

ART & FEAR

*Observations
On the Perils (and Rewards)
of Artmaking*

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I.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

*Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting,
experience treacherous, judgement difficult.*

— Hippocrates (460-400 B.C.)

MAKING ART IS DIFFICULT. We leave drawings unfinished and stories unwritten. We do work that does not feel like our own. We repeat ourselves. We stop before we have mastered our materials, or continue on long after their potential is exhausted. Often the work we have not done seems more real in our minds than the pieces we have completed. And so questions arise: *How does art get done? Why, often, does it not get done? And what is the nature of the difficulties that stop so many who start?*

These questions, which seem so timeless, may actually be particular to our age. It may have been easier to paint bison on the cave walls long ago than to write this (or any other) sentence today. Other people, in other times and places, had some robust institutions

to shore them up: witness the Church, the clan, ritual, tradition. It's easy to imagine that artists doubted their calling less when working in the service of God than when working in the service of self.

Not so today. Today almost no one feels shored up. Today artwork does not emerge from a secure common ground: the bison on the wall is someone else's magic. Making art now means working in the face of uncertainty; it means living with doubt and contradiction, doing something no one much cares whether you do, and for which there may be neither audience nor reward. Making the work you want to make means setting aside these doubts so that you may see clearly what you have done, and thereby see where to go next. Making the work you want to make means finding nourishment within the work itself. This is not the Age of Faith, Truth and Certainty.

Yet even the notion that you have a say in this process conflicts with the prevailing view of artmaking today — namely, that art rests fundamentally upon talent, and that talent is a gift randomly built into some people and not into others. In common parlance, either you have it or you don't — great art is a product of genius, good art a product of near-genius (which Nabokov likened to *Near-Beer*), and so on down the line to pulp romances and paint-by-the-numbers. This view is inherently fatalistic — even if it's true, it's fatalistic — and offers no useful encouragement to those who would make art. Personally, we'll side with Conrad's view of

fatalism: namely, that it is a species of fear — the fear that your fate *is* in your own hands, but that your hands are weak.

But while talent — not to mention fate, luck and tragedy — all play their role in human destiny, they hardly rank as dependable tools for advancing your own art on a day-to-day basis. Here in the day-to-day world (which is, after all, the only one we live in), the job of getting on with your work turns upon making some basic assumptions about human nature, assumptions that place the power (and hence the responsibility) for your actions in your own hands. Some of these can be stated directly:

A FEW ASSUMPTIONS

ARTMAKING INVOLVES SKILLS THAT CAN BE LEARNED. The conventional wisdom here is that while "craft" can be taught, "art" remains a magical gift bestowed only by the gods. Not so. In large measure becoming an artist consists of learning to accept yourself, which makes your work personal, and in following your own voice, which makes your work distinctive. Clearly, these qualities *can* be nurtured by others. Even talent is rarely distinguishable, over the long run, from perseverance and lots of hard work. It's true that every few years the authors encounter some beginning photography student whose first-semester prints appear as finely crafted as any Ansel Adams might have made. And it's true that a natural gift like

that (especially coming at the fragile early learning stage) returns priceless encouragement to its maker. But all that has nothing to do with artistic content. Rather, it simply points up the fact that most of us (including Adams himself!) had to work years to perfect our art.

ART IS MADE BY ORDINARY PEOPLE. Creatures having only virtues can hardly be imagined making art. It's difficult to picture the Virgin Mary painting landscapes. Or Batman throwing pots. The flawless creature wouldn't *need* to make art. And so, ironically, the ideal artist is scarcely a theoretical figure at all. If art is made by ordinary people, then you'd have to allow that the ideal artist would be an ordinary person too, with the whole usual mixed bag of traits that real human beings possess. This is a giant hint about art, because it suggests that our flaws and weaknesses, while often obstacles to our getting work done, are a source of strength as well. Something about making art has to do with overcoming things, giving us a clear opportunity for doing things in ways we have always known we should do them.

MAKING ART AND VIEWING ART ARE DIFFERENT AT THEIR CORE. The sane human being is satisfied that the best he/she can do at any given moment is the best he/she can do at any given moment. That belief, if widely embraced, would make this book unnecessary, false, or both. Such sanity is, unfortunately, rare. Making art provides uncomfortably accurate feedback about the gap that inevitably exists between what you in-

tended to do, and what you did. In fact, if artmaking did not tell you (the maker) so enormously much about yourself, then making art that matters to you would be impossible. To all viewers but yourself, what matters is the product: the finished artwork. To you, and you alone, what matters is the process: the experience of shaping that artwork. The viewers' concerns are not your concerns (although it's dangerously easy to adopt their attitudes.) Their job is whatever it is: to be moved by art, to be entertained by it, to make a killing off it, whatever. Your job is to learn to work on your work.

For the artist, that truth highlights a familiar and predictable corollary: artmaking can be a rather lonely, thankless affair. Virtually all artists spend some of their time (and some artists spend virtually all of their time) producing work that no one else much cares about. It just seems to come with the territory. But for some reason—self-defense, perhaps—artists find it tempting to romanticize this lack of response, often by (heroically) picturing themselves peering deeply into the underlying nature of things long before anyone else has eyes to follow.

Romantic, but wrong. The sobering truth is that the disinterest of others hardly ever reflects a gulf in vision. In fact there's generally no good reason why others *should* care about most of any one artist's work. The function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is simply to teach you how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars. One of the basic and difficult

lessons every artist must learn is that even the failed pieces are essential. X-rays of famous paintings reveal that even master artists sometimes made basic mid-course corrections (or deleted really dumb mistakes) by overpainting the still-wet canvas. The point is that you learn how to make your work *by making your work*, and a great many of the pieces you make along the way will never stand out *as finished art*. The best you can do is make art you care about — and lots of it!

The rest is largely a matter of perseverance. Of course once you're famous, collectors and academics will circle back in droves to claim credit for spotting evidence of genius in every early piece. But until your ship comes in, the only people who will really care about your work are those who care about you personally. Those close to you know that making the work is essential to your well being. They will always care about your work, if not because it is great, then because it is yours — and this is something to be genuinely thankful for. Yet however much they love you, it still remains as true for them as for the rest of the world: learning to make your work is not their problem.

ARTMAKING HAS BEEN AROUND LONGER THAN THE ART ESTABLISHMENT. Through most of history, the people who made art never thought of themselves as making art. In fact it's quite presumable that art was being made long before the rise of consciousness, long before the pronoun "I" was ever employed. The painters of caves, quite apart from not thinking of themselves as artists, probably never thought of *themselves* at all.

What this suggests, among other things, is that the current view equating art with "self-expression" reveals more a contemporary bias in our thinking than an underlying trait of the medium. Even the separation of art from craft is largely a post-Renaissance concept, and more recent still is the notion that art transcends what you do, and represents what you are. In the past few centuries Western art has moved from unsigned tableaus of orthodox religious scenes to one-person displays of personal cosmologies. "Artist" has gradually become a form of identity which (as every artist knows) often carries with it as many drawbacks as benefits. Consider that if artist equals self, then when (inevitably) you make flawed art, you are a flawed person, and when (worse yet) you make no art, you are no person at all! It seems far healthier to sidestep that vicious spiral by accepting many paths to successful artmaking — from reclusive to flamboyant, intuitive to intellectual, folk art to fine art. One of those paths is yours.

II.

ART AND FEAR

*Artists don't get down to work
until the pain of working is exceeded
by the pain of not working.*

— Stephen DeStaeblar

THOSE WHO WOULD MAKE ART might well begin by reflecting on the fate of those who preceded them: most who began, quit. It's a genuine tragedy. Worse yet, it's an unnecessary tragedy. After all, artists who continue and artists who quit share an immense field of common emotional ground. (Viewed from the outside, in fact, they're indistinguishable.) We're all subject to a familiar and universal progression of human troubles — troubles we routinely survive, but which are (oddly enough) routinely fatal to the art-making process. To survive as an artist requires confronting these troubles. Basically, those who continue to make art are those who have learned how to continue — or more precisely, have learned how to not quit.

But curiously, while artists always have a myriad of reasons to quit, they consistently wait for a handful of specific *moments* to quit. Artists quit when they convince themselves that their next effort is already doomed to fail. And artists quit when they lose the destination for their work — for the place their work *belongs*.

Virtually all artists encounter such moments. Fear that your next work will fail is a normal, recurring and generally healthy part of the artmaking cycle. It happens all the time: you focus on some new idea in your work, you try it out, run with it for awhile, reach a point of diminishing returns, and eventually decide it's not worth pursuing further. Writers even have a phrase for it — "the pen has run dry" — but all media have their equivalents. In the normal artistic cycle this just tells you that you've come full circle, back to that point where you need to begin cultivating the next new idea. But in artistic death it marks the *last* thing that happens: you play out an idea, it stops working, you put the brush down...and thirty years later you confide to someone over coffee that, well, yes, you had wanted to paint when you were much younger. Quitting is fundamentally different from *stopping*. The latter happens all the time. Quitting happens once. Quitting means not starting again — and art is all about starting again. A second universal moment of truth for artists appears when the destination for the work is suddenly withdrawn. For veteran artists this moment usually coincides — rather perversely, we feel — with *reaching*

that destination. The authors recall a mutual friend whose single-minded quest, for twenty years, was to land a one-man show at his city's major art museum. He finally got it. And never produced a serious piece of art again. There's a painful irony to stories like that, to discovering how frequently and easily success transmutes into depression. Avoiding this fate has something to do with not letting your current goal become your only goal. With individual artworks it means leaving some loose thread, some unresolved issue, to carry forward and explore in the next piece. With larger goals (like monographs or major shows) it means always carrying within you the seed crystal for your next destination. And for a few physically risky artforms (like dance), it may even mean keeping an alternative medium close by in case age or injury take you from your chosen work.

For art students, losing the destination for the work goes by another name: *Graduation*. Ask any student: For how many before them was the Graduate Show the Terminal Show? When "The Critique" is the only validated destination for work made during the first half-decade of an artist's productive life, small wonder that attrition rates spiral when that path stops. If ninety-eight percent of our *medical* students were no longer practicing medicine five years after graduation, there would be a Senate investigation, yet that proportion of art majors are routinely consigned to an early professional death. Not many people continue making art

when — abruptly — their work is no longer seen, no longer exhibited, no longer commented upon, no longer encouraged. Could you?

Surprisingly, the dropout rate during school is not all that high — the real killer is the lack of any continuing support system afterwards. Perhaps then, if the outside world shows little interest in providing that support, it remains for artists themselves to do so. Viewed that way, a strategy suggests itself:

OPERATING MANUAL FOR NOT QUITTING

- A. Make friends with others who make art, and share your in-progress work with each other frequently.
- B. Learn to think of [A], rather than the Museum of Modern Art, as the destination of your work. (Look at it this way: If all goes well, MOMA will eventually come to *you*.)

The desire to make art begins early. Among the very young this is encouraged (or at least indulged as harmless) but the push toward a “serious” education soon exacts a heavy toll on dreams and fantasies. (Yes, the authors really have known students whose parents demanded they stop wasting their time on *art* or they could damn well pay their own tuition.) Yet for some the desire persists, and sooner or later must be addressed. And with good reason: your desire to make art — beautiful or meaningful or emotive art — is integral to

your sense of who you are. Life and Art, once entwined, can quickly become inseparable; at age ninety Frank Lloyd Wright was still designing, Imogen Cunningham still photographing, Stravinsky still composing, Picasso still painting.

But if making art gives substance to your sense of self, the corresponding fear is that you’re not up to the task — that you can’t do it, or can’t do it well, or can’t do it again; or that you’re not a real artist, or not a good artist, or have no talent, or have nothing to say. The line between the artist and his/her work is a fine one at best, and for the artist it feels (quite naturally) like there is no such line. Making art can feel dangerous and revealing. Making art *is* dangerous and revealing. Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be. For many people, that alone is enough to prevent their ever getting started at all — and for those who do, trouble isn’t long in coming. Doubts, in fact, soon rise in swarms:

*I’m not an artist — I’m a phony
I have nothing worth saying
I’m not sure what I’m doing
Other people are better than I am
I’m only a [student/physicist/mother/whatever]
I’ve never had a real exhibit
No one understands my work
No one likes my work
I’m no good*

Yet viewed objectively, these fears obviously have less to do with art than they do with the artist. And even less to do with individual artworks. After all, in making art you bring your highest skills to bear upon the materials and ideas you most care about. Art is a high calling—fears are coincidental. Coincidental, sneaky and disruptive, we might add, disguising themselves variously as laziness, resistance to deadlines, irritation with materials or surroundings, distraction over the achievements of others—indeed as anything that keeps you from giving your work your best shot. What separates artists from ex-artists is that those who challenge their fears, continue; those who don't, quit. Each step in the artmaking process puts that issue to the test.

VISION & EXECUTION

Fears arise when you look back, and they arise when you look ahead. If you're prone to disaster fantasies you may even find yourself caught in the middle, staring at your half-finished canvas and fearing both that you lack the ability to finish it, and that no one will understand it if you do.

More often, though, fears rise in those entirely appropriate (and frequently recurring) moments when vision races ahead of execution. Consider the story of the young student—well, David Bayles, to be exact—who began piano studies with a Master. After a few months' practice, David lamented to his teacher, "But I can hear the music so much better in my head than I can get out of my fingers."

To which the Master replied, "What makes you think that ever changes?"

That's why they're called Masters. When he raised David's discovery from an expression of self-doubt to a simple observation of reality, uncertainty became an asset. Lesson for the day: vision is always ahead of execution—and it *should* be. Vision, Uncertainty, and Knowledge of Materials are inevitabilities that all artists must acknowledge and learn from: vision is always ahead of execution, knowledge of materials is your contact with reality, and uncertainty is a virtue.

IMAGINATION

Imagination is in control when you begin making an object. The artwork's potential is never higher than in that magic moment when the first brushstroke is applied, the first chord struck. But as the piece grows, technique and craft take over, and imagination becomes a less useful tool. A piece grows by becoming specific. The moment Herman Melville penned the opening line, "Call me Ishmael", one actual story—*Moby Dick*—began to separate itself from a multitude of imaginable others. And so on through the following five hundred-odd pages, each successive sentence in some way had to acknowledge and relate to all that preceded. Joan Didion nailed this issue squarely (and with trademark pessimism) when she said, "What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the

time you've laid down the first *two* sentences, your options are all gone."

It's the same for all media: the first few brushstrokes to the blank canvas satisfy the requirements of many possible paintings, while the last few fit only *that* painting — they could go nowhere else. The development of an imagined piece into an actual piece is a progression of decreasing possibilities, as each step in execution reduces future options by converting one — and only one — possibility into a reality. Finally, at some point or another, the piece could not be other than it is, and it is done.

That moment of completion is also, inevitably, a moment of loss — the loss of all the other forms the imagined piece might have taken. The irony here is that the piece you make is always one step removed from what you imagined, or what else you can imagine, or what you're right on the edge of being able to imagine. Designer Charles Eames, arguably the quintessential Renaissance Man of the twentieth century, used to complain good-naturedly that he devoted only about one percent of his energy to conceiving a design — and the remaining ninety-nine percent to *holding onto it* as a project ran its course. Small surprise. After all, your imagination is free to race a hundred works ahead, conceiving pieces you could and perhaps should and maybe one day *will* execute — but not today, not in the piece at hand. All you can work on today is directly in front of you. Your job is to develop an imagination of the possible.

A finished piece is, in effect, a test of correspondence between imagination and execution. And perhaps surprisingly, the more common obstacle to achieving that correspondence is not undisciplined execution, but undisciplined imagination. It's altogether too seductive to approach your proposed work believing your materials to be more malleable than they really are, your ideas more compelling, your execution more refined. As Stanley Kunitz once commented, "The poem in the head is always perfect. Resistance begins when you try to convert it into language." And it's true, most artists don't daydream about making great art — they daydream about *having made* great art. What artist has not experienced the feverish euphoria of composing the *perfect* thumbnail sketch, first draft, negative or melody — only to run headlong into a stone wall trying to convert that tantalizing hint into the finished mural, novel, photograph, sonata. The artist's life is frustrating not because the passage is slow, but because he imagines it to be fast.

MATERIALS

The materials of art, like the thumbnail sketch, seduce us with their potential. The texture of the paper, the smell of the paint, the weight of the stone — all cast hints and innuendoes, beckoning our fantasies. In the presence of good materials, hopes grow and possibilities multiply. And with good reason: some materials are so readily charged and responsive that artists have turned

to them for thousands of years, and probably will for thousands more. For many artists the response to a particular material has been intensely personal, as if the material spoke directly to them. It's been said that as a child, Pablo Casals knew from the first moment he heard the sound of a cello, that that was *his* instrument.

But where materials have potential, they also have limits. Ink wants to flow, but not across just any surface; clay wants to hold a shape, but not just any shape. And in any case, without your active participation their potential remains just that — potential. Materials are like elementary particles: charged, but indifferent. They do not listen in on your fantasies, do not get up and move in response to your idle wishes. The blunt truth is, they do precisely what your hands make them do. The paint lays exactly where you put it; the words you wrote — not the ones you needed to write or thought about writing — are the only ones that appear on the paper. In the words of Ben Shahn, "The painter who stands before an empty canvas must think in terms of paint."

What counts, in making art, is the actual fit between the contents of your head and the qualities of your materials. The knowledge you need to make that fit comes from noticing what really happens as you work — the way the materials respond, and the way that response (and resistance) suggest new ideas to you. It's those real and ordinary changes that matter. Art is about carrying things out, and materials are what *can* be carried out. Because they are real, they are reliable.

UNCERTAINTY

Your materials are, in fact, one of the few elements of artmaking you can reasonably hope to control. As for everything else — well, conditions are never perfect, sufficient knowledge rarely at hand, key evidence always missing, and support notoriously fickle. All that you do will inevitably be flavored with uncertainty — uncertainty about what you have to say, about whether the materials are right, about whether the piece should be long or short, indeed about whether you'll ever be satisfied with *anything* you make. Photographer Jerry Uelsmann once gave a slide lecture in which he showed every single image he had created in the span of one year: some hundred-odd pieces — all but about ten of which he judged insufficient and destroyed without ever exhibiting. Tolstoy, in the Age Before Typewriters, re-wrote *War & Peace* eight times and was still revising galley proofs as it finally rolled onto the press. William Kennedy gamely admitted that he re-wrote his own novel *Legs* eight times, and that "seven times it came out no good. Six times it was especially no good. The seventh time out it was pretty good, though it was way too long. My son was six years old by then and so was my novel and they were both about the same height."

It is, in short, the normal state of affairs. The truth is that the piece of art which seems so profoundly right in its finished state may earlier have been only inches or seconds away from total collapse. Lincoln doubted

his capacity to express what needed to be said at Gettysburg, yet pushed ahead anyway, knowing he was doing the best he could to present the ideas he needed to share. It's always like that. Art is like beginning a sentence before you know its ending. The risks are obvious: you may never get to the end of the sentence at all — or having gotten there, you may not have said anything. This is probably not a good idea in public speaking, but it's an excellent idea in making art.

In making art you need to give yourself room to respond authentically, both to your subject matter and to your materials. Art happens *between* you and something — a subject, an idea, a technique — and both you and that something need to be free to move. Many fiction writers, for instance, discover early on that making detailed plot outlines is an exercise in futility; as actual writing progresses, characters increasingly take on a life of their own, sometimes to the point that the writer is as surprised as the eventual reader by what their creations say and do. Lawrence Durrell likened the process to driving construction stakes in the ground: you plant a stake, run fifty yards ahead a plant another, and pretty soon you know which way the road will run. E.M. Forster recalled that when he began writing *A Passage To India* he knew that the Malabar Caves would play a central role in the novel, that something important would surely happen there — it's just that he wasn't sure what it would be.

Control, apparently, is not the answer. People who need certainty in their lives are less likely to make art that is risky, subversive, complicated, iffy, suggestive or spontaneous. What's really needed is nothing more than a broad sense of what you are looking for, some strategy for how to find it, and an overriding willingness to embrace mistakes and surprises along the way. Simply put, making art is chancy — it doesn't mix well with predictability. Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the prerequisite to succeeding.