

# THE COLUMNISTS

WSJ. asks six luminaries to weigh in on a single topic. This month: Status quo.



CLAIRE  
MESSUD

“I grew up with all these contradictory messages when it came to the status quo and how it related to the lives of girls and women. My mother was an active feminist in her reading and the things she said to us, and yet in her daily life she was a traditional wife—she married in the ‘50s and was still living in the ‘50s in the ‘90s. I adored my dad, but I don’t believe he ever boiled an egg. So that question—what is the status quo?—was always fairly complicated. Certainly, they were specific concerns in my novel *The Woman Upstairs*, in terms of Nora’s desire to be an artist and the ways in which all those contradictions play out in her life. But I would say an interest in the messy reality of those contradictions is something that I’ve internalized. That’s been part of my experience my whole life, not only with my family, but in watching other people’s lives.”

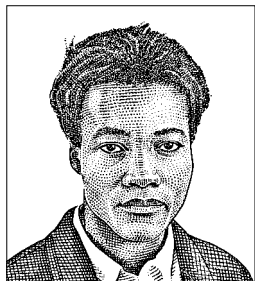
*Messud is an author. Her novel The Burning Girl was released last month.*



THOMAS  
CARTER

“Status quo can certainly have a pejorative connotation. Before opening Estela, my business partner Ignacio [Mattos] and I each spent time at places that upended the status quo in terms of fine dining. For instance, I used to work at Blue Hill. Dan Barber, the chef there, really changes the people’s perception of dining—how they’re eating, where they’re sourcing their ingredients. So when Ignacio and I opened Estela, our thought was that there weren’t too many restaurants in New York where you could get that quality of wine program, service and food without the price tag. (Although Estela isn’t cheap!) Nowadays, it’s expected that we all work ourselves to the bone, so we try to strip away all the extra things that cloud the experience and try to get to the pure experience, to allow a diner to connect with whomever they’re dining alongside.”

*Carter is co-owner of Estela, Café Altro Paradiso and Flora Bar in Manhattan.*



BENJAMIN  
CLEMENTINE

“It’s important for all of us to tap into things that make us uncomfortable. It’s good to challenge yourself as an artist, because that opens portals to new discoveries. I’m always looking for ways to tap into my vulnerability, to provoke something I never knew before. The people I adore, from Tom Waits to Prince to Virginia Woolf, they changed things. Look at David Bowie. Look at Jimi Hendrix. They experimented. I can never be like them; I can only hope that one day I will have my own sort of space. It’s not that I want people to think I’m different for superficial reasons. It’s merely about expressing things your own way. And if you do what you want to do and it’s similar to someone else, that’s fine, too. But it’s quite fulfilling to be able to do things your way. I suppose that’s what being an artist is really all about.”

*Clementine is a singer-songwriter. His new album, I Tell a Fly, is out next month.*



JEANNE  
GANG

“The very nature of architecture concerns change. Design requires a strategic plan of action for the future; it’s progressive by definition. For a certain generation of architects, change only pertains to buildings’ ‘style.’ This is a very status quo approach, which can limit architecture’s potential in multiple ways. To me, climate change and other major challenges we face today require innovative design and delivery methods. This entails expanding the definition of what architecture is and the range of people who practice it. Architects can act as agents of change in order to build sustainably and meet the varied needs and aspirations of society, but we must develop new modes of thinking. Supporting a more diverse generation of practitioners to address these challenges will pave the way for innovation, but strangely there’s still resistance to this within our profession. For a field that’s about change, it’s self-defeating.”

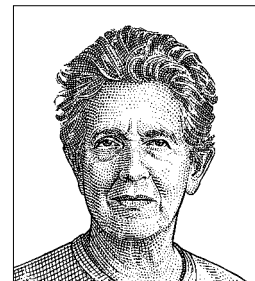
*Gang is an architect.*



JOHN  
LITHGOW

“To me the status quo is, as the Latin says, the present moment, the way things are now. But I guess the larger meaning of it is somewhat like the word *zeitgeist*—what is the prevailing mood? The movie industry is odd, because on the one hand it has to reinforce people’s prejudices so as to appeal to what they want to see—it resorts to clichés in a sense—but on the other hand it’s an industry that can change people’s minds. Take movies like *Moonlight*, for example, or *Easy Rider*. They’re little films that turn into big revolutionary statements. In *Beatriz at Dinner*, I play a billionaire real estate developer, an archetype for our times. It’s a movie about a dinner party where all the standard procedures are disrupted. It becomes a really interesting metaphor because, boy, are we at a moment when standards are being disrupted. What’s going to happen when we don’t have any structures to fall back on?”

*Lithgow is an actor.*



LOUISE  
FISHMAN

“Status quo is something that you think exists, but it’s just a framework for how we live, the formation that helps us ‘understand’ the world, when in fact we understand nothing of it. I was involved in a radical part of the feminist movement that caused me to examine everything I did. The whole tradition of art history I was deeply immersed in was male. I was also one of the few women who worked among a group of young male artists. So I initially rejected as much as I could, including the male understanding about art history. I cut up my grid paintings and stitched them together, trying to absorb a tradition that I’d never identified with, which was a woman’s tradition of quilting and sewing. I mean, I hated that stuff, but I knew I was going to have to sink myself into it in order to understand the richness there. The movement really gave me permission to be exactly who I was.”

*Fishman is an artist. Her solo exhibition at Cheim & Read opens this month, as does a retrospective at Weatherspoon Art Museum.*