



a year of positive thinking **mira schor**

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DECEMBER 15, 2016

M/E/A/N/I/N/G: The Final Issue on A Year of Positive Thinking-6

The first issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: A Journal of Contemporary Art Issues*, was published in December 1986. *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* is a collaboration between two artists, Susan Bee and Mira Schor, both painters with expanded interests in writing and politics, and an extended community of artists, art critics, historians, theorists, and poets, whom we sought to engage in discourse and to give a voice to.

For our 30th anniversary and final issue, we have asked some long-time contributors and some new friends to create images and write about where they place meaning today. As ever, we have encouraged artists and writers to feel free to speak to the concerns that have the most meaning to them right now.

Every other day from [December 5](#) until we are done, a grouping of contributions will appear on *A Year of Positive Thinking*. We invite you to live through this time with all of us in a spirit of impromptu improvisation and passionate care for our futures.

Susan Bee and Mira Schor

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Note to email subscribers: the videos in this post can only be viewed if you are online, they will not run in your email program.

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Noah Dillon

2016 was a very difficult year. Each day's news has been something horrifying, including intensifying effects from global warming, Syrian carnage, economic turmoil in Europe, refugee crises, authoritarianism in China and the Philippines, parts of Latin America suffering civil catastrophe. In the US, a white power presidency was voted into office. My cat and mom are dying, and a friend has terminal cancer. My sense of self continued to be a mess. I hurt people's feelings, and had my feelings hurt.

The day after the election, my friend Brian Dunning, who runs a science blog and podcast called *Skeptoid*, sent out a solicitation for donations. He wrote:

"From the election results, we can infer that about half the American population is (at worst) openly hostile to, or (at best) ignorant or dismissive of, these science facts:

- Anthropogenic global warming is real and a threat.
- Vaccines are important and do not cause autism.
- Gay conversion therapy does not work.
- Evolution is the scientific theory explaining the diversity of species."

I would, I think reasonably, add:

- Partial-birth abortions are a myth
- Trickle-down economics is magical thinking
- Trade is good and is not the cause of working class decline
- Crime and demographic data do not show white Americans under threat by black and brown youth, or a broad rise in crime generally

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- Immigration is an essential good
- Elections are rigged by statehouses and wealthy super PAC donors, not poor voters
- Authoritarian police states do not keep people safe from anything, least of all the state itself

One place I find meaning is in meaning itself. As far as I can tell, truth has been in a precarious civil position for a long time, with its value waxing and waning. Maybe cynicism and ideological closedness, rigidity, onanism are ascendant—they feel that way. Although it was most evident recently in the deluge of Trumpian trolling, this problem is pervasive on both the left and right: dissenting or even qualifying voices are suspected of being paid skills for George Soros or the Kochs, consensus is regarded as an oppressive imposition on personal freedom of disbelief, complex problems are constricted down into absurd dichotomies, the moral imperative to focus first on materially and spiritually enriching oneself reigns, and so on. These are huge problems!

(The president-elect seems to embody them perfectly: he is paranoid, believes in a completely alternate reality, speaks out of both sides of his mouth while wielding a club, and seems most interested in himself, while promising that each supporter's personal individual desires will be fulfilled. Although he played the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," his message on the campaign trail was that he will make it possible for people, certain people, to have everything they want. He is the vile man of our era.)

Reliable and true information is essential to a functioning democracy, and likewise the ability to openly, skeptically, systematically hear new information, test it, and accept it, reject it, qualify it, contextualize it, remain uncertain of it. That's really hard to do, and we've been encouraged to eschew it, or use it selectively. The insistence on meaning and truth, even in spite of its incompatibility with our beliefs, is really essential.

Agreement about facts ought to lead to moral policies and objectives. Moralizing in the absence of fact, conversely, I think, is tilting at windmills. There are some extremely difficult problems facing the world right at this moment. Really horrifying terrible problems. Only by knowing what they actually are—honestly—and openly approaching possible solutions, or at least mechanisms for harm reduction, can they be solved.

Knowing what the world is, and what its problems and solutions are, means a lot.



Photo by Davina Semo, 2016

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Felix Bernstein and Gabe Rubin

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