

I can't say how it begins, but I know that I am right in the middle of it. Of what? Something, anything. A conversation, an idea, a sentence, a project, a love story. I think to myself that it's hard not to be in the middle of it. Isn't what living a life is? Finding yourself entangled in it? You don't remember in detail how it all began. How can you? It is intricate. It is all a little messy. Other people are involved. Other voices and stories overlap with yours. You keep opening doors, sharing these stories. Life swirls. You can't stop it. You know that it's going somewhere, but can't tell exactly where, or how long it will take. You just have to let it run its course. But, how do you master the art of letting things run their course when people are scared of what cannot be controlled? How do you convince people that your let-it-run-its-course art project is worth their attention (and money) when it's not the kind of stuff that could be captured in a single JPEG, and therefore look good on the pages of an art magazine? There's too much going on, around you, in your life, in your head. You can't, for the life of it, box it in.

And why would you?

Content spills from your pockets, and that should be a good thing. After all, marketing “artistic content” is what cultural institutions compete over today. So one would expect them to take an interest. Ironically, however, the last thing a strained marketer would have the nerves to do is develop content with you. Markets are fast. Caring for content, on the contrary, takes time. A lifetime potentially. It's a form of affective labor. By listening to someone else's stories, getting involved with their art, we slowly become entangled in their life, sharing the intensity and burden of it all. It's how these relations are forged that give art a life. Otherwise, art is like a telephone that rings,

with no one on the line. Sound absurd? Still, it's the new norm, in the arts, as in society at large: the pressure is on to maintain a state of excitation that has everybody's ears ringing, 24/7, even though no one actually made a call and no one was home to pick up.

Life electricity must flow through the communications grid at all times to keep it up and running. This “juice” is provided—by professionals and amateurs alike—loading the net nonstop, for free, with bit-sized parts of themselves. But this is not content. It's isolated information: what you had for lunch today or who you dated yesterday, unrelated data, readily processed at the speed of a thumb-scroll. Content, on the contrary, takes shape when experiences become related, interwoven and condensed over longer periods of time. This process develops in exchanges with people whom you trust, yet equally in a medium in which you confide. To let art run its course as life takes its turns. In this sense, what would it mean to find ways of sustaining the

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relationship to one's own practice for long enough to permit experiences to accumulate within that practice? And then to metabolize these experiences into content?

In societies of advanced Capitalism today, however, it's as if we were being tested in a social experiment. How far we can flatten out our metabolism and professionalize life? Is it possible to go past the point where we can ceaselessly feed the world with unrelated information, and thereby stop relating to anything or anyone? By this point, everyone will play his or her part, professionally, yet be permanently out to lunch. If the sense of alienation caused by the sheer absence of relations—and hence meaningful content—registers, it is in the ‘private’ sphere, traditionally reserved for making sense of life, i.e., the place you drive home to, wondering what the hell the day was about. In privacy, the overall sense of un-relatedness thickens into a formless mess of feelings. Toxic, when left to mold.

Already in the 1970s, Italian feminist and dropout art critic Carla Lonzi had forcefully addressed the way the professionalization of artistic practices had left no room for the cultivation of meaningful relationships. She fought against the mythic notion of the artist as a man who pursues his art in solitude, only enters into social ties (grudgingly) if they promise to be instrumental for his career.

By contrast, she understood relationships as existentially transformative, mutually so. Such transformation, however, Lonzi argued, were only possible via a collective endeavor. This is why, among Italian feminists, she initiated a practice she called *Autocoscienza* (taking consciousness-raising into one's own hands): Women would meet in groups and, by sharing experiences from their lives, aid each other in finding ways to articulate a collective consciousness. Lonzi dedicated herself to forging transformative relations with people close to her and published records of these exchanges. In the spirit of *Autocoscienza*, she wrote *Taci, anzi Parla: Diario di una Femminista (Shut up. Or rather, speak: A Feminist's diary)*. It is a diary she created of more than 1,300 pages, comprised of reflections and conversations, collected from 1972 to '76. In the book Lonzi makes no attempt to reconcile conflicts and contradictions, neither does she struggle to appear likeable. She trusts the reader to handle the articulation of her life as a contribution to the mutual effort of creating consciousness differently.

The struggle against the socially imposed divide between “public” and “private” hence coincides with the effort to renegotiate the relation between “art” and “life.” The question, here as it was there, is: how to be in the middle of it, in the middle of the storm? When Lee Lozano's stormy life leaked into her work, her practice expanded beyond the sanctioned, dominant art world. Her *dropout piece* (which began in 1970) was the culmination of her practice and the beginning of Lozano's *LifeArt* metamorphosis. For many, *dropout piece*, which saw the artist's withdrawal from the art world, is Lozano's farewell to art and ultimately to life. While *dropout* entailed Lozano's disappearance from the art world's radar, she never stopped making art. Eventually Lee Lozano dropped most of the letters

in her name and referred to herself simply as “E.” No doubt, the metamorphosis into E came at a high price; yet, its strength and importance lay in Lozano/E’s refusal of form and definition. *Dropout* piece poses a big challenge to the viewer, as it forces us to question how we understand and measure visibility, and how society regards the invisible. Lozano may have denied the “feminist” label—as she denied so many other labels—but still, I cannot help thinking that her commitment to validating experiences of life that were otherwise deemed invisible by the dominant culture is in keeping with what feminism is all about.

The point of experimenting with art and life, in this case, is not about turning one’s own life into an artwork, nor art into a lifestyle. Where life and art overlap, practices emerge that challenge the boundaries between what can be said and what can’t. What can be done and what cannot. Such violations of constraints are vital for new forms to emerge. In her *Barf Manifesto*, a response to Eileen Myles’ essay “Everyday Barf,” writer Dodie Bellamy advocates a form of writing that is “messy, irregular, but you can feel in your guts that it’s going somewhere.”¹

Barf is intellectual work carried out outside of pre-established forms. It is driven by content.

It emerges from experience: “the

Barf is expansive as the Blob,

swallowing and re-contextualizing,

spreading out and engorging. Its logic

is associative, it proceeds by chords

rather than single, discreet notes.”

Yet, Barf is not the same as stream

of consciousness.

The point is not to let your thoughts

run freely. In her manifesto, Bellamy argues for a writing

that, instead of suppressing the self and claiming objectivity, puts the content of a life at the center. Barf is writing in which “the personal intersects content intersects form intersects politics.” Not constrained by existing forms, the only rule, Bellamy suggests, is to put oneself in it, taking the risk of finding yourself in the middle of it. Of what? Of a storm. Out at sea—in the middle of a mess.

To let experiences from life shape one’s work is a way of affirming the entanglement with the mess of life. It means that you let content drive the work. Yet, to do so, in fact, is to oppose the reductive formalism (or formalist reductionism) that has come to shape the canon of U.S. American art history and criticism since the 1970s. This canon teaches artists and writers that an edge of criticality can be gained within a work or text by copying (what has come to be venerated as) the stylistic rigor of classic avant-gardism: Take a position, clarify your strategy, make your point, radicalize!

Feminisms

Along this line of thought, concise form equals political resolve. A man of revolutionary intent doesn’t mess about; he takes a firm stance, states his case, understands the economy of means and hence, in his work, achieves razor-sharp precision and superior elegance by showing formal restraint and boiling things down to their essence. He addresses matters of objective importance (such as the flatness of the canvas, material conditions of production, or power structures of the art world) unflinchingly, with a view unclouded by fleeting affectations and other subjective hiccup-hang-ups. By virtue of spotless consistency, the form of his work commands authority.

In the face of such integrity one may only gasp and coyly exclaim: “Oh Captain, my Captain!” The codes of avant-gardist rigor perfectly match the patriarchal and militaristic protocol for how to divide power among men: 1. Stake a claim on a territory—be it a genre, medium, topic or

elbow-room in the art bar—by visibly asserting your presence. 2. Secure the perimeters (find allies, legitimate your claims, get degrees). 3. Hold your position, come what may, for as long as it takes, until people recognize your claim—content only distracts. Focus on the form of your strategy, on how and when you make your move(s). This works for artists and academics alike. But are we not sick of a scenario, where beyond strategies and positions, no one has any content to offer, no love to give, and nothing to lose but their claim to their spot at the bar?

Content may come from life as well as from art. Between art and life there is no secure protocol for translation. Collage, cut-up and assemblage have become a common way of picking up life’s pieces where they fall. Gertrude Stein would have loved Instagram. But the act of splicing together fragments is not a new genre. It’s a necessity, when life (or art) refuses to take cohesive form. This doesn’t mean that works engaging in the mess life makes would have to be any less precise than strategically calculated positions. It’s more a question of how far you allow things to travel into the realm of the cringe-worthy, and when to button up. You pick your outfit with care, particularly on nights when you dare the audience to bear with you as you take them on a *tour de force*.

Yet, precision in this case is not an end in itself. Rather, it comes into play when the nuances of a relationship to something or someone are being accentuated. For this is content: it is something to relate to, and something that allows others to relate to you, something put on the table—an anecdote, a memory, a fetish, the news. What counts as content worth sharing is not judged in terms of successful moves in a game of chess. It’s rather a question of how deeply meaning gets under your skin, how surprisingly physical your thoughts become when a realization hits you. Your body picks up a strong signal, registers an impact, channels an intensity. You feel a high, or cringe.

1. Bellamy, Dodie. *Barf Manifesto*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling, 2008. Print.