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A Sort of Artist Manifesto

Locked Out of Something Important

So I am supposed to write a thesis. I have no idea how to do this. It is supposed to 'bring me joy' and be 'for me'. I am getting contradictory advice on how to go about it. There is too much noise in my head and I feel foggy and confused. My mind seems to both throw up wild bits of thoughts, or sit in an impenetrable silence, not willing to give anything up. I've made mind maps, collaged image maps, studied other artist writings, pasted together pieces from all of my past papers, written at least three different versions of my thesis, and still feel sick to my stomach. Contradictory feelings of frustration at being locked out of something important, and fear of being forced to violate something precious roil across my heart. All the while, my mind resolutely scatters smoke screens and darkness, and the part of me that wants approval from my professors is in despair. Being raised as a white anglo saxon protestant in New England, I hit on working harder as the resolution to the dilemma. I shall impress my mind with how hard I can work and it will decide to behave and let flow its bounty so I can graduate and be done with this torture. Being wily it agrees to write, but balks at any mention of a thesis format; if I force it into an academic shape, it immediately lays down and dies. It is dead writing. I hate it's arrogance, its smugness, its neat and tidy theories, its art-speak, and it feels very far from my real life. I want my writing to be real, not academic, certain, or even rational. My mind is not rational, it's wild and all over the place and I have no idea how to manage the chaos or the stubborn darkness that resists my attempts to illuminate it. It refuses to be corralled, civilized, commodified, lit up like a neon sign, marketed and consumed. It's a rogue element, and I am falling in love with it.

The Spider's Web

The artist Anthony Romero talked about his mother, and she said a spider's web is both a home and a trap, and to always remember this. Maybe that is a bit of what my work is about; how our 'homes' are both a refuge and a prison. Home of our language, home of our family, home of our culture, our profession, home of our human body, home of our planet, home of our race, gender, etc... Well, you see the problem. My work addresses how to untangle the home part, from the trap part, in order to not get stuck, and then eaten. Although, even gotten eaten has its uses and is not separate from life.

A Trick Operation

It is all about our journey. So we are supposed to write about our journey without anyone realizing it. It's kind of a trick operation, maybe like a Zen koan. Koan's seem to be like questions, but they aren't really. They are about your life, your real and actual life, not your fake, fictitious life that goes on in your head all of the time. But I suppose even this fake fictitious life going on in your head, is still a part of your life! What could you leave out? What could ever be left out? Certainly not your thoughts, because even though they may not be made

of matter, they are as real as the heaviest stones; measuring by the effect they have on our life. They are our heaviest burden and perhaps our greatest light. Thoughts are always in a specific language that has been carefully directed and choreographed by parents, teachers, and generally everyone you grow up with. Language shapes our world. Each language creates a universe in which those who are speaking in it swim in it. It is our little language pool, ocean, or cosmos. We filter, create and co-create our worlds with language. It's really a type of cult, an indoctrination, without you being aware or agreeing to the proposition. It's like a fish in the water who has no idea that there is another option: a world of air.

How to save my life

I am interested in how to love the whole world and how to save my life. I don't really know how to do either. I know I can't love the whole world seeing as it contains all sorts of horrors and suffering, I am not blind. Pressing questions I am always trying to resolve are how to be a decent mother, a 'good' person, be of benefit, and not harm the world. How does one do that as an artist? What are the ethics of being an artist, or making objects. Especially during the time we live in - ecological disaster, pandemics, overconsumption, too much trash, too many people, too little time, just too much! We are killing the planet and ourselves with all of our stuff. How can I be of benefit? I make stuff - why? Do we need more stuff in the world? We certainly do not! And yet, the world is always making new stuff, but it recycles, it doesn't waste anything. It does not throw away the 'past' used material, the dead bodies. Is death really a thing? Water never dies, elements never die, they just go round and round. You can't take anything out of the universe and you can't put anything into it. So I like this idea of recycling, being ecological in my art making. The idea of transformation, and being reborn, reused. Taking 'dead' things or maybe old ideas and using them for what is needed now, bringing them back to life. Not as they were back then, they died for a reason, but let's not throw them out! If my art is going to mean anything and not just be a waste of materials and my life, it must be ecological and recycle the past and materials and maybe myself, my body, my environment.

Material Love

I love materials, but especially beat up materials; used materials. Materials that have 'worked', that have had a job, or do have jobs. This expression of labor, of their helpfulness to life is beautiful to me. I especially desire ones that have been worn out from use; they are like ancestors or grandparents. Like the deceased or old, they are outmoded in many senses, but maybe their very uselessness is of great service. Artists are rather useless in many ways and so is their art. I struggle with this uselessness, this laziness, or loitering type of activity that I am engaged in. This may be my puritan background and my capitalist upbringing. Our society is obsessed with use, efficiency, production and maybe spending time creating useless objects and environments is a radical act, a bit subversive. This destruction of productive time is something my work is interested in. The creation of environments that have a sense of deep time, of sinking into a space before we developed time; a type of primal space seems important to me. I long to be in a space where we have all the time we want and can wander from here to there, and go down many rabbit holes and see what interesting tangles of connections arise. We could just sit and think and watch and listen for years if we wanted, then maybe write a poem, or create a work of art. Not to sell, or gain applause, or to be clever, but just for the sheer joy of it, for no reason at all really. Just because you are alive and happy and want to share it.

The Red Thread

The red thread tends to overthrow neatly laid plans and generally create a chaotic tangle of mixed up life - a wilderness seething with possibilities. It is the opposite of puritanism, which likes to measure, count and generally repress any red thread moments. Most spiritualites are against the red thread and tend to yearn for purity, transcendence and nonattachment. My embrace of the red thread is an acknowledgement that purity might be the enemy of love, that religions have limitations and we should look at this, not be blindly attached to our preferred ideologies. This may be the reason why I have so much sewing in my work, so many threads and seams, I am always working with desire and how it tangles and weaves its way through objects, not knowing how it will shape the piece, working blind, I let my hands 'see' and 'know', my body and the material intermingle and communicate, luxuriate in allowing its own sense of time and pleasure. The thread can intertwine, penetrate each other, and create a new form; an unknowable form before that moment. Red thread impulses are all about touch, about having a specific body, about labor and the deliciousness of physicality and other bodies in one's life. Touch also imprints my care and devotion into the object. It is a way that I show my desire, struggles, and my inadequacies, my vulnerabilities, my flaws, my inability to do 'finished' work. I am clumsy and not great at making perfect stitches, cuts, or anything. I want to show that - to show my bodily limitations.

Are you afraid of this happiness?

My art practice is my spiritual practice, and my spiritual practice is nothing other than my life practice - or how to live a good life? What constitutes a good life? What is this word 'life' and this word 'good'? Do either of the words or ideas and concepts of these words actually get in our way of living a 'good life'? When the Buddha was about to become enlightened a question arose in his mind "are you afraid of this happiness?" Can we be afraid of happiness? I know for a fact that we can, as I was terrified of what I really wanted out of life. So if happiness is not what we think it is, and is actually something dangerous or risky in some way, I want my work to be daring. In my Buddhist practice we make a vow everyday to "transform my body, speech and mind to be a true source of benefit to myself and others (sentient and insentient)". How to do this? Let's be honest, I have no idea how to do this. It is completely outside of my wheelhouse, but it feels like a very daring thing to try to do. Also, the decision to try is humbling, as I need lots of help to figure it out; my partner, therapists, teachers, children, nature, books, mentors, other artists, the list goes on! I say this phrase everyday and I haven't the faintest idea how to go about it. It is completely inconceivable to me, but that is what I am trying to do each time I produce artwork - transform my body, speech and mind in order to be a true source of benefit for myself and others. In Zen there is a koan about relying on the inconceivable and has something to do with 'bringing a Rhinoceros'. I like the idea of relying on the inconceivable, and I especially like the idea that I might one day bring a Rhinoceros! How fabulous! I like the idea of having this impossible vision and not knowing how to do it, not even knowing if it is a good idea, what it actually means, or if it is possible. There is huge risk involved, especially to the self, which always likes certainty. There is no assembly line model or string of 0's and 1's that can tell you how to do this. Working with the unknown, the unknowable, the dark is very liberating in a culture that tries to disenchant everything with a mechanized or digital concept. The other wonderful offshoot of this approach is that I have to rely on help, on the universe

reaching out with its thousands of eyes to see what's needed and thousands of hands to aid in the process. Working this way activates all sorts of chance tangles and messy interactions and limitations in which there is no way you can foresee what the final outcome will be. It is also a way to transform my body, as the body of the universe, of other people, objects, nature, helps create the work. It keeps me from making 'perfect' things, or at least trying to make my idea of perfection, because my idea of perfection is really an inmate's idea of how to be happy in his cell. Which is generally more about making a cozier cell, and not about tearing down walls of his prison. The resulting work could be terrible and not at all what I wanted, or imagined, which in the end, might be just what I needed, or what the moment needed. It is the bringing of the rhinoceros.