

can we mean what we say



David Antin

its a pleasure being back here in paris after quite a few years
seeing so many people i know and others i might like to know but
i come to do a talk in english parce que je suis poète en anglais et
je ne suis pas poète en francais

i don't know what kind of language thinking goes
on in but for me it seems somehow to be close to talking and i
talk and i make what i can out of it i do the best i can and i came
here because i thought this place paris was a good place to
think in public and of course because friends invited me but i
was thinking of a work by a philosopher named stanley cavell an
extremely interesting book called *must we mean what we say* and as i
was thinking of that book recently i realized there was a question i
wanted to ask before dealing with that obligation which was can
we mean what we say and i want to ask that question now so i'm
calling this piece

can we mean what we say and the reason i was thinking about
this i was remembering how i have often represented an american
fascination with consumer goods

now i'm a pretty poor consumer

i hate shopping but we have a stereo system on which we listen to music and the amplifier broke down wed had it for nearly twenty years and i couldn't get another one just like it so i spent a little time reading up on amplifiers because i suspected they'd changed a lot since i bought my last one and they had they not only amplified better with less distortion and noise but they did more things now they were called upon to drive the sound of a vcr a cd player a dvd player as well as the tv and the satellite transmission system so i went out and bought an amplifier that does too much

all i'd wanted was a tuner amplifier to play music the way i wanted to hear it to deliver a refined sound to the four speakers hooked up to my fm radio my cd collection and the tv but this amplifier is set up to accommodate five six and eight speaker systems with dolby or surround sound for theatrical spaces for intimate spaces employing digital or analog reproduction

so i went out and bought an amplifier that does too much all i'd wanted was an amplifier that played music the way i wanted to hear it and i'd wanted to keep it simple but it had to drive the sound from our television set our vcr and dvd player and from the satellite transmission system and there were all these connections and each one required its own remote controller so now we have four separate remote controllers and its hard to remember which is which to make it louder you use this one to change the tv channel you use another to control the dvd player another and the vcr is controlled by yet another so that by the time you're through you've had an exercise in gymnastics because you often forget which control is which and you go back and sit down with the wrong control in your hand and then you have to go back and get the right one and i'm terrible about this

i used to be much better with technical devices i was very good at repairing old machines i used to do a lot of my own car repairs

but as i've grown older i seem to have lost patience with my machines or maybe its that when i was younger my machines were much older and I had more sympathy for them because they always seemed to need help i did much of the work on my old cars old cars were things i dealt with reasonably i thought i never owned a

new car i never bought a new car except once a brand new honda accord and i promptly traded it to my son for his old volvo p1800 because he was going away to ucla and didn't want to nurse a finicky classic with a manual transmission in smog choked los angeles traffic somehow i've always had an attachment to old cars something about the aging machine seemed to appeal to me because it shared a condition with the rest of us all of us fragile temporary semi steady state systems and i had a car an old cadillac that i bought many years after its birth so to speak it was a 1950 cadillac and i got it in 1961 or so we were living upstate in a part of upstate new york that gets very cold and snowy like paris probably except its not near the ocean its in the mountains and in the winter the car would freeze up it had a very small battery a six volt battery and in order to keep it from going dead i had to increase the battery charge to do which i had to get the generator to keep charging the battery past the six volt barrier at which charging was cut off by a voltage regulator in those days all cars had a voltage regulator which was a kind of switch operated by a solenoid so all i had to do was open up the voltage regulator and take up a couple of coils on the spring holding the iron core in place and voila the charging continues till i have a ten volt battery try and do that now now theres no such thing as simple as a voltage regulator with a solenoid switch everything is controlled by micro computers you cant go into your car with a screwdriver

back in the fifties i had a very eccentric car when i was living in in new york i was living in greenwich village where things could be stolen out from under your seat in a bus and i had a car that was theft proof absolutely theft proof it was an english four-seat convertible also very aged a sunbeam talbot a very snappy little car but the mechanic who'd repaired it for the first time had installed the gearshift backwards so that when you shifted the car into first it went into reverse only someone who knew the car would know this so i figured anybody who tried to steal the car would be frightened to death he would put the car into first and suddenly the car would slam into the car parked in back of it and the car thief would panic and run away and the car was never stolen and i never corrected the gear shift so you can see that my relationship to these machines was a

kind of respect for the idiosyncracies of age and a tendency toward making do

you see the perfection of technology has always seemed to me a dubious quest because there is a window of opportunity during which the technological advances produce brilliant results and its the moment between the time when you finish debugging your machine and the moment when the machine begins to deteriorate or the software begins to fail its the moment of perfection and this moment can be very small very often machines new machines are marketed with bugs in them that have never been discovered and you have to take your chances with them so i had never arrived at that condition which would make me look for the newest and the best and i tended to feel somewhat contemptuous of people who were always looking for the best and newest thing and it wasn't until i got familiar with michael that i had to rethink my relationship to this attitude

michael was a second cousin of eleanors he was a very energetic young guy who'd been bouncing around for several years in the sometimes cheerful sometimes miserable way of lots of young guys in their twenties with the usual share of sex drugs alcohol and lots of sailing

when we first got to know him he'd dropped in and out of two colleges and was into a bad marriage in boston while running a small design shop and working as a paramedic he'd come out to berkeley to help with his forty two year old uncles dying and maybe it was joels untimely dying at the beginning of a great scholarly career leaving the achievement of one brilliant book behind him that led michael to rethink his own life which he was beginning to feel was insufficiently ordered and he felt it so strongly that shortly after joel died he decided to join the army hoping its rigid military order would serve as an armature for his own personal order or as a kind of benevolent strait jacket providing him with a kind of stiffness against all the looseness he came to feel was wasting his life i think he saw joining the army as something like joining the boy scouts camping out with field trips to interesting places like honduras somalia or cambodia and i suspect he was even looking forward to basic training

because the first time we really got together with him was in san diego a few weeks after joel died he and his wife had split up she'd moved back to her parents somewhere in the middle west and hed joined

the army and moved to san diego where elly and i were teaching at the university of california we'd invited him to dinner and because our place was a little hard to find we arranged for him to meet us at the university but as a stranger to the school he'd parked in an illegal place where he would surely get a ticket and i was worried about him getting a ticket so i said lets go get the car and get you out of there and he starts running in the direction of the car and the two of us are sprinting tearing through eucalyptus groves and around islands of modernist buildings to get to his car before he gets a ticket from some imaginary narrow eyed meter maid who is always ready to give you a ticket we're both chugging away at full speed for nearly a half mile when we arrive breathlessly and happily to discover that his flagrantly illegally parked jeep has not been ticketed and there is no sign of a meter maid so the first time i saw him in action we were sprinting together and sprinting together gives you a kind of feeling of good fellowship that could be the beginning of a warm family friendship but just as we were getting to know him he was spirited away called up to the elder george bush's first gulf war

michael had enlisted in something called special forces a nasty outfit made up of small groups of specialists trained for covert and unconventional warfare here was this good-natured young american with a taste for adventure who wanted to help people preparing to crawl out of submarines or parachute by night into exotic places to conduct quick strikes in support of american foreign policy so they trained him to be their medical officer which wasn't hard to do since he'd had lots of experience working as a paramedic back in boston but before we could really get to know him he got swept up into the first iraq war which was supposed to defend kuwait against saddam hussein and while it took a fair degree of american optimism and innocence to see this war proceeding from a desire to defend the marvelous democracy of kuwait that was just what the bush administration was selling what the american news media were promoting and what the american public was buying i mean the only reason to believe that america had to come to the defense of the somewhat imperfect democracy of kuwait was oil which kuwait had and iraq wanted oil and saudi arabia which was situated right next to kuwait and had even more oil and was americas trading

partner in the turbulent oil world of the middle east so it was saudi arabia we were defending

but all of this was operating in a cloud far above michael's head michael always saw himself as ready to be doing the good thing so what could we do before he was shipped off we got him a book of basic iraqi arabic containing useful phrases and a little bit of grammar since we knew perfectly well that if any arabs were captured by his unit he would do the best he could to save their lives but they'd be frightened to death feeling that he would naturally try to kill them so i told him here's this phrase book it will teach you to say many pleasant things in arabic if you master it even though you won't be able to understand much of what the iraqis say to you but they'll probably feel somewhat reassured to hear someone trying to speak to them in their own language and as it turned out he had to treat wounded iraqi prisoners and they found it reassuring to hear an american talking their language even if he talked with a funny accent and couldn't understand much of what they were saying to him

anyway he survived this war and he came back and became a kind of brilliant young businessman which you might not have expected from this rough and ready cheerful kid that he still was but he got into something for which he had a great talent something that is central to the centrality of consumption he got into designing kitchens now if you're like me you're not sure what that means or maybe you all know about designing kitchens but i don't or didn't until nineteen ninety one or two because we had an old house with an elderly kitchen that was really inefficient that we'd lived with for fifteen years and since we were going to renovate the whole house our inefficient kitchen became a prime target for renewal but as we quickly learned architects are not specialists in kitchen design you need a kitchen designer so we went to michael who by this time was a successful kitchen designer

now designing kitchens i thought it was just a matter of putting the implements in place and that was it but there is no that that's it you have to decide where to put the sinks and work counters where to place the dishwasher the microwave the oven the refrigerator the toaster you don't just put the implements in place you have to decide on what kind of implements and what kind of storage spaces

how many shelves cabinets and drawers and where to put a possible breakfast nook with table space and where you want to put your stereo speakers if you want to listen to music there and maybe a tv and that's not the half of it you have to decide how you want to live in this space

it's an interior architectural career and we were a little baffled by it so we asked michael for advice and michael came and offered us an array of choices that were brilliant and baffling did we want granite table tops or marble we didn't know it had never occurred to us in our old inefficient kitchen you know you run your hand over a piece of granite and it feels good and the idea of eating a three minute egg off a billion year old piece of igneous rock is intriguing better than the marble which makes you feel like you're eating off a piece of the parthenon or a memorial slab from a cemetery so the granite seemed better i thought of the sleek carved granite used for statues of pharaohs but museums take care of them how would it go if we spilled scrambled eggs on it or placed a hot pan on it so we figured we'd go for stainless steel what can you do to stainless steel it scratches but so what and maple veneer for all the cabinets wood and steel that would give our kitchen a resolutely modern look wouldn't it

it begins to sound like a sculptural enterprise and look like an art work and the cost of it is the cost of an art work some art works anyway so you wind up having a kitchen designed for you it feels good but you don't know how well you can live in it until you have it in place and nobody knows that not even michael and he knew everything else about how it would look and feel so we said let's go for it stainless steel and maple you know stainless steel scratches endlessly but it looks good anyway and you can wipe anything off it that isn't a total catastrophe unless you drop hydrochloric acid on it which is something we don't carry around in the kitchen

but michael's ambitions extended beyond kitchens he was designing for all parts of the house bathrooms parlors media centers interior design for all parts of the house means you know how to house in a manner that is appropriate to them in the manner that they deserve

the extraordinary elements that form contemporary living in middle class america all these wonderful devices you know the dvd players the cd players the video cassette recorders and eventually you get dragged into this world too

so michael's world was expanding he had a pricey little shop in chic del mar where he and his growing team designed interiors for the expensive houses of rancho santa fe point loma and coronado his designs were documented in the sleek trade journals and he was invited to join a group of up and coming young san diego business men that met once a month to exchange ideas and discuss opportunities for investment and expansion and because michael was a very energetic and colorful guy with a take charge sensibility he became a central figure in the group he'd lived on a boat in the marina with a beautiful young vietnamese wife and two beautiful eurasian children apparently he had a taste for vietnamese women because he had married two of them one the first one was a very tough take charge woman and by the time he'd had a child with her he found out she was too take charge for him or simply that two take charge people can't live together under the same roof so he ran off with her cousin a seemingly sweet very shy young vietnamese girl who did fingernails in her cousin's beauty parlor so it's hard to tell exactly what kind of communicative life they had together but they seemed affectionate and they had two beautiful children so their sex life must have been pretty good

so there he was living the good american life supporting two wives and three children and moving up moving up economically and socially he was able to move off his boat and buy a house in claremont that wasn't as chic as del mar but with a big yard on a quiet street a good public school and an almost affordable mortgage and he became a homeowner with standing in the community he'd organized the neighborhood association to lobby the city for better police protection and arranged for his business group to supply laptops to the local public school and he had all these things in his life he had more things in his life than i have ever known but he used them see most americans i know don't use all the things they have he had a camper a camper that was a factory for living to quote le corbusier you could do everything with it it came with room for himself and his wife and the three children to sleep for the kids to sit and watch tv

while he was driving it had a dining table that turned into a drafting table or a site for his laptop and scanner when he stayed up to work when his wife and kids were sleeping it had a refrigerator and freezer for the fish they caught a cook stove and a shower all prepared for when he took his wife and kids to the mountains for camping in the spring and summer or in the winter for skiing michael was a great skier and was determined to teach his whole family to ski as he had taught all of them to fish his oldest was already a very proficient skier doing the most difficult ski slopes at the age of eight and michael was very proud of andrew for doing it but thuuy who was all right with fishing and okay with swimming because they had the boat felt that her four year old and two year old were still too young for skiing and drew the line against it

what's curious is that he had all these great toys but they weren't just toys because every one of them was a source of serious pleasure enjoyed with a kind of precise connoisseurship intent on extracting the fullest possible experience out of his material life

which i found interesting because it never occurred to me to want that i mean i learned to ski when i was fifty and i like skiing modestly steep slopes because i like the serene feeling of being on skis and the complete attention you have to pay to the ground just a few feet in front of you but i wasn't terribly interested in competing against the greatest hardships and running the toughest moguls so you can see i'm sort of lackadaisical about it but michael was into everything intensely and he was into watching football now we like to watch football games and i was sorry we'd just missed a great football game we missed the nfc championship game we would have liked to have seen it and michael had invited us to come watch it on his large screen tv because he was so into it he got the best television you could conceivably buy it was so large you were afraid you were going to be hit by one of the linemen but it also had so sharp an image that you could hardly believe it it was sharper than life because when a lineman is that close to you you don't see him so sharply unless you have very strange eyes i can tell you that for sure because i did have experience of that

but michael would research the catalogues i don't know how many of you look at catalogues for electronic equipment there's an

awful lot of technical information in there and much of it is irrelevant for you while the information you want is often not available

but if you ransack enough catalogues and you treat them as if you were doing a serious scientific study you can eventually come out with what michael came out with he came out with the most amazing tv set that i would not have had in my living room on my life

but he had two of them one in the living room and one for the bedroom in case he happened to want to watch tv while lying in bed and still half asleep which may be interesting but not to me on the other hand he savored technical toys the way wine fanciers savor the great wines he could tell the difference between one model television set and another whether you wanted a plasma model or a liquid crystal model for this particular room the way wine fanciers can tell you which chateau has better wines for which particular vintage year and whether the grapes grew on the right side of the hill or the left

so michael knew about television sets which kind of set was better in a sunny room and which was better in a shady room because after all you have to realize that the glare from the sun will in fact distort whats on the television set as you want to know how many feet you had to have between the tv screen and your sofa for the sharpest image because you don't want to lose the contour of the lineman the great lineman charging you at the most dramatic moment

you want to watch the quarterback getting sacked with great precision the way you may want to see the people in the beirut marketplace being blown up by suicide bombs with the same precision

so you see how all of these things these things were selected with great precision and how he enjoyed all these things with an intense and precise pleasure that he wanted to convey to others he had a little jeep and a camper and a boat with a little motor launch and he persuaded us to come out on his boat with him once and his little nine year old was steering us around the bay in the little motor launch with great skill that he had learned from michael and you could see how michael's life was a life of incredibly significant pleasure in americas system of consumption that i had always underrated the precision and richness of that somehow always felt alien to me and yet we live a comfortable life ourselves its not like we dont live a comfortable life but somehow my sympathies are often with people like this couple

we knew jim and chris

jim was a kind of survivalist at least in his head a survivalist who was always thinking this country was out to get him the united states of america was out to get him no matter what he was doing by raising taxes on his meager income or complicating his veterans benefits so badly he almost never applied for them when he was sick

if it wasn't taxes they were out to get him with they were out to make wars that would infringe his right to pee in public or whatever i don't know everything he was objecting to and i agreed with him about some of it but he would talk your head off about what was wrong with the american government the big brother that was always looking over your shoulder keeping records of where you were how much money you had in the bank what kind of car you were driving how old it was and who you bought it from who you called on the telephone and who called you it got so bad he closed his bank account got rid of his telephone and the only way you could reach him was through chris who kept her cell phone and drivers license and a small savings account in a little florida bank

he was a veteran of some war or another probably the korean war and he was a very tiny little guy who talked a fierce line but actually was one of the sweetest people we knew and he and his wife lived a kind of nomadic life in a camper that was always breaking down as he was on his way from one job to another you know these are people without medical care these are people without insurance these are people with no future only the present and they're surviving so his survivalism was not so much an armed resistance to the government as it was an attempt to live outside the system and they had this aged camper that was always breaking down he would travel to take temporary jobs in miami or in escondido in southern california where he'd work for a while in construction he'd get called to repair a roof or build a new driveway but these jobs were always temporary lasting a week or a month and they never paid benefits though recently they got lucky and hooked on with a traveling fair for which jim ran one of the food booths and chris dressed up like a gypsy and told fortunes which did pay some health benefits because chris also did the books but they were always at the edge of trouble

at the same time they were generous and amiable people who were

also reliable marcia ellys sister was dying of cancer and we needed people to take care of her and who took care of her? and who took care of our aristocratic pianist actress scriptwriter but this gentle scruffy looking and reliable couple they took care of her for months and they attended her with the greatest tenderness these two survivors who lived like so many other americans so far beneath the level of american middle class consumption they can hardly be classed as consumers because they're barely scraping it together but this didn't make them bitter it didn't make either of them bitter

on the other hand there are those for whom this kind of living forms a kind of pool of deep dark bitterness and in the course of living this bitterness seethes into something more problematic it wasn't the case with jim and chris but as i say there are many people who live below the level of affluence that is americas surface america is not all affluence and wealth and some of this lack of wealth is desperate some of it is so desperate that it forms like bile in the system and what happens when somebody from below the surface at some point erupts into the lives of people living at the surface which itself is sometimes roiled by crises

my cousin our second cousin got the bad news that his wife had cancer i believe it was a kind of rare form of cancer i think it was an adrenal cancer or something of that sort but the cancer was treatable treatable apparently with radiation with severe radiation maybe it wasn't adrenal cancer maybe it was ovarian or cervical cancer im sorry it was cervical cancer it was cervical cancer and it was treatable

but it was a very horrifying rigorous treatment that took place over a month after the surgery and michael was always at hand while his business was going on and he carried on his business by working late into the night designing kitchens but during the day he would be with his wife in the hospital when she had to be there he would take her to the hospital he would take their two kids to school and then he would drive back to the hospital park his camper in the parking lot of the hospital using it as his office drawing up plans and working the telephone when she was being treated rushing upstairs to be with when she needed him and carrying on his design work late into the night in his parking lot office on nearly no sleep

and somehow he was managing all the time to keep it all together with the same incredible good cheer with which we had sprinted across the campus at ucsd to make sure that he didn't get a ticket and then at the end of several months of treatment they got the good news thuuy's cancer was in remission so they decided to celebrate michael and thuuy decided to celebrate by going out with their two closest friends to this great after dinner place called extraordinary desserts a patisserie that made the most shamefully extravagant desserts the kind of desserts that until this patisserie made them existed only in the dreams of a mad pastry chef or his most decadent customers éclairs dripping chocolate and packed with whipped cream tarts dusted with cinnamon and nutmeg laced with cointreau and adorned with shaved almonds and glazed fruit and napoleons loaded with enough strata of custard to trigger a heart attack and they went there with this other couple to celebrate thuuy's recovery

so they were sitting in this small cafe which has a few tables set apart from the take out counter and the display cases they were sitting there nibbling their pastries over a sweet sauterne they had brought for the occasion and these two attractive young couples were having a great time talking and laughing when a scruffy looking guy walked in from the street in a frayed pair of jeans and a beaten-up jean jacket and came to a stop just inside the doorway standing about five feet away from their table staring at michael who had been laughing uproariously at something his friend had just said when michael noticed him still standing there so seeing something was wrong michael says to the guy can i help you and the guy mumbled something apparently incoherent and incomprehensible and michael realizing this could be something of a problem called over the waiter and said i think you should call the police the waiter sent over their bouncer and the bouncer came and escorted the guy out the door ten minutes later the man came quietly back in with a gun michael never saw him and he shot michael in the head and blew the back of his head off he fired his second round at michael's friend who'd lunged suddenly to protect his wife and the bullet grazed his head and lodged in his shoulder the man then walked quietly out of the café and michael was dead

the two worlds came together in this strange and terrible way and nothing is explained by the way the two worlds came together a

stranger comes into the café maybe with the intention of treating himself to a pear tart or a charlotte russe and is overcome by the sense of so much affluent pleasure that he simply stops and stares and the bitterness rises in his throat while he is walked out the door and returns to a wave of laughter that breaks over him

so the two worlds came together and michael's fortunate life becomes his family's misfortunate life as the tragedy of his death turns into his family's misfortune which hangs over everything like a cloud

was michael's business rich enough to provide thuuy with sufficient insurance to cover the mortgage the living expenses probably not because michael was a confident businessman on the way up a confident businessman on the way up almost always bets his present on his future so you see the problem coming how can thuuy support the two children as a manicurist or will she have to go to college and become a software designer she's lost a lover and that's irretrievable

but what can she do to recover the life the children that he spent so much time with what will they do who will take care of them michael's father lives in chicago and he and his wife are unlikely to be able to come to southern california for more than short visits but michael was part of a community of which he was the center and the neighbors rallied around them rather astonishingly to help

they gathered around thuuy the way they had gathered around michael this time to give rather than receive they took care of the kids they delivered them to school they did the shopping and the housework they prepared meals they started a fund for the kids but for how long could they keep this up before their own lives took them away their ordinary individual lives that would inevitably be affected by the personal randomness that eventually afflicts nearly everyone in the comfortable suburbs as well as the slums this randomness does it have a meaning and is that a meaning that i would like to inhabit my saying

i started this talk with the intention of asking whether we can mean what we say and i proposed to find out by asking if i could mean what i say and i don't know if i can mean what i say because what i say seems to be more or less than what i think i mean or to the left or right of it or above or below it and this is necessarily so because the words we use don't belong to us words like *consumer* or

epicurean or *soldier* existed before us and will go on after us — they have histories that we can't always regard or partially forget — my account of michael's life seems to me to be still borne down borne down — by the history of the word consumption — his connoisseurship by the history of the word *connoisseur* — and his notion of pleasure by the selfishness with which we invest the word *pleasure* — while the epicurean nature of his consumption — and the extraction of life from this raw world of consumer goods seemed to me a kind of triumph — of the human over the material — a triumph of a sort i had never imagined — and trying to give you an impression of it makes me feel that i'm not adequate at expressing my sense of it — of the epicurean brilliance with which he lived and the disaster into which his life had fallen — but what marks this event for me is the triviality of explanation — the irremediable randomness that no explanation alleviates — yet even saying that counts as a kind of explanation and leads to a sense of understanding that i reject as not quite what i mean — look — in french “to mean” is expressed verbally as *vouloir dire* — “to want to say” — but what is the relation between wanting and saying — what is the relation between wanting and thinking — “*vouloir penser*” — do i know clearly enough what i want to think — or do i more simply want to bring — my thinking closer to my wanting — and — so bring my saying closer to my wanting — can i bring my thinking close enough to my wanting to know what i mean — if not — how can i tell whether or not i or you or all of us know whether or not we can mean what we say