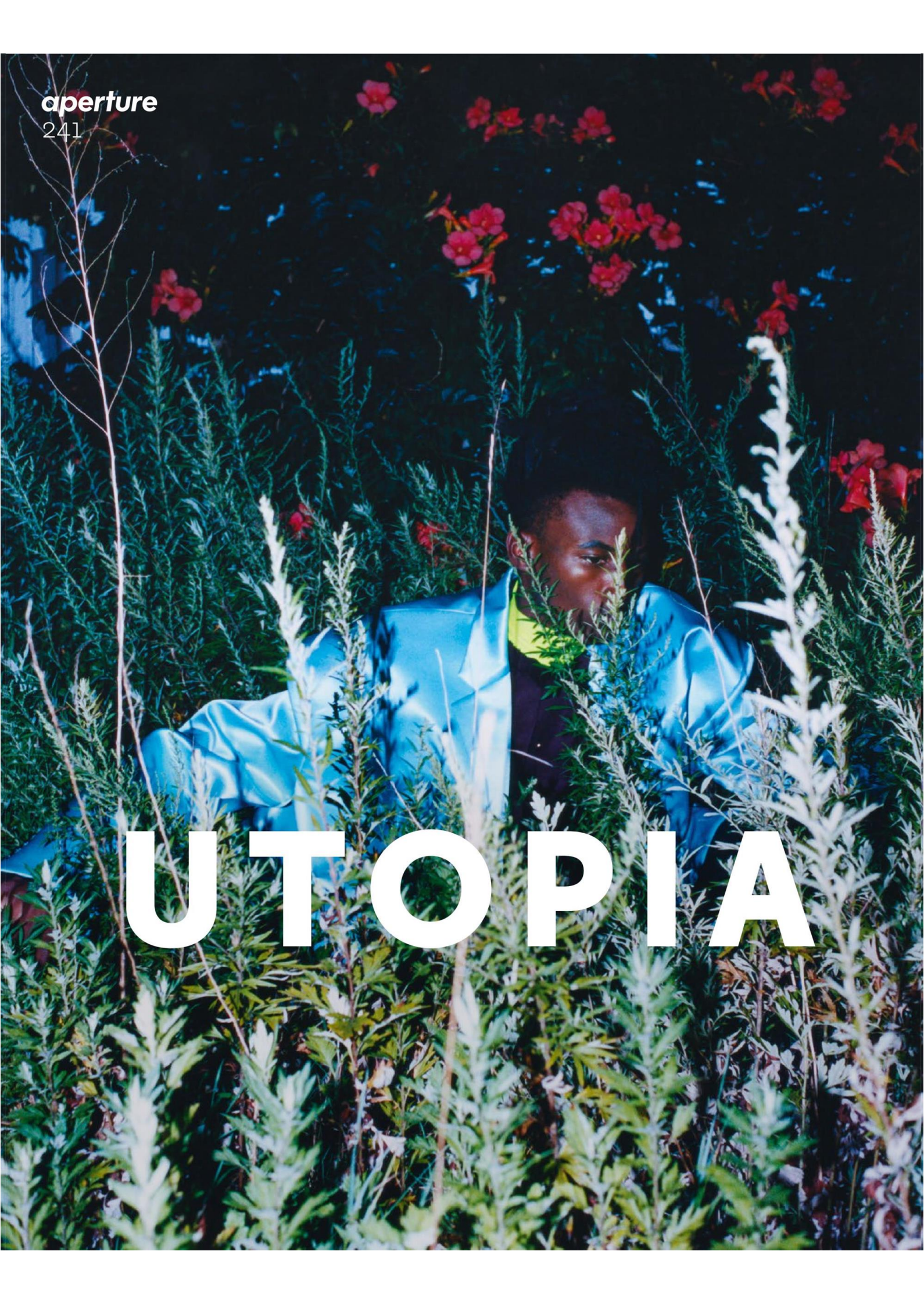


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UTOPIA



Chris Jennings

Utopia by Subtraction

It was less than a century after Thomas More's beheading that the adjective *utopian* became shorthand for naive or outlandish aspirations. That is a shame. Far from being impractical, the utopian imagination is a sharp-edged tool for comprehending the world and its discontents. Like certain photographs, visions of utopia offer a glimpse beyond the all-eclipsing present, revealing possibilities obscured by the torrent of daily life.

Early dreams of utopia were wrapped up in fantasies of distant, unknown lands. Following the format laid down by More in 1516, most literary utopias were travelogues: fictional voyages to some hidden Shangri-La where people had finally figured out how to live in harmony. When the utopian imagination began to run out of blank space on the map (not that there had ever been any), it turned to the calendar. Utopia ceased to be a place; it became an era. Some looked backward, seeking paradise in the green shade of prehistory. Others squinted toward the horizon, speculating about a golden age to come: the end of history, the withering away of the state, New Jerusalem, Epcot. The Enlightenment's promise of ineluctable progress—the fading of superstition, the gradual spread of reason and knowledge—seemed to practically guarantee a future of peace and abundance. Despite these evolving visions, dreams of the perfect society have never really been about distant islands or gleaming futures. Utopia is diagnostic. It is a way to see the present anew and to give some shape and color to our hopes and grievances.

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While the old faith in unceasing progress has had a rough few years, the utopian imagination tends to stir when the world feels simultaneously wrecked and malleable. The historian Eric Hobsbawm described the interlocking economic and ideological upheavals of the French and industrial revolutions as the “dual revolution.” A quieter sort of dual revolution seems to be underway in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic upended all the familiar rhythms of life. Everyone, even those with the luxury of hunkering down, ventured out into familiar spaces rendered strange. The inequities riddling American life lit up like radioactive dye in a PET scan. The world felt suspended, provisional, between here and there. And then George Floyd was murdered on camera, his name added to a very long list. Floyd's death accelerated the ever-deferred reckoning over state violence against people of color as well as over the countless forces which abet and undergird that

violence. The pandemic and the movement for Black lives have very different causes, but the tenor of the uprising was clearly influenced by the season of lockdown from which it sprang.

The thing which distinguishes utopianism from other forms of political or moral suasion is that it presents the imagination with a world in which certain dramatic changes have already been undertaken. So, for instance, instead of writing a tract on the hazards of landed aristocracy in England, More dreamed up the communist republic of Utopia and sent his guileless narrator off to have a look around on our behalf. Utopianism invites us to weigh radical reforms by the most immediate and humane criteria: Do these people seem like real people? Would that even work? Would I want to live in such a place? (Very often the answer is no.)

The standard critique of utopianism is that society cannot be invented in advance. No imagined “city of words,” as Plato called his own fictional republic, could ever contain anything so variable, so ambivalent, so unruly as human beings. The philosopher Robert Nozick advised would-be utopians to read Shakespeare, Austen, and Dostoyevsky as a refresher course on human complexity. Fair enough. Most utopias, both literary and experimental, depend upon the proliferation of novel institutions and social structures. More's fictional republic included an elaborate scheme for collectivized farming and shockingly aggressive immigration control. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, published in 1948, imagined a society made idyllic through stringent behavioral engineering. The French utopian Charles Fourier rallied workers to build Versailles-like palaces in which every snack and sex act would be scheduled down to the minute. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had several good friends swept up in the American Fourier craze of the 1840s, complained that the Frenchman “had skipped no fact but one, namely, Life.”

In recent months, the most urgent social movements have not proposed the sort of elaborate mechanisms for human flourishing that define the utopian canon. Posters and graffiti in Minneapolis, Louisville, Brooklyn, and elsewhere proclaim verbs of subtraction: Defund! Dismantle! Abolish! Instead of creating new entities, citizens clamor for the removal of existing ones—agencies, symbols, departments, customs, even entire professions—many of which were forged in fear or malice and have persisted through inertia, white supremacy, and a shameful disregard for life. Some of the most basic and eternal-seeming features of our society are themselves mere inventions. The utopianism suited to our wrecked but malleable present might be one that freely envisions a world without such institutions.

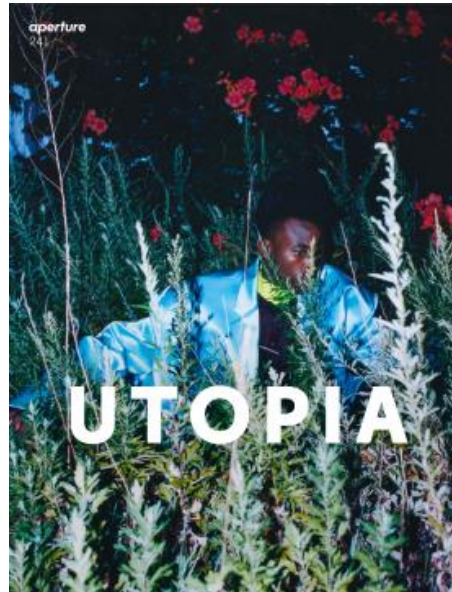
Chris Jennings is the author of *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (2017).

Terri Loewenthal,
Psychscape 69
(Tonopah, NV), 2017
Courtesy the artist; Jackson
Fine Art, Atlanta; and CULT
Aimee Friberg Exhibitions,
San Francisco



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