I really thought I was getting much better about newspapers. I can now read a paper that someone else has already looked at without too much trouble. And although it’s still my habit to take a paper from the middle of the stack, I can cope with the top copy, even if it’s torn or creased. But the other day I was in one of those cafés where they leave papers for you to read with your coffee. The paper I usually read was not available so I took another one. I don’t much care for it, so I saw it. On a nearby table. And the woman eating her soup wasn’t even reading it. Perhaps it was her own copy, I thought, making impossible the little performance in which one sidles up to the table and places a hand on the paper, saying “May I?” As it became clear that she was in fact about to leave, the tension rose. Would she leave the paper? And if so, would I get it first or would some other newsprint-deprived intellectual sidle in ahead of me? There was an awkward moment before I could give up pretense but then I accepted it: “Hello. My name is Nicholas and I’m a newspaper addict.”

As habits go, newspapers are reasonably cheap and fairly harmless. Like all addictions, they can lead you into peculiar and unsociable behavior. It need hardly be said that for the true paper gourmand, only the right printed pulp will do. In my case, it’s The Guardian, sometimes referred to by the more affected addict as The Manchester Guardian. It’s a liberal, dissenting journal, originally from the northern English manufacturing town of Manchester. Now the offices are located in Clerkenwell in London, across from the Marx Library with its memorabilia of Lenin, and the gate to which John Ball led the Peasant’s Rebellion in the fourteenth century. In this neighborhood, not long ago, lost causes were easily forgotten in the many pubs of the area. Now they are increasingly gastro-pubs, with fine wines and restaurant-quality food, targeting a more conservative audience.

When I was younger, just finding a copy of The Guardian was often an achievement. With its vaguely left politics and conservative returns policy (meaning that if a shop didn’t sell a copy it was stuck with it), The Guardian was hard to find. This simply appealed to the collector in me. With a Labour government in its second term in Britain, The Guardian is now ubiquitous there. Even in Europe, a slimmed-down version can be found quite easily in the major cities of France, Italy, and Spain—all countries with impressive newspaper habits. From a recent trip, I can report that while the paper is everywhere in Stockholm, it is not yet available in the Arctic cities of Sweden—I did try, yes.

In the United States, a collector can still find some sport. As a resident alien, my mental map of major U.S. cities is distorted by the routes required to pass by Guardian vendors. It’s Situationism for the newspaper addict, an apparently random walk, concealing a personal and political purpose. In New York, for instance, the appeal of NoLita is not the ridiculously expensive fashion-victim stores but the little South Asian grocery that is a reliable Guardian source. If going to the Strand, New York’s still-surviving secondhand bookstore, get off the subway a stop early to hit the newspaper shop on 23rd and Broadway. On St. Mark’s Place, there’s a shop with an amusing variation. Here they print out copies of the same day’s paper from an online supplier onto broadsheet-size paper. I still prefer the day-old copies on newsprint, but the new version will do in a pinch. Why not? Or why not simply access the very good website? It’s about the body and a
certain comfort that comes from the feel and smell of a commodity that has become an old friend, which the hunched, impersonal reading of a laptop screen cannot replicate. I grow old.

On the West Coast, things are harder. When I lived in Los Angeles ten years ago, you had to get to the Westwood newspaper stand on the day that the weekly overseas Guardian came out or forget it for another week. Now things have happily improved. Next to the fashionable King’s Road Café on Beverly—the new Melrose, apparently—is a newspaper stand that could often supply my habit. I could sit reading as don’t-even-think-of-looking-at-me supermodels passed by with their loud, attention-seeking dogs.

So what’s it all about? Newspapers seem to be a guy thing on the whole. My father was known as The Newspaper to my friends, who saw nothing of him except his hands clasping the upheld paper in the corner of the room. Within the family he was notorious for reading clips out of the paper at mealtimes to prevent conversation. So the classic organ of the public sphere is also a rather effective masculine device for avoiding the private realm of the home. It’s a gesture of weakness as well, a refusal to engage in social life. Some of this charge sticks to me, for even though my favorite place to read the paper is in a café or bar, that certainly implies the absence of children and is really a solitary pursuit.

There’s more to it than that. In L.A., one of the more interesting cultural divides was between readers of the Los Angeles Times and its grayer sibling the New York Times. As a supplement to my global reading, I always read local papers, so I reveled in the odd mix of conservative editorials and spaced-out showbiz gossip that is the Los Angeles Times. People who define themselves as local—a tricky question in L.A., as in other diasporic capitals—would get very irate at New York Times readers. Perceived as a declaration of East Coast supremacy, the Times question heated more than one dinner party. Guardian readership in the U.S. tends not to be so controversial, as its strong foreign news coverage, and editorials that occasionally take issue with Washington, make it respectable liberal reading rather than Anglophile pretension.

I left England with few regrets. So why do I waste time and money chasing down old copies of a British newspaper? The hard truth about identity is that only so much of it can be chosen. The rest is what you’ve got to deal with. I have to deal with Englishness, much as I would rather not. My newspaper allows me an intensely critical engagement that turns emotion into righteous indignation. Behind that layer, inevitably, is another. Today’s Guardian sports a designer-friendly logo in blue italics and black roman font. It’s starting to look dated now, a product of the first wave of 1980s postmodernism. Behind that logo, I see the ghost of another masthead, in simple block capitals, black throughout and rather smudgy. This resolutely antidesigner broadsheet was the Guardian that my parents used to read when I was a small child in the terraced house, converted like so many others from a working-class cottage by means of “knocking through” the downstairs rooms, transforming them into one living space, and adding an indoor bathroom. When they moved to a grander semidetached, they started to take the Time of London, then still the “paper of record.” In finding each fresh, untouched copy of the Guardian, do I detect a hint of that early childhood security in which everything seemed safe and enticing, a world yet to be read? Perhaps—but it really is a good paper.
Robert Gober. Newspaper, 1992. Photolithography on archival (Mohawk Superfine) paper, twine. 6 x 16 ⅜ x 13 ¾ in. (15.2 x 41.3 x 33.7 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements.
U.S. CRUISE MISSILES STRIKE SUDAN AND AFGHAN TARGETS TIED TO TERRORIST NETWORK

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DRESS FOR SEXINESS

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For each installation, Arcega makes nooses from newspapers, one for each day of the week. Relating the work to its material, the artist calls it "a physical translation of most of its content."

Steven Siegel. *Scale*, 2002. Newspaper. Installation view, Abington Art Center, Jenkintown, Penn. 17 x 16 x 7 ft. (518.1 x 487.7 x 213.4 cm).

Felt as if the way
were opening to the
unknown nourishment.

Nicholas Mirzoeff is Professor of Art and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

The images that accompany this essay were compiled by Emily Watson, the editorial assistant to *Art Journal*. She holds a B.A. from Oberlin College and this May received her M.F.A. in Metals from the State University of New York at New Paltz.

Michael Arcega is an interdisciplinary artist working primarily in sculpture and installations. His art, though visual, revolves largely around language. He lives and works in San Francisco.


Lesley Dill has been the subject of several museum exhibitions, including Lesley Dill: A Ten-Year Survey, organized by the Samuel S. Dorsky Museum at the State University of New York, New Paltz, and currently traveling to Colorado, Hawaii, Arizona, and Washington, D.C. This year, Dill will have her sixth solo exhibition since 1995 with the George Adams Gallery in New York City.

Robert Gober's work has been exhibited at the Paula Cooper Gallery, the 49th Venice Biennale, Dia Center for the Arts, Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), Walker Art Center, and the 2000 Whitney Biennial, as well as numerous other sites worldwide. His most recent exhibition, Robert Gober Displacements, was shown at Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Kunst, Oslo, through April.

Steven Siegel has sited pieces in Italy, Denmark, Russia, and England and all over the United States. They are placed in nature conservancies, universities, sculpture parks, and art centers. A graduate of Hampshire College (1976) and Pratt Institute, Siegel resides in the Hudson River Valley of New York.

Wang Youshen is the current art editor of the *Beijing Youth Daily*, published in Beijing. He has participated in exhibitions in Australia, Germany, Italy, the United States, and China.

The sculptor Yin Peet was born in Taiwan. Her work pushes the boundaries of the use of conventional sculptural materials into media that include time, sound, movement, and text. Her work has frequently been seen in the United States, Taiwan, Croatia, England, Hungary, Hong Kong, and Nepal and has received numerous awards. www.yinpeetsculpture.com