



"There Is No Not Art": Some thoughts on Art in Public and *Art in Public*

by A.D. Coleman

I came back to writing poetry a decade ago, on the morning after the first night of a fine, doomed love affair. I'd stepped away from the muse, or she from me, for some twenty years, during which time I occupied myself otherwise as a writer without regret; the closest I came to her during those decades was encouraging a neighbor of mine, a self-educated mystic sought out by animals for her healing skills, who secretly and by hand writes piles of glorious short stories with a narrative flair I've never even approximated.¹

When the muse came back from her long beer I pledged myself to slut for her, vowed that I would write any poem or fiction or whatever that came into my head

censoring myself, or asking if they were "right" for me, or otherwise interfering with the flow. As a result, I've written some really bad poems and stories, and more than a few curious, unexpected ones, and even a handful I think of as good. In the past several years I've taken to reading them publicly, not often in prestigious settings but generally at nondescript "open mikes" at various little joints around my working- to middle-class community, where I get to hear a considerable amount of other people's work.

Most of it, to the experienced ear, is not just mediocre but genuinely dreadful, which led me to write a poem that began, not entirely ironically:

¹ Her name is Lorraine Pickering, and she still refuses to publish.

The muse must like bad poetry, for why else spark so much of it in me and those who crumple up page after page, then come to read whatever they've smoothed out in rooms like these? ²

Yet the fact of the matter is that, each and every time I listen to others read, no matter how ungifted they appear and how hopeless the bulk of their efforts (I'm no impartial judge of my own), something inevitably does *flare out*, as Gerard Manley Hopkins said, *like shining from shook foil* -- and a phrase, a line, an image, a play on words brings me upright and gives me something to chew on for days. "Uprage and outroar," just last week, for example. Like fortune, inspiration passes everywhere, even across this desk of mine, and while I'm trained (like many of us, I suppose) to pay special attention to its appearance in concentrated doses among individuals who know what to do with it, there's something important and worth noting about that random, diluted sprinkling of

it you come across if you keep your eyes and ears open in the quotidian.

*

As I sit here writing this, I'm listening to *The Freeman Études* for solo violin,³ derived by the late John Cage between 1980 and 1990 from notational templates laid down over astronomical charts. It is complex, demanding, yet absolutely ravishing music. Dense as Bartok, fiendishly difficult to play, a true "music of the spheres," it also proposes that star maps are no less an available source of sound structures than the inner lives and inventive psyches of traditional composers.

Cage spent half a century weighing the proposition that the line between music and noise was thin, permeable, and not particularly useful. Merce Cunningham did the same in dance: where did casual bodily motion end and "dance" begin? William Burroughs, in "The Last Words of Dutch Schultz" and other projects, asked the parallel question of the written word. No medium of this century has been without practitioners who challenged its presumed boundaries.

² Allan Douglass Coleman, "Open Mike" 1995, unpublished.

³ John Cage, *The Freeman Études* (Newport, RI: Newport Classic CD, 1995), János Négysesy, violin.

All of them, of course, trace their tendencies back to Marcel Duchamp's idea of the "ready-made," the everyday object reconsidered, transformed by recontextualization. Robert Delford Brown, who knew Duchamp and is part of the cohort -- Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, et al -- that put his theories into practice, says it this way: "Everything is Art. There is no Not Art."⁴

Curiously, the music critic Alan Rich suggests that "[t]he ideal listener [for this music of Cage's] is someone just in from the Australian outback, or from Mars."⁵ Geographically close enough to New Zealand to suggest that the ideal observer of that country's "Art in Public" might be someone just in from the U.S. outback, or from Mars. Having known him since the late 1960s, I can testify that Larence Shustak qualifies on both counts.

What Shustak provides on this CD-ROM is an absolutely indiscriminate, idiosyncratic survey of what he calls "Art in Public" from the South Island of New Zealand in the 1990s. By *indiscriminate* I mean that it purposefully makes no



distinction whatsoever between governmentally commissioned public statuary of historic figures, corporately sponsored works of creative art commissioned for public display, mass-produced or one-off grocery-store and used-car dealership promotional installations, billboards, mural art, traffic signage, graffiti, visible tattoos on human skin and other forms of "body art," face painting on children at carnivals, T-shirt decoration, the mechanized horses and other inexpensive "rides" provided by stores to keep the little ones occupied, playing tenor sax for spare change in the street and the chanting and drumming of Hare

K r i s h n a devotees. In its absolute, clearly deliberate refusal to distinguish



between them it hypothesizes them all as pertinent to the concept of "Art in Public," a logical extension of the Duchampian premise.

⁴ Broadside (New York: First National Church of the Exquisite Panic, Inc., n.d.). Delford Brown has for a decade been collaborating with people from his neighborhood on a series of collaged "Maps to Nevada."

⁵ Liner notes, *The Freeman Études*, loc. cit.

In other words, Shustak here simply ignores the ongoing international debates over the aesthetics of "outsider" art (whose logical corollary, "insider" art, surely merits more discussion than it receives), *naïf* or "folk" art, "art in public" vs. "public art," "high" art vs. vernacular art, "quality" vs "kitsch," and the rest of that elaborate discourse. Instead, he cuts through that whole Gordian knot of class-based assumption with the keen-edged sword of Louis Armstrong's insight: "All music is folk music. I never heard no horse sing no song."⁶ Step outside your door, he asserts, and you're smack dab in the middle of the art world -- even in southern New Zealand. Look around carefully before you do, he implies, and you might find you don't need to leave the house to come across some art; carry or wear it outside, draw it on your hand, and voila!

Art in Public

Marshall McLuhan was fond of quoting the Balinese as saying, "We have no art. We do everything as well as we can," and I suspect that most people everywhere act on that basis even if they wouldn't put it in exactly those words. Genius, like fortune, passes

everywhere, as I said, and the inclination to play with the world and brighten up the corner where you are knows no particular age or nationality.

Shustak is not the first photographer to ask us to pay closer attention to these significant quotidian artifacts as revelations of cultural and individual expression. We can trace that impulse from Eugene Atget through Walker Evans to Robert Frank, find its first flowering in the late 1960s and nowadays encounter an entire genre of documentary addressing the manifold ways in which this or that segment of the population manifests its creativity in unschooled and professionally unambitious ways. Unlike Shustak, most of those who pursue this subject do discriminate generically, specializing in, let's say, decoration of the exteriors of houses, or lawn displays, or hand-painted signs. And most of them approach their subject with one or another variant of a rigorously formal documentary style, to signify a seriousness of intent that presumably echoes and dignifies the labor and creative energy involved in the production of the artifacts under scrutiny.

⁶ Frequently quoted; source unknown.

Shustak not only emulsifies all judgments regarding quality and all distinctions between types of "art in public" but also rejects the ostensibly ennobling strategy of a "high-art" photographic style. Instead, he applies to his theme -- which is the unpretentious artistic activity of the average citizen, in either private or business mode-- an equally democratic method of report: the casual, informal photographic style of mundane spectatorship, the snapshot attitude. Thus there's an appropriate balance at both ends of this project, an equivalent *gravitas* (or, more precisely, a refreshing lack of same) between the subject (this "art in public") and its spectator (Shustak), and between the photographer (Shustak again) and his audience (you and I).

Playing fields don't come more level than this. The result is something approximating looking over the shoulder of a quirky, eccentric tourist who could be you or me -- who's just gotten a batch of prints back from the Fotomat after spending a few days wandering around the South Island with his point-and-shoot loaded and an intriguing question foregrounded in his consciousness: if I cast the

widest possible net to fish for something called "art in public," what will I come up with?

Not a bad catch, I'd say. Sort it out for yourself.

A. D. Coleman
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author and Image/World
Syndication Services,
P.O.B. 040078,
Staten Island, New York
10304-0002 USA;
T/F (718) 447-3091,
adc@nearbycafe.com



A. D. Coleman
465 Van Duzer Street
Staten Island,
NY 10304-0002, USA
T.(718) 447-3280
F.(718) 447-3091
adc@nearbycafe.com

A. D. Coleman is Executive Director of The Nearby Cafe, a multi-subject website at **www.nearbycafe.com**, where his interactive newsletter, **“C: The speed of Light,”** can be found in the Photography section.

The Digital Evolution, a collection of his writings on digital imaging and electronic communication from 1967-98, was published by Nazraeli Press in 1998. He was recently named one of **"the 100 most influential people in photography"** by *American Photo* magazine.