

Why/How This Book Now?

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I've spent the last few days among you, artists and writers, intent on artistic pursuits. What is it that drives you? Me? Is it that you want to be artists? Aspire to the celebrity status and star recognition of special gifts the culture accords to the practitioners of fine art? Is it the high stakes gamble of potential success? Money, fame, license to do whatever? The fantasy of freedom from wage-labor and material constraints? Or is it the pleasure of making? Conceptualizing? Realizing works by hand or by command of resources? Or some combination of all of these?

I'm an artist and a writer and I make books. That is what I do. But why? Why now, in this age of multi-mediated stimulation and simulacral everything take the time to create these idiosyncratic and intimate spaces of carefully crafted experience? What is the purpose of a book in our current culture? And artists's books? The most complicatedly unreadable and often baffling form of book? What are *they* for? Is making a book art object any different from making any other kind of artwork? Who asks what is art *for*?

Where did I even get the idea of making art? Or making books?

Forty years ago Lucy Lippard, Sol Lewitt, Lawrence Weiner, Ed Ruscha and quite a few other conspicuously now well-known artists all thought artists' books were going to take hold and bring art to the masses. Artists' books were going to be democratic. They were going to break out of the class-bound elite gallery system. They were going to escape rarified commodity status. They were going to circulate like art spores to pollinate the popular imagination. In that vision of the world changed by art, Lippard, Lewitt, et al had the optimistic vision that supermarket check-out counters would put copies of *26 Gasoline Stations* or *Ducks on a Pond* right next to *The National Enquirer* and the pocket horoscope *Your Year Ahead Gemini* or *What to Name the Baby* books. Unsuspecting but receptive ideal readers would be caught unawares. Finding themselves flipping through 48 pages of nothing but pencil lines going up and down and then across each other at 45 degrees they would be struck by the lightning of aesthetic experience. Infected with the fervor of intermedia arts their fluxus fevers would rise and they would follow apostolic visions of St. John Cage and realize that life itself is a wonder if only one has eyes to hear and ears to see.

Oddly enough, I am still somewhat of a believer in that doctrine. Part of this mythology still holds, but I've given up on the supermarket distribution system. The rest remains, modified perhaps, but persistent.

As far as books go, however, I came to them through another route, literary and now quaintly antique seeming. I imagined myself a writer. From a very early age. How did that happen? How do any ideas get into our heads? Where do we absorb our ideas of

what it means to be a writer, an artist? So many ideas take over our minds without our having a clue as to how they come there – or how to get hold of what they are. Ideology 101. The more something seems natural – just the “way things are” – the more it is a cultural construct. Whose idea of a writer did I have in my young head? What idea of art and being an artist do I, you, we carry around now?

For instance, here is a picture of me at age 4. What am I doing? I am digging to China on a beach in New Jersey. I am quite convinced that at any moment I will break through the resistant crust of the earth and see the Chinese people – at that era a set of figures informed by illustrations in *Children of the World* – with straw coolie hats and long pigtailed down their backs. But even at that young age I had a suspicion that the hole poked through the globe would likely afford a view of the Chinese sky, and the universe beyond, given the place I which I sat to dig at the sand between my toes.

What did I know of China? Nothing at all, of course. Even two years later on a trip to Europe I had only a vague sense of what “the continent” was except that it signified massive and remote otherness, a terrain so far from home it held a vague threat of non-return within its capability. But as a four year old I had gotten China from a stray remark and it had sunk into my psyche like a pile driven foundation. I knew a name, a word, and that evoked a world.

What has this to do with books? The idea of authorship came with a similar force, colonizing my imagination. I somehow “always” imagined myself a writer, a lady writer, only later a woman writing. I aspired to those fainting couch images of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to the wild tempers of Emily Bronte and her fierce imagination, to the cloying sentimentality of Louisa May Alcott and the dead-on accuracy of Jane Austen. All these and others served to inspire me. But to write this way is to pretend that we are simply fated creatures, choosing destiny according to some antique formula. It doesn't work that way.

I was a writer. I would write *books*. Here is a picture of me at age 12. I have just put down my notebook because my mother has asked me to stand with her and have my picture taken with my Cousin Eleanor, my father's cousin, the Communist, who lived in New York and arrived by taxi from station, very extravagant and fancy seeming, who wore scarves on her neck like Ava Gardner and had been a White Rock Girl and drank whisky and smoked and talked all afternoon with my mother when she arrived so that I sat by and listened, catching glimpses of an adult world from which scraps were thrown to me in chance remarks that recognized my presence. I was there too, while they talked, allowed to be, as long as I was quiet. But I had been writing that day, I remember, and was also not feeling so well. My eyes are glassy, my hair messy, but I had broken off from my labors at their request. What was I writing? This, this thing here – this notebook in which my first novel was taking shape, laboriously written in my twelve-year-old hand.

But that was 1964 and the idea of writing a book was quite normal, really, not strange at all, not the least bit out of synch with the culture at large. Quite the contrary. So I

absorbed the book as the sign of authority, literary and adult, a mark and measure of achievement, a pinnacle of aspirations. Such a fantasy is understandable a half a century ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth. But now? How does that explain making books now? And this book in particular? *Combo Meals*?

Combo Meals: Chance Histories began with paintings. Notes. Scraps of prose and snippets of composition. Contradictions lived and witnessed, processed into images and texts. It builds directly on *Damaged Spring* and *From Now*, books done in 2003 and 2005, both books of personal reportage, works used to figure out what was—might be—going on.

Damaged Spring was produced in a terrible season, as the drumbeat of inevitable war set the tone for the beginning of this now unendable-seeming occupation. Winter came late and lasted, breaking the limbs of fruit trees with the weight of spring snow held by blossoms. A year of difficulties among friends, drought and a sense that the political process had become sealed from influence. Protest never registered on the screens, and screen life prevailed. Prevalence. Everywhere we look life is lived within the frame of one device or another: windshield, laptop, blackberry, mobile phone. Inside that sequence of lived events, how can you get hold of the shape of the moment? What history is unfolding through us?

The text is a series of blunt statements. Observations and records of passing events in the news, friend's lives, and the unstable climate, cultural and meteorological:

“Bitter winter grazed her cheek. Stolen breath was exchanged for impossible kisses. She smacked hard against the event horizon then watched the Miss World riots break out in an undisclosed location. Harbingers of a difficult season, finger after finger closed on her throat, cutting off the light. She found herself against his mouth. Hands. Daily rituals of transcendence fail to satisfy the desire that drives them. Military campaign ads streaked blood red, rising on a tide of patriotic music through a deceptively gentle New Year's night. Her heart froze in mid-air, terrified by the coming freeze.”

I wrote *Damaged Spring* and cut the linoleum blocks, printed it, and had it bound and ready for an exhibition in Tucson titled “Love and Terror.” Invited to speak at the accompanying conference, I put together a talk in which the book was excerpted. I said things about books. About Love. About Terror. But I also read snippets of the text. I showed some of the images. The conference organizers sent me the evaluations of my session. Receptivity, yes, interest, engagement, but sprinkled in among the other comments, a note of alarm. “Is this poetry?” “Did they tell us we were going to hear *poetry*?” More general observations, and then, again, with a shrill edge, “Why didn't someone warn us we were going to a POETRY READING???”

What was terrifying? The unfamiliar genre, showing up unannounced? Poetry, after all, is not quite evangelicalism, not proselytizing or propagandizing. I wasn't asking for money or calling anyone to witness. No one had to stand and Poeticize as if they were text-i-

fyng. But the impact of non-normative syntax provoked a phobic response. Aesthetic immunity, a histamine reaction broke out hives of fear in the trembling crowd. *Poetry.... is it, can it be, are we hearing – that???*

Given such a reaction, I ask: what is the role of art in contemporary culture? How can it thrive and flourish, even survive, with such alienation of affection? What was hard?

I've wrestled with various arguments in the last years about the status of art in relation to mass culture. Mallarmé and the tabloid press. I love them both. Photonovellas and William Burroughs, Gertrude Stein and the novelty candies, Hello Kitty and the songs of Shubert and the pips and squeaks of outrageous improv saxophone quartets. Hybridization, synthoid texts, the stuff and material of life and products of our culture all combined, but in a bricolage in which the source text still inhere, their specific shape and texture sounding out in syllabic dissonance and inexhaustible semantic richness. Side by sighs and cheek by jowl with creepy crawley cratylism, marinated Baudelaire, little Beckett's boring beats, and great green growling jaws of a Tygre, burning bright! The impossibility of totality, the recognition of heterogeneity – the whole sloppy, swarming, symbolic soup – that seems to be the medium that I swim in, that seeps through me, pumping its texts and textures, images and impressions, into the interior voice that collages and narrates sensation into the story of a life lived.

From Now was a more ironic dark take on the state of the world, relieved by humor, though it remains, as one friend said, a terrible book about the terrible world:

From Now: "Total Risk. Over there. Never paranoid enough. Hold onto your mouth, the black matriarch said. Sniper. Corners. Spread through the neighborhood. Fifteen minutes to uncover every street. Compassion haunts us. A low scream went up from the dying lawn. New age lovers cry out the secular universe, unsure of salvation. Game show responses and pop culture management strike the latent pond like lightning passing over HOT WET LIPS. Such is the fate of the popular body in imaginary culture."

And Combo Meals? As the very title suggests, I'm endlessly interested in the paradoxes and improbabilities that the juxtapositions of daily life offer to us. The spectacle and pseudo-spectacle, with its cruelties and inequities, blatant exploitation, utter absence of conscience... all strikingly impossible to reconcile with any single worldview, values, or beliefs. I am simply trying to make sense of it.

The drawings and notes come in fragments, pieces. I want to keep them discrete, separate, other from each other, and make them have to occupy each other's space. Nothing reconciles. The contradictions will not go away in this work, or in my vision of the world around me. How to show that? Make a record of it? The book takes off as a parody of *Candide*, with the figure of the little tween as our heroine-object, the central figure in the messy text. "No worries," she cries out, the only phrase she knows, just like Pangloss and *Candide* with their "best of all possible worlds." She moves through the landscapes and events of contemporary life.

The familiar landscape tilts along the broken meridian bringing the earth up to kiss the sky. The new view stretches unobstructed from the KMart parking lot to eternity. Twenty years ago the prairie scent still lingered in the branches of the live oaks that warbled with the song of thrush and sap sparrow. Change marks itself with milestones and monuments of obsolescence. Diamonds sparkle in a platinum skull displayed for a benefit auction, but the orphans nominated to receive their cash have been moved off site. The comfort zone stretches as an antique gem, guarded by an ill-paid thug, attracts an audience like a magnet to the glass case that serves as the center of the art world for a moment or two.

Camera shy and weary, the new-age benefactor screens the crowd from a cube of glass mirrored to make him invisible. A predatory scanner swipes the scene, its machine-edge libido seeking talent through a scrim of intangible parameters. "Top Pick," the button blinks, focusing in on a small, almost-adolescent silhouette. The tween, our quintessential icon of niche consumerism, has been made and tailored to maximize market opportunities. We recognize the still hipless body, dressed in imitation of lives lived in accessorized wonder. Looking for a celebrity portal, she wanders with a sure but sulky step along the spine of the street that stretches from the highway towards the infinite landscape. Shifting mores have created upheaval, whole blocks of ugly growth and unregulated odors, but zoning codes are not her thing so she shrugs and holds herself aloof, not breathing, until she is past the roaring cavities that pockmark the neighborhood. About as perfect a creature as nature and culture can contrive, she is out looking for a place to plug in, download, and recharge her devices.

Meanwhile, she wanders restless through the scenes of our times, registering them as news and entertainment in the screens of her eyes. On this night, she strikes out through the sprawl and din unsupervised to process stimulation with her never innocent gaze. Her parents are paying for her education and she takes it seriously. But the clothes she wears are tight, lips full, eyes bright. Her body hovers on the edge of pubescent angst and she monitors the signs and affect of the distant war with attention and hormonal anxiety.

Everywhere she looks she is imagining "possibilities" – some of which might be for her. Endlessly opportunistic, she has an entrepreneurial attitude towards experience, and invests for the sake of return. She lives her generically adorable life without anticipation or regret. Her little stuffed dog at her side, she frequently lets go the only phrase she knows, "No worries."

Some of the images are too strong simply to be placed on the page, in statements or as drawings. The painting of the prisoner, bound and gagged, for instance. He was a "detail" in a press photo, even if the caption called attention to his presence, it was within the larger scene of battle. Gratuitous to copy it, to appropriate it. The very term appropriate rings with the smug superiority of entitlement, with the everything is there for the taking attitude that shoots through the overheard language of the tween in Combo Meals, "Needs, as in –I need a European trip for spring break." I can't do it. A sense of respect stops me from just putting it bare, stark, strong, onto the page as a single statement as if to make a claim for the seriousness of its presence. The image is too serious. Too serious for whom? Are you kidding? But this is a work, a work of and about making art. So the

study comes onto the page as well. The comment made by juxtaposing the drawing to the watercolor – that this is about making, and knowing through the work, not about representing, as if the world were simply there and images like ancient semiotic signifiers were offering up their signifieds like any other consumable commodity. Parallax and difference defy reification.

Knowledge and pleasure are the aim of art. But knowledge is pleasure. Oh no, say my earnest colleagues, well-schooled in the tenets of cultural studies, knowledge is discipline. We must empower the students to think outside the mainstream, think back against its power. To *resist* mass culture. Really? Why? They have mapped the age-old fears of seduction onto the television, the game boy, the online virtual world with its constant gratifications endlessly renewed. The moral superiority presupposes the didactic stance. Taken for granted, the intellectual's role is to stand outside the culture. Art is outside the ideologies. Resistance will die hard, the critic said to me, narrowing his eyes and hunching up his well-padded shoulders in the butter-soft lamb of his leather coat. Yes, especially among those with career investments in its stock.

As I am writing a press release from the painter Joy Garnett comes across the email, bearing in it a brand new painting so new it looks wet even on the screen. The release says, "Garnett continues her exploration of the malleability of instantly globalized images." Culled and archived, so that their "context" evaporates. Much like the images in my book, real images, things and persons observed, photographs so striking they stop the day. I sit down with them to draw and in drawing am able to absorb, process, remake the images into something I experience anew. They are not outside me, but grafted, scraped, signed, traced in the physical act of that copying interpretation that somaticizes, embodies, the seeing through the hand.

Where does Joy Garnett get her idea of what she is doing? Where do I get my idea of art? Of what it is to make art, poetry, prose, texts, a book? To create aesthetic expressions? Is it any different from the way I got my idea of being a writer, or of China? The mythologies that inhabit us are legacy notions, they come from sources we have often lost the memory of, though we serve as the means of their transmission forward. Cultural mythology invents itself through us, anew, in each generation. What makes art different from other made things? Only context? Institutional site and circumstance? Is that what artists bid for? A place in the protected zone so their work is singled out, framed by the empty space surrounding? How, otherwise, can a hand-made or even fabricated image compete for attention in the over-produced world?

Compare Garnett with Damien Hirst. Here the consumerist issue comes to the fore. High stakes gamble, high priced art, kitsch vulgar imagery, the investment in branding. For the love of God. What God? Mammon? An outrage? OR the very work that demonstrates the importance of capital in the status of art?

Or Murakami? Product designer extraordinaire? Is this art or product? The crazed imagery flaunts its deviant identity, and yet finds its markets on every kind of product

line imaginable. An outrage? Or the demonstration of the importance of marketing and promotion in the production of art?

And Phil Collins, *The World Won't Listen*, the wonderful installation piece of filmed karaoke performances by fans of the Smiths. These images, made in Istanbul, Jakarta, Bogota, show the impossibility of fandom, the aspirations to be and failure to become the object of spectacular desire – and yet, at the same time, the videos in their tender and careful production of each performance show the wonderful individual humanity of each of these people. A mere demonstration of theory writ large in all its postcolonial, post structural critical analysis? Or a work of profound humanity, exhibiting its engagement with mass culture, complicit and complete? Collins is not outside of the phenomenon he documents, not passing superior moral judgment on fandom, consumption, or the culture industries of punk rock and its legacy. Quite the contrary. He is as engaged with exposing his own fascination as with showing that of others, and in that, he is bound by a common bond that he reveals. Art is not outside of culture, not above the ideologies.

And finally, back to books. How do they call attention to the issues of art as specialized product, thing apart, in our age of overproduction, over stimulation, and mass culture? *Maus* shows up in every major retail outlet – does that mean it is *not* a work of art? Graphic novels have broken ground in which all kinds of illustrated work will spring forth alongside typographically innovative and graphically rich visual texts. A cultural receptivity to visually striking book works goes hand in hand with the realization of the potential of graphic artifacts as spectacular media. But aside from the creation of ever-more dazzling products for aesthetic consumption – not a bad thing in its own right – the larger question still hangs. Is the work that distinguishes itself from other made things by claiming the name *art* actually doing something different from the glossy magazines or well-made comic books that amuse us and distract? What are the criteria according to which we decide that George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* is high, fine art – or not? Many contemporary artists skirt the edges of the consumerist paradigm, skipping over the border into sheer, dazzling commercialism and back, as if to say to the art world, I dare you to – to what? What is the risk posed by commerce to art? Or vice versa? And how did we come to be so attached to a distinction between the two?

The historical roots of these discussions go straight to the origins of aesthetic theory in the end of the 18th century, to the work of Baumgarten and others, for whom the cultivation of taste mattered rather substantially as an aspect of perceptual intelligence. Is it mere coincidence that such a sensibility arose just as industrialization was flooding markets with products in such unprecedented proliferation that discriminating faculties had a value of their own?

We inherit this legacy – through the lineage of 19th century romanticism and its many and varied responses to industrialism beginning with Blake's exhortations to open the doors of imagination – through the 19th century utopian socialism, Arts and Crafts utopian visions, into the radical 20th century avant-garde. Art as other, as the shock effect defamiliarizing incendiary gesture – the slap in the face of public taste, the device laid bare – these get passed forward through the 20th century as strategies of innovation, then,

resistance, then preservation of values felt lost in the culture at large. By mid-to-late 20th century, fine art is charged with the task of being the moral conscience of the culture, the site and instrument of advanced thought, the mechanism of resistance. The hallmarks of fine art in the radical high modernism mode? Difficulty. Negativity. That which cannot be absorbed or contained. The esoteric practice of specialized practice performing against the consumerist grain. Theodor Adorno stands out prominently as the figure whose work defines much of the more contemporary version of this belief system.

Works of art are made things and thus are different from nature, but they are made in such a way that they are other than the simple products of consumer culture. Different how? In an inherent tension between their idea and their execution – the concept and object of art are not quite ever the same. In the play between them a space opens up in which aesthetic experience is generated. Art is a sustain puzzler. An ongoing conundrum, a provocative object of meditation and response. Art makes the mind buzz, it creates a brain hum, engaging the pleasure centers of perception and the mental hardware. Right? Well, in principle, yes, and in the best scenarios, of course! But the pleasure centers had fallen on hard times there for a few decades and the sheer immediacy of mediated thrills has suffered from various burdens. Moral conscience became didacticism, the notion of the political work led to professional posturing of an empty and sanctimonious variety, and theory speak colonized the discourse fields until it seemed impossible to simply say of many things just what they were, so inflated were the terms and rhetorics within which they were framed. I'm all for minimalism, conceptualism, and heady art, and for work that sparks thought and progressive engagement. Activism has a role, ever more and still urgent. Mine is not a neo-conservative rant, quite the contrary. My goal is to free the work of art to work again – to be able to be free of the formulaic snares that lock it into servitude to agendas it was never meant to serve, that shut down its imaginative force and potency. The art task focuses on remaking, creating form that expresses experience.

Negative dialectics, the commitment to a form of thought that cannot be dominated, cannot be brought into alignment with forces of ideological repression, is the formulation that Adorno arrived at to sustain his argument in favor of difficult and challenging work. I can't dismiss this or disagree with it, and find the puzzling-ness of unfamiliar formulations still useful – certainly my own work, writing, is almost entirely strange, unfamiliar, de-familiarizing. And recalling those nervous audience members of the Tucson conference, their shifting in the seats discomfort with finding themselves suddenly exposed to something they could only call *poetry*, I am dramatically aware that I live the most rarified life, speaking in literary tongues. But to what end? What is the work for?

I say, not to resist. I am not, as the poets of my generation once believed they were, committed to creating difficult work in order to remove my language from commodity circulation. Well, or if I am, it is with the sense that the effect of such removal isn't so much to push back on that dominant system (the world of mediated spectacle does not care one whit about such stuff), but rather, to create a space outside that world and all its prepackaged pseudo-experience. The point of making art – for me, the reason I do it, is to have experience. Art is the space we make so we can have space – to think, feel,

perceive, reflect, engage. The mis-alignments to which Adorno was so attached are still with us, with me, as a core of belief, but with a difference. The usual formulations – art is the force to imagine the world not as it is but as it might be – needs changing. That is fantasy life, escapist. No, I think, the making over of experience into form – art making – is a way to have experience. True, this is in part a way to recapture the potential for experience from the monoculture's formulae, but not entirely. I inhabit the larger culture. I am not not of it, and its pleasures, pseudo as they may be, are nonetheless occasional junkfood treats for the mind. I have no hard and fast borders between the stuff and objects of mass culture and those of fine art, except, that the institutional spaces and discourses of art allow for reflection, engagement, dialogue and exchange in ways that the mass culture consumerist mode does not. I like to see, and to think, to have something that sets up a synaptic charge of associations and connections. I see the world differently, again, renewed, refreshed, in a bright refamiliarized light as a result of being exposed to smart art. A selfish pleasure, but one that underscores a social benefit and cultural boon.

And back to books? Why not. With their density and intimacy of scale they offer a scene in a world of screen life, they don't dictate the rate of engagement, they allow space to dwell, to linger, or browse, small worlds without a driving time-based exigency. The book, too, is a space that makes space, apart but within the mediated culture. Associations and links, world of reference and connection, books are like alternative worlds, opening their horizons within the real, as an imaginary extension of life lived and presented, captured and made, created and manifest, in a portable, convenient, consumable form.

Why/how this book now? Because I am trying to understand something, trying to make a funny dark vision of the world from what it appears to be, a vision of the culture lived and dreamed of now. But then I pause, hesitate, the question rising that is always with me, fraught and unanswerable -- *what is now?*