

NO FEAR

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Psych Times, a website owned by BetterHealth, the online therapy company, offers a seemingly endless list of phobias to scroll through, each one outlined in great detail with its own designated name.⁽¹⁾ This includes fear of animals, fear of God, fear of jealousy, fear of dryness, fear of clothing, fear of children, fear of vaccines, fear of tyrants, fear of shadows, fear of urine, fear of Satan, fear of Russians, fear of holes, fear of needles, fear of otters, fear of injury, fear of nudity, fear of thunder, fear of dying, fear of telephones, fear of failure, fear of symmetry, fear of syphilis, fear of symbolism, fear of shellfish, fear of wasps, fear of long words, fear of long waits, fear of music, fear of blindness, fear of forests, fear of lawsuits, fear of getting wrinkles, fear of progress, fear of sermons, and fear of the great mole rat. I never made it to the end of the list in fact, after plenty of clicking, but a quick search on the site reveals that fear of property is missing.

If there are fears of basically everything else, including panophobia, the totalizing "fear of everything," how does it breeze past the fear of something like property, which permeates so much of modern life? In such a vast psychological inventory, the discovery of its absence feels for a moment like gaslighting or a magician's act, the work of some invisible hand. Either no one is afraid of property, or it's an idea so ingrained and internalized as to not be worth any subconscious concern or the consequent therapy. Suspicions linger though, since property is tied up with money, a perennial source of stress, and it continues to be socially divisive, whether one reads from Marx's script or conservative talking points.

You own your house, or someone else does and you rent it, or you're unhoused like nearly 60,000 people in Chicago, or maybe you're a property owner struggling with your mortgage. The park where you play with your kids, or drink with your friends, is owned by the city but available for public use. An artist owns the copyright to their work, but collectors might own all their paintings. You stream music on Spotify and you're free to play it 24/7, until you stop paying and it's gone. Meanwhile a bank might be bundling and selling your debt, and corporations like Nestlé and Monsanto are buying up water rights or filing patents on certain seeds, coming for the very basics of life. Then there are two vast looming facts that this nation mostly tries to glide past: the descendants of those once enslaved and held as property in America number more than 40 million, and many of our cities and agricultural zones rest on land coerced or stolen from Native peoples.

We could spend days accumulating examples of how property intersects with daily life. In the end, it might be easier to avoid everything else in the list of phobias above, aside from the universal human fates of failure, wrinkles, and dying—although even these are not evenly distributed. While property doesn't affect everyone in the same ways, it's safe to say this is an abstract idea with profoundly tangible effects far and wide. A fact of life that can feel intensely present, property also reveals the long reach of history and it heralds futures that can seem either preordained or wildly unknown.

This exhibition, *Fear of Property*, wanders directly into this terrain, but rather than approaching property with a fixed hypothesis, it has developed in a more exploratory manner. Taking shape speculatively, the show grows out of conversations with more than a dozen artists; some of these dialogues have spanned years, while others have unfolded more recently and brought out new areas of focus. As the artists made new works for the occasion or turned to their recent artworks or publications, different categories of property have come into view (private, public, collective). So have a variety of property's many forms: land, objects, buildings, data, financial assets, intellectual property, artificial intelligence, cultural appropriation, and languages lost and revitalized, among others. The artists set off on individual paths that often led to unexpected places, rather than trying to survey the terrain. (My observations here, in a similar spirit, are the first of my own reflections on the exhibition, rather than a map—a set of thoughts that will continue to unfold, and maybe change, even after the show opens.)

The mainstream understanding of property is that it refers to things we own: a house, a car, a painting, a business. But more accurately "property" is a set of rules for governing access and use, structuring relations with other people and the world around us. Or as C.B. MacPherson puts it (writing in 1978 on the eve of the neoliberal era): property is *rights*, backed by a prevailing ethical theory. She notes, "What distinguishes property from mere momentary possession is that property is a claim that will be enforced by society or the state, by custom or convention or law."⁽²⁾

In the age of private property, it can be hard to remember that it wasn't always like this. In a recent essay, Eula Biss describes traveling to England to "look for a living record of enclosure, the centuries-long process by which land once collectively worked by the landless was claimed by the landed." She writes, "That land already belonged to the landed, in the old sense of ownership, but it had always been used by the landless, who belonged to the land. The nature of ownership changed within the newly set hedges of an enclosed field, where the landowner now had the exclusive right to dictate how the land was used, and no one else belonged there."⁽³⁾

Since those early acts of enclosure, the notion of private property has been integral to some of the uglier parts of human history. Women were long considered property of their husbands. Entire neighborhoods of Black residents were cleared out of cities like Chicago and New York to make way for highways. Land was taken by colonists and settlers throughout the world without consent or apology, and resources, even after the end of empires, continue to be extracted at great environmental costs with the support of the law. And if the actual *fear* of property can be observed anywhere in plain view, it's around the brutal history of slavery in America. The rise of policing in this country is tied to the birth of slave patrols in the 1700s, which the NAACP describes as a system of terror intended to "squash slave uprisings" and "pursue, apprehend, and return runaway slaves to their owners."⁽⁴⁾

At the same time, experiences of property are often complex and layered. There was one artwork I hoped to include in this show—a painting bought at auction and now owned by private collectors who declined to lend it to a public exhibition—that is spellbinding as it evokes a version of this layered reality. Kerry James Marshall's *Still Life with Wedding Portrait* (2015), depicts a man and a woman overlaid by an elaborate signature: "John & Harriet Tubman." It shows the iconic hero of the Underground Railroad and her little-known husband, almost hidden behind her. He rests his hands on her shoulders possessively as she looks directly at the viewer. But this painting is of a painting being hung on the wall by four hands: three are clad in the white cotton gloves of art handlers and the fourth in black leather, an echo of the famous Black Panthers salute on the Olympic podium in 1968. So much merges in one image here: marriage as possession, the history of slavery and different eras of resistance, art as valuable object, acts of invisible labor, even the private lived experience of a person who has since become effectively a legend, a name, almost a brand. It's a painting packed with negotiations of ownership and agency.



Kerry James Marshall, *Still Life with Wedding Portrait*, 2015
Acrylic on PVC panel, 59 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
© Kerry James Marshall.

Belonging, comfort, agency, safety: these are desires that most people share, regardless of background or means or ability to achieve them. One artist I initially invited to be part of the show is taking the year off from participating in any new exhibitions so she can focus on buying and building out a live-work space. She described being in “property hell.” Elaborating, she wrote: “Working with financial and real estate institutions is to interface directly with the white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy. It was hard on my soul. Yet I'm so lucky and truly grateful for the opportunity.”

She went on to share part of an email she had written to a friend earlier in the year, alluding to one of the twentieth century philosophers who reorient notions of property: “I don't think wanting a place of your own makes you capitalist swine. Have you ever read Simone Weil? She has a very dense essay regarding the fundamental needs of humans—and ‘private property’ is one of them. Not private property in the sense that

Marx would invoke, but ‘private property’ in the sense of personal dignity, which is an interior space but also a physical one.” Her final words still linger with me: “We need space that we have autonomy over and privacy within. We get that by ‘buying’ the space in our world today, but I truly believe the desire is more dignified than that.” One might also think of Virginia Woolf’s “A room of one’s own” as a condition of women’s emancipation, which strikes a similar note, or any number of other iterations.⁽⁵⁾

Property is often talked about on almost technical terms, but this idea doesn’t just shape social and economic life, it organizes our emotional lives, too. This can mean many different things, sometimes all at once. A sense of well-being. Desire, satisfaction, or pride. Anxiety or envy. Even simmering feelings like guilt or shame, maybe especially for white people—those of us who try not to look away from the histories mentioned earlier. When it comes down to it, this exhibition isn’t really about fear. It encompasses so much more. So perhaps think of the exhibition title here as a blinking sign outside a quiet building where all sorts of strange deals are being made. The word “fear” in the title opens the door, but the passageway behind it leads to more ambiguous, non-cathartic or perhaps even contradictory emotions.

Early in her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai writes, extrapolating from philosopher Paulo Virno, that one could argue “that in the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger or fear.” Suggesting another horizon of possibility, she adds: “the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings—ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth.”⁽⁶⁾

While viewing the works in the show, we should take seriously what Ngai calls “minor and generally unprestigious feelings” as well as the more vehement ones, the “grander passions like anger and fear.”⁽⁷⁾ This show for the most part does not put the “grander passions” on display, although you might feel them underneath the surface. The artists here occupy a wide emotional range and each of their works has its own unique contours of feeling. Some of the artists in *Fear of Property* have previously articulated philosophical positions themselves, such as Matias Faldbakken’s interest in “disengagement” and “resignation” or “negation.” More generally though, noncathartic feelings, as Ngai observes, “could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended ‘action’) and does so as a kind of politics.”⁽⁸⁾

There has been a fair amount of artwork in recent years that in one way or another deals with property. Some of it works in the modes of declaration and protest, but as Ghislaine Leung observed in one of our conversations, a lot of it has an administrative quality: focusing on deeds, rights, laws, etc., embracing the dry language of administration. As

Leung noted though, "As soon as you start dealing with a language of emotion, it's harder to place yourself."

Fear of Property largely turns to artists working in aesthetic modes other than the declarative or the neatly administrative. Very different tones tend to surface as well, whether satirical, melancholic, aspirational, or even vaguely paranoid, as if carrying that sensation over from corners of the culture at large. Along the way, the show oscillates between first-person and third-person points of view, to borrow the language of novels. Some works grow out of personal experience, while others have a more analytical position, with a shifting sense of closeness or distance.

Most art falls well within the bounds of property itself, whether as it's owned and traded, or as artists and museums rely on patrons with greater wealth to persist. Different mediums have their own relationships to property, too, from painting's descent from church walls to become portable commodities, to photography's employment toward various corporate or imperialist ends, to the subversions of the off-the-shelf readymade and conceptual work's resistance to sales, which the dealers eventually worked around. The shadows of all these histories spill out from this exhibition, which consciously includes a variety of mediums.

The relationship between art and property doesn't stop with paintings or videos, of course. In the past few years, the sudden proliferation of NFTs, as well as other novel uses of technologies like the blockchain, has underlined this fact. Some involve Direct Autonomous Organizations, trying to bypass central gatekeepers, or they have nothing to do with art, or they simply thrive on the web, developing their own circuits of creativity and exchange, like Holly Herndon's AI vocal clone, Holly+, through which Herndon yields ownership of her own voice to others online.⁽⁹⁾

Over time, intangible assets have grown more valuable than physical things: algorithms, patents, trademarks, brands, big data. The phrase that became the title of this exhibition, "Fear of Property" is drawn from a forthcoming essay by cultural anthropologist Cameron Hu, in which he discusses the work of Marissa Benedict, Daniel de Paula, and David Rueter and delves into the logic underlying the futures trading pits at the Chicago Board of Trade. Hu writes: "At the very center of the pits was a surprising fear of property... If things went as they should, the traders would never in their lives handle the wheat, soy, cattle, etc. from which they extracted a profit in downtown Chicago. In the octagon, between this world and the next, floated these intermediaries, hoping never to crash into the substance of the Earth."⁽¹⁰⁾

That rise of futures trading in Chicago more than a century ago leads onward to today's still accelerating tilt toward the intangible. McKenzie Wark has described the emergence of a new ruling class, "one that no longer relied on either land or industry as its source of wealth. Its working asset was information itself." In this new regime, "space becomes a topology in which any point can connect to any other. A line of economic activity becomes a *vector*, in the sense that it can in principle be deployed anywhere." As she describes this rising "vectoralist class," Wark speculates on cascading realms of

abstraction: industry separates from land and then information separates from industry.⁽¹¹⁾

Other related tech advancements bring new horizons that are full of promise as well as deeply unsettling possibilities. As machine learning algorithms feed off vast data sets, they yield results that their minders can't reverse engineer. The specter of artificial general intelligence, perhaps not so far away, will prompt a moment when something created by people, and owned as intellectual property, exceeds our control.

Jump cut to Pedro Neves Marques's films, which travel landscapes transformed by transgenic monocrops and introduce an indigenous android named YWY, meaning "land" in the Tupi-Guarani language, standing among the corn.⁽¹²⁾ This work, and others in the show, like Yukultji Napangati's paintings, suggest other ways of relating to the land that aren't framed in terms of property at all, or like Karrabing Film Collectives' work, they do so by imagining alternate histories and futures yet to come.

A new anthology published by Verso is titled *Property Will Cost Us the Earth*.⁽¹³⁾ It features essays about the future of the global climate movement and the urgency of direct action at a time when "protecting private property" comes "at the expense of our planet and our children's lives." Fear and anger are appropriate, these authors suggest. Still, it's surely not the only feelings most of us will have as we face the future and navigate our present lives.

The notion of "fear of property" isn't entirely absent from the Internet—whether it's the Verso anthology, or forums for anxious prospective homebuyers, or the occasional psychology wiki where it finally surfaces as a validated phobia. But rather than asking what different meanings the phrase might carry, a better question might be: what *should* we be afraid of? Is fear of property the fear of losing what one owns, with some recognition of the tenuousness of these claims? Or is it a buried fear of the burdens and risks of ownership? Should we be afraid of property because of all the pain it has caused and how much more it might cause in the future? Or should this fear be rooted in wondering about what would happen if the whole system of private ownership, now so deeply entrenched, were suddenly to dissolve one day?

Last spring, as I talked with Myriam Ben Salah, the Ren's director, she mentioned Gail Kaszynski's 1983 film *Fear of Poetry*, an improvisatory documentary about the lives of certain Los Angeles poets in the 1980s. I haven't seen the film yet, since it's hard to find, but in some weird way it clinched "Fear of Property" as the title for this exhibition. These two titles echo across time. The two phrases become slant rhymes, which fold things onto each other less neatly than perfect rhymes but can allow for unexpected twists. The world outside of the page is a messy but resonant place, too. Ultimately this whole show is more like a poem than an argument. It has elisions and evident gaps, but also rhymes and allusions, letting a relatively small number of elements do a lot, while pointing beyond themselves. In the end, it all leaves room, one might say, for the reader.

Metrophobia, the irrational fear of poetry, is there among the entries in the long list at Psych Times online. It is apparently a common condition in which the sufferer feels great anxiety when forced to read poetry or even when thinking about it. One of the explanations for why this fear exists is teachers demanding students decode poems and look for obscure meanings. It could also hide a simpler fear of a lack of clarity. The anxiety caused by metrophobia often leads the afflicted to avoid poetry completely. I like the title of Kaszynski's film because it's not about those who steer clear of poetry, fearful or not, but rather those who seek it out. One can feel discomfort or uncertainty, perhaps, and step into it. Maybe that's what this show is about, too.

There are surprising moments of tenderness that surface in this exhibition about property, these slow rising notes of care and attention, individual and collective. A glimpse of one family's land, held through generations. Handwritten logs of HVAC maintenance at the American Stock Exchange in New York become a steady marking of time, tuned to the breath of the building. Elsewhere, a poem appears on the wall in both Arabic and English. It originates from a period in Andalusia when religions and cultures blended as a unity based on difference and poets borrowed lines from other poems. *If you want me, as your dear love / Kiss this string of pearls, O little mouth of cherries.*

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Written on the occasion of the exhibition *Fear of Property*, Sept 10–Nov 6, 2022 at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago.

Notes:

- (1) Psych Times, © 2022 <https://psychtimes.com/?s=fear+of&>
- (2) C.B. MacPherson, *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 3.
- (3) Eula Biss, "The Theft of the Commons," *The New Yorker*, June 8, 2022.
- (4) See Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), and NAACP, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/origins-modern-day-policing>
- (5) Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).
- (6) Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.
- (7) Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 6.
- (8) Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 9.
- (9) Holly+ is accessible at <https://holly.plus>
- (10) Cameron Hu, "Levitators," in *deposition* (Milan: Mousse Publishing: 2023), forthcoming.
- (11) McKenzie Wark, "The Vectoralist Class," *e-flux Supercommunity*, August 29th, 2015, <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/the-vectoralist-class/>
- (12) Pedro Neves Marques describes this in a forthcoming book, *YWY, Searching for a Character between Future Worlds: Gender, Ecology, Science Fiction*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).
- (13) Jessie Kinding (ed.), *Property Will Cost Us the Earth* (London: Verso, 2022)