

AIR GUITAR

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Essays on Art & Democracy

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has accompanied my every encounter with the diffuse network of proprietary surveillance that permeates this society, I have simply written "the diffuse network of proprietary surveillance, etcetera," footnoted Foucault, and moved along.

This book is an apology for that sort of authoritarian behavior, because, in truth, I have never taken anything printed in a book to heart that was not somehow confirmed in my ordinary experience—and that did not, to some extent, reform and redeem that experience. Nor have I had any experience of high art that was not somehow confirmed in my experience of ordinary culture—and that did not, to some extent, reform and redeem that. So I have tried to reinstate the connective tissues here, and, in the process, have written an odd sort of memoir: a memoir without tears, without despair or exaltation—a memoir purged of those time-stopping exclamation points that punctuate all our lives.

So there are no Mozart Requiems here, nor masterpieces by Velázquez, no mind-bending sexual encounters or life-confirming acts of friendship, no bloody curtains or puking withdrawals, no heartbreaks, gunshots, humiliations, or bodies hanging in the bedroom. This is just the ordinary stuff—the ongoing texture of the drift, where, it has always seemed to me, things *must* be okay, or the rest will certainly kill you; and if I have any real qualification for the job that I have undertaken, it is that I have always been okay with everyday life and beguiled by the tininess of it—and beguiled as well by the tininess and intimacy of artistic endeavors—by The Bird with his horn and Velázquez with his tiny brush—and by the magical way these endeavors seem to proliferate.

When I was a kid, books and paintings and music were all around me, all the time, but never in the guise of "culture." They were remarkable domestic accouterments that I encountered nowhere else. They were not to be found in the homes of my friends, and I can assure you that my family played no part in any "larger cultural community." We played no part in anything,

except America. We were just out there in the middle of it, on the edges of it, and on the move. So cut apart were we, in fact, that I can remember being amazed that whatever city we landed in, my folks could always find these little bookstores and record shops, art galleries and jazz clubs that no one else knew about. I thought of them as secret places where you could go and meet other people who were part of this secret thing.

So the whole cultural enterprise, when I was growing up, was at once intimate and a little mysterious. It took place at home, in other people's homes, and in little stores. Yet, as we moved around, I begin to get a sense of how *huge* an enterprise it really was. Everywhere we went there were bookstores and record shops, art galleries and jazz clubs, where otherwise normal-looking people did all these cool things. *And nobody noticed. Nobody knew anything about it!* My teachers didn't know about it. The newspapers didn't know about it. My scoutmasters didn't know about it. The television didn't know about it. My friends didn't know about it. Even their parents didn't know about it. For a kid, this was awe inspiring. I was like Oedipa Maas, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when she discovers the Tristero, because, thanks to my folks, I was privy to this vast, invisible, underground empire that, unlike the Tristero, trafficked in nothing but joy.

I chose to dwell in that underground empire for the first forty-seven years of my life—in record stores, honky tonks, art bars, hot-rod shops, recording studios, commercial art galleries, city rooms, jazz clubs, cocktail lounges, surf shops, bookstores, rock-and-roll bars, editorial offices, discos, and song factories. I lived the freelance life, in other words, and did okay at it, until 1987, when this nation, in its wisdom, decided that citizens who lived the way I did were no longer deserving of health insurance, by virtue of their needing it a lot. Faced with this reality, I began to take teaching gigs in universities and soon discovered that, for the length of my whole life, from birth until the day I stepped on campus, I had been consorting with the enemy. According to the

masters of my new universe, all the cruelties and inequities of this civilization derived from the greed and philistinism of shopkeepers, the people who ran those little stores, who bought things and sold them, as I had done.

I found this amazing, because the problem for me had never been who sold the dumb object, or bought it (it was just a dumb object), but how you acquired the privilege of talking about it—how you found people with whom you *could* talk about it. My new masters were obsessed with *things*. So I wondered if they had known any shopkeepers. What, I wondered, would these people have thought of Sumpter Bruton, a tasty jazz drummer by night and shopkeeper by day, who ran the little record store where I learned about everything from bel canto to Blind Lemon to Erik Satie, who loved every kind of noise that human beings made—with the possible exception of the noises made by Neil Diamond? And what would they have thought of Mickey Ruskin and Hilly Kristal who ran great bars where new worlds were made, where you could talk about things and listen to music? And what would they have thought of Harold Garner and David Smith, whose bookstore was their baby and the site upon which I discovered *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* and *Logique du sens*, who would order weird books because they thought I might be interested in them, and never tell me if they weren't returnable? The books I didn't buy would just lay around, gathering dust, until I figured that out. Then I would buy them for cost, and cheap at the price.

I know, of course, what my colleagues think of Leo Castelli, Richard Bellamy, Paula Cooper, Klaus Kertess and the Janis brothers, because they are (or used to be) art dealers and, thus, the very embodiment of Satan. Even so, when I was a youngster adrift in Manhattan, these people recognized me the second or third time I wandered into their stores. They came out and talked to me about what was hanging on the walls. They even pulled stuff out of the back so we could talk about that, knowing full well (by my outfit) that I was a cowboy and no kind of a collector at all. That was the

best thing about little stores. If you were a nobody like me, and didn't know anything, you could go into one of them and find things out. People would talk to you, not because you were going to buy something, but because they loved the stuff they had to sell. The guy in the Billabong Surf Shop, I can assure you, wants to talk about his boards. Even if you want to buy one, right now, he *still* wants to talk about them, will talk you out into the street, you with the board under your arm, if he is a true child of the high water.

And I love that kind of talk, have lived on it and lived by it, writing that kind of talk for magazines. To me, it has always been the heart of the mystery, the heart of the heart: the way people talk about loving things, which things, and why. Thus it was, after two years on university campuses without hearing anything approximating this kind of talk, I began feeling terrible, physically awful, confused and bereft. I kept trying to start this kind of talk, volunteering my new enthusiasms like a kid pulling frogs and magic rocks out of his pocket, but nothing worked. There was no *bounce*, just aridity and suspicion. It finally dawned on me that in this place that we had set aside to nurture culture and study its workings, culture didn't work.

It couldn't work, in this place, because all the things that I wanted to talk about—all those tokens of quotidian sociability that had opened so many doors and hearts for me—all those occasions for chat, from *Tristram Shandy* to *Roseanne*, from Barnett Newman to Baby Face—*belonged* to someone. But not to everyone. All the treasures of culture were divvied up and owned by professors, as certainly as millionaires own the beach-fronts of Maine. So, even though, in the course of a normal day, I might chat with the lady in the check-out line about *Roseanne*, might discuss the Lakers' chances with some guy at the blackjack table, might schmooze on the phone with Christopher Knight about Karen Carson's new paintings, and maybe even dish with Karen herself about an all-male performance of *Swan Lake*, there was no hope of my having a casual conversation with an English profes-

sor about what a cool book *Tristram Shandy* was.

Because, in this place, books and paintings and music were not "cool stuff." In society, these objects were occasions for gossip—for the commerce of opinion where there is no truth. In school, they were occasions for *mastery* where there is no truth—an even more dangerous proposition—although my colleagues, being masters, had little choice but to behave masterfully. Exempted by their status from the whims of affection and the commerce of opinion, they could only mark territory from the podium, with footnotes, and speak in the language of authority about things they did not love—while I listened. Which I did, and I learned a lot, returning to school. All the secrets of the universe would have been poor recompense, however, for the miasma of social desolation; they could never have redeemed the fact that, within the cloister, we moved among one another, and among all the treasures of human invention, like spiteful monks sworn to silence, like silly, proprietary eunuchs in some sultan's harem—while all the joys that bind the world together kept us sullenly apart.

So this book is about other, more ordinary, uses for art and books and music—about what they seem to do and how they seem to do it on a day-to-day basis. It is not about how they ~~should~~ work, or ~~must~~ work, just about the way they seem to have worked in my experience, and the ways that I have seen them work for others. The pieces in this book, then, are quite literally "speculative writing," neither stories nor essays but something more like fables: compressed narratives, grounded in real experience and as true as they need to be, with little "morals" at the end. They move directly from what I have seen and experienced to what I think about it, from the particular to the general, with none of the recursiveness of ordinary essays and short stories. So there is a lot more "thus," "then," "therefore," and "because" than I would ordinarily tolerate. This is endemic to the form and the consequence, as well, of my having written them straight through, under deadline, in hope of enlisting haste as an aid to candor.