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**From**

Goat Island:   
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**To**

A Young Practitioner,

“In this present period of unemployment, you can render a high service to your own community, and to the whole country, by co-operating with all movements to accelerate building constructions, especially of family dwellings, new roads and local and state public works. These measures will provide employment, enlarge buying power, increase the circulation of money, create markets for farms and factories, and assure prosperity and contented homes.”

I found this text during a Goat Island workshop, on a research visit to the Elks Memorial Building at the corner of Diversey and Sheridan in Chicago. It was one of a series of texts, images, sounds, and associations collected on the trip, which later served as a resource for a collaborative performance. Instructions for collecting materials on that research trip included finding: 1. a gigantic detail; and 2. an echo from two different constructional forms, examples being a wall/painting – or ornament/furniture.

Friends unfamiliar with Goat Island’s performances ask me what they do, and I tell them: they use text, but not to tell a standard theatrical narrative or story; and they use movement, though it’s not what you would expect by the term “dance”. And combining those texts and movements creates something beyond those individual components of text and movement, and the best word we have for that is “performance”.

Bryan has said, “We practice creative research and assembly.” Lin sees “research as an agent from the outside that transforms the material within; that brings nutrients to the digestion of our personal, individual experiences.”

Goat Island’s performance work is developed collaboratively, a model also adopted when teaching their workshops. Divisions between individuals, and ideas of authorship are blurred – through this we see that the creative material connects to others, and is completed by them. The emphasis is on process, systems, structure, research tools for creation. Use what is around you, approach it with fresh eyes and ears: use the other workshop participants, Goat Island, the room you’re in, the building, the city - other bodies. Use your memory as a resource - mental recall, body recall – not as route to nostalgia or therapy, not necessarily to tell your story, but to tell a wider narrative which reveals the extent to which your body already contains a wider narrative. Critical evaluation is transformed into the need to respond creatively. The work exists in the moment, vital, perhaps not yet even assimilated or understood by the artists who made it. Give up what seems important to you; it’s not yours. Think formally and then thematically. Not analysing material to find its meaning, but accumulating material, finding unexpected connections.

We are already participating in a Goat Island workshop. Collaborating through words, sounds, touch, texture, viewing, thinking. The material is there to be received, processed, transformed. Keep a journal observing the incidence of the colour yellow. Memorize the street names between Monroe and Belmont: how many streets is that? – the geography traversed almost daily, let’s look at this a different way.

And in ten years you will find yourself living in San Francisco, writing a letter, which says: “CJ refuses to believe in the existence of the absolute. I have found it.” And you will mail this letter to the person who, ten years earlier, wore your left black leather glove at the same time you wore your right black leather glove.

This is not everything I have to say, but this is all the time / for all we’ve experienced together. I would like to review a few thoughts now; lessons if you will. There are seven of them that I thought of specifically as it pertains to collaboration.

**#1. Remember other people.**

Love them, hate them, give them gifts, steal their ideas, but focus on others to get out of your self. These other people will be your co-workers of course but also your audience and also those who have nothing to do with you or your art or your lifestyle. By all this, we mean, remember that there are people who live outside the art world. And we like to remember these because there is more to life than art. And we like to remember these because there is hunger and injustice outside. And we like to remember these because we want to communicate with other worlds of thought.

If you have someone that you can work with, make a commitment and work through the differences. Make a commitment to supplement the gaps with your own contributions. Pay no attention to those who will tell you not to work with your friends. It is an insurmountable work to be an artist. It is shallow to rely on your own energy. Ideas like to be cross fertilized. The bonding that happens between artists working together produces an integrity that reads into the work ... is visible in the work ... communicates to the audience and viewer.

**#2. Beware of Brilliance.**

Creativity and genius will only take you so far. They might be of little importance. Beware of these gifts if you have them. Beware of these gifts if you see them in those you collaborate with. Look for a sense of humor. Look for conflict resolution skills, forgiveness, the ability to listen, the ability to place faith in other people’s fragmented ideas, a comfortability with failure, a disciplined nature and a love of work.

**#3. Make small plans.**

Temper your big dreams. Dream the smallest thing you can think of and try to perfect that. It's good to have one tiny perfect thing in your history. This is not a small challenge there are infinite details to perfect in a small venture and the changes force themselves in, expanding the vision. I feel that my eyes have become sharper in seeing small things since I have been working with Goat Island. As a child I studied in a one room school house and the first word I learned to read was “LOOK.” My vision for a classroom would be an empty room save a table a chair and a microscope.

**#4. Value the work of your hands and body.**

This physical body is the meeting place of worlds. Spiritual, social, political, emotional, intellectual worlds are all interpreted through this physical body. When we work with our hands and body to create art or simply to project an idea from within, we imprint the product with a sweat signature, the glisten and odor which only the physical body can produce. These are the by-products of the meeting of worlds through the physical body. It is visible evidence of the work and effort to move from conception to production. Our bodies are both art elements and tools that communicate intuitively.

**#5. Work slowly.**

This follows quickly after the last lesson about the physical body. It takes lots of time to work by hand, but this time input is a distinctive trade mark. The old world crafts people made things. We think they are valuable not because of their content but because of the time signature of the work. Their bodies were not more capable than ours to join wood or carve stone or create paintings or make dances; in fact, it is possible that the physical body is more capable today than it was hundreds of years ago. But a possible advantage the old world did have was a different concept of time. Perhaps they were more at ease with the passage of time. It was acceptable for them to take years to finish a work of art. We would advise you to look for long periods of time at your project. Maybe put it away, forget about it, bring it back years later finish it after you have become a different person.

**#6. Learn to say no.**

This follows quickly after the last lesson about working slowly. If you work slowly you will not have time for every project that will be presented to you so you will pass up creative opportunities. It’s easier to say no when you are older, But while you are still young you might not have many opportunities of a lifetime being offered to you and it will be hard for you to say no. But I think the chance of a lifetime comes quite frequently to those who are looking. If you follow this advice you will definitely regret having said no to some great opportunity and you will learn to live with that regret, but in return, you will have time.

**#7. Be thankful for your fears**.

Add this to the others that have come / the day is still beginning.   
Never take the same route, always vary your path.  
Don’t write with a slow pen get one that flows well.

See as a new eye, as a novice, as someone who isn’t jaded by fixed notions.  
Invent 7 ways to exit your chair.  
Stand with the smile of a sad person. Mark the place where your soul lives.   
Breath out through the nose like my grandmother’s laboured breathing. Life was heavy and hard and she lived long and did not believe she would die, no not that way.  
She said: With my arms I don’t think I could touch the sky.

Dive a hundred times into a harbour.  
Fall into the grip of another.   
Perform a whirling dance to purge the toxic spider venom.

Listen to me:  
I heard the creaking rope of a rope bridge and the crashing of the ocean waves 100 feet below. I heard a thousand stones moved by a hundred feet grinding against each other like the gnashing of monumental teeth against mountainous bones. I saw a man climbing muddy down a rocky mountainside on hands and heels dragging his bottom along the slippery wet stones. I heard another man say “He’s trying to get a bit of punishment for all his wrongdoing.”

Move in place as seven body parts step in the same spot at least twice before you can make a new footprint. Breathe only once every fourteen moves.

All that my heart longs for, may you achieve, and be my accomplice.

Get your writing materials ready. Close your eyes.  
Adjust your body so that you are sitting comfortably.  
Take a deep breath. Let your shoulders relax.  
Let your forehead relax.

I forgive you all the endless hours you were away.

Coming apart at the seams, I need to get a hold on things in my brain. There’s a building   
coming down across the street. Men are turning the bricks and mortar to a fine silt with a huge machine and the dust shoots out into a pile.

Meanwhile in the building where I live the roof leaks and the landlord would not like to fix it. There are buckets in the attic that have to be emptied and when they are not, they overflow. The water pools around the ceiling fan. Yellow marks show where the rain went. Please oh please don’t make me climb that rickety ladder to the attic. Don’t make me lift down that bucket to empty its dirty leaky roof water.

The dust is everywhere and settling in my room.

But when, from a long distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone more fragile, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; hear unflinchingly in the tiny and almost imperceptible drop of their essence the vast structure of recollection.

Memorize to perform. Perform to remember.

When is the sky lavender and the sea slate hard and flat and not much like water?  
In the mornings the sky over the lake is white or pale blue and the water like metal deflecting the sun.  
In the afternoon and early evening the sky and water are shimmery shades of perfect blue.   
In bad weather it is all a mud grey with the cold and stormy.   
What time is it when the sky is lavender and the sea slate, hard as a piece of rock and twice as silent?

You are probably wondering / how does one come to or reach this place of a young practitioner? I still consider myself a young practitioner, and am now trying to decide when writing this letter, with the thoughts that are in my head of when one enters this transition. What is the counter point of a practicing artist to that of the training or discipline one enters into to reach this certain place?

In 1994, I graduated from art school but previously to this time I was within the guise of preparing, preparing to be where I can situate myself now.

In the context of background, we are informing ourselves through what we have learnt along the many interruptions and decisions we have reached until the point at which we can be decisive to be a practitioner, within the particular field of the arts we have chosen.

I am still at this point of preparing now, paying close attention to all the details and information that encircles me. I still have a desire and need to learn what is placed in front of oneself and others around.

In an exercise on departure during a Goat Island workshop last summer, I was given a white sheet of paper from a participant with a single word written on it. The word was openness. We asked each participant to take the single words given to them as a gesture of a gift to take with them, and possibly guide and incorporate into their lives throughout the year.

Openness is now blue tacked onto the wall next to my work desk at home. This single word I have taken into and incorporated into my daily life both private and public.

The act of receiving, and the acceptance of a gift is an important philosophy I adhere to, especially in the practice of one's artwork. Through receiving one can attach many different levels, how to be influenced, to take on others thoughts as presents and reinterpret into your mind and body. Once the digestion of the gift has been articulated in oneself then we begin to understand the nature and the power of sharing. Taking forward the information given. This idea of ownership becomes a wider participation, and one of interaction and creativity with others.

Roger Bourke, conceptual Installation artist and teacher on my art degree course once told me in a tutorial to firstly stop, then look and most importantly listen and be patient with your work. Do not rush, allow us the viewer to see what you are making. Be confident and allow the material to come to you, begin to see with different eyes and learn the value of listening, the silence of yourself and others.

In hearing these words of guidance it allowed for confidence to build. The display and act of mentoring and listening is a large part of my teaching and arts practice. To create a space where seeing and hearing is an integral and pivotal role in how to be understood and acknowledged. As a young practitioner it is your decision whom you wish to take from and be influenced by. Choose wisely. Identify possible situations you wouldn't normally come into contact with. Allow for a great deal of care and in return it's own saturation to take you forward in confidence and articulation.

Be open to new discoveries. Being excited by the many languages you are able to learn and create / you understand who you are.  
You understand who you could be.  
You understand the gap between the two.  
Sometimes, you close the gap.  
You become who you might be.  
You experience this for a moment.  
What if we call that moment: “the classroom”?  
I am talking nonsense, I know.  
But I have had enough of the rules.  
How straight the path, and how strict.  
This you must do; this you must not.  
That explains why we repeat the same thing over and over again.  
Why we see so many animated features starring heroic mice.   
Ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night, will that ever be your homework?  
Or might this be your homework?  
1. Describe the largest thing.  
2. Describe the difference between green and yellow.  
3. Describe something rough.  
4. What is 62ºF?  
5. What weighs 4 pounds 6 ounces?  
6. What is shaped like a hand?  
7. What can you lift?  
8. What is the opposite of music?  
9. Describe a perfume.  
10. Describe a delicacy.  
11. What unbalances?  
Take as much time as you need.

Strain the machine.  
Never think yourself singular.  
Absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly.

Don’t labour under the burden of importance.  
Don’t use up all your energy chasing the dollar.  
There are children in America who haven’t learned how to play.  
They sit immobilized.  
There they go, strapped into cars, into videogames, approaching their imprisonable years.  
The municipality has removed their sidewalks.  
Concentrate.  
Do one thing at a time.  
Never grow tired.  
Because what if we call that moment: “the performance”?  
I saw a dance, or a comedy.  
It was an act, people I did not know, doing things I did not understand.  
Yet I felt I knew them, and I felt I understood.

And as I left the theatre — I was exactly as old as you are now — I saw everything reel, as one does when one falls from a horse or bicycle, and I asked myself whether there was not an existence altogether different from the one I knew, in direct contradiction to it, but itself the real one, which, being suddenly revealed to me, filled me with that hesitation which sculptors, in representing the Last Judgment, have given to the   
awakened dead who find themselves at the gates of the next world.  
I knew then that I had a place, and that I had found it.  
I will love the experience longer than the rest because I have taken longer to get to love it.

You must forgive me…I have been unwell all this time.   
I am not yet well, writing comes hard to me, and so you must take these few lines for more.  
My hand is tired.  
I think of you often, and with such concentrated wishes that that in itself really ought to help you somehow.

Whether this letter can really be a help, I often doubt.  
But what if we call that moment: “the right now”?  
Prepare ourselves not for the world as it is, but for the world as it might become.  
In this preparation, we experience this world as it becomes that one, for a moment.  
For now / I cannot speak without hearing your voice. Your voice sits inside my voice and then again your voice sits outside my voice. Here is my voice. I exist. But I exist does not come before we exist. You switch on twelve mechanical birds, start them chirping, read me directions to a ghost town while a woman walks by in a grass dress. You kick my imagination into the air like a particle of dust and it floats. But it’s airborne with your imagination. Eventually, the two settle together on the floor, indistinguishable.  
I cannot teach without you teaching me.

I will tell you what I’ve been thinking lately. And listen for your response carried by lines of air. I have been thinking

One does not always want to be thinking in the future, if as sometimes happens, one is living in the present.

At twenty, I expected in the coming years to live the life of an artist. Having had artist friends in high school who jumped chain-linked fences to swim in swimming pools late at night when the gates were locked while I was trying unsuccessfully to fake an injury to remove myself from the agony of cheerleading at night games; and having painted paintings in a college art studio with skylights, where I spent afternoons discussing my paintings with Professor Thompson who sat in the corner of the room with a free standing ashtray at his elbow flicking a long-ashed cigarette into it as he told me to observe the beauty when I turned my paintings upside down and on their sides; having had these experiences I had a pretty romantic idea of the life of an artist. I was not prepared for what followed – researching pooper-scoopers, toys, and ear plugs for a patent office and delivering plate after plate of French toast to craving Los Angeles customers, leaving only fractions of night-time to make art. I did it by pooling my energy with others so that together we had enough usable heat to make a performance. But then, I saw the work of Pina Bausch, Tadeuz Kantor, and Tadashi Suzuki. I needed to work harder, much harder. These artists did not stop where I stopped. They kept moving. And they ran so far that the distance covered in their performances, caught me up and overtook me. The only way I could make work of this distance was by taking time. I moved to Chicago and found collaborators who were not in a hurry. I rested in each moment with the process and the moments accumulated. It was almost mundane. Mundane in the sense of a plodding ordinariness, a daily step taking of one and half to two years, to make a work. But also mundane in the sense of 17th century astrology when the word pertained to the horizon - that visible line of the in-between; between the two, of time to come and time elapsed. The final performances, when finished, had a rigor I liked. No one told me about this methodical, caught-in-the-moment beauty.

All you need now is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one-thing melts in another, until taxis are dancing with the daffodils.

Yours,

CJ  
Bryan  
Karen  
Mark   
Matthew   
and Lin

**NOTES**

The members of Goat Island wrote Letter to a Young Practitioner collaboratively, and delivered it for the first time at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago on March 16, 2000.

The text has been published in Goat Island’s [*Schoolbook 2*](http://www.goatislandperformance.org/publication.htm), and Theatre in Crisis?, edited by Maria M Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester University Press, 2002).

/ marks the transition from one author-reader to the next. The authors-readers progressed in the order, determined by chance, in which their names appear at the end.

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