Richard Hell

What Just Happened

WITH IMAGES BY CHRISTOPHER WOOL

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WHEN, IN THE PAST

When, in the past, my childhood bedroom and balloon not merely the familiar celebratory toy, nor verb, nor basket carrier but the relative of baleen that “flexible, horny” substance once used as corset stays wherein I was made to stay come bedtime and wherefrom I gazed out the window on days so long that sunlight lingered after bedtime far away a dog whaled.
BECAUSE

for Katherine

They wandered through the hand in hand.
—Bill Knott, “Untitled (‘They wandered [...]’)

The reasons I like to be held by you
are like paint-by-number results
your touch speaks to make me
what I’m spoken by it
and I understand that
physically, as
physicality is all
and everything
the way that an excited
poet once claimed to read Chinese
ideograms sans prior knowledge
although in our case it’s true
you, speechless, remove
all my unknown by touch
and I happy
then become, because
it’s you and no one else who does.
AFTER RIMBAUD

Everything is something else.

TO PERCEIVE IS TO READ or LESSNESS

It’s not that everything speaks, but that we can only perceive a thing as signifying, here in our mocking remove from meaning lessness.
THE THING

The thing about books
on their shelves is how
they look so uniformly
discreet while within is the
meat of all being
human like hues of glittery
or elemental sculpted pouring
into cups of teeny symbols almost
as prettily as the reciprocating
sexual object of one’s desires
though mental
usually. On the shelves, each
book separated by its binding
no more combines with another
than anything bound will with
another bound thing but
they do with a person.
The most interesting
thing about minds is
the books that bind them.
I always feel like what
I write is actually only two thirds
of itself because the other part
is the writing’s position
in a story. I mean the poem
is part of something else
that determines
and completes it, and
that other thing is indescribable. Say
you are reading this now, which
is a pretty safe bet, but
no; in fact, I am writing it.
I dropped out of high school to be a poet, so I needed to try to teach myself, by reading and writing, how to write. My first big insight was that poetry is metaphor (is that a metaphor?), in metaphor’s broadest sense—the evocation of something by invoking something else. Life is a dream, or death as sleep, and “even your shoulders are petty crimes” or “the hum-colored cabs.” Do those last two count as metaphors? I don’t know. Maybe the shoulders were committed in innocence. But ignorance of the law excuses not. What if all metaphors are literal? Inside a dog it’s too dark to read.

Language is about something meaning something else, just as it’s about a thing only existing in relationship to other things. As Borges pointed out in his late talk “The Metaphor,” [This Craft of Verse, Harvard, 2000] it’s been said—in the instance by Lugones—that words themselves are metaphors, in the sense that they contain other, underlying, prior meanings that have come to have the overriding meaning of the present word. An example Borges gives is “king” which derives from “cyning,” an Old English word that originally meant “a man who stands for the kin—for the people.” So, maybe the king is no longer related to all his subjects, but metaphorically he is, because of his title. And, to get even more abstract, words are metaphors in that they themselves, a sequence of alphabet letters or of sounds indicate the objects, acts and relationships, etc., they convey. Or is that wrong because the resemblance is arbitrary? (Yes it is.) There’s nothing about the sequence s, t, o, n, e, or the sound it signals, in
themselves, that has anything in common with a stone. (Then again, humming hums.) Except that...? (And words start seeming similar to that to which they refer.) And to pull back from the word to entire poems, the poems of many recent writers—John Ashbery, for instance—while not much operating in the classical way of using metaphor to refresh our sensation or understanding of phenomena, seem to be themselves metaphors for the poet’s inner being,¹ or the tenor of it at the time of composition. “Tenor” in the context of the concept of metaphor means the subject in the metaphor, while “vehicle” denotes how that subject is getting re-imaginatively evoked. For instance, Roy Orbison hummed like chauffered teal.

The longer I live, the more I can see patterns in my experiences and behavior and everyone else’s. That’s logical. A number of those accumulated, ever-provisional deductions seem to be converging now, drawn together by their density into an ultimate: that reality most resembles wherein combine wakefulness and sleep, the living and the inanimate. This is not unknown; another thing a person learns is that nothing’s original.

Existence takes place outside of life and non-life, but at their intersection or the space between them, or their combination, and one way or another art is about this situation and is rooted in it. Reality is the mixture of consciousness (self-aware life) and the unconscious/inanimate (I’m trying to include everything) and art is how humans investigate and express that territory.

¹ That inner being is a dream. All is a dream. Life is a dream. Death’s dream. We are the dream of the dead, the inanimate. We arose from the dead universe; heat and light and water and rock. We are its dream, the dream of mud, and when we fall asleep we come nearest to what things are.
1. snow is falling in huge clumps
   and gravity seems depressing

2. engrave on tombstone:
   out of control

3. people are different
   from each other and
   can’t communicate

4. whenever I learn that someone has read something by
   me I realize I haven’t written what I thought I had

5. what is the difference between eyes opened and eyes
   closed

6. Poetry is what reminds you what it’s like to live.

7. the thing concealed by
   everything mysterious
   is one’s description of it

8. hounded by the desire
   to be realistic

9. I decided to let myself become
   this thing of rock and roll