

VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Neil Goldberg

It's confusing to try to get people to come to your art exhibition while the world is going up in flames. Can you imagine some mid-career artist in Berlin in 1933 being like, "Isn't it crazy about the Reichstag? But, hey: I've got a solo show coming up, at Cristin Tierney Gallery, from October 25–December 15.

I'm calling this show VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS so that at least every act of promoting it will contain a call to modest political action. Also, I think my art is kind of like the midterm elections: it focuses on things that go overlooked or are considered unworthy of attention; it is sometimes overly local.

I realize that this title might preach to the choir. But I don't think everyone in the choir voted in the midterm elections. I know I missed a few New York State primaries.

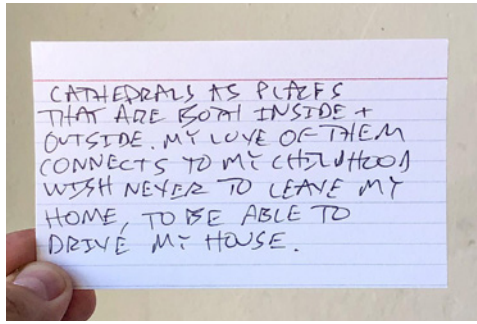
The show includes video and photography, plus a collection of index cards on which I've been writing passing thoughts and reflections for the past two decades. Although rooted in my particular subjectivity and circumstances, the cards are meant to offer an opportunity for identification and disidentification, and to provide a starting point for tangents, detours, or entirely different cognitive routes. The one I wrote today was: "How my therapist told me not to trust my gut."

On most Fridays and Saturdays for the run of the show, I'll be using the cards as prompts for conversations with anyone who stops by, plus scheduled guest artists, writers, performers, activists, and community groups from across the city. You can come and go and participate or not participate as you like. It might sound trite, but talking to each other in person feels especially important right now. Even if it's the choir talking among itself.

I realize that voting in the midterm elections is a bare-minimum step in a larger, hopefully much more profound struggle to address issues that have long preceded this political moment. If you want to do something more: I'll be skipping my performances on Saturday October 27 and November 3 so that some friends and I can knock on doors in a key swing Congressional District in my ancestral homeland, Long Island. If you'd like to join us, please email me at neil@neilgoldberg.com.

You can think of canvassing as a form of social practice art if you want. (But must you?) If that isn't your thing, I can set you up with something else: phone banking, data entry, gofer work at a local campaign office, etc. If any of this feels like too much, then, again: just make sure to VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS.

On Neil Goldberg's
VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS
by Rachel Lipstein



The artist Neil Goldberg's latest show, *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS*, on view at Cristin Tierney Gallery from October 25th to December 15th, is stirring and resolved, but it is also fundamentally about process. The show features, in several forms, a collection of index cards (*Inhibited Bites*), each bearing an aphorism or phrase in permanent marker. Goldberg, a Guggenheim Fellow and critic at the Yale School of Art, has been producing them at an often-daily clip for about the past twenty years. A record of fleeting thought or concentrated realization, the cards range on themes thoroughly infused with Goldberg's particular sense of unromantic pathos and humor: childhood and aging, art practice, urban life, friendship, sensory experience. They also compose the currency of *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS*, and serve as a unifying thread for the collection of work on display, which spans a variety of media and several decades. As Goldberg told me, "Every piece of art in the show started as an index card."

The exhibition of the cards represents a dialogue between result and method for Goldberg, whose video, photography, and mixed media work has been exhibited widely for more than two decades. "It has a damaged gene in a way," the artist told me, of the show. "You have these things that are meant to be instrumental, but they're being made central." Goldberg's work is highly attuned to moments that are themselves instrumental, or else instrumentalizes ordinary phenomena to produce new ways of seeing. *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS* deftly consolidates the processes of earlier projects: video composites of strangers emerging from the New York City subway, in their liminal moment of confusion and reorientation (*Surfacing*, 2010–11); closeups of hungry lunch-goers, registering alternating expressions of brutality, desire, and perplexity, filling to-go boxes at food stations (*Salad Bar*, 2006); the elbows of truck drivers, one after another, poking from their cabs, the catalogue of vaguely comic body part yielding a character study of sorts (*Truck Drivers' Elbows*, 2005).

GOLDBERG'S older brother died of cystic fibrosis when Goldberg was three and his brother was fourteen. "That has shaped my understanding of being alive," he told me, of the improbability and absurdity of moving through the world as we do. Years after his death, Goldberg began working in his brother's darkroom, inspiring a photography practice, and his father "doubled down on a relationship" with him. They began making things together—his father, who was an engineer and also crafty, had a "super clunky, Rube Goldberg-esque aesthetic." They made magic tricks and carnival games, of plywood, Masonite, repurposed domestic hardware. That background, familiar to certain Long Island Jewish boys of the seventies who got deep



into magic, has also informed the aesthetic of the exhibition design of a show that synthesizes, in a way, the text of Goldberg's inspiration. His childhood, and relationship with his family, provides the emotional context.

Displayed in the entrance of *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS* is a video work of Goldberg, seated in a life-size vitrine walled with plastic, surrounded by a small vortex of cards. The dervish is animated by an air-blower mechanism, referencing the mist tent used by his brother to assist his breathing, and de-sanctifying the presentation of a project that, indeed, had always been spontaneous and in flux. Goldberg sits at the center, purposefully snatching whirling cards from the space around him and providing passing commentary into a microphone. He takes up morbidity with a hard-boiled irony, the universal embarrassment of bodily function with a pragmatic wink, the ego with a wry but sympathetic gaze. The cards, the experiences that they generate, in turn, in the blower-box reflect an entertaining interplay of Goldberg's particular subjectivity.

Displayed on another wall is a recording of the artist's father, *A System for Writing Thank You Notes*, 2001, reading a list of sentences for the notes he sent to those who paid their respects upon his mother's passing. The recitation of commonplaces of grief and gratitude, as difficult as the expressions of condolence they are meant to acknowledge, is made pithy by Goldberg's father's quiet, algorithmic precision. The desire to organize the sentiments and their minute variations, the attention to language and the impulse to index its components, bears a family resemblance to the logic behind Goldberg's cards. Pulling a card from the blower-box, though somewhat more frenetic and physical, is a system, too.

In the back gallery, a vitrine on a horizontal axis operated by a rotating hand-crank passingly evokes a raffle drum. The rolling vitrine, a whimsical vessel for surprising or generative thought, also nods to the previous formulation of a magic box. This space provides the site for conversations taking place several days a week with visitors to the gallery, using the index cards as prompts.

A SELECTION of photographs from different periods dot the exhibition space. *My Father's Camry Filled with Leaves*, from 2009, depicts Goldberg's father's car, which Goldberg inherited after his death, centered on a bed of pale grass at the edge of a crop of woods. The pale gray Camry is stuffed and spilling over with bright autumn leaves, looking somewhat abject but also tenderly adapted, memorialized.

The print resides near an eerie photograph of an installation in which a series of index cards was projected in the squat first-story window of a brick-bottomed A-frame house at night (*Inhibited Bites/Suburban*, 2017). The cards blaze like an old-fashioned television screen between brown shutters and against the brick: an inviting, Lynchian portal beside the black cavity of the doorway and the darkened second-story windows. Between the video work, the photographs, and the rotating housing, the cards live in as many forms as they were once meant to bookmark, or inspire.

A new work, the series *Other Peoples' Prescriptions* (2018), captures bespectacled people on the street—viewed from oblique, cheek-side angles—and the distended, microcosmic fields of vision that their glasses

produce. Their expressions are obscured; instead, the lenses of the anonymous surveyors point toward the road ahead, or else cant downward at, presumably, cell phones. The viewer is invited to consider, though not to parse, their gaze. Goldberg is attuned to approaching—by attentive observation, by creative and selective framing, by recontextualizing and repurposing—an approximation of the subjectivity of others, rooted in his own interiority. In the 3 × 5 lines of the index cards, as in those projects, the autobiographical, observational, and global are equally mixed, the cards serving both as an autonomous production and as an intellectual trace. The text-based observations of the index cards are, in a way, the class notes of



Goldberg's decades-long practice of observation, speculation, and empathy.

GOLDBERG has used the cards in previous installations, and in different types of presentations. He has drawn selections and projected them onto a screen, to spark and frame conversations with invited guests and audience members, including, on a few occasions, myself. These performances are less displays in erudition, opinion, or wit—though Goldberg's Wildean talents for each are always as prominent as the projection itself—than they are an embodiment of the process of spontaneous thought.

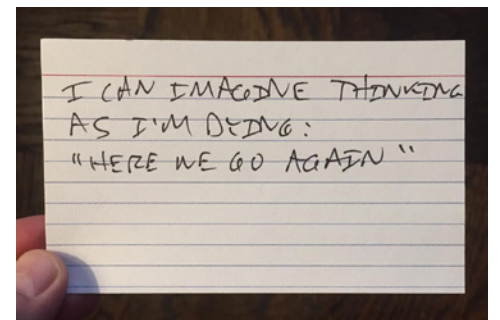
The artist's Instagram account collates the cards as nearly full-screen images, accompanied by the perennial thumb and index finger, where they serve too as a kind of tonic, a textual reclamation of the visual field. Presented alone, in the absence of the place or situation that caused him to distill a thought into a well-planned truth-like object, the cards function even more neatly as a site for identification. Skimming through a selection of them holds the excitement of traversing the pitted terrain of a strawberry or potato patch, or one's horoscope, to ask more openly than most art forms would admit to inviting: What resonates?



WHILE not *pro forma* political, Goldberg's work is urgent, frenetic, and generative, in ways that resist the phlegmatic complacency produced by coursing the same cognitive pathways and social-media feeds each day. It is concerned with regret and guilt, hubris and the humiliations of time, ego, and mortality. It is also, unsurprisingly, quite funny—the double-edged pathos of one who suggests self-awareness without grandiosity. In one of our conversations, observing that I drew cards with my left hand, Goldberg told me, "I stayed with a bad therapist for a year longer than I should have, because he was a lefty. I just assumed he had some

some thing I didn't." Still, Goldberg is possessed of his own sense of agency and even responsibility for someone with such a darkly comic take on the world we live in, and the people we live alongside, and the vessels in which we do it. The titling of the show, *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS*, is characteristically pragmatic: "At least every act of promoting it will contain a call to modest political action," he writes. "Also, I think my art is kind of like the midterm elections: it focuses on things that go overlooked or are considered unworthy of attention; it is sometimes overly local."

Goldberg is interested in the relationship one has to a highly anticipated moment, after it's over—in conducting the anticipatory post-mortem. "What will it feel like on November 7th," the day after the election, he wondered. "It reminds me of when I used to have a day job, I would have this feeling of, when the day passed quickly, 'It's 3 o'clock. I'm going to die soon.'" The futility of looking forward to something, of certain or uncertain outcome, well knowing that the moment will pass, and inevitably, in some way, disappoint, captures some of the contradictory good-humored fatalism, the Goldberg cognitive dissonance, of a solo art show entitled, *VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS*. The show provokes on a more cellular level. "I realize that this title might preach to the choir," he continues. "But I don't think everyone in the choir voted in the midterm elections."



Thank you to these people and organizations who helped make this show: Alexander Man Ho, Alix Pearlstein, Annie Levy, Bridget Leslie, Candace Moeller, Charlie Theobald, Cora Fisher, Cristin Tierney, Eric Rockey, Jane Wang, Jacques Servin, Karen Kaliski, Ken Kaliski, Kevin Graham, Larry Auerbach, Larry Krone, Maddy Sinnock, Maria Macias, Matt Bockelman, My Own Color Lab, Nate Gassaway, Rachel Lipstein, Roger Kingsepp, Sandi Dubowski, Shirin Mazdeyasna, Siena Art Institute, Sue Simon, The Creative Resistance, Tod Lippy, Tumbling Dice, Umber Majeed, William Petroni, Yo-E Ryou, Marina Ancona and especially Bernhard Blythe, Jeff Hiller, Jennifer Callahan, and Ria Roberts.

VOTE IN THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS
Cristin Tierney Gallery
540 W. 28th Street, NYC
October 25–December 15, 2018
Tuesday through Saturday 10am–6pm
All day performances at the gallery
most Fridays and Saturdays

