

## A Tangential Manifesto

I feel like a large part of who I am was a direct result of growing up next to railroad tracks, a genetic therapy compound, and a bowling alley, and I mean that in a fine art sense. At about the time that I was becoming incredibly self-aware, just after I got over feeling like I wasn't good at anything, I felt incredibly normal. Ashamedly so. I felt as though normal was what I had come from, and what I was doomed to, and that everyone who looked at me hard enough could tell. I felt surrounded by it. I was involved in the kind of friendships that one falls into without even trying. These are people, some of whom I am still very close to, who are the best friends a person can ever have. Yet, at the time, I cannot say that they seemed to feel this same urgency against normalcy.

By this point, I had come into contact with small isolated pockets of something I could only describe as an alternative. In many ways these instances scared me. They were foreign and comprised of something that would not mix with me. In an odd way it was art, although at a superficial level, that led me to my discoveries, which in turn, turned me into an artist. I frequently did drawings and paintings of things that were around me. The subject was often immaterial, as my true goal was mastering the skill of realistic representation. I almost never worked solely from my imagination. I was also involved in a beginner's class in photography. It was through this that I began to collect images from which to work. This process severely broadened my area of influence, as I was able to instantly access any location that I endeavored to seek out. I believe it was an instinctive desire to understand my immediate surroundings that led me to walk from my house to my first unknown locations.

Immediately outside of my neighborhood was a community center that was slowly being transplanted by an industrial complex. I found myself drawn to the looming, open, raw structures. There was something there that was unfinished, still able to be seen for what it was. I gradually became more daring at this new hobby. I shimmied under fences, climbed onto roofs, and eventually, enlisted the aid of a friend. This friend maybe felt some of the same that I felt, although in him it manifested itself more as a desire for unruly destruction. Either way, we formed a temporary alliance to aid in our discovery of the unknown. Strength in numbers. Somewhere along our travels we made another important discovery. Railroad tracks ran right by my neighborhood. From inside the houses one often heard whistles at anytime of the day or night. This may seem like a mundane fact to anyone who knows anything about anything. Goods and people are transported rapidly all over the country by railway. Why was it then that I felt such a deep sense of mystery? I decided to interact with this phenomenon as though I had no previous knowledge regarding it. All impressions were based solely on what I witnessed with my own senses.

At the far end of my neighborhood lay a cul-de-sac which was surrounded by a dense forest. Visibility inside was incredibly short. I stumbled into the clearing before I realized it was there. It stretched as far as one could see in each direction, four parallel lines of tree, rail, rail, and tree. We started walking along the tracks. For what seemed like forever, there was the illusion that nothing was changing. The longer we walked in this manner, the greater the sense of fear and anticipation grew. Sometimes, if we were

lucky, this feeling would find release. We would find ourselves face to face with a dark, rushing, heedless beast who came swiftly, created clamor and uproar in the very air around it, shaking the leaves so violently they appeared to be alive, only to recede as quickly as it came, leaving an impenetrable silence. These expeditions began to take place at night. The lights of the train and the darkness of the forest added yet another element to the experience. The emphasis had now officially moved away from taking photographs, and had become experiential.

To my surprise, upon being told of our exploits, many others expressed a similar desire to witness the spectacle. This experience held a universal appeal despite its superficial banality. On one night, traveling with others, we wandered far enough in one direction to encounter a bridge. The sense of apprehension of standing on railroad tracks is immensely heightened when one is standing in the middle of a sizable bridge. If a train comes, you have to make it to one side or the other, it is no longer a simple matter of stepping off the tracks. Despite these thoughts, we tentatively began to walk across the bridge. Upon reaching the middle, and this might sound a little too perfect, but it really did happen, we looked out upon a river valley which was full of fireflies. Every now and then I get the feeling that I am beholding a sacred place- that was one of those times. The constant flashing looked as if it was coming from some huge screen that covered all we could see. This sight, mixed with the apprehension of the possible approach of a train is something I will always remember. I don't remember if a train came that night or not, but I do know it came other nights as I stood on that bridge. There were never any fireflies after that night.

It had come to the attention of me and my companion that a large building, much larger than any of the others, was being constructed in the rapidly growing industrial complex. Some of my most recent ventures had been thwarted by security cameras and hired workers who pointed to private property signs and demanded I leave. This only increased my interest. We both had our eye on this new building, especially when signs began to label it as a genetic therapy company. Jokingly we spoke of inhumane mutant experiments. We decided to devote a whole night to trying to find a way into and up to the roof of this new monster. We plotted our course of approach and entry very carefully. At the end of my street there lay a hill. Just after the houses at the end of the street, the ground took a sharp turn down and then up again, creating a small triangular prism shaped valley. It always seemed incredibly odd, obviously man-made, perhaps some sort of psychological boundary between compound and neighborhood. Everything that lay recessed in this valley was covered by the shadow of its steep slope. None of the lights of the complex could reach it. There were also periodic trees that offered excellent cover. Our plan was to enter this valley, walk sideways under cover of shadow, darting from tree to tree until we reached the border of the fence surrounding the building in question. There was the feeling that we wanted to avoid light at all cost, as though to avoid the gaze of an omniscient eye presiding over the entire complex. We decided to bring cameras, in the event that if we were caught, we could appear to be only, "taking photographs". We weren't exactly sure how we would otherwise explain our actions.

Having successfully enacted our plan, we found an area of fence that we could push up and slip under. Once inside the perimeter there lay ahead the daunting task of crossing the 100 or so yards to the building in full view and under strong lights. If this

were not enough, there lay a trailer within the fence that appeared to preside as guardian. It seemed quite possible that here lay the opposition, carefully observing all that took place inside the structure from the safety of their monitors, ready at a moments notice to call the authorities, or act as them. Either way we had to be sure of what we were up against. We inched along the walls of the trailer, and stood on barrels to look in each window. At each one we were prepared to fly upon discovery, however, one by one, saw nothing but an empty interior. Believing now that the omniscient eye really was only in our minds, we slinked across the construction yard towards the structure itself. Scrambling over and around various materials, I mistakenly stepped into a bucket believing it to be empty. I withdrew my leg rapidly, having found myself up to the knee in some unidentifiable liquid. I was a little rattled and nervous about what was now soaking my pants and covering my leg, but I decided to put it out of my mind and focus on the mission.

Easily visible from the outside of the fence lay a large rudimentary metal door. We had planned on using it to enter the building, however, to our surprise found it locked with a padlock and chain. This was the first time that this had ever happened. We were both disappointed by the thought of failure, but encouraged by the fact that something inside was worth this level of protection. We scanned the perimeter, searched three of the sides, and then at last, reluctantly, the last side which faced the road. There we found a large metal grate with a ladder below that led into the basement. After a quick look around, we both started straining to lift the grate. It was incredibly heavy, but together we could swing it up on its hinges. One last look around proved our actions to have gone unnoticed. We descended the ladder and found ourselves in an outside underground part of the basement. We found a door and, sweet bliss, it opened, allowing us access to its mysterious contents.

Inside we found large machines of every shape and variety in various levels of completion. There were sealed chambers with “danger” and “hazardous” signs posted on the outsides. Things that might have been so at some point in the future seemed quite harmless at the time, and we bravely entered and searched everywhere. I can’t quite say exactly what was to go on there. The more we saw the deeper the mystery became, however, we were satisfied knowing truly what a great mystery it was. At one point we heard a door slam. In horror we froze. Quite unexpectedly, my friend picked up a metal pipe and began walking towards the noise. We discovered that the wind had slammed the door by which we had entered. I remember asking him what the hell he was going to do with the pipe, and not receiving a satisfactory answer. Simply an area on which we differed I suppose, although looking back, my life could have turned out quite differently had that really been a night watchman.

We found an elevator, but in fear of hidden cameras took the stairs. The building contained four floors, each with different layout, rooms, and equipment. On the top floor we found a door which led to an outside balcony area. There lay a large half cylinder shaped roof, circle side up, a good thirty feet up from the balcony floor. This would have been totally inaccessible save for the scaffolding covering the structure. Now we had our destination. It may have been the kind of destination to which the process of getting there is what is most important. But still, we had a destination. For some reason, the highest point of every construction site building has this effect. To get there, you have to

traverse the whole building twice. The power of the point lies in the process, ... and the view. We sat at the crest of the arch, transfixed, looking out upon the complex, confident that we blended in with the dark of the roof and sky. I noted that my pant leg had grown stiff as cardboard and wondered, this time aloud, what horrible concoction had been in that barrel. He complained of a sticky, tar-like substance covering his hands that must have come from one of ladders we had used to reach the roof. None of the complaints were whole-hearted, however, because what we truly felt was a deep feeling of satisfaction of knowing. As with the railroad, we now understood something secret and hidden about the world around us. Upon reentering the light and warmth of the building, my friend found his hand covered with blood. The water that had frozen on my pant leg thawed and became wet again. The return trip was otherwise largely uneventful.

The pictures taken on that trip perked the interest of our friends. Many other trips were made, none quite like that first night. One of the people who expressed interest in my escapades was of a different sort entirely. I knew her as a fellow painter. She embodied all of what I had described before as other and alternative. Despite this, we managed to get on quite nicely. I think I had found in her someone who seemed different than everyone else, only genuinely so. She made me realize the power of self-awareness. I could now learn to depart from normality in ways that felt true. She was quite affected by our trip to the genetic therapy compound. I was glad because it was something I could give back. She laughed because she had been going for some time to the Bowl America diner directly on the other side of the complex from my neighborhood. It was a meeting place of sorts for the alternative. I visited there with her on numerous occasions. I watched them smoke cigarettes and drink coffee. One, an ex-lover of hers, I believe thought of me as something of a threat. He took to calling me "perfect boy," sensing that I had not quite yet emerged from my shell, still a little too sheltered and smooth around the edges. One time, in confidence, I told her I thought he was a good candidate for the handle, "imperfect boy," but never said it to his face. She loved that, describing him as a would be writer, who had stopped writing and now only delivered pizzas.

Contrary to his perception, there really was never anything romantic between us. It almost happened, back when we were just getting acquainted. We were spending a lot of time together, looking at art, watching movies, and talking. Once, when watching a movie, we spooned on the couch in my living room when my parents weren't home. That was the closest we ever came. Soon after that we were driving somewhere. There was heavy traffic and heavy rain. She was at the wheel, turned to me, and said, "are you interested in me romantically?" I was flabbergasted and caught off guard. I wasn't sure I could just answer her like that and told her so. I inwardly thought it kind of depended on how she felt and how things developed between us. She told me I should be able to answer, unless I was playing games. There was a silence for about 15 seconds after that remark, and then I answered, "no", and knew it to be true. I liked her a lot, and was lonely, but knew it would never have worked out like that between us. I never knew what she thought about that answer, or how she felt about me. I did know that once I had answered, it didn't really matter. I think that conversation was in some way necessary for us to become so close. I became aware that I wanted to be this honest with everyone I met from now on.

Back at the diner, I found most of the others to be so depressed about the state of the world, that they had forced an extreme alternative state upon themselves. They couldn't be mistaken to be a part of what they hated. They sat with tattoos, piercings, and died hair, rolling cigarettes in their bohemian environment, surrounded by blue-collar middle-America rolling brightly colored balls down lanes.

Of all of these others that I met, her younger sister rang most true. The three of us would stay up late into the night chewing the fat. They weren't allowed to have anyone over past 10 or 11, so I would park a little way away, and approach from the back, jumping fences, running in the shadows. Then, when I knew the coast was clear, I would lightly rap on the back, glass-sliding door. We would tip-toe through the house into the garage, where we could talk at normal decibels without fear of being heard. Ideas were shared. Sometimes her sister transcribed because she thought it was all so good. At some point we began calling our pow-wows, "Sessions at West Fiftieth and Garage Street." I think I got the name from some late night music show on public television entitled, "Sessions at West 54<sup>th</sup> Street," or something like that.

These are the things I remember about the time in which I was coming into myself. I visited an old abandoned cement processing plant that I called the "oil refinery" because it looked like one on land. I visited banks, churches, and office buildings that were in various stages of being added to our homogenous landscape. There was no apparent sensible reason. The only motive was discovery, but discovery of things I supposedly already knew everything about. It was about transforming my own perception of my environment. Commonplace things took on mysterious, symbolic, and even cosmic significance. I reinvented the world, though not falsely, only truer to my own senses and imaginings. I left home feeling like I had never truly fit in on the surface. Now I had another world in which to live.