

SCRUPULUS
BIGERT & BERGSTRÖM

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CECILIA HILLSTRÖM GALLERY
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SCRUPULUS

On a sunny afternoon just before Christmas, I hiked the hills above San Francisco Bay with Alva Noë, chair of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley, whose recent writings on aesthetics have been reshaping my work as a critic. We talked about his new theories that bill art as a “strange tool” for endlessly rethinking our everyday routines. Normally, he said, “we live in a space of habit,” asking our cultural tools—photographs, songs, dance-steps—to perform quite standard functions that we barely bring to full consciousness. Whereas art, in its difficulty—in its fundamental deferral and even refusal of meaning—forces us to give up on such functional comforts. A work of art “confronts us with its own unintelligibility,” Noë said. “You want people to say, ‘What the fuck is this.’ That’s the right first response.”

The *modus operandi* of the aesthetic experience, he said, is discomfort: “There’s a pebble in your shoe, with art.”

His metaphor had particular force for me: Unknown to him, I did in fact, quite literally and very deliberately, have a pebble in my shoe—as art—the whole time we hiked.

That pebble was *Scrupulus*, the new artwork by Bigert & Bergström that, in its materiality at least, is nothing more than a one-carat industrial diamond, about as big as a good-size peppercorn, meant quite specifically to be worn in footwear. (More on that in a moment.)

Sitting in my shoe as I walked, niggling away at my foot’s sole, *Scrupulus* functioned as a perfect metaphor for how art, according to Noë, can and must niggle away at our consciousness, preventing us from settling into easy, unthinking behaviors. For Noë, art comes close to being philosophical, functioning at a “meta” level that sits above our normal lives in the world: The inherent puzzlement provoked by a photograph hung in a gallery, as art, helps us think about the way we normally use photographs; the opacities in a dance on a stage makes us reconsider the facile dancing we do at a wedding; the complexities of a monologue in Shakespeare help us endlessly rethink all the uncomplex talking and thinking we do. On this account, *Scrupulus* is Noëtian at yet one further remove: It is a work of art that gets us thinking about the very notion of the artistic, putting art’s discomfiting fuck-up-ed-ness on the table (and in our footwear) for our contemplation, when in the standard course of things even art often goes down far too easy.

Appropriately, *Scrupulus* title tracks back to a philosophical context. In the first century BCE, when Cicero wrote about the niggling worries that weigh on the immoral¹, he described them as mental *scrupuli*, using the Latin word

Cecilia
Hillstrom
Gallery:

for the pebbles that might get stuck in your sandal and keep you aware of your steps and your course. The *unscrupulous*, by extension, has come to refer to those who can do wrong without ever feeling it.

But as Noë and I looked down on the Bay, I accused him of what the French call a *déformation professionnelle* (an “occupational distortion”): His calling as a philosopher has him finding philosophy wherever he looks. Art, for him, inevitably becomes an essentially philosophical endeavor. Whereas, I explained, in implementing his ideas in my criticism, I’ve insisted that the “strange tools” of art don’t only talk, at a philosophical remove, about our normal artistic tool-use: Pondering a photograph in an art gallery doesn’t only tell us about how we use photos in our daily lives. Rather, the endless discourse that artworks engender—the peculiarly open-ended talk that, for Noë as for me, is the very essence of art—is just as much about the subjects and realities that artworks point to. I asked Noë to admit that art is semantic as much as epistemologic; photographs will always be about what they show, not only about how we use them to show things.

The *Scrupulus*, again, is a case in point. Although its discomfort might have philosophical import, *Scrupulus* also tells a story that, like many artworks, comes built into its precise history and nature. The fifth of a gram of carbon that Bigert & Bergström saw compressed into their *Scrupulus* diamond is precisely equivalent to the carbon that’s in one cubic meter of our postindustrial, CO₂-packed atmosphere. The suffering that *Scrupulus* causes its wearer is a kind of condensation of, or at least a synecdoche for, the suffering that our actions are causing the earth and its inhabitants.

Joshua Shannon, an art historian at the University of Maryland who is a leader in his discipline’s “ecological turn,” recently praised a sculpture that lives 20 feet beneath the sea for forcing its viewers to dive into a direct, bodily engagement with the imperiled environment that the work was meant to speak about. You could say that *Scrupulus* has similarly somatic effects, making palpable an environmental harm that normally sits below our sensory threshold.

I’m usually against readings of art that see it as inscribed in its perceptual effects—as speaking directly to the body and thereby lighting up the brain. After all, the black of Kazimir Malevich’s “Black Square” couldn’t have touched viewers the same way in 1915, when it was first shown, as it would have in 1815 or even in 2015, though it would have tickled the retina in the same way in each

case. But with *Scrupulus*, the artwork’s distinctly sensory effect seems very centrally the bearer of its meaning: The discomfort it reliably causes is what makes it matter. And unlike other works of art, once you choose to engage with *Scrupulus*, there’s quite literally no walking away from what it has to say—no shutting your eyes, as you might to avoid a painting’s troublings, or turning your back as you might to a sculpture’s vexations.

In the normal course of things, I see museums as the ideal and almost only place to have a full experience of art. They seem uniquely suited to triggering Noë’s “What the fuck is this?” response, and to prompting a breadth of deep attempts at an answer. But *Scrupulus* is the rare piece that does its best work out in the world, where it can remind us of the excess carbon in our air by making itself known as we stride through any air at all.

But if that makes *Scrupulus* sound distinctly avant-garde, I’m not sure it is. After wearing it for almost a full day, I concluded that it’s deeply embedded in the long history of artistic mimetics. This carefully crafted object almost perfectly portrays how climate change actually functions in most of our lives: Knowing that our planet is warming gives a little prick to our minds and morals that is palpable but fairly easily ignored as we go about our usual business. While hiking the Berkeley Hills, the thick rubber of my boot’s high-tech sole, product of some of late capitalism’s most dedicated research, largely cushioned me against any real discomfort the *Scrupulus* might have inflicted, the way the comforts of neoliberal life in the global North can—at least for some of us, for now—cushion the impact of the carbon crisis on our souls.

The next shoe-work by Bigert & Bergström might need to be titled *Thumbtack*.

Blake Gopnik

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¹ Cicero, “The Oration for Sextus Roscius of Ameria,” 2.6, in *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903). See also Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 3.16, trans. Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1970).