



# JOHN PREUS THE BEAST HERD MENTALITY

CURATED BY  
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## The Beast Seminars

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*When you dream of a savage bull, or a lion, or a wolf pursuing you, this means it wants to come to you. You would like to split it off, you experience it as something alien, but it just becomes all the more dangerous... The best stance would be: "Please, come and devour me."*

CARL JUNG

This essay describes one of many creative projects that occurred within *The Beast* during its occupation of Montserrat College of Art's gallery in the spring of 2018. As a kind of "deep dive" into the exhibition, we convened a liberal arts seminar of fourteen students to enter *The Beast* as an artwork and to discuss herd mentality in the context of our lives. In class we read and discussed essays by the artist John Preus and others, then each student invited a guest from Beverly and beyond to join us in one of four public seminar sessions under the headings: *Herd Mentality and the Bull*, *The Beast and Contemporary Art*, *Depression and The Beast*, and *Art and Politics*. The project became an opportunity to reformulate the idea of a seminar as "an art project within an artwork, inside an art school, inside an art city" in order to lessen skepticism of art theory and to break down barriers that separate contemporary art from the general public. I like to think that *The Beast* – under its steady gaze and its magnificent hide made from weathered wooden boats – was with us, or at least dreaming with us, on that



journey of discovery into a new, difficult, and far-ranging terrain of ideas, made easier with a sense of play that the space of art can provide.

Preus's thinking into the project goes deep, and we grabbed hold of *The Beast's* tail along with him to decipher the project in terms of its symbolism, its form, and its function as a public space. One of the first things we looked at was philosopher Carl Jung's discussion of symbolism in art. The sacrificial bull is a deep symbol in human consciousness, and it appears in art from its earliest beginnings. Jung instructs us: "If you dream of a charging bull, do not run away from it - let it devour you."<sup>2</sup> Being swallowed by *The Beast* became a kind of motto for the class. It was both simple and profound, since quite literally, the form allowed us to enter the belly of *The Beast* and to become not just viewers but bodies within the symbol. In such a way, we treated the artwork as a tool kit, a skill set, a fort, and a play space in which to confront ideas and make them real. We sought to find out the meaning of "herd mentality" and to test, on real terms, how art transforms the accessibility of public space.

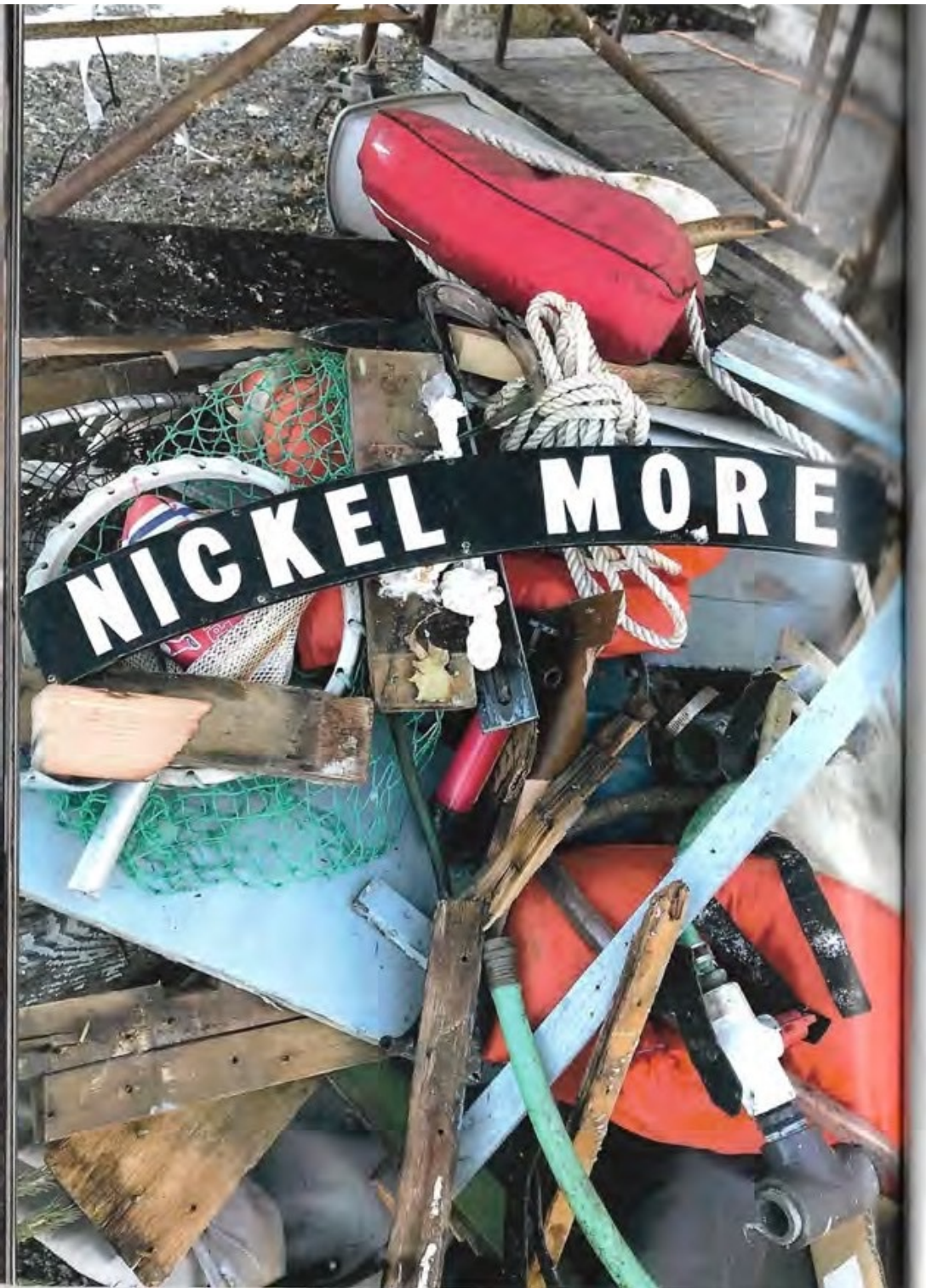
Two buzzwords emerged: *bricolage* and *kudos*. The first is from a famous debate in philosophy about art's ability to take what is "ready at hand" and make it into something else. The artist is a bricoleur who remakes the world through a magical and poetic transformation of things. The philosopher Jacques Derrida says bricolage has a "mythopoetical virtue" and is essentially a feat of language.<sup>3</sup> Derrida is responding to Claude Levi-Strauss, another philosopher who takes a somewhat less elevated view of the artist-bricoleur,



seeing him/her as a less efficient user of materials than the modern engineer. In considering the artist, Levi-Strauss says: "his poetry is derived from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only with things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The 'bricoleur' may not always complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it."<sup>4</sup>

By what magic did three boats - the black Mackenzie Cuttyhunk bass boat, the white and green Friendship sloop *Ollie M.*, and the red *Nickel More* (as in, "if I have to spend a nickel more on this boat...") - with their memories of excursions on the sea find themselves remade into a cool hang-out space at an art school? The sheer weight of the wooden boat fragments and their accompanying smells could have easily overpowered the gallery, but in the hands of the artist - the bricoleur - they took on the airiness and lightness of possibility. In the world of boat building, each piece of wood is assigned a name according to where it is used: covering board, garboard, frame futtock, stringer, floor, keelson, ceiling, shelf, hanging knee, rail cap, bulwark planking. White pine and white oak are sturdy and grow locally, while mahogany is both strong and light. The toxic copper-based paint on the boat bottoms keeps marine life at bay. The innumerable pieces of hardware, colloquially called "marine bronze," derive from various alloys of pink silicon, nickel, and iron. The mysterious formulas are the alchemy of ancient ages. In the hands of the bricoleur, many of these fasteners became precious prizes encased in jewelry boxes. It is mind-blowing to consider all the knowledge held within those objects and ideas.





To think seriously of myths is to realize that their demolished stories never go away - they just find new uses. What new myths did our class find for *The Beast*? We settled on a story of *kudos* - inspired by the display cases of necklaces made from the brasses and bronzes taken from the wreck - in the context of the art world. What do I mean by *kudos*? Our seminar readings took us to the writings of philosopher René Girard and his theory of mimetic rivalry, an all-encompassing formula of human violence, something we wanted to explore in the context of herd mentality. Basically, desire always presents itself in the world as an ever-evolving mask with a “monstrous double.”<sup>5</sup> Desire gives rise to violence, and violence always begets more violence. How can we escape the double bind (there is no victim without a perpetrator). The answer is by creating new ritual. An example of such a ritual is the ancient prize of *kudos*. Girard describes *kudos* as “a semidivine prestige,” which is a surprisingly apt term for contemporary art.<sup>6</sup>

Our seminars within *The Beast* explored many threads of thought: what it means to be born into a particular herd, what it means to be an artist, what it means to push against social structures that we no longer believe in. How easy or hard do those actions become? We took laps. We moved from the outside to the inside. We stood up and smelled *The Beast's* nose, rapped on its flank, gathered within its belly sitting on blocks, swinging, rocking, climbing, laughing, talking, listening. We opened up possibilities for imagining depression, immigration, relationships, and above all, art. Standing outside is no longer an option. Just let *The Beast* devour you.



NOTES

1. Carl G. Jung, "On the Method of Dream Interpretation," In *Children's Dream: Notes from the Seminar Given in 1936-1940*, eds. Maria Meyer-Grass and Lorenz Jung, trans. Ernst Falzeder with the collaboration of Tony Woolfson (Princeton UP, 2008), p.19.
2. *ibid.*
3. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Routledge, 1982, pp. 278-294), p. 280.
4. Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Science of the Concrete," In *The Savage Mind* (U Chicago P, 1966, pp.1-29), p.21.
5. Rene Girard, "From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double" in *Violence & the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins UP, 1977, pp.143-68), pp.161-164.
6. *Ibid.*, p.161.

