

Robert Atkins' *Artspeak* is a glossary to the *lingua franca* of contemporary art, a quick-reference guide that contextualizes its pivotal moments. It begins with an illustrated timeline that lists the major events from 1945 to the year of the book's publication (the first edition was published in 1990).

Artspeak's aim is "to provide access to contemporary art." It strives to be popular, accessible and straightforward, despite contemporary art's resistance to be any of those things. Thus the periodization of time is an ugly but necessary tool. In Atkins' book, time is chopped up by measurable events: grand upheavals, great discoveries. X begat Y, this comes out of that. A movement is defined by, in Atkins' words, "the moment of greatest vitality for a particular attitude toward, or method of, art making," more easily measured when localized to a specific location and bracketed with precise start and end dates, precluding the minor but no less important histories scattered around them. A single small representative image of an artwork dots each page, more of an exemplar of the period than an adequate depiction of the work itself. Starting with *abstract*, moving through *Bay Area Figurative Style*, *Light-and-Space*, *Neo-Geo*, and ending with *zeitgeist*, Atkins' list of buzzwords provide many points of access. But I ask: where do you fit in?

Kang Seung Lee's project *Untitled (Artspeak?)*, 2014–ongoing, counters Atkins' neat chronology with this question. Unlike Atkins' book, *Untitled (Artspeak?)* is joyfully messy and complex. Rather than establishing any central authority, Lee posits that the moment of greatest vitality stems from a person's own lived history. The project is a collaboration between Lee and a select number of his friends and peers. To each collaborator Lee assigns the page from *Art speak* for the year of their birth for reassessment. Their task is to rewrite that year of the timeline as they see fit.



What happened in the year of your birth? Plenty—more than Atkins or anyone else can list. For one, you began to exist. While your early memories are certainly very fuzzy to non-existent, to write your own canon you start filling in the gaps. In Atkins' timeline each year is neatly split into two categories of events: "the world" and "the art world." Which came first, the world

or the art world? In Atkins' view they were never corollaries; instead he casts them on parallel planes.

I cannot deny there are inexplicable synergies between Atkins' world and the art world. For instance, in the year of my birth NASA scientists got their first glimpse of Saturn's rings from images returned by a space probe launched six years prior, and Frederic Edwin Church's *Icebergs*, painted in 1861, was auctioned off at a record-breaking price. I'd like to think that Church's motivation to travel to the Arctic was more aligned with a scientist's desire to see something they hadn't before, rather than what price the resulting painting would fetch nearly a century after it had been conceived. In my book, Church's story is the story worth telling.

This is not on Atkins' timeline: in the year of my birth Joan Didion published an essay that attempted to sum up the zeitgeist at the end of the sixties, a period ten years prior. It begins, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." When I read Didion's essay for the first time at twenty-two it left only a vague impression on me. At twenty-eight I read it again and decided I was going to be a writer. At thirty-one I stepped onto California soil for the first time, and though I never experienced the sixties otherwise, "The White Album" became a sacred text.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Didion's opening line is concerned with the stories we fabricate for the purposes of survival. When I read that line at age twenty-eight, I understood it then, as I do now, that we do not fully live without telling stories. Events are not acute symptoms of the world; like stories, they emerge out of the continuousness of time, and as stories, they gain and lose meaning depending on the present context and who is telling them. Couched in each grand upheaval and great discovery there are a million little stories, each hurtling on splitting trajectories through time.

Maybe Didion's essay would have less meaning had I become a scientist or an astronaut, or maybe it wouldn't appear on my timeline at all—I cannot say. But I do know that while you may be the product of some unassailable cosmic alignment in the heavens, your own story eclipses our shared one.



Before the printing press, bookmaking was a laborious and expensive process: monastic or lay scribes toiled for weeks over a copyist's desk, replicating texts from master codices using thin feather quills. As demand increased books became more and more elaborate. The scribes passed each lettered page over to illustrators. These workers decorated the empty spaces with illuminated letters, decorative frames, and startling examples of marginalia.

It would be safe to say that marginalia was an accepted practice at the time, given the number of surviving examples and in the most sacred of texts. In that time it would not be unusual for the bishop to be completely unruffled by the image of a monkey sliding a trumpet into its ass, tucked into the gutter of his psalter.

While these additions might appear transgressive, we should not read them as sacrilege. Nor were they always anonymous: now and again, in the margins of some of those old medieval books, you might find a little self-portrait of a Matthew or a Joanna, hunched over a desk with a quill in hand. There is little doubt that medieval scribes and illustrators, tied to their task as servants of God, were still permitted to include annotations as profane or satirical commentary on the text. In Jewish scholarship, glosses that define or provide a correct pronunciation of certain words dot the margins of various copies of the Torah. Exegetical texts such as *midrash* reveal deeper meanings of Jewish scripture through anecdote and allegory. *Midrash* suggests what is written into our holy books is not necessarily dogma; as an Episcopalian bishop sees it, "everything to be venerated in the present must somehow be connected with a sacred moment in the past."

George Steiner, in his essay "The Uncommon Reader," writes "marginalia pursue an impulsive, perhaps querulous discourse or disputation with the text." To read critically is to read with a pen in hand, or as Steiner puts it, with "an active quill." A friend tells me she despises marginalia; she sees them as contaminating her understanding of the author's point of view. I hold the opposite view: when I browse books at a library or bookstore I am thrilled to find notes penciled into the margins, regardless if I agree with them or not. To libraries these books are "damaged" or "defaced," in bookstores they are "used with some wear." But those acts of defilement are the start of a conversation, not only with the author but also with other readers. When I see marks of a fellow reader—a usurper messing about in the text, a dissenter challenging the author's point

of view from the margins—the book itself seems much more alive in my hands.



For *Untitled (Artspeak?)*, Lee reproduces each assigned page by hand on large sheets of drawing paper. Some pages he reproduces twice (a few of his collaborators were born in the same year). He paints each letter of serif type in black ink. He copies Atkins' inset images in ink, acrylic, watercolor, gouache and colored pencil. At his collaborator's request he adds additional images, crowding the margins with contemporaneous visual cues. Lee's enlarged copies of Atkins' pages become something else. They supplant the printed book's soft authority with an auratic presence—of something carefully copied by hand, of text rendered as image—and refute the idea that a historical period can be summarized by a single emblem or image.

When Lee finishes a drawing he passes it along to its assigned collaborator to annotate. What is missing is scrawled into every available space: with pencil, with marker, with paint. What contaminations! Lee's drawings of Atkins' pages become the substrate for new scholarship, and the annotations take on the style of the annotator. They whisper, they howl, they gossip. They are love letters as well as didactics. From each set of margins comes a full expression of a person in but not of Atkins' "world" or "art world"; women and queer people and people of color and aliens and artists. Here a single authority is supplanted by many competing voices, declared, literally and figuratively, from the margins.

Through history we find the language of our practices. In that timeline we find events to bump up against or tether to; there we locate our influences, our allies, and our enemies. But we cannot hold such histories as sacred. Nor can we rely on rehistoricizing past events in order to give our present meaning (though I admit this essay does, in places.) I do not think *Untitled (Artspeak?)* strives to dismiss Atkins' book as a narrow, dogmatic text. It is no easy task to collapse nearly half a century into a few pages, and Lee's collaborators too are limited to just how much they can include on the page. But it is only because of *Untitled (Artspeak?)* that I begin to consider the relevance of Atkins' own subject position in his text: as a Western-educated art historian as well as a queer man.

Perhaps *Untitled (Artspeak?)* remains a self-styled rhetorical question. What happens when biography and subjectivity seeps into—or in some cases, invades—our established histories or stricter codes of scholarship? I endeavor to answer: in all cases it results in a more meaningful present.

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