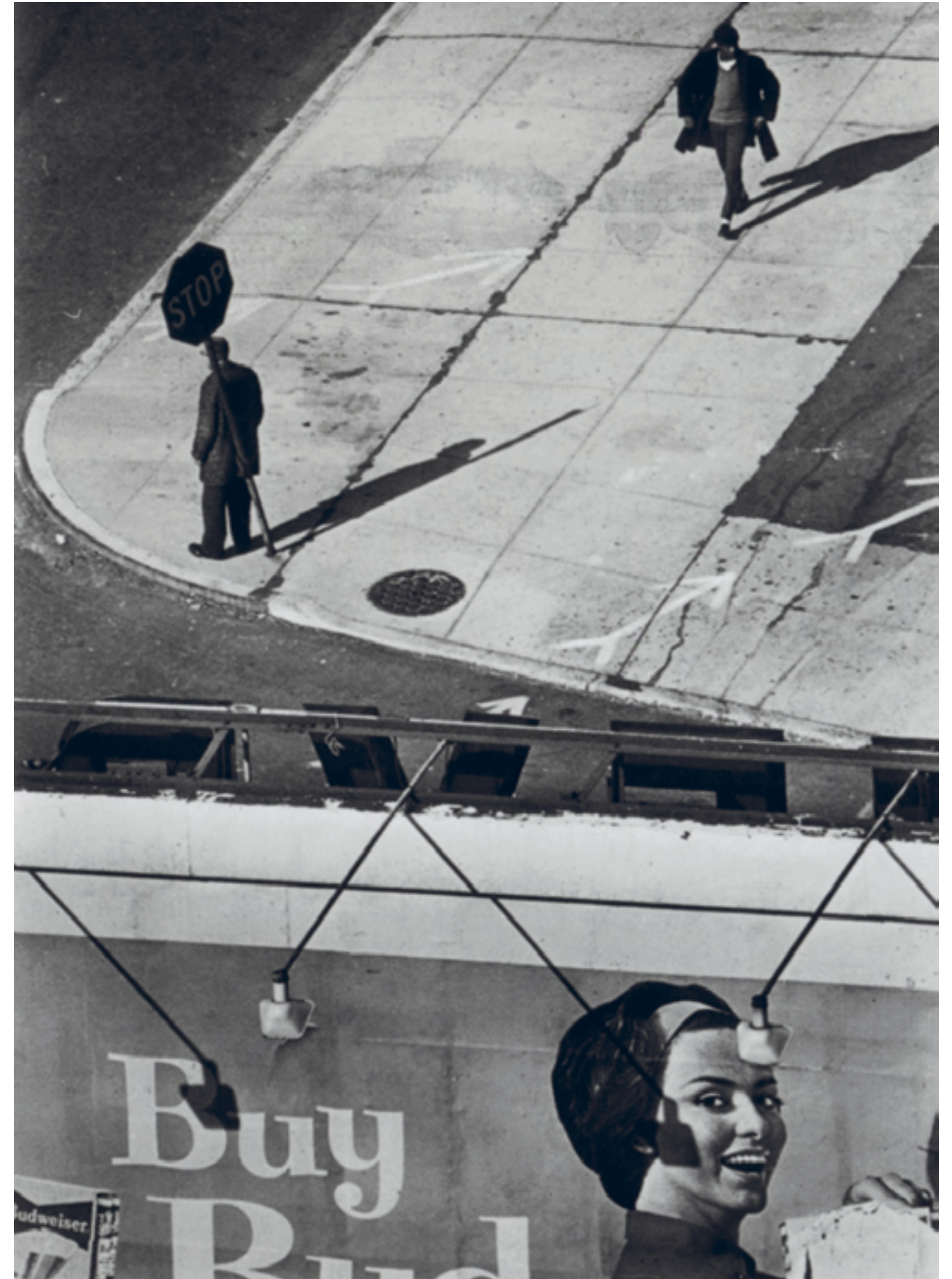


NEW YORK AS NON-PLACE?

An interview with carriage trade director Peter Scott by Veronika Molnar

Is New York anything like the city we've "known" from the movies or our Instagram feeds? While many people seek after the imaginary face of the city filled with success, fame and glamour as suggested by the mass media, the real-life experience is often neglected for a filtered, better version. Both in his curatorial and artistic work, Peter Scott attempts to observe the flipside of billboards and real-estate ads to address issues of urban experience, lifestyle, culture and the mediatized representations of the changing city. Picture City III – exhibited in carriage trade, a non-profit gallery ran by Peter – focuses on his major concerns in the form of a group show, hosting works of André Kertész, Cindy Sherman and Stanley Kubrick. Along with Peter's recent work, we discussed the reverse suburbanization of New York, and the role of Facebook as a neo-Victorian social register for the digital age.



André Kertész, Buy Bud (Billboard),
1962, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8"
Courtesy Bruce Silverstein Gallery

How does the NYC art market look from a gallerist's perspective who'd rather stay out of it to go non-profit?

My focus is on doing interesting exhibitions relevant to what's going on culturally, socially, and politically. Having exhibited and worked in galleries, non-profits, and museums, I arrived at a hybrid model for carriage trade that I felt adopts the strengths of each; the non-commercial mission of a non-profit, the programming flexibility of a small gallery, and the historical scope of a museum. In terms of how the market looks to me, there's some great art that has found support within the art market.

But if by "market" you mean a system invested in a kind of speculative hype at the exclusion of everything else, I think in this situation cultural relevance is often lost in favor of pure spectacle.

It goes without saying that this kind of atmosphere doesn't leave much room for serious consideration of aesthetics or interesting ideas.

What is your purpose in creating this hybrid model – like an art institute – for the gallery?

I like the idea of an art institute, it's a kind of terminology that we don't have so much in the U.S. It suggests an institution that's research based. I guess in Europe it's referred to as kunsthalle or art center, smaller than museums and as such more readily able to respond to cultural conditions in any given moment. My interest is in creating an institution that retains a skeptical position toward the institution itself. In some sense what I'm after is what I see as an ideal museum; one that's critical, responsive, and contemporary, while putting things into context historically.

You mainly curate group exhibitions and often include archive material as well. How does your curatorial approach interact with your personal work?

They inform each other. Ideas I develop in my own work manifest themselves in carriage trade shows and vice versa. Picture City I and II, which preceded Picture City III, the current show at carriage trade, were both exhibitions of my own work in other venues. Picture City III articulates these ideas developed through one-person exhibitions on urbanism and its mediation through advertising and entertainment and approaches them within a group show format. The inclusion of archival material, or images I find that are unauthored, might function as a kind of mediation between my artistic / curatorial role and the idea of an institution as "neutral". It's a third, non-fictional entity between the subjectivity of the artwork and the presumed authoritative role of the curator.

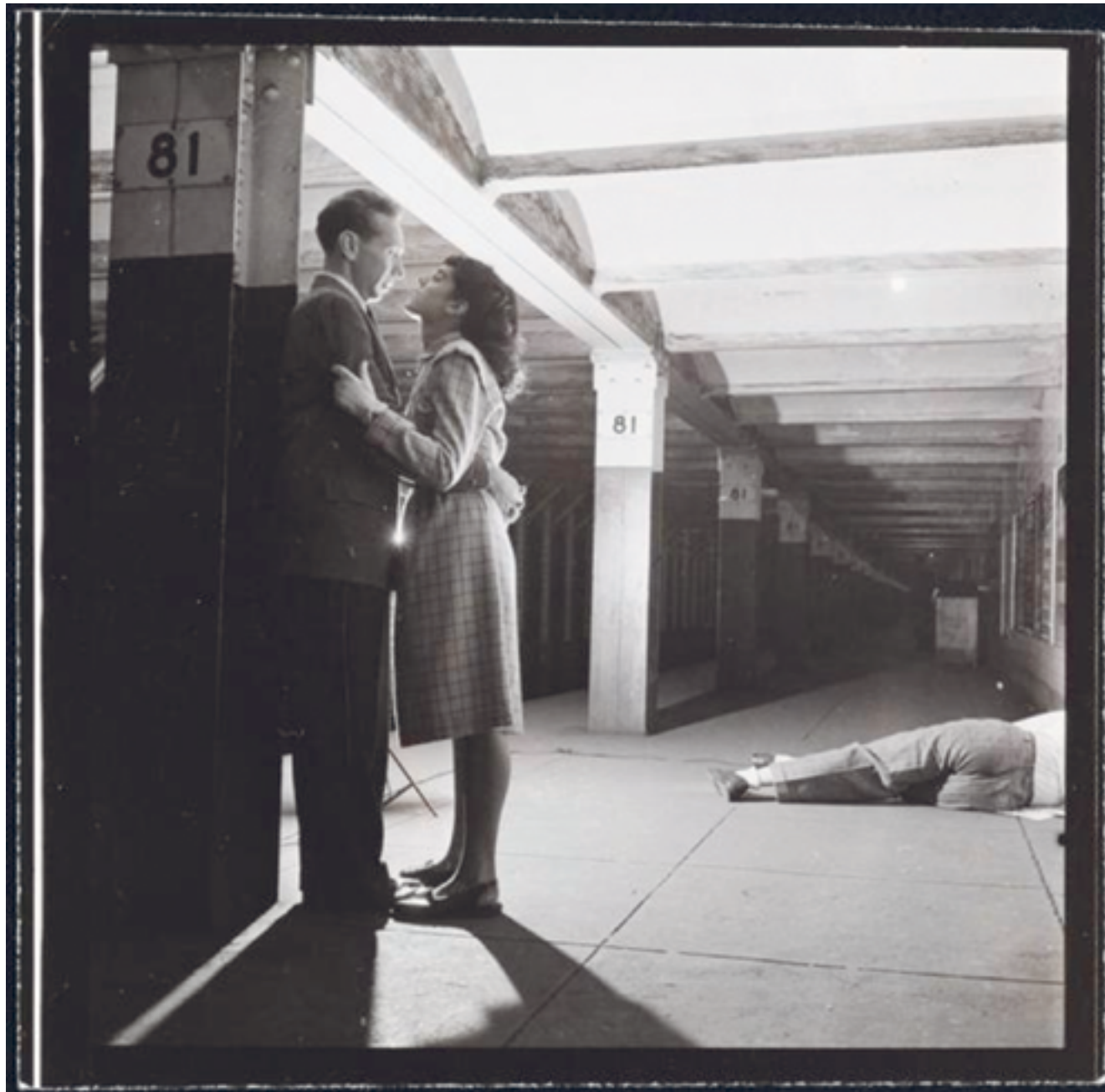
Why don't you exhibit your own artwork at carriage trade, if it elaborates very similar issues to the group shows you curate?

Presenting work as an individual artist and organizing shows as a director / curator aren't mutually exclusive but I see them as different kinds of authorships. I feel I'm more effective as a curator if I subsume my ideas into and throughout the show. Identifying myself as an artist within the exhibition might prove to be a distraction from the overall experience.

For the Picture City II show, you projected stills from Sex and the City (2008) as well as from the Taxi driver (1976), overlapping each other. What message did you try to convey when juxtaposing the ultimate consumerist character of Carrie Bradshaw with the typical outsider played by DeNiro?



I think alienation, or the gap between what is and what could be, is a very important part of our experience. Consumerism attempts to fill that gap with a dream world that suppresses disappointment with investment in objects as a kind of narcotic.



Travis Bickle's profound maladjustment offers a counterpoint to the presumed self-assurance of the consumerism impulse. Deep down, because it's largely dependent on peer approval, this outward self-assurance is often riddled with insecurities. In contrast, Bickle's alienated, neo-noir character travels through the nocturnal, near bankrupt mid- 1970's New York City, encountering its unvarnished truth, you could say.

In present day New York, as the city dispenses with its past through the expulsion of long-standing cultural establishments, local bars, and restaurants in favor of chain stores and franchises, the appetite for nostalgic re-creations of the city's more dissonant, apparently authentic self seems to have increased. Part of the idea of the piece was to reveal the current interdependence of consumerism and nostalgia. As the city eradicates its past it returns as a fetish.

You come back to this interdependence of consumerism and nostalgia in the current show with a different focus. Picture City III "examines the fine line between reality and fiction through visual evidence of the power of images to re-contextualize and reshape the physical dimensions of the urban landscape" – according to the press release. Why do you keep revolving around this issue, and what would be your favorite example of this phenomenon?

I think that making "head-on" arguments against gentrification within the context of culture often leads to a dead end. Many conversations in New York's cultural community revolve around the constant changes and upheavals in the city's neighborhoods as a result of gentrification. They usually end with a sense of resignation. Since an individual's role within the city's economy is in flux, their attitudes towards the process of gentrification is subject to change. One thing that continues to grow is the mediation of urban experience through the promotion of lifestyle culture, expressing a fantasy of endless leisure unencumbered by the problematic issues of race and class.

My favorite concrete example is a quote I came across from a Union Square developer in a Sharon Zucker book that went something like -"We're constantly trying to attract a specific demographic. Young moneyed consumers who know New York City from New York Magazine and who watch Friends. We can train these young consumers to think of urban living on Union Square."

That's a great example! And as a result of all these factors – the images of media, real estate, tourism and gentrification – the city is becoming more and more of a non-place (to use Augé's term). As franchises take the place of local shops and bars, walking around Union Square almost feels like an airport terminal...

There's a kind of "reverse suburbanization" process that's been happening in New York since the mid-nineties. Considered a dangerous city in the 1970's and 80's, many people either fled to the suburbs or refused to visit or live here. A very abridged version of how all this changed is that, in the early 90's, Mayor Giuliani used somewhat brutish police tactics to clean up and pacify the city, followed by Bloomberg's "beautification" process, which favored luxury high rises over affordable housing, and investment in "crown jewel" parks like the High Line over parks in marginal, less tourist-centric neighborhoods. Now deemed a "livable city", to many who knew it before, many parts of New York have become domesticated, franchise-laden, non-places replicating the uniformity found in the suburbs.

I think you have to include Social Media in what's happening within urban space as well. Cell phone technology has had an atomizing quality on people's behavior from the beginning, and this intensified with Facebook and Instagram. These are non-places that one can be "in" while being in the city, contributing to further dislocation of one's sense of place. While there is an enormous amount of stimulation and activity going on there, it falls short of a community. When people can come and go without a commitment to time or place, their actions have limited consequence. This indifferent relationship to time and place is then grafted onto urban space. I think Jean Baudrillard's invocation of the Borges story about the cartographer who created a one-to-one map of the world is very apt right now. As we look down at our phones and watch the Uber driver's little icon approach we're somehow in a digitized space along with the icon, more or less unaware of our surroundings.



John Schabel, Billboard #1, Long Island City,
2011-2017, inkjet on synthetic paper. 39 x
49 1per2", Edition
Courtesy the Artist and carriage trade

Right, and informing ourselves via apps and social media sites instead of our physical environment might lead us to make the wrong assumptions on certain issues. What's your experience of all this, living in New York?

My first really visceral understanding of these issues came out from my experience in Williamsburg Brooklyn, where I'd lived for many years. Unless you're oblivious or not really looking, it's impossible to understate the shock of what transpired there. The transition of Williamsburg from a mixed use, residential and industrial, working class Polish, Italian, and Hispanic neighborhood to a luxury condo saturated mecca for seekers of a "premiere" lifestyle culture experience was neither accidental nor arbitrary. It's become a cliché to claim that artists and bohemians are the seeds of gentrification. What's less often addressed is how clichés about bohemian life are conveyed through media narratives, which then contribute to the reshaping of neighborhoods.

As I read one article after another which characterized the place I lived in as "cutting edge", a "new bohemia", or an "artist's mecca", I realized how it was possible to brand an actual, material, built environment where people were going about their daily lives. As I saw it gradually reshape into a kind of caricature based on these claims, I realized that one's neighborhood was subject to art direction like in a play or a film.

When the huge, life size banner ads began to appear on the many luxury, residential construction sites across Williamsburg, I began a series of photographs that expressed this sense of dislocation and disorientation that I experienced as the neighborhood underwent rapid change. Framing the images in a way that created an ambiguity about which was "real", the full size replica of a "dream" living room, or the mundane elements of construction that it masked, my interest was to express the significant role that perception plays in our relationship to urban space, and how management of these perceptions can contribute to the reshaping of our environment.

You already mentioned that an individual's role within the city's economy is in flux. What is there to do about this sense of instability as an artist/ curator?

I think there are progressive possibilities in what one might consider the anachronism of the gallery space. In particular, one's relationship to and awareness of their surroundings is now subject to a kind of "dream state" promoted by a profusion of technological devices that inhabit our world. I see the possibility of agency in the direction of one's focus within a space, ideally "unarmed" with tech gadgets, engaging and interacting with objects that have the capacity to inform and transform one's experience. Both the shows at carriage trade and my own work tend to address these problems of mediation and perception. I'm convinced these issues have significant consequences in real world situations, and the gallery space is a place where these things can be considered at an "active" remove.

To get back to the exhibition, you are showing works of, among others, Sherman, Kubrick and Kertész in the current show. How does their work fit into your concept?

I'm thrilled to have the work of these artists in the show. The subjects in Cindy Sherman's Film Stills express a kind of interdependence between identity and a fictionalized urban space. Stanley Kubrick's picture was taken in the mid-forties in the New York City subway when he was a correspondent with Look magazine. It's a young couple on a subway platform caught up in each other's gaze while a prone figure lies nearby. A tripod and light are visible behind the couple, suggesting the scene was staged. The Kertész image is a forced perspective picture of a city street and billboard at the bottom of the frame; a kind of hybrid between a Constructivist formalism and John Berger's awareness of the power and insidiousness of advertising.

With respect to advertising; you once told me that we are living in a neo-Victorian era, in the sense that platforms such as Instagram and Facebook encourage an obsession with social status reminiscent of the mid-1800s. As social media and online journalism provide various narratives of what is happening in the surrounding world, all this seems to be a more complex problem than people enhancing each others profiles (and happiness) with their likes...

Facebook is an odd mix of community and self-promotion. They've personalized the branding process to the extent that everyday life becomes an entrepreneurial pursuit. No longer a "top down" situation where ads are produced and disseminated on behalf of huge corporate interests, this process has now been transferred to Social Media users, where ads are woven seamlessly within the discourse. Through its hierarchal systems of "likes" and collective birthday announcements, part of the appeal of Facebook seems to be its somewhat regressive function as a neo-Victorian social register for the digital age. At the same time, these new technologies and algorithms are assimilated too rapidly to comprehend their possible long-term effects.

Despite proclamations of post-modernism that modernism is dead, "modern life" continues to be celebrated via efficiency culture's endless creation of new technological advances. On the other hand, I think we may be at a point in the "digital revolution" that eventually arrived at in the industrial revolution, when large cities began to recognize the negative effects of overcrowding and pollution on inner city life. It's become clear to more and more people, including inventors of new technologies, that some of the psychological effects of the Internet and Social Media should give us pause. In a recent Guardian article called "Our Minds Can Be Hijacked", Justin Rosenstein, the Facebook engineer who invented the "like" button, is now expressing regret at what he put in motion, and is quoted as saying "Everyone is distracted, all of the time."

And in the meantime, Mark Zuckerberg is still pictured as a shoeless college kid in the media, however some alert that he, along with other tech-company CEOs has more control of the world than Trump or any future president. At this moment, it might not seem as scary as a person like Trump running the United States, but it could be a reason for serious concern in the future, don't you think?

To be honest, I think it's far scarier. You're absolutely right to point out the significance of the "shoeless college kid" imagery. This seemingly benign, non-threatening Peter Pan-type character has amassed a previously unimaginable degree of influence over the behavior of billions of people. I think it's more and more obvious that it's a kind of Pandora's Box that neither those responsible for it nor anyone else know how to control. Trump and Brexit were clearly the beneficiaries of the polarized discourse that enhanced Facebook's bottom line, and the real world consequences are still being calculated.

It's now come out that Facebook engaged in indiscriminate profiteering during the last U.S. election. Paid in rubles for political ads crafted in Russia targeting American voters, they enabled tactics meant to sow discord within a U.S. political system already compromised by out of control campaign spending and backdoor meddling. Enough evidence has surfaced on Facebook's (witting or unwitting) role in the election's outcome that congressional hearings were held to look into the matter. But rather than answering these charges, as many executives of industries called before Congress have done in the past, the "shoeless college kid" sent Facebook's lawyers to clean up the mess, as he remained at home, posting a picture of him and his family on Instagram, dressed as Vikings for Halloween.

Picture City III is on view until February 11, 2018. Peter Scott's solo exhibition opens February 18 at Magenta Plains.