the very best writings on art are not analytical or chronological; they are autobiographical. The artist, after all, was *there*.

An ancient tenet in Chinese painting holds that the Master paints not the created thing, but the forces that created it. Likewise, the best writing about art depicts not the finished piece, but the processes that created it. In his *Daybooks*, Edward Weston offered an intimate account (too intimate, some would say) of the myriad of influences bracketing the moment of exposure. In *The Double Helix*, Watson & Crick recorded (in more restrained style) the conjecture and experiments that led to their discovery of the molecular structure of DNA. In *Daybook*, artist Anne Truitt began a one-year journal (which in due time stretched to seven) filled with wisdom and insight. Weston's passion, Watson's logic, Truitt's introspection: these are all driving mechanisms of process. Every artist has issues that lie similarly close to the heart. Every artist could write such a book. You could write such a book.

VIII.

CONCEPTUAL WORLDS

The answers you get
depend upon the questions you ask.
— Thomas Kuhn

WRITER HENRY JAMES once proposed three questions you could productively put to an artist's work. The first two were disarmingly straightforward: *What was the artist trying to achieve? Did he/she succeed?* The third's a zinger: *Was it worth doing?*

Those first two questions alone are worth the price of admission. They address art at a level that can be tested directly against real-world values and experience; they commit you to accepting the perspective of the maker into your own understanding of the work. In short, they ask you to respond to the work itself, without first pushing it through some aesthetic filter label-

led Behaviorism, Feminism, Postmodernism or Whateverism.*

But it's that third question—*Was it worth doing?*—that truly opens the universe. What *is* worth doing? Are some artistic problems inherently more interesting than others? More relevant? More meaningful? More difficult? More provocative? Every contemporary artist dances with such questions as these.

IDEAS & TECHNIQUE

Provocative art challenges not only the viewer, but also its maker. Art that falls short often does so not because the artist failed to meet the challenge, but because there was never a challenge there in the first place. Think of it like Olympic diving: you don't win high points for making even the *perfect* swan dive off the low board. There's little reward in an easy perfection quickly reached by many.

To resist models of perfection in art may seem strange, given their acceptance in so many other facets

* A FOOTNOTE: Frederick J. Crews is author of the definitive text on the perils of philosophical tunnel vision. In fact the title to his small volume is itself a classic:

THE POOH PERPLEX
—A Freshman Casebook—
In Which It is Discovered that the True Meaning of the Pooh Stories is Not as Simple as is Usually Believed,
But for Proper Elucidation Requires the Combined Efforts of Several Academicians of Varying Critical Persuasions

of living. Swan dives notwithstanding, the Olympic Games themselves are founded on the concept of great achievement within a strict framework. Honors in the hundred meter dash, after all, go not to the runner who displays some intriguing personal skip, but to the one who reaches the set goal first. The burden for the artist, as Anne Truitt observes in her *Daybook*, is that "The lawyer and the doctor *practice* their callings. The plumber and the carpenter *know* what they will be called upon to do. They do not have to spin the work out of themselves, discover its laws, and then present themselves turned inside out to the public gaze."

Clearly that is not an easy space to put yourself in. And indeed many artists don't. Artists who need ongoing reassurance that they're on the right track routinely seek out challenges that offer the clear goals and measurable feedback—which is to say, technical challenges. The underlying problem with this is not that the pursuit of technical excellence is wrong, exactly, but simply that making it the primary goal puts the cart before the horse. We do not long remember those artists who followed the rules more diligently than anyone else. We remember those who made the art from which the "rules" inevitably follow.

More insidiously, technical standards have a way of taking on all the trappings of aesthetic standards. There is widespread agreement, for instance, that it's a genuine challenge to impart rich blacks and subtle high values to a photographic print. At some point, however,

this seemingly neutral observation gave rise (especially among West Coast landscape photographers) to a moral imperative that photographs *should* display such tonal perfection. As this genre established itself, criteria for judging a print increasingly concentrated on the virtuoso technical performance needed to produce the desired tones. Subtlety of tone became, often quite literally, the primary content. An equivalent fate befell much twentieth century symphonic music, which was seduced by arcane harmonic theory to the degree that its critical audience drifted progressively to other idioms (like jazz) that remained grounded in the rhythms of the real world.

To the viewer, who has little emotional investment in how the work gets done, art made primarily to display technical virtuosity is often beautiful, striking, elegant...and vacant. To the artist, who has an emotional investment in *everything*, it's more a question of which direction to reach. Compared to other challenges, the ultimate shortcoming of technical problems is not that they're hard, but that they're easy.

Artists, naturally, would be the last to admit that, if only because heroic accounts of grueling hours spent building the mold or casting the hot metal remain *de riguer* of artistic conversation. But while mastering technique is difficult and time-consuming, it's still inherently easier to reach an already defined goal—a "right answer"—than to give form to a new idea. It's easier to paint in the angel's feet to another's master-

work than to discover where the angels live within yourself. If technique were the core issue in art, our nominee for the Famous Artists Wax Museum would be the lifer at San Quentin who spent twenty years constructing a perfect replica of the Eifel Tower *from toothpicks*. (And well, yes, in its own way it was pretty impressive!) But that's not the way it works. Simply put, art that deals with ideas is more interesting than art that deals with technique.

CRAFT

Yes, there *is* a difference between art and craft—it's just that both terms are so overgrown with fuzzy definitions that drawing a clear distinction between them is close to impossible. We'll settle here for a fuzzy distinction.

Think of craft and you think of furniture shaped by Sam Maloof, of handmade clothing flaunted at Renaissance Faires, of everything made before the Industrial Revolution. Think of art and you think of *War and Peace*, a Beethoven concerto, the *Mona Lisa*. Both disciplines obviously yield good things, valuable things, sometimes tangibly useful things, and at first pass the distinction between them seems perfectly clear.

But is the *Mona Lisa* really art? Well then, what about an undetectably perfect *copy* of the *Mona Lisa*? That comparison (however sneaky) points up the fact that it's surprisingly difficult, maybe even impossible, to view any single work in isolation and rule definitively,

"This is art" or "This is craft." Striking that difference means comparing successive pieces made by the same person.

In essence, art lies embedded in the conceptual leap between pieces, not in the pieces themselves. And simply put, there's a greater conceptual jump from one work of art to the next than from one work of craft to the next. The net result is that art is less polished—but more innovative—than craft. The differences between five Steinway grand pianos—demonstrably works of consummate craftsmanship—are small compared to the differences between the five Beethoven Piano concerti you might perform on those instruments.

A work of craft is typically made to fit a specific template, sometimes a painstakingly difficult template requiring years of hands-on apprenticeship to master. It's staggering to realize that nearly all the truly great violins ever produced were made in the course of a few years by a few artisans living within a few blocks of each other. All this in a remote Italian village, three centuries ago. The accomplishments of Antonio Stradivari and his fellow craftsmen point up one real difference between art and craft: with craft, perfection *is* possible. In that sense the Western definition of craft closely matches the Eastern definition of art. In Eastern cultures, art that faithfully carries forward the tradition of an elder master is honored; in the West it is put down as derivative.

Yet curiously, the progression of most artists' work over time is a progression from art toward craft. In the

same manner that imagination gives way to execution as any single work builds toward completion, an artist's major discoveries usually come early on, and a lifetime is then allotted to fill out and refine those discoveries. As the Zen proverb suggests, for the beginner there are many paths, for the advanced, few.

At any point along that path, your job as an artist is to push craft to its limits—without being trapped by it. The trap is perfection: unless your work continually generates new and unresolved issues, there's no reason for your next work to be any different from the last. The difference between art and craft lies not in the tools you hold in your hands, but in the mental set that guides them. For the artisan, craft is an end in itself. For you, the artist, craft is the vehicle for expressing your vision. Craft is the visible edge of art.

New Work

In routine artistic growth, new work doesn't make the old work false—it makes it more artificial, more an act of artifice. Older work is ofttimes an embarrassment to the artist because it feels like it was made by a younger, more naive person—one who was ignorant of the pretension and striving in the work. Earlier work often feels, curiously, both too labored and too simple. This is normal. New work is *supposed* to replace old work. If it does so by making the old work inadequate, insufficient and incomplete—well, that's life. (Frank Lloyd Wright advised young architects to plant ivy all around their early buildings, suggesting that in time

it would grow to cover their "youthful indiscretions.") Old work tells you what you were paying attention to then; new work comments on the old by pointing out what you were *not* previously paying attention to. Now this would all be smooth and lovely except that new work can turn to old work in an instant — sometimes, indeed, in the instant immediately following the work's completion. Savoring finished work may last only an eye-blink. This is certainly unpleasant—but it's a good sign.

> CREA**VITY
>
> Readers may wish to note that *nowhere* in this book does the dreaded the C-word appear. *Why should it?* Do only some people have ideas, confront problems, dream, live in the real world and breathe air?

HABITS

Habits are the peripheral vision of the mind. Churning away just below the level of conscious decision-making, they scan a situation with a conceptual eye to disregarding most of it. The theory is simple enough: respond automatically to the familiar, and you're then free to respond selectively to the unfamiliar. Applying that theory, however, is a bit dicier. Indulge too many habits, and life sinks into mind-dulling routine. Too few, and coping with a relentless stream of incoming detail overwhelms you (much as users of

certain psychotropic drugs become mesmerized once they notice that every blade of grass is *growing*.)

It's all a matter of balance, and making art helps achieve that balance. For the artist, a sketchpad or a notebook is a license to explore — it becomes entirely acceptable to stand there, for minutes on end, staring at a tree stump. Sometimes you need to scan the forest, sometimes you need to touch a single tree—if you can't apprehend both, you'll never entirely comprehend either. To *see* things is to enhance your sense of wonder both for the singular pattern of your own experience, and for the meta-patterns that shape all experience. All this suggests a useful working approach to making art: notice the objects you notice. (*e.g.* Read that sentence again.) Or put another way: make objects that talk — and then listen to them.

Habits get a lot of bad press in the art world. Well, no surprises there — in a field where iconoclasts flourish and exploring new ideas is the order of the day, who wants to stay home with the familiar? Indeed, why should you? After all, if you're comfortable with what you're doing, you've probably been there before. Yet larger questions will never get engaged unless huge amounts of detail can be trusted to habit. If art is to nourish consciousness, habitual reactions must be encouraged as well as questioned. The need is to search among your own repeated reactions to the world, expose those that are not true or useful, and change them. The remainder are yours: cultivate them. In any case, you haven't much choice. As mathematician G.K.

Chesterton wryly noted, "You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from the laws of *their own nature*. Do not go about encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides; if a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end."

The trick, of course, is cultivating habitual gestures that are *yours*. Unfortunately the outside world is not overly charitable to the artist in this effort. Habits imprinted by genes, parents, church, jobs and relationships are called character traits. Habits acquired from other artists are called—depending on the form they take—affectation, derivation, plagiarism or forgery. Your authors find this judgement a trifle harsh, especially since it invalidates the very source artists most often draw from in their early artmaking.

The effect on the artist, however, isn't nearly so dire as critics would have it appear. Many people first respond deeply to art—indeed, respond deeply to the world—upon finding works of art that seem to speak directly to them. Small surprise, then, if upon setting out to make art themselves, they begin by emulating the art or artist that brought this revelation. Beethoven's early compositions, for instance, show the unmistakable influence of his teacher, Franz Joseph Haydn. Most early work, in fact, only hints at the themes and gestures that will—if the potential isn't squandered—emerge as the artist's characteristic signature in later, mature work. At the outset, however, chances are that whatever theme and technique attract you, someone has already

experimented in the same direction. This is unavoidable: making any art piece inevitably engages the large themes and basic techniques that artists have used for centuries. Finding your own work is a process of distilling from each those traces that ring true to your own spirit.

Once developed, art habits are deep-seated, reliable, helpful, and convenient. Moreover, habits are stylistically important. In a sense, habits *are* style. The unconsidered gesture, the repeated phrasing, the automatic selection, the characteristic reaction to subject matter and materials—these are the very things we refer to as style. Lots of people, artists included, consider this a virtue. Viewed closely, however, style is not a virtue, it is an inevitability—the inescapable result of doing anything more than a few times. The habitual gestures of the artist appear throughout any body of work developed enough to be called a body of work. Style is not an aspect of good work, it is an aspect of *all* work. Style is the natural consequence of habit.

ART & SCIENCE

It is an article of faith, among artists and scientists alike, that at some deep level their disciplines share a common ground. What science bears witness to experimentally, art has always known intuitively—that there is an innate rightness to the recurring forms of nature. Science does not set out to prove the existence of parabolas or sine curves or *pi*, yet wherever phe-

nomena are observed, *there they are*. Art does not weigh mathematically the outcome of the brushstroke, yet whenever artworks are made, archetypal forms appear. Charles Eames, when asked just how he arrived at the curves used in his famous molded plywood chair, was clearly baffled that anyone would ask such a question; finally he just shrugged and replied, "It's in the nature of the thing." Some things, regardless of whether they are discovered or invented, simply and assuredly feel right. What is natural and what is beautiful are, in their purest state, indistinguishable. Could you improve upon the Circle?

In the day-to-day world, however, improving the circle is different from, say, improving the wheel. Science advances at the rate that technology provides tools of greater precision, while art advances at the pace that evolution provides minds with greater insight—a pace that is, for better or worse, glacially slow. Thus while the stone tools fashioned by cave dwellers an Ice Age ago are hopelessly primitive by current technological standards, their wall paintings remain as elegant and expressive as any modern art. And while a hundred civilizations have prospered (sometimes for centuries) without computers or windmills or even the wheel, none have survived even a few generations without art.

All that is not meant to cast art and science into some sort of moral footrace, but simply to point out that—in art as well as in science—the answers you get depend upon the questions you ask. Where the scientist asks

what equation would best describe the trajectory of an airborne rock, the artist asks what it would feel like to throw one.

"The main thing to keep in mind," as Douglas Hofstadter noted, "is that science is about *classes* of events, not particular instances." Art is just the opposite. Art deals in any one particular rock, with its welcome vagaries, its peculiarities of shape, its unevenness, its noise. The truths of life as we experience them—and as art expresses them—include random and distracting influences as essential parts of their nature. Theoretical rocks are the province of science; particular rocks are the province of art.

The richness of science comes from really smart people asking precisely framed questions about carefully controlled events—controlled in the sense that such random or distracting influences don't count. The scientist, if asked whether a given experiment could be repeated with identical results, would have to say yes—or it wouldn't be science. The presumption is that at the end of a scientific experiment neither the researcher nor the world have changed, and so repeating the experiment would necessarily re-produce the same result. Indeed, *anyone* performing the experiment correctly would get the same results—a circumstance that on occasion leads to multiple claims for the same discovery.

But the artist, if asked whether an art piece could be remade with identical results, would have to answer no—or it wouldn't be art. In making a piece of art, both

the artist and the artist's world are changed, and re-asking the question — facing the next blank canvas — will always yield a different answer. This creates a certain paradox, for while good art carries a ring of truth to it — a sense that something permanently important about the world has been made clear — the act of giving form to that truth is arguably unique to one person, and one time. There is a moment for each artist in which a particular truth can be found, and if it is not found then, it will not ever be. No one else will ever be in a position to write *Hamlet*. This is pretty good evidence that the meaning of the world is made, not found. Our understanding of the world changed when those words were written, and we can't go back...any more than Shakespeare could.

The world thus altered becomes a different world, with our alterations being part of it. The world we see today is the legacy of people noticing the world and commenting on it in forms that have been preserved. Of course it's difficult to imagine that horses had no shape before someone painted their shape on the cave walls, but it is not difficult to see the world became a subtly larger, richer, more complex and meaningful place as a result.

SELF-REFERENCE

Self-reference, repetition, parody, satire — art is nothing if not incestuous. Witness Escher's drawing of hands drawing hands. Twentieth century art has made self-

reference pretty much its stock in trade — paintings about painting, writings about writing. Moreover, most every piece of art quotes itself, calling out its own name through rhythm and repetition. Music offers the clearest examples — like Beethoven building the first movement of his Fifth Symphony around just four notes — but all media have their equivalents.

When not quoting itself, artworks often pay homage to art that preceded them: Shostakovitch's masterful viola sonata (*Opus 147*) quotes Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata,* wrapping the tune around itself, drawing attention to itself drawing attention to something else. At the less reverent level, this becomes satire and parody, as in Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam.*

An operation like (for instance) applying paint says something not only about itself, but about all the other applied paint as well. Rembrandt's work looks different — the paint more deliberately applied — after you've seen Jackson Pollock's. It looks even more different after you've applied paint yourself. Our understanding of the past is altered by our experiences in the present.

Turning the reference point inward, it's apparent that at some level, all art is autobiographical. After all, your brush only paints a stroke in response to your gesture, your word processor only taps out a sentence in response to your keystrokes. As Tennessee Williams observed, even works of demonstrable fiction or fantasy remain *emotionally* autobiographical. John Szarkowski once curated a show at the Museum of Modern Art

titled *Mirrors and Windows*. His premise was that some artists view the world as if looking through a window at things happening "out there", while others view the world as if looking in a mirror at a world inside themselves. Either way, the autobiographical vantage point is implicit.

If art is about self, the widely accepted corollary is that making art is about self-expression. And it is—but that is not necessarily all it is. It may only be a passing feature of our times that validating the sense of who-you-are is held up as the major source of the need to make art. What gets lost in that interpretation is an older sense that art is something you do out in the world, or something you do about the world, or even something you do *for* the world. The need to make art may not stem solely from the need to express who you are, but from a need to complete a relationship with something outside yourself. As a maker of art you are custodian of issues larger than self.

Some people who make art are driven by inspiration, others by provocation, still others by desperation. Artmaking grants access to worlds that may be dangerous, sacred, forbidden, seductive, or all of the above. It grants access to worlds you may otherwise never fully engage. It may in fact be the engagement — not the art — that you seek. The difference is that making art allows, indeed guarantees, that you declare yourself. Art is contact, and your work necessarily reveals the nature of that contact. In making art you declare what is important.

METAPHOR

When you start on a long journey, trees are trees, water is water, and mountains are mountains. After you have gone some distance, trees are no longer trees, water no longer water, mountains no longer mountains. But after you have travelled a great distance, trees are once again trees, water is once again water, mountains are once again mountains.

— Zen teaching

Making art depends upon noticing things — things about yourself, your methods, your subject matter. Sooner or later, for instance, every visual artist notices the relationship of the line to the picture's edge. Before that moment the relationship does not exist; afterwards it's impossible to imagine it *not* existing. And from that moment on every new line talks back and forth with the picture's edge. People who have not yet made this small leap do not see the same picture as those who have—in fact, conceptually speaking, they do not even live in the same world.

Your work is the source for an uncountably large number of such relationships. And these relationships, in turn, are a primary source of the richness and complexity in your art. As your art develops, conceptual relationships increasingly define the shape and structure of the world you see. In time, they *are* the world. Distinctions between you, your work and the world lessen, grow transparent, and finally disappear. In time, *trees are once again trees*.

Viewed over a span of years, changes in one's art often reveal a curious pattern, swinging irregularly between long periods of quiet refinement, and occasional leaps of runaway change. (And though it's beyond our purposes here, we can't help but note the tantalizing similarity between this pattern and the manifestations of chaos theory in mathematics.) Sometimes our perception of the world flows smoothly and continuously from one state to the next, and sometimes it flips over unexpectedly (and irrevocably) into a different configuration entirely. As schoolkids we memorize the famous examples—like Newton's apple delivering him the Law of Gravity—but always with the caveat that such events are rare, probably excessively rare. After all, how often does anyone get the chance to rewrite the underlying laws of physics?

Yet it's demonstrably true that all of us do (from time to time) experience such conceptual jumps, and while ours may not affect the orbit of planets, they markedly affect the way we engage the world around us. Study French, for instance, and you'll likely spend the first month painstakingly translating it word by word into English to make it understandable. Then one day—*voilá!*—you find yourself reading French *without* translating it, and a process that was previously enigmatic has become automatic. Or go mushroom hunting with someone who really knows mushrooms, and you'll first endure some downright humiliating outings in which the expert finds all the mushrooms and you find

none. But then at some point the world shifts, the woods magically fill—mushrooms everywhere!—and a view that was previously opaque has become transparent.

For the artist, such lightning shifts are a central mechanism of change. They generate the purest form of metaphor: connections are made between unlike things, meanings from one enrich the meanings of the other, and the unlike things become inseparable. Before the leap there was light and shadow. Afterwards, objects float in a space where light and shadow are indistinguishable from the object they define.

Recently a painter of some accomplishment (but as insecure as the rest of us) was discussing his previous night's dream with a friend over coffee. It was one of those vivid technicolor dreams, the kind that linger on in exact detail even after waking. In his dream he found himself at an art gallery, and when he walked inside and looked around he found the walls hung with paintings—amazing paintings, paintings of passionate intensity and haunting beauty. Recounting his dream, the artist ended fervently with, "I'd give anything to be able to make paintings like that!"

"Wait a minute!" his friend exclaimed. "Don't you see? Those *were* your paintings! They came from your own mind. Who else could have painted them?"

Who else indeed?

Of course you can deny your dreams, but the result will be uniformly dreary. Insist that the world must always remain x, and x is indeed exactly what you'll

get. But that's all the world will ever be. And all your art will ever be. When your only tool is a hammer, so the saying goes, everything looks like a nail. Imagination and execution take their rightful common ground in possible acts: paintable pictures, danceable steps, playable notes. Your growth as the artist is a growth toward fully realizable works — works that become real in full illumination of all that you know. Including all you know about yourself.

IX.

THE HUMAN VOICE

Computers are useless —
all they can give you are answers.
— Pablo Picasso

THROUGHOUT MUCH OF THIS BOOK we've tried to confront the difficulties of making art by examining the way those difficulties really happen in the studio. It's a simple premise: follow the leads that arise from contact with the work itself, and your technical, emotional and intellectual pathway becomes clear. Having come this far, it's tempting to try to bring this idea to closure by resolving all those leads into a single clear, concise, fundamental, finely honed *answer*. Tempting, but futile. Answers are reassuring, but when you're onto something really useful, it will probably take the form of a *question*.

QUESTIONS

Over the long run, the people with the interesting answers are those who ask the interesting questions.