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you not also possess a sensitivity to culture and the world, an idiosyncratic take, a distinctive delivery? Isn't it this, your eye, which you possess who knows why and may sometimes wish you didn't, that enables you to perceive the strange, the other, the ill, the weirdly beautiful, the simply beautiful when it's obscured by ugliness? Isn't it this that provides both you and your audience a way to comprehend such things? There are people who do not see acutely, and people who do but cannot speak—because they don't have the language, or life has ripped out their tongues. Do you have a responsibility to speak? Isn't it up to you to reveal the beauty and normalcy in what's odd, excluded, unseen or unloved, to identify what is abhorrent but still accepted and declare it unacceptable? To speak the truth?

You are perhaps luckier than people with other callings. When the world seems too diseased, you can retreat to a zone of health: your studio. There you can start the healing by simply crafting a beautiful object. Can there possibly be anything wrong with adding to the world's limited supply of beauty? But does this reduce your work to pain management? Would that be OK—or enough? Suppose you do make art that is political—let's say, apparently abstract photographs in which each of ten thousand dots, seen close, is an exhausted person laboring up the wall of an open-face mine.

The dangers of political action are the same for writers as for artists; alas, these include making bad art.

The aestheticization of suffering: what are its ramifications? Is it exploitive or demeaning to the sufferers? Or is it urgently necessary to relieve them? If your art is confrontational—and assuming that you can find a place to show it—will it move others to action, or just agitate them? What if instead of cultures or continents, you try to save a tree? Or yourself? Is any purpose served by your remaining in pain?

Engagement, or withdrawal? But might these paths criss-cross rather than lead in opposite directions? A retreat to the studio, to focus on your craft—or less grandiosely, to feel better—may seem a rejection of the world. But couldn't this be an intentional choice for the smaller gesture, the humbler persona, the more agile stance? Can accepting your smallness in the world free, even empower



Glass artist Mark Angus reinterpreting the book form as a glass sculpture. Mark's class during the Craft and Social Conscience session explored stained and painted glass as a medium for visual narratives.

you? Can't it affirm this central mystery: that, even beleaguered, nature goes on? Doesn't it acknowledge that ideologies and strategies, in proposing to explain everything, explain too much away—and that explaining everything may simply be impossible? 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—because viewers experience what you experience, and you can help make sense of that?

But what if you wake up the day after some holocaust and must admit that despite your premonition it was coming, you sat alone in your

studio—perhaps listening to the news—only making things of beauty?

Calculations of risk and resistance.

This is a time of extreme polarization. Cultures, nations, political parties—even neighbors—are at odds. Suspicion and paranoia are engendered by governmental misbehavior. People feel insecure, fearing illness, fearing aging. In this environment, making activist art might have frightening ramifications: loss of money, freedom, life and limb, even loss of friends. How far are you willing to go? Who will go there with you? How might your resistance strengthen—or weaken—you? Will its possible motivating impact on others justify your risks?

The dangers of political action are the same for writers as for artists; alas, these include making bad art. In the dark days of

1939, when fascism was rampant and war looming, E. B. White heard the news that, ...a certain writer, appalled by the cruel events of the world, had pledged himself never to write anything that wasn't constructive and significant and liberty-loving. I have an idea that this, in its own way, is bad news....Even in evil times, a writer should cultivate only what naturally absorbs his fancy, whether it be freedom or cinch bugs, and should write in the way that comes easy...In a free country, it is the duty of writers to pay no attention to duty....A despot doesn't fear eloquent writers preaching freedom—he fears a drunken poet who may crack a joke that will take hold.

Polarization, meanwhile, not only results from political crisis, but causes it. Surely duality is one source of the world's current troubles: "You're with us, or against us." If political anger propels your art, can it reach people with other views—or only reinforce those who agree? Can you find a way to speak through your work that subverts duality?

When people feel immobilized and isolated, is simply doing your work an act of resistance? Or must it also be seen, given the chance to affect others? If it broadens viewers' perceptions, can it

actually change their behavior? Can speaking truth encourage others to not feel too crazy or scared or alone to act? Is provoking others to action your responsibility as an artist? Is it a responsibility you can decline?

How big is too big to think about what you do?

A strategy to redeem lives—starting with your own.

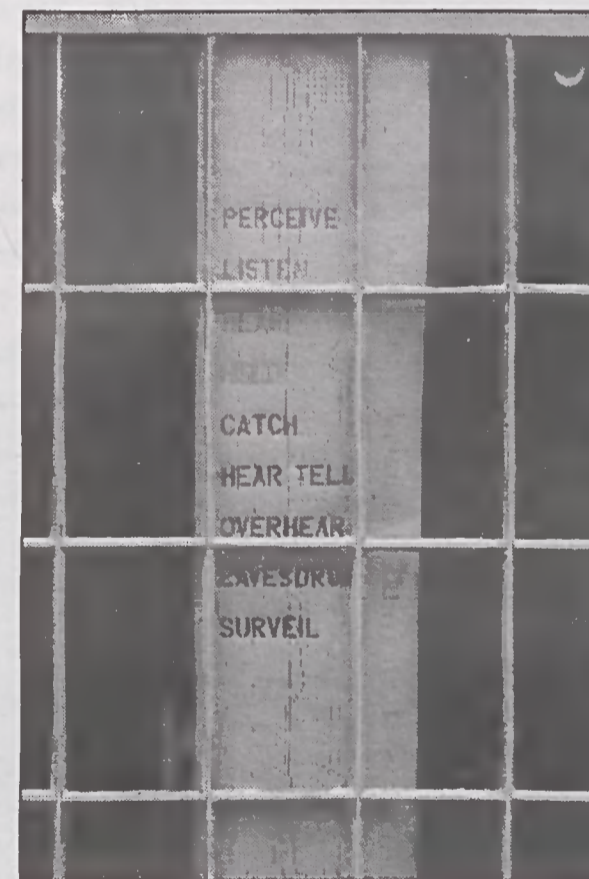
With its origins in tradition and the utilitarian, and its grounding in materials derived from the earth, craft easily enough takes on a social dimension. Craft is unthreatening, but also inspiring. Anybody who has visited Penland, where it seems as if every other hinge and door-knob is a unique and good-natured work of art, knows the lift of spirit which can occur where beautiful objects and their making are revered. This elation may not be political, but it is freeing. Some media, like drawing and printmaking, easily incorporate overt messages through recognizable words or images. Others can generate solutions to real social problems—say, an elegant design for cheap bamboo wheelchairs, for countries riddled with landmines. Other media take easily to recycled materials, so regardless of explicit meaning can imply a narrative

of survival. Craft can engender group activity and catharsis—through community quilts like the *Names Project*, for example, or the anti-hunger *Empty Bowls Project*.

Amidst rampant ugliness, can creating beauty generate a culture of resistance? The world needs people who can feel. Doesn't art make feeling people? Is it your job to model fearlessness for the

world, even by simply doing your job? Opportunities abound to join organized efforts for social change; your contributions to those could be valuable. But isn't it possible that you are needed more urgently in the studio than in the streets?

—Jonathan Lerner



This altered player-piano roll was part of an installation by Laurencia Strauss, who was student in Laura Vickerson's class titled a *Site/Space/Surroundings*.