

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.