

## Flitcraft's Basement: Art, Annihilation, and Inclusion

Zak Mucha

While supervising a young psychologist, she asked me of her own client, "He says he's an artist. Can that be a delusion?"

"Does he make art?"

"I guess," she said. "He sits in his room and smokes and draws."

My supervisee's client drew all day and did little else; his disability check covered the rent, cigarettes, and Pepsi. He wanted to have a gallery show. He wanted to be known as an artist, but leaving the house was a threatening consideration.

At the age of eighteen, I was working for an artist whose point of pride then was that he had, briefly, been a boxer, and also spent a little bit of time in Cook County Jail. He had come into the art world by creating his own entryway. My job was to hang artwork, tend bar at the after-parties and, every so often, collect money. This was more attractive than the college classes I had already started ditching. And from those years I thought I still knew some people who would be able to help get this artist a show.

This artist and I agreed to a three o'clock meeting on a Sunday: "I will be there at 2:55. I will be excited and informal."

The artist brought his portfolio, all loose paper tied between leather and cardboard. Each drawing was pencil on paper, covering every inch of space, carving out cavernous halls that opened like origami to new rooms and flattened totems. No humans were represented. Each page presented multiple perspectives, and the fractured viewpoints likened to a hall of mirrors. These were ceremonial spaces, waiting to be populated again. He was mapping out a private library, mausoleum and reliquary storerooms. These were black-and-white maps from one's dreams where, with each turn, the surroundings shifted and altered their purpose.

This artist said he himself did not look at art: "I'm an aesthetic hermit." For him, the outside world was either oblivious or hostile. Even when facing a measure of grace or generosity, he prepared for the collapse, the betrayal. "They" are either for him or against him. He and his therapist would go back and forth writing and withdrawing releases of information for his parents.

He tried once to sit in on a community-based art program, working at a big table in a bright and shiny room with other people's art supplies scattered around. After a couple hours he left, disappointed. "It was like when I had to put incense in boxes," he said. He wanted to get a job and defined himself as a loyal worker, but had no employment history.

The artist couldn't explain why he made art or what he wanted from it. In attempts to describe his work, he transposed syllables, grafted meanings and sounds from fractured terminology to get as close as he could to a sense that eluded him. His definitions did not apply anywhere else in the world.

Mircea Eliade wrote of the individual's drive to create a sacred space, and the origin of that drive comes from the tribal shift, historically, from nomadic constructions to a village center. A ceremony and a site signified this ground was different from all other land. This grounding is made to ensure a sense of safety, of home—marking this ground as different from all the other land. Included in a culture, we find ways to say: This is safe for our people. That sentiment becomes replicated in each physical space with a threshold, altar or totem. "This" is safe for us. This here is different from that out there. Laying claim to a chunk of land, a tree can provide the link between earth, heaven and hell. For those without their own ground, the ceremony demands a tribute to be made, even if it's wine poured on the sidewalk. That tribute is to the unseen, encircling either tree or spilt wine.

Eliade noted that we bring the sacred, the unseen, into the world in order to make it more real. Without the perceived inclusion sought and needed from infancy, an individual must remake the world. Mediating annihilation anxiety, the artist creates his own sacred space to make his world feel more real, to ground himself on the concrete. To feel safe, protected and included.

No artist truly driven to create feels themselves to be a part of the world. Some aspect of the self is not mirrored, some self-perception goes unrecognized, unacknowledged by the other. Even if the other does not perceive this, the artist does. The greater the distance the individual perceives between the self and the world, the more intense the efforts to mediate that distance.

We define ourselves by perceived degrees of inclusion or exclusion. We create narratives to explain this. Nelson Algren said:

"The strong-armed isn't out merely to turn a fast buck any more than the poet is out solely to see his name on the cover of a book, whatever satisfaction that event may afford him. What both need most deeply is to get even."

Bill Traylor, a sharecropper's son in the Deep South, drew monochromatic figures on shirt cardboards while sitting on a street corner. In the 1940s his drawings were presented to the formal art world as innocent, primitive and simple "celebrations of life." Decades later historians noted Traylor was not portraying the bucolic life of the South and the joys of drink and music, but was continuing his other work as a conjureman, selling potions and prayers to the sick and angry. His drawings illustrated the curses—a mix of African animism



and Christianity—cast against the women who left him and the men who lynched his son.

Traylor created his images out in public, but deflected any description of the drawings and left interpretations to others; the same silent deflections used by the field workers who politely declined to recite specific songs of vengeance for the Library of Congress recordings. They did not want their wishes for murder to be heard outside of a chosen audience lest it come back on them.

The artist had to hide the truth—while telling it—in order to save his life. Winnicott summarized this self-protection for the artist, “... driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide.”

That tension provides no direct reflection between the artist and ideal audience, but a split self for the artist that becomes a hall of mirrors. Remaining outside the crowd becomes a means to saving themselves. Lester Bangs, in discussing the death of Elvis Presley, took on a hypothetical voice of the king:

“... you were using me, projecting some fantasy of rebellion on me. I certainly wasn't rebelling against anything, ever... all I know is that all of a sudden... I started to stop being me. Because, well, everywhere I looked I started seeing me... something I started doing to make people know I existed started rubbing out my existence, a little at a time, day by day...”

For the artist, becoming a part of the community or creating a community is secondary—the primary goal is to define the self. That definition either comes with the response of the community or in spite of the response: accepted or not. The artist will accept almost any cost for that primary gain in the same manner we can deny one aspect of our health in order to protect another.

The concept of community becomes binary for the artist: yes/no; in/out. The artist holds both positions: the insider knows enough about the culture to comment on it, but also outside the culture via his disavowal. Mediating that split, two questions have to be answered: Am I recognized singly? And Am I included? These questions drop down from the anxiety of the root childhood terror: Will I be abandoned? Will I be labelled “bad”?

The artist says, “This is how I see the world,” hoping viewers respond as desired. This statement also refutes the childhood lessons of This is how the world is. One Aum Shinrikyo cult member, interviewed by Haruki Murakami after the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway, acknowledged readily: “When I graduated from high school I felt like I would either renounce the world or die—one of the two.” That cult member also noted that his lifelong dream was to be a novelist. That desire is the hall of mirrors in which the artist lives. The desire for mirroring which the artist sought (and seeks) is placed on the viewer. That drive to create can appear as a response to a narcissistic need not yet met.

When that narcissism does become buried out of a sense of survival, it will present itself in another form. That rift in the sense of self leaves the child with the void to fill. Children are not resilient. They are malleable. The child who is faced with the expectation of being resilient as a child is forced to be a malleable adult, both demanding of and acquiescing to the outside.

Those simultaneous and conflicting demands leave one always separated from their own self and the other with whom they desperately desire a connection.

Dashiell Hammett personified this split as he tried to identify some order in the world, using his writing as a series of mirrors between himself, his public self and his fictional selves. In *The Maltese Falcon*, the Flitcraft parable, as told by Sam Spade, becomes the illustration of the person disconnected and uprooted who disappeared from his stable life for no obvious reason. A near-miss industrial accident shows Flitcraft he can be killed randomly while walking to lunch:

"The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam... What disturbed him was the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life."

In response to this awareness, he disappears, "Like a fist when you open your hand..." leaving his wife, kids, job and home only to, years later, settle down into the same routine. Walking away from the real and mundane—once the truth was presented—made it real again. Or as Hammett wrote: "But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling."

Hammett's simultaneous refusal and acceptance of the popular culture was picked up again 50-some years later by the Leeds punk and art collective, the Mekons. Inside punk music's opposition to the stadium-celebrity-rock-virtuoso culture in 1977, the Mekons attempted to refute any idea of individual accomplishments, musical skills or identities in their effort to make music. It was a joke, but one they took seriously, stepping into the void without knowing how to play their instruments. They wanted to create a community for those who were, by their own actions or simply by omission, outside the culture. Their first single, "Never Been in a Riot," was a response to the Clash's sloganeering of organized rebellion.

Disappearing and coming back at the far edges of popular culture since then, they have become slightly known for refusing to die or remain still. They



joke that success is what kills bands and they have been safe since they haven't come close. In their songs "Flitcraft" and "If They Hang You," Hammett and his ideal, Sam Spade, are cited in their refusal of societal standards as the Mekons reframe Sam Spade's promise to the femme fatale that, while he might really love her, he will tell the cops, "If they hang you/ I'll have a few sleepless nights..." Sam Spade became the model for the anti-hero who is a part of society and plays a role in maintaining order, but who also breaks the rules as he sees fit. Much like the artist, he needs to protect his sense of connectedness while also claiming he stands apart from the culture.

The Mekons briefly flirted with the potential for acceptance into popular culture. Given their chance with a major record company and videos on MTV, they sang: "Destroy your safe and happy lives/ before it is too late/ The battles we fought were long and hard/ Just to be consumed by Rock and Roll..." The opposition of the culture was the only righteous stance as long as one understood the culture, ultimately and always, would crush any ranters.

Greil Marcus wrote in "The Cowboy Philosopher" that the band's work, "... was a situationist dream, which was a part of a very long line of projects to turn art into life and life into art." Elsewhere, Marcus also noted the band knew they were ridiculous, wearing cowboy satin and Sandinista t-shirts, drunkenly challenging each other and the audience from the stage: "Do you want to be part of the crime or part of the punishment?"

Dashiell Hammett, when subpoenaed to testify at the McCarthy trials, refused to give names. He didn't have any names to give, but rather than running the risk of appearing to be complicit, he accepted the empty accusations and did his prison time. His self-identity incorporated the other's side view and he adjusted for that.

The Flitcraft parable may have been about a man who did not recognize his own spiritual space, his own ground, because he had no connection to his sense of self except for that which can be easily quantified. For Flitcraft, home was anywhere because he had no real connection to anything, only an approximate sense of what the surface should be.

Christopher Bollas wrote of a client terrified he had no self. The client could not perceive his own self, could not describe it, had no set of introjects for "me" as he did for others in his life. In session, Bollas noted his own anxiety in not having a ready solution. He simply responded, I can feel you in the room with me, which provided enough of a validation and a spot of ground from which to start working. This became their starting point.

Slavoj Zizek writes of one way to find our own desires, our own sense of self, implying the view from the Other, the audience, which we want reflected back to us: "... if we look at a thing straight-on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it 'at an angle,' i.e. with

an 'interested' view, supported, permeated, and 'distorted' by desire." Without that, we are monstrously alone in the world.

Bollas' desire in the session was to connect with his client, to reduce their shared anxiety. In doing this, he could acknowledge the sense of sharing a room, sharing the space, acknowledging the other and consequently allowing the other to exist. That reciprocity, that empathy from one to the next, is the proof the artist seeks regarding their own existence in the world.