

Craft and Social Conscience

One of Penland's summer 2006 sessions was devoted to the theme of craft and social conscience. The theme played out differently in various classes—some of them directly addressed political content, some focused on recycled or sustainable materials, others used craft as a vehicle for creating social networks or exploring personal transformation. To unify the content of the session, the school invited documentary photographer Ralph Burns to serve as the session host. His role included moderating three lively, open discussions, which stimulated many other conversations in the studios, the dining hall, and the coffee house.

Penland also invited writer Jonathan Lerner to participate in the session and write something for us. Rather than ask him for a journalistic report, we invited him to take it all in and respond in whatever way made sense to him. The whole session was based on this question: *What is the connection between craft and the larger social context?* Gathering people around that question raised a lot more questions. Jonathan is a good listener and out of this experience at Penland he wrote the following essay, which brings some order to the inquiry that took place.

"To be an artist is to be both blessed and cursed," says Jonathan. "You probably work in solitude, yet you hope your work will affect others. You are hypersensitive to contradictions in the world around you—a source of creativity, but also of pain. Your finely honed skills of eye and hand can bring you peace and satisfaction, but your exquisitely active mind can force you to confront disturbing questions that have no ready answers.

"I wrote this piece using the second person, framing the questions in terms of 'you,' because I'm a writer, not an artist. But the issues for artists have corresponding manifestations for me. I work alone, am sole proprietor of my freelance business, and must make endless compromises about aesthetics and politics, for financial and psychic survival. And I spend perhaps a teensy bit too much time obsessing about my work's value for and effect upon the world. I also realized that all I could really offer was a synthesis of the questions asked during those provocative two weeks."

Questions, Mostly, About Craft and the Whole World

Would you kill a species to craft a masterpiece?

If a tree falls in the forest, it's probably an act of nature. If a tree is felled, it might be a crime against nature—if it's a threatened mahogany, say, in the Amazon. And if a tree is cut by a destitute peasant, clearing space for subsistence farming?

shrinking an ecosystem, depleting a biodiversity reservoir? "Ramification" means "consequence," but its Latin root means "branch," as in tree. If a tree falls, or is felled, the ramifications can extend far from where it crashes.

Materials for craft may be exotic, like mahogany, or everyday stuff from Home

Depot, or junk from the scrap yard. In any case, isn't using them to make something intelligent and beautiful an act of healing—of nature, of humanity which seems bent on destroying nature, of you the maker? Does that give you any comfort as you sit alone in your studio, listen-

ing to the news—and trying not to let its endless ramifications overwhelm you?

Say you're working with some recycled mahogany and copper. Maybe the mahogany was harvested before treaties protecting threatened species. But maybe the copper came from Chile

during the bloody Pinochet dictatorship which made that country safe for global mining interests. Does recycling cleanse your materials of the original sins of their procurement? Should you worry about their sourcing? Can you not? Anyway, maybe your piece will balance accounts by embodying an image to broaden viewers' thinking, about sustainability, or dictatorship. Or maybe your piece will simply be beautiful. Maybe your piece will only give somebody pleasure. In a world this wounding, isn't giving pleasure healing, too? But is it enough?

Does listening to the news make your work sharper—or your brain duller?

Alone in your studio, there's nothing but you and your material. Whether you are solitary or social, and even if your work requires extra help, it's all ultimately about you conceiving, you shaping. Even if you organize collective projects involving dozens of people or public ones seen

by thousands, the work still originates in your studio (or your sketchbook, or your head). You have chosen a career that guarantees you little beyond this situational irony: your work in the world is mostly not conducted in the world.

Alone in your studio, you may want connection with the world, and tune into the news. Thus you let in a rivulet and soon a roiling cascade—a flood of questions, too. How to make sense of all this information? Assuming you can, how to react? Which story lines are crucial? Which are causes, which effects? Do you really need to know more, or are you just addicted now to horror? Is too much information toxic—blurring sensitivity, stupefying thought, subverting good work? But does knowing too little engender false security, simplistic thinking?

Meanwhile consider the source, and your relationship with it. Marshall

Your work may seem apolitical or abstract or personal. Does that strip it of truth or prevent it from evoking response? Could its personal nature give it power?

McLuhan observed that reading the daily newspaper is like climbing into a hot bath. Have the narrations of NPR, perhaps your default source, become as soothing as lullabies?

Shouldn't you change stations sometimes, to Fox or BBC or Aljazeera? How are others—across town, across the planet—getting information? What do they know about your situation, their own, the chasms between? Is any information source reliable? Can you tell?

And what if a tree falls (or is felled)—but nobody hears (or reports) it?

Crafting the beautiful object: political action or pain management?

What are possible responses to what's wrong in the world? One is activism and engagement, through your work or outside it. Another is intentional withdrawal, to concentrate on your art. (There's a third possibility: nothing. Know nothing, care nothing, do nothing. This resembles intentional withdrawal, except for the lack of intention. But if you're still reading this, nothing is not an option for you.)

What makes you an artist? Mastery of aesthetics and techniques, certainly. Do



Serving soup during the Empty Bowls dinner that was part of the Craft and Social Conscience session. Empty Bowls is a craft-based hunger relief project that was developed by Penland studio coordinator Lisa Blackburn and her husband John Hartom. For more information see www.emptybowls.net.

Isn't destitution a crime, even if clearing rain forests might be one too? Striving for subsistence can't be a crime. Can it justify one? But what if the peasant uses the mahogany for shelter? Or what if he burns it to cook supper? What if he is one of thousands, each cutting a patch,

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