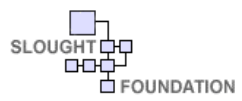

Careers in the Arts (1978)
Steve Benson



Slought Books, Philadelphia

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A Note on the Transcript

I prepared an initial transcript on electric typewriter in 1978 and abandoned it less than halfway through, feeling the result was not publishable and doubting I could learn more from completing the transcript. That transcript identified many but not all voices of audience members by numerical code. The present transcript, based on the original tape recordings, incorporates a thorough revision of the initial transcript, extending it through the entirety of the taped talk.

I deleted many instances of punctuating verbiage, specifically “like,” “you know,” and “uh,” but otherwise attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Elisions in my speech represent relatively lengthy pauses. Elisions in others’ speech usually represent words unintelligible to me. Occasional notes in square brackets describe sounds heard on the tape or offer tentative interpretations of others’ speech.

Speakers I was unable to identify are indicated with an X. Those I feel fairly certain of are indicated by other letters. I take full responsibility for any misattributions and faulty quotation due to errors of transcription, and I welcome corrections from those involved. Acknowledging the risk of wrongful identifications, I offer the following key as a tentative index to speakers on the tape:

S.B.

A	Steve Benson	K	Kit Robinson
B	Stephen Rodefer	L	David Highsmith
C	Artie Gold	M	Carla Harryman
D	Ron Silliman	N	Rae Armantrout
E	Barrett Watten	O	Bill Graves
F	Lewis MacAdams	P	Geoff Young
G	Bob Perelman	Q	Melissa Riley
H	Jock Reynolds	R	Stephen Vincent
I	Jill Scott	S	Ted Pearson
J	Francie Shaw	T	Keith Shein

CAREERS IN THE ARTS

Transcript of a talk by Steve Benson in the *Talks* series curated by Bob Perelman at 80 Langton Gallery in San Francisco, 02-16-1978

Transcription by Steve Benson, original draft 1978, revised and completed 2003

A

[Sound of cards being shuffled] The basic format will be—in all these talks, probably—but certainly in tonight's talk—that we'll have a sort of a *formal* talk in which the talker will talk, like I will *talk*, and so, I've planned some. Then there will be a [Sound of cards being shuffled] say a question-and-answer or a kind of discussion period at the end. [Laughter in the group] The way— So there'd be a break in between and that would be long enough so that you could go out for beer, or whatever people go out for. [Repeated shuffling continues through this part.]

In the first part of the talk I will make a lot of statements, and I will not *encourage* you probably in any way that you'll notice to speak back. But you may want to speak back, or you may just want to speak out, and if you do, that's okay. Y'see, it varies from time to time, but if you want to talk, just go right ahead, and I may pause to let you say what you want to say, and I may respond to you or I may not, or I may just talk on at the same time. And that doesn't mean that you shouldn't finish your statement. But if you have something to say— and I may just pause even if you don't speak. It's not necessarily to be taken as encouragement that you ought to speak. But (*very quietly, as if speaking to myself*) I'd be glad if you did.

In the second part, I probably won't say anything unless you talk. [Last of the shuffling, pause.]

Some of my statements may seem metaphysical to you, because they aren't clearly relevant to your situation. Some of my statements are made just for you to hear.

Somebody who's working out their career as an artist is going to need to get support from other people, it seems, to be— He has to know that people notice what he's doing, and yet he also seems to need to defend himself against other people second-guessing what he's going to do, or other people telling other people what he's going to do that's not really what he *is going* to do.

A *career* in the arts, I don't really take to mean a career in terms of how am I going to make money and achieve financial success through working as an artist. A career, as I understand it, is a lifelong pursuit in which you have something that you want to do, which is to make art, and you know that you don't—you know that you want to do it at this moment and so you're doing it, but you also know that you want to . . . be . . . You want to recognize that you've done that before and you want to recognize that you will be doing that some more, and you don't want to limit that, in any way. So, you have a career in the arts and you know that it's going to go on. And . . . or you may not. But *I've* decided, and that's part of why I decided to do this talk, I decided that I had a career in the arts and that was a fairly recent decision, like maybe about six months ago. And that, it was important to me to . . . know that.

And I became very aware of *other* people having careers in the arts too. And that, say, I was going to be a writer and I was going to keep doing that. It seems like how I make my career work is largely what I happen to be doing at the moment and so it's entirely unpredictable. But it also seems to have a lot to do with who the people are who I am working with. For instance *you* are here and we're talking. And . . . [Long pause, mumbling in the audience] . . . “among other things,” right. So some people *aren't* talking, who are here.

Anyway, all that really has a lot to do with what *my work* as an artist is going to be, and not just in the next one minute, but through the rest of the evening, and also next year, or like, this will be an event that's going to be referred back to, and the people who are here are the community of people who will have a certain kind of report about that, that will be extended through people who aren't here. And what I *do*, is

largely a function of who you are, and what *you're* doing, and how you take it. And I wouldn't be doing it if you weren't here.

If I . . . And I *chose* this audience, pretty deliberately. And choosing this audience was part of the choice to do a talk on this topic. And the audience that I have identified with since I have been working here in the last year or so in San Francisco has been an audience, most centrally of writers who are identified loosely as 'language-centered' or something, or as eggheads, or as coordinated with *Hills* magazine and *This* magazine, and more diffusely of friends and other people who are interested, and of people who are involved in performance art, or the College of Interdisciplinary Arts at San Francisco State. And those are the main contacts that I have had, and those have been who I've worked with.

Now I might have chosen to work in another direction. But how could I?

But still I think, if I really worked on my work in a different way and aimed towards an audience that is loosely identified with punk poetry, which at one time seemed much more sensible to me, or if I worked towards an audience of gay writers, and gay people as an audience, that would make my work much different. And I miss those people, but I didn't ask them to be here tonight. As a bloc, as a community, and yet the community that I've asked to be here is you, and you're somewhat diffuse and would to some degree include some of those categories. Feminist writing or something like that would be another thing, and I wonder how I limit myself by who I choose to talk to. And so that, that's one of the problems.

They either like me, or they need more time.

The crux is what happens *in* it, not a thesis or a position. The texture, not the deductive or inductive curse of one-track minds. One truth does not displace another. . . . In other words it doesn't matter what you *think* about it.

This situation is, right now, falling apart. . . . And that's largely what I'm here for. [Laughter from audience]

The work completed, doesn't leave me with the sense that I had intended, I don't feel the way I wanted to feel once the thing is done. And at the same time I don't feel in harmony with my public in the ways that *they* are disappointed in what I did.

There's an impulse to save everything that I do. To tuck it away, to keep everything that I do. . . . So I thought about, there is an article in a current slick magazine about how to hide everything in your house, and I wondered about trying to hide things so that I wouldn't be able to find them again. Which I think is what having ideas is. . . .

If I have an idea about something I might do, or if I think of something, I latch onto it, I want it, and it's because suddenly I attach a value to it. Like, *that's* a thing that I was looking for. So I want to have that. And having done that, makes me— That's like putting it away, and I never find it the same way again. Unless it's actually at a time that I'm making an artwork that's going to *stay* for a long time. Otherwise—and even then, it's sort of like, well, can you find it or can't you find it, I'm not sure.

But I feel like I lose things as soon as I recognize the value of them. I forget about them and I don't remember the things that I thought of that I thought were so good. And so I'm coming to— It's sort of an act of resignation to think that I've been hiding these things in my house—my psychic house or something—that I won't be able to find again, through the act of grasping them, but they're tucked away there. And maybe I will run across them again.

X

Do you look at your ideas as formulations or as discoveries of things you had?

A

Well, I don't make that distinction.

One of my principles has been to get on good terms with embarrassment. And I've received a lot of encouragement. [Laughter from audience]

Thus the superior man when he stands alone is unconcerned, and if he has to renounce the world, he is undaunted.

Or like getting in over my head, it seems like, if it's not necessarily a good first step, it's a good place to expect to end up.

B
Are these particulars of your career or reservations about your career?

A
I don't make that distinction.

C
You can ignore some of these questions.

A
I can ignore some of these file cards too.

So thinking about getting in over my head and thinking about time passing and that I get older and I change, and wondering, what's right going to happen next and what's right going to happen next— Am I going to— Does the metabolism slow down? Am I going to become more dependent on what people think of me? Am I going to become more concerned with whether the work gets over or not? Can I possibly get more concerned about that? And what was the tail of this thought? . . .

I don't really think that it's possible to prepare for the future in that way.

What Thoreau says is, "What was enthusiasm in the younger man must become temperament in the older man." So it suggests that what I'm all keyed up about doing right now would just sort of become the thing that I would continue to do when I grow older and that would just be the way I would work, as an integrity that I would adopt or something. I find it very frustrating to imagine not having enthusiasm. So that makes me feel like I have reservations about maturing. What does the word 'mature' mean, to me? What does it mean in the culture in which we live? Am I mature? I don't like it.

X
It means everybody else is getting older.

X
It means you can be trusted.

A
So it seems like a central feeling that I had was that there was a need going around to feel that there was a value in the work that a person's doing as an artist, and that you're never getting as much credit or enthusiasm back on your work as you feel you need in order to have it really appreciated as much as what you see in it. And that I feel as though there is a strong desire to pick up roles associated with art-work itself in order to accrue more value to the work. Some of those roles might be financial, to make more money by some sort of side effect of one's work, like publishing poetry with a house that would pay you a large royalty rather than a house that can't pay you very much will make one's work seem more valuable, or getting a position as a curator or art administrator or a teacher would seem to make being an artist seem like a more substantial and continuous and socially acceptable, respectable position to be in. I have felt that I wanted a role that people would look at me and respect me for. And then I got very angry at myself about that.

Artists sometimes choose a professional role in handling art in order to modify the position of artists as workers in society. In other words, to see that artists get better pay, that they're more respected or understood, that they get better legal protection. This is an integrationist approach to the political-economic system, as it presently stands. It would seem to be counter-revolutionary.

To be making art is a way of pleasing myself by being with myself and paying attention to myself. It's a way of satisfying others and getting in touch with others, by being with myself and paying attention to myself, and somehow knowing in the back of my head that others are there, that others are present as part of the medium that I'm working with.

How do I know that they're there?

I know that they're there because I am making a space for them to exist with what I'm doing.

They—the ideal would seem to be to have other people being there so that they're present to what I'm doing, they—but they don't identify with it, they don't think, "Well, that's me," and then they also, they're not there in a way that I have to respond to how they have reacted. I just have to respond to how they *do* react, in the moment that I'm working, and . . .

The word "you" in writing seems very powerful because it—I always, when I read "you" in a poem I always read it as *me*, I think that that's speaking to me, as a person, and I often have to be corrected about that, and I have to learn that "you" is fictional, in writing. And I wonder how it is in other arts. I can feel troubled right now because I'm straddling a really awkward fence between doing an artwork and just talking to people who are really here.

The decision to be an artist will be passive, as though un-, almost, not thought out or not planned, if I'm just doing it without other people reading what I do or looking at my paintings or telling me anything about myself. It's active when I do have reinforcement from other people. Then I say, "I am an artist," or "I'm making art-work." For instance, it gets down to reading Wordsworth will make me know that I'm an artist, because I'm getting reinforcement on my work.

The word "talent" has come up a lot, in questionnaires, and it seemed to me like talent was not an issue, and that talent was really just deciding that you're going to do something and not being wrong about doing it, on a very local level. For that reason talent and luck are often spoken of in the same breath.

What do I wear? How do I look?

The more that one works as an artist, the more work that I do, the more I seem to recognize that assumptions that I would have that I've grown up with, that I've been fed on, about how to succeed or how to attract attention to myself or what is going to be valued, what is going to be useful to my own work, the more that those assumptions seem to become invalid, or they just disappear.

So I want to know about how we relate to each other about being artists and what kind of support there is in the community that we are all doing this work and we somehow are interested in each other and curious about what we're doing.

Do we . . . Do we know what's happening to the other person? If somebody is feeling very bad about their work, what do you—how do you relate to that? It seems there's no way to relate to that directly. It's harder than relating to somebody about how they feel about almost anything else.

And, by the same token it seems very hard to criticize people. I feel like we criticize each other very little, and give each other very little negative feedback on what we're doing. To me that's a terrible thing.

And I feel like criticism and negative feedback is among the most imp—it's what I almost live for in making the work, in some ways. I need to know what people feel has affected them, and if they feel inhibited about the terms of responding negatively then I feel like, then I feel like there's this horrible problem in how to deal with it. And yet we tend to go into things and think so much in terms of, well, either I liked it or didn't like it, or it was worth going to or it wasn't worth going to, or it should have been more this way or it shouldn't have happened at all.

And it seems very hard to—it seems like if one wants response to one's work then one has to go out and one has to ask a lot of people very forcefully, "What did you think about it?" and to somehow very, somehow extremely diplomatically allow people to respond in a negative way, allow them to be—allow them to make it difficult for you, because often we're so inclined to resolve things and make things nice.

And I sometimes wonder how much that would be part of the background of being an artist, to sort of correct the world or to make a better place, to make things resolve themselves, to make things where everything is accounted for, to make things where the work works out and things are taken care of. And I feel like often that's our approach to each other's work, is, if something was wrong and you can't make it any better, to somehow gloss over it, deal as though it didn't happen or something.

D

Don't you think that negative reactions could be as arch and social as positive ones?

A

Yeah, yeah. So that to me is part of the larger, extended aspect of the work, which is something that I'm really concerned with, is not just the work that's local to the particular object, but the work that's in the object's place in its culture or in its audience or in its larger situation. So I feel that I and a lot of us will create works so as to somehow discount criticism and also to discount—well, in some ways to foster and in some ways to discount the kind of charming or charmed responses that people will make to what we do.

E

Do you think you could make a work that everybody could respond to?

A

No, I don't think of that.

E

Would you like to try?

A

What? Do I think I ought to think of that?

E

Would you like to try?

A

No. No, I don't think so.

E

Well, do you think anybody that we know is trying? I mean, isn't that what you just said?

A

I think that we do try a lot to make work so that we on the one hand will know what the response is so that we can predict it and figure it out and on the other hand we are making work sometimes so that the response will be unpredictable and unknowable, and that's another kind of second-guessing. A lot of the work that I do will be work where I do it deliberately not to know how it's going to end up, not to know how it's going to round off, or be finished, and I do it so that I don't know how different people are going to take it, and I'm curious about how they're going to take it. And I'm a little suspicious of that in myself because I think that *that* is kind of accounting for in almost discounting people's responses or evaluations of what I do.

X

[Scarcely audible on recording, except isolated phrases]

A

No, you can't know.

X

[Continued, including "*no idea* what I'm looking at"]

A

Well, you have, I mean, if I'm thinking about something when I'm making work I think other people might follow some of my thoughts that were in this, right? So that's a start, in terms of other people having thoughts about what I'm doing, and it would be pretty bizarre and pretty nonsensical to do work in which I thought other people's take on it would have nothing to do with what my take on it was.

X

[. . . someone looks at whatever you . . . sum it up . . . follow some thought . . . communication with the world . . .]

A

Somebody said that it's like if you were playing soccer trying to place the ball in a certain position so that the striker, if he came along at the right moment, would see it and be able to make the goal from that position

and would recognize your intention of passing the ball to him. So you're aiming the work. So you're aiming and he might miss, or he might, in fact, then he has the goalie to contend with and that varies the reaction, and his own sense of timing and he might want to pass it to somebody else, usually happens.

So I think about what the present situation is and how that fits into the work that I'm doing. I think of works and even categorize them in terms of in what way or how much they take into account the relationship to audience and who is going to experience them and who is going to read them and who is going to listen to them.

C

Does it bother you that someone else might get something you're working on with that's inobvious in a partial sense? They might not exactly misconstrue it but the best they might sorta interpret it would be eighty per cent, is that okay?

A

No, that's great, that's great. I mean I'm trying to set up a situation for an experience and I think that's what most everybody is trying to do.

F

Has your audience changed?

A

Yeah. Well, it started out that they were all sitting—you mean tonight, or . . . ? [Laughter in the group] Yeah. My audience has gotten a lot bigger. [Laughter in the group]

X

Tonight?

A

Tonight I mean it's fluctuated but it's about the same.

E

It's not your audience.

A

What do you mean by that?

E

Well, actually I mean that, I don't think it's your audience. It's a rotating one.

X

We're here, but we're not yours.

A

Right.

X

Didja come for the context?

A

Did I?

X

No, did they? The audience that's here.

A

Did *they* come for the context?

D

They came for their careers.

X

[. . .] those cards [. . .]

X

What's the audience's role in art?

X

[. . .] word for that.

A

Obviously that seems to be an element in what I'm saying—Am I—as though me or maybe artists in general have a pretty manipulative attitude. Just for starters, you're manipulating materials, words, paint or something, and maybe in total playfulness or totally in the expectation that you're never going to show it to anybody, but still you're working with this stuff and pushing it around and showing some sort of mastery over it. And then the more that you become aware of who other people are and how they're going to react, the more that you're aware of that playfulness or else sort of control extending out into the audience. So I don't know if the audience's role is just what the artist does with it and how he manipulates it, or if it's something else. Like, does the audience have a will of its own, or is it just something that various wills are submerged in and will express themselves by belonging to or flaking off of?

C

As your audience gets bigger, as your audience grows, there's going to be critics running interference on your work, so there's going to be a phase change, in how you're seeing it. Right now it's pretty much on a one-to-one correspondence.

G

Isn't there a kind of tension—I think it's happening tonight and it's a bit of a microcosm of what, or a macrocosm of what we all face individually, and that is, between, on the one hand there's the sort of horizontal plane of 'the audience,' which extends out infinitely, and you can hope to reach like Muhammad Ali, like he's the most well-known human on earth or something, you can hope for that if that's what you want, and on the other hand there is actually what you, lost—you know, your work, so these cards, for instance, now if you really wanted to hash out all the differences everybody might feel with the cards, that would be the talk, but on the other hand there's the vertical dimension, there's all those cards there. Since ten take forty-five minutes to get through and there's three hundred, don't you think, in one's life, isn't that what *Careers in the Arts*—I mean, talking about art, how do you *do* art given the limited economy of your life, I mean literal hours that you have? Doesn't that totally efface the audience as a determining factor? What are you going to do with the six hundred thoughts you're thinking between words or with those three hundred remaining cards? Do you see that other dimension? As opposed to the pop sociological one, there's the straight fact of the possibilities not yet realized.

A

I'm confused about what you're saying. Are you pointing out partly that the fact of relating to one's own body time and to other people being there are parts of what both fleshes the work out and makes it limited? In terms of how much can be done?

G

It *limits* it; it doesn't necessarily make the work limited, it *limits* it. No, I was just trying to say that the plane of the audience, the writer and then the *others*, there's nothing entirely *other* than that stuff. I just wanted to bring it up. I just saw your cards, and I was thinking. . . .

H

I'm curious why you chose to shuffle all the cards after doing all that work preparing your material. Are you interested in chance or are you ambivalent about organizing and presenting what you wrote down?

A

Yeah, I'm ambivalent about it, and I want to be—So there's a dimension of what's happening. I want to be in touch with organizing what happens at the moment that it's happening, so part of that is playing a card or passing on it, but another part is having the cards in an unpredictable order so that I'll have to attend to them at the moment it's happening.

H

How does that relate to what you said earlier about working with embarrassment and how does that relate to what you said about negative feedback? In other words, is the implication of presenting work in an awkward situation where you are sure to provoke embarrassment and sure to produce negative feedback a structure with which you want to work, or should we have all come here expecting we were going to sit down and tell us pretty straight out what your experiences were and ideas about career in the arts had been in a fairly linear and succinct manner? [Laughter in audience]

D

It's a very negative point of view. He's defining it in a very negative. . . .

A

I am?

D

No, he is.

A

In terms of planning this talk, somehow I wanted to plan it without my own success or failure as being on the line, and without knowing whether I was going to succeed or fail in what I was doing. So that's—I hadn't even realized that, but I think that that's true. What?

D

[. . .] have an investment in either of those two conditions.

A

What's my investment?

D

You have an investment, for example, in having it be a success, i.e., going into a space and facing that as a task and as a means to, like, you know, self-transformation in a public space, from which you would then proceed to come out therefore enhanced, right? And your audience might be larger, and your career. . . .

A

And that I would feel like I took care of something for myself. That as much as anything. And to the degree that I'm working for the people here, that together something has been said or done that will alter the conditions in which we live a little bit.

E

Don't you feel also that lack of response or articulation from the people around you makes you want to do something that would be bad? So that you [. . .] do your work?

X

What?

A

I don't think that I really predict that people are not going to respond or not going to do that, and if from time to—

E

[. . .] innocent. [Laughter in audience]

A

I really, I feel like I don't want to do something bad.

I

So how much responsibility do you feel to any given audience?

A

Right now I feel like I'm responsible to be making decisions when I'm with an audience, and that's both in advance and at the time that I'm doing—

[lapse in tape continuity]

H

—probably the normal way, I don't know how you worked in the past, but most writers write, finish it there on the page, and it's that kind of commitment to what's on the page and it's done, and it seems to me that you're interested at least the way you're working tonight in not being tied to that kind of It's-done-it's-on-the-page-it's-completed, but leaving the parameters of the situation open to that kind of improvisation. The things I asked about embarrassment and chance and ambivalence really centered on that as a working structure more than anything else. I'm not trying to be critical of it. It all really to me has implications as to, if you are going to improvise, at what point is a great jazz improviser interesting and at what point does a person have to work for that as a structure to get so that when they do go in front of an audience what they do with that way of work is interesting? At what point is that indulgent? At what point should they work that out to *some* degree of proficiency before that happens? I don't know if you want to tackle that or if that makes sense to you.

A

I feel like my work has always been improvisatory so I don't think that's an unusual thing for me. I am— Right now I don't establish a skill or a structure that's going to be reliable in advance. That's part of the work that I'm doing, right now, and yet, on the other hand, it's like, working in order to—like this is practice, in a way. That to me is the ultimate put-down of the audience, I think that's why I made that face. "I'm using you" or something. Which is weird to notice.

But I don't really, . . . I don't at the moment trust in a certain no— Like, I don't want to know what I'm doing in advance in terms of improvising, and I don't want to have some structure where I'll have it all set up. I don't know, I feel sort of *hot* when I say that, as though it's not defined and it's not explained.

C

Would it bother you if you didn't finish that pile [of file cards] tonight? Do you have a sense of that as this all goes on?

A

No, that's not—

C

Are we still on the cards, or has that stopped, are we always—?

A

We're not always on a card. [Laughter in audience] What, did I make you insecure to be unsure?

C

No, I was just wondering if it made *you* insecure.

I

Can Jock ask the last part of that question again, and you try to answer? At what point. . . do you start to improvise a little bit—

H

The point I was trying to make, is, there are a lot of things as a visual artist I do alone in my studio that I don't bother to show anyone else. There's a lot of improvisation with materials, working things out, whether it's fitting them together and tearing them apart, or painting them or doing any number of numerous kinds of manipulations of material, and there are certain points at which for whatever reasons it all happens it seems to be resolved into form or shape or idea or a number of things, and well, I'm going to keep some of these and they start getting organized into a piece of sculpture or a number of ideas come together into an installation or things happen to lead to a performance, whatever it might be, and yet it seems to me that clearly a lot of that activity isn't the kind of activity that I feel worthwhile to share or introduce to an audience, it's just stuff that I feel I need to work out. That's not to say that some of it wouldn't be interesting for people to observe, but I don't feel at some level it's important or that I would want to call people in from all points in the Bay Area to observe that part of my activity. The thing about improvisation as a working structure, is it seems to me that, if I were to work that way, I would like to get to a certain point of capability with that structure, before I would want an audience to come in. That's not to say that that isn't different for every person or that you don't need some kind of feedback or some audience exposure to get good at that. There's all sorts of classic analogies of people that start as comedians in clubs who fail a million times and work their way up in order to handle all that timing and ad-libbing and stuff you need to do. The sense in which you talk about using us, I don't ultimately think that's bad. I think at some point you need to use a few friends or use someone to get a reaction, if you want to work with improvisation. You're not going to be able to entirely use just yourself to be the gauge, you seem to be talking about that. . . .

D

Aren't you trying to impose a really heavy front-stage back-stage definition? I have the sense of a sort of a Goffmanesque semanticization of what the art of performance or a work might be, with the idea of 'back in the laboratory' possibility versus the [unintelligible] possibility. For example in your work 'Hospital,' I knew that 'Hospital' had gone through a number of changes and might actually at that point would go through more changes, and I only saw it once so I have no idea whether or not I saw the finished work or a working model, in *those* terms. And I have the sense that actually even when we try to impose those kinds of formal distinctions—for example, I write texts and I don't see myself as a performance artist, but nevertheless, I see an awful lot of that backstage material constantly leaking in no matter how hard I want to get it out, and I see Steve on the other hand as very much interested in bringing it all along with him, for everybody to see and chew on.

E

Yeah and that comes down to *your* responsibility. You're putting out this critical trip, and why don't you want Steve to talk? What's the problem here?

H

I have no plan.

E

Yeah. That's good.

X

[Questioning how many people enjoying something might make it worthwhile—?]

X

What is the structure of the cards?

A

It's just a deck of cards.

X

Do they relate to the questionnaires at all?

A

Yeah, some of 'em.

X

Do the other ones relate to something else, or—

X

What's the questionnaire?

A

Oh, I sent out a questionnaire as part of preparation for this talk to about 50 people and asked them to answer questions on this subject, very broad questions, so I got a lot of different kinds of answers, and some of those answers I used to develop ideas for these cards or copy terms onto these cards, but that was just some input into the thing, and other things were things I thought of saying.

X

Why did you define it as a topic about career and the arts, which to me intimates something to do with economics and lifestyle?

A

It has something to do with those, and something to do with other things. But—I wouldn't limit the word career to economics, it's like, a career is something that you're going to be doing a long time, and that you're going to improve or try to develop it to a point where you are satisfied in it and that you are doing it and that it goes on, an ongoing pursuit, is how I would define career. Career in this culture has a lot of associations with social structures and roles and finances, and so that's important, because this pursuit of being an artist seems to draw that out in a lot of us, to worry about that.

X

How about career in terms of vocation, the Catholic's calling,—

X

Commitment.

X

To art, art in itself.

X

—dedication.

X

... and bricklaying. Apply the word commitment to art and bricklaying.

X

Some bricklayers. . .

A

It seems like it's a different kind of thing from that and in that way it's not on a financial basis, as much as bricklaying is likely to be. Bricklaying is sort of inherited through maybe class or maybe a certain guild mentality or something, whereas art for me has a lot of associations, especially for me, that seem to me to have a sort of spiritual or mystical import. And when I think of my white cards with their black signals printed on them right now that's part of what I think is going on in putting this talk together. I had a lot of very strong images and feelings about what being an artist was that had something to do with self-transcendence or self-improvement or being very developing a sense of power and freedom over my own life and so forth, and that it has been very valuable to me to plan to *do* something about that, so that Jim's comment to me earlier about this event as a graduation seems pertinent to me, and that's how I hook it in with what Jock was saying, that . . . it doesn't—the fact that this is, if this is failing as a performance piece or even as an exercise in satisfactorily entertaining an audience, that *may* be just what I need, it certainly is not a failure in terms of what I want to do, tonight. I wonder if what I want is to separate artwork from work that I do for myself. I mean there's— [grimace-sounds]

X

. . . art and society . . . revolutionary things. . . do you have any idea about as a humanizing . . .

A

Yeah. I think that what art does when it's good is that it, and it's entertaining because it makes us more conscious and it makes us able to participate more consciously in what we know and what we are knowing, and so it flexes muscles or it leads to discoveries and things like that, and I think that that's humanizing and extremely valuable, and I think that, for those reasons I tend to proselytize a lot about it and think that it's important. At the same time, thinking that the role of the artist in society should be something more prominent and more accepted and recognized as a significant category that all people involved in the total culture should recognize and respect, seems like it is going to lead to roles for the artist that will be integrationist, that won't necessarily make the artist a part of the matrix of social economic political functions, which keeps things the way that they are.

X

. . . wonder about the lines of communication . . . relationship. I think the society could benefit much *more* from action . . . what you're saying leads me to believe . . .

A

Well, to me, then we're in a question about audience again and about an artist trying to develop a sense of audience and to make that important and to make himself herself valuable to the culture for *their* good, rather than for his own good.

X

Can you separate the difference between the audience and the artist? In terms of being better for them and not for the audience. The artist a suffering person that can't—

H

How about an audience of artists?

X

How about some more *cards*?

X

Yeah.

X

How many cards did we actually cover that you haven't covered yet?

A

About 80% are left.

E

[Unintelligible]

A

It's hard not to get sidetracked. [Laughter in audience]

D

Isn't that the form?

A

Yeah, right right right, but I feel I had something to say back there. Okay, yeah, that I do, that I do—about the artist and audience and can you separate them? Because it seems to me like, what happens in making work itself is that they're not separated, in actually doing the work they're not separated. To the degree that you are with the audience whether you're sitting still writing or painting or something or whether you're

working as a performer, that when the work is really creative and really happening then there's not a distinction between them.

On the other hand it seems like there's some kinds of—planning to put yourself in certain places, which is business of art, and there's some kinds of how you deal with being the same—right there with your audience, that will lead to making to like being somewhat taken over, co-opted by your audience, losing some of your original impulses, some of your original choices, options and decisions.

So I feel wary of, um, wary of audience, wary of the world that I in a way like I'm quite involved with and quite identifying with when I'm working . . . sort of unconsciously influencing my moves. And it seems like art that's bent on improving society, even revolutionary art, art that's bent on making other people more conscious, is like going to be very much absorbed in what other people want and what other people are ready so far to take care of and pay attention to. So that, to me, it leads me to look at an audience that I'm going to identify with in my own apprehensions about that and in my own wishes to make my own decisions. So that's likely to be an audience of artists, because that's how I think of artists.

So an audience of artists isn't a choice that I make because that's who I want to reach so much as—it's almost as though that's who I trust or something. In a way it's like choosing one's tribe, I think.

D

What about people who don't know you, who know your work and have an idea of you are from your work? I mean I know people who actually know your work who I expect don't know you or you wouldn't know them. I mean what do you think about those people who go around in their worlds with a place right in their conceptual map for a Steve Benson, and is he a good or a bad Steve Benson that's a very specific locale, that's doing things to them and that they in turn are doing things with. How do you relate to those existent but not present people? Especially since that's a group of people you're going to be dealing with more and more.

A

Yeah, I'm really fascinated with them. They're like fantasy people to me. It's like, it's as though they're some kind of tribe, or—no, forget that word, but some sort of little elfin population of others. They're elfin because they're so very partial, they're so very slight, because the only intersection between me and them is like what they've heard of me or what they've seen of me when I was 'on' as a public figure or something. And I really wonder about them a lot. But I wonder about them not so much who they are, I only wonder about them inasmuch as I'm in them, and what it's like for them to have me inside of them, to have me as being a part of them, in that way. Seems—

X

Claustrophobic.

A

—very strange. Claustrophobic to them, or to me?

X

I don't know. It's usually difficult . . .

A

Well, because they're only fantasy people to me, it's not claustrophobic. And it's like they are one definition that I can have of my audience that I can feel very playful with, because they're like little children who come out in the woods when the adults aren't around, and they just populate my imagination almost.

E

Do you think you're really really serious thinking about your audience, because I really wonder about the way you use, I mean it seems incredibly glib. I can't even believe you're saying something like this about your audience. I mean I can't even believe for a minute, in the way you're only giving yourself permission to use the terms as a kind of artifice, temporary world that you're trying to make out of this nonexistent problem of a career in the arts. Maybe it *is* a nonexistent problem, would like to hear something solid and defined, but it seems like we're tending away from . . . it could be anything really. Careers in the arts becomes like inside the artist becomes whatever structure just exists in the apprehension of it. I don't think that's what you intend, right? I think that the utopianism of your cards means that you have another idea.

A

Well, I think that, where I read you that I agree with you is that I, I do want, I think that there is something of wanting to just chuck this idea or problem of the audience and to work on my own, and when I focus on this event as something like graduation, it's as though like I'm surrounding myself with all these old playmates or something before I get rid of them.

E

Yeah but you're not really serious about that, I don't really take you seriously. I'm not going to treat you any differently. I don't believe that you've graduated.

A

Oh yeah.

E

You certainly don't think that you've graduated.

X

I think that you're trying to resolve the issue of art in your life all at once. After point L or point M whatever point this is in your life, art will no longer be an issue, it will become a latent fact, like gravity. [laughter in audience] And thereafter you won't have to deal with what art is and what's society's relationship to art and what's your relationship to society to art and in reaction I think you're trying to—objective statement that you're trying to resolve this all for yourself and possibly for your audience, parts of the audience or parts of this question. Could that be?

A

(dreamily) Yeah . . . yeah

I mean in fact it does seem like I do have a glib attitude towards a lot of these problems that I'm making up, and I just like pontificating, a little bit, and that—and I don't even take that very seriously, and I'm— And that in fact when I'm doing work I will be like very playful and assured about these things, and like, they're not really such monsters or problems or something as I'm making out.

And a lot of what originally caused me to do it was a certain—a recognition that I was being around people who are artists a whole lot of the time, maybe like a lot of the time, or maybe too much of the time, and my sense of my value has been getting very much identified with doing that work and being recognized for that work, and that I make relationships better with people who are artists and have that kind of involvement, and I wondered about ways in which I was limiting myself, or feeling kind of claustrophobic in my social life and in my self-image from really over-identifying with that role, and in that way it's a pretty serious thing. And so part of this maybe has been wanting to know if other people do that too? Is that something that many people here share the experience of, or is that a personal problem that I have?

X

Do you want an answer to that?

X

Who's an artist? Hitler was an artist. Is he one of the people that you could talk to?

A

No, that doesn't make any sense to me.

X

You said artist. Most people would say painters are artists. One time he was a painter.

A

But I don't know him, and he's not an artist to me, you know, so that really doesn't figure.

X

What is an artist to you? Whole system of values

A

Where is your question coming from?

X

My question is coming from your statement that the audience you feel comfortable with are artists, and that's who you want to have as your audience, that's who you care about, that's who you talk to, so who's an artist? What makes an artist?

A

What makes an artist is somebody who does that kind of thing as an ongoing thing and to me feels that they're doing it with imagination in a way that I can identify with their energy in doing it.

X

So it's completely subjective as far as you're concerned.

A

I am concerned, and it is subjective, yeah.

X

Well, everybody is creative, imaginative—

A

Yeah, sure.

X

Every computer programmer has to use his creativity and imagination in order to produce—

A

Well I don't have any basic antagonism toward people just because they're computer programmers or just because they think that they're not artists. Sure I agree.

D

Aren't you asking Steve to define his forms, like daydreaming in the bathtub—

X

I don't see anything serious about anything he's said at all, yet, except his initial questionnaire, the title of it, or, more or less, that's the only thing that brought me here tonight.

J

Well maybe you wanted him to talk about something other than what he wanted to talk about—

X

Definitely . . . definitely . . .

J

—but that's not within your realm, you're not the person to talk and define the subject. If he's not talking about that subject, what's that got with it?

A

In other words you wanted more like about the economic and political—

X

I thought you were going to talk about real life, not . . . bullshit

X

Come on!!

J

He *is* talking about something real.

X

He's talking about something *real*. That's true. Everything is real. But something that's real life to me.

X

... What is real anyway? [Laughter in audience]

X

... analogy for all this.

D

Isn't your question somewhat of a false one, Steve, about whether or not it's a problem you have or not a problem you have? Isn't it actually like if you were in Spokane, right?, or any of 5000 other places in the country, the situation would be that you would be seeking out friends in exactly the same way that you're still seeking out friends and getting those kinds of feedback that you're getting, but that because of the population density, the kinds of industry that are there, the cultural advantages and things like that, you might not get as much feedback that would be as useful to you there as you're able to get here and therefore you might make different decisions in your work, and you might turn out to be the best performance artist in Spokane, Washington, right?, but not necessarily known as far west as Tacoma.

It's that kind of a question, like, should I know artists or should I not know artists, and what is that weird ground of people have two or three times tonight gone towards, of what about carrying that kind of activity over to people who are not artists unquote, you know that whole question exactly I think an educational question, rather than an artistic one, what is the role of art in a quote non-artistic person's life—is that an artist's question or an educator's question?

X

Yeah. I sort of feel that too. I really wanted to know whether you were sincere when that woman asked you in the back if you felt that art had more in relation to the world and human society and you said you thought it did, you thought it jarred consciousness or something like that, and then later on—but the way you *said* it, it sounded so empty, and later on when you talked about the emptiness of having an intention of creating revolutionary consciousness through art, all of a sudden it seemed like it was all the same thing to you—that what you were saying was just abstracted from the particulars of the intention, that it was the same kind of, you know, this kind of 19th century, early 20th century justification or something, you know what I mean? So I'm really curious about whether you really believe that or—

A

Yeah I don't believe it as a justification. That's true, I don't want to justify what I'm doing to other people. And . . . I feel a lot more strongly about that than I seem to notice a lot. And so, one thing that happens to me when I stand up in front of a group like this, is that all my impulses about justifying myself to other people or looking good for other people or trying to keep them interested or trying to soothe their ruffles or make things come together for them, all these impulses come out and I really resent all of them. So, like, tonight, that has been like a real clear dynamic in a way, including what has been referred to as emptiness or glibness in a lot of what I have delivered.

F

What role [rule?] does satisfaction play in your career?

A

Um . . . I don't know. Can you, like, say that in a different way so I know what you mean?

F

Finishing something by doing a piece when you're thinking about it in the next few weeks like things that made you feel good, like you build on those rather than the things that made you feel bad? What do you think about the elements like when you stated like tonight we are doing business or doing art or whatever you want to call it? Do you build on the things that made you feel good or do you follow out the things that left you unsatisfied?

A

Well, I think that's what's satisfying to me is to have more—to have repercussions and things after I've done something, whether it's to write a poem or to do a performance, and so whether they're negative or positive if they proliferate for a while, you know, with some kind of surprise or effect to me, that's satisfying. It's satisfying because it's useful. So, I care about that, and I tend to try to make things so that will happen.

F

Like last night, Gregory Corso did this gig at USF and at the end about half the people demanded their money back and about half the people were really awed. The people that were really awed at least all the ones I talked to that had driven from Placerville and shit, were also talking about a feeling of being left out, unsatisfied, but that gap, which Corso said, a dollar fifty go buy yourself a tequila, that gap somehow, at least for several people I talked to, carried the obsession with the work on through the night into the next day. And so it's like, the emptiness, between the—between, the emptiness between, seems like, drove the work. Seems like that's your aim, or your desire.

K

You mean it drove Corso's work? Afterwards?

F

All the way through. Yeah, afterwards, afterwards, afterwards.

L

The people who were awed should have paid those people who wanted [to leave—?]. [Laughter in audience]

E

I don't think Steve is intending to be like Corso. Corso is trying to get out some [. . .] and then that's different than— There is a position that Steve's working that isn't particularly I mean you're not deciding on any of these questions, and you're not even deciding whether bringing them up is enough.

A

Yeah. I'm not deciding whether bringing them up is enough—

E

You're not deciding, now. And you're not even deciding whether *that's* enough, and so on and so forth, right?

F

But you are building, right? I mean, you're talking in terms of bigger audience . . .

A

(tentatively) I speak in terms of bigger audiences.

G

You mentioned it earlier.

A

You asked me whether my audience had changed, and I said that it had gotten bigger. And it has gotten bigger in the last couple years. But that isn't—

F

It's just the nature of the building, I guess.

A

Yeah, right. True, I care about building, and at the moment I'm not too interested in, and I'm really resistant to building in terms of making sure that people go home satisfied, or making sure that they feel like I *am* building. And some of what I am building is very passive and very sloppy, how I'm working.

One thing I'm thinking is that part of my original motivation for doing this talk was thinking about what the work does in going into . . . [Intermittent laughter from the audience, with no speech. Someone walks up to Steve and kisses him.] And so tonight I realized I didn't care about that.

X

You didn't care about what? I can't tell whether—it seems like you mean for it to be some kind of emotional experience for you, and this man just came over and kissed you and you didn't say *anything* about it—

X

[Unintelligible]

X

You said a lot about it [Big laughter from audience, many voices talking at once]. I can't figure out what you want from us as your quote audience.

M

Why are you worried about that? I haven't thought about it at all.

E

It's that empty feeling.

D

What is it about your work that makes you think the people in front of you tonight constitutes your audience, let alone *an* audience for writing, if it does?

A

Well the people, I figured that who would come tonight would be people who were wondering what was happening and who were in some ways in a role like myself of, like having lately decided that they were many of them interested in doing art work, and others who were involved in an artistic community to some degree but aren't doing art work and maybe are—and that's a dynamic in their lives and that they wonder about. Those are preconceptions that I had about the audience tonight, were those.

X

You're attributing a greater role of amateurism to one's commitment than— [Break in recording] I'm in deep.

A

You're in deep.

X

I'm in deep. All around.

X

I think Steve is in deeper than anybody I've ever seen. I don't know anybody *else* in this audience that would put their ass on the line like that. In fact I don't know anybody else who could fill the place. You know, if somebody from the audience wants to go up and make a statement—

X

No, you're attributing a casual [. . .]

X

Casual schmasual, what's casual have to do with it? What's the difference between casual and formal?

X

By casual I don't mean non-white-tie.

X

You don't mean *anything!* [Laughter in audience] You're asking questions but you don't know what the questions mean!

H

It's interesting to me that you chose this context. You talked a little bit at the start of the talk about choosing this context carefully as opposed to a gay context or a feminist poetry context or say the Rotary Club or the Lions Club or something else—

A

Or the public library—

H

It seems to me like just like being here 40 minutes or so now that you carefully chose the context where you could be the provocateur, and you could be the provocateur and be fairly guaranteed that the kind of audience coming to this place would be one that would stay around long enough and try to figure out what was going on and get involved in the crossfire between everything that's going on, and it seems like that dynamic interests you a lot. I'm kind of curious what you hope— Do you see anything resolving from that situation or working with the sort of structure that I tried to decipher earlier in terms of how you approached it— Do you see implications from working this way? Is that something that you're going to be able to develop further? Are you going to go away from tonight and be able to put something together from all these reactions and carry that on as a way of working, or is it just another kind of *hot* situation that we're all go home still hungry an hour later after Chinese food? You know what I mean?

A

Yeah. I didn't intend that people go hungry afterwards. I don't know, it seemed there was something I wanted to work out for myself and as a community of people, and right now I have real doubts about whether that was a worthwhile goal to do, and all along, how to do it. My intention here has been more to have some kind of a meeting than to really either bare my chest and create some kind of an emotional experience for myself or to create a happening or something like that, and that I want to— I want to meet somehow on— . . . I don't know, I guess I just want to meet on these terms about what does it mean to handle these kind of abstract questions that seem to come up about what one is doing? And that I want to know if it is useful to talk about those together, and that in order to do that I probably have to make this hot situation and do this performance number and a lot of odd elements come into it.

G

There's something I would be very interested for you to talk about, and that is, okay there's—you mentioned before these readers that didn't know you, and then you started talking about them in a way such that they were really the ideal reader, that nice fiction, the person really reads your poems and gets everything you put in and doesn't exaggerate and has total sympathy with what you're doing. Could you— And on the other hand then there's us, right, who—

[Gap in recording—the tape was changed at this point]

D

—talk you have in Bob's series about a year ago. I mean, which sequence does it fit into?

A

Well it's really related to both of them, for me, and I don't know that it's closer to one or the other, but—

G

Let me get back to what I was saying. What I want you to talk about, if you would, would be the ease and playfulness in your own writing and the difficulties you feel now, and that involves very much audience and . . .

A

If I'm working on my own writing, then I'm like alone and I can say what's going to happen and I can just play and I can chuck it out or keep it and use it, and what I'm doing now has to do with actually being a person

among other people, and also a person with my own private self. I mean, superficially I have a cold and I don't think very fast in public, unless sometimes I *do*, and when are those and why isn't this one of them, or is it beginning to be one? And then, so, like, but I, it's like, it's a question about art and what the work is, too, that I feel— I'm not—

I feel like for me the work of being art isn't, that somehow doesn't feel right to be just alone and working in my own little place and thinking, you know, that I'm doing this very private thing and then I present it to the outside world, because it doesn't work that way! You know, the work goes into books, it goes into readings, it goes into the consciousness of people that I know and people that I don't know, it goes into critics, it goes into other people who invite me into their occasion or exclude me from their occasion—and all that seems to affect me. It also . . . I have a distrust of working in a sense of total privacy and isolation, as though there's something empty or dissatisfying about that to me, and so a condition like this, or so this is closer that way to the talk I did in Bob's studio than to the talk I did here two months ago—it's like, wanting to . . . *(long pause)*

In some way wanting to know, like, where does my body fit into this work and where does my relation to other people fit in and where does their relations to each another— If it comes out in the politics of people in the audience talking, it doesn't seem very interesting, but it's—but I feel like . . . *(an even longer pause)*

I feel like I have to sort of chuck out the sentences that led up to that in order to start over again. . . . [Sound of someone leaving the gallery]

What I want to do tonight is because, I'm not—because I feel like a lot of lies or hiding, hidings go on in the privacy and autonomy of somebody doing work alone as an artist, and taking that as their role of what they do, as well as a lot of really great things, and then I also feel like there's some kind of— that there are conditions of how that work relates to everything outside of it, which . . . seem like they deserve to be fleshed out more and they deserve to be valued and seen as whole rather than just as something other. And I feel like I want people to be more in touch with each other as . . . as workers, and to be . . . to respond more fully to the work that each other is doing, I guess.

N

I was interested in one of the questions that you were dealing with at first, and that seemed to me to be, why would anyone really choose to do artwork, I mean really? And asking that question, to me, doesn't imply lack of seriousness, like some people seem to, like Jock. And I would really be interested in . . . It seemed you were trying to get to that before you got so challenged that you were put in a defensive position.

A

Well, the way that I've been thinking of it is that I work and people work because—that I work because I wanted to know what was—like, who I really was, sort of, or what I was really doing, and I didn't trust where other people were coming from, and that I didn't, I felt like I was not—like, all of who I was wasn't being recognized or valued and it was getting harder and harder for me to trust who I was and what I was thinking and feeling and knowing.

N

So you think a sense of mistrust might have motivated you to become an artist?

A

In a way. To the degree that making, say, stories or poems was a way of checking on who I actually was so that I did have something of myself that I could recognize and trust, and then *checking* that against what other people saw if they looked at it, and then I could see what they could recognize and what they would find there that would make sense to them, and then that would begin to give me a link of some kind in with other people, which I felt that I was really losing.

N

But couldn't that same thing be accomplished in thoughtful conversation, if you really articulated your thought well and the other person understood it and said, "Yes, I know what that means," and gave some response that showed that they did know—Would that accomplish the same thing, or does it have to be put on a page . . . ?

A

Well, for me—I don't know. I'm talking about being fourteen years old, at the moment. So, there wasn't anybody I was having those conversations with, except maybe my cousin, who just swamped me in the world of art, and that had been her solution, too. So I was sort of recruited, too. There was that social bond that drew me in, there.

O

The distrust turns into resentment, so often— You said several times how you resent—how you distrust resolutions or feelings of satisfaction, and you've also gone on to say that you *resent* [. . .], I think, wasn't that the word you used? I wonder why you resent it, rather than just distrust it.

A

Well, . . . I must resent it, I think, because it's—I think that's pretty irrational, and something that's just in myself, I don't know how much other people would want to buy into that, but, just . . . feelings I have of being, of having grown up and being expected to resolve everything according to norms that were presented to me, and feeling resentful of that for a long time, maybe without knowing it too deeply, or having trouble being aware of that from time to time, and finding it all too easy to identify with parents or peers or schools or clubs or whatnot, expecting me to resolve and work things out in their terms: You can be an individual or whatever, but do it so that it will make sense to us. And somehow, the range of rules that were offered seemed always to co-opt me or make demands on me that I was unwilling to go along with, and so I think that's been internalized a lot for me in ways I don't really need practically to feel resentment, just some distrust now, would be useful.

And so that's also part of my sort of transcendent or awe—awesome ideas about what an artist is like, if I start to think about it, I seem to get into real heavy idealizations of being able to create my own terms and make up my own decisions and choices that I can resolve—

G

Which you *are* doing right now, with a mixed [effects—?]. That's the thing that takes out the transcendence in the actual practice of art.

A

Yeah, the transcendence is if the effect is all to like enhance myself or something, I guess, to lift me up. And so in fact I'm doing that because I'm a person and I can do that, rather than being— Being an artist for me is somehow, has given me, and like, part of what's been going on for me in the last year or so is recognizing that I am and want to be this artist has given me more license to do that stuff, to make risky decisions or to see myself as making up the own grounds for my choices even when I'm uncertain, even when it's maybe rather ill-defined or something, to feel like I can go ahead and do it. To be an artist is like a license to be more fully human, for me. And I suspect that maybe that's not true for many of the other people who are artists.

G

Why not? Why do you suspect that?

A

My distrust! My sense of resistance around here or something. Professionalism is just when you're doing your work, and then you're also a person.

X

Why is being more human some kind of standard?

A

Why is being more human some kind of standard??

X

Yeah, the feeling of being more human?

A

Well, I don't know, for me, I've often felt kind of not very human or not very complete or not very completely present or not very capable of loving or not very capable of defining myself and making my own decisions,

and so to be able to do things like that more, I would label those all together with the terms “being more human.” That’s valuable to me.

X

A really narrow adjective.

P

Being more savage, being more human, being more—

G

Edible?

P

—edible, evanescent— I like the word “human,” it’s fine with me.

J

We *are* human.

Q

It’s sort of like saying being more yourself, and yet making a general term. Rather than being more rabbit, rather than snake.

A

Yeah, I guess so. I think that I’m being myself as much at any one time as at any other time.

H

Steve, it seems to me you’ve talked a lot about—I’m going to try to draw a couple things together that are going on in my mind—You’ve talked about a couple of things that seem real interesting to me. One is the fact that artists to a large degree often like to work within one form and then another form. In other words, you’ve talked about your work, which a lot of people here know is work you do on a written page, it’s in a sense kind of distanced from the work we’re doing here tonight and that’s satisfying on some levels and it’s unsatisfying on other levels. And then you’ve come here tonight and have adopted a different form of working, and believe me, I think you’re working, to make something happen. And it seems to me that you’re adopting this form because there are certain things about immediacy of feedback or response that you don’t get when you are writing, and I can identify very clearly with that in terms of some of the works as an object maker in the studio and creates things that no one ever sees and you send it off to a gallery and someone hangs it on the wall, and you read about it from the two or three people who write about it in some local paper, maybe someone buys it who you don’t know and they take it back, as opposed to adopting another form, which I do, which is performance, in which you know sometimes I’ll have people just a few feet away so you’re getting a very immediate live audience response, and it seems to me you’re talking about two different ways of working, and you’re here trying to work one way tonight. I mean you brought up another thing that I think is interesting to artists, is the whole context in which the forms of their work are viewed, and I think Langton Street or an artist’s space, an artist audience that you’ve chosen tonight is not a very different one than say—it’s a very different audience, let me please talk in my own terms—For me to show work here is very different than showing work downtown in a gallery, and I feel much better about having worked as an artist-member towards creating a context like this and directing the work at a particular kind of audience and being able to control the context of how work is presented, how my work is seen, and how other artists are handled in this situation. I think that both those things, the ideas of artists work in different forms and the contexts in which their work is perceived, I don’t know if other people are interested in talking about that. Those seem to be a couple of interesting things that have come out of, that seem to be the premises of what you’ve been trying to do, have been here laboring to do. I’m sure writers must have similar feelings to painters about sending things off, just having them out all over the country and sending them to journals where they don’t really know the people and getting back rejections and rejections and having things out in print or in libraries and that same kind of distancing which you often get in a gallery situation where you just hang the work and you leave as opposed to the kind of intimacy that’s involved with having fifty artists in an artists’ space talking about something that means something to them.

A

To me, having that work go out and be these objects that are passed around and evaluated in terms I don't know what they're going to be by people I don't know makes me feel kind of ironic towards the work that that happens to, that it becomes just an object to some degree, and just a thing that accrues value or doesn't.

P

But don't you know the value of your work to yourself, and how successful they are, and isn't that always the measure that you—it's not that important what they think, and so it seems to me you have a good clear shot on your own work as you send it out, so they're not all so mishandled as all that out there by we object-handlers—

I

Right but you might get more immediately out of working this way than you would that way.

P

Sure, but one is always impatient to know what the others' response is, but one can be too impatient, getting to the risk has to have some patience built into it, so that responses don't have to come that week or that month, but there's this ongoing education of an audience to read you, so I think that kind of degree of patience would be extremely important when you're taking real risks in your writing. Not that I don't admire the *need* for response.

R

Steve, I'd like to say this in terms of this evening. Usually when I come to a public event, sometimes I hear someone, say, especially if it's music, say Elvis Costello, and I'll get home, whatever turns me on, in the next three or four days, I'll hear that in my head and I won't try to reflect on it, it just goes through. Other times I'll hear people who'll provoke me and I'll go home and I'll be jarred, write or respond, talk to others, it'll generate a kind of inner reaction. Tonight I felt that was happening when you began to talk, because I sensed the cards from which you were reading from in part were from responses you received from the people you had written to and there was that kind of expectation that something that I had written or other people had written was going to come up and there was this whole body of work that was randomly related and that began to signify things, and that was exciting to me, and then it somehow broke down. I don't want to get into the mechanics of why that happened, but somehow it's left me. . . . And somehow, the only way I can come out of that, is just to say what I'm saying. Otherwise I would feel shitty, you know. I would have felt better if you'd stayed—at least kept that current alive, that you began with, because I think that you *violated* some kind of contract you set up with the audience you invited by asking them to impart information about what they felt about the questions you were raising, and when you left that and got into this, I'm calling it a phony dialogue with the audience, it just became an indulgence of some sort.

A

(*pause*) Well I've—I feel like—the questionnaires—that kind of response or that kind of intention does inform what I've been doing . . .

R

I think you lost contact with it.

X

Who got a questionnaire?

X

I did.

X

I mean how did you distribute them?

A

I distributed them by just a few lists I had of names and addresses, my address book and various things that occurred to me, and I didn't work at it very hard developing a list of people to send them to, and maybe

chose people I knew or knew of that I was interested in what they would answer, what kind of experience it would be for them to get the questionnaire, and if they might answer what kind of answers they might give.

X

Had you already chosen your topic, your title?

A

Oh yeah. Yeah.

S

[A question about return rate]

A

Thirty out of fifty.

D

How many of them showed up?

A

I don't know. To get back to what Jock was saying, to me, it is like a concern in what this talk is doing and what I want to do, how—how work comes up in front of other people, and I'm—in ways in which the situation is created by me or ways in which the situation is created by people that I'm alienated from, feels really different and I feel like in a situation like this here now, I want to cut out what is ironic in the way I work in relationship to other people, and I—that's—part of why I set this situation up the way I did tonight, was to try to get a situation where I would cut out for myself the tendency to take an ironic role towards audience or the people that I'm participating with in the work, whereas if I'm thinking about the idea of showing in a downtown gallery or publishing in a magazine I don't totally and completely respect and identify with I feel like I have this relationship with my work like well, it's going to become something that—it's going to be an other, that it's going to mediate between itself and them, and it gets really far from me, and—I mean, I don't know, there's nothing wrong with that!

And I'm curious about what it means to manipulate the situations of being with people to do work. Like, maybe it's really like what Steve was talking about a minute ago, is sort of like what's happened now is I decided to let myself lose touch with the people as a sort of term in my head or a plan of who I was going to perform for and who had sent me answers to questionnaires and what writers I had chosen to quote and so forth, and just determined to participate more and more with who was actually here, if I could, and um . . .

M

That seems awfully—I mean the first thing that went through my head is “you're too kind” or something like that. Like I mean, if someone for instance in the audience says something that makes no sense or seems boring or like a question you don't want to entertain. Like, I had that response myself sometimes, like why— Say, well— Why pay attention? Why not just decide for yourself what, at some points, determine for yourself what is worth entertaining or what isn't? Because I think that the audience was doing that for you in some ways or for themselves— in some respects on your behalf and in some respects on our own—

A

So, in that sense, in terms of what was going on here tonight, I've been sort of letting go more than would be useful of my role as controlling what goes on.

M

I can't entirely determine that for you, but I mean that is something that has gone through my head. And it's something that, because I know you, also occurs to me, you know?

A

Yeah.

T

I have a question. It seems to me that the terminology of career implies a conflict that everybody feels between the necessarily private act of composition and the necessarily public act of any form of publicity that

we choose, whether we give a reading, or we choose to make connections socially among other artists that we meet through a more or less professional context, and the two perhaps clearly distinguish parts of our activity, and centers of feeling get [confused—?] and out of that a lot of contradiction and ambivalence develops. It seems to me that the way one treats that often has a lot to do with how the conversion takes place at the moment that you decide, “I’m going to have a career,” and my question would be, given the fact that you have in your own history at least a year and a half since some moment of conversion that this specifically came about, how has that developed? Have you seen any fluctuation? Is it a desire to resolve a dissatisfied or a slightly stark sense of participation of social needs or personal needs that aren’t acted out with other people in the moment of composition that brings you to the moment of public statement that you’re making now in a much more uncomposed sort of way? You see what I’m saying? [Overlapping voices]

A

What— Well, I’ll try to answer and you tell me whether I seem on target or not. I felt like there was a lot going on around of both in myself and other people, of how sort of, situations get established that determine or seem to determine values of what kind of work is done or what kind of achievement people are making, and that I felt like, um—

[Conversation, laughter, in back of audience, with someone complaining, “I can’t hear what Steve’s saying. I’m trying to listen and it’s really annoying.”]

A

I wanted to sort out ways in which we identify with the roles like publishing in a magazine or submitting to a magazine or showing in a gallery or things like that, and in what ways those in fact *help* us to like, feel like we’re doing something, and in what ways those are problems and can be negotiated actively—Thanks—rather than just, um—I don’t know, it’s as though I wanted to include— I guess I want to include that stuff in the work and yet I somehow want to maintain my autonomy or distance from it.

T

[Unclear on tape. Part of it may be “You don’t want to invest the work with a certain conduct, it’s not proper, it’s not the right place. And if you do—”]

G

You always have your own person, right?

T

[Something like “The person’s always tacky discretion or sense of place to make the work— because it makes it too narrow to engage certain personal. . . . it’s not as if those feelings are detached from the value of that activity in your life, and therefore it becomes a real serious problem, articulating that alongside, because *it* doesn’t appear in a magazine, or it doesn’t appear in a book, and oftentimes it won’t even appear in a reading—you could chose to read the way Raworth . . . , I have nothing against . . . , except very fast, vocabulary . . . , so it becomes difficult, trying to find a way to articulate that doubt—one’s own relationship with the activity . . . For me, I haven’t the slightest idea how to do it. I’ve yet to develop a personality, in that way.”]

A

And so I feel like in doing more work publicly in the last year or so, I’ve become very aware of that—that the work is not just alone, somehow, and the more I became aware of that the more I became aware of how there were a lot of tensions and conflicts that seemed to center around kind of standard questions or structures or establishment ideas, and I was interested in somehow tackling problems with that. So what Jock was saying about making a space to do your work in seemed important and significant to me.

X

I see this sort of activity as building walls for you, understanding the distance for audience. Formulating your own role. This kind of activity, this talking, a sort of banter, in some senses, can only be that, or, [. . .] being therapeutic—Some people might want to do something like this to get through to the point of building some sort of scar tissue where they can more fit in as sort of their place where they would like to—sort of obsessive contact even though very painful contact with the people they believe to be important to them or

part of their own society of artists, but it seems to be an [unintelligible] looking for boundaries between yourself and some people of your own generation.

A

Hm. Well I don't agree with that. I don't think that it's being particularly therapeutic either.

[A brief unintelligible exchange ensues.]

I

I think that— Isn't your intention to raise the issues and then to have no control over where the issues go?

A

Yeah.

I

And you can never do that in work on the page, really. You can only do that by being in the situation.

A

Yeah, right, I mean to raise the issues and then have no more control than people give me the space for and I give them the space for, and then, what dynamic is that? And so, this talk, this forum, may not be a very good dynamic for that, that might— in terms of figuring things out in advance that may be rather ill considered, I don't know. But that's where that lies, and . . .

R

I don't know, you dismiss this evening as being very cruel for you, as if you could have partly anticipated how you would come out of it.

A

Well that's just *me*, that's the way that I deal with—

R

Is it?

A

—presenting myself.

R

So it's [another party for you, just another evening—? Another part of being for you, another idiom—?]

A

I don't know! You want to know what my affect is.

F

This is just another [. . .]?

A

No, I don't even feel that I know what it is. I feel like have been having a good time, you know. I certainly hope that not too many people are pissed off or ill-disposed or what-not, but if they are, then I don't think that's going to last a long time, and I'm not too worried about that either. I feel like what goes on this evening is something different for me than just talking to people one-to-one, and I'm also— I don't know now what that is, but I know it's a lot more puzzling, and it's a lot harder to have a sense of, sort of, that I am master of the situation or that I can be pleased with myself than when I am just with one or two people and sort of expounding on something. But I don't know entirely what the difference is, right now.

G

Do you think that—

A

And I don't know how it will affect the way that I talk to people or relate to artistic institutions and situations in the future, maybe very little, it doesn't really—

I

That's actually all I meant by that, because that's the way we feel, because we're in the same career as you are. I mean that seemed like—I would like to raise the issue as to whether that is only a situation that an artist would feel?

A

What's your reference—what's a situation that only an artist would feel?

I

The feeling that you had there—what you were just talking about, about not being in control.

A

Uh-hunh. Well with an artist it seems like— To me there's like this added thing of not knowing what the value *is* of an experience, for other people, or what the significance of it *is*. Like if you're teaching school or something at least you have a plan like that they'll figure out grammar or—and it's already established that it's *good* to enjoy Wordsworth, or something.

G

Hey, why don't we stop here, and anybody who wants to keep talking come over to our place, down the street. Is that okay?

A

That's okay, yeah.

G

Okay, well thanks a lot.

Journal entry of 2/17 [1978]

Yesterday was my abortive, “meaningful” careers talk. Yesterday AM, between 930 (having been awoken by phone twice, nervous + wondering whether I’d be able to sleep anymore) and 11, I had the most (also painful recognition my cold was getting worse + sore throat developing) convincingly real dream: wake up lying in bed w cord? oh extension cord wrapped tight around L index finger rub eyes—glasses on in sleep?! Take off (Ben Franklin style glasses, didn’t know I had), ½ dressed, apt drastically altered since 9:30 by Jill + her artist friends in preparation for art “events”—weird conglomeration, esp in living room (where weird brkfst is in progress + I get only fragment of a bowl of cereal) + my dresser for instance is gone, not to be found, replaced by strange neofunctional gaudy sculpture w/ colored paper flowers + butterflies—finally angry lift huge plate glass window + go out to find Jill + Carla,— up path to house, big mansion, 2nd or 3rd story spy them from landing in party in a suite, go sit next to them, can’t speak for disparity between my despair (everything’s changing?!) + their pleasant chatter w/ each other which nohow predicts my upset— I sit on floor + look at feet a few seconds then impatiently roll on back hit my head gainst a man’s knee/boot ow!, roll on side + begin crying, wondering whether I’m ever going to get out of this state as tho I’m dreaming + everyone else is awake it’s like being crazy what’s happening?! Carla’s + Jill’s arms reached towards me questioningly (I ask C to hold me?) w/ Carla holding me I feel I may be able to regain coherence— + in fact conceiving then the dream/“reality” dichotomy + am now curled holding myself facing wall (if I open my eyes) in bed.

Shaken up after the talk I asked Carla to come home w/ me. It was hard to admit that I wanted her to. She’s been very supportive tho clearly critical + not making excuses, about my talk.

I was sick. I wasn’t prepared. I didn’t really want to talk abt that anymore. I didn’t have perspective on my motivations. I didn’t want to control an event. I didn’t have confidence in my planned material. I hadn’t had time to synthesize the whole process. I wanted to destroy/abandon/humiliate these barriers/demons/foolish ideas in myself more than I wanted to do something about them for other people (my talk premise was based on illusions about my role vis a vis other “artists”—as though I were to be a paragon of discovering integrity, unity, personality + politics as elements of working). In fact I wanted to undermine what I’ve felt to be false confidence, cockiness or good cheer based on self-esteem as artist lately—I wanted to “have a failure”—perhaps resultant to the resentment against “them” for wanting me to be consistently + graduatngly a success.

Entry in notebook listing public appearances

Feb 17 (?), 1978— Talk: “Careers in the Arts” 80 Langton St (1st there) BPerelman’s talk series. I was feeling sick + dropped the ball, then conscious of courting failure. Freeforall. BP has tape.

Preparatory notes for the *Careers in the Arts* talk

The file cards on which substantial portions of the first section of the talk were based were later destroyed. I think I threw them away or destroyed them myself within weeks of the talk, but perhaps at a later date. I have been unable to locate them, and I remember rejecting them as unworthy of retaining.

I did, however, decide to keep 16 smaller cards and slips of paper on which many of the file cards for the talk were based (others were based on the responses to questionnaires or on ideas that occurred to me in the final several days before the talk while I was writing out the final file cards). These are undated and probably were written in the weeks of December and January and early February prior to the talk. Many were probably carried in a pocket and added to occasionally.

New typed verbatim transcriptions of these preparatory notes are here presented one card or slip of paper at a time, approximating their original appearance as written by hand. Most have two sides, presented here as (a) and (b) sides. In most cases, they bear no evident relationship to each other. The sequence of cards as presented here is accidental.

S.B.

thinking myself handsome or not dictating how I relate to people socially, artistically—
reputation +
design

If I don't think I'm going to be goodlooking, I don't want to try to get attention.

I must be given value before I can express myself (Bob + Mozart).

Do I have to indicate that I like myself in order for other people to like me (myself) (my art).

being gay + being an
artist

not having a magazine/press

being "nice" –
resolving things
(closure)

scared + doing
art to be bold

happy because
of this / drugs

Shklovsky: "It begins w/
dedication, w/ a vocation . . .
(Don Quixote, Saul) . . . Inspiration
overcame the poet in the
desert. It overcomes like death,
it arouses like a wound."

"This is a stream on wch one
cannot return." "The geese
in the fields looked like
scattered + torn pieces of paper
. . . Moscow appeared." "Let's
be grateful to the wind of
the mountain passes."

"The poet's vocation
begins w/ anguish. You know
of this spiritual thirst, this
withdrawal from life. Of that
new way of seeing + hearing
a great poet is born out of
the contradictions of his
time. He is preceded by the
inequality of things, their

dislocations, the course of
their changes."

"If, tomorrow, we were propelled
50 yrs forward, many of us wd
bring back from the future our
past."

"The future lives w/in us
hidden under its contradictions.
It lives w/in us by the way we
flow toward it or ascend to it."

* Some of my statements may seem metaphysical to you because they aren't clearly relevant to your situation.

artist, on his own, needs to defend himself against demands of others + also needs support of peers.

working as an artist tends to dissipate assumptions about how to succeed or gather value to oneself – negative capability

Prepared part of talk – get some matters out of the way that I want to say – interrupt or ask Q's but I don't promise to answer – economics issue a shuck? little white children. money doesn't make art happen well, nor does poverty.

Mandy Aftel 844-6500
Therapy for artists + writers

drawbacks of living in the city (esp if poor).

solitude

sociability w/ + w/o other artists

self-sacrifice

wondering why
I've brought you
all here together

support groups (feminist,
gay, 3rd world, language-
oriented, punk, etc.)

flirting w/ habit +
nonchalance of knowing
what yr doing –

dealing w/ yr own weak-
nesses by attacking them,
entertaining them, offering
them a suitable opponent
or dilemma to show their
hidden powers . . .

I'll show them vs.
what I'm most absorbed by
on my own (urban vs.
rural poetics?) . . .

criticism vs. support
"even your best friend
won't tell you" what's
wrong w/ yr work.

wanting
success +
validation
lead to dis
respect for
self

can I make
art w/o
having a
public career
+ . . .

art is occasion
of relating
to public –
installation +
performance art
dependent
for conditions
to work on
other art/social
controls outside
social – insecurity

la guerre est finie – after
the revolution what do we
do – useless – what war
to wage

the work completed doesn't
leave me w/ the feeling
I intended; nor am I in
harmony w/ the public
in my disappointment.

hide things from yrself
so you can't find
them again

try to let yrself be em-
barrassed w/o being
boringly selfrevelatory

I'd rather choose
what I do than
choose what I
try to do.

Page
between Schrader
+ Cole

“What will become of me?”

Destiny + objectification
as passively submitted to.
Is being an artist not
essentially to question
this question’s assumptions?

Artist’s responsibility
to self (society aside).
Why he be’s an artist.
(no society role model
acceptable). (so a model
of freedom to make – +
destroy – one’s own roles?)
No social roles^{rules} to excuse
conduct inconsiderate of
oneself, except those
of art politics + society’s
economics.

for me art has been a way
of pleasing myself +/- by
indirectly pleasing others
(a way of being w/ myself
like dreaming or meditation
or physical exertion + of
sharing such immediate
experience w/ others as
not observers but actively
involved respondents –
who don’t identify w/
what I present + yet whom
I need not in turn respond
to)

=====

decision to be artist is
passive w/o reinforcement &
active when community
reinforcement fosters sense
of artwork having effect.
(even having read Wordsworth
is external validation of
decision)

=====

"What will become of me?"

little white children
+ govt funding.

~~\$8.75 [illegible]~~
~~\$13.70 chopping food~~

humor in art

~~642 0088 (8pm)~~
~~Cal B. O. for Therp~~

artwork + personality –
how do you relate
to the fact that
in yr choices and
decisions to do + how to
do yr work, you are
demonstrating/express-
ing yr personality +
hope this will produce
contexts for exper-
ience that others will
(over)

value? You are what you
write (paint, etc.), in that
you freely determine it
(including how it fits
into the already known,
done + acceptable), even
its relation to setting
(poem in magazine, in
sidewalk, or in conver-
sation).

~~Jean 6263495~~
~~near Castro + Market~~

involving yr daily life +
political/economic cir-
cumstances in yr art.
is it denial of some of
the work's conditions to
leave them out? is it
giving up the freedom +
integrity of the work to let
conditions determine how it
happens.

challenging preexisting
patterns + ethics of
making + distributing
art.

===

sheepish – oh I know
I ought to –

vs.

filling a gap one sees
needs to be filled

===

gay versus literature

- - - - -

agreement on days of the
week, appts., etc.

parties + 'receptions'

Bently: gay uncle tomism.
"the oppressed only gets
over his oppression at the
moment when he decides
on revolt" we are (over)

pressured into self-
mystification by others.

Morgan
626-7409

attn + enthusiasm of others
as problem. distance from
one's own attn.

connotations of the
word "careers"

=====

how one sees one's
situation is/isn't in
the work

considering other's problems
vs. considering one's own

hierarchies fame status
access decorum

---_---_---_---_---

sexual politics – begging the
question – woman-identified
or gay-identified art looking
for ghettoization

money = people telling you
what to do (buying you off
from changing what you're
doing, for instance).

___ ___ strong w/in weak at the
_____ outsides – situation can-
_____ not last, must change . . .
_____ or misfortune will result
_____ (no changing lines).

___ ___

"The ridgepole sags to the breaking
pt. It furthers one to have some-
where to go. Success."
The weight of the great is excessive—
transition needed, as current "ends"
cannot support . . . a momentous
time but not 'revolution'.

"Thus the superior man, when he stands
alone, is unconcerned, + if he has to
renounce the world, he is undaunted."
lake over trees: a flood, but temporary.

shoplifting as an option

does art come 1st - -
over other responsibilities
plans promises?

manipulativeness in
art – carries over
to social, economic,
one's own perceptions
+ experience

photography +
documentation

good looks

“problem”
(struggle)

license to live + work
— status as artist

sacrifice – a way
to offer myself up
on a platter
intentionally

"interesting"

—

can I tell you
why you or we do
anything?

—

old hat (talking
about myself)

—

personal presence
as hype

—

reappearance – I've
been here before

—

surprise + novelty
+ identity

glasses + contact lenses
+ distance –
putting them on in
AM, shifting one to other –
'natural' perception

—

careerism – contemporary
movement

—

80 Langton:

- > once a year
membership mtng.
 - > 12 bd members
elected once a
year, anyone
can run.
"advisory" but
really runs it
+ heads committees.
 - > rented from Jock
 - > entire bd resigned
last summer—
except 3.
now 6 artists, 6
art administrators.
 - > begun by art dealers
assn but they
backed out.
 - > NEA matching grant—
donations, mem-
bership drive
- Committees open to
all members—
1. fund raising
 2. benefit
- \$5000 needed by May.

(2.)

- > Artists in residence
also NEA matching
grant – 4day
workshops, curated
by Suzanne.
1. Michael Opping
2. Suzanne Lacy or
David Behrman or
format up to the
artist.
fee may be used to
meet NEA grant.
- > Committees
3. membership.
4. curating – 5 –
reviews proposals.
+ may make requests
criteria:
nonobjective.
noncommercial.
interdisciplinary
outside of usual
art setting.
work designed for
this space.
experimental.

one need consider the
ways in which avant
garde art must function

to privatize con
while it repro system
destructive of [or at least detrimental to] elements
art it produces
interrelated network social/econ elements