

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Life & Arts

FTWeekend



### SNAPSHOT

**'Standing Rock Prayer Walk' (2018) by Mitch Epstein**

Every day, 570,000 barrels of oil cross below the Missouri River close to North Dakota's Standing Rock Reservation. The construction of the underground Dakota Access Pipeline back in 2016 prompted thousands to protest over its potential impact on local water supplies and sites sacred to Native American communities. That demonstration was the starting point for Mitch Epstein's *Property Rights*, an exhibition from the New York-based photographer examining the history of land

disputes across the US. Whether showing sit-ins atop Pennsylvania white pines, the construction of the controversial border wall in Texas or environmental destruction in Paradise, California, Epstein has found both the country's vast, breathtaking landscapes and the people prepared to defend them.

Chris Allnutt

*'Mitch Epstein: Property Rights' is showing at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art until February 28*

## What really roared about the Twenties

Janan Ganesh

Citizen of nowhere



an already practising the Charleston. Economists, some of my colleagues included, wonder if the post-pandemic world will roar as it did in the 1920s. The case seems logical enough even to us in the innumerate laity. Take a year's worth of unspent earnings, top it up with fiscal largesse, throw in the stymied urge to party, and you have a boom for the ages. Unless a country does something fanciful, like withdraw from a mega-market in its own continent, it is hard to think what a countering drag on growth might be.

Another Jazz Age would be nice before I ease into my Burgundy-hoarding middle years. But the period was so called for a reason: the 1920s were as much a cultural Arcadia as a material one. People responded to the Great War and the Spanish flu by spending, yes, but also by shredding all convention in the arts. Painting continued its prewar drift away from singularity of perspective. Novels became plotless explorations of the inner life. Music was complicated by atonal experimentation as much as by jazz itself. In the built environment, Art Deco and the International Style displaced 19th-century fussiness with clean lines and chrome. Scribbling as a prisoner of war, Wittgenstein transformed — he would say destroyed — philosophy. To paraphrase Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, trauma had its creative uses.

The tantalising mystery is whether it will again. We have lived through nothing to equal the systematic gunning-down of 19-year-old

conscripts in French meadows. But taken together, the 2008 crash, the pandemic and the populism that reached its foul apotheosis in Washington this week add up to an era of concentrated distress. The waning of a superpower against a rampant new one (another echo of the interwar years) is yet a fourth dislocation. It would be strange if this period did not provoke artists into something new. A Year Zero, a point of departure, might be in the offing.

It is due. The need for some kind of rupture will not be evident to all. But the early 21st century deserves to go down as a long cultural recession. This

**A Year Zero, a point of departure for the arts, might be in the offing. It is due**

was when Hollywood ran out of plot ideas until it cannibalised old franchises. Episodic television drama, the central art form of the age, is conservatism incarnate. The linear narratives, the costumed worship of the past, above all the alleviation of all burdens on the audience to do any work: these shows are too often soap operas with better lighting. As for literature, the artist who has best reconciled depth with sales, Hilary Mantel, immerses us in a world that is half a millennium old.

Peter Thiel had science and technology in mind when he warned of

declining innovation. Even before the recent vaccines gained him, though, his point applied much more fittingly to the arts. If anything profound is to come from the pandemic and the other upheavals of the day, I hope it is a jolt out of this generation-long imaginative rut. Or at least an awareness that we have been in one.

Some of the social conditions are there for an epiphany. The 1920s are possible because all authority — political, aesthetic — stood discredited after civilisation's near-fall. The world is mercifully not working with quite such a naked canvas now. Enough is in flux, though, enough is tainted, to allow for experiment.

Not all of it will be good, or even pleasant. But then it wasn't last time. Even by century-old standards, Virginia Woolf was a crashing snob. Ezra Pound was a logorrhoeic anti-Semite. Openness to new ideas led to eugenics being given the time of day. Just as the economics of the 1920s are misremembered (much of Europe did not roar), so too is the culture. Kevin Jackson's book on 1922, *Constellation of Genius*, is eye-opening but too generously named.

Still, there is a parallel universe where those years of giddy novelty never happened. You wouldn't want to live there. It is the economists who are channelling the 1920s right now. It should be the artists. Just our luck if we get all the bling of that decade, the tragic end too, and none of the inspiration.

janan.ganesh@ft.com

## How to survive the new year from hell

Jo Ellison

Trending



**Forum Auctions**