

A Personal History of the 'F' Word

By Robert D. Kirvel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Sure the title piqued our curiosity. But once we started reading we were hooked. Whether you're writing about Aristotle or algorithms, academic prose imposes its own stylistic demands upon an author all of which Kirvel fulfils in both letter and spirit. But then there are gems like... 'guns are impulse accelerators' and 'it's akin to asking whether length or width is more important to determine the area of a rectangle.' A well-researched precision paper by an impressive writer.

The question I keep asking is how to account for the bitterness. Why are so many unwilling or unable to engage across the conservative–liberal divide? Why am I?

“We all did it as kids,” my friend Sue reminds me over lunch, a shared Caesar salad with grilled chicken. We are both thinking back to days when we might have been guilty of fibbing, bullying, or being just plain “chicken” ourselves. A familiar exchange between children captures the idea:

“You’re a big, fat scaredy-cat.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No. *You* are.”

“No, *you*.”

We know the drill. Word-volley. But Sue shakes her head as we both wonder: does a deeper dynamic having to do with inverted truth lurk under the childish banter that could shed light on contemporary moral and political polarization? Take a more grown-up example of back-and-forth:

“You’re all the same. More government and zero guns.”

“No, you people want no government, zero regulation.”

“Guns don’t kill people, abortion kills people.”

“More Americans have died from domestic bullets than in all our wars.”

“Anyone can invent numbers.”

What do these two conversations, childish versus arguably less childish, have in common? My lunch companion and I are talking about more than getting our conceptual nappies in a snit over a juvenile taunt, or over the mellifluous versus grating tone of voice of some right- or left-wing politician. We are discussing why so many citizens have declared interpersonal warfare triggered by deeply held—sometimes insupportable—opinion.

I tell Sue I just finished reading an essay by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book.”¹ It details the widespread white justification for bloodlust directed against blacks over a century ago, reinforced by inventing or stretching facts to fit preconceived beliefs. Pro-lynching apologists often claimed an outrage, black beasts raping helpless white women, served as moral high ground for retaliation by noose justice.

In reality, the history of slave ownership confirms the impunity with which white masters raped enslaved women, not vice versa of course, but to reinforce a strained logic, black women were blamed for inciting white masters to lust and rape. Granted, sexual baiting might have happened, but plain old racism was at work along with something else. Call it an unhealthy dose of justification or anxiety reduction, in this case pinning what whites had done around the necks of blacks, the very people upon whom violation had been visited.

During my teenage years, an uncle enjoyed “chewing the fat,” as he put it, with my mother just before our evening meal. Conversations turned cringe-worthy when he would bring up one of his pet topics, all those fat-a** boogies and lazy-a** jigaboos populating the rust-belt city in which he worked as a factory security guard during graveyard shift. I remember wondering at the time how my exceptional black teacher in grade school might have responded to this relative as he vented to Mom, but teenagers of the era in my household were to be seen and not heard. Years later, with tongue untied, I asked another family member to stop using the “N” word in my house. When he resurrected the issue one holiday, he seemed on the verge of apologizing.

“You don’t understand what I mean when I use that word.”

I felt cheered. Until he explained.

“What I mean is really stupid people.”

In an environment of self-deception, bordering on duplicity in defense of demeaning epithets, it’s not surprising that a while later, a fifteen-year-old member of the clan posted his desire on the Internet to burn “retarded” feminists at the stake and rid the world of

fags. When I despaired to family members of the misogyny and homophobia underlying those youthful yearnings, more than one relative rallied to the boy's defense by stating he held ill will toward nobody; rather, I was the one being intolerant. A good boy did not have a problem; I had the problem.

The neurologist Henry Head long ago differentiated between two types of sensations or feelings. Epicritic experiences are fine and localized discriminations of touch or pain. Protopathic sensibility is poorly localized, more visceral or emotional and can be paroxysmal. My reaction to a relative's use of the "F" word was protopathic, deep and enduring.

In retrospect, part of the difficulty seems to have centered on my choice of words. By invoking the label, "homophobia," I'd hoped to elicit familial empathy for reasons having to do with my personal identity. Instead, the term was perceived as name-calling and interpreted as a declaration of war. How to explain the 180-degree reversal, with me in the perceived role of heterophobe?

As a neurophysiologist by training, I am not an enthusiast of psychoanalytic theories, whereas my friend Sue, a practicing psychiatrist, is more familiar with the territory. Both of us agree it is too easy to clobber people with high-toned diagnoses and alienate them; nevertheless, we both credit insights in the realm of unconscious coping techniques to ward off anxiety.² Do the ideas have relevance to our 21st-century polarization of opinion much in the news? Here is a proposition worth considering: at least one of five anxiety-reducing strategies can underlie inverted-truth propositions, which I will dub the "I'm-OK-But-You're-Not" dynamic. The mechanisms include (1) denial, (2) projection, (3)

splitting, (4) rationalization, and (5) disgust- and fear-based illogic. Others could be added to the list, but five earn top billing in my book.

In the aforementioned fraidy-cat dialogue and its variants, an accused child might refuse to admit fear because the kid is not fearful. But if fear is felt, shame might rear its unwelcome head. Rather than confess to an anxiety-inducing emotion that weakens one's self image and identity reflected in the eyes of another—rather than acknowledge shame—the child refutes having the emotion of fear. This is the home turf of denial, sometimes described by psychologists as “primitive” because it is often expressed during childhood as a refusal to accept reality.

In contrast to reflected identity, people sometimes actively project an identity onto another. Projection, the second mechanism in the list, involves incorrectly attributing one's unwelcome thoughts or feelings onto someone else, especially when the thoughts or feelings are anathema. As a follow-on to denial in the fraidy-cat exchange, the child projects fear onto another person. In this case, the I'm-OK-But-You're-Not response is basic stuff that comes naturally. Kids don't think much about how they react, but what about adults when it comes to moral or political opinion?

The role of projection in historic black lynchings seems obvious today, but discernment is not always evident in the heat of the moment. When I asked an adult relative my own age to consider the idea that he might be engaged in a denial of bigotry regarding the feminazi/fag comments posted by a teenage kid on Facebook, his response was also perhaps predictable. He denied being in denial, adding I was the one guilty of being “judgmental and intolerant.” More projection.

Splitting, a third coping mechanism, is as commonplace as projection but in some respects more interesting. It is difficult these days to avoid encountering statements claiming Donald Trump is the devil incarnate or a national hero. Add to the list Barack Obama, Ronald Reagan, Gloria Steinem, Justin Bieber, the Pope, Hillary Clinton, and dozens of others in or out of the news. An individual espousing intense feelings might generalize an indictment or praise, depending on political party and other alignments, to all liberals or conservatives, or to all religious advocates or atheists, or to all young pop stars. In the realm of black-and-white thinking, of clown journalism and kneejerk partisanship à la Fox News and MSNBC, scant middle ground is in sight; we and everyone who thinks as we think are right, whereas they and everyone like them are wrong. Why reason on the basis of an individual's worthiness or faults—or the logical merit of a given position—when it feels better to indict an entire group, all African Americans for example, all Republicans or Muslims, all who are welfare recipients, or drug addicts or terrorists or jihadists or something-else-ists? This is the home turf of the splitting landscape in which extreme polarization or splitting of opinion into good and evil is the pathway to veracity, to hell with middle ground because there is none, and hello Truth, because I am the one who owns it even if I distort or invert it.

Such thinking is nothing new even in intellectual circles. During the early twentieth century, scholars rallied to one side or the other of the nature–nurture controversy. Are we what and who we are because of biology or the environment? Although the debate simmers today, the Canadian psychologist, Donald Hebb,³ convincingly argued from data (*The Organization of Behavior*, 1949) the modern view that we are the product of both nature and nurture, 100% owing to genetics and 100% to our surroundings. It's akin to

asking whether length or width is more important to determine the area of a rectangle, Hebb offered. Is the U.S. President a demon or angel then, and how about that intemperate uncle of mine? Might the two individuals contain a bit of both good and bad?

Rationalization, a fourth coping mechanism in the list, involves distorting facts until thinking makes the distortion appear to represent reality. Think of rationalization as unconscious self-deception to reduce psychological discomfort through justifications that seem plausible but are not, in reality, legitimate. In the realm of not-rational rationalization, something approaching genuine empathy might be reduced to false do-goodism. Why donate money to feed the poor if those losers will just buy more drugs, for example?

Rationalizations abound in political campaigns and shroud many hot topics. When shown reliable, statistical data on gun violence in the U.S., an acquaintance of mine dismissed the numbers by responding, “Anyone can say anything. Everybody is biased these days.” This is an example of wanting to win an argument so much that anything goes, including carpet-bombing with words just to win. Unwelcome hard evidence, cause and effect, and intellectual or academic authority might be viewed as desirable or undesirable, depending on one’s outlook and willingness to reason, but they can also be dismissed as their opposites, namely untrustworthy, elitist, or proof of what this same acquaintance calls intellectual bigotry. When asked to read about splitting, this person stated that no such thing existed. “I don’t need to read articles or books,” he maintained, “besides, history doesn’t mean anything any more because it’s just someone’s opinion, no better than my own.” Such abjuration is a remarkable combination of several unconscious defense mechanisms, with rationalization stage center.

Theory suggests that the strategies of denial, projection, splitting, and rationalization are unconscious, but most of us are at least partly aware of moral or political dilemmas and our reactions to them. The idea of cognitive dissonance⁴ addresses conscious conflicts and the discomfort or tension arising from conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Even an ardent pro-choice advocate, if sane, does not condone the wholesale taking of human life, so how can the conflict of life-taking via abortion be justified? One option is to define the beginning of “life” in a way that is acceptable, if at odds with pro-life definitions.

Another way to reduce the conflict is to argue that abortion is a medical decision between physician and patient, thus politicians should keep laws from female bodies. The flip side of cognitive dissonance is cognitive consonance: we seek out what makes us feel more harmonious with the world and ourselves. When listening to an emotionally charged discussion about abortion for example, we might focus on what strengthens our viewpoint and helps us feel better. To the extent that we want to support our position or beliefs, we attend to and incorporate information bolstering our personal position and may not even be aware that we are not processing counter arguments.

To the four coping mechanisms discussed so far, I would add a fifth response pertinent to political or moral polarization. Fear-based illogic is a horse of a different temperament. We hear its echoes all the time: guns don’t kill people; people kill people. Though many individuals might acknowledge the proposition somehow “feels” right or wrong, it’s difficult to put a finger on the exact reason. However, the notion that “guns are never the problem, but people are always the problem” is black-and-white thinking already characterized as splitting.

Another way to look at the NRA's assertion that guns don't kill people is to consider the missing elements: let's say the proposition is true for the sake of argument, but then what should be done about guns, if anything? This is a complex issue because several mechanisms are at work, as is the case in most controversies. Taken at face value, the statement "Guns don't kill people" is empirically false. Guns kill more than 80 people a day in the U.S. on average (including suicides, though estimated numbers are just that), so a more accurate mantra might be that guns do kill people, and people with guns kill people. However, what a gun advocate usually means is that guns properly disabled and safely locked away do not kill people by themselves. Besides, automobiles kill as many folks as guns do, more or less. A counter argument is that autos are not designed explicitly to kill or maim, and guns are impulse accelerators. To the comeback that cars, too, can function as impulse accelerators, one could answer that all cars and drivers are licensed regularly. Arguments might continue endlessly, but it is doubtful opposing sides can reconcile when one camp remains fiercely motivated by an underlying fear that big, corrupt government will confiscate firearms along with other "Constitutionally guaranteed rights" and the opposing camp fears and deplors everything to do with instruments designed to shoot bullets.

Brain research is beginning to provide insights into neurophysiological mechanisms underlying personal and political ideology. We frequently hear that a powerful, causal factor behind hatred is fear. One might then wonder what could trigger fear or accompany it with respect to belief systems or dogma. Could the basic and universal emotion of disgust have anything to do with one's political ideology or moral perceptions?

One of the earliest scientific studies on disgust is included in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.⁵ The emotion of disgust is roughly defined in psychology these days as a feeling of revulsion or intense displeasure to something unpleasant or offensive. As with pornography, it's the sort of thing we know when we see it. However, to be rigorous and reproducible, contemporary scientific studies variously define human disgust in terms of "disgust sensitivity" measured on standardized surveys or questionnaires to emotionally evocative images, such as those in the International Affective Picture System (IAPS) database.

Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom⁶ have suggested that an individual's general predisposition to feelings of disgust can play an important role in one's social life. Results from two studies by these researchers showed that proneness to disgust was associated (that is, statistically correlated) with greater self-reported political conservatism, and the linkage is strongest for issues centered on purity, such as attitudes toward homosexuality.

Terrizini, Shook, and Ventis⁷ supported the positive correlation and added that inducing disgust increases prejudicial attitudes for conservatives and reduces prejudice for liberals.

Such correlational reports are suggestive, but how and where does something like revulsion operate in the human brain when it comes to social or political values? P. Read Montague⁸ and ten coworkers from Virginia Tech and elsewhere are answering this question by measuring human brain responses directly with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

While 41 male and 42 female test subjects (ages 18 to 62) were monitored in an fMRI scanner, they viewed pictures that included disgusting, threatening, pleasant, and neutral images and then rated all the pictures they had seen. Afterward, participants completed

questionnaires about their political attitudes and sensitivity to disgust. Brain responses to a disgusting picture were enough to predict an individual's political orientation. This was true even when a person's verbal rating of images (reports of low disgust for example) disagreed with the brain's reaction (strong neural activation response). Details from this experiment were remarkable: brain-based prediction of a person's liberal or conservative views was accurate 95% of the time on the basis of a single disgusting image, with conservatives biased toward the negative, that is, showing a stronger disgust and threat response in brain areas such as prefrontal and insular cortex and the amygdala, which is involved in supporting memory for emotionally arousing experiences, including anxiety. My friend Sue tells me that lowering electrical activity in the subcortical amygdala with promising computer-based treatments might be a way of reducing post-traumatic stress disorder with greater success than previous approaches, such as medication.

Political ideology—including attitudes about family, sex, education, and personal autonomy—is now being shown to reflect, at least in part, basic biological mechanisms that help defend against perceptions such as physical threat. People like to think their political opinions are objective or at least rational, but the study by Montague and his coworkers strongly suggests emotions play a greater role than previously thought, and that role might lie outside our awareness or gainsay verbal statements. The head (mouth) says one thing, but the heart (or in this case, emotional brain) begs another.

A disconnect between what humans feel (experience internally) versus express (say or do) may not be too surprising in view of the fact that many animals defend against physical threat through the well-known fight-or-flight response. A rabbit that does not flee may still be threatened or terrified. It is tempting to speculate on a possible interplay

between disgust and shame in humans: if the brain responds with disgust (say, in a racial context) but the public voice says “no, I harbor no prejudicial feelings,” might the overt expression have something to do with shame-induced denial, just as a child might deny fear because of shame?

Neuropsychologists like to talk about our brain’s internally generated version of reality, which may not always agree with the world “out there.” An internal model—as it is called—of experience or memory is a way of organizing and representing what we perceive, so that our interpretation of “reality” depends on our experiences along with cultural biases and related factors. This idea is often discussed in the context of vision, where visual parts of the brain can process more information than the eyes send in. The world, for instance, remains steady even though our eyes dart around. Perceptions are not straightforward reproductions of data from the eye to brain but are reconstructions in the brain shaped by expectations, probability, and memory.⁹ But what about morality? If an internal model evokes disgust in the context of, for example, homosexuality, would that inner model not shape one’s moral and political opinion regardless of what one says?

Data from fMRI alone may not completely explain what’s behind the polarizing I’m-OK-But-You’re-Not stance, but such information points the way to clearer understanding of what’s going on at the neuronal level. Because of educational bias, I favor a physiological approach as potentially the most productive whereas Sue combines that avenue with psychodynamics, placing equal emphasis on mental and emotional processes that may be unconscious and shaped by early childhood experiences. Sue is more optimistic than I am as well, possibly because her professional commitment—treating vets returning to Fort Knox from conflict and trauma—is centered on real-world experience plus an expectation

that injured minds and bodies can be mended, or least modified for improved adaptability to a tough world. Even she has dark moments though when caseloads diminish her role to pill pinging and when reflecting on how government funding agencies erratically address struggling veterans.

Like many others of my generation, I left the Midwest overcast in search of brighter skies and outlooks, settling decades ago along the West Coast where residents do not complain quite so much about weather mucking up a metaphorical climate of shame and disgust. Here at home, minority neighbors are everywhere visible and often, like myself, transplants. Looking back several decades, it's tempting to remember the pleasant and discount the disagreeable, leaving me slightly nostalgic, yet largely disenthralled, about the past. My parents quibbled about politics, but they remained respectful while favoring either the political party of the "little guy" (Mom) or no-nonsense "business interests" (Dad), and they voted during every election, unlike most Americans today. A mental reboot of yesteryear reminds me most families in our sphere back then did not engage in emotional battles over irreconcilable viewpoints at the evening meal. These days, many of my extended family and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum in ways I would never have anticipated.

What do I mean by a climate of shame and disgust back on the home front? First, the disgust. When I do return for a visit to the place of my adolescence, semi-rural mid-America, it is tempting to pass judgment on local values through which residents often claim moral high ground while looking down at outsiders, such as city slickers, feminists, gays, minorities, welfare moms, and all those immigrants. In doing so, self-righteousness becomes apparent, generalizations abound, and insulting epithets are common. But that is

a two-way street. For example, it seems to me that almost every household where I grew up remains a community of the like-minded, and that is also true in my current urban neighborhood of largely mixed-ethnic, liberal, whale huggers who are happy to ridicule hicks frittering their lives away in corn country. In both places one sees a predisposition to smugness and towering self-righteousness, but there is a difference.

In households rooted in the turf of my adolescence, one sees faces of only pale flesh tones, hears words with reinforcing overtones in only one language, witnesses expressions of faith over fact in propositions that stand on wobbly but unchallenged legs. Most of my relatives still live within a cultural cocoon only a stone's throw from the houses in which they were born. They live and love miles—light years, really—from me geographically and disconnected from my way of thinking, tuned always to a single channel of information with little possibility of real news about an incredibly diverse world—where, yes indeed, the climate is changing—reaching out occasionally but never absorbing in a personal way much to do with that world, keeping a firm hold on entrenched beliefs and values, innocence and naivety, loyalty and purity. And if that is so—at least the innocence and purity parts—is it tragedy or cause for rejoicing?

Jonathon Haidt,¹⁰ a social psychologist from NYU, suggests that a liberal-minded person tends to be more open to new experiences than a conservative person; however, five moral values or systems form the core of political choices whether an individual identifies as left, right, or center. A liberal-minded person tends to honor two of the five values most: minimizing harm while maximizing care (think Hippocratic Oath), and fairness/reciprocity (in essence, adhering to the Golden Rule). Conservatives honor those two values highly as well, but they also nurture three additional roots of morality: in-

group *loyalty* (faithfulness to their own kind), *respect* for authority (for example, police or church), and *purity* of mind and body (for example, abortion is murder). Liberals care little about these three concepts and sometimes reject them. A proposed connection between political conservatism and the idea of purity is reminiscent of findings from the Inbar study and others.

I worry that some explanations suggested by experts are too facile to address the complex factors underlying political, moral, and religious opinion. Is a single dynamic at work in a given situation or a dozen? Do we understand any of them fully, to say nothing about our beginner's concept of brain wiring? And isn't branding a person either liberal or conservative—nonracist or racist—far too simplistic? Sue and I add another wrinkle to the quandary by asking an uncomfortable question.

“Could racism have some basis in biology, which is to say, evolution?”

The suggestion feels unnerving, even sinister, as though we are imagining a justification for eugenics or worse. I like to regard myself as nonracist, but can anyone claim to be entirely without thoughts of cultural bias, no matter one's skin color? I have to work on occasion at consciously suppressing negative judgment of others of a different culture or nationality or color. Doesn't everyone? Do such thoughts qualify as racism, and if so, is the tendency biological or entirely cultural (learned)? The evolutionary speculation Sue and I are mulling is that as humans evolved, it might have become biologically adaptive for survival purposes to favor and protect our kind, that is, “us,” and to distrust unfamiliar or foreign hunter-gatherers, “them,” especially given competition for resources. Such conjecture flies in the face of social–scientific dogma holding that differences among human societies are cultural and not genetic, to say nothing of the contemporary

biological viewpoint that “race” is an unscientific term.¹¹ But even if the idea of some biological basis for racist behavior (such as bigotry) turns out to have validity, it is grounds for contemporary discrimination no more than a presumptive instinct for human aggression justifies torture or genocide. Furthermore, the hypothesis of biologically based racism would operate as a two-way street, favoring no particular “master” race or country over another in a civilized world. These are swampy waters, but they illustrate the emotional burden and complexity inherent in trying to unravel the origin of social judgments made by humans.

When I taught neuropsychology, I cautioned students against the error of hypostatization. To put it simply, explaining something merely by giving it a name is often no explanation at all. (Of course she’s homeless; she’s crazy. The kid’s a thief because he’s delinquent.) Labels are fine so long as they are linked to a deeper understanding of—and explanation for—a given behavior together with the possibility of prediction and control of that behavior. However, when bandied about injudiciously, a tag can induce counterproductive responses, including hostility, as happened when accusing my family of homophobia.

Finally, about that climate of shame back in corn country. In reflecting on my extended family, I believe our hearts beat as one in hopes for common ground fertile in common sense, but in areas of morality and politics, otherwise decent people intending no harm can be utterly irrational. I know I am.

My father did not give voice to sexual matters except on one occasion when I was in middle school. In a moment of breathtaking humiliation for me, he issued in earnest tones

a warning about guarding against perverted men. I knew at once, though he did not, that I was the gay person my father was warning me against.

Because I'm a homosexual male who grew up in rural America in an era of police harassment and gay bashings and Stonewall riots, the word "fag" is a blasting cap still detonating in my brain. The pejorative is a reminder of shame, whether uttered in irony today by a gay acquaintance in San Francisco or with loathing by an unwitting kid or a Gospel-brandishing believer from the Bible Belt. When I re-evaluate whether neighbors or relatives discount bigotry or I overreact to the "F" word, I remind myself of denial, projection, splitting, rationalization, and complex fear- and threat-based mechanisms capable of inverting truth but also serving as splendid coping mechanisms for individuals struggling to make it through the day. I reflect on our emotional (reptilian) brain about which we often have as little insight as crocodiles, then on the generous mantle of gray matter that makes us social mammals, both more and less, for better or worse.

The humane socialist economist E. F. Schumacher cautioned that the proper work for us in curing contemporary problems is to work on ourselves, not to take the either-or approach but one *and* the other.¹² Understanding oneself and others often resides in the vicinity of middle ground, in the idea of balance—often the higher ground—in both discourse and in our heads. Although knowing that much will solve neither the world's problems nor my own, it might help in negotiating the conservative-liberal divide with greater civility.¹³

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End

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

What inspired your essay?

In a word, the essay was triggered by intolerance. Extreme opinions about contentious topics—such as abortion, gun control, gay rights or immigration—can inflame discussions online or around the dinner table, as most of us know. This essay was sparked by a single posted comment that begs the question: what is an informed way to interpret or respond to offensive prejudice? Creative nonfiction provides an appropriate framework to address the question because it asks

writers and readers alike to process their thoughts and words through a reality filter, and it also allows for some creative leeway in framing arguments.

What does the essay mean to you?

I continue to publish a series of nonfiction pieces centered on the destructive emotional consequences of personal judgment, sexual discrimination and political bias. This essay considers aspects of personal identity from the relatively objective perspectives available to us from neurophysiological research and psychological theory. It addresses the question: Do extreme views too often characterizing uncivil discourse in recent years have more underlying behavioral mechanisms in common with us than we usually recognize?

Why do you think it is important to our readers?

Appreciating some of the physical and mental processes triggering what we do and say to one another, particularly in the realm of antagonistic political and social discourse, can provide insight into personal motivations. Perhaps the knowledge can also help bridge what sometimes seems to be unbridgeable personal divides.

BIO:

Robert D. Kirvel is a PhD. in neuropsychology, is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for Short Story and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, New Zealand and Germany, in translation and anthologies and in several dozen U. S. literary journals such as *Arts & Letters*. His novel *Shooting the Wire* is forthcoming from Eyewear Books, London, in early 2019.