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ISSUE 57
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Sting in the Tale

Art, Hoax, and Provocation

Book Review
H.R. HYATT-JOHNSTON

ANTOINETTE LAFARGE, NEW MEDIA ARTIST, WRITER, AND PROFESSOR OF ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE, HAS ASSEMBLED A ROLLICKING FORAY INTO THE SPHERE OF FICTIVE ART. IT IS PRESIDENTIAL READING IN THESE TIMES OF FAKE NEWS, FABRICATION AND DISINFORMATION.

STING *in the* TALE Art, Hoax, and Provocation



Antoinette LaFarge

Antoinette LaFarge's *Sting in the Tale: Art, Hoax, and Provocation* is a thought-provoking analysis into the realms of fictive art. LaFarge uses "parafact" for fiction "too strange not to be real," though it has also been called "superfiction" by Scottish-Australian artist and writer Peter Hill and "parafiction" by US theorist Carrie Lambert-Beatty. LaFarge's fictive art challenges what we believe when we realise that we have been deceived.

This genre is not just about art per se but embraces the disciplines of science, anthropology, archaeology, philosophy and literature to name a few. LaFarge illustrates this throughout the book with examples from history and the contemporary world. It raises many questions regarding how we see the truth, what we believe and how we understand and relate to the real, and navigate the unreal.

The book is divided into six sections covering "invented artists," "speculative history," imagined "institutions and movements," fictional "science and taxonomic inventions," "culture jamming," and fake news.

Inevitably, there are crossovers but all the personae, astonishing beings, and fabled or fake institutions challenge the accepted norms, beliefs and assumptions about our culture. Initially, I was surprised at some of the omissions. I was sure US sculptor Charles Simonds's *Dwellings* for imaginary "Little People" that have been installed throughout the world over decades would have been included, as well as the French art duo Anne and Patrick Poirer's "cities of memory," but then I was entranced by those I hadn't been aware of or considered in that way. It was also surprising to find so many examples from Australia. *Sting in the Tale* is extensively researched, clearly written, and is an impressive journey of revelation and rediscovery.

Many of the examples are familiar, but when contextualised in this book prompt an alternate awareness, as one considers the ramifications of blurring the lines between belief and doubt. The "pseudo-archaeology," for instance, of Erich von Däniken's book *Chariots of the Gods*,

1968, argues that the remains of ancient constructions from previous civilisations are the result of extra-terrestrial visitations. This sort of rationalisation, as LaFarge suggests, could also have been used in Heinrich Schliemann's search for Troy. That is until its discovery, because until then Troy had existed only in myth.

The use of pseudonyms in literature has long been used for those wanting to conceal their identity in order to have a voice or alter ego. Mary Ann Evans used the pen name George Eliot to disguise her gender. A contemporary example of this is J.K. Rowling using initials instead of her first name, allegedly as a marketing device, to attract young male readers. In the visual arts alter egos have long been used, though as LaFarge points out this can get "elided" in artists' histories. A good example is Marcel Duchamp's "Rose Sélavy," which was actually a collective pseudonym or multonym and shared with the French surrealist Robert Desnos. It is a device that can result in differing receptions ranging from admirable appreciation to being seen as a deceitful abuse of trust, as experienced by Australian writer Helen Demidenko (now Dale) with *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, 1994 – perhaps suggesting that false claims of ethnicity might be a step too far.

In 1989, the *Museum of Contemporary Ideas* was "created" by Peter Hill complete with generous backing from billionaire benefactors and based in New York City. Official looking press releases were sent out to major media organisations and various art magazines throughout the world creating excitement about this new museum. So much so that the German magazine *Wolkenkratzer* published an article in October 1989 about the museum not realising that it was a fiction. Hill's project, which is ongoing and ever evolving, is the blueprint for how to create future superfictions.

Recently, Comedy Central's satirical program *The Colbert Report*, 2005-2014, is an example where Stephen Colbert's conservative talk show persona managed to exert enough cultural influence to establish a real political action committee (PAC). The committee reportedly raised over

“ It raises many questions regarding how we see the truth, what we believe and how we understand and relate to the real ”

a million dollars, thus highlighting the loopholes in the laws that were designed to regulate political donations but instead enabled their exploitation. The project illustrated that the longer the artifice can be maintained the more it can insinuate itself into the culture.

LaFarge cites various examples where opaque “specialist jargon” has been used to provide sufficient cover in order to appear genuine and infiltrate particular groups whilst actually critiquing them. US culture jamming activists The Yes Men (created by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos) are a good example of this strategy. In 2007, they convincingly impersonated ExxonMobil and National Petroleum Council representatives at a Canadian oil industry conference. Another example used by LaFarge are the Australian poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart, who created the poet and artist Ern Malley in 1943. McAuley and Stewart did this in response to what they considered to be the pretentiousness of the modernist movement favoured by the editor of the journal *Angry Penguins* (1940-1946), the surrealist poet Max Harris. The “discovered” improvised freeform poems of Malley’s found after his “death” were published by Harris but later exposed as a fiction. Presently, we have the far-right conspiracy movement QAnon, reality television, and the now-ubiquitous influencers all operating in varying ways, illustrating that the “trickster spirit” can “morph” into something far more damaging, undermining the roles perception and doubt play in society.



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Fictive artists and their various realisations remind us not to place too much on face value. Story telling is important whether it is fabled, fairy tales, or fact. All have lessons to be considered. LaFarge indicates that if no one reflects on these misunderstandings and misdirections, then the role of fictive art has failed. Trust is needed in societies but there must be room for questioning conventions, perceptions and doubt.

In mass media, “culture jamming” isn’t new. The competition to control information with propaganda, misinformation and derision has been used by all sides throughout history – but now it has a global reach. ■

Sting in the Tale: Art, Hoax, and Provocation

Antoinette LaFarge
DoppelHouse Press, Los Angeles (2021)
ISBN 978-1733957953
Paperback 432pages

AUD \$89.99

01 Antoinette LaFarge, photographed by Kyle Welker

Courtesy the author and DoppelHouse Press, Los Angeles