

Where Writers Live

The state of the artistic community

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One of the most amusing and entertaining books I read as a youth was Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. That Stein wrote someone else's autobiography never mattered in the least to her, for as she explains in the book's closing pages, Alice was far too busy taking care of the house, planning dinner parties, shopping, and gardening to bother with writing an autobiography. Therefore Stein, her soul mate and companion of twenty-five years, would write it for her. She joked that its title might as well be *Wives of Geniuses I Have Sat With*. Stein and Toklas had both sat with many of their era's geniuses: Aaron Copland, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Henri Matisse, Isadora Duncan. Stein recorded her observations of this tumultuous Parisian artistic milieu frankly and astutely—the rivalries that developed and dissipated among painters and their disciples, the influence that her compatriots in her day-to-day life had in shaping the emerging literature of the twentieth century.

Reading the book, I wanted nothing more than to live in such a time and place, to drop in on a friend and discuss our current literary projects or the latest treatments in our painting. We could throw in a dose of politics, religion, and social problems; talk about how to live and then live accordingly. And indeed, I have been able to find circles of friends occasionally who behave this way, but in the end they had proven to be so eccentric to American society as to evaporate completely from her social fabric, leaving only dying sparks where flames might have been.

When I committed my life to writing, upon graduation from college in 1981, I was fortunate enough to find a place and time to write among friends in the south suburbs of Pittsburgh. Our house, an unkempt English Tudor, was owned by a middle-aged bachelor who had befriended us at our fraternity. He had frequented the

Greek houses to campaign for membership in an honorary organization, Omicron Delta Kappa. Many of our brothers at Sigma Chi became members because of our high academic standing. And so we paid either a very small rent or none at all to pass a summer full of practical jokes, beer, dinner parties, and endless conversation. My duties there (in lieu of rent) included, for the most part, cooking. I also worked evenings as a waiter in a nearby restaurant. Mornings, I wrote.

None of the others in the house wrote, painted, sang, or did soft shoe. One was an accountant; another a dental student. One had majored in psychology; another, in classics. One thing we had in common was laughter. But a group of artists we were not. For all the good times we had that summer and ensuing school year, I felt a profound loneliness living there. Many times during discussions I had with our mentor—a former lecturer in philosophy—I would pose questions about the ideas of beauty and creativity, intuition and knowledge. What I got in return was not a lively and challenging debate, but an eloquent (and very long) monologue of whatever he had been cultivating all those years in his academic head. Never did I find a shred of sympathy for what went on in an artist's head. He just didn't seem to get it. And for all the respect and admiration I had for him and his well-composed dictums, I found none of the solace I was seeking in souls that were more akin to mine.

These days I work as a medical illustrator at Yale University's department of Photo+Design, all day, five days a week. The work is rarely glamorous: Much of the illustration work has dried up due to clients' budget constraints. Pen-and-ink work is, for the most part, gone. The computer offers new creative potential for drawing, but the process remains costly. We spend most of our time printing out large-format posters that clients have produced themselves—many of them garish, unbalanced, and in immediate need of some (any) color scheme. We also produce logos, brochures, and PowerPoint presentations. How do we keep sane?

We are, all of us, artists. We've spent years studying the masters, drawing, painting, taking photographs, observing, reflecting, accepting deviants, being deviant ourselves, craving acceptance, accepting. It's no wonder that we often talk about art, either directly or obliquely, while sitting around the lunch table, walking out the door, or taking a break from our tedious work. Of course, we artists at Photo+Design are also busy all day making a living, a living that makes only tangential use of our talents and aspirations. Most of us have private projects cooking, lifelong pursuits that have lives of their own. Sometimes those pursuits are silent, sitting under a dark shroud in the corner of the attic; other times they consume us with their raucous energy, overcoming not only our lives, but those of our loved ones as well. It can't be helped.

I have never personally known a person whose art allows a fully self-supportive life. Some may be teachers; others have husbands with sizable incomes. Many are lawyers and doctors on the side. The truth is, every time I meet someone who has composed something brilliant from the bottom of his or her soul, I inevitably find out that there has been little monetary gain from it.

If a book has a plot that is the least bit familiar; if a painting has a look that places it somewhere within the Canon of Respected Works; if a photograph can be substituted for one of the many fine photographs on blank, black-and-white greeting cards, then these things may generate income. And within all categories of the familiar there is room to breathe, room for new twists, interesting treatments and brief illusions of originality. But works of true art have always been hard to find, and it's likely they are not all found. It's simply too great a task for individuals, who toil as editors, curators, theater producers, and the like, struggling to stay alive like the rest of us, and blinded by the manna-generating familiar. The great works, those few originals, must pass through many sets of numbed eyes and ears in order to get anywhere, let alone receive any modicum of public recognition. These works are like trick mirrors, pretending to show you what you already know while presenting

unique, multifaceted shapes that have never before been seen. It takes work—constant vigilance and the cultivation of an unaffected mind—to recognize them.

Where, then, might these works of art reside, even flourish?

In its fiction heyday, *The Atlantic Monthly* published 15 to 18 pieces of fiction a year. They received about 12,000 *unsolicited* manuscripts a year for these precious slots. If you think it may be a superhuman task to pick 15 outstanding manuscripts from a pool of at least 12,000, well, you may be on to something.

We are a nation of artists. We paint; we write; we write music; we paint baskets. We find people to paint little birds on our dining room walls. We throw pots, sew quilts, direct mini-films on our computers. And when it comes time to sort out all this artwork, to divide the serious, sacrificial work from merely self-serving entertainment, we find that a good chunk of it falls somewhere in the middle. Masterpieces currently lie hidden behind china closets or backed up on ancient floppy disks in someone's drawer. Who will ever mine them out?

Part of this responsibility, you might suggest, falls on the artist, who is expected to learn the market, to start networking, boldly crashing through one barrier after another with his manuscript, musical score, or painting in hand. How feasible is this? Let us imagine, for a moment, Emily Dickinson mail-ordering six or seven issues of various literary magazines in order to glean which one, if any, might publish poems akin to hers. Or how about Jackson Pollock interviewing gallery owners today, cheerfully holding up Polaroids of some of his works: "You guys show stuff like this?"

Still, you might easily cross paths with one of them. And you can do this quite easily without a marketplace. All you have to do is look for artists, and because they are everywhere, chances are you'll come across something oddly new and interesting from time to time. If you show a genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for the original, it will help propel it to the fore so that others may witness it too. An

artist's work can become appreciated even if the artist is unsociable, a drunk, psychotic, a religious fanatic, bipolar, boring, crass, or downright nasty. None of this matters. And no artist with even one of these qualities should be expected to network or learn the market. It's not gonna happen. Of course, many a contemporary artist will find success by being pushy, searching out influential people, granting sexual favors; but that artist will most likely lose those qualities that make an artist in the process: humility, subtlety, inclusiveness, perspicacity, love. And as a result of losing these qualities, the art will suffer and degrade. Thus no more originality, and certainly no masterpieces.

This difficult, firebrand artistic type is a more marketable commodity in Hollywood films and bestseller biographies, so we tend to have a skewed perspective on what great artists are like. If artists are everywhere, though, it is safe to assume that many are kind and unassuming; it's quite possible that most are. Cézanne spent much of his life in a quiet country home with his mother. Emily Dickinson also took care of hers. Van Morrison has called himself a loner. The list of performers who dazzle on stage but get sweaty palms at cocktail parties is endless.

My next-door neighbor is a composer. We trim the shrubbery between our yards, help each other carry air conditioners up and down steps, and invite each other to dinners, comparing the ethnic foods of our backgrounds. He has taught both of my children piano. Gradually we have come to know one another and our work—not just because we are acquainted with it, but because we appreciate each other's dedication, perseverance, and urgency in producing it. Such trust and camaraderie among artists does not come quickly. It cannot be forced, or orchestrated by a third party. Those involved in the business of creating art do not give up their time easily, and they cherish above all spontaneity and veracity. Human relationships can never be forced, lest they too lack these qualities.

One day I woke up and decided to make a poetry video. I have

never been known to be a movie buff, and others have mistaken the fact that I seldom watch movies to mean that I do not enjoy them. On the contrary, just about every film I've seen has affected me so deeply that I often become incapable of speech, and lose sleep, for several days following viewing it. I remember certain scenes as I remember lines from literature or experiences from my childhood, they have become so essentially a part of me. My decision to make this video rested on the realization that I am somewhat well-versed in both the literary and visual arts. Why not combine the two?

To complete this project, I needed help. Not knowing the first thing about shooting with a video camera or editing, I asked two friends of mine from the workplace, who did this sort of thing for a living, if they would be interested in the project. This was a big step for me, who had never before collaborated on such a personal artistic endeavor. I had asked them to take part not just because we hung out together at work, but because I knew them well enough to trust their genuine creative instincts. They said yes, though they too had never done anything like it.

Since there would be no dialogue in this visual representation of one of my poems, I deemed it necessary to include a soundtrack. At first I considered producing the sound myself, using my son's Casio keyboard, but then, quite wisely, I settled on asking my composer neighbor if he might be interested in getting involved in this thing. He also said yes.

Together, the four of us—a writer-painter, a photographer, a film editor, and a composer—produced a remarkable video that surpassed anyone's expectations by light years. One year after its completion, the young classical trumpeter who played on the soundtrack contacted me to ask if he might include the video in an arts festival he was organizing in Omaha. So there was my little whim playing to strangers in Omaha in August 2005. Through a connection with another poetry video artist I discovered via the internet, my video was shown in September of that year at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The video was named a finalist in a national short film and video competition in Dallas; it toured cities in India as part of the Sadho Poetry Film Fest. And the whole thing came about as a result of one early morning whim.

Art, it seems, will find its own way, regardless of how much, or little, human contact is involved in its journey. There is no controlling it or its inevitable path. Works that are propelled artificially will ultimately drop into the Canyon of The Forgotten, while those that have a kernel of authenticity will eventually be stumbled upon and archived by some stranger along the way who is as passionate as its composer.

Trouble is, we, as artists, need human contact. It is the only thing that informs our work. For while artworks are most often produced in solitude, they overflow with human emotion, emotion that is, as Wordsworth said, "recollected in tranquility." Simply being alive may provide this contact. If I had never fallen in love as an adolescent with a school mate, interacted with a host of characters in my extended ethnic family, witnessed the intricacies of power play at the workplace, or raised two children, I might not have anything to write about.

But we are all muddlers, creating a mess and then trying to get something out of it. The polished pieces that end up on shelves and walls are phonies, slick simulacra of their true messy selves. Living is a delightful mess, and those we bump into along the way of life provide even more. This can be overwhelming for artists, who tend to think and feel in overdrive. We prize spontaneity, but we yearn for some kind of order to sort through so many stimuli. And though many of us must keep to rigid schedules in matters such as day jobs and raising a family, these do not provide the deeper order we crave.

This order is somewhat mystical and fleeting; it is not easily recognized. It has nothing to do with schedules, responsibilities, or appointments. It has more to do with how we uncover mysteries;

how we paint, sing, or write about them. We find this order in the things we create. But we might also find it in interacting with other creators.

The number of artists working in various media these days is astounding and, I assume, continues to grow. And just as the number of humans (and therefore artists) has increased dramatically over the last two centuries, so have our methods of communication. Horse-drawn carriages, telegraphs, cars, telephones, television, and now e-mail and cell phones have allowed the vast human family to be well connected. At this point in history some may even feel too connected. Watching the news has become a theatrical event; e-mail bombards us with hastily written notes, as well as spam; texting is too often a nuisance. For those who think and feel too much, quality communication is prized. We like, occasionally, to have a conversation, face-to-face.

During the 1990s I met many writers at regular meetings in a room at one of Yale University's residential colleges. We came from all walks and corners of the university, young and old, novice and seasoned, quiet and talkative, tired and fresh. We were known simply as The Yale Poetry Group, and we met to read work, raise aesthetic issues, comment, or just listen. The meetings, organized by a professor in the Italian department, took on a Quaker-like atmosphere. The depth and breadth of conversation was determined by who happened to be present. The experience was similar to opening a book: You never knew what you were about to read, or how you might respond to it.

These were the days before Facebook and blogs, before e-mail had become rampant and telephone conversations had been replaced by sporadic texting. Once arrived at a Yale Poetry Group meeting, the only distraction was the conversation that ensued. The group no longer meets, but I have often wondered what gifts it offered, or how that experience differed from, say, the digital discourse of blogs. A blog is by nature a random method of communication.

Tune in, tune out. Follow along or reject. Stumble upon or come directed by a third party. Sounds like the Yale Poetry Group, right?

Hardly. It is difficult to harness writers into a group. We are a diverse bunch; we come individually chock-full of unique life experiences and perspectives, and these influence our writing to such an extent that there can be little common ground. We also think, speak, and behave differently in one another's presence. Could it be called manners? Civility? We take more care when relating our thoughts face-to-face. We use our craft as wordsmiths more wisely, more humanly. Perhaps we become better writers from the experience of devoting real time to meeting other real writers. If we write because we have been so deeply affected by our interactions with others, why not recognize that a gathering of writers, or artists of any kind, will deliver us to even greater depths? We may reach out to one another via many new electronic means, include everyone if possible, but then we should set aside time to cultivate our own ateliers, ateliers with doors always open; conversation fluid, random, and enlightening; free of expectations, but full of the human interaction that engenders art.

Masterpieces may take generations to unearth, but we don't have to wait that long to help each other make them.