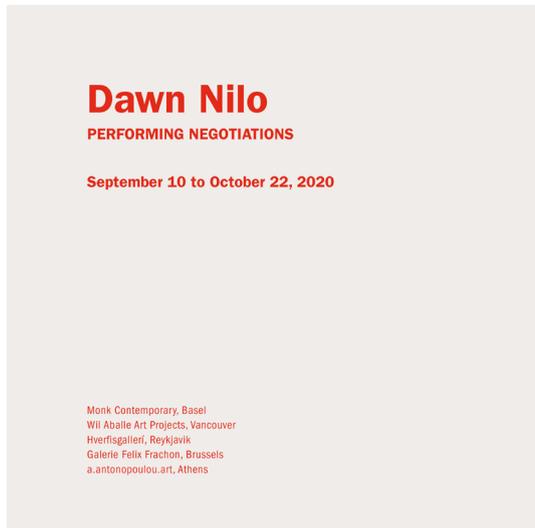


# Dawn Nilo: A Stable of Jockeys. Swiss Art Awards 2020.

by Lauren Fournier



## i. the frame which is the work

In *A Stable of Jockeys*, Dawn Nilo inverts the artist-gallerist relationship, a foundational relationship that structures and undergirds the contemporary art world as we know it today. The artist is no longer in the jockey's "stable," but has instead gathered a stable of jockeys.

The playful logic of Nilo's art-foolery practice comes through once again, with clarity: if a gallery can have a stable of artists, then why can't an artist have a stable of galleries? By inverting the terms of that formative art-market relationship, Nilo inverts the power too—at least in the context of the work, which is an enclave of conceptual play and exploration.

Her audience might be ready for this reimagining of *The Order of Things*, in the year 2020, when so many long-suppressed anxieties are coming to the surface, when the word "unprecedented" has taken on a heretofore unprecedented frequency of use, and when even the most conservative of folks are having to wrestle with what revolution might look like.

We are living in a world of omnipresent institutional critique, as every institution around the world falters, in one way or another. And here emerges Nilo, a readied fool prepared to play.

## ii. a stable of gallerists, a stable of jockeys

Never before have we seen such a configuration, such a reimagining of *The Order Of Things*.

But haven't we? There are those readers who might not question the list of galleries next to Dawn Nilo's name. These different commercial spaces comprise a geographical range that does not seem to overlap, suggesting that multiple "representation" might be *fair game* within the contractual practices of the transnational art market.

Indeed, there are cosmopolitan artists with representation by different institutions in different parts of the world. This is one of the many unspoken yet always-being-negotiated rules of the contemporary art world, which, depending on who you ask, will get you a different perspective. Some artists are “loyal” to a single gallerist, respecting that originary relationship: they are indebted, at least on some psychic level, to the gallerist who first invited them into their “stable,” maybe when they were just getting started, and who has given them that requisite support, a kind of care. Other artists are eager to take on more than one representation, to have a list of galleries in different cities next to their name.

There is a selection of available concepts and non material works for sale through Contemporary Monk’s website, the online “flagship store” as it were for Nilo’s project, representing Nilo’s work and, looping back in on itself, having Nilo represent the galleries—jockeys—themselves, all through negotiated acts of sale. One concept for sale, that I’d quite like to buy, is that “two parallel lines meet at infinity.” Another, still: “The thoughts of the living are different from the thoughts of the dead.”

Since the dawn of conceptual art, following the “creation” of a readymade work that is framed as a work of art in the context of a gallery space—Marcel Duchamp’s innovation, or the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s (an ongoing art historical aporia)—it has been the act of framing the work that has become more important than anything about that work’s medium, materiality, composition, colour, or form. It is a philosophy of art-making-as-art-*framing* that, while contended, remains formative to present-day contemporary art and its systems of purchase. In this philosophy of art, it is the frame that constitutes the work of art as art. Framing art makes it art. And if we extend that logic a little bit further:

*It is the frame itself that becomes the work.*

### **iii. the joke that remembers it is funny**

While that more staunchly conceptualist philosophy of art might seem dated, it is one that continues to live on in innocuous ways in our twenty-first century art-world. Consider the many discursive structures that frame our engagement with art, and that point out what is *art* in a contemporary sense. Alix Rule and David Levine called attention to the politics of this with regards to the gallery press release in their “International Art English” in 2012, an almost anthropological analysis of the hegemonic kind of language used in the globalized art world. They called IAE a bastard form of English language that inflates value and evades meaning. Looking to the e-flux online press releases as their source material, Rule and Levine made the claim that such hyper-specialized language not only diluted the work but obfuscated audiences’ understandings of it in the service of some larger, more nebulous aim of value-creation. The elusive art object with a value buttressed by this ostensibly-fancy artspeak. Rule and Levine’s text itself was also a comedic, conceptual gesture, one that somewhere along seemed to lose its way: *ARTINFO* went so far as to call Rule and Levine’s IAE “The Joke That Forgot It Was Funny.”

The press release continues to hold value here, and Nilo’s joke is one that is unable to forget its funniness.

In *A Stable of Jockeys*, the medium of Nilo’s work consists of all of the promotional acts and strategies that support and create value around artists and their practices within a global audience of art lovers, viewers, readers, critics, curators, comrades, and collectors. This includes websites and social media accounts, exhibition announcements and congratulatory ads placed in prominent art publications, press releases, catalog essays, reviews and prestigious awards. These all prove to be malleable media in themselves, materials for Nilo The Fool to have fun with.

“FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Five Galleries Launch the First  
International Solo Exhibition of Swiss Art Award 2020 Finalist Dawn Nilo”

Nilo’s representation spans from the westernmost coast of the colonized lands known as Canada—with Wil Aballe Art Projects in Vancouver—across the Atlantic to the Nordic Sea of Hverfisgallerí in Reykjavik, down to the Western European mainland of Gallerie Felix Frachon in Brussels, south to the mediterranean of a.antonopoulou.art in Athens, and back to central Europe to the artist’s originary jockey, Monk Contemporary—the first in her stable. Like parents, kindly encouraging gods, these gallerists showing their public outpouring of praise for their artists’ recent achievements. It is to serve their own aims as much as the artist’s, the cut of things tending to be a quite literal 50:50. These discursive acts in the form of print and digital ads form so much of the present-day media-scape that they are like a white noise that goes unquestioned because it is effectively unheard. The discourse functions to create value. At it’s most cynical, we might put it as *fake it til ya make it*.

We are already playing one game—the Game of Art—so why not take this further and play a game with the game? We are already jockeying for position, attempting the quite impressive feat of creating value and relevance out of what, to some eyes, might seem like ‘nothing’. And then the frame is set around it and:

*Voila.*

Nilo’s foolery affirms the collective need for reflecting on the systems of value and meaning-creation that we are a part of when we make, frame, and collect art. Far from a nihilistic critique, this is critique-in-solidarity. Yes, Nilo is a fool. But her jokes do not come at anyone’s expense. The gallerists—hailed as “jockeys”—are in on the game. They are willing players, consenting to play with their institutional identities and the meanings they are part of inscribing (and imbibing) through “cultural production.”

And while Monk Contemporary is speculative, the transactions are as real as any other art-purchase transaction. Throughout the run of the exhibition, Nilo will be selling works advertised through the website and social media platforms, the prices of which will be negotiated as part of her ongoing piece *Performing Negotiations*—which is also the title of her “first international solo exhibition. The authorship of all of the works that are for sale through Monk Contemporary is shrouded, so that the “value” of the work cannot be predicated on the name-value of The Artist. This is a move that further complicates the terms of Nilo’s conceptual art game. The names will be revealed only through live acts of negotiation between Nilo and another player—a prospective buyer.

Working for her stable of jockeys, she is open to selling other works for the galleries too—works that are not her own. She’s labouring, hustling, negotiating, proposing—and it’s not clear who exactly benefits.

She has a Monkian life to support, but instead of cheese and wine she is selling immaterial concepts and performance-based works, at times manifesting them through objects into physical currency. She has a life to support, too. There is something driving the value-creation, something as pressing and urgent as paying your rent, putting food on the table.

#### **iv. the stable that is support**

Nilo is a happy part of this joke-game herself. She is a director of this work as well as a collaborator, an artist-fool who is part of an intricate web of myriad negotiations and exchanges in the international art market. She acknowledges her ambivalence when it comes to how she perceives

that artist-gallerist relationship. There is something desirable about being part of a stable, about belonging and being accepted in this recognized way. On the occasion of her nomination for the 2020 Swiss Art Awards, Nilo takes this as her opportunity—a chance—to explore that need for validation. Now, she is part of an impressive network of reputable commercial galleries with international reputation. Because, if we are being honest with ourselves, what is value without reputation? We spend this time building our reputations—as artists, as galleries—because we know our value in the market is dependent upon it.

Other questions are raised. What if you are a ‘free agent’? Can something have value, without being part of a stable? We need something to hold it, to frame it—whether a stable, a vessel—or a text template.

As an emblem of stability and constancy, the concept of a “stable” points to something quite rare for life here on earth. The stable, insofar as it represents such stability, is like a precarity to be cherished—a temporary but nevertheless valid and vital form of security. It is a shape that shelter takes—economic, and also literal, physical. A place to enter. Somewhere to be held by, held within.

Jesus of Nazareth was born in a stable in Bethlehem after his parents wandered in the night, not able to find room at any inn because there was no room available. There was no vacancy—a shortage of housing, even short-term housing. It is a tale as old as time. And so they stayed in a stable, or a manger, sometimes used interchangeably. The key to this story as an allegory of god-becoming-man-in-the-most-humblest-of-ways-to-then-go-back-to-heaven-in-a-similarly-humble-or-humiliating-way, is that a stable is not a place where a human would typically stay, or sleep, or give birth:

A stable is for horses.

## **v. the economy that knows it is speculative**

The economy knows it is speculative. It has long been entangled in discourses of “speculation.” While parafictional in a certain sense, nothing about this work is a *lie*. There is no actual untruth in what Nilo is doing, and yet it is not real. It is imaginative and fantastic, existing at least on the border of a shared reality. What is a real gallery today, if not a space on the web where work can be contextualized with text and sold for a certain price? By playing the fool, Nilo is able to create a different reality within our own reality without resorting to the insidious “post truth” and “fake news.”

As a fool, Nilo believes that the only way out of our current stuck-places is through play—serious play. Play becomes a way out of the modes of thinking—about language, economy, circulation, sociality—that we are currently bound by, living as so many of us are in this late, late capitalist, neoliberal world. A *dystopian hellscape* is how it was put in a recent “joke” powerpoint, shared with me by an educator colleague, as we prepare for teaching “art school” online this coming fall. *Teaching in a dystopian hellscape*, the powerpoint promises. And it delivers: an actual powerpoint lecture on teaching online, written satirically, with those of us ‘in’ on the joke—art-school Profs, mostly adjuncts—getting the subtext. It is not an untruth—it describes the current conditions for teaching quite accurately, dismally comedic—but is also not real, insofar as you would not “really” use this as a resource in your university—or you might, if you’re feeling playful.

What do you really have to lose? With the suspended Order of Things here on Earth revealing each of our entangledness in each others’ lives, the air we breath, the way we place our bodies in

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