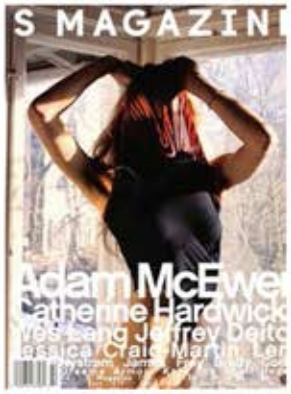

V is for Vital Signage

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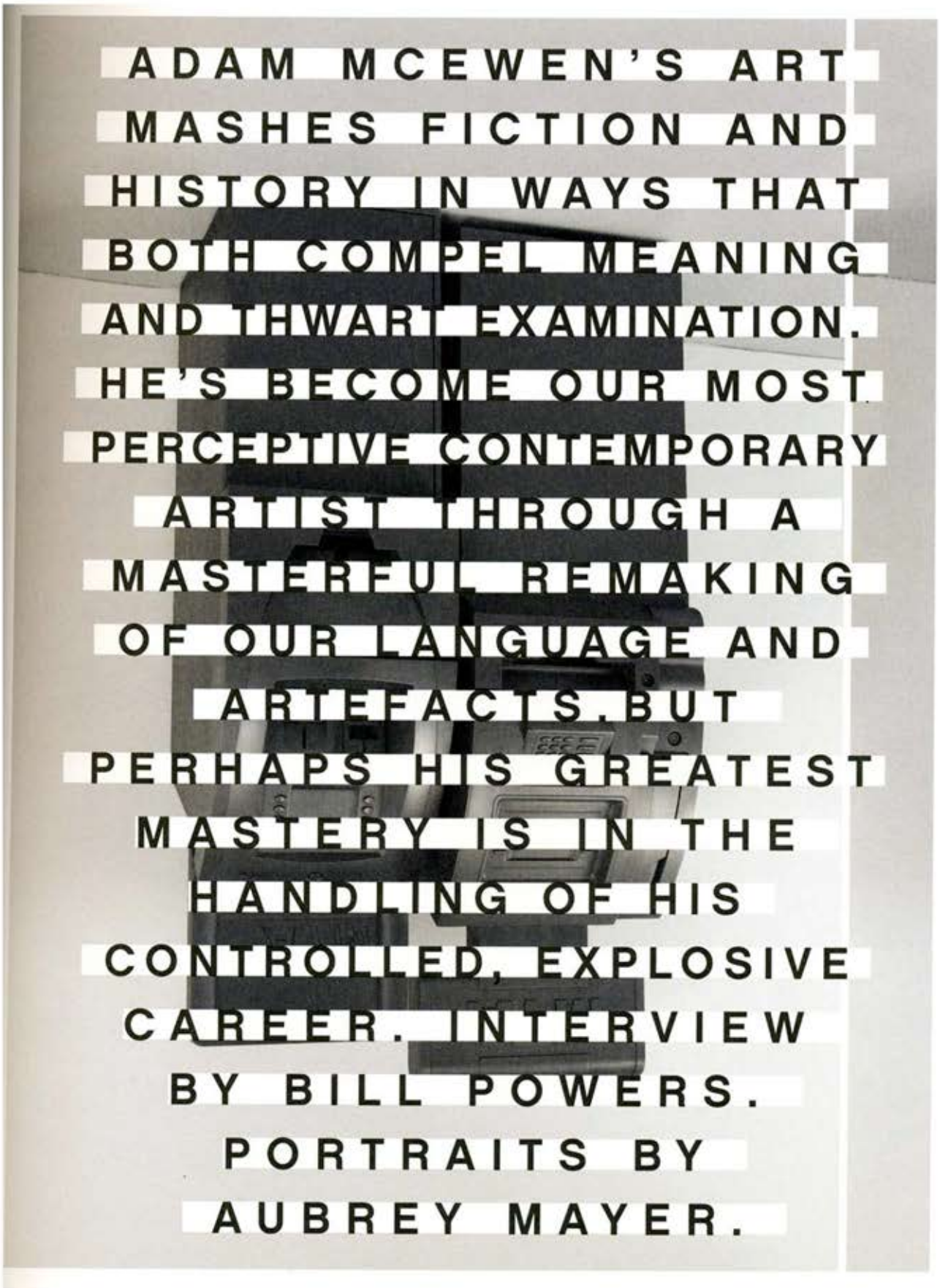

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It's strange, those bits in a person's biography – the odd job, the quirky relative – that become fodder on a late night chat show couch, but from the safe distance of success. And so more than any moment in his life, we might think back on artist Adam McEwen's days at Britain's *Daily Telegraph* in the 1990s, writing obituaries for the notable among us, some even not yet deceased. It's a common practice now to prepare remembrances for famous individuals – particularly the decrepit and out of control – before they actually die, so that newspapers are made ready for the imminent passing. In retrospect, this employment makes for a fun aside, but to think of him really sitting there, at a desk in an office, typing out tributes to the undead while his dreams risked withering on hold? One wants to speculate how dreary the undertaking was for McEwen, how hard it is to maintain the internal lie that we live forever when our days are spent measuring the hourglasses of others. Who then could have predicted that a short decade later he would turn that maudlin enterprise into some of today's most iconic contemporary art. It's like Rob Pruitt once said, when life gives you lemons, add vodka... and McEwen's distillations are a hundred and eighty proof.

Switching here from abstract material to the real world, one sees that graphite is a popular recurrence in McEwen's sculptural work. Of course, there's the obvious connection to the literary, but just because you own a pencil doesn't mean you're a writer, and so the medium must extend beyond word creation. A cursory refresher on graphite reminds us of its use as an electrical conductor and its relationship to coal, that dirty fuel of industrial revolutions. Perhaps the most striking pieces in his recent townhouse exhibition *A Real Slow Drag*, on New York's East 64th Street, were the oxymoronic graphite objects, uniformly cut off from their intended functionality: a yoga mat with no give, the bone-dry water fountain, some black hole of a mirror in the gallery's back office, or the safe never to be cracked. Even the picture frame stretcher bar in the foyer hung lifelessly without an image to support. Those already familiar with McEwen's store signs witnessed his continuing negation of services rendered, accounts accessed. What's more, viewers brave or foolish enough to attempt interaction with, say, his graphite ATM machines came away with filthy hands minus the soiled money, which is almost a Dadaist gesture. Then there's the oversized loose cigarettes leaning like towering tombstones or resting coffin flat on their backs. Rumour has it, they exist from an edition of twenty, as any good cigarette should. There's not a warning label in sight, but his obits abound as gentle reminders. Another day, another dollar, another smoke, another sext. It's not so much about broadcasting content; rather it's a question of delivery systems.

Bill Powers: The first time you and I met was about ten years ago, at a documentary screening in the old Gavin Brown space on 15th Street, for this Sly and The Family Stone movie.

Adam McEwen: It was a film I had produced for Showtime right after I came to New York, in June 2000. That was my first job here. A friend of mine worked for the *New York Times*'s television production company, which is how I became involved. We interviewed everyone in the band except for Sly, who was living in the valley at that point with twin sisters.

BP: Was your focus more on music or cinema back then?

AM: It was just a strange coincidence. I already had my plane ticket to come, but I needed a job, and didn't know how I'd pay the rent. Maybe I worked with the *New York Times* for about eight months, and then I got some weird offers to produce things like the VH1 Fashion Awards.

BP: And did you take them up on that?

AM: No, I decided the reason I moved here was to make art, so I worked at home for a while, and then I got a studio in TriBeCa on Murray Street.

BP: What was that first body of work like?

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AM: The signs: **"Sorry, We're Sorry", "Sorry, We're Dead", "Come In, We're Cunts", "Fuck Off, We're Closed".**

BP: Later on, were miniature versions of them at the Wrong Gallery?

AM: Yes, those four were in the window of the Wrong Gallery. Soon afterwards I did signs with names: "Sorry, Joan Didion", "Sorry, Ravi Shankar", "Come in, Keith Moon", which I've never really shown. Around then I was in a group show at Andrew Kreps with a sign that said, "Yes, We're Excerpts", which became the title for the show.

BP: And was that your official debut?

AM: I had already been in a drawing show at Greene Naftali the year before. They had a "Sorry, Joey Ramone" and "Sorry, Robert Smithson". In 2003, I was included in a show at Blum & Poe, and that got some attention. I had obituaries of Rod Stewart and Malcolm McLaren — just Xeroxes on the wall. That was the first time I'd shown them in America.

BP: Do you remember what your dreams were at that stage, of what life might become for you?

AM: Well, I was pretty old by that time, so I wasn't exactly doe eyed, but I knew it was a slow game. I didn't want to piss it away. I'd been around London in the early '90s.

BP: So you saw the rise of the whole YBA movement?

AM: I was at CalArts in '89, '90, but I came back for six months in the middle and met Damien Hirst, Liam Gillick, all those people. It was a tiny group of people. You could fill a pub with them. It was fun and unpredictable and inclusive.

BP: And was that a bit of a cautionary tale for you?

AM: Well, people were taking risks and having fun and it was great, but **ten years later, when I arrived in New York, I'd already seen people blow up or implode and I didn't want that for myself. I realized this was going to take some determination.**

BP: I've always thought that to make it in New York you have to have the right mix of determination and naïveté. If you knew how slim the odds of success are, you might not try in the first place.

AM: That's true, especially in the beginning. But as you get older, maybe it becomes determination — and determination. I had many reasons to think it wasn't going to happen for me. I had no career in 2000. For me, getting away from London was key. Those first signs that I made were very British, but I couldn't have made them in England.

BP: Probably for the same reasons that Robert Frank couldn't have made a road trip book about going cross-country in Switzerland.

AM: Maybe. I always forget he's Swiss. Some people come to New York to be autonomous. I certainly felt that level of freedom.

BP: You once told me that your father had a sculpture onboard the QE2.

AM: My dad was a musician in the late '50s and early '60s. He was a well-known folk singer and a very good twelve-string blues guitar player. He'd been to America and travelled all around and was on TV doing that. He was also a painter, mostly of botanical works. He died young, at 50. In the mid '60s to mid '70s, he made a lot of work involved with multiples, and he was into the geometric abstraction thing coming after Abstract Expressionism. By the time the sculpture you mentioned was commissioned, it was probably 1967. And it was

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a big wall sculpture. He was in shows in London and New York, and I've come across art magazines from the era with ads for his exhibitions. He had some kind of profile.

BP: Which I find interesting, that you're in some sense carrying on where he left off, no?

AM: I don't know. **I grew up with a lot of art around.** One of his best friends in the mid '60s was Jim Dine, who came to London quite often. In the '70s, he was very close to a painter called David Novros, who still lives in New York. I remember we had an Ed Ruscha drawing that my father had traded for with Ed, for one of his botanical paintings. So there was a lot of art around. **It was good in some ways but also maybe too much information or something.**

BP: Too much information for a young boy?

AM: Well, it was good at the time. Why not? But later, as an artist, maybe it sets up a scenario.

BP: And that scared you?

AM: Not so much fear, but it sets up rules. Maybe it becomes harder to identify your own private nutty road outside of those early influences. I'm not complaining. For me, it gets back to the importance of getting away from where I grew up. Something clicked here. **Nothing really changed when I came to New York, except everything changed, in this infinitesimal way, this tiny shift.** I was making text things in '89, '92. I studied English at university. I worshipped Bruce Nauman. As I said, there was Ed Ruscha, and I loved Christopher Wool's work. But some tiny thing shifted for me, and I make a text work that says, "Sorry, We're Sorry". And it's a text work I still like, whereas the stuff I'd made before wasn't quite right. **I needed a slight perspective on myself, combined with the diesel adrenaline of New York.**

BP: But the text works are an ongoing project, right? I saw a sign in John McWhinnie's office last year that said "We Are All Prostitutes".

AM: I'm not opposed to doing more signs, if I thought of a great one, but it doesn't feel necessary now. John asked me to do that sign as a sort of commission. We talked and laughed about it. The phrase comes from a classic punk T-shirt, and it was also the name of a Pop Group album. The image was of Margaret Thatcher flicking a V sign to the camera. John asked me to do it after he'd found all these great little '50s signs in a very particular blue and white. I took the blue he sent and used that in my "We Are All Prostitutes".

BP: So do you believe we are all prostitutes?

AM: Sure, why not. Better, I like the idea that you would *say* we're all prostitutes. I'm more interested in that headspace. There's a great Thomas Bernhard line where he talks about Zurich being a global brothel.

BP: I like to say that in any commercial exchange, they're all used cars, whether it be art, fashion, sex — anything you're selling.

AM: I think of it more in terms of a psyche. Commerce isn't the bit that interests me. Of course, there's a transactional implication, but I think about it differently. You can think about art without thinking about the selling of it.

BP: Then it isn't really *not* prostitution anymore. Isn't it just being a whore?

AM: When I think of the dilemmas or opportunities in a phrase like "We Are All Prostitutes", I go immediately to a personal headspace: how the person thinks about themselves, how they think about their family, lovers, or

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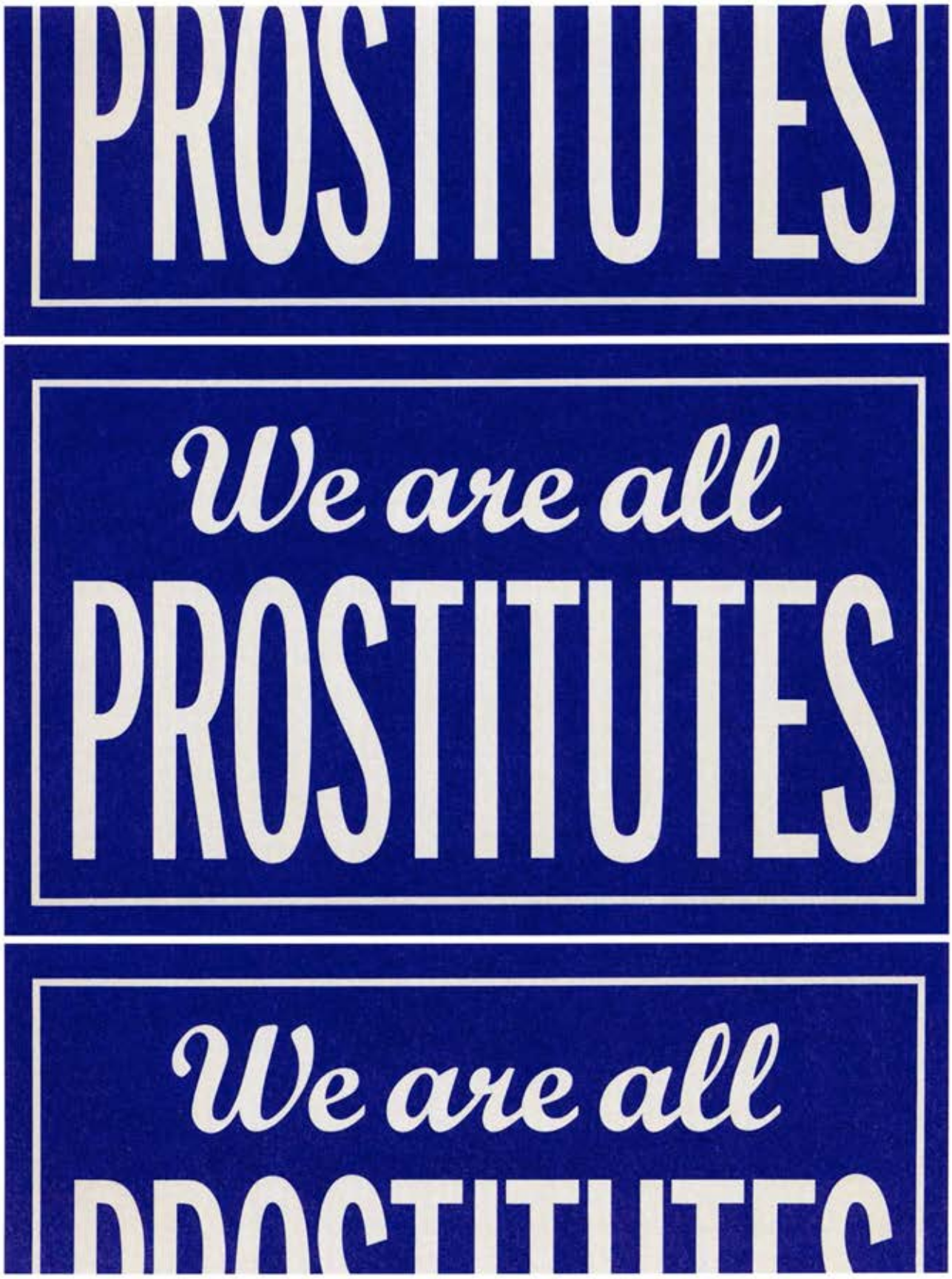

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friends, and how they relate to the world around them. **There's a messier, more indistinct area about selling out, betrayal, delusion, that intrigues me. Something less literal. I like that sign because it has sort of a bitter acidic truth to it.**

BP: As opposed to "Sorry, We're Sorry", which is more directed towards Americans' habit of empty apologies?

AM: Not at all. The signs are about denial of transaction in fact. They're saying, What if the world was unavailable to you? What if you're cut off from the world you live in? "Sorry, We're Sorry" is saying, I'm sorry, I can't even give you another word other than the word I've already given you, which is "sorry". It creates a closed circle of language, a closed loop. So then it's not a big stretch from there to imagine a sign that reads, "Sorry, We're Dead", which is even more unavailable, so unavailable that we're not even alive.

BP: And then you have others with names like "Sorry, Joan Didion" — whom, by the way, I saw at your *A Real Slow Drag* opening uptown.

AM: I've known her for a while, and she's always been very sweet and supportive.

BP: I've always treasured that first line of *The White Album*, "We tell ourselves stories in order to survive".

AM: It's a genius line.

BP: And the signs with names, how are they meant to operate?

AM: "Sorry, Ravi Shankar" is a kind of acknowledgment that we weren't able to carry out the promise of the '60s — that Ravi Shankar's hopes of how the west might understand Indian classical music may have been disappointed.

BP: Can we talk about your fake obituaries? I remember seeing them in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. I wondered what it felt like when one of the subjects actually died. Was Malcolm McLaren's passing the first time that that happened?

AM: I'm pretty sure Marilyn Chambers died the year before. I guess I was interested in the idea of an artwork that comes with its own sell-by date. Each obituary work of mine is guaranteed to become redundant, to self-destruct in a way. **I may not know a lot personally about Bret Easton Ellis or Jeff Koons or Kate Moss, but the one thing I know for sure is that they will die, at which point the obituary I made will be replaced by another one very much like it, a real obituary.**

BP: Is there something that attracts you to writers like Joan Didion or Bret Easton Ellis? Is it because your collegiate years stateside were spent in greater LA, their stomping grounds?

AM: It's more the melancholy they demonstrate in their writing. And no one can deny *American Psycho* as a contemporary masterpiece. It almost ruined his life.

BP: The newest obituaries you debuted in the Marianne Boesky exhibition were for Princess Stephanie of Monaco and that famous Burmese political prisoner.

AM: Aung San Suu Kyi is her name. I was aware of her from an early age because she was married to the brother of a friend of my dad's. To a young boy she seemed beautiful, smart, brave, dedicated — the whole thing. All of the obits are homages in one way or another. As with most of my work, they're about the difference — or rather, overlap — between fiction and history.

BP: Is that what your gum paintings are all about? Given that they're bombing grids?

AM: Walking around New York, you always see the remnants of gum on the sidewalk. And living here, you know

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there are people in the world that would love to bomb and flatten New York City. I was hoping to make the sense of abstract threat more tangible, more banal.

BP: I remember first seeing your gum paintings at a Nicole Klagsbrun show, where the invite was you dressed up as a major general.

AM: Yes, I made a photo, a self-portrait, as Air Marshall Arthur "Bomber" Harris. He was the man who perfected the technique of area bombing during World War II. As a kid at school in Britain, I was taught that he was a war hero. Later he became a controversial figure for his having pushed so hard to level all those cities, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. **For me, part of the process is about looking again at the history you're fed as a child, or thinking about the ways that things don't add up.**

BP: It's funny, because I don't think of you as a military artist in any way whatsoever, but there are several instances where the symbolism you employ harkens back to World War II, whether it's aerial view precision targeting or Bomber Harris or the Kilroy character.

AM: I used Kilroy on the announcement card for my Gagosian show in LA last November. I like it as a global export of pre-graffiti, almost hobo, art that went viral before we had such a term. There's no single owner of that image, and it's debatable what the meaning of it is.

BP: Since you can't tell whether Kilroy is hiding behind a wall or peeking out from over it, he remains an open question. Of course, you could project a level of menace, given that it's a tag done by soldiers. Yet there's a meekness to the character, almost a "who me?" quality.

AM: I like the way people frame the things they stand behind. I did some paintings of a German anti-nuclear power sticker from the '80s that says "Atomkraft? Nein danke" — Nuclear power? No thanks. The politeness of that sticker today seems fascinating, almost inexplicable.

BP: I laugh looking at your text messages now, because they have the outmoded option buttons on the screen, which were standard on like a circa 2001 Nokia phone. Even though texting is seen as a very modern invention, they've been instantly time-stamped by their platform.

AM: These were already dated when I made them. The messages are private shorthand for the way people speak and think.

BP: And some of the text is taken directly from strands of communication, correct? Didn't I hear that Nate Lowman or Leo Fitzpatrick forwarded to you messages they found entertaining?

AM: Many did. People were very generous; they had some crazy texts.

BP: I remember the uproar that your *Chicken or beef?* windows caused for the exhibition in East Hampton a few summers ago. You had frosted the windows the way businesses do when they've been shuttered, and I think John McWhinnie, the gallery owner, got some nasty calls from the chamber of commerce. It was also oddly prophetic given that the Great Recession was just two months around the corner.

AM: That was in August 2008. I put a painting of a foreclosure sign in the window. I'd read an article about young hedge fund guys not being able to pay for their new pads in the Hamptons. Yes, John got a lot of aggression. I think he loved it.

ADAM MCEWEN'S SOLO EXHIBITION WILL RUN FROM 13 APRIL TO 28 JULY 2012 AT DALLAS'S GOSS-MICHAEL FOUNDATION (WWW.GOSSMICHAELFOUNDATION.ORG). THE CATALOGUE FOR HIS 2011 EXHIBITION *A REAL SLOW DRAG* AT NEW YORK'S MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY IS FORTHCOMING FROM KARMA (WWW.KARMAKARMA.ORG).

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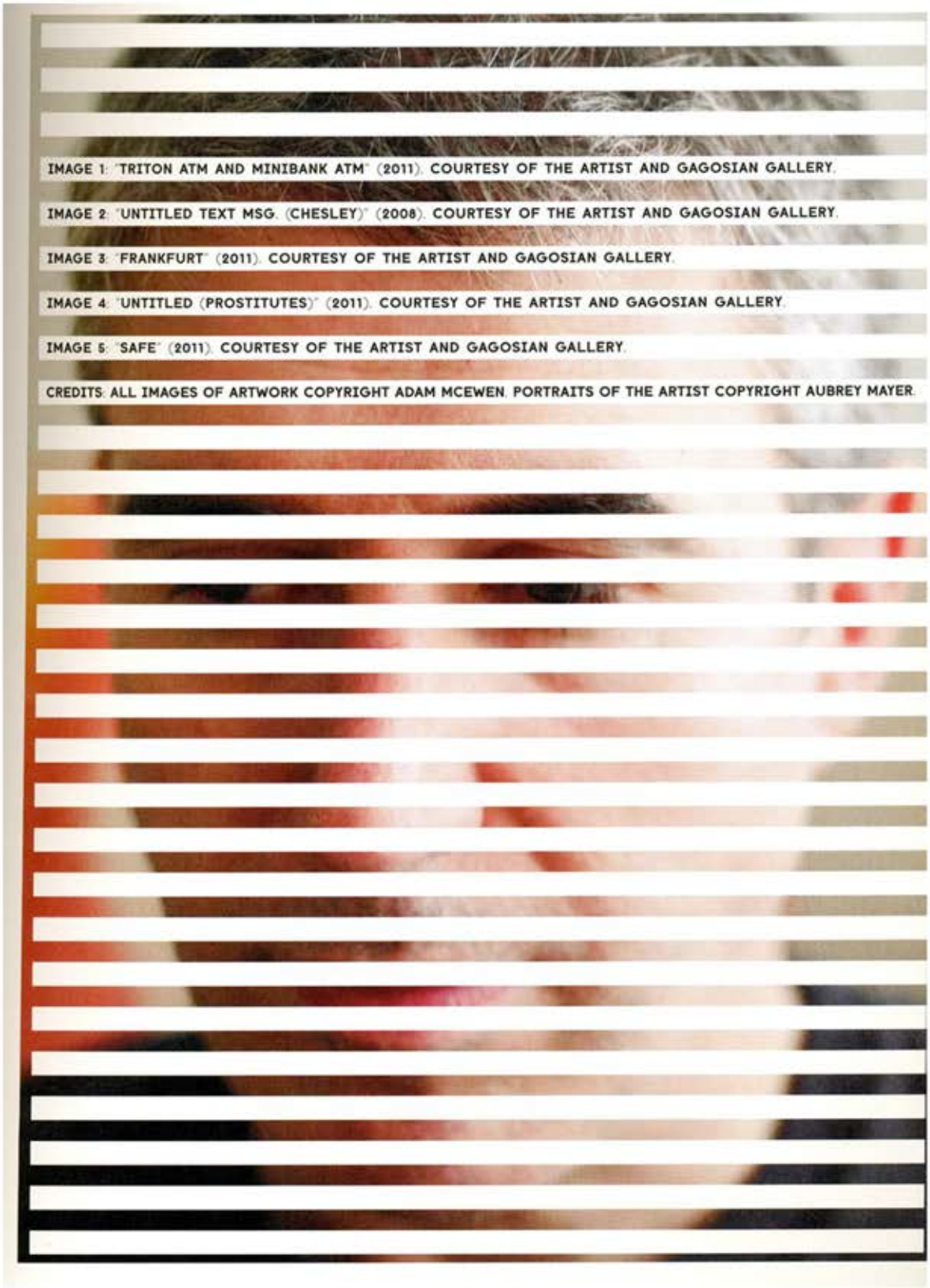

IMAGE 1: "TRITON ATM AND MINIBANK ATM" (2011). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

IMAGE 2: "UNTITLED TEXT MSG. (CHESLEY)" (2008). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

IMAGE 3: "FRANKFURT" (2011). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

IMAGE 4: "UNTITLED (PROSTITUTES)" (2011). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

IMAGE 5: "SAFE" (2011). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

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