

**WIP
THEN
RIP**

**“I HATE
MYSELF
AND
WANT
TO LIVE”**

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MYSELF
AND
WANT
TO LIVE”**

**SANDISON
MONTGOMERY**

**LAYOUT DESIGN
BENJAMIN COLE**

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For James and Betty

**“Common people have plenty;
scholars are never satisfied.**

**Common people are vibrant with
common sense;
scholars seem dull and confused.**

**Common people are useful;
scholars are useless.”**

**-LAO TZU,
Tao Te Ching,
Book of the Way
(Torode ch. 20)**

"Teenage angst has paid off well/ Now I'm bored and old," Kurt Cobain sang on "Serve The Servants" (Nirvana *In Utero*) before going on to commit suicide at 27. It was an incredibly violent way to go. This was my first hero. I was 12 when he died. Now, 26 years later, I look up to Bernie Sanders, a 78 year old who has inspired a new crop of young people. But, married with two children, I can't claim to be one of them. In fact, I've gone in the past few years from feeling like an old young person to a young old person. I don't even listen to music anymore, really. Instead I consume far too many leftist podcasts, to the degree that they have their own intersecting storylines and universe, like Middle Earth or Narnia. When I watch YouTube clips of Cobain now he looks like a kid to me. But he radiates a mysterious sort of timeless wisdom, especially when he plays music. Sanders, though, gained

his notability as an old man and, having been to his rallies, I can say that to see him speak is not to bear witness to some otherworldly force. What Sanders exudes is not enigmatic or ethereal. He offers a rich and righteous, visceral fury, articulated plainly with beats left in for applause. I imagine had I been able to see Nirvana live, I wouldn't have caught a magical glow coming off of Cobain either. And yet I see both figures as being something like divine vessels, which is complicated because I generally consider myself agnostic.

The political cynics and sickos made death a subject of Sanders' campaign from the very beginning, when he first ran for President, citing his age as the main reason not to take him seriously as a candidate. The competing one being that he labeled himself a Democratic Socialist (almost always referred to as, "a self-avowed socialist!" in the press). When he had a heart attack on the trail in 2019, corporate news pundits were salivating, openly pleased with the idea that, while *he* may not yet be gone, at least his campaign would be. And they were happy for him to live on if that was the case, sent back to the Senate or, better yet, into retirement, with his grassroots support mowed down and his influence diminished.

Unlike Bernie, Kurt was never a significant threat to power. And, maybe, on

some level, that was part of what he sensed was wrong. Mark Fisher, in his book *Capitalist Realism* said, "Cobain knew that he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV," (Fisher 9) and it makes me fear that, in the long run, Sanders will become relegated to the shallow status of cultural icon. It's a standing he's already achieved but one he never sought. His fame is the result of his work. The goal of winning the presidency for him was a means to bring relief to working people. If his legacy is that of protest and of speaking truth to power alone, and we don't see universal healthcare come to pass in the U.S. or a Green New Deal enacted then the ruling class will have won and his image will live on mostly as posters and t-shirts, maybe on a flag at a march. Cobain in a journal entry said:

We can pose as the enemy to infiltrate the mechanics of the system to start its rot from the inside. Sabotage the empire by pretending to play their game. Compromise just enough to call their bluff. . . . it starts with the custodians and the cheerleaders. And ends with the entertainers. The youth are waiting, impatiently. . . . The band now has an image: the inti-gluttony [*sic*], materialism, & consumerism image which we plan to incorporate [*sic*] into all of our

videos. The first one: 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' will have us walking through a mall throwing thousands of dollars into the air as mall-goers scramble like vulchers [sic] to collect as much as they can get their hands on. . . then we go to a pep Assembly at a High school And the cheerleaders have Anarchy As on their sweaters and the custodian-militant-revolutionarys [sic] hand out guns with flowers in the barrels to all the cheering students who file down to the center court and throw their money & jewelry & Andrew dice Clay Tapes into A big pile then we set it on fire and run out of the building screaming.

(Cobain 178-180)

Watching the music video, which now has over a billion views on YouTube, one can see all of the elements for the pep rally scene there: the cheerleaders, the custodian, the entertainers, even the fire. But everything was made tame. The A insignias seem relatively polite, the custodian looks as though he's swaying jovially to the music, and the fire is only ever atmospheric, complemented by a smoke machine. Gray fabric hangs from the wall of what must be a soundstage, creating a more dreamlike space. It's understandable why the director or label or band subtly censored the video but these adjustments changed a fairly

overt anti-capitalist message into a more general emotional grievance (Nirvana Vevo). The song was the result of a conversation Cobain had with Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill after they drunkenly tagged a pro-life clinic. She later wrote "Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit" in sharpie on his apartment wall and, not knowing the brand name, he read the phrase as poetic (Hanna :50). It strikes me, reading his journal entry, how the 90s zeitgeist is understood to be about apathy and indifference under the weight of neoliberalism and austerity and how I personally adopted an attitude of disinterest and sarcasm as a young person which took many years to shake. And I wonder whom I would have been if Cobain's anger and sadness had been more clearly defined.

One of the criticisms of Sanders is that he incessantly repeats his stump speech and talking points. But, like any pop earworm, his rhythm and cadence have been absorbed into the culture, familiar even to those who don't like what they're hearing; a mantra about millionaires and billionaires in a thick Brooklyn accent. I see this type of political communication as smart because it recognizes repetition as a key to acceptance. It's not just that the content of Sanders' speeches is meaningful but that their refrains are memorable.

I'm not naïve enough to think that Sanders is egoless or, for that matter that

Cobain was, but I believe both men's work would have continued had no one ever listened. It is perhaps this that connects them for me because it speaks to a conflict I hold within myself, a desire to be seen and appreciated for my practice and an understanding that the aspiration effects and even injures it. It seems best to labor for its own sake and yet the job of art or of activism or of politics does not seem done until masses of people are convinced. Maybe the mistake is in thinking that art can ever be more than art. It cannot be the frontline; symbols are too easy to shoot through.

While I'm not claiming that political messaging is entirely analogous to art making, artists don't do themselves or their audiences any favors by obfuscating their purpose. Art is a form of communication. If it is ever to have an effect again, we must not leave things up to interpretation so much so that the work is never understood nor should we weigh it down with needless complexity. To take it a step further, I think one must risk making work that may seem unsophisticated to some in its straightforwardness. The elite, particularly the Trump administration, deal in confusion, misdirection, and indecipherability.

As I write this, the world is changing under the spread of the coronavirus. After multiple primaries were held during the

pandemic, with the Republican establishment, led by Trump, and the Democratic establishment, led by Biden, encouraging voters to get to the polls while Sanders suggested the contests be postponed, Bernie dropped out and soon endorsed the former Vice President.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek in a recent interview said, "It's now clear how if anything Bernie Sanders wasn't radical enough. The problem is not just universal healthcare in the United States. We need literally—okay it sounds crazy now but—some kind of global healthcare system. Some mechanisms to follow epidemics all around the world to act in a coordinated international way. . .to prevent them. . . No, things will not return to normal. And that's the political moment." (Avila 16:00)

Have I been duped? Not by either figure as a role model, or by the messages they spread, not even by the idea that each man tapped into something holy (whatever I think that means), or by the idol-worship itself. What I have to ask myself in current conditions is if I've been tricked into believing that anyone can change things. Am I still just a sucker for this country's marketing? Bernie's backers are split, some blame him, some blame the Democratic National Committee, and that divide is the greatest possible outcome for the elite on both "sides of the aisle". There's no consensus on how to move forward. But an outlook

of nihilism on the left could do wonders for wannabe-fascism. The shortcoming of putting ones faith in a single person is that it is easy to become more interested in who they are than what they represent. But, like it or not, we need leaders. We need people to name the abstract longing we feel and articulate and offer a method to resolve it.

As quarantine continues, I have the feeling of going deeper into darkness. The future is always uncertain, but it feels like we've gone from low light to no light. We are guideless, having a communal yet entirely individual experience, all of us holed up in our homes. And this is a relatively light tragedy compared to what could be in store for us. Not to mention, other parts of the world regularly experience calamities that Americans cannot understand, many of them caused by us. I feel an obligation to act as a source of optimism for my family and even one identifiable pinhole of escape would provide something to direct us toward. Joe Biden is not it. Donald Trump is even more so not it. I must act as my own source of hope and rely on those closest to me.

Bernie has been swallowed by the same thing that Kurt was. In the end, they were both digested by the system and the best I can hope is that they gave it heartburn.

I began painting a portrait of Sanders before voting started. And through part of the

process I believed he would be the nominee. And that if he had been, he would have been President. Now, almost completed, I understand that the piece was made as an act of processing his eventual defeat, and maybe a way to combat my own defeatism. I can see now that I am the one shelving him, like a kid working at Newbury Comics in the 90s. I've wondered how to price the painting, if I could get whatever I asked. At cost, for free, for millions?

My Nirvana posters came down when I left for undergrad and I had already stopped wearing the apparel for a few years by then. Recently a teenager got special permission to take one of my adult painting classes and one day she came in wearing the Nirvana tee with the 9 circles of hell on it. I complimented it and never felt more like a dad. It's "classic rock" now, the oldies. When the imagery gets pulled out again, of a wild-haired Bernie gesticulating, I wonder what it will signal. For the time being, it is about the death of a great man.



**“Never ever lose your sense
of outrage.”**

—BERNIE SANDERS

(Democracy Now!)

Some people still feel hostility toward paintings of photographs. It is a reaction unique to painted works that read more photorealistic than not, as opposed to representational paintings for which photographic references are *used*, but in which perceivable reality is in some way significantly obscured. Common knowledge says art making evolved *out* of realism and photography has its own parallel, separate, and yet intertwined history.

But the purpose and the point of painting a photograph, and perhaps of painting in the early 21st century generally, is in the labor expended in the process and in the viewer's relationship to that labor and process. Because images are omnipresent, cheap, and fast, a friction is created when they are dragged into the realm of inherent preciousness and historic importance that painting occupies. There is specificity to a photograph that disagrees with the flexibility we expect from painted work; we want to find ourselves within the daubs of color while also being guarded by the medium from its message. Painting as a form of communication tends to be coy even at its most direct. A photo, on the other hand, has an innate bluntness, a posture of truthfulness,

even when it seeks to be mysterious, and especially when it is lying.

A painting of a photograph manages to be neither a painting nor a photograph. The result of the combination is instead to create an awareness of its maker, for better or worse. The source image claims to contain a narrative, alleging to be representative of the real: a frozen instant, candid or staged. But the translation into paint simultaneously challenges that claim, telling the viewer that hours were spent to reinvent what a machine did in a fraction of a second. This is the reason some people view the method as boneheaded or boring or tacky. But the choice to make painstaking what was easy should be understood as intentional. The maker knows the image they have created is less exact than that from which it's derived. The act should not be seen as a futile attempt at perfection but a re-contextualization and an alteration.

After beginning a practice of meditation and going to psychotherapy, I have realized art making is the lifelong restorative practice I began long ago, as a child. The repetition of drawing and painting soothes me. And while this comfort of habit can come from working abstractly as well, I believe replicating an object from the real world is a deeply and uniquely empathic exercise, regardless of the tools I use to achieve it. It is more accurate

to say I *feel* an object when I draw or paint it, rather than see it. The use of a photo, whether digital or physical, is admittedly a barrier to understanding a subject, not a window, as well as a means to potentially fetishize it. That said, the inability to truly comprehend the world outside our bodies and the people who inhabit it is unavoidable and unchangeable regardless. The subject matter of a painting of a photograph is the picture itself. But the content is the labor and its relationship to viewer and subject. So the viewer should wonder why the maker exerted their labor on behalf of the particular subject. The answer will always be tied at some level to human fragility and mortality. Susan Sontag said that, "Photography is the inventory of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. . . . Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people." (Sontag 70) The additional labor of painting may be viewed as rumination on both the swiftly captured and instantly lost moment as well as an attempted pushback against time.

“...with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undecieve me. The photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand ‘it is not there’, on the other ‘but it has indeed been’): a mad image, chafed by reality.”

-ROLAND BARTHES

(Barthes 115)

ART WON'T SAVE US

Clear meaning is gauche because mystery is an invitation, no matter what lays beyond it. Coyness is sexier. A clear statement can feel assaultive. On the other hand, in an era in which facts are flexible, is obfuscation not a conformist position?

The avant-garde as an attitude or as a series of related genres is easily folded into the mixing bowl of capitalism. In a March 2020 article for *Penta* I happened on, a magazine funded by the Dow Jones Media Group, published during the covid pandemic, about art in times of crisis, artist Mika Rottenberg said, "In times of breakdown or war, sometimes art becomes more conservative. . . Maybe artists want to do stuff with color and texture and kind of retreat." (Schultz) Dada is mentioned as a counterpoint. The line stood out to me because it presumes that the reader understands "conservative" as a visual language and there is an implication that that language is inherently tied to a type of politics or outlook on life. But the notion that art's rebellion can be against anything other than art's own conventions seems suspect to me at best. And in the 21st century it isn't even that. Ask most artists and I believe they can tell you what societal or political forces or ideas they support or are opposed to. But

the true struggle for artists today is to define what aesthetic or formal conventions they are against. The question is whether an artist is more interested in art making or in fighting power. It is not that the two are not interlaced but rather that art cannot be a replacement for political action. It is dangerous to believe so.

Here in Austin, there is a well-meaning arts group who started running with the slogan, "Art Will Save Us," after the 2016 election. I found it a bit insulting. Art will *not* save us. Didactic, messaged work, regardless of its structural or formal qualities, seems to have more in common with propaganda like Soviet Realism than with any true rebellion. Rebellion today is a style. And if the intention is to codify a visual companion to a particular fight for resources or political movement, then the strength of that organization should be bolstered by it and it should be clearly linked. But if each individual artwork only serves to raise the profile or values of its maker, and to represent an "alternative" posture, then it should be seen as part of a fashion trend.

In his film *Hypernormalisation*, Adam Curtis says, referring to artists of the 70s, as an image of a young Patti Smith comes onscreen:

. . .radicals across America turned to art and music as a means of expressing

their criticism of society. They believed that instead of trying to change the world outside, the new radicalism should try to change what was inside people's heads. And the way to do this was through self-expression not collective action. . . But some of the left saw that something else was really going on. That by detaching themselves and retreating into an ironic coolness a whole generation was beginning to lose touch with the reality of power. . . One of them wrote at that time: 'It was the mood of the era and the revolution was deferred indefinitely and while we were dozing, the money crept in.'" (Curtis 8:55)

Our concept of the artist as rebel and genius includes a quiet notion about the value of a work ethic as balanced against the value of an idea. The reason that abstraction or conceptualism may bother some laypeople is in fact not because of a misunderstanding of the why but revulsion for the how. Maurizio Cattelan's 2019 *Comedian* at Art Basel Miami, the infamous \$120,000 duct taped banana, is perhaps the easiest most recent example to consider. Personally, I have respect for what seems to be the message of the piece, a sendup of art fairs and of the art market, and an utter contempt for the work itself. Its glibness was as much what it expressed as what it exposed.

It was extraordinary for its ability to make headlines and for representing the shallowness of the field and was horrid for the exact same reasons. The performance artist David Datuna who pulled it from the wall and ate it, whether a paid participant or a true protestor, could not alter the symbolic value and offense of the piece because its meaning was intangible and out of reach. His action, while both amusing and briefly satisfying, seemed representative of the futility of fighting back. And that was perhaps what was ultimately most depressing about the work: where do we go from here? The fruit itself was easily replaced because the content had never been destroyed. Now try to eat the Mona Lisa.

The snark, smugness, and sense of intellectual superiority that fuels a certain approach to art making is derived from relatively recent history, figures whose bread and butter was their ability to challenge formal norms and uptight conventions, or at least that's what they're famous for. Two such figures are Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, both of whom seem to be referenced in Cattelan's piece. But, in our time, what convention is challenged by a work like *Comedian*? To quote Mark Fisher from *Capitalist Realism* again, "So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange," (Fisher 13) and for this reason

Comedian is ultimately only an acknowledgment of the already painful. It does not ultimately mock the art fair, but rather its attendees. One can make a similar argument about Duchamp and Warhol's most famous works—Warhol loved money—but what is lacking in Cattelan's piece is any formal challenge. The piece is ultimately a readymade and therefore no more exciting or innovative than what Duchamp did more than a hundred years ago. Though perhaps bananas were harder to come by.

For me this begs the question not of why contemporary art is not more challenging but rather why we still fixate on the concept of rebellious, ingenious people. It is a dynamic that feels more interested in individualism and meritocracy than in commonality and egalitarianism. What I want to envision is an art practice that behaves like love and spirituality and can be returned to day in and day out, not with the intention of having one massive eureka moment but with a goal of wellbeing and contemplation. What seems required for this is not only a rethinking of our relationship to the art market, but an overhaul of our system of money and reward. And because the latter seems impossible, the former seems as though it must be done in the face of the status quo. My own goal is to prioritize sustainability and fulfillment over dreams of success, which sounds like it

should be easy. Jerry Saltz (who I have been blocked by on three different social media accounts for daring to question him) says in his new handbook, "Art is also a survival strategy. For many artists, making their work is as important, spiritually, as breathing or eating," (Saltz intro. x), and I tend not only to agree but to think this is more important than any given artist's production.

“We need to pay attention to what a work of art actually does--as distinct from whatever its supposed intention.” - DAVID SALLE (Salle 7)

STAY AT HOME, DAD

When James was still small I bought a toy time machine. We were in Target getting diapers and wipes, among other things, and, despite the sticker saying it was for ages 6 and up, I couldn't resist getting it for him. Kids provide a good reason to revisit our own childhoods or indulge in childlike behaviors and the thing wasn't terribly expensive. Kate made a snide comment about it—we had been bickering in the car on the way over and the tension hadn't really subsided—but she didn't actually care.

I'm a night owl, which is a cute way of saying I have trouble sleeping, so I went out to our garage after Kate fell asleep with the baby and I put the thing together. It was essentially just an embellished little chair comprised of hunks of plastic held together with tiny screws. There was a seatbelt. It didn't look as cool in person as it did on the box but the reflective stickers gave me a distant dull thrill, a still-lingering aftertaste of the joy I got from my Huffy bike in elementary school.

A few of my paintings were leaned up against the wall. I had just picked up a brush again then recently. I knew the work I'd made

so far was crap but I was convinced I was still capable of great things. I had strayed from my own practice while working in "visual merchandising" for ten years. I still felt young enough at that point that pursuing painting again didn't seem remotely crazy to me. And when we moved to Texas, I was James's main caretaker, since Kate landed a good job first.

I managed to awkwardly force my butt into the thing. It already felt tremendously stupid to have bought it. James was still so little, and we didn't have money to waste. I felt a pang of what was probably loneliness instead of guilt. It felt so quiet. I don't remember ever feeling isolated in New York. I was sad sometimes, sure, but there were always people everywhere. Southern friendliness felt passive aggressive to me, and car culture was a drag.

It was only a blink, not any kind of fireworks or big to do, that found me in the future. So I never really awoke there or zipped through a wormhole but simply found myself in a changed world, confused and out of place, when I had only just been a young guy who "got it", or at least believed I did. And you'll think I'm joking but my little James had become President. Things had certainly changed from when I left. In his time, anyone could just call the Oval Office directly and more or less be put right through, which is how I eventually got in

touch. It actually didn't take much to satisfy James that I was his father. I had anticipated having to plead with him but it turned out Kate had never hidden me from him. There wasn't a picture of me on the Resolute Desk or anything but he assured me I looked exactly like the photos he had seen over the years. He looked so much like me I began to cry. James was tougher, of course, being the President, and his cool demeanor reminded me immediately of his mother. I was always the one who wore my heart on my sleeve. Nevertheless, I felt the same sort of discomfort a person has watching a video of themselves. James's mannerisms, his loud sighs, and even the way he stood up and began pacing reminded me of me. I sat, as if I was the child, looking at the polished furniture, smelling some vague lingering lemony cleaning agent, and feeling dissociated, as if it was happening to someone else, while my son explained to me that time travel was no longer unheard of. But he had believed I was dead. James had grown up without me.

"Mom thought you'd walked out at first," he said. "I'm not sure she ever completely believed otherwise."

"Did she remarry?"

He laughed scornfully, and shot me a look I wasn't sure how to interpret.

"Are you mad at me, bub? I only just got here. And part of the reason I came is that,

when I heard about what you do, I figured if anyone could help send me back-

"It would be easy to send you back, Ryan," he said, and it hurt that he didn't say Dad, "but do you have any idea what I have accomplished?"

"I've heard, James, and I'm so proud of you. Is it really true that food *and* housing are completely free?"

"The whole world would be worse off if you go back. Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm glad we've never met."

I think I groaned audibly.

He opened the desk drawer and reached inside.

“My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that tie me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source.”

—ANA MENDIETA

(Viso)

A METHOD TO RESOLVE IT

There is a junction between my views on love, spirituality, and art making that has led me to believe they are all similar activities. Each is a practice to be returned to as frequently as possible, ideally each day. And each contains a clue to life's purpose or, short of that, a technique for meaning making. In his 1956 book, *The Art of Loving*, psychologist, sociologist, and Democratic Socialist Erich Fromm suggested that love is an art that must be learned, saying (gendered language his):

Our whole culture is based on the appetite for buying, on the idea of a mutually favorable exchange. Modern man's happiness consists in the thrill of looking in shop windows, and in buying all that he can afford to buy, either for cash or on installments. He (or she) looks at people in a similar way. . . . Two persons thus fall in love when they feel they have found the best object on the market, considering the limitations of their own exchange values. . . . This attitude—that nothing is easier than to love—has continued to be the prevalent idea about love in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the

contrary. There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love. . . . Could it be that only those things are considered worthy of being learned with which one can earn money or prestige, and that love, which 'only' profits the soul, but is profitless in the modern sense, is a luxury we have no right to spend much energy on?" (Fromm 3-6)

Though the book has a few dated qualities, the overarching assertion that love is a state many of us mistakenly believe we must *fall* into rather than a practice to continuously revisit still feels completely contemporary. Meanwhile, a studio habit (whatever the "studio" may look like today to any given individual) is understood as a type of labor, at least by its practitioner. But in the 21st century, art making now copes with similar challenges around value as love does. Skill means something different in the post-post modern age. Art's meaning, like love, is personal and intangible. And, perhaps as a result, one must fall into artistic legitimacy by luck and by circumstance. Art is something that can be made by anyone, but financial reward requires some form of institutional or social approval. Most makers I know have at some point

lost a gig to a potential client's creative niece or nephew. Artist Grayson Perry, in his book *Playing to the Gallery*, says, "The web does have the alarming potential to realize Joseph Beuy's prophecy that everyone is an artist. This could spell the end of art as we know it when everyone becomes a producer and we all drown in a sea of mediocrity made up of billions of minutely niched micro-channels. The arbiters of taste melt away." (Perry 102-103) The simultaneous yearnings to have art and art making accessible and to keep it safely cordoned off may actually be a friction between art's highest purpose as a therapeutic, empathic, regenerative exercise and the monetary worth of its creations. Adequate funding for the arts is a missing necessity but, even if other needs were properly paid for through governments, like healthcare in the states, for instance, or a broader, substantive commitment to keep everyone clothed, housed, educated, and fed, then art making could likewise become healthily all-inclusive. As it stands, there is either working despite the system or for it. But if covid or climate catastrophe indicates anything, it is that nature will not wait for the power brokers to figure things out. The old ways won't hold and inaction or working within the existing structures is not sustainable. Art making is a natural compulsion. The incentive of profit can engender stunning works of genius

to be enjoyed by the many but it can also lay waste to the spirit of would-be masters, who must navigate an art market reigned over by megadealers and the sometimes shady money that flows through them. What does a natural art practice look like?

Anti-materialism can be a feature of religion, though, of course, there are countless exceptions. Most of us seem to find a lot of wiggle room between our principles and our practices. My personal spiritual belief is that it is impossible for us to know whether or not there is a higher power. I have found solace in zazen, the meditation practice of Zen Buddhism because it does not challenge my agnosticism. On the contrary, it has allowed me to view my unknowing as a form of connection to the universe. Shunryu Suzuki in his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* said:

We do not even know what we are doing when we just practice with a pure mind. So we cannot compare our way to some other religion. Some people say that Zen Buddhism is not religion. Maybe that is so, or maybe Zen Buddhism is religion before religion. So it might not be religion in the usual sense. But it is wonderful, and even though we do not study what it is intellectually, even though we do not have any cathedral or fancy ornaments, it is possible to appreciate our original nature." (Suzuki 116)

It is the ritual, which I admittedly struggle to keep consistent, which I find curiously similar to painting and drawing. There is no more satisfying or mysterious feeling than the separation of my intellect and physical self that occurs while deep in the process of creating art. It feels as though "someone else" is doing the work. I have also experienced this while making music, when a melody comes from nowhere, and while exercising, when my body goes into autopilot, and now during meditation, when my awareness becomes acute. This is referred to colloquially as being in "the zone" or as a "flow state".

There are those who seem to want to turn a studio practice into a place for logic and others who insist it is only a realm for play. Others still see art as an open question, its greatest strength being that the possibilities are endless. For me, it is this zone, what is perhaps a break from intellect, that I find most fulfilling. It is a state I consider natural and unencumbered by incentive. For this reason, I don't always understand those who would pull their practice away from toil, particularly in service of a cheap joke or an attempt to seem clever. But monetizing that labor is rife with complexity. Is it more important to sell the finished result or to sell the method of the practice through teaching? I want a bigger house and a better future for my children and

I want to return to my practice day in and day out. But if I'm not selling decorations and I'm not selling entertainment and I'm not even selling poignancy then what should I sell? Perhaps I shouldn't. Maybe art is not merchandise at all.

Patreon accounts have become a way to support makers at the same time that GoFundMe accounts are being used to pay medical bills that should be covered by public dollars. Art is not a necessity in the way that health is. But art is intrinsic to civility and humanity. It should not be viewed as a luxury to make, own, or view.

The painter Katherine Bernhardt said, "I think the best painters don't intellectualize their own art—they just make stuff. It's more about color choices and color combinations," (Kerr) and I think that's right, though my own mind won't rest when I'm not painting or meditating. Love's work can also seem tedious and requires a commitment of returning. A romantic partnership's best moments are those of deep understanding and connection that cannot be achieved without hours of prior experience. But I cannot hock its triumphs. If art can be engaged in by anyone, perhaps it is perverse on some level to pass judgment on anyone's engagement with it. Or at least to the same degree that one understands it's inappropriate to have opinions about other people's choice of

partner (or partners) or religious beliefs.

What is success without money?

What is artistic fulfillment without flattery?

~~Donate to find out.~~

“You must practice being stupid, dumb, unthinking, empty. Then you will be able to DO.”

**—SOL LEWITT
(Steinhauer)**

I put a buttercup under your chin.
When it turned yellow,
you said you preferred margarine.

Special thanks (in alphabetical order):

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