

2HB

Acknowledgements

This page is made use of in order to convey appreciation and indebtedness to others. On this occasion we include Mary and Margaret G., Mère Marie Poussepin, John O'Donohue, L. Fuller, Gaston Leroux, Ida, Doris Lessing and La Marquise de Belbeuf. There are others.

Believe us

A.R. and R.K.C.



2HB *vol.5*

Contents

I

Acknowledgements no.513

AUDREY REYNOLDS AND ROSIE COOPER

4

Circle Poem (Radio On, for Chris Petit)

Circle Poem (HICA | Loch Ruthven)

Untitled (Circle Poem)

Untitled (Circle Poem)

ALEC FINLAY

8

Always the Same, Always Different

FRANCES STARK

12

Antananarivo

EMMETT WALSH

16

credo (not | but) 2007 – 09

ALEC FINLAY

ohm sweet ohm
elm sweet elm

beyond mountains
mountains beyond

falling inside
the rain

were names
before
there

Always the Same, Always Different

FRANCES STARK *Always the Same, Always Different*

FRANCES STARK

I'm heading west from Chinatown so I turn right onto Cesar Chavez, which is also, in fact, Sunset Boulevard. I'm driving a Volkswagen Vanagon instead of my customary wagon because the station wagon's the car with the baby seat. Right now I'm alone, free to cruise up Sunset Boulevard to check myself into The Argyle hotel. The only hotel I've been in on Sunset Boulevard was the Tropicana, which is now a parking lot. I never spent the night there, I only—for lack of a more dignified term—'partied' there a few times in the early eighties as a kind of fourth-rate punk rock groupie, and not even with any bands worth remembering. But now I'm going to this landmark art deco hotel to celebrate my having been asked to contribute a text in honor of Ed Ruscha, one of the most consistently inspiring, solid, and profound artists of contemporary American art. I'm not going to celebrate with a glass of champagne, but by corralling my notes and whittling my sentences in a room with a view of all of L.A. Between the driver seat and the empty passenger seat I've thrown down my laptop computer and my not-exactly-portable inkjet printer. The printer's an awkward drag, but I still rely on hard copies. When making an imperfect stop or fast turn I extend my arm out to ensure my writing hardware doesn't fly forward or tumble back, and this protective maneuver reminds me of riding between the two front seats of our '65 Ford Econoline van, occasionally flying into the back at intersections. My printer and computer suddenly seem more fragile and helpless than a kid who loves the thrill of a nicely managed tumble. Imagining the potential damage makes me think of Ruscha's 1967 book, *Royal Road Test*, in which a manual typewriter gets thrown from a moving vehicle. The Royal was a memory-free machine, a handsome tool unable to bother with storing incomplete thoughts next to the best completed ones, unable to hold a person's artwork or photos of that artwork and/or photos that inspired that artwork on top of photos of that person's baby turning into a kid.

Right before I left Chinatown to drive to Hollywood, I took my laptop downstairs to The Great Wall book store to find out what, if anything, the signs on Ruscha's *The Old Tool and Die Building* said. I could make out only two familiar Chinese characters. I wasn't supposed to show anybody, but I figured this was entirely out of context, and besides, how else could I be sure what I was looking at? I mean, never before had I been unable to decipher the

text on a Ruscha painting, so despite my thrill at the shock of utter illegibility I still felt I had to at least investigate. The man in the bookstore looked puzzled, and between strained Chinese utterances he said, "It is not right it is not right." "What is that?" his colleague asked. "It's a painting," I answered. They were somehow taken aback by my answer and then subsequently flabbergasted as they stuttered to make anything out. "Well that's a Chinese character and that's one on its side, but nothing's really right," they said. I thanked them heartily while indicating with my face, "As I suspected." They looked so proud, as if they helped to discover an act of deception before it was too late. I went away smiling and even laughing a bit as I pulled out of the Mandarin Plaza parking lot.

The radio was stolen out of the van so I have to listen to the soundtrack of the percussive VW engine but I also have a song in my head, called *Ed's Babe*, by The Fall. It came up when the word 'offspring' leaped out at me from the cover of a catalogue of a lesser-known body of Ed's Ruscha's work, *Birds Fish and Offspring*. I had been wondering about whether it might be productive to give Ed's actual offspring, Eddie, a call and see if he couldn't come over and talk. Last time I saw him his father's new paintings were still so top secret I didn't even know what they were and he wouldn't tell me despite my wanting to get to the bottom of the intense enthusiasm on his face. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, because we were with our two toddlers who were basically just crashing into walls and making any developed conversation pretty much impossible. Eddie probably knows *Ed's Babe*, The Fall's lamentation of a life changed by a baby. A friend told me that the late British DJ John Peel often described The Fall as being "always the same, always different." "Surely there is no better description of Ed Ruscha's work," said my friend. "And surely no better example than the revised tool or die." He meant the tool and die, though that 'or' is too good to ignore. And so you see, I also secretly told him about the painting on account of being positively unable to contain myself upon seeing it.

On Sunset, right when you hit the 99-cent store the Hollywood sign comes into view. Hollywood isn't even a real city and I can't believe my dad hadn't bothered to tell me that until relatively recently. The Southern California roadside landscape has always caused factual minutiae to spew endlessly out of my father's mouth. Whether driving cautiously down skid row in a station wagon, cruising brazenly down the strip in a Corvette, or in a pick-up tangled in freeway traffic and news radio, he would always keep me in tune with whatever he knew about whatever he saw. The impossibility of being able

to assess each increment of change became especially clear whenever driving through Watts, the neighborhood where my great-grandparents settled in California in 1921—their house is now a gas station. My father would always give quasi-Marxist explanations for why buildings and companies were where they were and did what they did and who owned what and how that might have mattered: TRW, IBM, Hughes Aircraft, Fluor Corp., and any number of other unassuming corporate headquarters inside of which our culture was perpetually and invisibly being transformed. In contrast, Ruscha's *Blue Collar Tool and Die* tells it like it is: inside they're a tool and die outfit, they make things for making things. We tool and die. Not such a bad life for a lot of people, depending on the wages. In any case, that structure looks just like all those light industrial concrete tilt-ups I grew up amidst, and also just like this building my dad pointed out once on Olympic Boulevard, the Papermate pen factory where he worked the graveyard shift while attending city college. I called him to ask about the pen factory and told him what I was up to and he said *Ed who Venice what Joan who?* But I told him about the drawing *Will 100 Artists Please Draw a 1950 Ford from Memory?* and about the Standard signs and the tool and die. Before long he started calling me to share insights about what the paintings were making him think about, instead of just calling to report in monologue form about traffic jams or who's misusing their leaf blowers or overwatering their lawns. While skimming through *Guacamole Airlines and Other Drawings* with my dad on the line, I came across one of my favorite anomalous Ruscha drawings, called *An Average Guy*. I teared up as I sat there experiencing Ruscha's 'average guy-ness' touching an actual average guy.

Oops, I'm not paying attention and forgot to veer left on Sunset which leaves me on Hollywood, a lucky mistake, because I need to pay a visit to the Hollywood branch of Washington Mutual, formerly Home Savings of America, formerly Coast Savings—whatever. As soon as I turn back onto Sunset I encounter the following massive LED message: YOU'LL SEE WHY, JUST READ IT! I scrawl it into a notebook lodged between lap and steering wheel, and two seconds later on the other side of the street—you'll see why, just read it—there stands EMPIRE BUILDING, an innocent enough storefront saying everything without even meaning to.

As much as that would be the perfect ending, there's still quite a few blocks before I hit the strip and land in my hotel. I can see a big CNN logo up ahead, which reminds me I have to confess to sharing *The Old Tool and Die Building*

with one more person, an artist whom I've admired since the early nineties. We finally met during the 2004 presidential campaign so our conversations revolved solely around the news coverage of the war and the election, and regrettably not each other's art. More recently I visited his studio with a head full of Ed Ruscha instead of CNN, and it became obvious that he was indebted in the best possible way to Ruscha. This artist's insistence on being a comedian reinforced for me the importance of Ruscha's sense of humor, highlighting that certain economical audacity required to be equally funny and serious at the same time. I wanted to get into it with him, drive down a road from Ruscha to him to me, making perfect sense of my own particular place and perspective art historically. But I was relaxed and happy enough in the passenger seat. A bit delirious still from having just seen Ruscha's newest paintings, again I couldn't help myself, and so I finally said, "There's this Ed Ruscha painting I am positively dying to tell you about..."

Antananarivo...

Today I intended on writing a sonnet during the thunder storm – regarding a gold mine in Ghana – but was distracted by pairing off my family’s washed socks.

According to the dictionary on my computer – set to the New Oxford American Dictionary – ‘Baird, John Logie (1888 – 1946), was a Scottish inventor. He made the first transatlantic transmission and demonstration of colour television in 1928 using a mechanical system that was soon superseded by an electronic system.’

My elder brother, sat at the dinner table with myself and the rest of our family, told us a story about one of his friends who was also a teacher of physical education in one of the local schools. This friend, named D, had for some time been a member of the Territorial Army, a division of the British Army that is not in full-time service. Those involved in this branch of national defence have always been mired with the tag of ‘Part-time’ or ‘Boy Scout’ soldiers, possibly due to the connotations arising from the morose looking buildings in which weekly drill meetings are carried out – community centres with the addition of barbed wire escarpments and Royal military coats of arms, appearing as grown-up and brutal versions of the neglected Scout huts and village halls that have been sagging with wood rot in Britain since the 1950s.

D was recently called up to serve on the front line in Afghanistan, a duty he supposedly accepted with relish. However, within a couple of weeks he had been airlifted out of action, on account of an allergy to a granola bar. The funniest part, my brother professed, is that D knows he’s allergic to nuts. We’d once gone to an ‘all-you-can-eat’ chinese buffet with some other teachers, and he’d started coughing shallowly. When quizzed as to the reason for his discomfort, D said he couldn’t think what the problem was. He’d eaten a number of things. ‘You reckon it’d be the satay chicken I had?’ This news fuddled me. What was sadder to think; the display of brazen stupidity of one of our country’s many ‘heroes’ waging war in this dusty scuff version of Vietnam; or the fact that the only image springing to my

mind at the dinner table was Tom Hanks enacting heroic idiocy as Forrest Gump, being wounded in the buttocks and subsequently moving into a blissful ignorance of recuperation, fueled by ice-cream and table tennis. I began to wonder what kind of casualties would be surrounding D at the military hospital he was lifted to. Amputees, road side bomb survivors, those with post-traumatic stress disorder; perhaps even other allergy sufferers.

I was in the garden recently with my mother, as she was preparing to mow the lawn, when I spotted a monstrously endowed rhubarb plant in a shaded corner, next to our disheveled tool shed. Walking over to the plant – which I could recall from years past as a far more modest affair – I realized that it had flowered at the top parts, a long bobbled appendage of six inches or so, reaching directly skyward as a totem. Mum told me with mild surprise that in all her years of growing them she had never seen a rhubarb plant flower before. I asked whether she had treated this one differently to its predecessors, which produced a reply in the negative. ‘Oh, well there is one thing it might be,’ she said after a moment of thought. ‘I pour the Holy water out on this patch. That must be it.’ And she began cutting the grass.

My mother is one of a number of women who washes the altar linen for her parish church, which is part of the Roman Catholic faith. The ecclesiastical protocol desires that the linen – which may contain spilt traces of the Divine Host – be twice hand washed separate to the ordinary household wares, and that the water be returned to the bare earth rather than down the sullied depths of man’s sewage pipes.

The following day, when talking to our two dogs in the garden, I noticed an unsightly gap next to the shed. I asked mother where the rhubarb plant had gone. It transpired she had chopped it down to the nub, as the usually delicious, tart pink flesh of the stems had become too green and developed to process for any culinary needs. The usual destination for this numinous fruit was the kitchen of my mother’s friend in the parish, who would make jam and occasionally the odd pie, which would in turn be sold to fellow parishioners to raise funds for various charities and missions. This time however, the remnants had come to rest in the large green waste bin, the contents of which tend to sit and fester for weeks at the side of the house. This bin crossed my mind two weeks later. A bin nearly identical in shape and hue appeared in the national news, as the receptacle for a murdered individual who was cunningly stuffed in and left in front of her house for three weeks, before being discovered by a visiting estate agent who had been

entrusted with shifting the as yet undiscovered corpse's property. Presumably the killers had an unwavering faith in the local councils recycling capabilities.

J told me that he was sitting on the toilet at B's house and was looking at the shower curtain. It was covered by a diagram of the earth. He was thinking what wonderful names Africa is filled with. He spotted Antananarivo. An-tan-an-arivo. I was sold immediately.

William Blake mounted his first and only one-man exhibition of paintings and drawings in 1809, above the hosiery shop owned and operated by his brother. I went to see the re-hang of his 'Poetical and Historical Inventions' show in Tate Britain on my birthday this month. The room, unfortunately, was not an exact facsimile of the show presented 200 years ago. Indeed, there were six paintings missing, the largest of which measured four meters by three. Each misplaced vision was designated a blank white oblong on the blue wall, with dimensions true to the original. Next to these curious gaps hung an explanatory note written by the curators, detailing the invisible contents. Therefore, the most dominating feature of the exhibition was the largest void, titled 'The Ancient Britons', which depicted three archetypal models of man (courageous, beautiful, and ugly) from the last battle of the mythical King Arthur. This work was on a scale unheard of for Blake and marks an epic, ambitious swipe at addressing a nation; a visual crying out against the vapid thought of the day. It must have been exhausting working under the gaze of posterity, attempting to create representations of divinity for an indeterminate public, before finally withdrawing into his own visionary perambulations. His form of self-assured mysticism was met with scorn from critics and public alike, and the show is stated as being a resounding failure over the year long period it was open; a 'farrago of nonsense, unintelligibility, and egregious vanity, the wild effusions of a distempered brain', according to the only known critical review of the time by Robert Hunt of The Examiner. The descriptive catalogue that Blake wrote and printed - which hastened to set the author on a par with the Great Masters of the past - surely didn't endear him to his audience. And it is from this publication that the second most perplexing revelation came to me in the gallery. On an open pair of pages, beneath a perspex box, amidst hand annotated notes by the troubled author, was:

'The great and golden rule of art, as well as life is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect work of art.'

Perhaps a self-imposed nettled ring from which to battle free.

That day when walking around the cavernous effigy to Sir Tate's sugar empire, I thought about a boy I went to school with, who shared the same date of birth as me. Master Baird had been the subject of much bullying, due to his rotund shape and the sharp unfamiliarity of his native Northern Irish dialect. He was particularly derided for once protesting the cause of his stature as being the consumption of too many aspirin tablets when he was younger, to fight the pains of regular headaches; a diagnosis that to this day I have not fathomed, though I have always admired it as a quick-witted and mysterious retort to school bus thugs.

Last year Baird and his partner had been expecting their first son. This little individual, Elliot Jack, was stillborn. In the following weeks I learnt of this via a notification on the social networking site 'facebook'. An obituary had been set up by the grieving parents, and posted round to hundreds of people. Some photographs of the small bundled child and the wreaths at the funeral, eulogized the single day of his appearance and disappearance. The shock of a still child does not transfer kindly to the anonymous skittishness of a world-wide web screen.

Mother and I found a small injured bird in the garden, beneath a swing chair that no longer has its swing structure. One of the dogs drew our attention to it. The young bird couldn't fly or use its left side. It appeared to be toppling over to the right as if inebriated. Mother picked it up and stroked its head. Neither of us could kill it - there was no neck to wring, and a smash from a saucepan would be undignified we agreed. So we took it to the green bin. I pulled up a small tuft of grass from the fetid load, and mum placed the bird inside. I covered the grass back over and closed the lid. As I did so we heard a solitary 'cheep'. We ate garlic bread for dinner that night.

'"Yes, once we understand, really understand, that we are going to die, astronomy is the only consolation [constellation]."'

credo

'not waving but drowning'
– Stevie Smith

not words but writing
not writing but drawing
not drawing but painting
not painting but breathing
not breathing but thinking
not thinking but dreaming
not dreaming but sleeping
not sleeping but listening
not listening but hearing
not hearing but feeling
not feeling but hurting
not hurting but resting
not resting but changing
not changing but remembering
not remembering but hoping
not hoping but knowing
not knowing but believing
not believing but living
not living but living

Alec Finlay (ed)

not shoes but steps
not steps but snow
not snow but salt
not salt but crystal
not crystal but liquid
not liquid but air
not air but wind
not wind but kites
not kites but stones
not stones but splashes
not splashes but rings
not rings but stars
not stars but diodes
not diodes

Alec Finlay & Pravdo Ivanov

not launched but rigged
not rigged but garlanded
not garland but ribbon
not ribbon but sugarwrack
not sugarwrack but saltlick
not saltlick but sillock
not sillock but lithe
not lithe

Jen Hadfield & Alec Finlay

not me but you
not you but hmmm
not hmmm but uh-hu
not uh-hu but ha-ha
not ha-ha but but
not but but not
not not

Alec Finlay & Zuzana Hruskova

not known but unknown
not unknown but known knowns
not known knowns but unknown knowns
not unknown knowns but knowns we know
not knowns we know but knowns we know that we know
not knowns we know that we know but unknowns
not unknowns but knowns
not knowns

Alec Finlay & Donald Rumsfeld

Writers' biographies:

ROSIE COOPER

Rosie Cooper is an artist and curator whose work is at once a show, a spectacle, occasionally a disappointment and sometimes a cliché. Her projects are devised to form investigations into theatricality and performance across numerous artforms. Her work has been shown at the V&A, Danielle Arnaud and the Hackney Empire in London.

ALEC FINLAY

Alec Finlay is an artist, poet, and publisher based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Finlay has adopted such innovative poetic forms as the mesostic and circle-poem. Recent poetic works include *Mesostic Remedy* (morning star, 2009), *Mesostic Interleaved* (morning star & The University of Edinburgh, 2009). Finlay established morning star publications in 1990, a press specialising in publications involving collaborations between artists and poets, including the award-winning pocketbooks series (1999 – 2002).

AUDREY REYNOLDS

Audrey Reynolds makes sculptures, reliefs and paintings, sometimes with plasticine and found detritus, that shift between levels of identifiability and status. Much of this work forms the foundation for the prototype entity she calls *The Museum of Nothing*. Her work has most recently been shown at MOT, Ancient & Modern, Gimpel Fils in London and at *Netwerk*, Belgium.

FRANCES STARK

Frances Stark is a Los Angeles-based artist and writer. She has had solo exhibitions at the Secession, Vienna; Culturgest, Lisbon; Portikus, Frankfurt; van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven; Kunstverein, Munich; greengrassi, London; CRG, New York; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne. Recent group exhibitions include *The Space of Words*, Mudam Luxembourg, 2009; *Quodlibet II*, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, 2009, Cologne; *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse*. ICA, London, (curated by Mark Sladen) 2009; *Yes No Other Options*, Art Sheffield 08, UK (curated by Jan Verwoert), 2008 and *Learn to Read*, Tate Modern, London, 2007. Stark's solo exhibition *But what of Frances Stark, standing by itself, a naked name, bare as a ghost to whom one would like to lend a sheet?* is currently on at Nottingham Contemporary and will travel to CCA Glasgow. Stark is currently the Assistant Professor of Painting & Drawing at USC Roski School of Fine Art, Los Angeles.

EMMETT WALSH

Emmett Walsh lives and works in London, he completed an MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008. Forthcoming projects include an International Fellowship, Greatmore Arts Cape Town (Jan – Feb) in conjunction with Gasworks Gallery London 2010, Bastard Gum, research and film residency, St Helena Island 2009. Recent solo exhibitions/projects include *Antananarivo...*, (with Jochen Plogsties), 101, Brooklyn, NY 2009, *sotto voce*, Spectacle Gallery, Birmingham 2007

Colophon

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