

Wayne Koestenbaum
**Lounge Act at
Thek Lounge**

01/13

Transcript of a performance, given on Sunday evening, 9 p.m., November 20, 2016, during the “Avant Museology” conference at the Walker Art Center. Thek Lounge was presented by Bureau des Services sans Spécificité, Geneva, with Adam Linder, Shahryar Nashat, and Sohrab Mohebbi. Koestenbaum performed piano miniatures (Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Schumann, Fauré, Milhaud, Antheil, Poulenc, Diamond, and Persichetti), while incanting spontaneous Sprechstimme-style soliloquies. Koestenbaum’s words – improvised on the spot for the occasion – streamed in correspondence with the musical phrases in the score.

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start shortly ...

[ambient music]

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start shortly ...

Please welcome Mr. Wayne Koestenbaum to the Thek Lounge.

We appreciate your hushed attention and look forward to serving you drinks during the intermission.

Wayne Koestenbaum: Thank you, Sohrab Mohebbi, for giving me the idea for being a lounge actor and for bringing me to Minneapolis. I owe you everything.

To strike a funereal and melancholy note: I want to dedicate this performance to the memory of David Antin, whose talk poems were the direct inspiration for my act. I can’t claim to touch the hem of the great David Antin, but it’s in his spirit that I wish to embark tonight.

The music that I will be playing for you tonight is entirely scripted – classical music by dead people – but the words that I speak (and somewhat sing) are improvised. Some schtick is honed at home. But most is spontaneous.

The point of this exercise, in this somewhat autumnal phase of my life, is to feel more alive. And I feel more alive if I’m improvising. So thanks for tolerating improvisation. My aim is pedagogic: in case you don’t have enough improvisation in your life, let me influence you to have a little more.

O piano, my first love.

This first little piece is by Robert Schumann. My father, who was born in Berlin in 1928, would never allow us to give him gifts. The only gift he would allow us to give him was marzipan.

[singing]

marzipan, marzipan,
no one likes to eat marzipan

why did my father
ask us to give him marzipan?

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perhaps because in Berlin
before the Nazis were fully in power
my father's grandfather had a candy factory
maybe the candy factory made marzipan

the Jews need marzipan
like a hole in their head
they need marzipan
sweet amidst sorrow

clouds of sorrow
are already arriving here

[speaking]

I'm in a deep state of oedipal regression,
always; and so I'm thinking about 1963. The
whole show is about 1932, 1963, and 2016. Here
is more Schumann –

[singing]

when I was ten years old I fell in love with
my best friend's balls
I fell in love with his testicles

and then his mother made us Swedish
pancakes
she made us cube steak

I idolized cube steak because it was
partitioned
I idolized cube steak because it came in
bits

Melanie Klein says
the ego is in bits if you're psychotic

or if you're in the bathroom with your friend
before a course of Swedish pancakes and
cube steak

my friend gave me a bottle of crème de
menthe
I first tasted inebriation in the bathroom
with my best friend's balls
when his mother gave us cube steak
for the pleasure of the modernist grid

I am a sucker for the grid in any guise
I need symmetry

[speaking]

Why do straight men want to hang around
me?

That's a topic I'm going to handle in the
second part of the program. For now I'm going to
stick to 1963 and more sexual adventures related
to food. Schumann advised me:

[singing]

when I was five I played doctor with Kim
and then her mother drove us to a
restaurant

somehow exhibitionism and restaurants
are twinned

also fetishism and any kind of perversion
you can name
they all come in a "basket of deplorables"

I stripped with my friend Kim in the
bathroom
then her plain mother Joyce drove us to the
smorgasbord

all you can eat
at the smorgasbord
and then you have guilt feelings
about your oppression of Kim

[speaking]

The temperament of this evening is
influenced by German Romanticism. I swallowed
German Romanticism whole, like a fish bone, and
I'm trying to do the Heimlich maneuver with
American 1930s "pederastic" music. This next
piece is by David Diamond, from 1935. Even his
obituary in the *Times* said that he was a very
unpleasant man. But I imagine being at his death
bed:

[singing]

touching a dying man's nipples
can be instructive
if the man needs an escort to go down to
hell
if that man is David Diamond
who made enemies in his life in Manhattan
my goal is to touch his nipples
and bring him solace
and a day pass to hell

if you have powers in your hands to touch
any dead man's or dying man's nipples
spread your wealth, spread your spirit
through random gropes of the near dead

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and the living

I believe in public and inappropriate
displays of affection
in the style of the Mineshaft circa 1980
when Foucault haunted those halls
and Hervé Guibert – oh Hervé
I wish I could touch your nipples
the moment before you died
as if it would do some good

[speaking]

Most of the aesthetic platform that I've
rested upon in my life ended a week ago,
unfortunately. Some of us don't need to rethink
our aesthetics, but I need to rethink mine.

A week ago I would have said that I thought
that separated roses on a rosebush were more
beautiful than joined roses, but I'm reconsidering
... [starts playing piano] Here is Darius Milhaud:

[singing]

does a separate rose on its bush
have aesthetic autonomy
as Adorno said it might?
ask Adorno after palpating his nipples

ask Adorno while palpating his nipples
is a separate rose as beautiful as a joined
rose?
are three roses better than one?
three roses are a symbol of Lesbian Nation
oh Jill Johnston
may I be court jester for Lesbian Nation

let's bring back organizations like the
Mattachine
we think we've transcended earlier gender-
revolutionary gestures
but now in a time of crisis
it's necessary to rethink the communist
communitarian impulse
and stop being a fetishist of lone things

stop the Adorno mode
stop the Adorno love of opacity
stop worshipping difficulty
join forces with others
and don't sit blindly
sick rose on your bush
a bush that has no land

[speaking]

I got lost there – I was planning to go from
Lesbian Nation to Gertrude Stein and roses.
Gertrude Stein seemed to stand for the solitary

rose, but then she went triplicate on us with *a
rose is rose is a rose*. Sameness, tautology, and
repetition lead us away from the monadic state
that my early love of cube steak stuck in me. One
bubble per grid.

Now I'm going to speak-sing a piece. None
of these pieces have words originally. These are
piano miniatures: salon music for young people.
Here is a piece by Vincent Persichetti. He was a
rather punitive guy, I hear. He ran Juilliard for
awhile – the composition department – and
wrote an influential book on twentieth-century
harmony, trying to justify the contortions of
tonality, post-Schoenberg, but fitting them right
back into the tonal system. You can hear the
energy, maybe the pointless energy, of trying to
fit dodecaphonic, anarchic elements into the old
grid. He was a scary pedagogue, so I dedicate
this song to all the scary pedagogues.

[singing]

if you love scary pedagogues
perhaps you're Hannah Arendt in the bower
the bower of the Hochschule
and there is Marty Heidegger with his
mutton chops beckoning you
oh he is scary but he might reveal
the secrets of being and time
and how somehow the banality of evil
will get you out of the dodecaphonic prison

what do you think about the banality of evil
today
with Donald Trump around
not banal
yet sometimes I'm afraid that I'm a mere
functionary
I'll stop cooperating right now
stop cooperating now
forego banality
join forces with *The Origins of
Totalitarianism*
gotta read that book
you've all gotta read it
what are the origins of totalitarianism
do the origins reside in the hands of Marty
Marty Heidegger played by Ernest Borgnine

Ernst Borgnine – the German version of
Marty
starring Ernst the Oscar-winner

he played a working-class lout
the Academy loves the working class
every other year
when they're not awarding a statue to
aristocrats

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[speaking]

Some scenes you never return from the morbid imagining of, like the love song of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, even if you know that neither the task of universal good nor the project of demolishing evil (including current evil) will be moved ahead a millimeter by morbid fantasies. I need to figure out what to do with my treasured, honed perversity and the tradition (from the Marquis de Sade through Genet, Hervé Guibert, and Foucault) that celebrates perversity and finds revolutionary seeds in it. What will you do with those seeds right now? Are they stale in the hand? Will perversity help us now? I need to return to the origins of my perversity – exhibitionism – and to think again about 1966:

[singing]

on our block
there was a bully named Mack
he had me strip
in the backyard
and then he promised
that he would show me the picture
of his drunk mother
when she was a psychology student at UC Berkeley
before she was a lush in butterfly glasses
and a muumuu

if I'd strip he'd show me the picture
of his mother in her glamour era before she
descended
to muumuu abjection

Mack asked, why is your penis so big?
and I said, it isn't big until
I take off my pants
then it gets big

but is size a bribe
to extort a pervert's glimpse
of that photo of his mother before she was
a drunk?

and why do I want to see
a photo of an alcoholic woman
before she was a drunk

when she was studying object relations?

[speaking]

That piece was by George Antheil. Thank you. Two more quickies from Robert Schumann.

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My painting studio is right down the hall from Visual AIDS, an organization I love and support and praise. I had a funny encounter with a young man who worked there. Very sweet. He ended up going to divinity school. He said, I want to write about your book for my blog. And then he came to me afterwards and said, I'm really sorry but

[singing]

your book isn't AIDS-y enough for my blog

that is understandable
I know that my account
of AIDS won't be quite the account that
your blog needs

and yet I remember 1983
I remember ARC and I remember GRID
I remember kiss-ins on Christopher Street
and I remember fear
I remember not getting tested

your book isn't AIDS-y enough for my blog

[speaking]

Back quickly, if you have the patience, to food. Schumann again:
[singing]

I'm thinking about my mother's tuna melt
she ate it at the counter
at Stickney's Restaurant alone

nothing more poignant than a tuna melt
I have a repetition compulsion

I loved my mother's tuna melt
and I savor its abjection

I have a death wish and a repetition
compulsion
and a love of tuna melts
of the past

[speaking]

Tuna melts, tuna melts. Let me tell you about a dream I had. A shaman was giving a performance. He was very tall, and he was wearing just a thong. He was almost nude, and there was one thing very strange about his body, which I'll describe to you in this Chopin mazurka.

[singing]

that shaman had a penis coming out

Réplique

L'istesso tempo

The musical score for 'Réplique' is written for piano in 3/4 time. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 1-5) begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The right hand starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a four-measure phrase marked with a '4'. This is followed by a *pp* section with the instruction 'un poco con grazia'. The piece concludes with a *ritenuto* section. The second system (measures 6-11) continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system (measures 12-15) includes a first ending marked '1.' and a second ending marked '2.' with the instruction 'poco ritenuto'. Handwritten annotations 'Al niente' are present above the first ending and 'Niente' above the second ending. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingering numbers (1-4).

Sphinxes

No. 1

Musical notation for 'Sphinxes No. 1' in bass clef, showing a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

No. 2

Musical notation for 'Sphinxes No. 2' in bass clef, showing a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

No. 3

Musical notation for 'Sphinxes No. 3' in bass clef, showing a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

of his right hip
his only penis came out of his hip
he had a super penis
but it came from the wrong place
he was like Dionysus born from the hip of
Zeus

what can I do with the dream of the
shaman?

can I manipulate his penis
even though it's only a dream penis?

can I transfigure myself –
can I transfigure this moment
by thinking about that third penis
like the penis in Alice Neel's painting?

you must know that painting by Alice Neel
of Joseph with three penises
Joseph has three penises
it's a symbol of social conflict
in 1930 in New York –
communism

Marxist cells on the Lower East Side
led to three penises

I dreamt about a shaman
who had a strange growth on his side
and I'll use that dream to navigate
nothingness

[speaking]

Try it. Does no good. That trick worked two
weeks ago. Doesn't work now. The trick is to
reimagine the genitals and find your way to a new
world. Genitals are getting a bad name these
days. Certainly the penis is. But I've always been
committed to undermining the penis by
complicating it. It's a dreadful sign, and it's also
a symbol of the president-elect's moral
decrepitude and abusive behavior. I saw a sign in
New York that said, "I'm Sorry," and then " –
Men." Men should apologize – that is the mood.
But I'm also thinking about Paul Thek. He knew
about Nixon; he knew about Goldwater. So this
one's for Paul Thek, who communicated to me
last night. Here is a Poulenc "Improvisation":

[singing]

Paul Thek communicated to me
he asked for a tube of Vaseline in the grave

bring me a tube
I am dead and I miss my unguents

Paul Thek
needs a tube of Vaseline

I will go down to hell with Vaseline
I'll help Paul
I'll lubricate Paul in hell
I hope he isn't busy
like Sisyphus
or all those sodomites
in that circle of hell
dedicated to a sodomitical population

Paul Thek painted the skyline –
he became a painter
after his meaty phase –
he became French
after making sculptures like that hunk of
meat
you see in the back of this room

he regressed
he became a painter of landscapes
he escaped into the French image-
repertoire of the liquid –
things oceanic
watery and gleaming
like Mallarmé

write yourself into a corner
write yourself into nothingness

being oceanic is nothing
and that's what Paul Thek was escaping
when he became a landscape painter again

not because he thought
painting was revolutionary

but he needed moisture in the underworld
Paul Thek needed moisture
he has dry lips
from kissing Chopin and Poulenc in hell
it's a gang bang for musical and artistic and
poetic men
they find a way to penetrate each other
in the afterworld –
fun to imagine

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how does bringing a tube of Vaseline
lubricate the revolution we need now?
I'll bring a tube of Vaseline
to the bonfire of America

[speaking]

A long time ago, before many of you were
born, or when you were not yet pubescent, I
made a mistake at a conference. I made the
Sylvia Plath mistake: Daddy equals Führer. I
don't think I truly made that mistake, but I was
accused of it. I understand that kind of
accusation. I indulge in a slippery, liquid mode:
skidding via the signifier wherever I want, or
wherever the linguistic cesspool that I am – that
I embody – takes me. I trust that cesspool, and I
glide on it as far as I can, in the interests of you
all.

It's not my language that I'm sampling, it's
yours. It's *language*. I don't own it. Back to my
Germanic Prussian origins and the way I was
raised: I don't know if any of you know the
Wilhelm Busch book *Max and Moritz*. It's about
two troublemakers. I'm going to think about Max
and Moritz in these last two numbers before
intermission. These pieces are by Robert
Schumann, whose madness was love of the
same – repetition compulsion. He was haunted,
as he grew mad, by the note A – it was an
auditory hallucination he could not escape. You
can hear it in the pieces he wrote when he was
practically a baby. They re-circle around one
note, like Terry Riley's *In C*. For Schumann it was
In A, which was being in hell.

I feel deeply, as we all do, the wound of the
planet – the gash in the planet experienced last
week, an ongoing gash in a ruined planet whose
doom seems even more sealed. As human
beings, we're all complicit with the "human turn,"
and so it is incumbent on me – I've learned this
mostly from younger people – to think about
things, plants, animals. When I was a kid,

[singing]

I killed my pets
I killed my pet turtle and my goldfish
I flushed them down the toilet
my father was complicit

my father pushed them
my father wanted to clean the turtle bowl
so he said let's throw them in the toilet
then we flushed it
we flushed poor turtle down the toilet

we flushed turtle
we flushed goldfish

we flushed nonhuman things down the tube

we killed my pets
I'm not celebrating their death
I can't celebrate the death of those animals
and yet I am guilty
of their extermination

[speaking]

Finally, another dream. I was left alone in a
library – maybe the Bibliothèque Nationale –
with a rabbi and a wooden nipple. Here is
Schumann:

[singing]

I was left alone with a rabbi and a wooden
nipple
the rabbi said interpret the nipple
try to knock on its wood
interpret the nipple's wood
can you interpret the nipple?
if you don't interpret, you'll be sentenced to
death
death comes to those who don't interpret
the wooden nipple

you must interpret the wooden nipple's
obdurate refusal to give language and milk

oh dear rabbi please forgive my
interpretation
my non-interpretation of the recalcitrant
nipple

what nipple?
what did the nipple mean?
can I help myself by interpreting a wooden
nipple?

maybe the rabbi is Walter Benjamin
maybe the rabbi can teach me to interpret
the crossroads on which we stand
and turn the crossroads into
incandescence

can we turn these horrible crossroads into
revolution
as Benjamin advised us
in the manuscript that was in his briefcase
when he tried to cross the Pyrenees
and he said Wayne please interpret that
wooden nipple
in the Bibliothèque Nationale
try to hold the manuscript for safekeeping

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then you will become a posthumous star
everybody will try to learn about the
revolution by perusing your case
as if your case could help
but what about that wooden nipple
what can I learn by interpreting
the nipple
the nipple can give a simulacrum
of Midrash

[speaking]

Take twenty – take ten – minutes to get
more booze, and then there will be a shorter
section, which will involve your participation.

[intermission]

Recorded voice: The Lounge Act will start
shortly ...

[ambient music]

Recorded voice: Please welcome Mr. Wayne
Koestenbaum back to the piano.

Koestenbaum, speaking: My gratitude to
you for your hushed attention during the first
part knows no bounds, because I had, as one
would, many panicked moments in the last few
weeks anticipating what this Skyline Room
adventure would be like. I imagined a horde of
people paying absolutely no attention, which was
itself a kind of bliss. Art is nourished by nobody
paying attention to it. But having the luxury of
your attention was unforecasted and deeply
pleasurable.

Now we're really going to regress. I'll play a
slightly longer piece by Rachmaninoff, from his
Moments Musicaux. He was always pre-October,
but this piece is January, I think, in terms of
inching toward the revolution. This piece is a
gorgeous dirge. I've been thinking about the
origins of fetishism – the usefulness of fetishism
– fetishism's connection to imperialism:

[singing]

when I was a kid
Mr. Baer gave me his stamp collection
Mr. Baer met me at a cello concert
he had heard that I was a stamp collector
he wanted to enlarge my collection
he understood the joy of accretion
he was eighty years old
would he be a pedophile in some
jurisdictions
or am I reading too much into an innocent
act
of generosity?

I never thanked Mr. Baer for his stamp
collection
most of the generous people in the world
aren't adequately thanked for their largesse
we take it for granted that they will look

out for our desires

I wanted to expand my collection to be
alphabetized
from Abu Dhabi to Zululand
to be a stamp collector is to be a miniature
imperialist
oh all the stamps were celebrating the
remaining colonies

French colonies had the most beautiful
stamps
Eastern Europe's stamps were drab
nothing more drab than East Germany
East German stamps typified
the demise of art under communism
or so I was taught by the *Weekly Reader* and
Scholastic books

but stamp collecting
paved the way to libraries
collecting books is a form of amassing
a wall against death
and change in the troops

can you hear the troops
marching into our country?
imagine the troops marching in
and you have no
inside or outside

the martial instincts that make up Russian
music
at its most romantic are part of the system
you're trying to flee in pain

how can we resolve this conflict?
can we collect without appropriating
and without destroying?
is there an innocent conquest?

can you take over and introject
without violence?
can a ten-year-old's
stamp collection contain the violence of
imperialism?

[speaking]

If you've laid most of your cards politically in
the fetishism pile, where can you go with
fetishism? My fetishism was a stamp collection
from Abu Dhabi to Zululand. Doesn't look good.
But we're going to die soon. And I'm not going to

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be cremated. I'm thinking now of a slightly more aesthetically revolutionary Russian, Alexander Scriabin. Here's a little prelude by Scriabin.

[singing]

what shoes do you want to wear in the grave?
do you want to wear Gucci?
does it matter which shoes you wear when you're exhumed?

if you were to exhume Oscar Wilde from Père Lachaise
would he be wearing shoes by Aubrey Beardsley?
or does it matter what Oscar's wearing?

Oscar worked for *Women's World*
but then he went to prison

imagine – in one year
the greatest playwright in England can be in jail

it can happen overnight
when you're wearing opera pumps

[speaking]

And now a slightly longer piece. I'm tapping into the French image-repertoire, where a certain harmonic liquidity, embodied in the piano by increased arpeggiation and tonal uncertainty, somehow equals *le néant* – in a sexy way: the abyss is a beckoning, entropic, narcotic invitation. Don't know if that works! I hear that many of you have sipped some libations tonight. We've all taken hits from a drug that moves through Fauré – Gabriel Fauré, the underrated. Here is his first impromptu, when he was really a babe. As I play this piece, I think of liquid, but I also think about another great dead person:

[singing]

Liz Taylor made many movies
she made *Boom!* and *The Sandpiper*
and *Butterfield 8*

on the mirror she wrote
I will not sell my body
though you may look at me

in *Cleopatra* she says don't look at me
and then Monty Clift had an accident
driving home drunk from Liz's house

she reached her hand into Monty's mouth

she helped him breathe though his face was ruined
Monty's face was ruined
that's how he could play Freud
Monty as Sigmund Freud
with a ruined face

how can we use Liz now
as a posthumous talisman?
what would she think now?

does no good to think of Liz's opinion
remember she was married to a creepy senator

but think about Liz at the moment of AIDS
think of Liz and Rock
Hudson and then backtrack
to James Dean and all those boys

Liz is a heroic principle of survival
she survived her tracheotomy and had a scar on her throat
in *Cleopatra* you can see the scar on the Queen of the Nile's throat

Liz in *Cleopatra* has a gay son
who rides with her on a sphinx into Rome
and she says look at me and take strength from my cleavage

in my cleavage
lies the divide itself

and divided selves are better than one
we must, through the specular, divide our ego into parts

divide ourselves into the one who experiences analysis
and the one who performs analysis

how can you enjoy the spectacle and also analyze the spectacle
analyze the waters of forgetfulness

the waters of forgetfulness

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are washing over me

I'm watching Liz
in *Boom!* when she gets an injection

she symbolizes drugs and booze
there's something heroic in the way she
uses inebriants
she uses inebriants to open
her shamanic third eye

I'm now thinking about that shaman with an
extra penis

like Forrest Bess
who dug a hole
behind his testicles
in search of an end

you can have your orgasm
and the world's orgasm at once

if I drive a hole through my perineum
I will bring all of us into one orgasmic
moment

somehow Liz's boozing is equivalent to
Forrest Bess

Bess
Liz
Bess
Bess
Liz

unforgivable but necessary
these watery connections
unjustified by anything logical
but the dialectic works in strange ways

you must use metaphor
you must crossleave with metaphor
that boat

the Bridge of Sighs is over the boat
in which Paul Thek and Liz and Forrest Bess
are riding
Liz and Forrest Bess and Paul Thek are
riding

under the Bridge of Sighs
in search of the nadir of the world

[speaking]

I didn't have the presence of mind to lead
you on the trail of her scar – the tracheotomy
scar and the wound, but that's part of the trail
where we find Paul Thek, Forrest Bess, and Liz in
that unhappy gondola. Let's call it the drunken
boat.

And now the last song before the question-
and-answer period: I'm going to play a Chopin
mazurka.

You know I don't believe in the future. "No
future," as Lee Edelman once wrote. And to avoid
the future or any hope of futurity,

[singing]

I tied my tubes in St. Paul
before I arrived at The Walker

I tied my tubes in St. Paul
I found a rabbi
he tied my tubes

he tied my tubes and he gave me some
Midrash
he said, there's no future, you should just
sink

give up futurity
sink into lechery
sink into prostitution and fetishism
sink into sybaritic pleasures
forget the revolution
sink into the abyss
and retitle it *joy*

the planet is dying
a mazurka won't bring
our homeland back

and yet we sink into the absent future
I tied my tubes in honor of the dead

[speaking]

Okay. Four quick little numbers to end, and I
would love questions – nonhostile questions.
Because it's not about me, it's about the world.
So if you have a comment or a question, I'll
respond in a song.

Audience: What's the Midrash?

Koestenbaum: What's the Midrash that I
was offered? Or what *is* Midrash?

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Audience: What it is.

Koestenbaum: Okay. Here is a piece by Vincent Persichetti: "Dust in Sunlight, and Memory in Corners."

[singing]

I wasn't bar mitzvahed
so I don't know what Midrash really is
but I can tell you from Walter Benjamin
Midrash is to go into explanation
too deep for tears

to elaborate and into the labyrinth you go
you make of your confusion something
decorative
and you build a fellowship of interpreters
you build a community of those who
overread

you overread
you quibble about legalisms
and you say of the world
quibbling is a balance of power

you balance the power of God
you create theodicy, you justify the ways of
God to men
you defend some perfect world
by interpreting

you interpret acts of evil
and your Midrash reveals God's watching
God has a plan
if you can find it

[speaking]

Another question?

Audience: What's up with nipples?

Koestenbaum: Mmm! Thank you. This is a Scriabin prelude.

[singing]

here's the story about nipples
I like to complicate the simplest anatomical
facts
they are my locus

I choose an ungendered part of the body
both men and women
they and we all have a nipple unless it's
removed
in a surgical procedure

so said an internist

he found a third nipple
midway on my chest

and so I'm dreaming of thirds
and thinking that the normal nipple is in
twos
and what if there's a third

we must cling to the parts of the body
that are not binary
like the perineum
I would linger on the perineum
but the nipple is a nicer word

nipple is a nicer word
than perineum
but the perineum like the anus
is something that crosses the gender divide

the nipple gets a bad rap
it seems to be equated with a simplistic
maternity
we need to book a room in the nipple and
interpret it to death

[speaking]

Another Scriabin prelude, if you ask me a
question. Those were really amazing questions.
Or just make a statement.

Audience: Los Angeles.

Koestenbaum: Los Angeles.

... Oh, Los Angeles!

[singing]

today an Uber driver
told me that he wanted to move to Los
Angeles
if it's safe

he said he doesn't want to live in a place
that's dangerous
and why is LA dangerous?

I think that LA, like New York, is one of the
only places
that symbolizes
the free movements of the mind

that's deplorable chauvinism but
I'm addicted to the places that I can
mythologize
Gloria Swanson Sunset Boulevard
that's not the Los Angeles of skid row

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I could just sing a song for skid row
but that would be obscene
obscene to sing a song for skid row
skid row doesn't need my melody

but Scriabin worked so hard on his
accidentals
he thought that synesthesia
would be a metropolis
like Paris, capital of the nineteenth century
where this prelude
via its chromaticism
takes place

and Schoenberg in LA
is part of the deep dodecaphonic
underpinning of this harmonic resolution

[speaking]

And one more from the depth of my heart ...
no froth this time.

Audience: I feel like somebody missing
tonight is Bruce Hainley. I wonder if there could
be a way of summoning him.

Koestenbaum: That's great. Bruce Hainley's
an amazing writer who long ago was a student of
mine, when he was getting his PhD at Yale. He
was my first graduate student. And he's
endlessly inspiring to me. He lives in LA. He was
going to be here tonight, and we were going to
circulate cocktail napkins printed with poems
from his book, *No Biggie*. I love *No Biggie*. I also
love his first book of poems (this piece is by
Scriabin) –

[singing]

Foul Mouth

I have a foul mouth
once when I was a kid
I had my mouth washed out with soap

why am I bragging about having
a foul mouth?
foul mouth brings me into intimate touch
with the cesspool
I don't disavow the abject nature
of my language

to make a thing is to participate in shit
the cloacal is my home
I'm sewage –
sewage, baby

my thinking takes root in the nipple found
in the anus

the nipple of the anus
the foul is my home
at least linguistically

I need a little bit of filth
to understand that I have a land
filth is my aesthetic homeland
no more nation-states
but for a minute give me a metaphorical
homeland called filth
where I unite with the sublime

#

Thank you.

x

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Wayne Koestenbaum has published eighteen books of poetry, criticism, and fiction, including *Notes on Glaze*, *The Pink Trance Notebooks*, *My 1980s & Other Essays*, *Hotel Theory*, *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films*, *Andy Warhol*, *Humiliation*, *Jackie Under My Skin*, and *The Queen's Throat* (a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist). His next book of poems, *Camp Marmalade*, will be published in March 2018. He has had solo exhibitions of his paintings at White Columns (New York), 356 Mission (L.A.), and the University of Kentucky Art Museum. His first piano/vocal record, *Lounge Act*, was issued by Ugly Duckling Presse Records in 2017. He is a Distinguished Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and French at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.

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