

Small consolations

In August, when it was easy to sleep, I had a teaching dream. I had brought John Lennon to class as a guest lecturer. He had complex algorithms for peace. He was explaining the mathematics of them with the confident precision of a research scientist. The room was filled knee-high with dirt and in it he spelled the word, – "love" with his finger, right-to-left. The students in the classroom lifted their eyebrows with polite bemusement, as if he were advocating the manual typewriter...

A student from my sculpture class came into my office a few years ago. His name was Rusty, and he looked as if he probably lived in a wild-weekend frat house. He possessed the sort of young-twenty something masculinity that could cause lesser beings, myself included, to assume he was mostly just waiting for class to be over. He was tall and quiet and not particularly interested in hanging out with the "art kids." I can't remember much of the conversation in my office. I do remember that he did not have answers to any of my questions about his plans for his project. I am sure that I was secretly wondering whether maybe he didn't know because he didn't too much care. I am sure that I tried to discuss pertinent topics, like motivating yourself and working from a point of personal interest; otherwise how can you even know where to start? He was quiet for a long time before he said through the clenched teeth of a twenty-year old kid who lived on a farm, not a frat house and was trying not to cry in the office of his more than slightly condescending art teacher: "But it's all just so beautiful ... and it's all just so awful. How does anybody ever know where to start?"

That is where I am today, as I write this – wavering between the awful and the beautiful and wondering where to start. I left my teaching job to move to New York. The day after I got here for good, the telephone woke me to the news that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. My roommates and I watched the rest of the horror unfold on live television.

In the days since then, I have been reassured constantly about my decision to come to the City, and reminded repeatedly of the complex perspective Rusty taught me. While much of what we have been experiencing is the completely appropriate extreme sadness and extreme anger, New York has the privilege of witnessing firsthand the vastness of human generosity that exists in between mourning and vengeance. The atrocity will remain immeasurable; we are not capable of processing

this kind of loss in any quantifiable way. But the altruism that accompanies it is also unspeakable, and the latter, at this point, also seems endless. It provides hopeful images that I can carry to counter the hellish when I am trying to force myself to sleep these nights:

At a Manhattan Volunteer center in the basement of a church, a homeless man empties his cup into the donations box. As I am trying to wade through all of the other images of the last few days on my precarious walk to sleep, I come back to that one. A wrist turning a tattered coffee cup. I replay this kind of gentle gesture as my best defense.

The top edge of a dumpster at a construction site outside Union Square is lined with lit candles. In the Square itself, small white tents, like what you would see at outdoor flea markets, house volunteers who shout to the waiting crowds lists of what supplies are needed: tube socks and respirators, flip-flops and bath towels, men's clothes and work boots. Very soon, a line of people forms with their arms full of plastic bins and shopping bags, delivering their donations. In my trek to sleep I remember that through the foggy plastic container, the folded, cantaloupe-colored towels were the same color as the candles on the dumpster ledge, and I cling to this color as some argument for optimism.

A hand-drawn sign over the door of a Ma and Pa Deli reads: "Free Food, Drinks Sandwiches – Whatever You Need! Anything FREE for Firefighters, Cops, Red Cross, Doctors, Nurses." I trace in my mind the hollow circle that dots the "i" in "anything" the way that children worry the corners of silky pillows.

It is not much, I know; these are days of small consolation. I talk to artists between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, some with whom I went to school, some who were my students. The majority of them are not what I would call Hopeful. Their generation is one given easily to cynicism. They are embarrassed by drama and sentiment. Sincerity seems obsolete, somehow. These young artists do not find their ideals represented in government. They cannot even imagine having a political hero. And they are in the unprecedented position of feeling that nothing they do – nothing anyone does – really matters. Previous generations at least felt as if en masse they could "make a difference." These young people carry that era's disappointments as evidence of futility. They are articulate in their bleakness; they cite international examples of failed ideals. Hope feels like foolishness. "Doubt makes the most sense." How does anyone ever know where to start?

I ask myself the same question. But as artists, we ask ourselves this question, obviously on a scale with much less urgency, every time we enter the studio. There is emptiness, and there is doubt. They are palpable. Initially we can only struggle

with them, moving around the materials we have in front of us. I know it is a weak analogy against the reality of these horrors; I know that metaphor cannot even begin to address tragedy. But from the very act of struggling with emptiness and doubt, we invent things we could not have possibly understood or even consciously imagined in the moments before. Again, it is a small consolation, but today I'll take it.

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