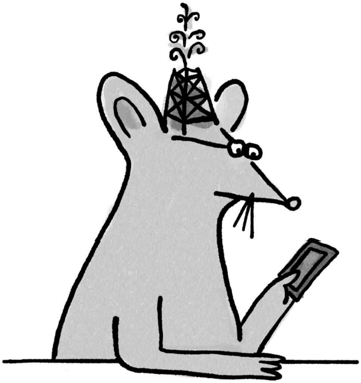
Winter of the Mind

On the front lines of the attention liberation movement

JAEL GOLDFINE



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Jun 21, 2024
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I AM WALKING AROUND Hell's Kitchen like a French Marxist. This is to say: slowly and weirdly. Dangerously. I have been told to "set aside all of my usual motives for movement and action," and follow only what draws my attention. Stepping into Fifty-Fourth Street to beeline toward a crushed bed of magenta flowers sprinkled with dog shit, I am almost hit by a car.

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I am performing what's called a *dérive*, which loosely means "drift" in French. Guy Debord of the Situationist International devised the exercise in the 1950s as a way of disorienting himself and his friends. By breaking the rules of the street, Debord hoped to inspire people to see themselves and the city in a new way. The Situationists would *dérive* around Paris for days on end, once for as long as two months. I am due back at a cooperatively run event space in twelve minutes.

A month prior, clicking through Instagram stories, I saw a sponsored advertisement for something called an "attention lab," hosted by a group called the Strother School of Radical Attention. An Instagram page described the group as "a Brooklyn-based education initiative dedicated to the community study and practice of radical human attention."

This pitch was seductive. I had been worried about my mind for some time. Like most people I know, I use my phone constantly and compulsively. I spend most days, particularly during the workweek, when I have no social engagements to interrupt my distraction, texting nonstop and toggling frantically between half a dozen feeds. It can be frightening how long it takes me to complete even mundane work tasks, or how rarely I focused on something for more than a few minutes without interruption. I had also begun to suspect that my mind was fundamentally different than it used to be, that it didn't work as well as it once had. And I had become fixated on the idea that I was no longer capable of the creativity or intellectual seriousness I once possessed. This is not to mention the task of writing, which lately felt like a magic trick I'd forgotten how to perform.

Still, the ad set off alarm bells. The Strother School's Instagram spoke the language of social justice and academia but also of a pop-psychology TED Talk or wellness brand's startup deck. Their grid featured attractive young people journaling, staring into each other's eyes and contemplating nature in parks, as well as infographics posing questions like "How did our attention become the raw material in a trillion-dollar industry?" Who were these people? What were they selling? I RSVP'd.

A few days later and an hour before my near-death experience, I arrive at Prime Produce Apprentice Cooperative, a member-run guildhall in Hell's Kitchen, on a cold, sunny November Saturday. The room is full. Well-dressed people in their twenties and thirties chat over unpretentious snacks: Goldfish, cookies, juice. I sit down in a circle of about thirty chairs, working overtime to pin down the crowd. My neighbors are a Black kid in their early twenties whose acting teacher suggested better focus could improve their craft and a nerdy white guy in Allbirds who works in philanthropy. He says he's there to keep his mind active after college. We all found the event on Instagram. Four moderators, each in the stylish young person category, begin the lab. One of them launches into an upbeat but harrowing account of the attention economy, in her words, the multi-trillion-dollar network of industries that seek to capture and monetize every second of our waking gaze. She explains that today, four of the five of the biggest companies in the world—Alphabet, Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon—are staked in this industry. She explains "attention fracking," a term coined by one of the group's founders, D. Graham Burnett, to characterize the way tech companies use data-refined algorithms to pump maximally addictive content into our brains, expelling crude attention that can be sold by the view. The stakes of this, the Strother School believes, are higher than we might realize. The group contends that, as a society, we are losing the capacity for deep thought or sustained focus. That these companies are robbing us not only of our productivity but also of our health, our literacy, our relationships, our civil power—our humanity. The Strother School hopes to resist the commodification of our minds by nourishing what it calls radical attention: deep, sustained focus that is not a means to an end, but an end unto itself. The moderator explains that this is a "political space," and by virtue of being at this lab, we are all "attention activists."

> Unfortunately, learning you are the cash crop in the attention economy doesn't actually make it easier to resist your algorithm or more feasible to opt out of the devices and platforms on which we conduct lives, any more than discovering how capitalism works means you stop desiring new clothes or needing to earn money.

We begin our activism with some deep breaths. As a warm-up, we hold our pointer fingers in front of our faces, drawing one away to demonstrate the difference between sight and perception. Next, we are placed in small groups and instructed to spend three minutes staring at our outstretched palms. My hand starts to look grotesque, then sculpturally beautiful. When the exercise requires us to close our eyes, I can't stop imagining a claw at the end of my wrist. At the end of each exercise, we take notes and share them.

It's during this first debrief that I start to feel something. It's strangely wonderful to be here, discussing in granular detail the feeling of staring at one's hand. It feels good to take slow stock of this small experience, to be listened to, and to listen closely to others. My mind feels sharp and expansive. It feels good to have thoughts. We could talk about anything, and I'd hang on to these stranger's every word. Later, as I *dérive* around Midtown, my euphoria builds. I stare at mundane scenes like a tourist: the crushed flowers, the corpse of an e-bike, a closing pizza shop. I imagine novelistic backstories. I feel the way I sometimes do on drugs: that the world is so painfully beautiful and full I could drown in it, or at least walk this block forever and never get bored.

I now associate these feelings with what the group calls "radical" or "pure" or "collective" attention. Small group discussions and getting people to act weird in public space are two levers the Strother School pulls to access this state of mind. By the time the real fire-and-brimstone speech arrives, I am primed. The cheerful facilitator's tone turns indignant. We are amid a new industrial revolution, she says, which involves a newly cruel form of extractive capitalism carried out in, as members of the group wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, "the little satanic mills that live in our pockets." She explains that just as the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century produced unions and collective bargaining, we will need solidarity en masse and new strategies to protect our attention. What might these unions of the mind or these new methods of resistance look like? Disarmingly, the group admits they do not have the answers. But they have theories.

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THE STROTHER SCHOOL of Radical Attention is not really a school. It's also not really an organization of activists, or campaigners, or lobbyists. It is not, at this time, advocating for the regulation of the tech or advertising industries. It does not, at this time, organize protests or carry out political direct action. It is also not a meditation group or a mindfulness program or a type of therapy, though the people who run it are interested in all of these things.

The school is a nonprofit that grew out of a collective of artists and academics called the Friends of Attention, which emerged at the 2018 São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. (The school is named after one of those founding members of the Friends, Matthew Strother, who passed away in 2023.) One of those academics was Burnett. He was there curating a symposium about attention, a subject he'd been studying for some time as a professor of the history of science at Princeton. (Burnett is at work on a book about the history of the scientific study of attention.) The event took place a few weeks after the presidential election of the far-right nationalist Jair Bolsonaro, giving the panelists little choice but to set aside abstract questions of art and aesthetics in order to consider those of politics and power. Burnett began to reflect on how the commodification of attention had fractured our "shared world," exacerbating "political fragmentation" and "failures of civic solidarity" while amplifying "truculence in our collective environment."

He and a few others—people like Princeton poetry professor Jeff Dolven, Wesleyan political scientist Sonali Chakravarti, College of Mount Saint Vincent's Leonard Nalencz, artist Stevie Knauss, and filmmaker Alyssa Loh, many of whom overlap with a mysterious group called the Order of the Third Bird, recently profiled in the *New Yorker*—formed the Friends and spent the next few years writing, thinking, and talking about attention. The Strother School's founders are highly educated, and their ideas can sound lofty. But their concerns can be understood by anyone who has spent any significant portion of life online. Their materials articulate the risks of the attention economy in ways that are more alarming and persuasive than facts about shortened SAT readings or rates of teen Instagram users with depression. Their "Manifesto for the Freedom of Attention" explains digital life as "a masquerade" in which the agency to click, scroll, read, or look at whatever we want, at any time; to speak to whomever we want; and to represent ourselves however we want disguises a frightening lack of choice over how we spend our time or use our minds. This is because ultraprecise algorithms organize our feeds in order to capture our attention for as long as possible, turning each of our phones into a prison without walls. In the group's defining text, *Twelve Theses on Attention*, which was published as a booklet in 2022 by Princeton University Press, the authors write: "The absence of freedom of attention may thus feel like freedom (endless solicitation). Freedom of attention may feel like unfreedom (deliberate submission)."

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Despite the school's Marxist influences, interest in labor unions, and critiques of corporate greed, Burnett says the school's politics don't map neatly onto left or right, and that *anti-capitalist* doesn't quite capture their stance. The attention movement will need to be "broad-church, big-tent," program director Peter Schmidt, a twenty-seven-year-old Princeton graduate, tells me. Events in Brooklyn may bring together professors, journalists, and tattooed DSA members, but after publishing the *Times* op-ed, they heard from parents and teachers all over the country. "Part of the politics is that people are already doing this everywhere," says Schmidt. Anyone spending time on pursuits that require or produce deep, sustained attention is doing something increasingly rare and radical. This may sound precious or effete, like some sort of back-to-the-woods, cottagecore Luddism. But the school is neither antitech nor especially nostalgic. ("I'm so excited about this new world," Burnett says. "It's not about not using our phones. It's about not being completely fucking destroyed.")

Thanks to frightening statistics about rising ADHD diagnoses, shrinking attention spans, and screen-time impairing children's development, concern about what technology is doing to our minds has become commonplace. Regulating Big Tech is perhaps the last bipartisan issue in Congress. Books like Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing* (2019) and Tim Wu's *The Attention Merchants* (2016) have helped popularize the term "attention economy." Then there are the self-help gurus preaching the gospel of unplugging, like Catherine Price in her book *How to Break Up with Your Phone* (2018); the finger-wagging "get off your phones" TED Talks (see Cal Newport's "Why You Should Quit Social Media"); the start-ups hawking nouveau dumb phones; the screen-time tracking app Opal; and the genuine nostalgists like the Catherine Project, a free provider of Plato seminars, and Matthew B. Crawford's Shop Class as Soulcraft, a paean for working with your hands.

The Strother School embraces all of the above. Burnett considers ideologically diverse, large-scale movements such as feminism and environmentalism models for the attention movement. "[The feminist] movement had a lot of different components," Burnett says. "Some of them were things like Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and *Womanhouse*. Some were collective, [like the workshop that gave rise to] *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.... There were also people lobbying for legal change. The breadth of the movement was constituted by a wide range of activities. There were all kinds of fellow travelers and allies." The Strother School's role might be reading poetry and asking people to stare at their hands. They believe that there is nothing frivolous or trivial about such activities today.

NOT ALL, BUT MANY young people are aware of how social media works and why it's bad for them. The Strother School has actually come up with something to do about this—and it's not an app or a book or a routine or a suggestion to notice birds. It's small, in-person, seminar-style group discussions and spatial exercises, both ideally done in public spaces that force people into encounters with the world around them—with, as the Friends write in *The Twelve Theses*, "the astonishing reality of things and persons." The school's most powerful tactic is using these tools to remind people how good deep thinking and sustained attention feel, how "retracing the attentional path of a free mind is one of the keenest pleasures we can take in each other and in the world."

It took the Strother School time to figure out how to talk about what it does. Schmidt, currently the only person working full-time for the group, is in charge of marketing the attention movement. When Schmidt first encountered attention activism, he'd recently quit a job at a climate think tank to write a novel. He wanted to return to the environmental movement but was feeling increasingly lost. He got an email from Burnett, his former professor at Princeton, in early 2022. Burnett told him about the Friends of Attention and invited him to a lab. Schmidt enjoyed it and began attending meetings. But when the Friends asked him to join them to work on the labs, he said no: He was busy applying for climate jobs. A call with Andrew Schwartz, a director at the Center for Earth Ethics (a nonprofit under the aegis of the lefty Union Theological Seminary at Columbia) changed his mind. "This whole attention thing—this is what's missing," Schwartz told Schmidt. Describing a feeling he had sitting in high-powered meetings, he reflected, "We've forgotten what we're trying to protect." In August of 2022, Schmidt told the Friends he would come aboard.

"At that point, it was just a concept," Schmidt recalls. There was no Strother School, just the term "attention lab." "It's hard to get people to show up to something you can't explain," he says. "I'd be like, 'Have you heard of the attention economy?' People would say no." However, when they settled on the name the Strother School of Radical Attention, he recalls, "everything changed." "I'd say 'radical attention' and people would intuitively understand." A few months in, Schmidt also created an Instagram for the school. The irony wasn't lost on him, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it's where they've found many of their most enthusiastic program participants.

These include Amalia Mayorga, an artist and Columbia grad and the enthusiastic facilitator of my lab. She's a wunderkind and star organizer of the attention movement. Mayorga designed her own "critical technology studies" major and wrote her thesis about phone addiction. "I came to this work through my own personal pain," she says, remembering how she watched her own attention erode starting when she was a child. She is critical of a lurking ableism in the attention world and would like to see the work directed by young Black and brown people, who have the highest smartphone and social media use rates of any demographic. (This shift is beginning to take place: Some college students in the Friends of Attention collective who are younger and more diverse than the school's founders have been hired as paid facilitators.) Mayorga helps run the school's "sidewalk studies," during which participants read an "attentional text" such as selections from Toni Morrison's *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019) or Sarah Schulman's *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012), then complete an exercise inspired by it on the way to a second location, often a bar. As I discover one snowy January evening, reading Diane di Prima at Coyote Club in Bed-Stuy, these events encapsulate the Strother method—close reading, group discussion, acting weird in public space—and produce the same pleasurable effects.

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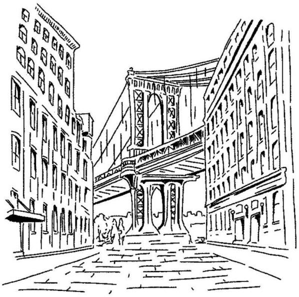
I suggest to Schmidt that the labs work by getting people hooked on deep attention, showing them how satisfying it feels, in contrast to the insatiable hunger the attention economy produces. He agrees but emphasizes that "it's not about people showing up and getting their brains blown; it's about people understanding themselves in relation to an economic system, to each other, and to their own faculties."

Unfortunately, learning you are the cash crop in the attention economy doesn't actually make it easier to resist your algorithm or more feasible to opt out of the devices and platforms on which we conduct lives, any more than discovering how capitalism works means you stop desiring new clothes or needing to earn money. The attention economy is the world we live inside, and distraction is a lifestyle, particularly in media-centric, dense urban places like New York City, where business and hustle are glamorized, where digital screens on the subway ensure our minds don't wander even for a second, and where people come to work in art, fashion, and media, industries in which we are rewarded socially, financially, and professionally for building large online followings. Still, without this knowledge, we don't stand a chance of reclaiming what we've lost. Like most ideas that change your life, this one is as easy to learn as it is to forget.

What Schmidt means is that the euphoric experience you can have at an attention lab isn't enough, even if afterward, you throw your phone into the East River and never scroll again. The Strother School believes that the crisis of attention cannot be solved by lowering individual screen time any more than climate change can be solved by reducing our personal carbon footprints. Their classes won't fix people's brains or get them off their phones. But if they can convince people of the systemic roots of the attention crisis, they will help a lot of people who are suffering. They may even be able to turn people's shame about their distraction into anger about their instrumentalization, boredom on their phones into wonder at the capacities of the mind. It feels good to have thoughts. It feels good to be in the world. If the Strother School can convince people that there is a relationship between their attention and the quality of their lives, they could become a powerful enemy to the brokers of the attention economy and other lucrative systems of exploitation that rely on our distraction and despair.



Selfie alley in Dumbo KRISTIN TATA

Schmidt texts me one day in April, as New York is becoming fragrant and explosive with flowers. It's official: The Strother School has signed a lease. The headquarters of the attention movement will be in Dumbo, on a cobblestone street beloved by tourists and influencers for the way it frames a slice of the Manhattan Bridge. It's a triangular room that can fit fifty, with a gleaming, shiny floor, a view of the river, and huge windows almost flush with the bridge, meaning that the Q train inserts itself into every conversation: an attentional challenge, members joke.

For the Strother School, the space is a prefiguration, however modest, of an attentional utopia: a small patch of the city where attention is safe and celebrated. They will hold their three-week-long seminars here and host open member hours, screenings, talks, and readings. There are lots of places in New York where you can sit and read or talk to people about politics or intellectual ideas. (Around the corner, for example, is the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research.) Schmidt thinks the Strother School will be different. Elsewhere, the focus is on the subject matter. What the Strother School cares about, he says, is the moment when people turn their chairs away from the screen or the text and toward each other. (Phones are not banned, but discussion is strongly encouraged.) Although Burnett says that his ambitions for the space are "immodest"—he hopes this room will change the world—Schmidt is more bashful when he admits what they really want to do with their scrap of the city is "world-building." What does that look like? He gestures around, "People here, spending time together, thinking and talking together." If that seems simplistic, Schmidt says, he agrees. "In a sense what we're doing is timely; it's responding to a problem. In another sense, we're just doing something people have always been doing and needed to do."

Back in February, I attended a second attention lab, in an art studio at the site of the ExxonMobil oil refinery building in Greenpoint on the banks of the Newtown Creek Superfund site. We do the staring-at-our-hands exercise. I see the claw again. We discuss. Later, for an exercise similar to the *dérive,* we go to the roof, which has a view of the Superfund site, Queens, Manhattan, and a wastewater treatment plant that looks like a mosque. We are to write a list poem of our observations, based on

Georges Perec's "An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris" (1975). The feeling comes almost instantly as I look. An expanse of blue trash bags. Access Self Storage. A red crane in repose. I want to look forever, to exhaust the city, to attend to each and every inch of it. I feel like I did on Fifty-Fourth Street, crushed *by the astonishing reality of things and persons*. A Megabus on the Queensboro Bridge. A hideous mural in Long Island City. A billboard for *Dune: Part Two*. COP-SHOT $10,000. Mere attention, suggests *The Twelve Theses*, is like a door through which something can enter. "But unmixed attention—pure attention to what cannot be used, to what no one already wants—to what promises no knowledge or gain—does not require doors, because it walks through walls." The poison creek is a lovely gray-green. A barge full of trash floats lazily by. The sky is four different shades of blue. ●

Jael Goldfine has been reading more lately.