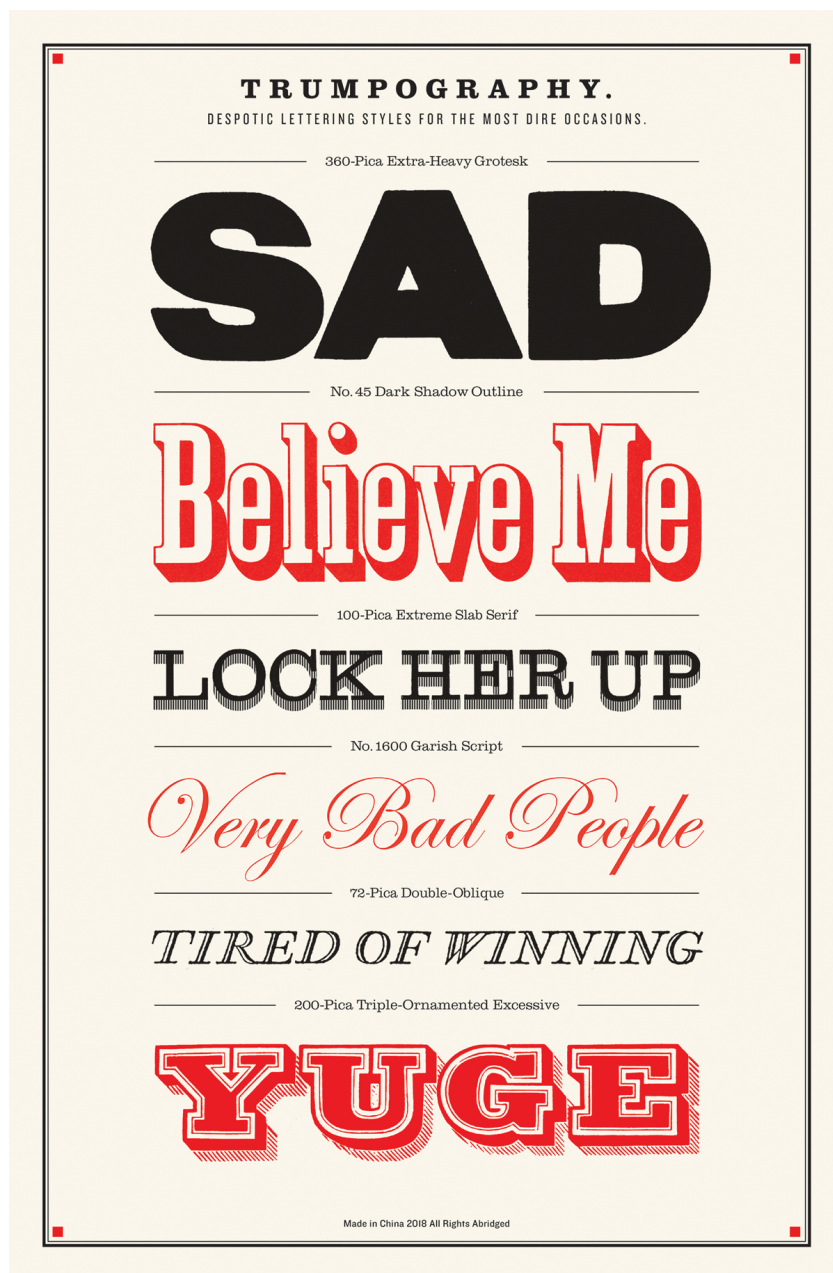


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# Friends Who Host Benefits

Donald Trump and the rise of the Art-Right



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**THE POLITICAL THOUSAND-YEAR STORM** of the Trump presidency has smashed headlong into the hot-take factory of contemporary media. The result, as anyone knows who has read, well, anything in the last year, is a truly unprecedented explosion of Trump-themed cultural criticism. From the exhausting “lectureporn” of late-night comedy to Style section hot takes to plodding diatribes in art theory journals, the entire media ecosystem has become a round-the-clock referendum on the Meaning of Trump. In March, *New York* magazine both satirized and indulged in what they coined an “insta-angle” when it headlined a movie review, “Stop Saying Every Piece of Art Is About Trump. Only Boss Baby Is About Trump.”

In this media fog, it becomes harder and harder to distinguish serious analysis from self-amused venting. And the truth is that in these weird mixed-up times, one has to maintain two seemingly contradictory thoughts simultaneously. The first is that Trump really is a uniquely awful and alarming spectacle machine; as Masha Gessen wrote shortly after the inauguration, his freakish charisma represents “a different aesthetic vocabulary than any candidate in living memory.” That merits a special kind of attention.

But the second thought is that the single-minded focus on Trump’s personal excesses reflects the shallowness of mainstream liberal politics and the punditry’s well-established obsession with personality and optics as the motor forces of politics. That myopia cost us dearly during the election, when the media consensus was that Trump was just too culturally outside-the-norm to attract the larger support that he did actually attract. That’s part of what makes the guy diabolical: as a political personality, he’s so excessive, and what is wrong with him so obvious and satisfyingly mockable, that he repels complex analysis of the system that enables him. Cultural writing is particularly vulnerable to this vice, liable by its very nature to over-invest in the value of style and branding, to rewrite political questions as matters of taste.

“To the billionaire real-estate tycoon, the gold on that chair means ‘winning,’ having ‘success,’ and being ‘great,’” the writer William Vaillancourt inveighed in an essay titled “The Great Destroyer: Donald Trump’s Contempt for Aesthetics” for *The Progressive*. “In his hamfisted, zero-sum pursuit of this axis of idolatry, Trump has failed to see what others can: that there is a different type of greatness. All that glitters is not gold. The defining qualities of the arts and humanities—nuance, humbleness, reflection, and appreciation—are consistently at odds with how Trump conducts himself.”

It’s a real burn. It is not, however, a particularly acute analysis of the specific event that triggered the essay, the proposed defunding of the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the

Arts. The Trump budget was not cooked up by the man himself out of some deep personal “contempt for aesthetics.” It followed, nearly word for word, the recommendations of the preppy libertarian brain trust at The Heritage Foundation. Eliminating federal arts funding has been a passion project of the anti-government crowd *for decades*, and Trump was merely open to going along. His taste for gold chairs has only circumstantial explanatory power.

And here, let’s turn to look specifically at the Trump administration’s links to the institutions of fine art, because that relationship provides an interesting test case of the relationship between the image of Trumpian populism, and its actual base. In the end, too, it tells you something about the limits of the critique of taste as a form of political analysis.

## Greed is Good Art

Trump doesn’t get art. This is a tenet of the #resistance. And it’s both true and not true. In *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, his 1987 self-help book/calling card, we are treated to a snapshot of his life as a 1980s dealmaker. There, in the midst of a breezy hour-by-hour account of his adventures, we get this priceless story:

2:45 p.m. A friend of mine, a highly successful and very well known painter, calls to say hello and to invite me to an opening. I get a great kick out of this guy because, unlike some artists I’ve met, he’s totally unpretentious.

A few months back he invited me to come to his studio. We were standing around talking, when all of a sudden he said to me, “Do you want to see me earn twenty-five thousand dollars before lunch?” “Sure,” I said, having no idea what he meant. He picked up a large open bucket of paint and splashed some on a piece of canvas stretched on the floor. Then he picked up another bucket, containing a different color, and splashed some of that on the canvas. He did this four times, and it took him perhaps two minutes. When he was done, he turned to me and said, “Well, that’s it. I’ve just earned twenty-five thousand dollars. Let’s go to lunch.”

He was smiling, but he was also absolutely serious. His point was that plenty of collectors wouldn’t know the difference between his two-minute art and the paintings he really cares about. They were just interested in buying his name.

I’ve always felt that a lot of modern art is a con, and that the most successful painters are often better salesmen and promoters than they are artists. I sometimes wonder what would happen if collectors knew what I knew about my friend’s

work that afternoon. The art world is so ridiculous that the revelation might even make his paintings more valuable! Not that my friend is about to risk finding out.

The anecdote is probably too neat; *The Art of the Deal* is known to be colorfully embellished by his co-writer Tony Schwartz (though I have talked to people who were there, at the heart of the go-go money-money-money '80s art world who tell me the painter is real). Here you see him trying out, in this boutique realm, his weird brand of tycoon populism. The cultural elite are full of it (“modern art is a con”); Trump’s the guy who can tell it like it is, because he saw it all from the inside.

You could even say that Trump learned a useful business lesson from art: “They were just interested in buying his name,” he marvels about his painter friend. After he failed as a casino mogul, the Trump Organization would end up making at least \$59 million by licensing out the “Trump name,” according to the *Washington Post*.

But the point should be that this aspect of art was very much *not* an invention. *Wall Street*, Oliver Stone’s operatic distillation of the era’s whirlwind of yuppie depravity, hit theaters the same year as *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, a fable of the same time and place. “This painting here? I bought it ten years ago for sixty thousand dollars. I could sell it today for six hundred,” Michael Douglas boasted as “greed, for lack of a better word, is good” prophet Gordon Gekko. “The illusion has become real, and the more real it becomes, the more desperately they want it. Capitalism at it’s finest.” This was very much the image the New York City art scene was radiating at this time.

It was often said—and it is true—that Trump said out loud what the Republican Party already insinuated, replacing dog-whistle politics with full, barking racism. He is, in that sense, both in excess of politics-as-usual and the purified product of it. The same goes for his relation to the “cultural elite” that he so expertly antagonizes. All the high-flown liberal rhetoric about the innate virtues of the arts—“nuance, humbleness, reflection, appreciation,” and all that—has very often been the polite packaging around a lot of unexamined entitlement, social posturing, and raw, mercenary greed. It is just impolite to say so at the cocktail party. The notion that there is something suspect about this rhetoric of virtuous taste is not a conspiracy theory that Trump picked up from Infowars. That particular transmission came from the elite side of the New York City art world *itself*.

## 1600 Fifth Avenue

Trump's base has been referred to as the "Fifth Avenue Crowd." This sounds posh, but it actually refers to his infamous speech in January 2016, a bit of culture wars invective with an especially bellicose flourish:

Hard-working Americans are a lot smarter than any of the ideological eunuchs in all of their pontificating glory. It's true. My people are so smart. And you know what else they say about my people, the polls: they say I have the most loyal people. Where I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and I wouldn't lose any voters, okay? It's incredible.

One legitimate reason for training the conversation on Trump's gaudy aesthetics might be that it holds the clue to his cult appeal to these "regular hard-working Americans" (read: the aggrieved white working class). "In his aspirational but undisciplined 'You only live once' style, Trump is an avatar of those who are acutely aware of money's evanescence," the *Guardian's* Justin Gest postulated. In *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Allison Coffelt theorized that the key to Trump's appeal is his embrace of "kitsch," with its appeal to simple emotional spectacle and hostility to elitist nuance. "Not all Trump supporters are blind to these complexities," she explained. "Yet many—especially the ones who initially propelled him to center stage—still choose, unconsciously or not, to welcome his kitschy world with its simple us/them story."

As seductive as these analyses are, they may themselves represent rather un-nuanced analyses of the Trump Phenomenon. Post-election, the *Guardian* offered the following reassessment: "Far from being purely a revolt by poorer whites left behind by globalization, who did indeed turn out in greater numbers for the Republican candidate than in 2012, Trump's victory also relied on the support of the middle-class, the better-educated and the well-off." As it turned out, grasping the tycoon's mythical crossover appeal to the left-behind is only as important as grasping the fact that traditional Republican voters rallied to him.

Now that the man is in office, what do the assembled forces of Trumpism represent, culturally? In some sense, this constellation definitely justifies the most panicky *Handmaid's Tale* assessments of the administration's culture wars agenda. The man has a fondness for military hardliners and evangelical demagogues. He handpicked, from a range of options, Vice President Mike Pence, a born-again former talk radio show host and self-described "Rush Limbaugh on decaf." Pence's culture wars bona fides are impeccable; he has made it his life's mission to make life a hell for LGBTQ people and Planned Parenthood. The fact that his wife, Karen Pence, is, according to the White House, an "award-winning watercolorist" and has made championing art therapy her personal cause is unlikely to comfort those who fear a kitsch tyranny. (Her support has, in fact, produced a real rift among art therapists.)

Among the wider rings around Trump, however, the cultural profile gets more complex. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is part of a family whose funding has bankrolled the rise of the modern Christian right, mauled unions in Michigan, and lavishly empowered anti-LGBTQ causes. Still, she is one culture warrior who loves the arts, with “her lifelong interest in art and design” mentioned in her personal bio. Her son, Rick, founded ArtPrize, a populist art contest in Grand Rapids that attracts huge crowds. In more traditionally highbrow circles, the former director of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts once described Betsy DeVos as “the best board member I ever had.” In 2010, she and her husband gave a \$22.5 million gift—the largest private donation in the institution’s history at the time—leading to the founding of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management.

The DeVos Institute has a focus on bringing the rigors of better management to the notoriously undisciplined and cash-strapped non-profit art world; “DeVos Institute services are lean, direct, and practical,” it boasts. Given that there is a very real crisis of funding facing such institutions, this seems a strategic area of philanthropy. A generation from now, a good section of the arts infrastructure may be shaped by DeVos-trained administrators. The organization has boasted of its commitment to “Capacity Building for Culturally Specific Arts Organizations,” though to date its biggest brush with notoriety may be a hotly contested 2015 study that claimed that minority-run arts organizations should, in effect, be culled because there is not enough money to go around: rather than provide small grants to many recipients, “funders might see better results by focusing their grants on a limited number of organizations.”

DeVos’s art credentials are trifling compared to those of Wilbur Ross, the self-described billionaire banker (aka “king of bankruptcy”) turned Secretary of Commerce. He and his wife told *Forbes* in 2013 that they’re “museum junkies” and regulars at Christie’s and Sotheby’s. In 2013, it was conservatively estimated that they own \$150 million of art, including a cache of Magritte paintings and a variety of Chinese contemporary art. Ross himself features in the background of Chinese artist Liu Bolin’s fittingly named *100 USD*, a work that the artist meant as a statement about how U.S. dollars have become “a new religion in today’s world.”

But the most highly art-connected player in Trump World may be his campaign finance chair, Steven Mnuchin, now Secretary of the Treasury. “The first thing most Wall Streeters would say about Mnuchin is that he has deal-making—and a certain level of Manhattan glamor—in his blood,” the *Wall Street Journal* wrote in 2009. His father, also a former Goldman Sachs banker, runs one of Manhattan’s swankiest galleries, Mnuchin Gallery, known for showing classy blue-chip modernism, as well as revered African

American conceptual artist David Hammons. The younger Mnuchin has an extensive art collection including a “stake” in a Willem de Kooning painting worth millions. His wife, Louise Linton, infamously made an ass of herself bragging about her designer #brands on Instagram; she also boasted to *Town & Country* about “admiring rings while in Miami for Art Basel.”

Most important, though, Mnuchin has been prominent on museum boards, including most recently the board of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, a position he resigned from after the election. He went on to put that society background to work for Trump. As the *Los Angeles Times* relayed when he was first tapped as campaign finance chair, “Mnuchin said he had no experience raising money for a political campaign, but a history of doing so as part of his work on charitable boards.”

What do these upscale ties say about the broader contours of Trump’s populism? His enabling inner circle consists of people who are not just mega-millionaires but positive sophisticates. The point should be obvious, but Trump’s grotesque shtick seems to make people forget it: proximity to refinement isn’t some kind of royal road to progressive ideals. Presumably, the members of the Trump circle know their own agenda and don’t much care about how it *looks* getting done, whether it is laying waste to public schools (DeVos) or getting the best possible deal for corporations and the wealthy (Mnuchin).

These cultural elites joined his administration after his most boorish remarks: after he called Mexican immigrants “rapists”; after “grab ’em by the pussy”-gate. As of this writing at least, they have stood by his side, literally, well after he began to openly flirt with neo-Nazis. *They* truly are the Fifth Avenue crowd.

## First Lady of the Art-Right

Throughout the first part of 2017, the media was aflutter with speculation about the future of the Trump administration. Would it be shaped by the Ivanka-Jared Tendency, or would the Bannonist Tendency, armed with Breitbart News, win over the diseased hearts and purulent brains of the White House? It is here, of all places, that the aesthetic question gets twisted and interesting.

Ivanka and Jared, as opposed to her dad, have been fearsomely concerned with ingratiating themselves to a sophisticated audience. Associating themselves with an on-trend collection of contemporary art is very much a part of their brand. Even the couple’s house, as glimpsed in Ivanka’s obsessively curated Instagram feed, is airy and tasteful and accented with pieces by well-known “bad boys” of contemporary art: Alex da

Corte, Dan Colen, Alex Israel, Nate Lowman, Christopher Wool. Out and about exploring her family's new turf in D.C., she courted 'likes' posting from Yayoi Kusama's *Obliteration Room* at the Hirshhorn Museum.

In January, JarVanka's taste in edgy art led to one of the more off-the-wall bits of recent art activism. Richard Prince, an artist known in the 1980s for rephotographing images of the Marlboro Man as his art, has lately taken to blowing up other people's Instagram images and printing them on canvas. Ivanka's art adviser evidently thought this was perfect for her client; the art adviser approached the artist in 2014 and asked him to pick one of her photos and give it the Prince treatment, a sort of custom conceptual-art, social-media-era form of society portraiture. He picked an image of her checking her phone while being made up.

But after the election, Prince had second thoughts about being associated with the Trumps. He returned the \$36,000 he had taken for the Instagram portrait and declared the work to be no longer by him, in much the way he had originally taken the image and declared it to be his own. Specifically, he posted a picture of Ivanka with the incriminating artwork with the caption, "This is not my work. I did not make it. I deny. I denounce. This fake art." Prince's withdrawal of authorship marks an absurd flipping of the script on Donald Trump's painter friend saying his collectors "were just interested in buying his name."

At any rate, you can't get away with the bad-taste-is-bad-politics equation here. Indeed, so positive is the public perception of her bond to high culture that the *New York Times* dedicated a whole article to musing, "Might Ivanka Trump Speak Up if Her Father Guts the Arts?"

Meanwhile, it is the militant anti-globalist side, the Bannonists, who have claimed credit for Trump's harder alt-right crusader impulses: the "Muslim ban," attacking transgender military service members, etc. "Turn on the hate" is a signature Bannon phrase (and that was directed at *Republicans!*). As to taste, the man himself has a chip on his shoulder, supposedly, about his working-class Catholic roots. As a political documentarian (the 2011 Sarah Palin doc *The Undeclared*), Bannon once listed his aesthetic influences as the unlikely trio of Sergei Eisenstein, Michael Moore, and Leni Riefenstahl. When it comes to fine art, he is known to own a painting of himself as Napoleon, a gift of Brexit leader Nigel Farage, a fan.

Scroll through the archives of Breitbart News, the right-wing media machine of which Bannon was formerly and is now again the executive chairman, having been ejected from his official Trump administration role. There, you'll find that art is spotlighted principally as an example of liberal



decadence. The site is militantly small-minded, micro-targeted to stoke right-wing populist outrage. (Since Bannon, in his days as a banker to Hollywood, made a ton of money on *Seinfeld* residuals, I am surprised no one has yet written the inevitable think piece on the “Seinfeldian Aesthetics of Breitbart News,” how it cartoons the tiniest controversies into parables of the lunacy of the metropolitan elite.)

Yet here’s the twist: Breitbart and a good part of Trump’s campaign were alike bankrolled by the billionaire Mercer family. While the Trumps are exuberantly public, the Mercers, until recently, have been discreet. Robert, the father, is a chilly libertarian who minted hundreds of millions of dollars at the hedge fund Renaissance Technologies. His middle daughter, Rebekah, has been called the “First Lady of the Alt-Right.”

And, as it so happens, it was Ivanka and Jared who took the initiative to reach out to Rebekah Mercer for her financial support, meeting with her for salads and sandwiches at Trump Tower. And it was Rebekah Mercer who, in turn, brought Bannon and Kellyanne Conway onto the Trump team in the midst of the election, to fine-tune the projection of vitriol. According to the *Washington Post*, “Ivanka and Rebekah bonded over parenting young children and being the daughters of hard-charging, successful fathers.” This common culture of head-strong entitlement is the real cultural glue of Trumpism.

The Mercers are known to throw lavish costume parties at their Long Island home, The Owl’s Nest, invite-only conservative Woodstocks. The post-election do was “Villains and Heroes”-themed: Conway came as Superwoman; Bannon and Trump came as themselves. One year earlier, the theme had been the end of World War II. The Mercers brought in museum relics for guests to view, including a chunk of the USS Arizona recovered from Pearl Harbor. (Ted Cruz showed up as Winston Churchill.) They also have a super-yacht, The Seal Owl, valued at \$75 million and custom-designed with amenities including a Venetian glass Dale Chihuly chandelier and bespoke trompe l’oeil murals. *Boat International* magazine remarked, “While the décor is playful, it is never kitsch.”

The Mercers are very much welcome among Manhattan high society—in fact, culturally, they are denizens of its starchier quarters. They have been patrons of the Frick Collection, the Metropolitan Museum, the American Museum of Natural History (something of a scandal, as they are also major funders of climate change denial), and the Central Park Conservancy.

“She reads every story, and calls when there are grammatical errors or typos,” an “insider” told *The New Yorker* of Rebekah Mercer’s involvement with Breitbart. In short, the nastiest side of the present culture war is actually sponsored by the same people who patronize Manhattan’s loftiest cultural strata.

## Design Flaw

A personal favorite of the genre of Trump-themed art criticism comes from design maven Peter York, writing in *Politico Magazine*. “The best aesthetic descriptor of Trump’s look, I’d argue, is *dictator style*,” York wrote, laying out a Grand Unified Theory of Despot Aesthetics, based on his study of figures ranging from Nicolae Ceausescu to Saddam Hussein. “With its marble-inlaid dining table, painted ceilings and gold flourishes quite literally everywhere,” he concludes, “Trump’s aesthetic puts him more in the visual tradition of Turkmenistan President Saparmurat Niyazov, who erected a massive rotating golden statue of himself in Ashgabat, than the self-effacing gray-suited conventions of Western democratic leaders.”

As a kind of hybrid of pop psychology and interior decorating advice, this is very amusing. But you also see all the weaknesses of the genre. When it comes time to pull back the sparkly golden curtain and give a glimpse of the implied positive term, the alternative to which you are comparing Trump, what you get is . . . the “self-effacing gray-suited conventions of Western democratic leaders”? The suffocating business-as-usual of neoliberal politics? And so it turns out that the level of argument was, quite literally, superficial.

The self-flattering focus on Trump’s bad taste is tempting, but the obsession with it is a trap. As a rule, it serves to lower the level of discussion. It strangely abets its enemy by reframing the alarmingly toxic politics in the White House as a “snobs vs. slobs” narrative that actually flatters Trump (because who wants to be on the side of the snobs?) Mainly, though, parsing the man’s personal aesthetics may illuminate certain aspects of Trump’s appeal, but it just as easily obscures the broader phenomenon of Trumpism, which finds its roots in the museum as well as the megachurch and draws as much power from cynical sophisticates as it does from the sans culottes.

The aesthetic critique of politics often starts by reading style as a symptom of a deeper malady. The danger is that it often ends up mistaking the symptoms for the illness itself. The urge to condense everything that has brought us here, all the pervasive institutional decay, corrosive inequality, and social fragmentation, the grip of racism and oligopoly on U.S. politics, into a referendum on the belligerent garishness of one man, Donald Trump, subtly renders political problems into problems of cosmetics or etiquette. It implies,

comfortingly, that the problems he represents are fixable by cosmetic solutions. If you imagine Trump as a boorish party crasher, you don't have to ask if it is the party itself that is corrupt.

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