

# frieze

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## The Art of Distraction

Movie stars, late capitalism and fragmented attention spans

As I write these words one warm September day at my desk in south-east England, the actor Shia LaBeouf is running 144 laps around the perimeter of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Entitled #METAMARATHON (2014), this performance work is his contribution to 'Metamodernism – The Return of History', a 12-hour symposium that 'seeks to draw a cognitive map of our present in order to grasp the changing contours of our everyday lives'. Like the speakers in the auditorium – among them the anti-Cassandra of late capitalism, Francis Fukuyama, *frieze* co-editor Jörg Heiser and the artist Cally Spooner – I can't hear LaBeouf's grunts and footfalls, but nevertheless I find myself wondering what motivated the star of *Transformers III: Dark of the Moon* (2011) to stage his jog. Perhaps he simply took one look at Jay Z's Marina Abramović-inspired rap epic *Picasso Baby: A Performance Art Film* (2013) or, indeed, James Franco's various forays into contemporary art and thought: 'Well, that's got to be a whole lot better than standing in front of a green screen and pretending to emote at an anthropomorphic robot truck.'

Followers of the Dutch art scene might note that LaBeouf's performance bears a striking resemblance to Guido van der Werve's film *Nummer dertien, emotional poverty, Effugio C, You're always only half a day away* (2010–11), in which the artist runs approximately two and half marathons around the perimeter of his house over the course of 12 hours. This is a work about endurance – not only that of its maker, but also that of his audience, who are asked to watch him complete his feat in real time, without any of the compensatory pleasures afforded by seeing a Hollywood A-lister break a sweat. I'm a great admirer of Van der Werve, but even I couldn't hold out for more than a fraction of *Nummer dertien*. Then again, I felt much the same about LaBeouf's turn in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008).

I check Twitter for news of #METAMARATHON. One user opines: '#ShiaLaBeouf so sexy in his purple spandex!' Another asks 'What Have U done 4 Situationism lately?' and

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links to a video of the actor warming up. In Amsterdam, LaBeouf continues to pound the pavement, accompanied by the artists Luke Turner and Nastja Säde Rönkkö, and a handful of fans. Perhaps he is thinking about the title of his 2010 film, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. Perhaps he is thinking about Guy Debord.

Before news of #METAMARATHON appeared on my social media feed this morning, I had planned to spend the day writing about the attention we pay to works of art, in what the novelist Adam Thirlwell (by neat coincidence another speaker at the 'Metamodernism' symposium) has called 'the distracted era'. I would have kicked off with a passage from Sir Kenneth's Clark's publication *Looking at Pictures* (1960), in which he asks: 'How many people can look at a picture for even long enough to peel an orange and eat it?' – a question that summons up the pleasing image of the tweedily patrician art historian, museum director and broadcaster settling down in front of a Nicolas Poussin or a Piero della Francesca, with nothing to divert him save for a brimming bowl of fruit. Next, I would point to how the sheer volume of contemporary art production, not to mention the professional and social pressure on those who show, sell, collect, teach or write about it to demonstrate something close to omniscience, often makes the Clarcean minimum difficult to achieve. From there (perhaps via a study made by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, claiming that gallery-goers spend on average 32.5 seconds looking at a single work, and a rather predictable broadside against anybody who thinks a biennial or art fair is the perfect spot to put their iPad's camera through its paces), I would segue into a paragraph on Karl Ove Knausgård's extraordinary sequence of six autobiographical novels, *Min Kamp* (My Struggle, 2009–11), in which distraction is both the enemy and the motor of the writer's achievement. Returning to visual art, I'd wonder if cohabiting with a work makes it more or less visible. It would seem appropriate, here, to mention Gilda Williams's witty new guidebook *How to Write About Contemporary Art* (2014), which is discussed by Orit Gat elsewhere in this issue.<sup>1</sup> Williams notes that Walter Benjamin's famous riff on Paul Klee's ink drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920), in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), is more of a dazzling hallucinatory fantasy than an accurate description. Contra-Benjamin, Klee's image contains nothing in the way of 'a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage on wreckage' nor any evidence of a 'storm [...] blowing in from Paradise', only what Williams rightly calls a 'modest fellow' with wings. Benjamin owned *Angelus Novus*, and presumably looked at it a great deal. A surfeit of attention – a surfeit of oranges peeled and eaten – might, it seems, distract us from what is

actually there.

I was going to write about all of the above, but then I heard about #METAMARATHON . I check Twitter again. Somebody has posted a picture captioned: 'Francis Fukuyama a bemused bystander'. So I guess the author of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) has finished delivering his lecture and is watching the actor punish the tarmac. The account @Stedelijk informs its followers that 'Shia LaBeouf had a special meeting with performance artist Ulay!' before the event, and that there are 'Around 130 lapse [sic] to go'. In the first volume of *Min Kamp*, published in English as *A Death in the Family* (2009), Knausgård writes: 'The only thing I have learned from life is to endure it, never to question it, and to burn up the longing generated by this in writing. Where this ideal has come from I have no idea, and as I now see it before me, in black and white, it almost seems perverse.' Shia LaBeouf runs on.

1 Protocol dictates that I should mention Williams cites me in her book. It's not much more than a footnote focusing on a curatorial project (the answer to *How to Write About Contemporary Art* is not 'like Tom Morton'), so a footnote seems the right place to flag it up.

### **Tom Morton**

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