LEARNING MIND
EXPERIENCE INTO ART

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MAKING NOT KNOWING

In this ongoing, unfinished story of all possible future-making, students hold the potential for a lot of future. That makes me feel optimistic and grateful, though I don't think this is an optimistic time. When I am asked to speak to students, the question arises: What is speaking? What *is* this orphic machine of the mouth, opening and closing to make sounds, vowels, and consonants, of letters filling into words, and on down the road into sentences and meanings? And looming even larger, in a haunting sort of way: What is being said? What are the forms and possibilities of saying? I think about the space of someone speaking and someone listening—a situation of response. I begin to think about words: What can words do? How can words be acts of making? And I begin to ask myself: What words need to be said now? What can words say now? Through what process might I find words that are up to the task of all the things that need saying now, when cultures fight cultures, when invention and reciprocity seem on the decline, when listening hasn't kept pace with speaking? As a maker, more comfortable with a line of thread than a line of writing, I begin to wonder how words might become the material of my making.

I recently learned to speak a short text in classical Arabic and French. This act of learning brought me to thinking about how our mouths, like other parts of our bodies, form muscle memories; how the sounds that shape the words we unconsciously make every day are formed, over and over again, by the way the tongue pushes against the front of the mouth or retracts to let a particular sound form: the repetitions, a thousand times a day, of these subtle formings in the mouth's hollow cavity, this orifice which is a place formed internally by use. And I began to think about how learning another language—before it is about learning grammar and vocabulary and syntax, before it is about gaining an entirely new set of metaphor-making possibilities—is, first, a newly acquired muscle memory of the mouth. To learn another language is to re-form the shape habits of one's speaking, to take on those of another; to take on another's language is to take on another culture and all

the accumulations of its history into the body. One is touched, and in being touched, one is changed. Then empathy and understanding have a chance.

In entering the dense, layered challenges of translation—of one language to another language, of one body to another—in finding these newly forming sounds coming from my body, I began to think about what a small percentage of poetry and fiction published in my country is translated from other languages. Salman Rushdie wrote:

> *It has perhaps never been more important for the world's voices to be heard in America, never more important for the world's ideas and dreams to be known and thought about and discussed, never more important for a global dialogue to be fostered. [Never more important] to believe in . . . art as the proper counterweight to power, and to see . . . art as a lofty, transnational, transcultural force that, in [Saul] Bellow's great formulation, "open[s] the universe a little more."*[1]

This celebration of art as the "proper" counterweight to power implies responsibility, a responsibility that comes with the artist's power to exercise a free imagination.

So I began thinking about the situations we have made for public speaking, opportunities to speak together, to speak in unison, contexts that aren't professionalized. Where does this speaking happen? What does it sound like? What is being said? You can hear a unison voice in a political rally; you can hear this voice in church, but where else? I didn't come up with much, and I began to think about how our first accountability is tied to the way we exercise the actions of our voices. How might we find a way to speak together, to be a chorus of speakers summoning together a need to *say*? And I tried to imagine what that space might be, and what might be said.

One doesn't arrive—in words or in art—by necessarily knowing where one is going. In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist, and so, by default, you work from what you know to what you don't know. You may set out for New York, but you may find yourself, as I did, in Ohio. You may set out to make a sculpture and find that time is your material. You may pick up a paintbrush and find that your making is not on canvas or wood but in relations between people. You may set out to walk across the room, but getting to what is on the other side might take ten years. You have to be open to all possibilities and to all routes—circuitous or otherwise.

But not knowing, waiting and finding—though they may happen accidentally—aren't accidents. They involve work and research. Not knowing isn't ignorance. (Fear springs from ignorance.) Not knowing is a permissive and rigorous willing-

1. Salman Rushdie, "The Pen and the Sword," *New York Times Book Review*, April 17, 2005; http://www.nytimes.com. In the original essay Rushdie uses the term "literary art" as opposed to the term "art."

ness to trust, leaving knowing in suspension, trusting in possibility without result, regarding as possible all manner of response. For the responsibility of the artist, as Gertrude Stein has said, is neither historical narrative nor descriptive mimesis but immediate engagement and response: "each of us in our own way is bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing."[2] Our task is the practice of recognizing.

We honor this practice of art—of a life of making. A life of making isn't a series of shows, or projects, or productions, or things; it is an everyday practice. It is a practice of questions more than of answers, of waiting to find what you need more often than knowing what you need to do. Waiting, like listening and meandering, is best when it is an active and not a passive state; it is helpful to know that "wait" and "hope" share the same root in Spanish, and to remember that *not* acting can also be

2. Gertrude Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America* (1935; New York: Virago, 1985), 176–77.

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an action, as in the story of Charmaine Means, who refused direct orders to shut down the TV station in Mossul, Iraq, on the grounds that she was not in the army to suppress freedom of speech.[3]

I asked my ten-year-old son, Emmett, what he thought art was for and he said, "Nothing." He said, "It isn't good for anything." And as he saw my eyes roll back in my head, thinking, this is what you get from a kid whose parents are both artists, he quickly added, "Art just is." He said "Art just is" with an assumption that, like breakfast on the table, it will always be there—a given of culture. In my head, I could hear a voice saying in response to his confidence, "Yes, *but* . . ." Can I really believe, like Rushdie, that all the collective acts of making carry a weight that can counter the acts of unmaking that accrue daily? For acts of making to be acts of resistance and tools for remembering, this given-ness has to be made and maintained, and to have room made for it.

Our culture has always beheld with suspicion unproductive time, things not utilitarian, and daydreaming in general, but we live in a time when it is especially challenging to articulate the importance of experiences that don't produce anything

3. Charlie Thomas, "US Army Major Refuses Order to Seize Iraq TV Station," *Asheville Global Report*, no. 226 (2003).

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obvious, aren't easily quantifiable, resist measurement, aren't easily named, are categorically in-between. Peter Sellars gave a talk in London entitled "The Culture of Democracy," in which he reminded his audience that, in Plato's *Dialogues,* truth exists not on one side or the other but in between. "When two people are talking, when two groups are engaging, the truth is present but is owned by neither."[4]

So, if our great inheritance from classical Greece is truth that is made present not from monologue but through dialogue, we have part of the answer to our question: What is art for? Sellars spoke, too, of how the Greeks created an entire culture to make spoken dialogue possible. He noted that the first step in democracy is to learn to listen, and that Greek theaters were giant ears carved into the sides of mountains. He spoke of how most Greek choruses were made up of foreigners. So Greek theater gathered everyone in one place, into a giant ear to listen—"let's hear what they have to say . . . let's hear what the old people have to say, the young people, the people we never hear from."[5] Greek theater was a place where what was not allowed to be spoken in public *was* spoken. How? It was spoken in visual art, in dance, in music, and in poetry. Where is that place now? To leave Greece and come forward to now, this question seems important to what Emmett's answer, "Art just is," could mean, how it might be recognized.

Every act of making matters. *How* we make matters. I like to remember, and remark with regularity, that the word "making" occupies seventeen pages in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* so there are multiple possibilities for a lifetime of making: make a cup, a conversation, a building, an institution; make memory, make peace, make a poem, a song, a drawing, a play; make a metaphor that changes, enlarges, or inverts the way we understand or see something. Make something to change your mind—acts that amplify.

Remember the butterfly effect—the flap of a wing on one continent changing the weather on another? That is how a metaphor travels: the initial act may be small, but it can change things. We have the butterfly effect because scientists found that the minutest variations—almost undetectable phenomena, things hardly registering—can cause entirely different weather patterns to emerge.

Ann Lauterbach, poet, essayist, and writer, remarks in her book *The Night Sky:*

> *Imaginative work is grounded in thinking about and thinking through the immediacy of events both private and public, in order to draw from them objects, materials rendered into forms that bring us closer to our sense of connection, our personal agency. Art asks to be interpreted not just consumed; it asks us to suspend our judgment while we engage our senses. Art is a language which anneals individuals to each other through experiences that are uniquely human, that*

4. Proms Lecture given on August 3, 2003, at the Victoria and Albert Museum Lecture Theater, London. Published as "The Culture of Democracy" in *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 7–10.

5. Ibid.

demand connection at the level of making meaning. If we lose our ability to make meaning—that is to interpret, to find form in the raw materials of life—then we stand in danger of having meaning made for us, a rupture between what is said and what is done, between false intentions and disastrous consequences.[6]

A key recognition in Jonathan Schell's book, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People,* is that the change that counts in revolution takes place first in the imagination.[7] This foundational change, the one from which all else issues, is the hardest to track. Sometimes change gathers over five years, over a generation, and then finally the wall comes down or a country is formed. But before the wall comes down, there are symbolic and cultural acts, uncountable small acts, that can shift the world, make political power, spread ideas, shape imaginations. That is what art is for—it is to remind us of our power to make the world.[8]

Some of my own makings as an artist have met with initial resistance from my son. A few years ago, when I wanted to think about the relationship between vision and language, I made a series of pinhole cameras that I could set into the hollow interior of my mouth in order to make the mouth opening a way of seeing rather than a way of saying. At first my son said, "I hate it, Mom, when you do these weird things." But then, in time, a little more proudly, I heard him say in an aside to a friend, "My mom takes pictures with her mouth." The conflation of speech and vision had registered in his imagination. It isn't necessarily the objects of art in their many forms that we are here to support, it is the possibility of art, the question of art, the place it makes in the culture for those acts which "just are" and, in their being just for the sake of themselves, can open worlds in which we might listen differently.

All things are possible. According to Nadine Gordimer: "The people know what to do before the leaders."[9] I would add that perhaps it is the task of artists to know before the people. It is the task of the artist to make material form, to give it presence, to

6. Ann Lauterbach, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience* (Toronto: Viking Adult, 2005), 248.

7. Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

8. These thoughts are given permission by Rebecca Solnit's book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2004).

9. Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places,* ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 277.

make it social; it is the task of the artist to lead the leaders by staying at the threshold; to be an unsettler in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our first public tricksters: "Let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no past."[10]

10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and English Traits*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier, 1909), 164.

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