What’s the Big Idea?  
Getting the Facts Right at Yaddo

This fall, the Whiting Foundation announced the first recipients of a prize for writers of creative nonfiction. One of the winners was Tim Golden, a guest at Yaddo in 2010 and 2011. With the help of the fellowship, he’ll be able to push forward with an over-ten-year investigation of the US detention camp at Guantánamo Bay.

Since our founding, Yaddo has hosted artists exploring the most urgent topics of the day. We rely, for instance, on Hannah Arendt’s conceptual frameworks to make sense of the twentieth century and our own; she was a guest at Yaddo in 1952, between Origins of Totalitarianism and Eichmann in Jerusalem. We can also claim Tim Weiner, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his exposé of secret Pentagon and CIA budgets; the art critic Lawrence Weschler; Jacki Lyden, who reported from conflict zones from Northern Ireland to Iraq; and Sheri Fink, a New York Times correspondent. Fink was part of a team of reporters from the Times to share a Pulitzer in 2015 for coverage of the West Africa Ebola outbreak.

The need for critical, adversarial voices; deep research; willingness to question authority; and a commitment to facts is sorely needed in these so-called “post-truth” times. We asked three 2016 guests—Rania Abouzeid (regular contributor to the New Yorker); Lewis Hyde (The Gift); and Marie-Therese Connolly (DC-based lawyer and MacArthur Fellow)—to give us a sneak peek into what they’re currently investigating: complex topics that are in the Zeitgeist and demand attention and thought. Yaddo provides the calm space for just that work.

Lewis Hyde  
“Louise Bourgeois Forgets”

My current book project is a meditation on forgetfulness, especially on those places where forgetting is more useful than remembering. It has many parts—the mythological, the political, the spiritual, the psychological. As for the artistic, I’ve tried to imagine a Museum of Forgetfulness and then describe the works that might be found there. Here is one such work and the wall text to accompany it.

Louise Bourgeois—eighty years after her father abandoned the family to enlist in World War I, seventy years after he abandoned them again, taking young Louise’s English tutor as his mistress (“the trauma of abandonment” she once wrote, “has remained active ever since”), twenty years after the death of her husband, and just a few years after the death of one of her three sons—made this large, unique fabric book using for pages the linen hand towels embroidered with the initials LBG for Louise Bourgeois Goldwater, her married name, each page collaged with designs cut from fragments of clothing and household items, some as old as the memories of trauma themselves.

Bourgeois has said that every day you must accept the past and abandon it and, “if you can’t accept it, then you have to do sculpture.” If your need is to refuse to abandon the past, then you have to recreate it. Which is what I have been doing.” Except as the title implies, in the case of Ode à l’Oubli, for here the process of making designs out of old cloth is intended to put the past to rest.

Abstraction was, for Bourgeois, an ars oblivios. To calm and relieve her insomnia (the Too Much Memory Disease!), she used to draw...
THE BIG IDEA continued from front cover

repeated, simple lines across sheets of paper. With Ode à l’Oubli she takes a near-century of memories (“You can ... remember your life by the shape, weight, color, and smell of those clothes in your closet!”) and converts them into grids and circles, pyramids, star-bursts and waves (“strong emotion...held in a kind of formal restraint”). True, there is one oddly soiled page. In red letters it reads—

The return of the repressed

—and a long brown stain runs across the page between the last two words. And yet, taking the book as a whole, that unyielding stain is ten square inches of the unforgettable in over four thousand square inches of oblivion-by-design.

Rania Abouzied

I have covered the Syrian uprising since the first protests in the capital Damascus in February 2011. At the time, they were in solidarity with the Libyan revolution, not against the Assad regime. Since then I have watched a country shatter into shards, each sliver deeming itself territory liberated from them - from the neighbors and sons and daughters whom Syrians once considered “us.”

Syria is now a conflict where the dead are not merely nameless, reduced to numbers; they are not even counted by the international organizations that usually keep track of such things. But no death or life is inconsequential. Each is a thread in a communal tapestry, playing a role in holding the larger intact, or unraveling it. I intend to tell the story of how that grand ancient mosaic called Syria came undone and why it matters, through the journeys of several characters over five years. They include members of Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, the Free Syrian Army, and regular families on both sides. Their trajectories intersect at times, their stories illuminating and untangling much larger truths, while underpinning it all is a rigorous investigation into the great game of nations that armed and fueled the bloodshed.

Marie-Therese Connolly

In our culture, despite immense investment in extending life, we view aging with fear, loathing, shame and denial.

This has consequences. Among the most insidious is elder abuse: one in ten people sixty and older is victimized by elder abuse, neglect or exploitation. The rates climb higher still for people with dementia. Yet, we don’t recognize or treat elder abuse like other public health problems. Programs are fragmented and chronically underfunded. Laws aren’t implemented. And we don’t know what works to prevent or respond to it.

I’m writing about a doctor, social worker, prosecutor and others who are pioneering new ways to address the problem. But answers are often elusive. And the problem itself raises big questions: As older adults’ capacities decline, and they make risky decisions, how should we balance their autonomy rights with the duties of family and society to protect them from harm or losing their assets? Why do we have more empathy for some kinds of victims than for others? And why do we devote trillions of dollars and unrivaled intellectual capital to extend life but so much less to assure well-being in the time we gain?

An Enchanting Path

OUR FACILITIES MANAGER
Shane Cassidy took this photo of the road to Stone Tower, the Frankenthaler Studio, and Foppa Studio during the first snowfall of the season. One of the small but significant improvements to our property in the past year was the addition of seven new lampposts, including those shown here. All use LED and are sensitive to sunlight for efficiency.
The Mansion Gets Support

In 1891, Spencer and Katrina Trask hired architect William Halsey Wood to build a high Victorian, mock-Tudor mansion on their Saratoga Springs estate to replace the villa lost to fire that year. They commissioned their friend Louis Comfort Tiffany to create a mosaic for the fireplace of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

The Mansion is an essential part of Yaddo’s history and lore, as well as the heart of our National Historic Landmark property. But the annual cycle of opening and closing, destructive winter storms, and humid summers, have taken their toll on the 126 year-old house, and the foundation and façade are in critical need of repair. We sent out an RFP in May, selecting Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson Architecture & Preservation of Albany for the two-year project. A capital campaign is underway to finance the work.

Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson has an extensive amount of experience with late Victorian architecture, characterized by eclecticism in building materials (our Mansion has them all, from stucco and terra cotta to stone and glass) and embrace of asymmetry (Yaddo has a turret, loggia, and porch) – characteristics that demand unique expertise.

At this stage, they are using nondestructive technologies (which do not require disturbance of material) to create point cloud images of the Mansion exterior, such as the one shown here. The models will show the areas where the stone is under the most stress and a closer look is called for. According to principal architect Steven Reilly, their approach is to “balance traditional investigation with nondestructive techniques to get the best results.” We anticipate the work of stabilization and restoration to begin in May 2017 and to have the work completed by November 2018.

TOP: The Mansion, built between 1891 and 1893, has 56 rooms, 14 fireplaces, and 330 windows. Photo by Wes Haynes.

ABOVE: Point cloud images courtesy Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson/MJ Engineering.
OUT AND ABOUT

On the Road with Jennifer Weiner

Two hundred and seventy-five people packed Congregation Shaara T’fille in Saratoga Springs on October 16 to hear bestselling author Jennifer Weiner interviewed by Yaddo president Elaina Richardson. Weiner is currently on tour promoting her new book Hungry Heart: Adventures in Life, Love, and Writing; she was invited to Saratoga by Northshire Bookstore, one of Yaddo’s local partners. The pair talked about living in a beauty-obsessed culture and what writing “for women” means. As Richardson noted, the conversation was timely in the midst of a general election campaign centered to an unusual degree on women’s appearance and experiences. The interview took a surprisingly dark turn when Weiner spoke about her late father, whose mental illness and opiate addiction hid several other secrets. “Sometimes,” she said ruefully, “you should just stop digging!”

Illuminations: Adam Frelin’s Breathing Lights Evokes the Capital Region’s History of Innovation

The photographs were striking: two-family houses with peeling siding; floors of living rooms a vivid green with weeds and wildflowers, beneath windows without panes; handsome brick buildings, ominously empty. Photographs of urban blight, within commuting distance of Yaddo.

At this September’s Annual Meeting here at Yaddo, visual artist Adam Frelin showed our board members the scope of the challenge he set for himself with his public art project Breathing Lights, which was on display through the end of November. To draw attention to the impact of deindustrialization and disinvestment in the Capital Region, Frelin, with architect Barbara Nelson, installed frames of lights in the windows of over two hundred abandoned homes in Albany, Schenectady, and Troy. The soft lights rose and fell in brightness on a timer set to the duration of a human breath.

Breathing Lights was supported by a $1 million dollar Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge grant – one of just four winners across the country. Frelin, an associate professor of art at SUNY Albany, was a finalist when he was in residence at Yaddo in spring 2015. Frelin underlined that art cannot solve the problems wrought by a half-century of economic change and political choices. Citing Christo as an artistic influence, Frelin said that that he had wanted to create something “beautiful” for the neighborhoods that also had a social message.

Fast Friends

There’s something about braving bad weather to attend a cultural event that makes an audience especially jovial. That was the situation when Meg Wolitzer came to town on October 27, during the first snowstorm of the season, to read at Universal Preservation Hall as part of our Yaddo Presents series. Wolitzer visited Yaddo in 1983, shortly after her debut novel, Sleepwalking, was published. At UPH she read a scene from 2014’s The Interestings, a group portrait of artsy friends from adolescence in the late 1970s to early midlife. The narrator’s feelings of envy towards her more brilliant (but also more fortunate) friends is the central preoccupation of the novel. In the Q&A, Wolitzer said that she had wanted to write a novel about “talent over time.” Proceeds from ticket sales were divided by UPH and Yaddo, and each ticket came with a $5 discount off any Meg Wolitzer title from Northshire Bookstore.
FRIDAY NIGHT
Brought to You by Yaddo

A professional backgammon player faces his mortality in Jonathan Lethem’s *A Gambler’s Anatomy* (Doubleday), which also provides the thrill of vicarious travel. In Ann Patchett’s *Commonwealth* (HarperCollins), a drunken indiscretion in the mid-1960s is the catalyst for the breakup of two marriages and the creation of two new families; the grown-up children today look back on that event and another defining family trauma in a novel the New York Times calls “exquisite.” This year’s *Best American Essays* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) was co-edited by our Jonathan Franzen. Emily Witt deftly maneuvers you through sexual subcultures in *Future Sex* (Macmillan). Robert Storr’s intellectual and artistic biography of twentieth-century art titan Louise Bourgeois, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois* (The Monacelli Press), is as challenging and imposing as its subject.

The battle between Damian Lewis’s Bobby Axelrod and Paul Giamatti’s Chuck Rhoades in *Brian Koppelman’s Showtime* drama *Billions* resumes in February. Tickets for previews to J. T. Rogers’s political drama *Oslo* at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, and to the musical *Amélie* (with book by Craig Lucas) at the Walter Kerr Theatre, are on sale now.

An exhibition of Philip Guston’s political drawings from the Nixon era is currently on view at Hauser & Wirth.

President Barack Obama opened the National Museum of African American History and Culture on a perfect late September morning with the words of James Baldwin: “For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard.” The expatriate Baldwin’s passport is one of the 37,000 objects in the museum’s collection, which also includes the Jacob Lawrence

Above: Malin Akerman as Lara Axelrod, Damian Lewis as Bobby “Axe” Axelrod, Maggie Siff as Wendy Rhoades, and Paul Giamatti as Chuck Rhoades. Photo: James Minchin/SHOWTIME.

At right: The National Museum of African American History and Culture. Photo: Alan Karchmer/NMAAH.

gouache *Dixie Café* and books by Langston Hughes and Alice Walker.

Accolades

*Apollo Magazine* nominated two exhibitions featuring Yaddo artists for Best Exhibition of the Year. Colm Tóibín read Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* as part of *Inside – Artists and Writers in Reading Prison*, while Cliford Stil’s paintings are in the huge survey *Abstract Expressionism* at London’s Royal Academy of Arts (closing in early January).

Karan Mahajan’s novel *The Association of Small Bombs*, a finalist for the National Book Award, appears on both the New York Times’s and New York’s “Best of 2016” lists. He wrote the first draft during a Yaddo residency.

JoAnne Carson won a 2016 Guggenheim Fellowship in the Visual Arts. We’re now over the 500 mark for Guggenheim Fellowships awarded to our artists.

Painted Lives

This wonderfully surrealistic dress by artist Pat Lasch is made of acrylic paint, pearls and glass beads. *Wedding Dress* is the third element of a five-part installation entitled *A Life Blessed*, which also includes a christening dress; a communion dress; a fiftieth anniversary piece; and a shroud. The train on the dress is 9 feet long.

Photo: David Plakke. Courtesy of the artist.
Young Archivists Roll Up Their Sleeves

Though the relationship between Saratoga Springs High School and Yaddo goes back over a century – it was in 1912 that the Yaddo Medal was first awarded to two graduating seniors – we're taking it to a new level. Starting this fall, a select group of high school students are going to be digging into objects of interest from Yaddo to tell the stories of the people who lived and worked here, whether the Trasks, artists, or staff, and looking for connections to broader historical developments. Students have handled fabric samples sent to Katrina Trask in 1915, vintage postcards of Lake George, handwritten sheet music for Homer Keller's Violin Concerto in C; a movie poster in German for Carol, based on the Patricia Highsmith novel The Price of Salt; and a Polaroid taken of an artist in his studio in the 1980s. The students' projects will be entered in the New York State Archives Student Research Award contest in July. We can't wait to see what they'll discover!

ABOVE: Saratoga Springs High School student Sara Zlotnick looks at an original copy of the Woman Citizen from 1917, with an editorial by Katrina Trask in favor of women's suffrage. Photo: Freya Mercer.