

“Antagonism, Authenticity, Authorship, and Art”

Nicholaus Arnold

When I'm asked about a personal artistic biography, I usually explain that I was born on the beaches of Dayton, Ohio where I wandered with my sled dogs, Asimov and Rutger creating seashell and macaroni mobiles for the fishing biplanes which frequented the shoreline. From there on I decided that I would devote my life to making art, and I've been doing so ever since.

This is total bullshit. I like the description though. It works, its sort of Beuysian, and creates a strange personal mythology for myself.¹ It fits into what I call my "dialectic of process". My work revolves around the ideas of authenticity, authorship and antagonism. These three words define my work and bring it together. I basically extrapolate ideas from the personal and mundane, and universalize them for an audience to experience or view. That all sounds really simple though, and at the same time really complicated. I suppose that's why I'm supposed to write a "thesis", something to give a little more body to my ideas right? So let me start again and provide some depth here, and some honesty to the situation.

I was born in Dayton, Ohio. My father is homosexual and has spent the last sixteen years in a relationship with Randy, my step-mother (who is a dude). Growing up, I lived with my mother as my dad was seen as unfit and lost custody of me when I was four. My mother has been married approximately five times over the course of my life and she enrolled me in twelve different schools from kindergarten until the tenth grade across four different states, my dad added a thirteenth where I finished high school back in Dayton, Ohio, and I returned to living with him. It was a fine art magnet school, which I was forced to go to because it was the closest to our house. At the time I found art to be

¹ Beuys in Caroline Tisdall: Joseph Beuys (Guggenheim, 1979)

“lame”, and still do in many ways. In all honesty I don’t know who wouldn’t prefer the first story about my life.

In reality though this kind of upbringing was pretty great for disillusioning a youth. My Dad was smart and quirky and turned every bad situation around on itself, probably to maintain sanity. He took ideas and made them real if only to live in imagination a little longer. He set out on projects such as convincing my mother his parents were actually midgets and trying to teach me everything wrong, so I’d be more interesting to talk to in general. My mother never let me settle down into a school system, or keep friends in any way. We lived in so many places that I couldn’t even remember most of them other than some singular feature, or incident. There were too many schools and new living situations that I doubt anyone could become adjusted in any real manner.

What does this have to do with my work? I never quite learned an idea of the authentic. Reality can just simply be a manipulation of our existence. Kind of like the Allegory of the Cave and Plato.² In the “story” as I like to call it, Socrates, Plato’s teacher is a prisoner in a cave viewing shadows cast on a wall from a fire behind him, and the experience of these shadows becomes reality to any prisoner within the cave. Our experiences can simply be turned into a canvas and displayed to a viewer. If this is true, and it’s a method of thinking I like to operate under, many other rules of art begin to lose their validity to me under these rules of perception.

Why should I have to be the one to make something? Frank Zappa once said that art is just a situation with a frame around it.³ Pretty sure that’s true if I’m going to find it

² Allegory of the Cave, Plato’s The Republic Book VII; Jowett, Benjamin; 1991; Vintage Press

³ Zappa’s actual quote was “The most important thing in art is the frame. For painting: literally; for other arts: figuratively - because, without this humble appliance, you can’t know where The Art stops and The Real World begins. You have to put a “box” around it because otherwise, what is that shit on the wall?” my source for this was <http://thinkexist.com>

interesting. I take situations as they happen to me and re-present them. The idea of whether I made something or whether or not something is art are two questions that I love to hear asked about my work as an artist. I have a hard time seeing the validity in such remarks but at the same time love the fact the questions are asked of me. If I was making something that didn't bring those questions to mind, then I'd probably not be doing something right. As a maker and as an artist, I don't want my audience to think of my work as not challenging. I want it to hurt a little.

Antagonism. In a word it's simply my own mistrust of humanity brought out through my work. What I do can be loud, challenging, and even mean at times. I want the viewer to pay attention to it and at the same time give it its due. The easiest way I know how to accomplish this is to force it onto the viewer. This antagonism is almost an aesthetic feature of my work. It's deeper than just antagonism, but it gets your attention. That punk rock style play I get out of my work also motivates it. There's nothing better than when I've got an audience right where I want them, and I can let the work be in control.

All of these things are integral to my production. It wasn't always this way though. It took a bit of breaking down to realize these things about my process. When I was in undergrad, I wanted to make pretty pictures that weren't pretty pictures. I also found myself more at odds with the format of the class and the structure of projects to the point where I would get an assignment to do something and do the exact opposite. None of this occurred to me as being any sort of working process as I finished undergrad and went to grad school. Not sure how I missed it.

So when I got to graduate school, I was pretty sure I'd just walked into a situation where I'd be expected to be in constant "make" mode. The problem with this is figuring out how I was going to make things honestly for myself and still make what I thought was "art". This strange act of trying to figure out what art was, but more specifically what my art was, became my life for my first year. I thought I understood the format of all of it too. I was supposed to work really hard, making things, then make something huge and write a thesis about it. After that I'd graduate and spend the rest of my career making stuff along the lines of that thesis work, as that would be my shtick in a sense.

I'm glad that I turned out to be very wrong with my initial perception of what all of this was. After an embattled and sleepless first semester, painful critiques with my peers and faculty, I was ready to give up. I tried starting with a clean slate, and even failed there drifting back to old habits just to keep creating. Old habits, old imagery, and dead-ends for myself. The work I made looked like giant tattoos, or seemingly faux-conceptual. It was a piss-poor time for me, but I made a bunch of sweet-ass skull drawings that turned out to pay off. After almost a year in graduate school, I was pretty down, but open to almost any idea. This, despite feeling as though I had failed, had me right where I was supposed to be; I decided I'd do something I'd never attempted before. I decided to make whatever I wanted, not what I thought I was supposed to want.

I started this process by sitting in a critique room during spring break and drawing for three straight days onto post-it notes. Not making anything idealized or nice, just going through the action of "making". Creating for creation's sake. As my friend Frank Travers said upon learning of omelets (yes, just simply omelets) after finishing graduate

school for fine art, “this was a game-changer”.⁴ The analogy of an omelet as being “a game-changer” might not seem to fit, but really it does. Mundane= Universalization.

Makes sense now, stupidity and charisma are one.

I realized the potential of perception while almost meditatively drawing in that room. This work was a method of universalizing of my thoughts and what was working inside of me presented in a raw form. This wall of post-its was something that I wanted, and broke my own ideals of what art should be. It worked; it looked appealing, and at times was hilarious, although completely honest. There was no strict conceptual format and it didn’t necessarily heed to any form of art theory, it was what it was. This was the first thing I liked that I’d made in nearly a year, which made everything that had come before it moot. In a sense I had found my own authenticity. It was a wall of drawings of every thought I’d had over three days, with no filter. Authentic.



“Impulse” (2009)
2200+ 3”x3” Post-it Drawings
22’ x 12’

⁴ Frank Travers; Stella’s Diner; 110 Wolf Street, Syracuse, NY, June 2010 Frank tasted an omelet for the first time in his 26 years never realizing the potential of something so simple as using eggs as a wrapper for other food.

This work had no place in everything I'd made to this point. At the same time I'd struck a chord with myself. The work had made something possible that I'd never imagined, I could work for myself, and not towards a definite end. So where would I go from here? Where would this idea of the authentic come back? What the hell was I supposed to make after that? One of the next projects I embarked on began to backtrack for myself. I immediately went out and tried something I would never have done in an attempt to combine my new found knowledge into print. I decided that I'd take a page from a new friend, Sean StarWars, and take a more humorous route to creating. My project: The NASCAR Jury. I wanted to make a series of 12 NASCAR driver portraits and donate the series to the new NASCAR Hall of Fame being built in North Carolina. I planned on driving them to the museum curators and personally handing them over and getting my photo taken with the curator. This was a project destined to fail.

I created three 48"x36" portraits before realizing my folly though. They were big, annoying, and boring to make. My letters to the curatorial committee of the Hall of Fame were received positively, but they didn't garner much more than that. The curators told me that they would take my prints . . . eventually. After putting in all this work for something bound to fail, I tried to twist the situation into something that did work. I decided that I'd fake it. Even the faking failed though, my model fell through, and I ended up using a semi-homeless guy in a suit who tried to molest my friend Frank while getting dressed. Everything I'd set out to accomplish when this piece started didn't work, even when I tried to cheat it.

What happened though was that I was able to realize a faux situation that I'd masterminded in a sense. I could take my photos of the fake donation, take an altered

letter from the NASCAR Hall of Fame and twist it into something new. My experience of making the work would become the piece. An illustrated failure of sorts; I take a situation that has presented itself, and display it in all of its failing glory. Not to want to seem too dishonest, I decided I'd present it like an honor, but with a letter back to NASCAR telling them of my complete failure. In the end it looks like someone's graduation display, "artifactual" if you will. The prints ended up props in a production that just tells a story. Unrealized conceptual performance or what I like to refer to as "semi-conceptual printmaking."



"Introduction To Disaster" Detail From "NASCAR Justice" (2009)
Photographs and letters
24" x 36"

I learned to let the situation dictate the terms to me and not fight it. This was a big moment for me. Kind of like when Jed Clampett found “Texas Tea” on his property and starting becoming a Beverly Hillbilly⁵. Not knowing the final piece was as integral to this new process of working as making something conceptual. Who wants a one liner? Let it grow organically is my new motto. One issue I had with this new way of working was that all the skills I’d been formulating in art school up to this point were useless. There was no reason to make something pretty because it just fouled the read from an audience. Dennis Oppenheim once said that the best conceptual art is that which is the simplest of ideas executed in the simplest manner possible⁶. I don’t feel like that from most of his work, but I did get that from his performance work, and I really love the motto. Aesthetics should be secondary in nature to the product. To get your ideas across you must present them in the most clear of methods.

There I was beginning my second year of schooling with an epic failure and one work I really liked. Well, I liked them both but for completely different reasons. What I was unaware of was how well they were actually connected. They’re simply two different sides of the same coin when it comes to the idea of “Authenticity”. Maybe I’ll start capitalizing that word so it’s more important from here on out. In my work Authenticity is a tool like a pencil or an eraser. It’s a means to an end, an awesomely powerful tool I use in my process, and in both these pieces something I was trying to achieve, or deceive. They’re both honest works in the same way, but in them I was able to take Authenticity and utilize it as another art tool, and I was really into it.

⁵ From the “Beverly Hillbillies” opening sequence, broadcast on CBS starring Buddy Ebsen from 1963-1971

⁶ *Marks from the Matrix*, R. Finch, V. Rivers, Normal Editions Workshop, Illinois State University College of Fine Arts, Normal, Illinois 2007

How will this fit into the overall art industry? It already does. There's plenty of artists toying with humor and creating situational works but my two favorites are kind of failures in the end. One is J.S.G. Boggs, a currency draughtsman, and semi-performance artist. Boggs hand draws currency (one-sided) spends it at face value convincing shopkeepers and store clerks to accept his art as currency. This isn't the final product which goes into galleries though, He then re-declares these purchased items and receipts as his art and shows this in galleries. His audience then purchases the leftovers and tracks down the physical objects he's made. Talk about taking the idea of authenticity for a walk. He creates a fake, makes it real and sells the results. He's unfortunately in prison in Florida for meth charges of some sort. ⁷ Although at this point he's probably out and hopefully making once again.



J.S.G. Boggs' work

⁷ "Boggs, A Comedy of Values"; Weschler, Lawrence; 1999; University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London

Another great example was the performance artist, Lowell Darling, who through out the 1970's acupunctured American cities to cure their ills, nailed down cities to prevent them from flying off the earth, and created post projects simply by mailing his ideas to those in charge and asking why things couldn't happen the way he wanted. Things such as sending moon rocks back to the moon to balance out the solar system, starting a people zoo where people dressed as animals to prevent animal cruelty and give work to those in need. Antagonism and the Authentic. Darling peaked his career in the California gubernatorial primary of 1978, where he ran as an independent against Jerry Brown, promising things such as Wednesdays off, convicted murderers will have to eat their dead, and slot machine parking meters. He received 2% of the vote and disappeared from art until David Ross pulled him to design the first website for the Whitney Museum in the mid-90's. He's sort of depressive nowadays and considers his art career a failure.⁸



Lowell Darling

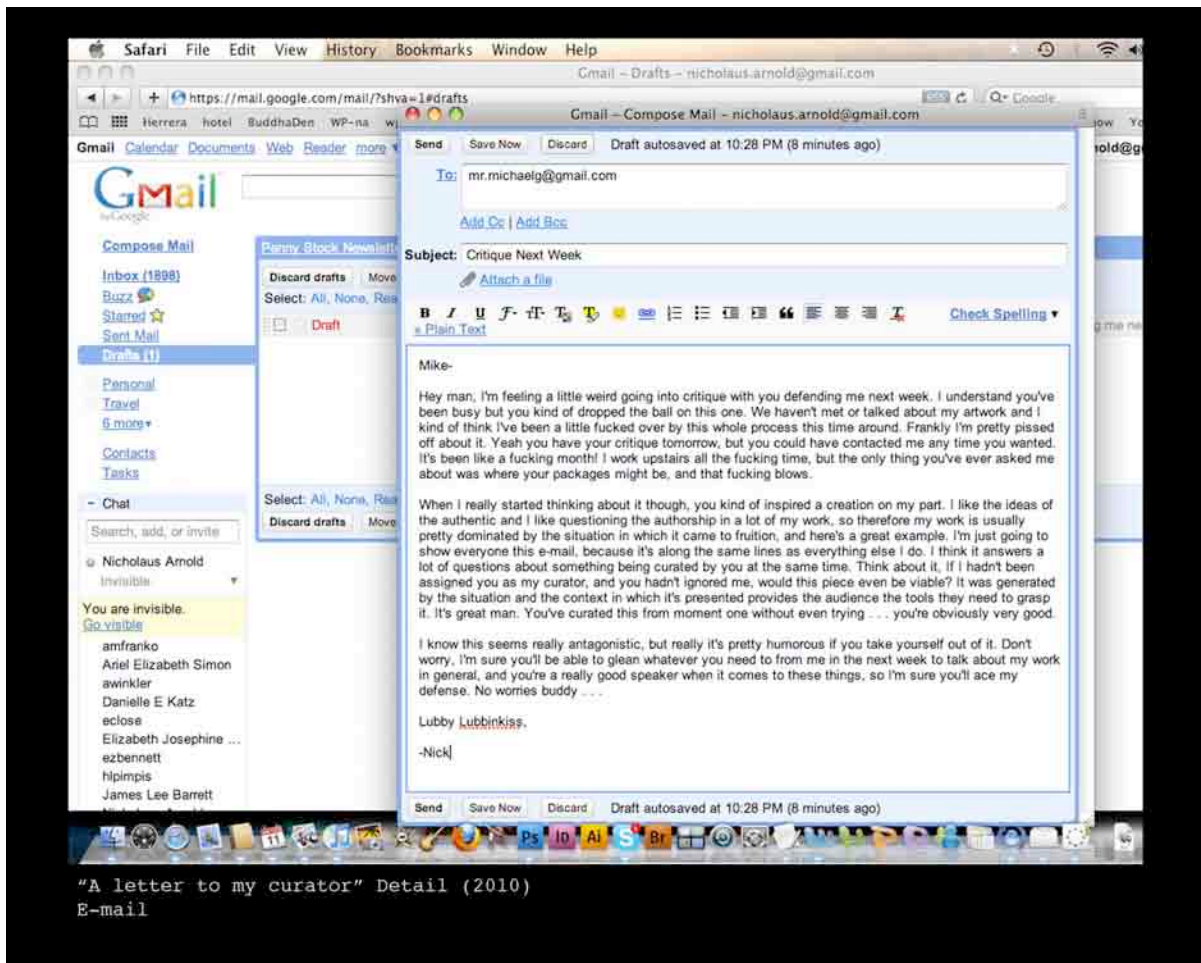
⁸ “One Hand Shaking, A California Campaign Diary”; Darling, Lowell; 1980; HBJ; NY,NY

These two artists both take Authenticity and use it as a tool. Boggs uses it onto itself and Darling in a way that takes it literally at face value and shows how it is failure. Both utilize antagonism to its greatest extent with their respective audiences. If there are two people who probably receive the question “is this art?” from many of their viewers, its probably them. Neither one of these guys works within the traditional bounds of the Art Industry.

I read about Boggs my first year of graduate school and was more into his “where’s the art” part of his work than many of his other ideas. He was basically orchestrating a performance to his audience where they were the performers and he was just an orchestrator. Kind of like a puppeteer he controlled the situation and dictated the terms to his audience and they bought into it. He put the frame on the situation under his own conditions. Beautiful.

At a strange point during my second year I showed a simple screen shot of an e-mail during a critique. The email was to the person who had curated the critique. The curator had no idea what was going to happen, and really neither did I. The contents of the e-mail were situational: He (the curator) was supposed to contact me about the work I was going to show for the crit and the e-mail attested to fact I was pissed that he never did. It created a situation for a closed audience (the class) where they were essentially the performers in a situation I had crafted for them. It was antagonistic and mean to the curator but at the same time the e-mail absolved him of any wrongdoing. My curator took it in a bad direction for himself. Instead of taking the out I had provided (I provided it because I’m not really that mean) he tried to challenge the work in the critique (this is what I’d wanted and did something marvelous). The room was on edge because of his

reaction and fearing how he was going to fully react. The tension, the feeling of not knowing, but being completely understood at the same time by the audience created something more for them. Some described it being inside of a reality television show that was being played out in front of them. It worked, I took antagonism and authenticity and transformed a situation.



Lowell Darling would've probably done the same. His work mostly consists of correspondence where he plays the antagonist and those on the receiving end: the foil. This is one situation where the foil and the antagonist work together (knowingly or

unknowingly) to create a set-up for an audience. It's a familiar tactic used by comedians, such as Andy Kauffman, for performances. This sets up a curious dichotomy for a situation too. Who's making the work if it just starts where the artist flaps their wings and starts a hurricane?

This is the curiosity I like to call "Authorship". I'm going to capitalize this too from here on out, as it's pretty important. Let's face it; you can make a lot more stuff if other people are making it for you. The idea of authorship also comes to mind a lot with thinking of my field of choice: Printmaking. As a print artist, I'm responsible for coming up with the printable matrix, beyond that it's just labor and craftsmanship in many ways. I design the matrix and then get the work done often with assistance on larger projects. That's a standard method of operating in print. I've printed fine art prints for probably twenty other artists in my time, and it's their work. No doubt in my mind, I just participated in its creation. The rest of art despite either its reluctance to admit it, or outright demand of it, works similarly.

The idea that an artist has to be the direct author of the work seems rather antiquated in my mind. Many artists utilize found objects or image appropriation in methods that trigger the questioning of authorship, just look at Duchamp, Warhol, or Shepard Fairey.⁹ All of these artists utilize found or appropriated imagery in the name of art. It's a line to follow and garners attention pretty easily.

When I approach a work, I feel the necessity to expedite its creation before I lose interest in making it. Sometimes this means jumping on an idea as soon as I have it, sometimes it means finding some place online to make it for me. Other times the idea

⁹ "Shepard Fairey Is Not a Crook"; Heller, Steven; Graphic Content, NY Times; April 2009

would just be better if I convince someone else to do it for me, and let me have it. The e-mail is an example of some of that. What happens when you distance yourself from the making/production with the intention of trying to negate your impact on the art you've created? Is it yours any longer? Are you still a maker, or just a designer? I like that kind of "off" attention.

I once created a series of drawings where I induced their production at a Karaoke bar, then took the results and crafted their final product. I called the piece "Blind Bob's Shitty Drawings". They were a series of cocktail napkin drawings that I enlarged to as big as 38"x84". I didn't draw them though, just got people to draw and then made them real big. That way they'd seem more like art. It was another one of those moments where an art school critique declared them "not art" despite my own recognition of the fact they were. The whole whether or not it's art thing; I've gotten that a lot in art school, not something I've ever really understood. In this case it was probably the lack of a definite author of the work, which is why I find the issue of Authorship so fascinating. It's something that even someone not involved in art would see as a direct violation of the trust an artist establishes with his or her audience. When those who are highly educated do not understand it, I feel it's something that probably needs to be addressed. Once again another reason it's so cool.

As my professor Holly Greenberg pointed out on a rough draft of this paper, "If an Artist takes a shit and declares it "art" is it art? If a musician makes a fart and calls it music, is it?"¹⁰ My answers to these kinds of questions are always a resounding YES! The real question is whether or not it's good art. For me these questions legitimize

¹⁰ Greenberg, Holly, Red Pen Margin notes on rough draft of this paper originally titled "Cease and TheSIS"

everyone's practice. I make a lot of stuff that could be considered bad art, and every now and then I hit something that could be considered good. That's where the viewer comes in, and their own perceptions of the work become a qualitative standard. Unfortunately, not every viewer is the same so it makes the whole process a lot more interesting.



Authenticity, Authorship, and Antagonism. These intertwining methods of process can be screwy though. These kinds of thoughts can lead to a bit of circular logic. The kind of thoughts that make introspection and process intertwined. Sometimes I feel that I'm too inside of my own head to make the work I want to. I don't let go of an idea too easily and this can create problems for me. I find myself calling the product of an

actualized work, semi-conceptual as opposed to conceptual as I find that every work I make still has formal attributes, which means I have to split hairs to define it. This can be a bit unnerving.

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Suffice to say I've had my shares of ups and downs in school. I've found that I know the kind of artist I am, and the kind I know I want to be. I want my work to have

¹¹ Syracuse University Health Services, Syracuse, NY 13244

the power of artists like Warhol and Duchamp. I want to be part of a new trend and be where art is going not where its been and stuck. More than anything I want to have a lot of fun doing it. I once walked into the Duchamp room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and actually felt it, that “aura” that’s supposed to be around art. I saw the same things that I’d been trying to do were present in that room. The same criticisms, and the wanting to guide the audience to figure out what was going on, were present as I viewed those works. That grasp that art has, the aura that writers such as Walter Benjamin talked about in those essays regarding mechanical reproduction was actually there for me. I even saw the Brillo boxes by Warhol outside the room. I touched them, because I could. Their rough plywood (I’d always thought they were paper) exterior actually made me feel like I was in a good place for myself . . . and I didn’t get caught by security, bonus.



At Syracuse University, I basically found out what kind of artist I am. I found my process, and I found that by defining myself in that manner I fill in any number of blanks in between my work conceptually and can make anything. I have no overarching conceptual basis other than the fact I am what I am, and will do what I do. I work with any material or situation that interests me at the moment. I need nothing more than what's at hand to create now. I feel liberated as an artist, and will continue to create forever.

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My Brain

