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# THE NEW YORKER



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- 6 GOINGS ON  
9 THE TALK OF THE TOWN  
*Benjamin Wallace-Wells on Trump's criminal trial; Civil War photos; Ramy Youssef's Eid banquet; Putin and Berezovsky in "Patriots"; chess and basketball.*
- PROFILES  
Parul Sehgal 14 The Phantasm  
*Why Judith Butler has aroused fury around the world.*
- SHOUTS & MURMURS  
Bess Kalb 21 Horoscopes Written by My Mother
- OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS  
D. T. Max 22 Design for Living  
*Turning office towers into apartment buildings.*
- AMERICAN CHRONICLES  
Casey Cep 28 On Native Grounds  
*Deb Haaland addresses her federal agency's cruel past.*
- ANNALS OF INQUIRY  
Nathan Heller 40 The Battle for Attention  
*How to hold on to what matters in a distracted age.*
- FICTION  
Cynan Jones 50 "Pulse"
- THE CRITICS  
A CRITIC AT LARGE  
Louis Menand 56 *Academic freedom under fire.*
- BOOKS  
59 Briefly Noted  
Kelefa Sanneh 61 *The animal-rights movement.*
- POP MUSIC  
Amanda Petrusich 66 *Taylor Swift's "Tortured Poets Department."*
- THE THEATRE  
Helen Shaw 68 *"Stereophonic," "Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club."*
- THE CURRENT CINEMA  
Justin Chang 70 *"Challengers."*
- POEMS  
Paul Tran 32 "Second Nature"  
Ellen Bass 46 "Laundry"
- COVER  
Faith Ringgold "Sonny's Bridge, 1986"

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**DRAWINGS** Jeremy Nguyen, Amy Kurzweil, Barbara Smaller, P. C. Vey, Sofia Warren, Joe Dator, Tyson Cole, Roz Chast, Michael Maslin, Amy Hwang, Liana Finck, Frank Cotham, Maddie Dai, Sarah Kempa, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby **SPOTS** Rashin Kheiriyeh

# THE BATTLE FOR ATTENTION

*How do we hold on to what matters in a distracted age?*

BY NATHAN HELLER

**O**n a subway train not long ago, I had the familiar, unsettling experience of standing behind a fellow-passenger and watching everything that she was doing on her phone. It was a crowded car, rush hour, with the dim but unwarm lighting of the oldest New York City trains. The stranger's phone was bright, and as I looked on she scrolled through a waterfall of videos that other people had filmed in their homes. She watched one for four or five seconds, then dispatched it by twitching her thumb. She flicked to a text message, did nothing with it, and flipped back. The figures on her screen, dressed carefully and mugging at the camera like mimes, seemed desperate for something that she could not provide: her sustained attention. I felt mortified, not least because I saw on both sides of the screen symptoms I recognized too clearly in myself.

For years, we have heard a litany of reasons why our capacity to pay attention is disturbingly on the wane. Technology—the buzzing, blinking pageant on our screens and in our pockets—hounds us. Modern life, forever quicker and more scattered, drives concentration away. For just as long, concerns of this variety could be put aside. Television was described as a force against attention even in the nineteen-forties. A lot of focussed, worthwhile work has taken place since then.

But alarms of late have grown more urgent. Last year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported a huge ten-year decline in reading, math, and science performance among fifteen-year-olds globally, a third of whom cited digital distraction as an issue. Clinical presentations of attention problems have climbed (a recent study of data from the medical-software company Epic found an over-all tripling of A.D.H.D. diagnoses between 2010 and 2022, with the steepest uptick among

elementary-school-age children), and college students increasingly struggle to get through books, according to their teachers, many of whom confess to feeling the same way. Film pacing has accelerated, with the average length of a shot decreasing; in music, the mean length of top-performing pop songs declined by more than a minute between 1990 and 2020. A study conducted in 2004 by the psychologist Gloria Mark found that participants kept their attention on a single screen for an average of two and a half minutes before turning it elsewhere. These days, she writes, people can pay attention to one screen for an average of only forty-seven seconds.

“Attention as a *category* isn't that salient for younger folks,” Jac Mullen, a writer and a high-school teacher in New Haven, told me recently. “It takes a lot to show that how you pay attention affects the outcome—that if you focus your attention on one thing, rather than dispersing it across many things, the one thing you think is hard will become easier—but that's a level of instruction I often find myself giving.” It's not the students' fault, he thinks; multitasking and its euphemism, “time management,” have become goals across the pedagogic field. The SAT was redesigned this spring to be forty-five minutes shorter, with many reading-comprehension passages trimmed to two or three sentences. Some Ivy League professors report being counselled to switch up what they're doing every ten minutes or so to avoid falling behind their students' churn. What appears at first to be a crisis of attention may be a narrowing of the way we interpret its value: an emergency about where—and with what goal—we look.

**I**n many ways, it's the oldest question in advertising: how to get attention,” an executive named Joanne Leong told me one afternoon, in a conference room on the thirteenth floor of

the midtown office of the Dentsu agency. We were speaking about a new attention market. Slides were projected on the wall, and bits of conversation rattled like half-melted ice cubes in the corridor outside. For decades, what was going on between an advertisement and its viewers was unclear: there was no consensus about what attention was or how to quantify it. “The difference now is that there's better tech to measure it,” Leong said.

Dentsu is one of the world's leading advertising agencies, running accounts for Heineken, Hilton, Kraft Heinz, Microsoft, Subway, and other global corporations. In 2019, the firm began using digital technology to gather data that showed not only how many people attended to its ads but in what ways they did—information that could be applied to derive a quantitative unit of attention value. In 1997, the technology pundit Michael Goldhaber had envisaged a world in which attention supplanted money as a dominant currency. (“If you have enough attention, you can get anything you want,” he lamented.) Since then, advertising has caught up with the trade.

“Six years ago, the question was around ‘Can this usefully be measured?’” Leong said. Now it's a circus. “There are companies that use eye tracking. There are companies that do facial coding”—reading emotions through micro-expressions. “It's no longer a matter of convincing clients that this is something they should lean into—it's how.”

There is a long-standing, widespread belief that attention carries value. In English, attention is something that we “pay.” In Spanish, it is “lent.” The Swiss literary scholar Yves Citton, whose study of the digital age, “The Ecology of Attention,” argues against reducing attention to economic terms, suggested to me that it



*As the market chases our ever-waning focus, a secret society of writers and artists fights back.*

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN REA

was traditionally considered valuable because it was capable of *bestowing* value. “By paying attention to something as if it’s interesting, you make it interesting. By evaluating it, you valorize it,” he said. To treat it as a mere market currency, he thought, was to undersell what it could do.

Advertisers’ interest in attention as a measure was sharpened with the publication of “The Attention Economy” (2001), by Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, which offered a theory of attention as a prelude to action: we pay attention in order to do (or buy). But there have long been varied views. The neuroscientist Karl Friston has suggested that attention is a way of prioritizing and tuning sensory data. Simone Weil, one of attention’s eloquent philosophers, also resisted the idea of attention as subject to economic measure.

In the Dentsu office, Leong, who had her hair in a neat ponytail and wore a sweater with wide, simple horizontal stripes, sat beside the company’s head of research and measurement, Celeste Castle, an executive who oversees the math behind Dentsu’s own answer to the question of attention’s worth—the “effective attention cost per a thousand” impressions. The old metrics used in advertising were based on an *opportunity* to see. “An ‘impression’ is just a measure that the ad was served,” Leong said. But recent data revealed that even most supposedly “viewable” ads weren’t being viewed. “Consumers’ span of attention is now believed to be less than eight seconds,” Raja Rajamannar, the chief marketing officer of Mastercard, a Dentsu client, told me. “That is less than the attention span of a goldfish.”

At Dentsu, as elsewhere, the aim has become to get more from these shrinking slivers—an endeavor some outsiders liken to fracking, the process used to force lingering pockets of fossil fuels out of the earth. When I asked whether these efforts would dissipate people’s focus further, Castle said that optimizing would result in ads being even more precisely tailored to entice

their audiences. “As attention measurement matures, things will fall by the wayside and we can eliminate some of the waste,” she said.

In “Scenes of Attention,” a collection of scholarly essays published last year, the editors, D. Graham Burnett and Justin Smith-Ruiu, challenge the idea that shortened attention spans came about because of technological acceleration alone. True, tools and lives are faster, they write. But claiming innovation as the original cause is backward: “*Human beings make the technologies*—and they make them in the context of other human beings needing and wanting various things.” It wasn’t as though people, after mil-

lennia of head-scratching, suddenly “discovered” the steam engine, the spinning jenny, and the telegraph, and modernity unspooled. Rather, people’s priorities underwent a sea change with the onset of the modern age, turning to efficiency, objective measurement, and other goals that made such inventions worthwhile. The acceleration of life isn’t an inevitability, in that sense, but an ideological outcome.

Burnett, a historian of science at Princeton, is the author of five books, ranging in subject from seventeenth-century lens-making to New York’s judicial system. For the past several years, he has been working on a history of the scientific study of attention. I went one day to the main branch of the New York Public Library to hear him speak at the invitation of the New York Institute for the Humanities. “It was the sciences that sliced and diced this nebulous, difficult-to-define feature of our conscious and sensory life so that the market could price it,” Burnett said.

As an academic at the lectern, Burnett cut a curious figure. He was tall, with a graying backpacker’s beard and light-brown hair pulled into a topknot. He wore sixteen silver rings, gunmetal nail polish, and an outfit—T-shirt, V-neck sweater-vest, climbing pants—entirely in shades of light gray. He looked as if he had arrived from soldering metal in an abandoned loft. Scientific models of attention, he argued, had been products of their eras’ priorities, too. So-called

“vigilance studies,” which figured attention in terms of cognitive alertness, had coincided with the rise of monotonous control-panel jobs in the years after the Second World War. When soldiers began having to deal with multiple directives over the wire, attention science became preoccupied with simultaneous inputs.

It was a short leap from there to attention-chasing advertising. Companies that once resigned themselves to using billboards and print ads to appeal to a large American public now target us in private moments. The legal scholar Tim Wu, in his book “The Attention Merchants,” notes, “Without express consent, most of us have passively opened ourselves up to the commercial exploitation of our attention just about anywhere and any time.” No wonder young people struggle. Burnett, in an opinion piece that he co-wrote in the *Times* last fall, argued that schools, rather than just expecting students to pay attention, should teach them how.

I visited Burnett one afternoon in Washington Heights, where he lives with his partner, the filmmaker Alyssa Loh, and his two teen-age children. The windows of his living room were open; breezes off the Hudson River twirled silver spiral streamers hanging from the ceiling. A sideboard featured a blown ostrich egg, delicately etched with an image of the bird’s skeleton—a gift from a student.

“It’s a perfect mix of scrimshaw technique and X-ray of the form of the bird,” Burnett commented from an open kitchen. He was chopping radishes for a salad.

The rest of the living room was artily posed, as if presented for study by visitors. There was a faded dhurrie rug and a dining-room table made from a single slab of tree trunk. In one corner, a kind of altar had been assembled with peculiar objects: a feather-trimmed bow and arrow from Guyana; a bird skeleton; and a short stack of old leather-bound books, such as the first English edition of “L’Oiseau” (“The Bird”), a nineteenth-century study of birds by the historian Jules Michelet, and “Canaries and Cage-Birds,” by an ornithologist named George H. Holden. I opened it. “The lectures on which these chapters are based were appropriately announced as given under the *auspices* of one of our bird clubs,” the book read, “for the word



*auspices* comes from the Latin *avis*,—a bird,—and *spicere*,—to look at.”

The passage touched a memory for me. Years earlier, I had heard of something called the Order of the Third Bird—supposedly a secret international fellowship, going back centuries, of artists, authors, booksellers, professors, and avant-gardists. Participants in the Order would converge, flash-mob style, at museums, stare intensely at a work of art for half an hour, and vanish, their twee-seeming feat of attention complete. (The Order’s name alluded to a piece of lore about three birds confronting a painting by the ancient artist Zeuxis: the first was frightened away, the second approached to try to eat painted fruit, and the third just looked.) I had tried then to get in touch with the Order. My efforts had led nowhere. “It’s a Fight Club thing,” someone later explained to me, with a degree of earnestness that, like much about the Order of the Third Bird, I struggled to gauge. “The first rule of the Birds is you don’t talk about the Birds.” I’d wondered whether Burnett might be involved.

Burnett was a longtime Bird, he admitted. The Order’s work was more complex than it sounded, he said, and some of the Birds, concerned about widespread loss of attention, were more willing to discuss their practice than they’d been in the past. For years, the Order had devoted itself to its subject: what attention was, how to channel it, what it could do. With Burnett’s help, I sent up a new flare in Birdland, expecting to hear nothing. That wasn’t what happened at all.

One Sunday morning, I received a cryptic text from a performance artist named Stevie Knauss, whom I had never met. “Let’s tentatively plan on meeting in the zone indicated on this map,” the message read. A Google satellite image of the neighborhood around 155th Street and Broadway was attached, with a red arrow pointing to the Hispanic Society Museum & Library.

Later, as the train that I was on travelled uptown, Knauss sent me a Find My iPhone request. I followed it across Audubon Terrace, a plaza named for the nineteenth-century artist and ornithologist, and into the Hispanic Society’s gallery. My eyes took a moment to adjust. At the place where my phone told

me Knauss was stationed, a young woman in a black T-shirt sat on a bench with her back to me, staring at a painting. I sat beside her. “Stevie?” I said.

She was wearing wide-legged green Dickies, high-laced leather work boots, and dangly asymmetrical earrings. She turned to regard me, then looked back at the painting.

Knauss identified herself as an emissary affiliated with the Birds, and began to describe the way their actions worked. “The practice lasts twenty-eight minutes—four parts of seven minutes each,” she said. “The movement from one part to another is announced by a bell.”

Knauss told me that the Birds who were about to convene might not have met before. Actions were called in e-mails from alias accounts—she had heard about this one from “Wrybill Wrybillius”—with invitees’ names hidden. Any Bird could call an action; the Order was decentralized and ungoverned. Existing Birds invited new participants at their discretion, and, in this way, the Order slowly brought additional people into local chapters, known as *volées*. Nobody was sure how many Birds were in the world—New York City alone was home to several *volées*, overlapping to some degree—but there were believed to be hundreds. Actions

had taken place as far afield as Korea, the Galápagos, and Kansas.

Knauss eyed some passersby. “The first seven-minute phase is known as Encounter,” she said. “I think of it as entering a party. First, you take a look around the scene.” On arriving at the action site, the Birds wander. The subject of an action is rarely, if ever, identified in advance, but usually it is the most desperate-looking work in sight. (“In a museum, it will be, like, the painting next to the bathroom or on the wall opposite the Mona Lisa,” Burnett told me.) The work is unnamed because the Birds are supposed to find it by paying attention. Those who don’t can follow the flock.

Next comes Attending, announced by the first bell. “At the party, that’s when you maybe settle into conversation with someone,” Knauss explained. The Birds line up before the work, side by side, in what is known as the phalanx. For seven minutes, they silently give the work their full attention. Three things are discouraged during this period, Knauss told me. “One is what we call studium”—analysis from study. Another is interpretation, and the third is judgment. If Birds find a work offensive (or simply bad), they’re meant to put aside that response. Alyssa Loh, Burnett’s partner, who is also a



“Can we set the flame to medium high?”

Bird, told me that she understands the injunctions as a guard against the ways that people shut down their attention. “There’s a question you often hear in relation to art objects: What is it for and what do you do with it?” she said. “In the Bird practice, we mostly answer that in negatives—you can’t ‘solve’ it, can’t decide if it’s good, can’t victoriously declare that you have correctly identified its origins or that it’s an example of an eighteenth-century whatever.” You just keep attending.

The second bell heralds the start of Negation, a phase in which Birds try to clear the object from their minds. Some lie down; some close their eyes. At the third bell, seven minutes later, the group reconvenes in the phalanx for Realizing.

Knauss said, “A good way to think of Realizing is the question: What does the work *need*?” In some cases, the answer may be concrete—to be moved to a nearby wall—but it is often abstract. Perhaps a sculpture needs children climbing on it. “It might need you to hear its song,” Knauss somewhat mysteriously noted. At the final bell, the Birds disperse. “Leave the scene, find somewhere quiet to sit, and write down your experience of the four phases,” Knauss said.

A short while later, they meet up, usually in a café, for Colloquy, in which they take turns describing what they went through, distractions and all. Some Birds consider Colloquy the most important stage; it distinguishes their approach from “mindfulness” and other solo pursuits. The discussion can take on an uncanny charge. “It’s unusual to spend so much time in a small group looking at one thing, and even more unusual to talk about your impressions to the point of the ultra-thin vibrations and the associations they give rise to,” a Bird named Adam Jasper, an assistant professor of architectural history at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, told me. “With people I’ve Birded with more than a few times, I know more about how they work emotionally and mentally than I have any right to.” The writer Brad Fox described the experience as “seeing people at their best.”

Knauss, checking her phone, seemed suddenly in a hurry. “I’m going to leave you,” she said. “But first there’s a tradition that I give you this.” She pulled a piece of saffron-colored cloth from one

of her belt loops, tore off a strip, and handed it to me. It was how the Birds recognized one another, she said.

“After I’ve gone, you’ll walk out the door over my left shoulder, onto the terrace, and turn right.” She stood. “The work will be on your left.”

“But how will I know which one it is?” I asked.

“You’ll know,” Knauss said, and walked away.

Outside, in the sunlight, a mother was playing with her two children at a yellow installation by Jesús Rafael Soto: not a Bird. An older man sat at a table: possible, but unlikely. Then I saw them: a tall, thin man and a pregnant woman crossing the terrace, indistinguishable from other pedestrians but for flashes of saffron like mine. The Birds were here.

Despite all the recent laboratory study, attention was for centuries a path of humanistic exchange. The Stoics wrote of *prosochē*, an alert attention, as a prerequisite of moral consciousness. For Freud, *gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, “evenly hovering attention,” was the analyst’s working mode. Burnett often cites Henry James’s image of attention, in “The Wings of the Dove,” as a “great empty cup” on the table between a busy doctor and his suffering patient—what Burnett describes as “somewhere between an offering and a readiness to be receiving.”

In many people’s view, it is William James, Henry’s brother, who supplied the first comprehensive American model of attention. In a chapter devoted to the



subject in his “Principles of Psychology” (1890), James portrayed attention as a restless thing. When we think we’re holding it, our mind is winging out on errands and returning; sustained attention is, in effect, a stream of attentional moments. Thus, despite the complexity and multiplicity of the world, “there is before the mind at no time a plurality of *ideas*.” (This insight went on to frame James’s

philosophical work.) When we look at a statue, the stone doesn’t change, but the art work we see does, because we are continually noticing different things. James’s model pushes against the idea that attention is something you pay out, free of wandering thoughts and individual reverie.

Nested in James’s understanding is also a serviceable definition of art. In its objective state, van Gogh’s “Starry Night” is daubs of paint on a canvas. On the moon, without an audience, it would be debris. It is only when I give the canvas my attention (bringing to it the cargo of my particular past, my knowledge of the world, my way of thinking and seeing) that it becomes an art work. That doesn’t mean that van Gogh’s feats of genius are imagined, or my own projection. It means only that an art work is neither a physical thing nor a viewer’s mental image of it but something in between, created in attentive space. The Brazilian art critic and political activist Mário Pedrosa wrote of the experience as a dialogue between form and perception.

“It’s actually pretty straightforward,” Len Nalencz, another Bird, told me at one point. “The Birds use attention as a medium—like clay or words or marble or oil paint. You use your attention to make something, but only *you* can see the thing you’ve made. And so you have to translate it into words to share it.”

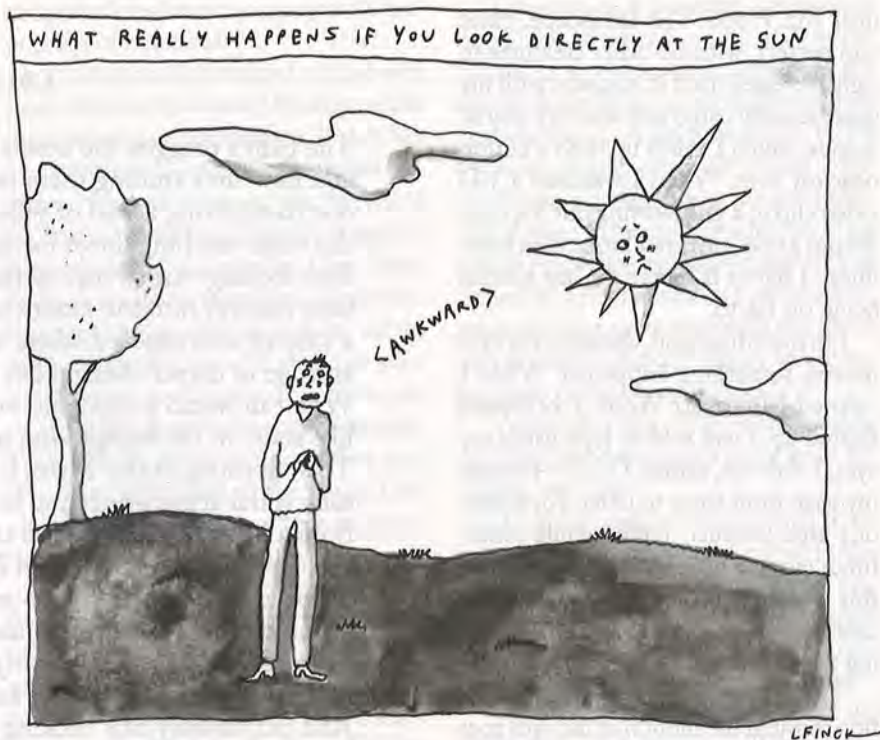
Nalencz spent several years working as a union organizer, but now he is an assistant professor of English at the University of Mount St. Vincent, in the Bronx. Many of the Birds I met were academics. A number expressed Faustian dismay at having mastered rigor in their fields without, it seemed, coming closer to the human artistry that originally stirred their interest. Joanna Fiduccia, an assistant professor of art history at Yale, told me, “There is an art historian, Michael Ann Holly, who writes about a ‘melancholic’ posture art historians have in knowing we’re never actually going to get it right, never going to get to the thing that we were drawn to in the first place. Then Birding came along for me. It was this other way of being within art work that was joyously collective and yet emergent from subjective consciousness, or ‘experience.’”

“I think it’s a puzzle for all of us what to do with—or even just how to be in

the presence of—a work of art,” Jeff Dolven, an English professor at Princeton and a Bird, said. “Here we are together. Well, what do we do now?” There is a middle-school-dance aspect to the endeavor: people feel something real across the room but, without a way into the conversation, settle into wallflower analysis. For some, the Birds provide a framework and an aesthetic, expressed through a disproportionate number of pamphlets and guides, all printed in an epigrammatic style that might suit a fortune-teller’s card table. “I remember that this protocol was a little off-putting at first—like, are you serious with all this oldy-worldy hear-ye typeface?” Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, a curator, told me. “But what I have observed in many years of attentional practice is that the more scaffolding you put in, the freer the experience becomes.”

Unable to refrain entirely from academic habits, a subgroup of Birds have produced their own outlandish body of work. Early in the last decade, Burnett and a couple of his colleagues began writing and assigning articles for an imaginary peer-reviewed journal devoted to scholarly study of the Birds. At first, the project was a way of sharing ideas about the Order’s attention work without writing about it directly. (Like the Birds themselves, I was allowed to participate in actions on the condition that I not describe the experience in print. “My fear,” one longtime Bird said archly, “is that people will mistake the description of the thing for the thing.”) But many enjoyed writing for the imaginary journal of the so-called Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers)—or ESTAR(SER)—and some seem to have enjoyed it more than their real work. When Burnett and two co-editors culled a selection, in 2021, they ended up with a book more than seven hundred and fifty pages long.

Landing somewhere between “Pale Fire” and the formal irony of *Timothy McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*, the volume, called “In Search of the Third Bird,” is rendered in the voice of hapless researchers trying to chase down the elusive Order. The articles are not pure fiction—they include real attention scholarship—but neither are they a hundred per cent objectively true. Counterfactual histories filter in, cross-



referencing one another. Some articles are by real scholars, while others run under birdy pseudonyms (“Molly Gottstauk”) with preposterous author biographies. Justin Smith-Ruiiu, a writer and a professor at the Université Paris Cité as well as an editor of “In Search of the Third Bird,” touted to me “the world-making dimension” of it. “Our idea was: Let’s turn academic practice into an art form,” Smith-Ruiiu said.

Even many members of the Order describe the ESTAR(SER) work as a bit precious. “The amount of effort in the book is huge, but its effect is, uh, marginal,” Adam Jasper said. “It sort of fits into the Birds’ ethos of not being concerned with inputs and outputs.” In a sense, it is bizarre that ESTAR(SER)—an acronym that, being two forms of the Spanish “to be,” is largely un-Googleable—has become the Order’s public front, mounting lectures and exhibitions across the country. (Last year, it had an exhibition at the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; this spring, it will present a show at the Opening Gallery, in Tribeca.) But that improbability is the point. Catherine L. Hansen, an assistant professor at the University of Tokyo and another editor of the book, describes the project as a defiantly playful performance of human-

ities scholarship’s twenty-first-century limits—the way that disciplines are increasingly pressed to approach the work of human imagination with the objective rigor of a science.

“When I look at the world, I feel that something is being lost or actively undermined,” she told me. “Sometimes it feels like attention. Sometimes it feels like imagination. Sometimes it feels like”—she thought for a moment—“that thing you wanted when you became an English major, that sort of half-dreamed, half-real thing you thought you were going to be. Whatever that is: it’s under attack.”

One recent afternoon, I visited an Apple Store to try the company’s new augmented-reality goggles, called the Apple Vision Pro. I had seen YouTube videos of people wandering around in the devices, interacting with invisible objects and making obscene-looking grabby-squeezy gestures with their hands. When I put on the contraption, under the care of an employee, I found myself trapped in a realm where my attention was at once more passive and more active than it usually was. The details of the world within the goggles seemed premade for my inspection: I was moved from snowy Iceland to the edge of a lake



near Mt. Hood. The landscape, quiet and perfect, with no other creatures in sight, revealed itself in measure with my gaze; scenery came and went by way of menus, which I called up with a button near my eyes. When I watched a 3-D video clip of a girl blowing out the candles on a cake, my heart broke with loneliness. I felt as if I were the last human being on Earth.

On the other hand, wherever my eyes moved, something happened. When I opened Microsoft Word, a keyboard floated up. I was told to type using my eyes. I did—or, rather, D-i-d—moving my gaze from letter to letter. For someone used to touch-typing while sometimes ranging his eyes around the room, this immersion in the key-by-key process was a surreal way to write, like driving a car from the camshaft.

The idea of following visual attention through the motion of the eyes goes back more than a century. In the eighteen-seventies, Louis Émile Javal, a French ophthalmologist with terrible glaucoma, began studying tiny eye movements—he called them “saccades,” for the jerking movements of horses under rein—with an aim toward understanding how people read. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Soviet psychologist Alfred Yarbus (né Kraćkowski) suctioned a contact lens to the surface of the eye and traced its path across a painting. Yarbus was exploring what had long eluded science: the mysteries of people’s attention to art. In his most famous experiment, involving Ilya Repin’s “They Did Not Expect Him,” a realist painting depicting a Russian revolutionary returning to his family, viewers were asked to look at the canvas both freely and in response to prompts, which changed the course of their attention. In the Soviet Union, the results of the experiment could be taken to speak to the power of social education. In the West, the notion that the eye’s attention was suggestible had commercial weight. In recent decades, researchers and advertisers have used updated versions of Yarbus’s technique: instead of employing a contact lens, they often track the eye with infrared technology, a method that also helps support the Vision Pro.

But people see what they are looking for. One theory of our attention crisis is

## LAUNDRY

The baby’s dragged the sheets to the kitchen  
and now she’s stuffing them in the washer,  
one hand lifting a wad of yellow cotton,  
the other reaching down for more and more. Breathing heavy,  
she’s feeding vast swaths by the armful,  
bent halfway into the mouth of the machine,  
a strip of skin exposed where her shirt’s ridden up,  
an edge of diaper sticking out of her pants.  
Who can watch a child and not feel fear  
like static in the background or a tinnitus you try to ignore.  
This morning, in the *Times*, I saw the galaxy LEDA 2046648—  
each spiral arm distinct and bright against the dark ink. Light  
from a billion years ago, just as the first  
multicellular life emerged on Earth.  
What are the not-quite-two years of this intent creature  
in the sweep of time? Her quadriceps and scapula,  
the alveoli of her lungs, twenty-seven bones of her hand  
that evolved from the fin of an ancient fish.  
And her scribbly hair sticking up from her first ponytail.  
When she was in her mother’s body,  
the California fires turned the air a smoky topaz  
and the sun glowed orange on the kitchen wall.  
Last month the floodwaters rose and seeped under the door.  
Still, there must be time for this, to watch her—  
hands deep into the doing, she’s wedded  
to the things of this world.  
When she stands, her sleeve slips down  
and she pushes it up like any woman at work.

—Ellen Bass

that it’s actually a measurement crisis, because the signals we are focussed on define our understanding of the field. If “attention” entails a battle for our immediate gaze, then that gaze becomes the valuable commodity, more than a slow-accruing mental simmer.

“You have this idea of attention as an object that is traded between people, so all of your science goes into measuring this object,” Mike Follett, the managing director of Lumen Research, which claims to hold the largest eye-tracking data set in the world, told me. In the past decade, more than half a million people have participated in Lumen’s studies (for which they have been paid); the company supplies much of the raw attention data used in Dentsu’s models. At first, Lumen mailed out infrared kits to track eye movements, but the process was tricky. So the company created an app that uses smartphone cameras to

measure glints of light off the eyes. “Now we can get a thousand people to do a research project in an afternoon,” Follett said. “We’ll observe not only how many people looked at ads or for how long but how many people *clicked* on the ads and, if they did click, whether anyone bought things.”

And yet, Follett said, our minds are not merely our eyes. “Eye tracking is *not* attention, in a number of important ways,” he told me. “You can look without seeing—and you can see without looking.”

Other body language signals attention of different kinds. People watch TV screens with a posture distinct from the one they use for looking at their phones or laptops. They read a *Times* article in a different position than they search for flights to Paris in. The more types of data one admits into the science, the more surprising and enigmatic the picture of human attention becomes. By

many measures, Follett said, one of the very worst advertising environments is social media: "People are scrolling so tremendously quickly, like on a slot machine in Vegas—is it any wonder no one actually looks at these ads?" One of the most valuable advertising spaces, according to his data, is next to long, absorbing articles from trusted publications.

"It turns out that attention to advertising is a function of attention to content," he explained. A general schlockification of material may have helped create a mirage of shortening attention. "Maybe people do not have time to spend looking at a thirty-six-second ad—or maybe they just don't do it on Facebook," he went on. "So Facebook responds by developing new advertising products meant to work in five or six seconds." The platforms, in this way, produce their own ecology of scarceness. "I don't know if it's chicken or egg," he said.

For most people, attention is not a point of visual focus but something nearer to a warm breeze through an open window, carrying fragrances from far away. We feel its power when we read an absorbing novel. We find it when we visit a new place and notice everything for the first time. To Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the mid-century phenomenologist, attention was the inconvenient truth of modernity, the heart of why both empirical science and pure inner reason were doomed to fall short of capturing the world as it truly was. Modernity prized objective measurement and transmissible bodies of knowledge over experience, and yet, for millennia, experience was intimately tied to knowledge: our elders were our sages.

"Objectivity is a big success, but it scorches the earth of the experiential and makes it merely 'personal,'" Burnett posited one day over a meal at the Watermill Center, in Southampton, New York, where a group of Birds have had a couple of residencies through the support of the artist Robert Wilson. A small dining hall was crowded with them: Loh, Fox, and others. "Phenomenology was saying, Hey, why not go back to experience and *not* break it across the knee into objectivity and subjectivity, leaving the subjective discarded as weak?" Burnett said. "Can we go back to the experiential and hold it close—but make some-

thing that's real and true, not just an outpouring of emotions?"

That afternoon, I walked around with Loh, who had discovered Birding on her own, before meeting Burnett. "It felt like everything I saw in life disclosed the same thing, which was that the world was more interesting than the image of it in my head," she recalled. The Birds' injunctions against studium, interpretation, and judgment seemed to her to apply to people, too. "You're not supposed to use people, or to think that you understand what they're about," she said. "What is the thing you do with a person that's adequate to the thing they are? And my best pass at that is: attention. You attend to them."

For some, the practice of people attending together makes up not only an ethics but a politics. Kristin Lawler, a sociology professor at Mount St. Vincent and the author of a scholarly monograph on surfing, was drawn to Birding for, as she put it, "the idea that people can create their own world together." She went on, "The flood of images that are coming toward us all the time are destroying our subjectivity." It left individuals, especially young ones, less room to decide for themselves what they were interested in. Reclaiming attention, in that way, was an act of resistance.

People of all stripes have tended to agree. In the new book "The Anxious Generation," the sociologist and pundit Jonathan Haidt links smartphone technology to escalating teen depression and other ill effects. "The members of Gen Z are . . . test subjects for a radical new way of growing up, far from the real-world interactions of small communities in which humans evolved," he writes. "It's as if they became the first generation to grow up on Mars."

Seeking a response, Lawler, Len Nalencz, and others have begun teaching through an institution that they helped form, the Strother School of Radical Attention. (It was named for Matthew Strother, a young Bird who died, last year, of cancer.) The school, run by an organization called the Friends of Attention, holds workshops in New York public schools; for adults, it offers evening courses and free weekend "Attention Labs." "Because one doesn't have to be a Bird to produce some of these same effects," Burnett said.

I stopped on a Saturday afternoon at one of the Strother School's adult workshops, at a community center on the Lower East Side. Around fifty people had shown up. A lot were under thirty. "Young people, many of whom I admired, were coming up to me and being, like, 'I need to be more productive,'" the school's founding program director, Peter Schmidt, a former student of Burnett's, told me. "But, once they're in the room, you can create the conditions where less tangible experiences emerge."

We sat in a big circle of chairs; daylight streamed through a set of floor-to-ceiling windows.

"In a moment, what I'm going to do is invite you to choose some spot in this room that you can focus your eyes on," Schmidt said. "Then I'm going to invite you, keeping your eyes fixed, to notice something at the edge of your vision."

He waited ten seconds while we did the exercise, then rang a bell.

"To recap, you had your eyes fixed on some point, and then some other part of you was moving throughout your field of vision," he said. "The question here is: What was that part of you? What moved?"

Attention, of course. Schmidt's exercise made a point of teasing out the difference between a movement of the mind and a movement of the eye.

For the next two hours, there were other short practices to isolate and cultivate attention. A producer and d.j. called Troy (Bachtroy) Mitchell, who had long locs and a lime-green fleece, played an experimental piece of his four times, instructing the participants to listen in a different way with each repetition. Loh and a colleague took a group of people onto the balcony to study the cityscape: directly, in selfie mode, backward (in the black mirror of a switched-off phone), and with eyes closed. Then they gathered in a small circle, Bird style, to recount their experiences.

Nalencz told me about the school's origins. "I met these great people in the Birds, but who were they? Academics, artists, mostly white," he said. And yet the greatest victims of attention predation, he thought, were young people from under-resourced communities, who, like some of his students, were able to access public culture mostly through their phones. "I felt a double need to try to get to students who I thought were really

smart but (a) wouldn't show up at the Met because of class reasons and (b) *only* have phones, not books."

One of his students had been Jahony Germosen, a senior English major who was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in the Bronx. Although she'd got A's in Nalencz's classes, her attendance was irregular. Nalencz challenged her to fix that—and then to try something else.

"He was, like, 'I'm a part of this non-profit organization. . . . I want you to come,'" Germosen said. She did, and the experience moved her.

"I don't know how to describe the feeling," she told me. "Sometimes the world makes everything and everyone seem so replaceable, like they lack value. But then you come here, and it's, like, no, everything matters. You matter. That building *matters*." When she realized that the youngest facilitator at the Strother School was an ancient twenty-seven, she applied to join the staff. That afternoon, it was Germosen who began to close out the workshop.

Not all Birds have found comfort in the group's increasing public openness. "I haven't been active in a lot of years," Dorothea von Moltke, a co-owner of Labyrinth Books, in Princeton, New Jersey, told me. "The performance aspect of it was not ever where my interest was—I

loved the *rogueness*." At the edges of the Order, though, a new vanguard is taking shape. "What I feel is extremely important about these practices is that they are open, and people have absolute liberty to reinvent and adapt them," someone who asked to be identified only as Daphne, and who worked at a trans-community-support organization in Montreal, told me. "The way I practice with people in Montreal is very different from the way I practice when I'm with the people who introduced me to it."

The people with whom Daphne practices in Montreal are largely sex workers. "They have a relationship with the city that's engaged with the history of the violent eradication of sex workers in the red-light district," she said. One of the actions centered on the façade of a defunct strip club. A few weeks later, the club burned down, in what she believes was arson: one more piece of that world eradicated. Their attention, Daphne felt, had meant something. "It would have been very different if I'd gathered with that same group of people and attended to, like, a Donald Judd," she said.

One rainy afternoon, I watched an action that a New York Bird had called at the New Museum. When the first bell rang, four Birds emerged from the crowd to settle into the phalanx be-

fore "The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg)," by Leonora Carrington—a surreal painting of a woman being swarmed by birds. The group, two timorous young men and two women in rain parkas, looked nonthreatening, but, by the time the Realizing bell sounded, guards were on alert, peering around dividing walls and texting. Visitors rubber-necked, as if entranced by—what? Reactions of that sort are standard.

"You quickly find that even museums, places supposedly devoted to art, aren't set up for people doing more than the standard fifteen seconds per painting," Burnett said. Recent art vandalisms have led to tightened security, but there has always been pressure. (Among New York *volées*, the Guggenheim is considered the most *laissez-faire*.) In 2014, Nalencz initiated an action on a mural, by Julie Mehretu, in the lobby of the Goldman Sachs building in lower Manhattan—a piece that the company touted as being on public display, visible to passersby through the lobby's large windows. As soon as Birds began to gather on the sidewalk, security told them to leave. Under Nalencz's instruction, they went on to attend to the mural through the windows. Police came.

"Tell me where the public sidewalk is," Nalencz said to the officers. "We're just looking at the art work."

"But nobody's looking," a guard pointed out. True enough: the Negation phase had begun. One Bird was studying the bushes. Another had seemingly gone to sleep.

"This is a performance," an officer averred. "You got a permit?"

Nalencz looked at the officer, at the other Birds, and back at the officer. He leaned in confidentially. "I mean, it's not *much* of a performance, is it?" he said.

The structure that I learned from Knauss—Encounter, Attending, Negation, Realizing—is what's known, within the Order, as the Standard Protocol. Many variations have been devised. There is the Vetiver Protocol, for attendance to fragrances. There is the Protocol of the Sea Watch, to be done in water. (Its final step: "Resurface; lose your gills.") Some inventions are soon forgotten, but the most successful endure. While meeting up with Birds in Shanghai and Beirut, two places where participants in public, semi-performative gatherings could face real risk, Burnett helped de-



"They say registering online should take ten minutes to two days, depending on my computer skills."

velop a walk-by form of action, called the Doppler Protocol: Attending happens on the approach to the work; Negation is the instant of reaching it; and Realization happens over the shoulder, while walking away. "We call it an Orphic Realization, à la Orpheus," Burnett said. Back in New York, he tried it on the statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle, with the Birds attending as they walked up Eighth Avenue.

One of the most affecting protocols is the Proosphorion, performed on an object of great importance that has become inaccessible. In the protocol, one of the participants "becomes" that object. Nalencz once became "Tilted Arc," the Richard Serra sculpture installed in Foley Square and removed, in 1989, after controversy. Again, he was accosted by a guard. "I'm the sculpture!" he cried, and stood unyieldingly, in a "Tilted Arc" sort of way. (The guard said, in a downtown sort of way, "Oh, O.K.," and moved on.)

I was never able to see the Proosphorion. But a number of Birds told me that the protocol carried unexpected emotional weight. In the final phase, the absent object "attends to you." "People cry, or go into trance states," Catherine Hansen said. "It is very difficult not to think of things that *you* have lost or are missing." Caitlin Sweeney, the director of digital publications for the Wildenstein Plattner Institute, which produces catalogues raisonnés, was so moved by the "Tilted Arc" action that she passed along a written account of it to a friend who worked for Serra. To her surprise, she received an enthusiastic response from Serra's wife, and the account was added to the studio's dossier for the sculpture, making the Birds' art of attention part of the artist's record of his most notorious piece.

Such evidence of the Order's reach made me wonder more about its origins. Sweeney wasn't sure where the Birds came from. Adam Jasper told me, "You see things that make you suspect that this has been going on for a long time, but I don't know. I've virtually accused Graham Burnett of inventing the practice." Burnett said, "I've always thought it's somehow French." I went to look through an archive of unpublished writeups of Bird actions, which, for arcane reasons, was housed in a large

travelling trunk in a corner of the office of Cody Upton, the executive director of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Poring over the documents, I noticed that there were no records of actions before 2010. I talked to Hansen. "I would recommend that you speak to Jeff Dolven and Sal Randolph," she said at last. "These are people who most likely witnessed the big bang."

Dolven, when I asked, laughed. "When I started practicing, I was not particularly aware of other Birdish activity," he said opaquely. "It was me and Graham and Sal Randolph. . . ." He drifted off. "Have you talked to Sal?"

Randolph, an artist and a writer who published a book called "The Uses of Art," arranged to meet me at a large Think Coffee in Manhattan. Her hair was cropped short and dyed a deep blue. She told me she'd grown interested in attention in the late nineties, while making art in Provincetown. "You spend all winter making a body of work, which you then show for two weeks in the summer," she said. "People were doing this very familiar-looking dance: I approach the work of art, I tilt my head a little bit, I give a little nod, and I step away to the next piece. It lasts two or three seconds." For months of painting, the response seemed preposterously meagre. "I had this sense that art, poetry, cultural work is being *wasted* at a phenomenal rate."

In 2010, Randolph met Burnett on a panel. He worked with Dolven, and the three of them started talking. "We began to think of art works in need of attention that they don't receive," she said. I told her I'd found no direct record of Order activity before then. Did that align with her understanding of its origins? She was silent. "It aligns with my sense of when a group of people got to know each other," she offered at last, then met my gaze squarely. "But this is really old."

On one of my last visits with Burnett, I found him in a bubbly mood. A Bird action would take place that evening—"a full-on, paramedics-of-attention situation," he explained. The work, a public sculpture by Peter Lundberg, was encircled by a ramp of the

George Washington Bridge, not far away. The Birds had had it in their sights for years. Car passengers might catch a glimpse of it from the side as they sped past, but there was no way to see it from a stable position. Then, last year, the Port Authority reopened the George Washington Bridge's long-dormant north walk, making the piece newly visible to pedestrians.

I arrived on site early. On the approach, I passed Brad Fox sitting on a bus-stop bench in a navy raincoat; in the Birdish way, he registered no recognition. The walkway was lined on each side by a chain-link fence and a green rail. Cyclists sliced around the curves. On rough ground, near a utility truck, lay an elegant steel-and-concrete sculpture, as if someone had set it down in the course of a journey and forgot to pick it up again. I noticed a familiar figure loping up the walkway: Burnett, with a gray hoodie pulled over his head.

A minute later, Nalencz followed, wearing a black jacket and a sports cap that said "PILSNER." I saw Loh, then Fox, then Kristin Lawler. The group eventually fell into the phalanx at the north arc of the walkway. A gray-haired man joined them for a moment, trying to see what they were seeing. When the bell chimed for Negation, the Birds moved out of formation. Burnett studied a drainage grate. Fox found a quiet place to lie down.

A wind rose all at once. The waters of the Hudson darkened to a moody gray. The walkway traced a horseshoe shape around the sculpture, and, on an impulse, Nalencz called Realizing while leading the group to a position on the other side of the curve. They made a new phalanx, facing the opposite direction: five people giving everything to an art work hidden for years. Could it have been my own imagination that the steel flanks of the sculpture seemed to flash with new importance under the force of their attention?

It was sunset now; the skyline of New Jersey carried a thin wire of gold. I watched the group wield their strange power on the art work, and it was one of the most real things I have ever seen. ♦

