

*from "The Book That Makes Itself", artist book published
by Robin Cameron, 2011.

K
A
Y
L
A

G
U
T
H
R
I
E

W
R
O
T
E

T
H
E

A
F
T
E
R
W
O
R
D

FEEL THE FEAR AND DO IT ANYWAY
ARTISTS, ANXIETY, AND WRITING

Apparently Martin Kippenberger once said, "Use art like you'd use anything else." I'm not sure if this has to do with demystifying the elevated status of art, or if he meant that you should do art like you do your hair, to reflect your personality (or to just get it over with - I guess it depends how much you like art). But what if you "Use anything like you'd use art"? Like writing, for example. When Robin first asked me to write this essay, she told me it would be an intro for an artist book that was going to be shown in her end-of-first-year show at Columbia's MFA program. She handed me a rough draft: a colophon; notes, quotes, lists; photos of works in progress; fake letters; short anecdotes from her experiences in first year. Robin's artwork was fuel and foil for the book: there were photos of her collages, temporary sculptural assemblages in the studio, possible assignments. On the phone earlier this week, she told me, "It's changed a lot since that earlier stuff I gave you. I guess I kind of made a manuscript, sort of." She emailed me her revised version, which read more like a short story about a grad student and her imaginary friend: not only do things noticed, thought, and copied down by Robin form the mutant matter that become the Book That Makes Itself, but the book does things on its own now. It hangs out, notices things, gets its feelings hurt, complains.

So, this is an afterword, which was going to be an intro, to a mostly picture book, which is now an experimental narrative. Whatever; the book speaks pretty well for itself - it makes itself.

However. I think one of the reasons Robin asked me to write this essay is because I am also an artist turned writer. Shortly after graduating from art school, where I did a lot of painting and sculpture, I began submitting "text pieces" when asked to contribute to shows organized

by friends: other young artists, recent graduates inhabiting that nobody-cares zone between one level and the next. Shows in Berlin and Brooklyn. Uncompensated hopefuls. Between BFA and MFA.

A lot of us very young artists tend to fall into one of the following groups: those in the process of applying to an MFA program; those currently attending or recently graduated from one; and those very leery of the whole idea. Each group has their own problems, and everyone seems to agree that it's a) very expensive, and b) a process of somehow willfully destabilizing yourself. Even with the knowledge that it's potentially overrated, we still compete to get accepted, and then empty our pockets to get subjected.

"Why come to grad school? It's about paying a lot of money so you can change. Whatever you thought was certain about how to make art is dismantled. You wobble. You don't make any sense at all. That's why you are here," says Leslie Dick, writer and CalArts MFA faculty, interviewed in *Seven Days in the Art World*, Chapter 2: "The Crit."

The recent journalistic bestseller *SDITAW* is not the kind of book you get assigned to read in grad school, and probably not the first book you admit to reading if you have any aspirations to get in. But it does contain an informative account of an MFA grad crit, in this case a 12+ hour session in Michael Asher's long-taught class at CalArts. And the stories inside are confirmed by the things that Robin writes about in her book: that MFA students are being assessed and taught to scrutinize themselves throughout the entire process, from the application and interview to the group crits and studio visits which are one of the core ingredients of these programs.

So, instead of finishing artwork this semester, Robin decides to write. A move that's fully sanctioned by now - R Smithson, D Judd, M Kelley - and also an efficacious way to fight the intense self-exam-

ination and questioning that accompanies grad school, the process of change which costs so much \$change\$. "Journaling" is a classic therapeutic exercise: write down exactly what it is that scares you. Get it out on paper, and you won't feel so crazy. Break it down. Your anxiety only belongs to yourself, nothing to fear but fear itself. And writing is a temptingly rational and familiar medium. More introspective and controllable than the chaos of group crits, it can also be highly explicit. With Robin still in mind, let's reflect on using anything else like art, with the aid of writing.

This could be an obvious one, but when it comes to studio hand-wringing it's impossible to ignore Jutta Koether's cult-famous work *The Inside Job*. Created in 1992 while she was also a "student", at the Whitney Independent Study Program, it fascinatingly documented the hit and miss flavor of the low- or no-status artist's reality. It was "exhibition" staged as "studio visit." And sort of "crit", too. The painter and multi-disciplinary artist rented a room, called it a "studio" and announced it as an art show, by appointment only. When visitors arrived, they found an oversized painting in progress that took up the whole room, with Koether lurking at a nearby desk, instructing them to leave comments in a notebook. Intrinsic to the piece was *The Inside Job*, the book, a cheaply printed publication later made out of Koether's daily notes and the comments written in her visitor log. The book and the artwork informed each other: things were written down with the knowledge that they might be printed, and visitors to the show, by signing the comment book, were awkwardly drawn into the performance. Koether's practice, which often integrates her expressive paintings into performances and installations in a novel way, is becoming an approved and fashionable model for young artists now. But during the time that she attended the Whitney ISP, Koether was existing in "a hotbed of anti-painting theory in a city whose broader art community was itself arrayed against expressionist painting," wrote Isabelle Graw in a 2006 feature article for *Artforum*; her combination

of painting and performative practices was “met with skepticism.” The Inside Job mapped out the anxieties Koether had about her show (social, creative, financial), which would have been going on in the background anyway, and placed them in the open, as the show.

Then there’s Mike Mills, the Thumbsucker director, graphic designer and multi-disciplinary artist, who built a modern indie sensibility through his graphics made for 90’s streetwear brands like X-Girl, Marc Jacobs, Susan Cianciolo, and Cosmic Wonder, and the classic album art and music videos he did for Sonic Youth, the Beastie Boys, and Air. His graphic work is pervaded by light emotional glitches and a pussy-ass attitude, hand-drawn lines, pretty girls, pastels, and animals. I’m mentioning him because Robin also has a background as a professional graphic designer, and like him, her work softly fuses art and functional style with a personal twist. While Koether picks out and over-acts the limitations created by her commitment to an “art medium”, I would guess that if there is any anxiety on Mills’ part, it might come from the neurotic use of so many platforms, and this fun/jumpy untetheredness shows up in Robin’s work too. Mills succeeds in a way that Koether can’t - he gets his fee and can show in a gallery too - but likewise, Koether’s insistence on not fitting in, from my point of view, has bought her a place all her own. What Mills does looks fun, but Koether imposing a month’s worth of studio visits and unwelcome criticism on herself? Not so much.

Will Robin’s trials make her happy one day too? She transforms her work so quickly, while still pulling off a slick product with all the usual determination. Also nice: she trusted me to write this with almost no rules, and waited politely while I took my time finishing it. As you might have guessed, this is an afterword for a friend, and it’s addressed to many of my friends - other young artists, a few of them grad students. Some of the things I’ve considered here may not be totally worthy discourse, and there’s been some whining, some nit-pick-

ing. But Robin probably wanted me to write something that she wouldn’t or couldn’t. And what better place than grad school to let it all hang out, especially if you’re not the one being graded? You might not get an A for effort, but hopefully there’s points for honesty.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Graw, Isabelle. “Peripheral vision: Isabelle Graw on the art of Jutta Koether”, ArtForum, March 2006.
- Koether, Jutta. The Inside Job. artist book, 1992.
- Thornton, Sarah. Seven Days in the Art World. New York: WW Norton, 2008.