easy. The LP downloaded to your computer through walls on the wireless network it runs on. That was easy. But it could be easier. The imagined and anticipated frictionless of the digital makes for a new difficulty equation. Once easy has plateaued into a consistent and constant condition—an ever-present pulse like Wi-Fi—then difficulty is not as difficult as we had once imagined it. Now it's difficult to get from easy to easier to easiest. The final state of easiest is spirit. Imagine how easy it would be to live in spirit only, relived of the burden of a body. After all, much of our difficulty resides in the lugging around this cumbersome, endlessly needy hunk of flesh—Sisyphus's stone and body. When physicality is a thing of the past, we can enact the ultimate state of easy: pure spirit. Heaven is frictionless.

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