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Aesthetic Statement: Writing against my will

For about two years I didn't write anything at all. Anything as deliberate as words on a page filled me with misgivings, especially when they piled up into phrases and sentences. I wanted less from myself. It was a time when I was travelling a lot, and by coincidence, I visited many of the places I lived when I was younger. I started finding letters in the world, in the form of rocks, scrap metal or pieces of wood. They're everywhere, especially O, L, and E, which make Leo, or more excitingly, olé! In Spanish it means something like hooray or bravo, but some etymologists think it's from Arabic and an invocation to Allah.

I found lots of E's, which when spun around could just as well be M's or W's. I'm not sure now if I really found them or was looking to find them, but suddenly they were appearing and I sought them out. After I found a few I would combine them into possible words, the first of which were *wow* and *mom*, which could also become *woe* or *emo*. These would subsequently be woven into sentences, or rather interpretations infused by where the letters were found and what message they might contain. *Mom* appeared near the house of my early childhood, and *emo* where I spent my adolescence. I thought of this as something between site-specificity and shamanism. A message from beyond!

In "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," an early essay on Reader Response criticism, Stanley Fish describes arriving in a classroom where the readings for the preceding class were listed on the board, just a set of last names: Derring, Rosenbaum, Smith, Thorne, etc. When his students arrived, he told them it was a poem and asked them to explicate it with him. Derring was a dare, manhood, or chivalry, or even a gun, and Smith was slower and more purposeful, like a blacksmith forging through with the task. The Jewish-sounding Rosenbaum was a rosebush, beautiful but with thorns, a challenge to overcome. Since love is like a red, red rose, they concluded it was a love poem, a romance between a Gentile and Jew, with many obstacles and even Old Testament references, which arise through other names on the list that I don't remember.

People are only too willing to create not just meaning but even narrative from bits and pieces, and often the smaller or less directive these bits, the better. There's virtually no boundary between reading and misreading. If you're told it's a poem you'll see it as one; sometimes even if you're not told. I love humanity for its grim determination to wring meaning from the incidental. It's a pathetic impulse, stuck in its incapacity to just let one bit be. Just letting one word sit still floods people with anxiety. What if it doesn't mean anything? We can't have one thing without another; we can't leave anything alone. One bite of cake tastes good, so we have another. We're gluttons for meaning.

Lists are appealing to me because they have a concrete function without much ornamentation. Princes and paupers make lists because they help get things done. Unlike literature, the list has a tangible purpose. Sometimes the order is significant, a ranking of importance or chronology, but often there's no meaning at all. The list captures the way things came out, one after another, like shots from a rifle. A reading list sometimes tells you the order in which to read, but lots of them are alphabetized, or chronological. When I was young I longed for people to give me reading lists, to tell me what I needed to know, book by book. Instead I figured out what to read through the arrangements of books on the shelves of the bookstore down the street from my house. After that I worked in categories, like 19th century Russian novels. If you like Gogol, you'll probably like Dostoyevsky.

Umberto Eco says we like lists because they help us make sense of infinity. Humans have a cheery capacity to endlessly organize and catalogue, collecting things in museums and glass cabinets. Lots of culture is about listing, like the list of the 2,063 women Don Giovanni seduced, or how James Joyce describes Leopold Bloom opening his drawers and itemizing what he finds inside them. Narrative description is a kind of literary list-making, often for no other purpose than inventory, or to convey the presence of a real world. It doesn't even need to be the presence of the real, just the presence of something. The classic Dutch still life is a kind of visual list: on this table is a loaf of bread, three oysters and a lemon. One painting I love has the lemon half peeled, the peel curling below the table's edge like a flourish or question mark. It's as if to ask why are we here, after all?

Eco says that our desire to control the infinite through lists is filtered through something very finite: our own death. We make lists because we don't want to die. This is a literary commonplace, *ars longa, vita brevis*, but I like it better when applied to something as banal as a list. Part of the list's aesthetic, if you can call it that, is that length doesn't much matter. A list is infinitely expandable. You don't really need to stop, unless it's a list of the ten best piano sonatas. The way to expand that list though is to list Beethoven's ten best, and then Schubert's, etc. Theoretically you reach a limit (Scriabin only wrote ten), but practically you can go on forever.

The list as a form is related to the serial, a work of many parallel parts that follow a certain set of constraints or modular principles. Serials are repetitive, but often the repetition is tempered with variation. One of my favorite teaching texts is Joe Brainard's *I Remember*, every sentence of which begins with "I remember." It's a little childish at first, and sentimental, a list of memories and things: objects and bits of his past. Soon it's just too cute. But if you persist in reading, the fabric begins to transform. He talks about growing up, recognizing that he's gay and coming to terms with his desire. The very phrase "I remember" drops away as you read, and suddenly you are there with him, in his web of associations. You lose the trajectory of sissy boys, pink girl's dresses and New York poets to find yourself in something resembling a story, but also because of its serial form, something that exceeds narrative. Philosophically it's the move from being to becoming, a concept that dates back to Heraclitus, who said nothing in this world was constant except change (or becoming). Nothing will hold for long and only fools try to freeze time.

Something bigger than Brainard's will, and bigger than the compulsion to tell us he's gay, compels him to speak, or us to listen. Only the rigor of the list could dragoon us like this. He wrote *I Remember* in a world that was just beginning to care to see gay men. For a work that begins in sentiment, there is nothing sentimental at the end but his grim longing. Working in the same period, Sol LeWitt writes that the serial artist "does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise." I reckon that the warmth and even eroticism of Brainard's book is there by dint of the cold, methodical cataloguing.

One of the recurring features of our lives as they're lived on social media today is the appearance of new memes. You're asked to list your ten favorite writers or fifteen songs that changed your life. I'm usually paralyzed by these demands. Why ten, why fifteen? What exactly does it mean to change your life? And though restrictive, these memes are invasive. If I did hammer out a list of ten writers, what would it say about me if I left off Virginia Woolf, or Gertude Stein? I can't bear that kind of scrutiny—it's too intimate.

Something about the emptiness of a random list of 25 things about myself felt easy, though I was faintly troubled by the arbitrary cut-off. When you finished your list, you were supposed to tag 25 friends and send it to them. They were supposed to read it, learn new things about you, recognize you or not, and then write their own list and send that to 25 more friends. It's like a chain letter, almost as empty and annoying. Everyone can find 25 random things about themselves, and doing so felt far less precarious than a list of favorite artists or foods or philosophers. It's like turning on the vacuum cleaner and sucking in whatever fits through the hose.

As the first week passed, two subjects started to push to the fore: the death of my friend Kathy Acker and the death of my mother. The veterinarian told me my dog, Peggy, had cancer and there weren't many options to help her. A friend from college whom I hadn't seen in many years, Sydni Bender, found me on Facebook and started leaving comments on my daily lists. Sydni herself was fighting cancer, breast cancer, and it had metastasized. Many other people left comments, and of course they also wove their way into what I was thinking. As the months went by Sydni jokingly accused me of playing out Peggy's illness to get attention. The social conversation—which of course the format invited—inserted itself into me despite my resistance to it.

The minute you intend to be random, you can't do it. You try not to pay attention to it, because your attention is itself a filter: every time you focus on randomness you're being deliberate. John Cage solved this problem by deploying chance operations, with mechanisms like dice or the I Ching to depersonalize the act; he even had computer programmers run a set of random numbers to further distance the operation from his own hand. What isn't removed however is intention: chance hardly comes barging in uninvited. Even the Delphic oracle was not immune to intention. Just entering the room after the oracular leaves settle to the ground disturbs them a bit, so the presence of the observer is never eradicated. It relates back to my uncertainty about finding letters on the ground. Though I was really finding M's and O's in the dirt, was this just happening or was I looking? Was it a way to convince myself the world was really paying attention?

"Indeterminacy," the collection of stories from Cage's *Silence*, are texts Cage used in performance. From a repertoire of about 90 stories he selected one through a chance operation, then another, until he was done. He read each story for one minute, so the long ones were very fast and the short ones were very slow. Most of the stories were things that happened that "stuck in [his] mind," some were told to him by his ex-wife Xenia, or Merce Cunningham, and others he remembered from books by Martin Buber, Joseph Campbell, or Zen philosophers like Kwang-tse. He didn't plan any continuity in them. "I simply made a list of all the stories I could think of," he tells us, "and checked them off as I wrote them. Some that I remembered I was not able to write to my satisfaction, and so they do not appear."

Joe Brainard's *I Remember* and John Cage's "Indeterminacy" seem to me the epitome of the kind of conceptual writing that compels me most, combining the personal and the impersonal, or rather the intentional and the speculative. "Many things, wherever one is, whatever one's doing, happen at once," says Cage. "They are in the air; they belong to all of us. Life is abundant." Brainard and Cage stand on a hill looking out at the world. Each of them is looking from where he stands, examining the personal, but also something beyond it. You might call this thing *being*, but that makes Brainard at least seem too metaphysical. To me the thing they examine is the shift from being to becoming, the always incipient movement that can never be concluded. It never stops. It's less related to memory than to consciousness.

I'm pretty ready to let go of the personal, or narrative for that matter, but I'm attracted to iteration—the repetition of a process or an utterance, repeating the gesture until something else emerges. Most conceptual art has a specific formulation that unfolds through some kind of repetition in the work or in the execution itself. This "aesthetics of administration" (a term from Benjamin Buchloh) feels richer to me than creative subjectivity or expression: you set up a paradigm or hypothesis and then follow it through with some internal consistency.

Trying to be random, or receptive to chance, is obviously not something you can just *let happen*. You have to invite chance in. I began to keep paper with me all day and to note whatever came up. After about three lists the patterns were already formed. Like Cage, I found things that stuck in my head, the things I read or things people told me, and things that were happening around me. I pushed them away, hoping for something wilder. But then the random things had to be about me, and I'm not wild at all: everything came out clean and polished and even in complete sentences, as if to put a point on it. Like the English language, the complete sentence is stamped into my mind.

Peggy's declining health worked its way into my daily list more often than not. She stopped eating her dog food, so I'd cook things for her. When I wasn't traveling, she was at the heart of my daily life; when I was away, I thought about her. I knew that Peggy's death and the end of the project might coincide. Sydni Bender, whose cat had died of cancer, was full of advice about what to feed her. As I hit the last ten days, Sydni begged me not to let the last list end with Peggy's death. Everyone with cancer deserves hope, she said. She noticed that I skipped writing a list on occasional days. Was I manipulating the narrative or was I manipulating my life? I felt guilty that I was engineering the lists around Peggy's coming death, as though it was not just a narrative manipulation but might even contribute to Sydni's death, or at least her suffering. I tried to ignore the tone of her messages, and often left one-word answers. She was going through her next course of chemotherapy and somehow lost her internet connection, and then she stopped writing.

Sydni Bender died in 2011. Her Facebook page is still active a year later; people leave sentimental notes for her, testaments about her life, elegies for her death. If I were a guiltier person I would dedicate this book to her. In fact she did affect the book: so as not to hurt her, I wrote the final list as we were leaving to put Peggy to sleep, but I left out her actual death. It's the most conspicuous example of the ways in which many aspects of the list were against my will. Writing anything, much less a book, is always an act of will, but perhaps this one is less so.

This brings me back to Umberto Eco's sad old chestnut about making lists because we don't want to die. I prefer even clinical formalism to rage-against-the-dying-of-the-light poetics. If I'm fighting anything, it's my own divided will, and yours as well. You want me to make sense, and to tell you stories. You want more than words. Maybe you're a bigger coward than I am, and fear death even more. I traded one thing I didn't want, to finish this project, with another: the end of Peggy's life. Or you could say I traded my attention to her death for your attention to my list.