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Andy, I'm interested in talking with you about politics and religion. You have a relationship to these two topics that's unique amongst the artists I know, and both of these show up in your work quite often. To start, can you talk about your impressions of your Catholic upbringing?

I've always been more interested in politics than in religion. I never felt any religion in church, and I haven't felt it anywhere else. One current line is to say that someone is spiritual, not religious. I have no idea what this would mean, beyond simply saying it. Discouraged from recitational prayer, my parents suggested personal prayer, or to have my own mind while I said the Hail Mary, for example. In dark episodes in my life, when I may have wished that my life was done I did not pray. Visions in dreams, ESP, unordinary time, etc., these have all occurred in my experience and seemed entirely real. Such moments feel very material, like being a very smart, healthy animal, not like a spiritual person.

My parents guided me into the sacraments and socializations of a child in the church. I was even baptized twice and given the last rites as a baby, but as an adolescent I refused to be confirmed and essentially left the community at that point.

The church we attended had a definite post-60s, post-Vatican II sensibility in its visual look. In more traditional churches, such as those attended by my grandparents, one could witness in the design of the interiors the aspirations of the working-class immigrants who founded the parish expressed in painting and woodwork that alluded to Europe. The altar of my church was a multi-leveled stage of ramps and stairs surfaced with super soft beige carpet. The whole of the congregation sat on pews in what clearly was meant to be reminiscent of a conversation pit, or maybe something like Mary Tyler Moore's apartment. The effect was contemporary with no allusion to a Kingdom of Heaven. It felt a bit like appearing on television and a bit like being upper-middle class.

There were huge, curved wooden rafters, expressionist "exposed beams". Where they met at their apex, where one could imagine woodworking on a transcendent level, there was in its place a veil of plain white plastered ceiling just like in my family's home. It was just incredibly high up there. My nextdoor neighbor made beautiful 70's style fiber art wall pieces for the church. The stained glass was chunky and abstract. It was a pretty cool place. The community went crazy with fundraising for years to pay for it. There were always financial announcements at the end of mass. I clearly got the message that the place was "ours", collectively, not God's.

So the congregation has been gathered into this beautiful place, and there's this feeling I had that all of the context is bunk, no God, no religion, and I don't believe in modern love, and so on. So what about the subtext? What's really going on here? While I was fascinated by the tabernacle off in the corner of the altar (on a counter next to a standard kitchen sink of all things), there weren't many actual mysteries put forward. Like anyone else operating without believable explanations, I tried to put together my own theory of what was going on there. The chunkiness of the windows somehow explains carpeted risers. The white plaster somehow explains the absence of frescoes. The fiber art on the walls and on the priest's robes somehow explains the pancake lunch held after the service in the multi-purpose room. It was the 80's and the church had gone Po-Mo in way I'm still sympathetic towards. It was noisy and indecipherable. If any of it added up to clear idea it was just as much coincidental as anything else.

In past conversations you have talked about radical, politically-Left Catholicism as being a part of your upbringing and influencing the way you see the world. What's this all about?

My father was a Conscientious Objector during the Vietnam War. He was also a catholic seminarian from when he left home for boarding school at age 13 until his college degree. Of the two, his status as a C.O. always seemed the more important in the cosmology of my world as it developed. He believed in non-violence with a devotion I took on as my own. I was constantly in little boy fights in my neighborhood and at school. I still had to try things out for myself. Immediately after I gave or took a bloody nose, the fear that my father would find out overtook me.

Around the time I was 6 my family participated in these exchanges that sometimes had soviets staying at our house for a week. One time, our guest, a writer named Anatoly, came downstairs to my playroom to see what I was up to. I was playing with space legos and showed him the little ship I had made. He asked me if part of the ship was a laser. He asked me if it was there to kill Russians. Similar to this story is one time when my grandfather found my cousin and me playing with little fighter planes. He became extremely upset. This may have been the only time he raised his voice to me. He told us that if we ever joined the military he would never forgive us, and that he “had died in World War II.”

We talked about war, nuclear war, and Reagan so often, but I never remember talking about religion even though we went to church every Sunday. For me non-violence essentially super-imposed itself atop Catholicism. At some earlier time, this must have happened for my father.

By the time I was in college I was an activist, but entirely unaffiliated with any political allies or with this religious background. The strategy I employed as an activist was to learn politician’s speeches from watching C-SPAN, but really what I did can be done without even that much work. I would sit at the front of a rally or lecture at my university. From the beginning I would convince the speaker that I was his ally, by cheering louder than anyone, anticipate the big-lines: become the hype-man. If you do this for about five minutes, the speaker starts talking through you as a medium to appeal to the crowd.

When the speaker finally came around to the topic I was interested in—the WTO, the living wage, the war machine, etc. --- I would turn on the speaker, become disappointed, and start moaning. Left at that, it just looked like to everyone in attendance that the speaker had broken some young man’s heart, but usually the stunt would start an argument that would derail the rest of the event. I did this all the time in college: Al Gore, Rob Reiner and the cast of *The West Wing*, John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, Ashley Judd, Dick Gephardt, Bono. At the time I understood what I was doing as living politically as if there were no hierarchy. It is pure exhilaration when a room turns on you, when people from other parts of your life threaten and condemn you. Besides hassling Christian fundamentalists on campus, I restricted my activities to liberal and democratic party events, so what was important in being there as a disruption was that the speakers and the crowds tacitly accepted that what I was saying was part of their worldview, but leftism and non-violence are permanently repressed into the unconscious of popular “liberal” politics.

When the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 happened, the University of Iowa held a sort of gathering that same night with thousands of students around a stage. People were supposed to come up and say how they felt. No one volunteered at first, so I raised my hand and got on stage. My comment was that we can choose not to have enemies; we can refuse enemies. It was obvious our generation was going to be asked to fight a war over this event, and we had to start that day to refuse our own leaders. Someone in the crowd yelled something about “fucking hippies” and “commies”, and I laughed at him. I was no better at rallying people to my side on stage than I was in the crowd. To ask people to believe in non-violence is essentially to ask them to leave their community that founds its worldview on the inverse.

When I started trying to organize anti-war actions the next day the only people who seemed interested were old Left-Catholics and Quakers, the quiet world-refusers. I became interested in them as they seemed the only people interested in what I was trying to do. It was around this time that I learned the term “radical witness.” It is the position one takes when the agency of his subjectivity is handed over to a sort oceanic feeling for social justice. This is political grace. As such it abandons a transcendent sublime of the spiritual for something more material. Paradoxically, the Catholic emphasis on “works” is carried out with something that appears useless, by “witnessing.” To do this, one can tax refuse, can live in “community” with others in protest, one can trespass onto a nuke facility and pour blood, one can hop a fence of a military base and enter the School of Assassins.

All of these actions have the same slippery relationship with materiality and pragmatics as post-conceptual art. In comparison with relational aesthetics, I found the idea of community in this politics much more appealing because it was honest about our fundamental loneliness and alienation. To carry out an act of radical witnessing one is always “naked and alone.”

Would you describe your work as being Catholic in its worldview?

An almost animistic corporeality and not gold leaf is the essence of Catholic materialism: icons and fetishes, the image located in the body, in an object or place, in an idea that moves in the world through avatars. In all of these, it should be clear that the church has always primarily communicated with the laity, as does the art world with its audience, via ambiguous visual and sensual methods. This consistent approach that relies on a reverie of synesthesia makes clear that to witness any appearance of the spiritual is part of the same experience as understanding it intellectually. Anymore, I do not have much use for connecting all of this to Catholicism.

Certainly, the idea of the Radical Witness is important to me. It could be that an artist needs things to do more than he needs a totalizing or programmatic philosophy.

You have used the structure of the Gospel and homily from the Catholic mass as a metaphor for several things you do in your life: teaching, filmmaking, art, and conversation with friends. Can you break this down a little bit?

I've long felt that it is more accurate to think of narratives as anecdotes, and not "stories". Whether or not life actually is teleological, as an experience it never feels that way for me. To summarize someone's life into a coherent story is one of the most commonplace de-humanizing moves available to an artist. The rush to meaning is a rush to resolution, similar to “End of History” arguments and millennial Christianity. The anecdote just suggests that something happened at some moment and certain details must be noted to appreciate its specificity. It's the case that we mostly communicate with anecdotal information. This can be observed in the gospel and homily that happen near the end of the mass.

When you say “near the end” are you thinking of the liturgical structure? Because experientially it happens about 1/3 of the way through.

No, mass is nearly over by then, everyone wants out. Old people cheer themselves and remember they backed into their parking spaces. Soon, lunch will be served. As far as anything meaningful there's only the eucharist left. This is actually the only “real” thing that happens in the whole service. It is a miniature Easter. I might have the order of events wrong. Honestly, I haven't been to mass in years. If it wasn't for funerals and weddings I'd gladly never attend one ever again. Whatever was left in remainder of the Liberationist mindset has been chased out. They've finally, totally banished living culture from the church.

During mass, everyone thinks about the end, very few about actual mortality. Most just wait for that Sunday to be over with. Others are waiting to grow up and quit religion. So, the priest really has to deliver the goods in the homily.

In essence the priest reads from the gospel and then follows with a lecture on the reading. The interesting thing is that the gospel which is essentially a collection of short anecdotal stories is almost always discussed in terms of other anecdotal stories. The priest will discuss stories from his own life, parishioners, made-up people, news stories, etc. to provide context. When anecdote interrogates anecdote like this, one senses the overlap and disjunction, feels it more than understands it. In mass the priest sings, "Let us proclaim the mysteries of faith."

You have characters and scenarios in several of your pieces that have recognizable Left politics: counterculture people from the 60's, activist nuns and war protesters, to name some that come to mind. To what extent do you identify with the politics you reference in your work?

I only make work from my own political perspective. I'm not interested in work that functions as analysis, explanation, summary, and so on. The point of view of someone who appears on screen inevitably collapses into my own as the maker, just as that of the audience will later on.

There really aren't actual politics in my films. There's no social exchange, no convincing, no arguing, nothing necessary for actual politics. Individuals are presented as isolated, alienated in my films. If there is a politic act in the films beside witnessing as already framed, it is refusal. I like the idea of world-refusers, sort of like tax-resisters of reality.

One of the most interesting strains in your work for me, Andy, is the presence of people who have lived with a countercultural ideal for a long time. You have these characters in some of your films, and here I'm particularly thinking of your father in TETEDMORT and the protest nun in Black Iron Vatican, who have in some way outlived the sweeping revolution of their youth, but who quietly and forcefully stay devoted to a revolutionary philosophy. Basically, old hippies. This is perhaps a very complex question, but could you talk a little about how or why you use these figures in your work?

When I studied political science as an undergrad I soon became aware that most of my peers actually wanted to become lawyers or get party work, with its caucuses Iowa is very good place to start one's climb. Of course, all of this offended me. I was also studying studio art in a mode that may as well as have been called "Art Forms of the 60s and 70s". At Iowa it was officially known as Intermedia Art. For years the librarian of the art school had been systematically destroying all copies of October Magazine every month when it arrived in the mail. Ana Mendieta had been in the program and there were heroic MFA candidates that had managed to extend their degrees-seeking years into decades and had actually studied alongside her. I think some of them may have assassinated Carl Andre if he had crossed the Mississippi into Iowa. Coming from there, I'm not sure what I thought my future was going to be, as I think I lived many years in a disconnected (albeit superior) timeline and worldview. I can still imagine that path. I want it back. When I discovered multi-versic fantasy novels like Michael Moorcock's and Philip K. Dick's a few years later I was so moved to see contemporary life so sensitively described. So when I arrived at SAIC for my MFA, I was ready for something different than what was available there. I was going to have to face it at some point. Even though sometimes I think of the time as when the Chums of Chance in Pynchon's *Against the Day* spent a few years in an hallucination thinking they were harmonica students at Candlebrow University.

What I'd missed out on was a particular kind of approach to integrating politics into art, usually from a perspective that Marxism would rehabilitate and reform. Or more in the terms of such

work, it would critique. Like so many students when they learn about this approach, I wanted to be handed that knife and start cutting.

There was a book I read around this same time that ultimately led me out of this approach. Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid, Melts into Air* asks, among other things, if Marx was just another modernist. As if, was Jesus just another religious man? So, is surveillance just another topic in aesthetics? Is globalism just another version of subjectivity, a new frame?

Another thing Berman talks about is millennialism in Marxist thought and how this strain ultimately allowed the formation of Neo-Liberalism and its reactionary double in parts of the anti-globalist movement. The problem for art school Marxism is, again, teleological. It's morbid. It wants destruction. It is narrative. The only world pictures widely available to us today, in art, in politics, somehow cannot imagine a future without calamity. This is probably realistic. But if art involves itself in such narratives, I suggest tragic anecdotes and tragic gestures over tragedies proper. It's stinkin' thinkin', buddy.

If you want to ruin a weekend, read Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* on Saturday, and on Sunday read her *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*. If indeed, everything solid melts in air, why do so many use Marxism as the basis for trying to turn art into reality? At least Lippard was describing a period when most of the artists honestly believed in such transfigurations. This line of thinking makes me reconsider alchemy as an aesthetic framework, another, but less dominate theme from my grad days.

Here's where I actually answer your question. I've been interested in my subjects for personal reasons, but also because their lives can be presented in such a way in my work that they are not part of critique. Instead they embody in actuality some of what I've just talked about as part of a particular aesthetics. Like Berman's version of Marx they're more interested in bearing witness to changes in state, with a resolute belief that the audience is just as often the actor. The people I'm interested in aren't believers in endgame moves. They go through changes like Harry Smith turned milk into milk.

We have talked in the past about seeing the thru-line of a narrative in film as being a trick or sleight-of-hand. How do you handle this in your own movies?

Quite simply I don't try to tell stories. I try to restrict myself to images, gestures, and Ideas all organized at an anecdotal level. Because the film is linear, the viewer will have to reconcile all of these parts with some temporal organization that is understandable. Hopefully this can be done with kind of finesse. Although I've no real experience with things like yoga or dance, I often think of structuring a piece in time as achieving one correct posture or pose, and then another, and then another.

The convention of ellipsis is a problem for me. This brisk morbidity is present in essentially every feature film that isn't Tarkovsky, that isn't essentially "durational". It is the essential support to the feeling of inevitability that allows films to push forward into the narrative towards a certain conclusion without the audience getting lost in the banal distractions of time as it actually passes. It might be a simple as to say that to remove this approach to narrative is what allows for what we think of as an artist's film. There's something claustrophobic about purely formal film-making as well in some abstract, non-objective, whatever, film where a visual set is put forward and every variation is shown and then the film ends. Some artists just really want to solve these sorts of problems once and for all.

Immediately I want to roll this back and think about exceptions or less rigid ways of thinking. Maybe the way Lynch is inclined to organize his films around clichés both from melodrama as well as the Ur-source of clichés, the collective unconscious. *Wild at Heart* acting mostly in the first tendency, *Inland Empire* in the second (let's only discuss Laura Dern, please.) In these films, no reality is lost in the ellipsis, instead he emphasizes the horror of life as an abbreviated rush through crises. There are absolutely no solutions available, and really no development in the story, just changes.

Your video work seems to have gotten increasingly opaque in recent years Andy. Born to Live Life and Don't Shoot the Power both present wildly eccentric personalities, but neither are difficult for a viewer to engage. Your newer films, and here I'm thinking of Glass Flag and the abstract videos set to Black Vatican music, are not narratively accessible in the same way as the earlier work I mentioned. From conversations with you, I know that the new work developed out of interests that are close to what led to the earlier work. Can you talk a bit about the way you're working now, in terms of tools and processes?

I've lost the thread. Life feels less and less like a story all the time. Somehow, my unconscious mind never made it to Chicago. It's still back in Iowa having fun, being younger, out in parks late into the night. I may never have had a dream that took place in Chicago. I can't make those sort of films here now.

You have made some great observations about the cultural stance of the classic avant-garde filmmaker in America. One of these that I think is particularly interesting is how the filmmaker relates to their work, especially in terms of being personally present to screen often difficult or opaque material. What are your thoughts on the job of being an avant-garde filmmaker?

Even though the filmstrip, and so the film, is an object, albeit a reproducible one, it seems that no one really lets films and videos just sit there on a screen in the corner or projected up on the wall without some kind of framing top. No one trusts films to be autonomous. This might be because so many who are interested in this sort of film and video culture reject the mass culture screen's reliance on anonymity of the viewer (his near personlessness). The artist film is never just another relaxer for the body reclining before the screen. One can observe in the comments sections of YouTube or any other such site the desperateness of so many people for a connection between the consumption of media and a social life.

The artist short-circuits this with work that requires some kind of mediation from the sender, albeit from a didactic text on a gallery wall or an in-person artist talk. The sort of work we do is not nearly as robust as that intended for mass consumption. The work leans pathetically on the support of theory, genre, art writing, and so on. Even with this buttressing, the artist, as presented to an audience, is the most foundational, because he in kind leans back towards the work. The artist and the work always need each other more than the audience needs either. Maybe like the therapist hosts of a couple's retreat, the pair models some kind of behaviour.

The strangest thing is when an artist is present and refuses to speak or take questions. Maybe this just goes back to my old penchant for derailing rallies and lectures. Maybe it's just that I'm verbal and other artists aren't so much. There's a fear that the work will be interrogated until there's nothing left of it. There's a belief that words won't match or will even replace the work. The film could become an illustration to supplement the talk.

There are good reasons to just let the work be and shut up, but I'd rather the work be damaged, if it means forcing the work further into the audience. For example, once when I saw a performance by Bruce McClure he mentioned that he'd only been listening to Monster Magnet. It's the little breezes that can blow a mind!

Your collaboration with David Price resulted in some very strong work; in my opinion some of the most interesting film work made in Chicago last year. Can you talk about working with David?

We met about 10 years ago at Chelsea College of Art in London. David was a student there and I was on an exchange. He was my best friend while I was over there. We kept in touch over the years, often talking about some kind of collaboration or show. It finally happened when last year David was planning a trip to the U.S. to do some research with the papers of Don DeLillo at a library in Austin. Kat and George Monteleone had asked me to make a film for their Saturday Cinema series and I suggested to David that we make some work together.

We wound up making 4 films. Each one was a sort of game or negotiation between us. It may have been that the film Two Balls was the first one we made. On screen one sees an edit that cuts between a ping-pong game and a game of racquetball. David shot the ping-pong in London where he is quite an enthusiast. My side is a view of my father and his friend playing racquetball as they have on a weekly basis for years. The two of them are viewed through a mask that frames them inside a bouncing colored ball. The whole thing is fun to watch, and really lacks the assertive quality I'd long employed in my personal work. The origin of Double Denim had something to do with David's trip to Austin and my suggestion he pack a "Texas tuxedo." Eventually that came around talk of Chris Isaak, Mexican western wear, and "where the denim meets the denim", by then the film was nearly done. While we're very sympathetic, the other day I found myself described how we'd been working together as "irreconcilable collaboration".

The last year has been one when I've felt a bit lost in my work and otherwise, but working with David was the just an effortless, happy reunion.

You're the best person I know at coming up with titles for your work. How do you do it?

So much of working on this stuff is spent alone toiling away, staring at your work, thinking about your work and so on. You just get familiar with a piece and start to love it, so you name it, give it a nickname. I use it to address the work in progress, so the name has to be snappy.