who are not.

once reviled, now ever-present?

The Art of the Pun SHARE: FACEBOOK, TWITTER

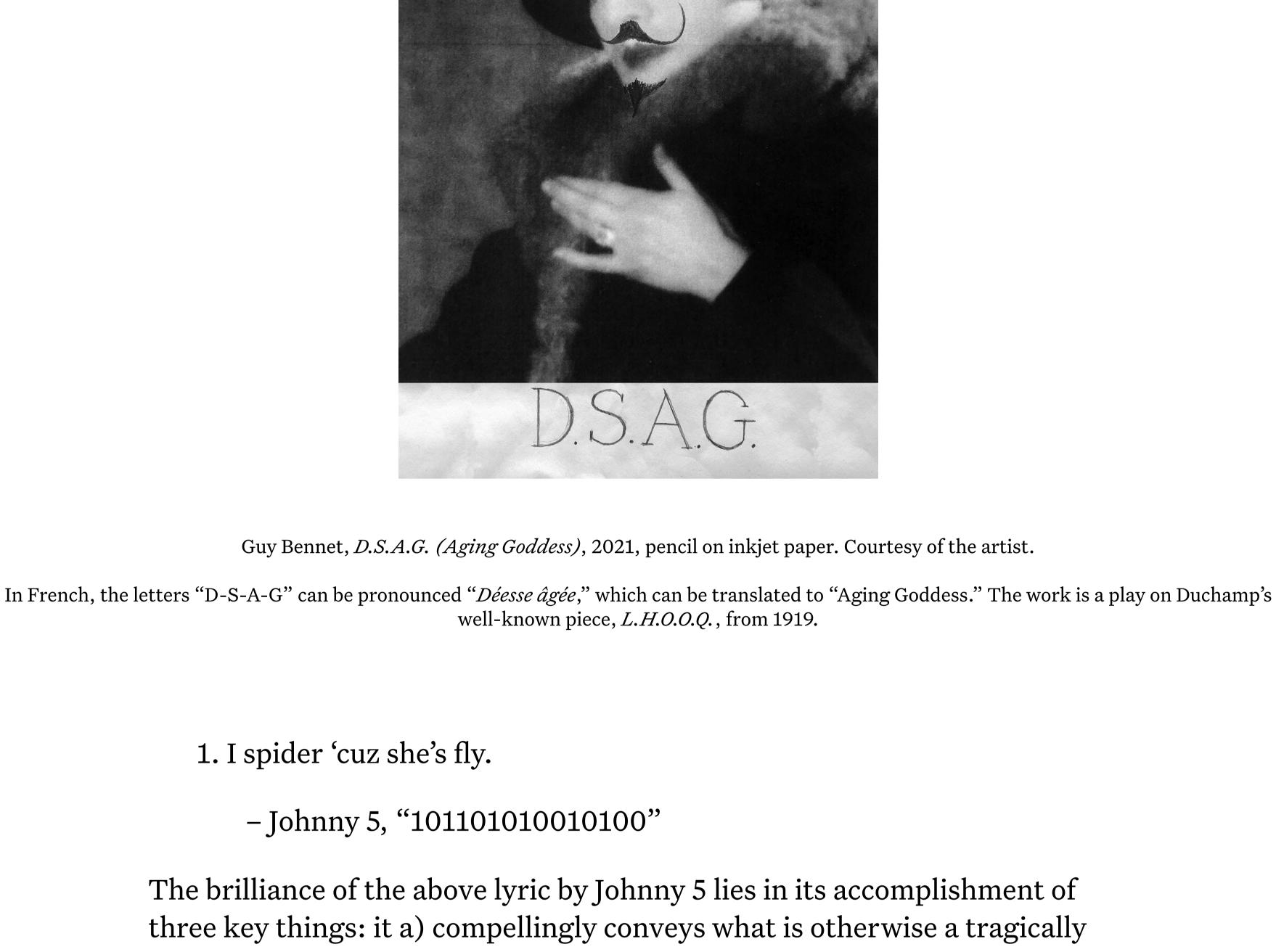
01.03.22 / DASH Dakota Higgins

I see two types of artists: those who are working with puns and those

Is it a coincidence that Marcel Duchamp, the true-if-over-cited midwife of the readymade, grandfather of the found object, was also an avid producer of puns? Might there be a relationship, in both form and function, between the loathed and lowly pun and the repurposing, repositioning,

recontextualizing, and general rethinking of given forms—that strategy

- Jimmy Raskin, *The Final Eternal Return*



tired cliché ("I noticed a pretty girl") by not only b) resituating the terms "spider" and "fly," playing on the multiple ways that these sounds can be interpreted, but by also c) creating and utilizing a context in which its

because we understand that they are somehow related. Without the context of their relationship, it would be impossible to even *hear* the insect-words "spider" and "fly;" we would only catch "spied her" and "fly," the adjective

art objects themselves?

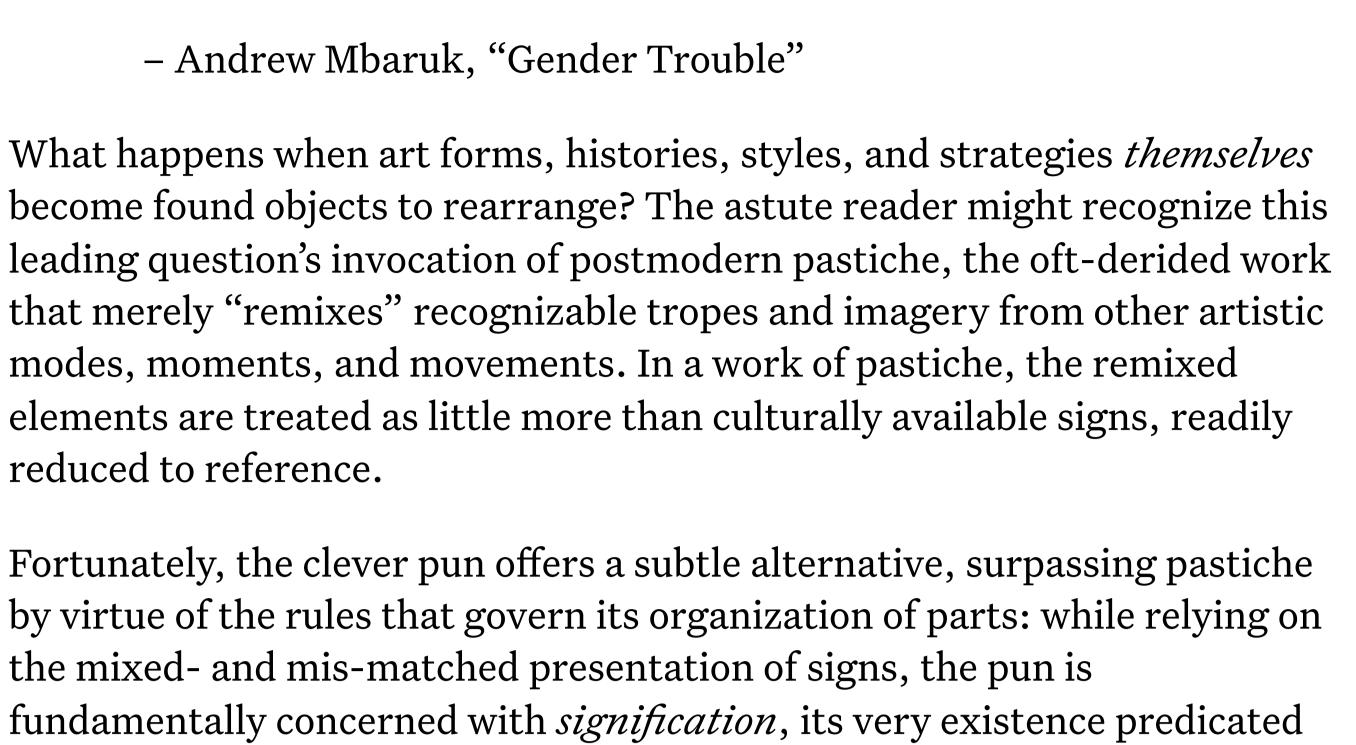
anticipates a recognition of these multiple meanings to be fully intelligible. What's more, this recognition is not an end unto itself: one might, for example, go on to consider how the above statement implies a predatory relationship between the spectator and the spectacle. Thus, we begin to discern a surprising set of parallels between the architecture of the pun and the logic of de-/re-contextualization inherent in the use of found forms in art. It could be said that puns emerge when words, phrases and sounds are treated as found objects to be recontextualized; while a pun's constituent elements may be presented matter-of-factly or as minimally manipulated (as are the sounds "spider"/"spied her," "fly"/"fly" above), the subtlety and particularity of their presentation leads the listener down unexpected paths, creating an opportunity to reconsider the meanings and uses of the featured terms.

elements are comprehensible: the words "spider" and "fly" only function

meaning cool and beautiful. Impressively, Johnny 5 does more than play,

arbitrarily, with the varied meanings of the words he uses; his quip

Within this framework, might Duchamp's readymades be viewed as puns of



Stock image approximating Marcel Duchamp's *Trébuchet (Trap)*, 1917, a coat rack nailed to floor. The title references a particular position in

chess wherein any move a player makes will result in a loss.

2. Sometimes a phallus is just a penis.

cigar is just a cigar."

said: to be played with, words require familiar rules. It is this weaving of past (by virtue of the contingent meanings and histories upon which we rely to communicate) and present (by virtue of the particularity of the wordplay in the moment) that allows puns to defy cliché. Rather than regurgitate past expressions in all-too-familiar ways, the pun parkours played out uses of terms by intentionally resituating them. Take, for example, the lyric by Vancouver-based rapper Andrew Mbaruk that introduces this section. As opposed to the relatively self-contained nature of the pun analyzed at the top of this text, Mbaruk's play on words depends not on the sounds that comprise it, but on the syntax and metahistory of the phrase famously misattributed to Freud, "Sometimes a

upon the plausible intelligibility of the meanings, concepts, and histories to

which it refers. As such, puns necessarily depend on what has already been

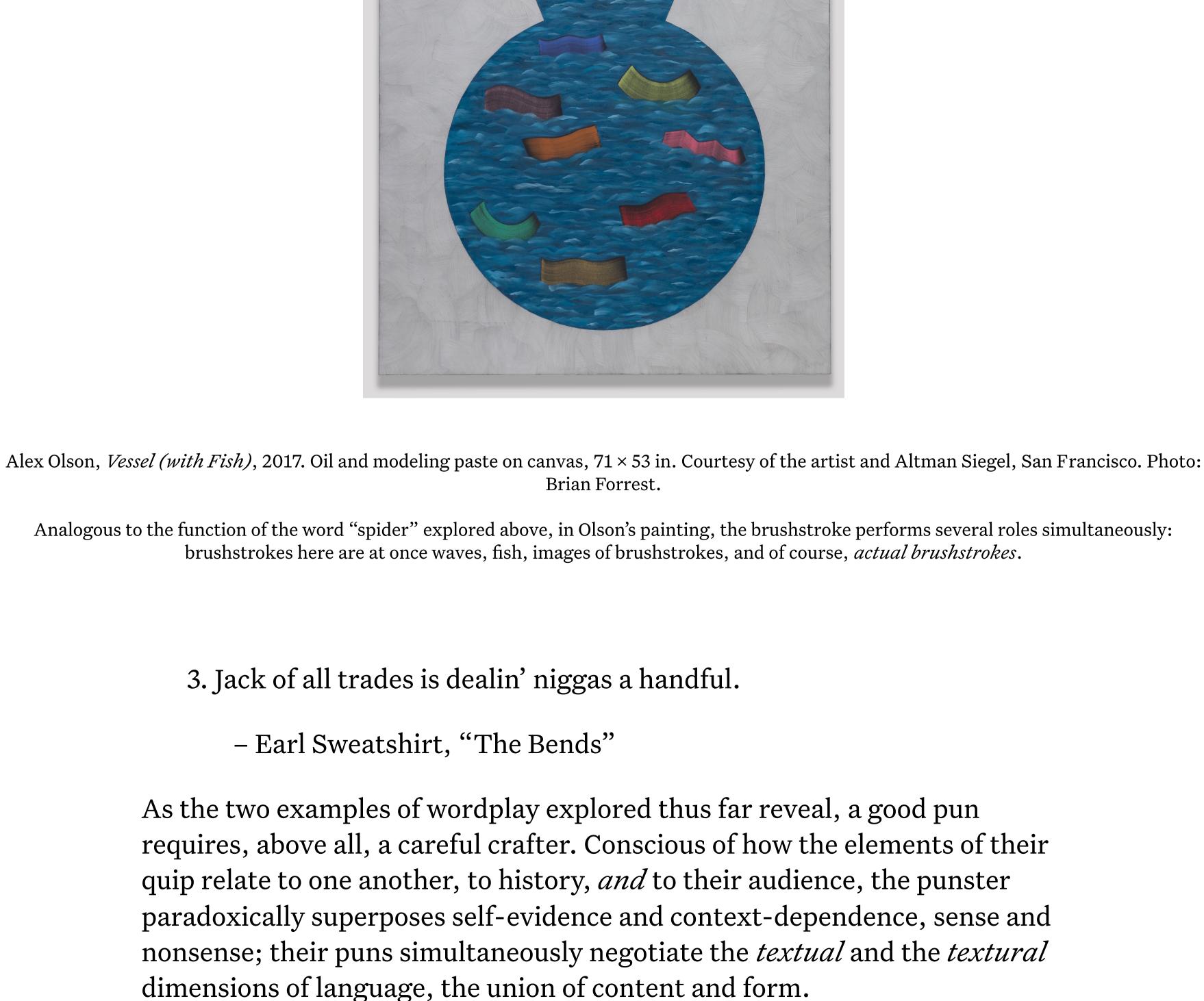
understanding of how the mix might manage to mean. A pun is a precise kind of remix; a form of context-aware, self-evident repetition that addresses and interrogates its status as a thing said before, as a play on the past. Considered thusly, we can begin to see how puns may be used to structure artworks dialectically, such that a work made in the present may "echo" the past, but in the self-aware and self-evident ways prescribed by the pun.

While a remix as such is principally defined by the blending of historically

demonstrates how, in order for a remix to be a pun, it must not be mixed

arbitrarily, or simply with respect to style or taste, but instead with an

unrelated or previously uncombined sounds, Mbaruk's paraphrase



In a revivalist-raving, pastiche-pasting, sequel-spewing aesthetic climate

like our own, the pun may provide (and indeed has provided) a "way

histories of Abstract Expression. Similarly, Cammie Staros's recent

word play titularly; the artworks themselves demonstrated how a

thoughtful pun can generate a true constellation of things.

exhibition at Shalumit Nazarian, What Will Have Being, not only utilized

Several of the forms in the show are works of punning conflation. Formal

ambiguity defines her wall-mounted ceramic pieces, for example, as they are

simultaneously classical vessels and snail shells. Aptly, Staros refers to these

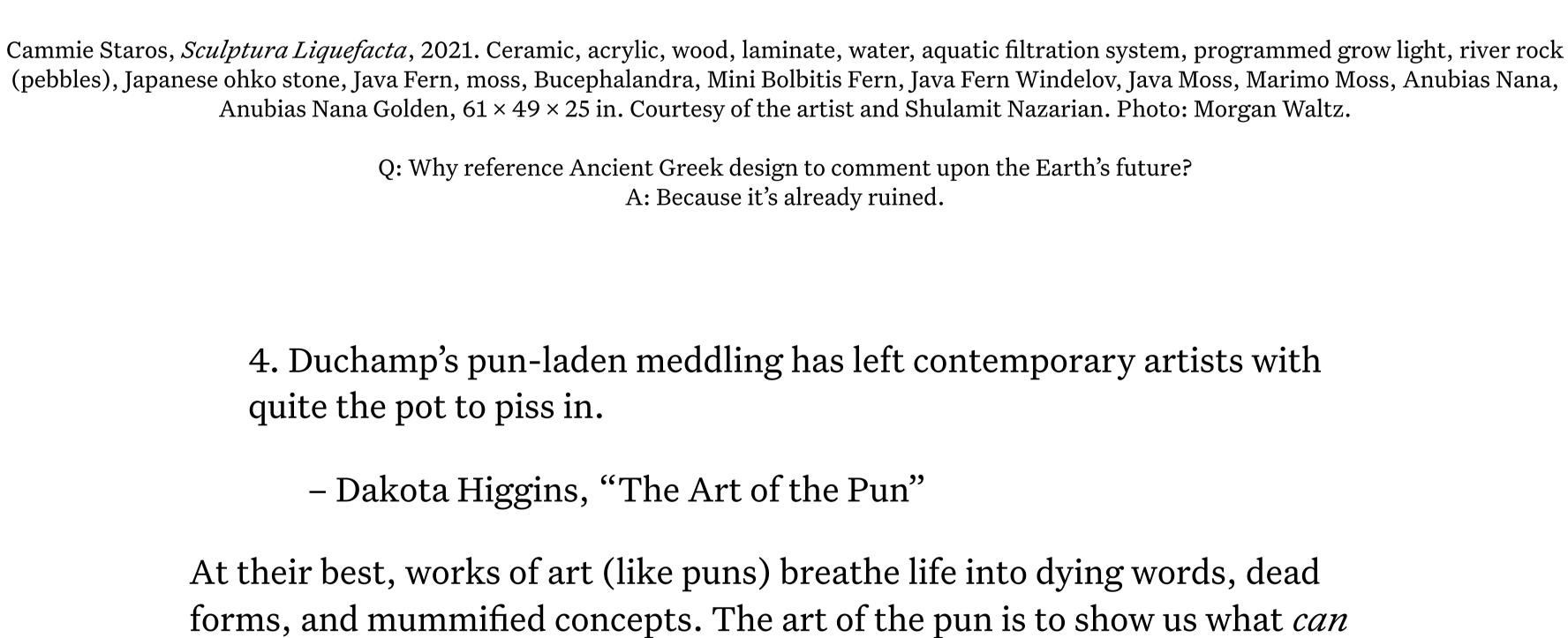
through," allowing artists to revisit the ghosts of (art) histories passed while succumbing neither to empty cliché nor point-less gesticulation. For example, Alex Olson's insistence on the brush stroke as both a material fact and a recognizable sign has resulted in several works that keenly pun

works as "shell pots," describing their form as a "cross-species analogy." As already-existing forms ("shell" and "pot") treated as found objects recontextualized by their ambiguous unification, how else is this analogy made but by the logic of the pun? The pun facilitates, furthermore, the ironic relationship between the shell pots—vessels that *should* hold water but *can't*—and the vitrines—vessels that *shouldn't* hold water but *do*. In true punning fashion, both the museumvitrine-cum-fish-tanks and "shell pots" ambiguate the uses and meanings of

implementation of a pun are not means unto themselves, but an opportunity

their forms. They demonstrate once more how the recognition and

to further consider the pun's constituent elements. In this case, puns advance the exhibition's metaphors regarding the nonhuman Earth, Classical Western culture, and rising water, activating them with greater depth, formal nuance, and play.



referenced clichés, dressing them up with clever craft? To this charge, Duchamp may have responded, in a word: "Sélavy." X Dakota Higgins is an artist, writer, and musician based in Los Angeles. He runs the experimental music venue, The DMV, LA (aka The Departure from Music Venue[s]).

be said by exploring the potential of what has *already been* said, surprising

and spoken) that we use every day. Is this to suggest that good art is but a

bad joke, a game to see who can create the most compellingly cross-

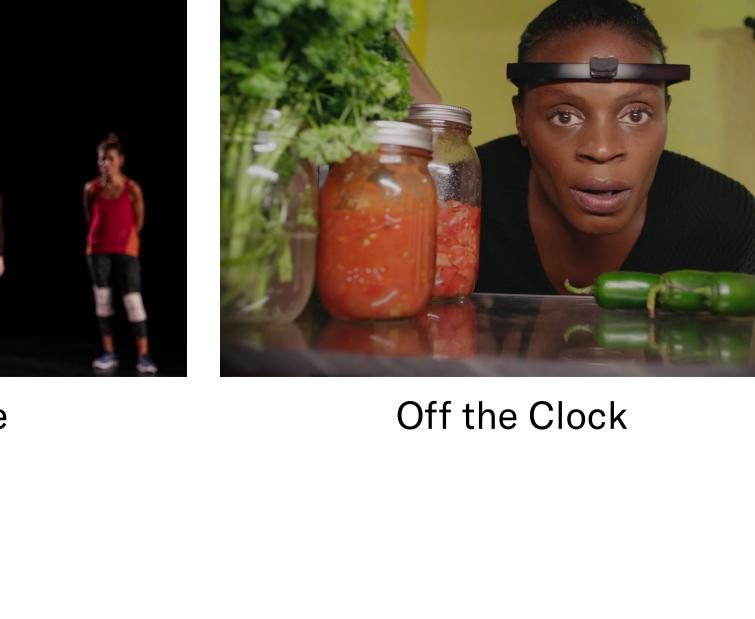
us by slyly confounding the given conventions of the languages (both artistic

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