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## CULTURAL POESIS

*The Generativity of Emergent Things*

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What follows is a piece of imaginative writing grounded in an intense attention to the *poesis*, or creativity, of ordinary things. This is an ethnographic attention, but it is one that is loosened from any certain prefabricated knowledge of its object. Instead, it tracks a moving object in an effort (a) to somehow record the state of emergence that animates things cultural and (b) to track some of the effects of this state of things—the proliferation of everyday practices that arise in the effort to know what is happening or to be part of it, for instance, or the haunting or exciting presence of traces, remainders, and excesses uncaptured by claimed meanings.

The writing here is committed to speculations, experiments, recognitions, engagements, and curiosity, not to demystification and uncovered truths that snap into place to support a well-known picture of the world. I ask the reader to read actively—to follow along, read into, imagine, digress, establish independent trajectories and connections, disagree. My own voice is particular and partial, tending in this case to be a surreal, dream-like description of ordinary spaces and events. The subject I “am” in the stories I tell is a point of impact meandering through scenes in

search of linkages, surges, and signs of intensity. I suppose that the writing gropes toward embodied affective experience. Finally, the writing is also a set of provocations in that it tries to cull attention to moments of legibility and emergence, to moments of impact (instead of to stable subjects), to models of agency that are far from simple or straightforward, to the vitality or animus of *cultural poesis* in the jump or surge of affect (rather than on the plane of finished representations), and to the still life—the moment when things resonate with potential and threat.

In calling this particular arena of things cultural poesis—the creativity or generativity in things cultural—I am thinking of the ways in which this field of emergent things has been written into cultural theory in various ways by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway, Marilyn Strathern, Eve Sedgwick, Michael Taussig, and others. There are Foucault’s (1990) theses on the productivity and micropoetics of power, Williams’s (1977) attention to emergent structures of feeling, Benjamin’s (1999, 2003) theories of allegory (vs. symbol) and his own nomadic tracking of dream worlds still

resonant in material things, Bakhtin's (1982, 1984) fundamental theorization and elaboration of the social poetics lodged in language, texts, and social worlds, and Barthes's (1975, 1977, 1981, 1985) intense and sustained insistence on the workings of spaces and pleasures in between, or outside, or somehow in excess of the recognized objects we call texts, experience, meaning, concept, and analysis. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) polemicized the conflict between meaning-based models of culture and models that track actual events, conjunctures, and articulations of forces to see what they do. In the wake of their critique, they outlined a theory of the affective as a state of potential, intensity, and vitality (see also Guattari, 1995). Contemporary feminist theorists, notably Haraway (1997, 2003), Strathern (1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1999), and Sedgwick (1992, 1993, 1997, 2003), have carefully—and with enormous creative energy of their own—worked to theorize the generativity in things cultural and to make room for ways of thinking and writing it, as has Taussig (1986, 1992, 1993, 1997, 1999).

Here, I try to incite curiosity about the vitality and volatility of cultural poesis in contemporary U.S. public culture through a story of ethnographic encounters (see also Stewart, 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b).

#### ■ ORDINARY INTENSITIES: AFFECT, VITALITY, GENERATIVITY

This is a story about public circulations in moments of vital impact. It takes place in the United States during an ongoing present that began some time ago. This is a time and place in which an emergent assemblage made up of a wild mix of things—technologies, sensibilities, flows of power and money, daydreams, institutions, ways of experiencing time and space, battles, dramas, bodily states, and innumerable practices of everyday life—has become actively generative, producing wide-ranging impacts, effects, and forms of knowledge with a life of their own. This is what I mean by cultural poesis.

Here, I offer some random examples of the generativity of all things in a state of cultural emergence. The objects of my story are emergent vitalities and the ordinary practices that instantiate or articulate them, if only partially and fleetingly. Caught, or glimpsed, in their very surge to be realized, these are things that are necessarily fugitive, shifting, opportunistic, polymorphous, indiscriminate, aggressive, dreamy, unsteady, practical, unfinished, and radically particular.

The writing here is one that tries to mimic felt impacts and half-known effects as if the writing were itself a form of life. It follows leads, sidesteps, and delays, and it piles things up, creating layers on layers, in an effort to drag things into view, to follow trajectories in motion, and to scope out the shape and shadows and traces of assemblages that solidify and grow entrenched, perhaps doing real damage or holding real hope, and then dissipate, morph, rot, or give way to something new. It talks to the reader not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the perfect links between theoretical categories and the real world but rather as a subject caught in the powerful tension between what can be known and told and what remains obscure or unspeakable but is nonetheless real. Its thoughts are speculative, and its questions are the most basic. What is going on? What floating influences now travel through public routes of circulation and come to roost in the seemingly private domains of hearts, homes, and dreams? What forces are becoming sensate as forms, styles, desires, and practices? What does it mean to say that particular events and strands of affect generate impacts? How are impacts registered in lines of intensity? How are people quite literally charged up by the sheer surge of things in the making? What does cultural poesis look like?

#### ■ DREAMLAND

The roller-coaster ride of the American dream had come into a sharp-edged focus. Good and bad. Winning and losing. Those were your choices. Anxious and haunted sensibilities tracked unwanted influences and veiled threats in idioms

of addiction, trauma, and conspiracy while dreams of transcendence and recluses set afloat reckless hopes of winning or escape. Life was animated in equal parts by possibility and impossibility. We lurched between poles of hope and despair as overwrought dreams flopped to the earth, only to rise up again, inexplicably revitalized, like the monster in a horror movie or the fool who keeps going back for more. Lines of escape were fascinating too—the rocketing fortunes of the rich and famous, the dream of a perfect getaway cottage, the modest success stories of people getting their lives together again. New lifestyles proliferated at the same dizzying pace as did the epidemic of addictions and the self-help shelves at the bookstore.

The political dynamism of this tense mix of dreams and nightmares registered in an everyday life infused with the effort to track and assimilate the possibilities and threats lodged in things. Newly charged forms of the desire to know, to see, and to make a record of what was behind or underneath surfaces and systems formed a network of ordinary practices. Proliferating practices of turning desires and ideals into matter both encoded the everyday effort to master, test, and encounter emergent forces and demarcated a state of being tuned in to the mainstream. The new objects of mass desire promised both inclusion in the very winds of circulation and the nested still life of a home or identity resting securely in the eye of the storm.

As previously public spaces and forms of expression were privatized, previously privatized arenas of dreams, anxieties, agencies, and morals were writ large on public stages as scenes of impact. Yet the world had become weirdly mysterious just when it started to seem like a private life writ large or some kind of collective psyche institutionalized and exported in a global mutation. It was like a net had grown around a gelatinous mutating substance, creating a strange and loose integration of planes of existence and sensibilities. Things had become both highly abstract and intensely concrete, and people had begun to try to track emergent forces and flows on these variegated registers without really knowing what they were

doing. Somehow it was all personal, but it was also something huge flowing through things.

The feminist slogan, “the personal is political,” took on a new charge of intensity and swirled in spinning and floating contexts far beyond any simple ideological clarity or political program.

## ■ ORDINARY LIFE

We were busy. Homes were filled with the grounding details of getting the rent money together, getting or keeping jobs, getting sick, getting well, looking for love, trying to get out of things we had gotten ourselves into, eating in, working out, raising kids, walking dogs, remodeling homes, and shopping. There were distractions, denials, shape-shifting forms of violence, practical solutions, and real despair. For some, one wrong move was all it took. Worries swirled around the bodies in the dark. People bottomed out watching daytime television. Credit cards were maxed out. There was downsizing and unemployment. There was competition to get kids into decent schools and for them to keep their grades up. Schedules had to be constantly juggled to keep up with dance classes or layoffs. Dizzying layers of tasks filled in the space of a day.

People took walks in their neighborhoods, peering into windows by night and murmuring over beautiful flowerbeds by day. Or, we scrambled to find ways to get to work and back on unreliable buses that quit running at night. We baked birthday cakes or ordered them from the supermarket decorated with Tigger or a golf course. We “flipped off” other drivers, read the luscious novels and sobering memoirs, disappeared into the Internet, and shopped at Wal-Mart and the other megastores because they were cheap, convenient, or new and had slogans such as “Getting It Together” and “Go Home a Hero.”

Positions were taken, habits were loved and hated, dreams were launched and wounded. There was pleasure in a clever or funny image. Or in being able to see right through things. Some people claimed that they could rise above the flow and walk on water. Others wore their irony like an

accessory that gave them room to maneuver. There were all the dreams of purity, martyrdom, a return to nature, getting real, having an edge, and beating the system.

Just about everyone was part of the secret conspiracy of ordinary life to get what he or she could out of it. There were the dirty pleasures of holing up to watch one's secret bad TV show, taking a trip to the mall, working out in spinning classes at the gym, spending nights on the Internet, or playing music loud in the car on the way to the supermarket.

### ■ GAMES

There were games you could play. One was the driving game of trying to predict when the car up ahead was going to try to change lanes. Some people developed a sixth sense about it. They discovered that if they concentrated on the car they could sense when it was considering a move, even when the driver was not signaling a lane change and when the car itself was not surreptitiously leaning to the edge of the lane or acting "nervous." The game of the sixth sense became a pleasure and a compulsion in itself. It spread fast, even without the usual help of expert commentary.

You could try out this game in supermarket checkout lines too. There the game was to try to size up the flow of a checkout line in a glance. How fast is that cashier? Does that woman have coupons? That one looks like a check writer. That one looks like a talker. But the checkout line game was harder than the driving game. Even a brilliant choice could be instantly defeated by a dreaded price check or the cash register running out of tape. And once you made your choice, you were stuck with it. Already impatient, you might then start to feel a little desperate. You could switch to multitasking—make a phone call, make lists in your head, or get to work on your palm pilot. Or, you could scan the surrounding bodies and tabloid headlines for a quick thrill or an ironic inner smirk at signs of other people's eccentricity or gullibility. Or, you could just check *yourself* out by opening and paging through *Home and Garden* or *Glamour* or *Esquire*. You could relax into the

aura of tactile bodies, living rooms, and gardens that staged the jump from fantasy to flesh and back again right before your eyes. The glossy images offered not so much a blueprint of how to look and live as the much more profound experience of watching images touch matter.

### ■ ODD MOMENTS

At odd moments in the course of the day, you might raise your head in surprise or alarm at the uncanny sensation of a half-known influence. Private lives and the public world had gotten their wires crossed. Any hint of private movement would be sniffed out and thrown up on public stages, and people now took their cues so directly from circulating sensibilities that the term "hard-wired" became shorthand for the state of things.

Public specters had grown intimate. The imaginary had grown concrete on public stages. All of those bodies lined up on the talk shows, outing their loved ones for this or that monstrous act. Or the reality TV shows, with the camera busting in on intimate dramas of whole families addicted to sniffing paint right out of the can. We would zoom in to linger, almost lovingly, on the gallon-sized lids scattered around on the living room carpet and then pan out to focus on the faces of the parents, and even the little kids, with big rings of white paint encircling their cheeks and chins like some kind of self-inflicted stigmata.

The labor of looking had been retooled and upgraded so that we could cut back and forth between the images popping up in the living room and some kind of real world out there.

*America's Most Wanted* aired photos of bank robbers with and without beards so that you could scan the faces at the local convenience store looking for a match.

The streets were littered with cryptic, half-written signs of personal/public disasters. The daily sightings of homeless men and women holding up signs while puppies played at their feet could haunt the solidity of things with the shock of something unspeakable. *Hungry. Will work for food. God bless you.*

The sign hits the senses with a mesmerizing and repellent force. Too sad. The graphic lettering that pleads for the attention of the passing cars glances off the eye as something to avoid like the plague. Moving on. But it also holds the fascination of catastrophe, the sense that something is happening, the surge of affect toward a profound scene.

The handmade, handheld sign of the homeless on the side of the road pleads to be recognized, if only in passing. In its desperation, the sign makes a gesture toward an ideological center that claims the value of willpower (“will work for food”) and voices the dream of redemption (“God bless you”). But it is abject; it offers no affect to mime, no scene of a common desire, no line of vitality to follow, no intimate secret to plumb, no tips to imbibe for safety or good health. Instead, it sticks out of the side of vision. The shock of something unreal because it is too real, too far outside the recognized world, unspeakable. There is no social recipe for what you can do about homelessness or even what you can do with your eyes when confronted with homelessness face to face. We live in a profound social fear of encounters like this.

Even to glance out of the corner of the eye at the sign on the side of the road is a dizzying side-step. What the glance finds in the scene it glances at, half panicked, is the excluded other’s abject surge to be included in the wind of circulation—the mainstream. Its message is too stark; it begs. It mimes the discourse of the mainstream to the letter, pushing it to the point of imitation or parody or fraud. It makes the mainstream seem unreal and heartless—dead.

A dollar bill stuck out of a car window gets a quick surge forward from the one with the sign and the heightened, yet unassimilated, affect of a raw contact. “God bless you.”

Now we are trudging the rough terrain of bodies and the sensuous accumulation of impacts.

#### ■ WHATEVER

Jokes had started to circulate about how we might as well wire ourselves directly to sensation buttons and just skip the step of content altogether.

One day an e-mail came her way from Penny, a friend in the neighborhood who liked to keep up a running commentary on quirky characters and scenes spied from her studio windows or fabricated on drowsy afternoon walks. Penny would stop by to report tidbits and then move on. A light touch. When she used the e-mail, it was to forward funny tales filled with delicious descriptive details sent to her from like-minded others building a corpus of matters to chew on. This one told the tale of something that happened shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, in a medical clinic where a friend of a friend of Penny’s apparently worked:

Of course, it’s not the big money area and the building is very rinky-dink. Not a big target for anthrax, let’s just put it that way. She works with mothers who have drug abuse problems and the office downstairs treats juvies [juveniles]. Apparently one of the women who works downstairs turned on the a/c [air conditioner] (window unit) and a white dust sprayed out all over her. Yikes. They called the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and men in white suits and gas masks invaded. My friend who works upstairs was dubious—and so the people in her office just stayed and worked while the downstairs was cordoned off and investigated. They rushed the substance off to the lab and put everyone who was in the office on Cipro. Then the test results came back. Low and behold, the substance tested positive for cocaine! So good, isn’t it? They think one of the juvies hid his stash in the a/c when he was afraid of being searched. I think it’s a brilliant idea to start pumping cocaine into the workplace. No need for caffeine anymore. Let’s just move right on up to the next level of productivity inspiration. Whadya say?

#### ■ A LITTLE ACCIDENT, LIKE ANY OTHER

She was in a café in a small town in west Texas. A place where ranchers hang out talking seed prices, fertilizer, and machines and where strangers passing through town are welcome entertainment. The sun had gone down, and she was half-way through her fresh-killed steak and baked potato when the biker couple came in limping.

All eyes rotated to watch them move to a table and sit down. The couple talked intently, as if something was up, and from time to time they exchanged startled looks. When she walked past the couple's table on her way out, they raised their heads and asked whether she was heading out on the west road and whether she could look for bike parts. They had hit a deer coming into town and dumped their bike. The deer, they said, had fared much worse.

The room came to a dead stop as all ears tuned in to the sentience of the crash, still resonating in the bikers' bodies. Slowly, taking their sweet time, people began to offer questions from their tables, drawing out the details. Then other stories began to surface of other deer collisions and strange events at that place on the west road.

As she left, she pictured how, during the days to come, people would keep their eyes open for deer parts and bike parts when they traveled the west road out of town. She imagined that there would be more talk. Conversations would gather around the event and spin off into other questions such as the overpopulation of deer, hunting regulations, and the new law that legalized riding without a helmet. There might be discussions of how to fix bikes (and especially this particular make of bike), what parts might break or twist when the bike is dumped, and who was a good bike mechanic. Or, people might talk about the condition of the roads. The image of hitting the wide open road or surviving the desert injured might come up. The talk might call up anything from the image of sheer speed encountering a deer caught in one's headlights to the abstracted principles of freedom, fate, and recklessness.

But one way or another, the little accident would compel a response. It would shift people's life trajectories in some small way, change them by literally changing their course for a minute or a day. The chance event might add a layer of story, daydream, and memory to things. It might unearth old resentments or suddenly bring a new conflict to a head. It might even compel a search for lessons learned. Resonating levels of body and mind might begin to rearrange themselves into simpler choices—good luck and bad luck, animal

lives lost and threats to machine-propelled humans, risk-taking wild rides and good old common sense.

But for now at least, and in some small way in the future too, the talk would secretly draw its force from the resonance of the event itself. Its simple and irreducible singularity. And the habit of watching for something to happen would grow.

## SCANNING

Everyday life was now infused with the effort to track and assimilate the possibilities and threats lodged in things. Newly charged forms of the desire to know, to see, and to record what was behind surfaces and inside systems formed a network of ordinary practices.

She was no different from anyone else. All of her life, she had been yelling "pay attention!" but now she was not sure whether that was such a good idea. Hypervigilance had taken root as people watched and waited for the next thing to happen. Like the guy she heard about on the radio who spends his whole life recording everything he does: "Got up at 6:30 am, still dark, splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, 6:40 went to the bathroom, 6:45 made tea, birds started in at 6:53. . . ."

Or, there was the neighbor on a little lake in Michigan whose hobby was recording his every move on video—his walks in the neighborhood and in the woods, his rides in his Ford Model T, his forays into Polish folk dances where old women went round and round the dance floor together, the monthly spaghetti suppers at the Catholic church in town. He gave one of his videos to her and her friends to watch. They played it one night—three anthropologists peering at whatever came their way from the weird world out there. It was a video of him walking around the lake in the winter snow and ice. They heard his every breath and footstep. There were some deer droppings on the path and some snow piles with suspicious shapes. Then he was walking up to Bob and Alice's cabin (the couple were in Florida for the winter), and he was zooming in on a huge lump of something that was pushing out the black plastic

wrapped around the base of the house. Uh oh. Could be ice from a broken water main. Maybe the whole house was full of ice. The neighbor guy wondered out loud, if in fact it was ice, what would happen when the ice thawed. Could be a real problem. He said that maybe he would send a copy of his video on to Bob and Alice down in Florida. Then he moved on. Back to his breathing and the icicles on trees and his footsteps in the snow. Tracking the banal, scanning for trauma.

The three anthropologists looked at each other. What was that? She was mesmerized by it, like it held a key to how the ordinary could crack open to reveal something big and hidden that it had swallowed long ago. The other two were not so easily swayed. It was some kind of weirdness that pushed banality to the point of idiocy and made no sense at all. A puzzle as to why anyone would want to record the droning sameness of things, looking for something worth noting to come his way. Some strange threat or promise that popped up just for a minute and then sank below the surface again as if nothing had ever happened. A shimmering—there one minute and gone the next. Or maybe some lyrical scene you would want to remember. Something with *meaning*.

All of this watching things was mostly a good-natured thing. Like happy campers, people would put up with a lot of nothing in hopes of a glimpse of something. The ordinary was the mother lode that they mined, hoping for a sighting of a half-known something coming up for air.

It could be that ordinary things were beginning to seem a little “off,” and that was what drew people’s attention to them. Or, maybe the ordinary things had always seemed a little off if you stopped to think about them.

There were the obsessive compulsives who kept track of things because they had to (“Got up at 6:30 am, still dark, splashed cold water on my face. . . .”). These people became sightings in themselves.

Or, there were those who gave shape to their everyday by inventing practices of mining it for something different or special. People like her friends, Joyce and Bob, who lived in the woods in New Hampshire. He was a lumberjack. She

cleaned those little 1950s tourist cabins that were called things such as “Swiss Village” and “Shangrila.” She had left her husband and four kids after years of living straight in a regime of beatings under the sign of Jesus. She went out the back window one day and never looked back. Then she met Bob when she was tending bar, and the two took a walk on the wild side together that lasted for a dozen happy years (although not without trouble and plenty of it). He had a drinking problem, and she let him have it because he worked hard. He would hit the bottle when he got home at night and all weekend long. She called him “Daddy” even though she was a good 10 years older and pushing 50.

Joyce and Bob moved from rental cabin to rental cabin in the north woods. They invited raccoons into their cabin as if the animals were pets. They got up at 5 am to write in their diaries, and then when they got home at night they would read their daily entries out loud and look at the artsy photos of treetops and bees’ nests that Bob took. Finally, they were able to get a “poor people’s” loan to buy a little cabin they had found in some God-forsaken place on the north side of the lake and to fix it up. But then a card came from Joyce saying that Bob had left her for “that floozy” he met in a bar.

She wonders whether Joyce still keeps a diary, whether she still fancies the serendipitous discovery of happiness and looks for ways to deposit it in the ordinary, or whether something else has happened to her ordinary.

## ■ THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

The anthropologists kept doing the fun things they did together. Like knocking on the doors of the little fishermen’s huts on the frozen lake. They would invite themselves in for a visit, but then they would sit down on the bench and the fishermen would not say anything. Not even “who are you?” or “what are you doing here?” So, they sat together in a wild and awkward silence, staring down into the hole in the ice and the deep dark waters below. The anthropologists could not think of a single question that made any sense at all.

When the anthropologists took walks in the woods, they would come across hunters. The hunters were more talkative than the ice fishermen. That is because they all wanted the friendly, nosy, overeducated strangers to know that they were not “Bambi killers.” Maybe some other hunters were, but not them—the new breed. They were nice, and a lot of them had been to college and had things to say about politics and the environment and the state. Most of the time there was a woman in the group. The others were teaching her to hunt. Everyone—the anthropologists too—would cover when the mean-looking game wardens came around a bend looking for poachers. The wardens were the bad guys. They would drive slowly past in postapocalyptic cars with burned paint and giant guns and spotlights mounted on the hood. They would fix us with hard stares, and you could see the muscles jump under their camouflage hunting suits. These guys were jumpy.

### ■ BEING JUMPY

Sometimes, the jumpy move would take over. Lingis (1994) saw that this had happened among miners at the Arctic Circle:

The young miner who showed me the mine put out every cigarette he smoked on his hand, which was covered with scar tissue. Then I saw the other young miners all had the backs of their hands covered with scar tissue. . . . When my eye fell on them it flinched, seeing the burning cigarette being crushed and sensing the pain. . . . The eye does not read the meaning in a sign; it *jumps* from the mark to the pain and the burning cigarette, and then jumps to the fraternity signaled by the burning cigarettes. (p. 96)

### ■ A SLASHING

On the river in Austin, Texas, in the early morning, joggers pass over the long high bridge and stop to stretch their hamstrings on its metal rails. Pairs of friends, about to part for the day, will stop to stare out at the expanse of watery sights laid out

below—fishermen in flat-bottomed boats sit upright in straight-backed chairs, giant blue herons poise on drowned cottonwoods, new limestone mansions perched on the cliffs above throw reflections halfway across the river. Crew boats pass silently under the bridge like human-powered water bugs skimming the surface. Occasionally, a riverboat will thrust itself slowly up the river, dredging the hard mass of the water up and over its wheel. Here, the world-in-a-picture still vibrates, as if it was just at that very moment that the real world crossed paths with an imagined elsewhere and the two realms hung suspended together in a still life.

Sometimes there are scenes of quiet desperation.

Sometimes people leave memorials on the bridge.

One morning, a crude sign appeared, taped to the metal railing. Below it was a shrine—yellow ribbons and a Sacred Heart of Jesus votive candle with half-burned sticks of incense stuck in the wax. The names Angela and Jerry were written in bold letters at the top of the sign, like the names of young lovers repeated over and over in school notebooks or graffitied on train trestles. The star-crossed lovers’ names were harshly crossed out and followed by the words “Relationship destroyed, with malice by Federal Agents & A.P.D. [Austin Police Department] for beliefs guaranteed under U.S. Constitutional Bill of Rights. I miss you Angela, Jessica, & Furry Dog Reef.”

It was signed “Always, Jerry.”

Below the signature were two graphics: the nickname “Yankee Girl” encircled by a pierced heart and a thick black box encasing the prayer “Please Come Back.” Then a final howl and a promise:

Angela, Jessica and Furry Dog Reef. . . . I miss you.

May God have mercy on the souls of the hateful, evil, vindictive people who conspired to take you from me, and did so with success. Angela, I will love you always and forever.

I miss you babe,

Jerry

At the bottom, another pierced heart held Yankee Girl in its wounded arms.

The sign was both cryptic and as crystal clear as a scream. Bitter fury was its vitality and its end. Its drive to a sheer satisfaction quivered like flesh in its wavering letters. It heaved grief and longing at the world not as an outer expression of an inner state but more directly as an act of the senses making contact with pen and paper and matches. Its slashing was like the self-slashing of young women who cut themselves so that they can feel alive or literally come to their senses. It had the same self-sufficient fullness and did not ask for interpretation or dream of a meaning.

This is a sensibility as common as it is striking. It is the kind of thing you see everyday. In the elaborate poetics of graffiti—the signatures left so artfully, the politics of slashing through them, crossing them out, erasing them, replicating them all over town. Or in the signs of the homeless on the side of the road. Or in the countless verbal and visual signs that come to life on the charged border between things private and things public. It is the kind of sensibility that surges through the wild conversation of AM radio talk shows and Internet sites. It adds force to the railing of the enraged in everything from road rage, to letters to the editor, to the face-to-face raging resentments of workplaces and intimate spaces. It permeates politics from right wing to left wing.

Something in its roughened surface points to a residue in things, a something that refuses to disappear. It draws attention, holds the visual fascination of unspeakable things—transgressions, injustices, the depths of widespread hopelessness. What animates it is not a particular message but rather the more basic need to forcefully perform the unrecognized impact of things.

It flees the easy translation of pain and desire into abstract values or commonsense coping. Yet every day its dramas of surge and arrest are bathed in the glow of some kind of meaning or form of dismissal. Then there are these questions: Will the gesture of the slashing shimmer as a curiosity passed on an everyday walking path, and will you feel a little jolt as you pass? Or, will it just go in one eye and out the other?

Sometimes, it might have the vitality of a pure surge pushing back, gathering a counterforce to a

point of intensity that both slashes at itself and spits at the world.

Other times, its very violence means that it will be erased, ignored, or drawn up, like blood in a syringe, to infuse new life into the enveloping categories of good sense, healthy protest, productive acts and lives, and mainstream moods by virtue of its bad example. It will be unwilling and unwitting nourishment for the more settled world of calculation, representation, value, and necessity that gave rise to its spitting fury to begin with. Yet even then, the sign, in its perverse singularity, will peep out of little cracks on barely public stages simultaneously defying and demanding witness. It will remain a partially visible affecting presence because what it registers is not only points of breakdown in “the system” but also lines of possible breakthrough beating unbidden in the blood of the mainstream.

A person walking by such signs might be touched by them or hardened to their obnoxious demands. But either way, a charge passes through the body and lodges in the person as an irritation, a confusion, an amusement, an ironic smirk, a thrill, a threat, or a source of musing. For better or worse, signs that erupt as events teach us something of their own jumpy attention to impacts by leaving visceral traces in their wake.

## ■ STRESS

The lone body and the social body had become the lived symptoms of the contradictions, conflicts, possibilities, and haunted sensibilities of pervasive forces. Stress was the lingua franca of the day. If you had it, you were onto something, part of the speeding force of things-in-the-making. But it could puncture you too, leaving you alone during times of exhaustion, claustrophobia, resentment, and ambient fear.

The self became a thing filled with the intricate dramas of dreams launched, wounded, and finally satisfied or left behind. You could comfort it like a child. Or, you could look at the outlines of it against the relief of other people’s missed opportunities. Or, you could inhabit it as a flood of

events and relationships caught in a repetitive pattern that you recognized only when you got to the end of a cycle, and by then you were already onto the next one.

There were little shocks in the rhythms of splurging and purging and in the constant edgy corrections of the self-help regimes—take an aspirin a day (or not), drink a glass of red wine a day (or not), eat butter or low-fat margarine or canola oil, eat oatmeal to strip the bad cholesterol from your arteries, eat salmon to add the good cholesterol, try antioxidants or kava kava or melatonin.

The figure of a beefed-up agency became a breeding ground for all kinds of strategies of complaint, self-destruction, flight, reinvention, and experimentation as if the world rested on its shoulders. Straight talk about willpower and positive thinking claimed that agency was just a matter of getting on track, as if all the messy business of real selves affected by events and haunted by threats could be left behind in an out-of-this-world levitation act.

Against this tendency, a new kind of memoir began to work the lone self into a fictional sacrifice powerful enough to drag the world's impacts out onto secret stages. Self-help groups added density to the mix, offering both practical recipes for self-redeeming action and a hard-hitting, lived recognition of the twisted, all-pervasive ways in which compulsions permeated freedoms and were reborn in the very surge to get free of them once and for all.

## ■ THE BODY SURGES

The body builds its substance out of layers of sensory impact laid down in the course of straining upstream against recalcitrant and alien forces or drifting downstream, with its eyes trained on the watery clouds and passing treetops overhead and its ears submerged in the flow that surrounds it, buoys it, and carries it along. The body surges forward, gets on track, gets sidetracked, falls down, pulls itself up to crawl on hands and knees, flies through the air, hits a wall, regroupes, or beats a

retreat. It knows itself as states of vitality, exhaustion, and renewal. It exerts itself out of necessity and for the love of movement and then it pulls a veil around itself to rest, building a nest of worn clothing redolent with smells of sweat or cheap perfume or smoky wood fires burrowed into wool.

The body cannot help itself. It is an extremist seeking thrills, a moderate sticking its toe in to test the waters, a paranoid delusion looking for a place to hide. It is a bouncing fool throwing itself at an object of round perfection in the dogged conviction that it is on the right track this time. What the body knows, it knows from the smell of something promising or rancid in the air or the look of a quickening or slackening of flesh. It grows ponderous, gazing on its own form with a Zen-like emptiness. As a new lover, it dotes on revealed scars and zones in on freckles and moles and earlobes. As one of the anxious aging, it is drawn to the sight of new jowls and mutant hairs and mottled skin in the bathroom mirror.

The body is both the persistent site of self-recognition and the thing that will always betray you. It dreams of its own redemption and knows better. It catches sight of a movement out of the corner of its eye and latches on to a borrowed intimacy or a plan that comes as a gift to sweep it into the flow of the world and free it of its lonely flesh.

The body consumes and is consumed. Like one big pressure point, it is the place where outside forces come to roost, condensing like thickened milk in the bottom of the stomach. It grows sluggish and calls for sweet and heavy things to match its inner weight. Or salty or caffeinated things to jolt it to attention.

Layers of invented life form around the body's dreamy surges like tendons or fat.

Lifestyles and industries pulse in a silent, unknown reckoning of what to make of all this.

The body builds itself out of layer on layer of sensory impact. It loves and dreads what makes it. At times, it is shocked and thrilled to find itself in the driver's seat. At other times, it holes up, bulks up, wraps itself in its layers. The world it lives in spins with the dancing poles of ups and downs and rests its laurels in a banality that hums a tune of its own.

## ■ BODY FOR LIFE

She once took up *Body for Life* on the advice of a friend. Between them, it was a joke. They called it their cult. But they also knew that there was something *to* a little extreme self-transformation. Or at least the effort. *Body for Life* was a best-selling book with glossy “before-and-after” pictures of bodybuilders on the inside covers. It started as a bodybuilder’s, movement-building, moneymaking challenge to the unwashed to put down the beer and chips and start loving life instead of just living it, to start thriving and not just surviving. It was “12 weeks to mental and physical strength.”

She was not at all taken with the tanned, oiled, muscle man and muscle woman look on the inside covers, but the little game of moving her eyes back and forth between each pair of before-and-after shots caught her in a spell of momentary satisfaction. The eye jumped happily between the paired scenes. Now fat and pale, now muscled and oily and tan. Peek-a-boo. All of the bodies were white. They made her think of the body displays that she was always running into when she lived in Las Vegas. At the post office, or at the drive-in movie theater, or while waiting in line to get a new driver’s license, there were always half-naked bodybuilders with wet-skinned snakes draped around their necks, or monkeys on leashes, or stars-and-stripes halter tops and permed blond hair.

Her friend called the people in the pictures “beefcakes.” Class seemed to be somehow involved in all of this, but people would swear up and down that those who were into *Body for Life* came from all walks of life. That comfortable claim to plainness emerging out of some kind of mainstream. Some kind of mall culture. Ordinary Americans unmarked by anything but the will to change their bodies and by the real or imagined fruits of their success after those glorious 12 weeks. They were people who had been catapulted out of the back seat of life onto the magic carpet ride that turns flighty self-defeating dreams into vital generative flesh.

They had experienced their breakthroughs when they saw the inspiring photos on the inside

covers, or when they took a good hard look at their own eye-opening “before” pictures, or when—while watching the inspirational video that they could get for a \$15 donation to the Make-A-Wish Foundation—they were suddenly released from the feeling of being alone and felt hope instead. They began to crave the 12-week program even more than they craved a piece of key lime pie or a beer.

There is nothing weird about how this happens. It is laid out step by step like a 12-step program where the spiritual transformation flows directly through the flesh. You follow the steps in the book as if it were a recipe book, consuming each new exercise with relish. You create 12-week goals out of gossamer wishes. Done. You pull your dreams out of their shadow existence into the light of day. Okay then! You harness the force in your own faintly beating desire to change. Wow! Okay. You ask yourself hard questions. You write down the answers. You speak your goals out loud with mimicked confidence every morning and night until the confidence is real. You commit. You focus; forget the zoning out and drifting downstream. You create five daily habits. You imagine other people looking at your new body with gleaming eyes, and you hear their approving comments until the imagining is effortless and part of you. You surrender the negative emotions that hold everyone back, and you start looking forward. You realize that you will never again get sidetracked. Everyone who takes the 12-week challenge feels like a winner. You do not need a carrot on a stick anymore; you take your eyes off the prize (a blood red Lamborghini Diablo) and even consumer fetishism seems to fade into the background of a half-lived past. Now you are consuming your body, and your body is consuming you. It is more direct.

She was not really interested in the inspirational business, however, and she never actually read the book. She passed directly from the game of before-and-after photos to the charts near the end of the book that tell you exactly what you have to do and eat. She got organized. She made copies of the exercise charts so that she could fill one out each day like a daily diary. She memorized the acceptable

foods in the three food groups and stocked up. She ritualized each meal and gleefully took off the 7th day each week, carefully following the instruction to eat exactly whatever she wanted that day and no less. She ordered boxes of the shakes and power bars and began to experiment with the recipes that made the chocolate shake taste like a banana split and turned the vanilla shake into that famous liquid key lime pie. She got the picture. She felt the surge. She let it become a new piece of her skeleton. Then there were the inevitable ups and downs, the sliding in and out of its partial cocoon.

A couple of years later, long after she had consumed the program enough to reduce it to a few new prejudices about how to exercise and how to eat, she drifted into *Body for Life* Community.com and the dozens of listservs and chat rooms in its nest. Some were modeled as Christian fellowships:

The only requirement for membership is the desire to be healthy. This is not just a set of principles but a society for people in action. Carry the message or wither. . . . Those who haven't been given the truth may not know the abundant life we have found—a way out, into life, a real life with freedom.

Other listservs were just organized by state. In any of them, you could click on someone's name and up would pop a *Body for Life* photo, slipping you right into the culture of personal ads. In the chat rooms, things got really concrete. One woman confessed that she could smell the chocolate right through the wrappers in the bowl of Halloween candy by the door, and someone shouted support in capital letters: "HANG IN THERE! YOU CAN DO IT!!!" A man happily obsessed about how to prepare his shakes:

My favorite is chocolate, and to prepare the shake I always use 3 cubes of ice from the Rubbermaid mold, put them (without water) in the jar, and then pour the water in. Use 12 and a half ounces and 1 centimeter, then blend for about 55 seconds. You [have] got to use a stopwatch! I think this is why I love Myoplex, because I blend it for more seconds and I drink it cool without milk or bananas.

People exchanged stories of ongoing tragedies, seeking workout partners to help them

get through the ordeals. Others just focused on keeping up the network connections:

Good morning to everyone. Been off for a few days. Lizzy—sorry to hear about your migraine—scary! Jim—it's true—your pictures don't do you justice! Abs—I love your philosophy! It's true—we become what we think about. Deb—congratulations! Good luck with your photos—can't wait to see your progress! If you find something that covers bruises, let me know—I bruise just thinking about bumping into something. Can't wait to see you all at the upcoming events!

All of these self-expressions are excessive in their own way. They proclaim, confess, obsess, and gush. But that is not because the body really does just get on track and march forward armed with the drama of success and the minutia of disciplinary practices. It is because it slumps and gets sidetracked and rejoins its *Body for Life* self. It is because it wants and it does not want and because it might do one thing or another. It is because it smells its way along tracks, and new tracks intersect the old and carry it away. It is because it catches things out of the corner of its eye, and half-hidden things on the sidelines are always the most compelling.

*Body for Life* draws its own life from the force of a bodily surge enacting not the simple, deliberate, one-way embodiment of dreams but rather the pulsing impact of dream and matter on each other in a moment when the body is beside itself. Caught in a movement, floating suspended between past and future, hesitation and forward thrust, pain and pleasure, knowledge and ignorance, the body vibrates or pulses. It is only when the body remains partly unactualized and unanchored that it seems intimate, familiar, and alive. This can be lived as an event—a moment of shock, climax, or awakening. But there is also something of it in the banal and quotidian—a continuous background radiation, a humming left unremarked like a secret battery kept charged.

*Body for Life* says that turning fleeting fantasies into the force of vitality is about making a decision, but making a decision is itself about

playing games, looking at pictures, following recipes, mimicking desired states, inventing social imaginaries, and talking to yourself in the mirror. Getting on track and staying there is not the simple and sober choice of a lifetime but rather a thin line from which you can, and probably will, topple back to ordinary sloppiness or onto an “epidemic of the will” (Sedgwick, 1992) such as excessive dieting. Then the body might swing itself back to a state of moderation or exhaustion, stick its toe in to test the waters, and pull the blankets over itself to hide.

The proliferating cultures of the body spin madly around the palpable promise that fears and pleasures and forays into the world can be literally made vital all-consuming passions. But this promise (and threat) is already there in the body directly engaged by shifting public sensibilities, in the senses retooled and set in motion. Like an antenna, the body picks up pulses that are hard to hear, or hard to bear, in the normalizing universe of cultural codes. It stores the pulses in a neck muscle or a limb, or it follows them just to see where they are going. It dares them and registers their impacts. It wants to be part of their flow. It wants to be in touch. It wants to be touched. It hums along with them, flexing its muscles in a state of readiness.

#### ■ SOMETIMES WHEN YOU HEAR SOMEONE SCREAM . . .

Laurie Anderson had a show at the Guggenheim Soho called “Your Fortune, \$1.” A spooky white plastic owl perched on a stool in a darkened corner spewed out a stream of two-bit advice, trenchant commentary, and stray advertising lingo plucked out of a realm of sheer circulation. The owl’s mechanical yet sensuously grainy voice droned on and on, transfixing her in a flood of Hallmark greeting card schlock. She was fascinated to see how the flood’s ordinary reality seemed to instantly deflate and become both laughable and alarming from the owl’s simple mimicking.

Then it said something that she swore she had already been anxiously chanting to herself.

*Sometimes when you hear someone scream, it goes in one ear and out the other. Sometimes it passes right into the middle of your brain and gets stuck there.*

It was one of those moments when the indiscriminate flow stops dead in its tracks. The super-saturated soup of sensory images and sounds gently prodding and massaging us like waves lapping a shore takes this opportunity to solidify into something momentarily clear or even shocking. Like a trauma we had forgotten or never quite registered that comes back in a flash. Or like a whiff of something hopeful or potentially exciting passing with the breeze. We perk up in a mix of recognition, pleasure, and alarm.

One minute you are afloat in the realm of sheer circulation. Then some random sound bite hits you with a force that seems to bring you to your senses. We sober up in the face of a cruel lucidity. But it is the hungry sense that has been awakened that drives the world back into the land of enchantment. The waves of desire lap at our feet, and we drift off again, held aloft by the sheer density of images, sensory signals, and objects drawn into play in the dreamworld.

When she heard the owl’s line about screams that pass right into the middle of your brain and get stuck there, she went home and wrote down a story that had been lodged in her psyche ever since she heard it.

The story starts with a question lodged in a tactile sense anxiety and then opens onto an aesthetic scene of the senses. The question: Do you ever wake up in the morning, or in the middle of the night, with a sense of sudden dread and start scanning your dreamy brain for the memory of what you have done or a premonition of what is coming? Some do this all of the time; for them, this is what morning has become.

The aesthetic scene: She has a big iron bed lodged against long wide windows looking onto the back deck. Tropical breezes waft over her in the night, carrying the sweet and fetid smells of kumquat trees and mimosa blossoms. At dawn, there are wild bird cries—mourning doves and grackles and parrots that once escaped their pet cages and now breed in the trees. At certain hours

in the still of the night, the train cries in the near distance. The night pulses with the high lonesome sound of haunted machine dreams roaming the landscape.

When she has guests, she lets them use the iron bed, and they wake up talking about the bed and the wailing train as if they feel pleased to be set down in some kind of American Heartland. But she is only too happy to lay down a pallet on the living room floor and fall into a deep sleep with only the smell of old ashes from the fireplace because she knows why the train sings.

The train sings for Bobby, a homeless drunk who laid himself down on the tracks one night and passed out as if he too could lay down a pallet and escape from his ghosts. He and his old lady had been down at the free concert on the river where some of the street people party hard. The weekly concert was their moment to be at home in public, doing what everyone else was doing, only more. Some would laugh loud or make announcements or give people directions and advice. As the day went to full dark, the power of music would flow out from the stage, touch spellbound bodies, and spread out to the neon skyline reflecting in the dark glassy expanse of the river. There were always graceful moments—a dance gesture, a wide open smile, a sudden upsurge of generosity, the startled gratitude of pariahs who suddenly found themselves seamlessly rubbing shoulders with the housed. There were always crashes too—people falling down drunk in front of the stage; the vomiting; a man huddled and pale, too sick to party; flashes of hope and ease dashed on the rocks of familiar fury, frustration, humiliation, and grief; people making spectacles of themselves. Sometimes there were fights.

That night, Bobby had a fight with his old lady and stomped off alone. He followed the train tracks through the woods to the homeless camp, where he sat on the tracks alone, taking stock in a booze-soaked moment of reprieve. He loved the romance of the high lonesome sound in the distance and the train's promise of tactility and power—the rumbling weight of power incarnate rumbling past, the childhood memory of the penny laid on the tracks, the way the tracks

carved out a “no man's land” where shadows could travel and live.

He laid himself down on the icy cold tracks and closed his eyes, as if tempting fate. As if that simple move held both the possibility of checking out and a dream of contact with a public world that might include him.

Somewhere in the middle of the long train passing over, he raised his head, awakening. They say that if he had not woken up, the train would have passed right over him.

Now the train screams out a warning when it draws close to that place on the tracks not far from her iron bed. It often wakes her. Or it lodges in her sleep and comes as an unknown shock of anxiety in the morning.



#### ■ CODA

The stories that make up my story—disparate and arbitrary scenes of impact tracked through bodies, desires, or labors and traced out of the aftermath of a passing surge registered, somehow, in objects, acts, situations, and events—are meant to be taken not as representative examples of forces or conditions but rather as constitutive events and acts in themselves that animate and literally make sense of forces at the point of their affective and material emergence. More directly compelling than ideologies, and more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic representations of an abstract structure brought to bear on otherwise lifeless things, they are actual sites where forces have gathered to a point of impact, or flirtations along the outer edges of a phenomenon, or extreme cases that suggest where a trajectory might lead if it were to go unchecked. They are not the kinds of things you can get your hands on or wrap your mind around, but they are things that have to be literally tracked.

Rather than seek an explanation for things we presume to capture with carefully formulated concepts, my story proposes a form of cultural

and political critique that tracks lived impacts and rogue vitalities through bodily agitations, modes of free-floating fascination, and moments of collective excitation or enervation. It attempts to describe how people are quite literally charged up by the sheer surge of things in the making.

My story, then, is not an exercise in representation or a critique of representation; rather it is a cabinet of curiosities designed to incite curiosity. Far from trying to present a final, or good enough, story of something we might call “U.S. culture,” it tries to deflect attention away from the obsessive desire to characterize things once and for all long enough to register the myriad strands of shifting influence that remain uncaptured by representational thinking. It presumes a “we”—the impacted subjects of a wild assemblage of influences—but it also takes difference to be both far more fundamental and far more fluid than models of positioned subjects have been able to suggest. It is not normative. Its purpose is not to evaluate things as finally good or bad, and far from presuming that meanings or values run the world, it is drawn to the place where *meaning* per se collapses and we are left with acts and gestures and immanent possibilities. Rather than try to pinpoint the beating heart of its beast, it tracks the pulses of things as they cross each other, come together, fragment, and recombine in some new surge. It tries to cull attention to the affects that arise in the course of the perfectly ordinary life as the promise, or threat, that something is happening—something capable of impact. Whether such affects are feared or shamelessly romanticized, subdued or unleashed, they point to the generative immanence lodged in things. Far from the named “feelings” or “emotions” invented in discourses of morals, ideals, and known subjectivities (leave that to Hallmark and the Family Channel), they take us to the surge of intensity itself.

My story tries to follow lines of force as they emerge in moments of shock, or become resonant in everyday sensibilities, or come to roost in a stilled scene of recluse or hiding. It tries to begin the labor of knowing the effects of current restructurings not as a fixed body of elements and representations imposed on an innocent world

but rather as a literally moving mix of things that engages desires, ways of being, and concrete places and objects.

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