Remarks for The Setbook Project Reception
Friday, November 22, 2024
University of Alaska Museum of the North
Professor Chris Miles

When we say, "we make art," we are mistaken. Art makes us. We are created in the act of submitting ourselves to its process; and the more we submit, the more we resign ourselves to seeing what needs to be made, to that degree, what is made goes on making. The more transparent the act of vision, the more of the signal comes through. The sense—the only sense—that detects that signal is the imagination.

Whether poet or bookmaker, chef or scientist, there is no more powerful attribute of the one who creates than the imagination. Geoffrey Hill writes that poetry is the stronghold of the imagination; if so, then the book is the stronghold of poetry. These strongholds disassociate their contents from the chaos of our condition, so that we may see into the nature of that condition.

The written word, and the book which contains that word, represent messages, signals containing the truth of where we are, of what lies outside our perception, and of what the essence we are formed from, is: the nature of our being. In other words, if it wasn't for art, we wouldn't know we exist *because we wouldn't be able to look upon our own existence*; without art, our vision – our imaginative-knowing-- would atrophy within the incessant confinement of perception and survival.

The imagination is the organ of invention; its function is to tend our connection to a place that remains unstudied by physicalist enterprises because the body of which the imagination is an organ of, is not physical; it is existence itself; it is that which wears all matter like a peacoat. Art is the relationship to the fact that *we are*. Everything else after that, is detail.

Art does not deal in illusion. By its very definition the imagination cannot create illusion. Fantasy can, but that is something else, which cannot induce knowledge of the world; it is too dependent on sense-perception; its hold on psychic-time remains brief; it lacks the intensity required to shift the human mind from one dimension to another.

Art is not a hobby; it is, in the words of the telepathic Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi, "the intermediary between the world of mystery and the world of visibility". As every artist who has been in the trance of making knows, there is a place within us where the mystery of being dwells, and when we are in it "we are looking out *from*, that which we are looking *for*" (Philip Renard).

Anne Carson writes that "metaphors teach the mind to enjoy error and to learn from the juxtapositions of what is and what is not the case… From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned. Not only that things are other than what they seem, and so we mistake them, but that such mistakenness is valuable." Roger Caillois writes that "nature [is not] the model of art, but rather art constitutes a particular instance of nature." Bernardo Kastrup writes that the medium of my own practice, language, "underlies the way we reason and delineates the boundaries of what we consider possible… language isn't arbitrary: it is what it is because we are what we are. Before being a tool for communication, language mirrors the very way our intellects process information about reality. Language is generated by the intellect, and … the intellect cannot go where language cannot take it"

…unless the imagination leads the way, as it does in Alice Oswald's following poem, in which she re-visions, in nine lines, one of Homer's similes from the *Illiad*:

> Like a man put a wand of olive in the earth
> And watered it and that wand became a wave
> It became a whip a spine a crown
> It became a wind-dictionary
> It could speak in tongues
> It became a wobbling wagon-load of flowers
> And then a storm came spinning by
> And it became a tree uprooted
> It became a wood pile in a lonely field

Here we have what Jean Vanier calls: "A language of play, or rest, and of tenderness, but also a language of commitment and bonding which brings security and safety, the knowledge of being loved and valued." "It is through language that humanity is bound together" (Vico). And language is bound in books, so books also bind us together. I know from experience that the act of binding a book can very much be the binding of one's self. And when the verbal textures of poems, in this setbook project, become physical textures in the hand, that is, when the expression of the tongue is felt by the finger. Magic. From the heart to the tongue. Magic. From the tongue to eye. Magic. From the eye to the book that enacts what the poet describes. Magic.

GC Waldrep writes: "First you make the tools / out of nothing. And from the tools, / you must make nothing. Then, out of nothing, / you must remake the tools." But how is this done? Though I do it myself I have no idea. If I knew, I wouldn't do it. If I understood what I did, I would do something else. Jonathan Culler writes that, "It is precisely at the moment when one finds it impossible to write—[to make]—anything that one enters the aesthetic condition." Perhaps that condition is not relegated to the aesthetic. Perhaps it is the entirety of our condition. Perhaps we were put here, at least in part, to create along with creation, to sing along with the song of nature.

To practice art is "to gather the power that accrues to us when we look" (Blanchot 302); and to make art in response to other art, across mediums, across bodies, across cultures, across materials, across matter, across mind, is to accrue even more powerfully by virtue of the vision of another. This is a normal and healthy thing to do. This is something we should contend for, and should help others contend for: the space to make art, the time required, the solitude needed. The shut door. The silence. The ignoring of the overarching demands of culture. Family. Society. Career. Until the present instant somehow begins "to extend the territory of what we are claiming truthfulness for" (Rowan Williams).