
complete, comprehensive, limitless reference book on your work. There is no other such book, and it is yours alone. It functions this way for no one else. Your fingerprints are all over your work, and you alone know how they got there. Your work tells you about your working methods, your discipline, your strengths and weaknesses, your habitual gestures, your willingness to embrace.

The lessons you are meant to learn are in your work. To see them, you need only look at the work clearly — without judgement, without need or fear, without wishes or hopes. Without emotional expectations. Ask your work what it needs, not what you need. Then set aside your fears and listen, the way a good parent listens to a child.

IV.

FEARS ABOUT OTHERS

*"Don't look back —
something might be gaining on you."*

— Satchel Paige

ART IS OFTEN MADE IN ABANDONMENT, emerging unbidden in moments of selfless rapport with the materials and ideas we care about. In such moments we leave no space for others. That's probably as it should be. Art, after all, rarely emerges from committees.

But while others' reactions need not cause problems for the artist, they usually *do*. The problems arise when we confuse others' priorities with our own. We carry real and imagined critics with us constantly — a veritable babble of voices, some remembered, some prophesied, and each eager to comment on all we do. Beyond that, even society's general notions about artmaking confront the artist with paralyzing contradictions. As an artist you're expected to make each successive piece uniquely new and different — yet reassuringly familiar when set

alongside your earlier work. You're expected to make art that's intimately (perhaps even painfully) personal — yet alluring and easily grasped by an audience that has likely never known you personally.

When the work goes well, we keep such inner distractions at bay, but in times of uncertainty or need, we begin listening. We abdicate artistic decision-making to others when we fear that the work itself will not bring us the understanding, acceptance and approval we seek. For students in academic settings, this trouble is a near certainty; you know (and you are correct) that if you steer your work along certain paths, three units of "A" can be yours. Outside academia, approval may be clothed in loftier terms — critical recognition, shows, fellowships — but the mechanism remains the same.

With commercial art this issue is often less troublesome since approval from the client is primary, and other rewards appropriately secondary. But for most art there is no client, and in making it you lay bare a truth you perhaps never anticipated: that by your very contact with what you love, you have exposed yourself to the world. How could you *not* take criticism of that work personally?

UNDERSTANDING

We all learn at a young age the perils of being perceived as different. We learn that others have the power to single out, to ridicule, to turn away from and to *mark* the one who is different. Choose your own memories, but one way or another we've all felt the

hurt of the little boy who wanted to write poems, or the little girl who tried to join the sandlot ball game.

As an artist, you learn these lessons all over again — with a vengeance. In following the path of your heart, the chances are that your work will not be understandable to others. At least not immediately, and not to a wide audience. When the author fed his computer the question, "What works?", a curious pattern emerged: a consistent delay of about five years between the making of any given negative, and the time when prints from that negative began selling. In fact, one now-popular work was first reproduced in a critical review to illustrate how much *weaker* the then-new work had become. Performing artists face the added, real-time terror of receiving an instant verdict on their work in person — like the conductor being pummeled with a barrage of rotten fruit halfway through the Paris premier of *Rite of Spring*, or Bob Dylan being hooted off the stage the first time he appeared live with an electric guitar. No wonder artists so often harbor a depressing sense that their work is going downhill: at any give moment the older work is always more attractive, always better understood.

This is not good. After all, wanting to be understood is a basic need — an affirmation of the humanity you share with everyone around you. The risk is fearsome: in making your real work you hand the audience the power to deny the understanding you seek; you hand them the power to say, "you're not like us; you're weird; you're crazy."

And admittedly, there's always a chance they may be right — your work may provide clear evidence that you are different, that you are alone. After all, artists themselves rarely serve as role models of normalcy. As Ben Shahn rather wryly commented, "It may be a point of great pride to have a Van Gogh on the living room wall, but the prospect of having Van Gogh himself in the living room would put a great many devoted art lovers to rout." Put that way, platitudes about the virtues of individuality sound distinctly hollow. Just how unintelligible your art — or you — appear to others may be something you don't really want to confront, at least not all that quickly.

What is sometimes needed is simply an insulating period, a gap of pure time between the making of your art, and the time when you share it with outsiders. Andrew Wyeth pursued his *Helga* series privately for years, working at his own pace, away from the spotlight of criticism and suggestion that would otherwise have accompanied the release of each new piece in the series. Such respites also, perhaps, allow the finished work time to find its rightful place in the artist's heart and mind — in short, a chance to be understood better by the maker. Then when the time comes for others to judge the work, their reaction (whatever it may be) is less threatening.

Conversely, catering to fears of being misunderstood leaves you dependent upon your audience. In the simplest yet most deadly scenario, ideas are diluted to what you imagine your audience can imagine, leading

to work that is condescending, arrogant, or both. Worse yet, you discard your own highest vision in the process.

In the face of such pressures, it's heartening to find contemporary role models even among those who made it their goal to address the mass audience. Charles Eames and Jacob Bronowski consistently placed trust in the potential of their audience to grow and benefit from new ideas. Eames once designed a museum exhibit that featured a fifteen foot long wall chart (set in textbook-sized type and equally small pictures) delineating the entire history of mathematics. When asked who on earth would possibly read the whole wall, he calmly replied that each person would probably absorb about as much as he/she were able to, and just slough off the rest. And, he added, that would include some who would make connections between the data beyond what Eames himself could perceive.

ACCEPTANCE

For the artist, the issue of acceptance begins as one simple, haunting question: When your work is counted, will it be counted *as art*? It's a basic question, with antecedents stretching back to childhood. (Remember those dreaded playground rituals, when you'd feel badly enough if you weren't the first one chosen for the softball team, but would rather die than not be chosen at all?)

If the need for acceptance is the need to have your work accepted as art, then the accompanying fear is finding it dismissed as craft, hobby, decoration — or as

nothing at all. In 1937, when Beaumont Newhall wrote the first substantive account of the history of photography (titled, logically enough, *The History of Photography*), he picked a select number of artists to praise or criticize. As it turned out, the photographers hurt by Newhall's book were not those he damned, but those he left out entirely. In the public's mind, the former at least became part of "the history of photography", while the latter ceased to exist entirely! Literally decades passed before some talented "outsies" began receiving recognition for the work they produced in those early days. That example is extreme, but the general caveat still applies: acceptance and approval are powers held by others, whether they be friends, classmates, curators...or author of the definitive history of your chosen medium.

At some point the need for acceptance may well collide head-on with the need to do your own work. It's too bad, since the request itself seems so reasonable: you want to do your own work, and you want acceptance for that. It's the ballad of the cowboy and the mountain man, the myth of artistic integrity and Sesame Street: sing the song of your heart, and sooner or later the world will accept and reward the authentic voice. Jaded sophisticates laugh at this belief, but usually buy into it along with everyone else anyway.

In the non-art world, this belief system is a driving mechanism behind the American Dream — and the Mid-Life Crisis. In the art world, it's a primary buffer against disillusionment. After all, the world does (in

large measure) reward authentic work. The problem is not absolute, but temporal: by the time your reward arrives, you may no longer be around to collect it. Ask Schubert.

There's a fairly straightforward explanation for this: at any given moment, the world offers vastly more support to work it already understands — namely, art that's already been around for a generation or a century. Expressions of truly new ideas often fail to qualify as even bad art — they're simply viewed as no art at all. Stravinski's *Firebird*, today considered one of the more lushly melodic of twentieth century symphonic pieces, was rejected as sheer cacophony when first performed. Robert Frank's *The Americans*, now considered a seminal turning point in American photography, was at the time of its publication largely ignored by a press and public that couldn't decipher its dark and gritty vision. It's a dreary tradition: artists from Atget to Weegee were ignored through most of their careers because the work they produced didn't fit within the established definition of art.

For the artist, the dilemma seems obvious: risk rejection by exploring new worlds, or court acceptance by following well-explored paths. Needless to say, the latter strategy is the overwhelming drug of choice where acceptance is the primary goal. Make work that *looks like art*, and acceptance is automatic.

Surprisingly, however, this is not always a bad thing. At least for the novice, some period of artistic capitulation is both inevitable and, by most accounts,

beneficial. On both intellectual and technical grounds, it's wise to remain on good terms with your artistic heritage, lest you devote several incarnations to re-inventing the wheel. But once having allowed for that, the far greater danger is not that the artist will fail to learn anything from the past, but will fail to teach anything new to the future.

Recent photo history offers a textbook example of the perils that success itself can lay in the path of continued artistic growth. In the first third of this century, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and a few fellow travellers turned the then-prevailing world of soft-focus photographic art upside down. They did so by developing a visual philosophy that justified sharply-focused images, and introduced the natural landscape as a subject for photographic art. It took decades for their viewpoint to filter into public consciousness, but it sure has now: pictures appearing in anything from cigarette ads to Sierra Club books owe their current acceptance to those once-controversial images. Indeed, that vision has so pervasively become ours that people photographing vacation scenery today often do so with the hope that if everything turns out just right, the result will not simply look like a landscape, it will look like *an Ansel Adams photograph* of the landscape.

This too will pass, of course. In fact, artistically speaking, it *has* passed. The unfolding over time of a great idea is like the growth of a fractal crystal, allowing details and refinements to multiply endlessly — but only in ever-decreasing scale. Eventually (perhaps by

the early 1960's) those who stepped forward to carry the West Coast Landscape Photography banner were not producing art, so much as re-producing the history of art. Separated two or three generations from the forces that spawned the vision they championed, they were left making images of experiences they never quite had. If you find yourself caught in similar circumstances, we modestly offer this bit of cowboy wisdom: When your horse dies, get off.

Cowboy wisdom notwithstanding, the Weston/Adams vision continues to support a sizable cottage industry of artists and teachers even today. But this security carries a price: risk-taking is discouraged, artistic development stunted, and personal style sublimated to fit a pre-existing mold. Only those who commit to following their own artistic path can look back and see this issue in clear perspective: the real question about acceptance is not whether your work will be viewed as art, but whether it will be viewed as *your art*.

APPROVAL

The difference between acceptance and approval is subtle, but distinct. Acceptance means having your work counted as the real thing; approval means having people *like it*.

It's not unusual to receive one without the other. Norman Rockwell's work was enormously well-liked during his lifetime, but received little critical respect. A generation or two earlier there was widespread

agreement that John Singer Sargent was good, but that for various reasons his work didn't really count. On the flip side, every season brings a small bundle of films and plays that garner rave critical reviews while on their way to becoming box office disasters.

That this dichotomy exists is undeniable; whether it need be destructive is an open question. Both acceptance and approval are, quite plainly, audience-related issues. In a healthy environment, good work would get recognition; if your only validation is internal, society has failed. Sounds straightforward enough, but society is hardly a monolith — it harbors many environments, some repressive to the artist, others supportive. For artists who thrive on confrontation, rejection is not a problem, but for many others the constant wear and tear takes a toll. For those artists, survival means finding an environment where art is valued and artmaking encouraged.

In a supportive environment — one found, more often than not, within the artistic community itself — approval and acceptance often become linked, even indistinguishable. The operative criteria for this rather select audience is typified by Ed Ruscha's remark, "There are only artists and hacks," or James Thurber's observation, "There's no such thing as good art or bad art. There's only Art — and damn little of it!"

But be forewarned: this approach can be harsh. There's a story (perhaps apocryphal) of the Master who was asked to judge a competition for twenty young

pianists by rating their performance on a scale of 1-to-100. Afterwards, his tally sheet revealed he had awarded two pianists a perfect hundred — and given the rest a zero. When the sponsors protested, he replied bluntly, "Either you can play or you can't."

Filmmaker Lou Stoumen tells the painfully *un-*apocryphal story about hand-carrying his first film (produced while he was still a student) to the famed teacher and film theorist Slavko Vorkapitch. The teacher watched the entire film in silence, and as the viewing ended rose and left the room without uttering a word. Stoumen, more than a bit shaken, ran out after him and asked, "But what did you think of my film?"

Replied Vorkapitch, "What film?"

The lesson here is simply that courting approval, even that of peers, puts a dangerous amount of power in the hands of the audience. Worse yet, the audience is seldom in a position to grant (or withhold) approval on the one issue that really counts — namely, whether or not you're making progress in your work. They're in a good position to comment on how they're moved (or challenged or entertained) by the finished product, but have little knowledge or interest in your *process*. Audience comes later. The only pure communication is between you and your work.