

Blues is happy music

Interview with artist TR Ericsson following the opening of his exhibition "Industrial Poems - Poèmes Industriels".

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Your current exhibition is titled “Industrial Poems”. Where does this title come from? How does it relate to works in the exhibition?

It comes from a series of vacuum formed works Marcel Broodthaers was doing in 1968, plastic signs filled with abstruse texts and logo-like images meant to subvert the usual clarity of advertising signs. I’ve loved these works for a long time. A poem turned into an object is an attractive idea. My father was a graphic designer for a greeting card company and my grandfather owned a bookstore and sold mostly poetry books, so commercial signage and poetry both resonate. I’m also interested in industrial fabrication. Making an exhibition in Broodthaers' native city of Brussels on the fifty-year anniversary of these first plastic poems became a unique opportunity to combine his influence with a moment from my past. Like pairing machine guns with patio furniture, the end result is an evocative puzzle.

This exhibition is part of a much larger project you’ve called “Crackle & Drag”. What is crackle & drag? Where does the title come from? When did it begin for you? How has it evolved into a project? What do you hope for the project?

It’s another appropriated title, but from a poem. Crackle & Drag is the last line of Sylvia Plath’s "Edge", written just before her suicide. It’s a cryptic text that’s difficult to summarize, “Her blacks crackle and drag” is the final line. But that’s not where it started for me, it started with Paul Westerberg from The Replacements, a song from his solo album "Come Feel Me Tremble". I was laying on my couch in Ohio and my wife put it on. I was only half listening at first but there was a refrain in one of the songs that stood out. Westerberg takes that final line from Plath’s poem and puts it in the form of a question, “Can you hear her blacks crackle and drag?”. Then it becomes more of a challenge to whoever’s listening to maybe do more than just listen. It was instantaneous, it was the perfect phrase to envelop more than a decade’s work.

But obviously that’s not where it really began.

It began when my mom died in 2003. I was 30. Her death was a suicide. That’s where it started. Or you could say further back than that with our life together, or still further back to her life before I was born and so on, there’s no way to punctuate things like this with a definitive beginning or end. It all moves in so many different directions.

How has it evolved? It’s evolved profoundly and also not at all. That’s what drives the whole thing. Every work I make, every thought I put into it, every dialogue that surrounds the work in one way or another is an endless attempt to relate myself to that moment, the moment and immediate aftermath of her death, maybe that sounds crazy and maybe it is, and maybe it isn’t, it doesn’t really matter. It is what I do. Like a striptease in reverse, I’m trying to dress this raw unspeakable moment’s effect on everything that came after it and even before it. How can you shape something like that into a form and you could ask why shape it into a form, why hold onto it at all, awful things like that happen in our lives and we move on, why not simply move on? I felt and feel a certain indefinable responsibility. It’s not guilt. I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s just my internal wiring. Whatever it is I can’t let it go. Can’t let it rest. There’s this nagging something in her story that my gut tells me relates to the deepest things art, literature, philosophy

or even religion have ever tried to get at. And that's a very high-flown thing to say and we should all blush inwardly when someone talks like that but it doesn't make it less true.

What is my hope for the project? To finally get it right. I read somewhere recently, a writer saying, people think they can tell a story and then they try and write one and they don't know where to start or how to do it, it's an art, it's like that. One thing negates another, or you don't quite hit the raw realness of a thing, or it's too much you and not enough them, too much them and not you, or whatever else it all is, or isn't. And trying to simultaneously make a story out of an object or use an object to convey a feeling or a mood or a loss, it all just gets more and more difficult. Every move is filled with failure, and then the whole thing as it increasingly does starts to feel like this bizarre fictionalized reality, no matter how hard you try to be factual and true, eventually it's not the truth that matters, there's some complex dance between all the fragmented gestures that are held together in the same ambiguity Plath's poem is suspended in. We're in a culture that craves, simplicity and brevity although the story of our lives is anything but brief and simple. And yet art has this power to be simple and to convey something straight to the heart of a person, again go ahead blush inwardly. But that's the hope, to get it right like that.

You grew up in Ohio and graduated High School at the start of the 90s. The cultural context could explain your often “punk” approach and passion for zine culture, as well as your innovative use of silk screens and DIY approach to craftsmanship. Does it?

Punk is honest in it's way, authentic and against something more than it's for something. Its expressiveness is often cheap and fast and raw and real. It's not academic or schooled. It's off beat and wrong and misfitted. You take what's at hand, not just in a material sense but in a living sense, you take your stupid shitty life and you do something with it. Or x yourself out if you want to. My work is both conceptually and technically more sophisticated than what I think we mean here by “punk” but the influence remains, there's a certain let-go quality after all the decisions have been made and funneled through whatever processes I put an image through. But it all remains punk in tone, singular, putting the wrong thing in the wrong place, which has been a determining factor my whole life, even here, is all of this a good fit for how we think about art right now, or what we need it to be? Or what Artsy is? I wish I cared.

How do you think about art right now? How is that different from how you thought about it in your first year at the Cleveland Institute of Art or your time at the Art Students League?

CIA was the wrong school for me. I didn't know anything about art schools or where to go. I dropped out and gave up a scholarship that would have paid for half of the whole thing. I took what money I had left and moved to New York City and took classes at The Art Students League. I ended up there for four years. It was a good fit at the time, I loved the history and independence of the place, what I knew about art I knew from books and museums, and there were so many significant American artists that passed through the League that just being there made me feel connected to it all. I don't know. I painted from life for years but it dead-ended for me. I won a prize to travel in Europe and see all the museums there and make work, and that was incredible. But after it was over I was alone in a little apartment in Brooklyn struggling to figure out what next. I again went to the books, and the museums, and the galleries, and started looking at modern and contemporary art. I started to see that I could approach visual art like an author, or a poet. But what would I write? I didn't really care about New York, there was no story there for me and yet I felt like I'd never get back home again either, and I was right, that homesickness has never left me and the price I've paid for my absence is the story I found that I wanted to tell. Art has to be in service of something else, it can't be an end in itself. When I was younger art was about art, now it's not. It's not about clever techniques, it's not an escape, it's not a vehicle to achieve some faux-notion of celebrity or success, or whatever else. How do I think about art now? It's a tool, something you can use to navigate life and living, like Wittgenstein's ladder, you eventually realize a lot of the early efforts were

nonsense, it was all just something you did to climb up out of something else, once you get up the ladder you kick it away.

How do you place yourself in art history? Are there movements, groups or artists with which you align yourself? Where do you see yourself fitting in?

You can't really place yourself in art history, that's too speculative. "Fitting in" is tough too, fit into what? It's all so fractured now, Duchamp's prediction has become mostly true, every artist for themselves like in a shipwreck. When you stare into the abyss and see it stare back at you, what kind of artist is that? What's that called? I could align myself with certain artists, that's easy, Like Broodthaers, or Duchamp, or really just so many. There are so many influences it would be absurd to list them all, some obvious and some not so obvious, but it's tricky. It's all a misprision, I love this word, in a literary sense, it's a misreading, or misinterpretation of a text, but as a means to an end. I think this can be conscious or unconscious, influence whether direct or perceived is a little dicey, an artist relates to something in another work because of a misprision, they see themselves where they are not, they extrapolate from that and create works that have very little to do with the aims of the artist they think they're emulating. And that's great and core to the whole progression of generations, but it's still all based on a fundamental misunderstanding. And an audience can be guilty of misprision too, and that's equally valid, so all this "what is a thing" questioning is great, but I think it's important for the artist to resist making that too easy, it might be helpful, but in the long run, it's dishonest.

I would name two movements in art I feel strongly aligned with, and neither is contemporary: Flemish Primitives and Dada. The flayed and tortured figures of those Flemish painters, the plagues, famine, depictions of christs and demons, there's an urgency to that work. At the time burning in hell was a very real proposition, death lurked around every corner, the agonizing efforts to preserve likenesses and narrate the cruel fantasies of Christianity, it was no fuck around entertainment/party art and the Dada artists were not fucking around either. Dada and surrealism is all a clever joke now, fur lined bowls and lobster telephones, but the best of these artists were trying to turn the world on it's head, the top-hatted rigid conceits of a conventionally wired majority brought us our first world war and with it some of the most troubling physical and psychological injuries we'd ever seen or experienced before. I always think of the photograph of the Dada artist in the street with his t-shirt and suspenders swearing at a priest, I like art like that. Aesthetics, art about art, glitz and glam and big shiny balloon poodles aren't for me. I need the pathos or I just do not care and I don't mean melodrama, which is applying more emotion to a thing than it possesses. Pathos is suffering in a real way, expressing that, the real terrors and complexity of being simply human, or the real redeeming parts that drift toward love and compassion. But even here misprision occurs, maybe even more poignantly, and maybe my whole thing is a misprision, something I didn't and don't really understand about my mother, or her life, or even my life. I think most things are driven by misunderstanding. It's ok, it's not just about the artist, it's half the audience too. An Artwork isn't simply a measure of the artists success, or failure to express something, or make something, the audience can fail too. To be a witness is a position filled with responsibility, you can't just peak in and out of a fair booth, or an internet site demanding simple clarifying answers where there are none, you're implicated in a far deeper way just by being there to see the art.

When did you start making one-off silkscreens and how did the various materials you use (graphite, powdered graphite, smoke, and ashes) enter your practice? What challenges or issues do these materials raise?

I've always loved printmaking. At different times I've done it all. The screen work started with my first solo show in Chelsea ("As If Life Isn't Hard Enough They Have To Tear Out Your Flowers", 2007), I made an installation with various objects, it was a conceptual portrait of my mother using mostly non art

materials. I'd had a screen made for a print I editioned to put in a publication for the exhibition, I was still finding my way after years of a relatively straightforward painting and drawing practice, and I'd been drifting closer toward photography, so printmaking which combines easily with photo imagery was a logical move. One night in the studio wanting to make a drawing, but no longer interested in all the hoopla and techniques that go with it, I rubbed powdered graphite through that photographic silkscreen and the results were interesting. From there and with the already settled on notion of using non-art materials, I started wondering what else you could put through a silkscreen, so I tried cigarette smoke, lipstick, alcohol, and eventually ashes, but the ashes came later and that's a more complex process than simply pushing the medium through the screen. None of this was that easy, nothing quite worked at first, but it worked enough that I knew I could figure it out if I kept at it. The graphite especially was a perfect medium for the work I was doing at the time, it was like a metaphor, an industrial material, used as anything from a lubricant to a pencil lead, a slippery medium that could conduct electricity, be pulverized into a powder or used in liquid form, all these slippages were like metaphors for the content I was exploring in my work, fractured, unreliable, ambiguous narratives and images, it all fit. And chance, the results were filled with chance and failure and that was a reasonable metaphor too, everything might not work or you'd have to work your way out of what wasn't working.

Printmaking as a means to an end is a sort of interruptive mechanical structure wedged between the maker and the work. I like the brokering or distancing that occurs there. I like that you have to allow for degrees of un-control. And this is tightly wrapped into the personal narrative surrounding the death of my mother and what I valued most about what was revealed to me from that cataclysmic personal event. Art flirts with notions of perfection. Perfection is a dangerous notion. The pursuit of it can lead you to some profoundly imperfect consequences. You can literally become a monster. My mother's embrace of the imperfect, her ability to get with people at their worst and be a comfort to them were qualities I shared with her but the art life was fucking it all up and I was becoming that monster. I want this for me, I do this for me, etc. A life in art can be a very controlling and self-centered journey. I almost gave it all up after she died. I was so disgusted with myself, losing her, I'd been so out of touch and so dialed into my career and work I wasn't present in my own life anymore. I was losing myself, that's what it is, you lose yourself, you become crazy, you forget other people are anything but stepping stones to where you want to be, it's vile. Not unlike the printmaking structures I just described as intrusive wedges, maybe that's what my mother is, a wedge like thing that hampers, pulls the control away, an ambiguity, an unknown acting on me, centering me, keeping me alive in my own life, a resistant force to what could conjure this loss of self, and maybe this is present in the work and even becomes present for the viewer. Maybe more than anything else that's the whole thing, and this was all very much like her, her whole affect was one of "fuck the world and whatever it wants of you and me, let's just sit here, have a drink and talk for awhile, tell me what's wrong, I'll listen, I'll understand". This also keeps things from stagnating, the bottomless well of self-examination is so vast that you're constantly driven to express it in new and unexpected ways, you avoid the monotony of using the same medium, branding your style and images and point of view in a repetitive cycle that's far more capitalist than what I ever understood the savant-and-sage-like nature of the artist to be.

Sometimes it seems as if your whole life's work is dedicated to the mission of dispersing your family's ashes; a long grieving process that looks to the future. Many people seem to have this reaction. It's touching. Your mother is now in nearly a dozen museums where her story becomes part of cultural history and education, as well as admired on the walls of homes around the world. Some of these people have also asked about the complexity of "selling your mother". This refers to the ashes, but also her image, words, voice and belongings. Does the transaction interrupt the burial? How long will your supply of ashes last?

The ashes won't last but I like what you say, a burial interrupted. And it all does point to the future. But how? Why hold onto pain, why express it, or put it out there to others? People who suffer approach my work like a warm bath, for others it's far more difficult to accept, like not what they expected or something, which is ridiculous, clock back through time, art is not only filled with death and mourning, every square inch of it, it is itself an expression of death and mourning. Museums are morgues, why not fill one with ashes? Sure there's always this fleeting contemporary moment, like a festive party and you can do and think whatever you want, you can make art for the party, colorful, sexy, absurd, expensive, flamboyant art and some of it will be great art, but it's all going to the morgue eventually. I remember seeing a huge Warhol in the Met lobby; flowers, bright colorful flowers, but looking closer you see the aging weave of the canvas, the cracking paint, and more than that, you feel it. The work itself decaying, like a body does, and then lying interned in a box, it's just a really beautiful box. Laying the ashes into images is a simple gesture, death is absurd, all our lives we're up and about, talking, laughing, making things happen, then we vanish, in dirt or flames, whichever. But to embed the ash, the remains, into the living past image, and particularly a photographic image, that's a beautiful contradiction, a beautiful suspension. But then it has to be more than the gesture, you have to tell the story, you have to get the context right. And again, why this as a choice, art is all about choices, why choose this? The things that terrify us aren't to be avoided, as Rilke rightly says, they pursue us, looking for our help. You can't avoid relating to something you're completely bound to. The avoidance of things like that produces more cruelty in the world than the somber inward moments my work might provoke.

But let me answer the "selling my mother question" There's so many ways to answer that. She used to tell me that when she died I should cremate her, and put her urn on my mantelpiece and yell at her when I was mad about something. She was outrageous. If she thought I could make money "selling her" she'd be thrilled to know that. She was so classy, even elegant, so attractive, but she was never formal. A friend of mine was talking to her on the phone once and they heard a crash (it was the Christmas tree, one of her cats jumping for a decoration got caught on the light wires and the whole tree fell over). My mom's laconic response was "Oh god the Christmas tree just exploded" she just didn't care about what most people care about, she didn't care about money, or what people thought of her, she didn't judge people, a drunk wasn't a drunk, they were a friend, or maybe someone that needed help.

She'd overdosed before. After a very bad day of paramedics and hospitals and whatever else, they revived her and she told me (without further explanation) that it was all ok, because I was an artist. Me being an artist really mattered to her. I was all she ever really cared about, the only thing that wasn't tainted somehow, I gave her a lot of hope, it was always just the two of us. I also tried to help her even as a little kid, I remember her pain after her divorce from my father, I was maybe 8 or 9, and she would ask me why? Why did your father leave me? I'd try to answer in whatever limited way I could, I was always trying to make wrong things right for her, even her death, this final wrong, I may be trying to put that right too, it's sewn into me somehow. But it went both ways, as she once put it, she "gave me my life", she meant she didn't hold me back. Now that I have a child I see how reciprocal it all is, the mirror-like way it all develops, lavished love breeds lavished love, extremes breed extremes, it is what it is, you can't resist it.

What should we honor and preserve? In the most cockeyed, you-would-never-guess-it way, my mother got something about love, it wasn't through books, or religion, she was just wired to get it, and she suffered all these hideous abuses, and made terrible choices, and that was all part of getting it too. It was easy to judge her as wrong, she was wrong all over the place, but what was right is the only thing I can think of that's really worth celebrating or preserving, and it floats there in the ashes of her eyes and in all the things she left behind. I feel it all the time. If you're an artist around all that what sort of fool would you be to ignore that?

Something different, if your child said "Dad, I want to be an artist," what advice would you give her

Honestly I'd groan inwardly in despair and be super happy at the same time. It's such a hard game, and I don't mean the vocation, every vocation has its unique challenges, but art is a disaster in a glutted and saturated world where originality is almost impossible; the competitiveness is so diabolical that it's often not enough the other one wins, but you have to lose; where you have to answer for yourself in all these crazy ways, represent yourself, stand alone in front of what you do and on and on; then all the gate keepers and taste makers, some qualified, others not; it can be isolating, you come into things and back out of them again when you've done your dance together; then there's the money problems and the rest of it all; but that all being said I still think its the best response there is to being alive in the world. Not necessarily the best contribution, but the best response. At the very least art means you're paying attention, you care enough to have an opinion, are aware enough about the fact that you're alive, that you want to leave a personal mark, encapsulating the experience. Stuff like that is golden. There's something powerless and futile and unjustifiable about art that in an inverted sense lends it its special power, it's not overt.

Over the past couple of years, you've made it a ritual to start your studio visits by reading a page from a James Baldwin text. Why did you start doing this? What is your intention? How does it work out?

Yeah I used to read this passage from I Am Not Your Negro, the transcript from that film, I'm not sure where it originated.

"I have always been struck, in America, by an emotional poverty so bottomless and a terror of human life, of human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears to be able to achieve any visible, organic connection between his public stance and his private life...This failure of the private life has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct..."

What is that?

I guess I thought this passage would help the visitor understand where I was coming from, that I was attempting to do exactly that, create a connection between my public stance and my private life. Life can be very hard, incredibly sad, especially at the level of the individual, "The whole earth can suffer no greater torment than a single soul." I have a binder of little stories, brief passages from things I've seen, or heard, moments of single soul suffering, and of course my mother's story. There's another Baldwin thing I keep close to me. His novel "Giovanni's Room", maybe to end here with that is the perfect summary for all this, we're ultimately talking about intent, right? Why do this, or that, what is meant by this or that? I mean ok I make things, crafted objects. At its simplest definition that's what art is, a made object that can be silently contemplated, evocative in many ways, but it's just as obvious, whether stated or unstated, that each of these objects, by whoever makes them has some purpose or aim for having been made in the first place. Giovanni's Room is a disquieting book about love, disquieting because it's also about a character who is unable to love, can't really get with another in a real, and vulnerable, and honest way. He's a murderer and the people who come close to him die or become lost. Baldwin plumbed the murky depths of us, found the horrors and emptinesses there and brought them into the light where they could be seen, and held, and acted upon. I think as far as what we need now, or what art might be valid now, this sort of intent to provoke an audience to a place where they think about individual suffering and love, and relate themselves to an expression like that, well it should be given at least a lane on the highway. No?