

## Ben Kinmont

scholarship brought me to the writings of people like Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather, and Mary Rowlandson, and specifically to that Puritan relationship with fear, via the Old Testament. These pilgrims left England in blind faith to start a new life by sailing into the absolute unknown, awash in total fear, feeling quite viscerally that their mortal souls were at stake. There is plenty of insidious fear today, but it's so mediated, mitigated, and medicated. And it's fear that keeps us closed off from the breadth of life, from real risk and real agency. You know, living in New York, you see a lot of people looking for absolution in yoga class, wearing fucking crystals around their necks, or going on diets. The kind of fear that the Puritans knew when they stared into the shadow of that Old Testament God—frankly, it's beautiful and alive and terrifying. I'm hardly a Christian, but those texts bring me to something that's missing from my life and maybe contemporary life in general. It's not fashionable. It's a profound love entwined with profound fear and profound purpose. It's something about making this life count.

**DB-Q:** Well, there's a kind of real pleasure in fashion that also seems to me like a genuine irony of fashion: it clothes our naked condition, that state of being

absolutely unchanging, in which we suspect we're wholly seen despite what we're wearing, and that has little to do, in the end, with being "clothed." It seems very connected to the way in which the Old Testament insists that the proper way to pray is in love and fear and that these qualities are in equal measure and absolutely simultaneous. One of the things I worry about in this culture is that love and fear bear no relationship to one another.

Fear is itself a kind of fashion that one pays however much money to feel because it's as if fear is, instead of a kind of ontological condition, just a need for more jolts of adrenaline, for dangers that actually aren't dangerous, or for some simulation of real sensation that, to the particular intelligence of the postmodern mind, is accepted as actual stimulation—an aesthetic that divorces itself from the body it secretly depends on. Of course, the same discrepancy has been an argument in all eras, from Aristotle and Plato to Augustine to now. And sometimes it feels to me that in our culture love, sadly, is given in a sticky note that says, "You look good today!" You tack it on your mirror so that you can face the world one more time. You know, if we're looking for such an easy form of self-affirmation, then as a

culture we know nothing of actual fear, existential fear, fear that keeps us aligned with that oblivion that is the counterpoint of genuine love.

Howe was also my entry point into those authors and all that language you mentioned. What we feel—what's so moving—in Anne Hutchinson, Herman Melville, and that whole astonishing bunch is that they had at a single point of a certain self a kind of infinity of bewilderment that they were always brushing up against. Maybe to have an American voice is to always locate oneself in that thinnest strand between an arrival that's known and everything that threatens the ability to stay at that place, to stay there, to find a way to dwell. It feels infinite and prophetic and godlike and fearsome; the only way to do it properly is to understand that love is some dwelling at the other edge of oblivion.

The art I love most offers us these kinds of dwellings. You read a poem and you climb into a kind of hut, so to speak, and that hut is right there, between knowable things and unknowable things. For a little while, a great piece of art lets those two things coexist and lets you stay there as long as you can look at it or as long as you can read it. But, of course, no one gets to stay. One can hardly bear it.

### BEN KINMONT speaks with THOM DONOVAN

**Thom Donovan:** Yesterday, by phone, you spoke again of your idea of "the third sculpture" with regard to various ruminations about the archive, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, and problems of consensus building within and outside of art discourse. Can you talk about how the "third sculpture" relates to your work as a whole?

**Ben Kinmont:** The idea of the third sculpture is to have a specific syntax with which to speak both about spaces in-between—between two people, two points, or one idea and another—and about the way in which that in-between space, as soon as it is identified, becomes another point that then creates other third sculptures, or spaces in-between. What strikes me about the idea of consensus and dissensus is the way in which dissensus, once successful, becomes consensus, and how this constant motion from one to the other constitutes democracy.

This idea of things coming into being and the connection between being and power interest me.

**TD:** *Sshhh* (2002–ongoing) seems to be another of your projects that considers the threshold of "art discourse," as well as offering a proposal on how to move forward when art threatens to expropriate our most intimate relationships. Given the parasitic relationship many artists currently have in relation to various forms of political and social practice, *Sshhh* seems a particularly timely work to reactivate for the 2014 Whitney Biennial. When the art discourse

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threatens real sociopolitical results, such as providing spaces where communities and families can properly care for one another, the Sshhh project produces a means by which to act in the face of art's failure to produce a more equitable and salubrious world.

BK: With Sshhh, I am trying to acknowledge that there is a domestic discourse that is outside of art discourse, a place where meaningful things occur and also a place to which art is not invited. So, with these engravings, there is no image, and no information that reveals what was said. We just know that a certain family had a conversation on a particular day, a conversation that is referenced by the engraving but known only to the participants.

TD: Whereas some artists would like to partition art from other forms of cultural work and still others would like to take up other disciplines and discourses as extensions of their practice, it seems to me that much of your work is about making certain thresholds appear regarding what has been constituted as an "art discourse" and other types of discourse. This seems especially true of your ongoing project *On becoming something else* (2009-ongoing),<sup>2</sup> where you're trying to find the more or less exact point at which art's extension into other disciplines negates its ability to function within an art discourse.

More than anything else, I see your work as persistently trying to embody an ethics that accurately observes contemporary art's undiminished tendency to appropriate a world of lived relationships for itself, as well as risking your own participation in this appropriation. It is as though you are suggesting that by observing art more clearly (or making it visible at all), we might reorganize what it can do, who it is for, and who is capable of participating in the assertion of its value.

BK: Once things are made visible,

we do have the opportunity to reorganize what art can do. I suppose that this is the optimism that can be found at the end of institutional critique: that once we have a sense of how meaning is made, where power lies, and how it is used, we can propose a plan for a more equitable future. But remember—to refer back to the ideas of consensus and dissensus—that once a new, more just structure is created, it too will leave out some other idea or person or group, and will therefore need to be challenged and renovated to meet the needs of others. And so change continually occurs.

TD: I couldn't agree more with what you say about institutional critique regarding "visibility." I hear Karl Marx in it ("the point is to change it") but also our beloved philosopher William James, who made a lifework of coordinating ontology with a constant sense of change.

BK: Thom, I have a question for you, one that came up for me last summer while reading an article by James Wood in the *New Yorker*. In "Sins of the Father," his review of four literary biographies of novelists written by their children, he writes, "Almost twenty years ago, George Steiner suggested in these pages that doing philosophy was incompatible with domestic life." Later he asks, "Can a man or a woman fulfill a sacred devotion to thought, or music, or art, or literature, while fulfilling a proper devotion to spouse or children?" I would argue that this points to a threshold worth careful consideration. What are your thoughts on this, in the context of your life as a poet and your interest in various political activities, such as Occupy Wall Street? Although Wood's question refers directly to family life, it has implications that go beyond one's private life and extend into our relationships across a social fabric.

TD: I immediately think of the many women artists and writers who, despite bearing the brunt of (unpaid) reproductive labor, have had careers and asserted

themselves beyond the domestic sphere. It also reminds me that one of the not-small leaps of feminism was instilling in men a sense of responsibility for reproductive labor—from child rearing to keeping house to making sure everyone in the household is cared for.

Without an attention to the domestic sphere, I don't see how a proper political praxis can exist. Something interesting to note about many of the Occupy camps is how the occupiers created a domestic space, a home, through the appropriation of spaces like parks and squares. At Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, in particular, groups were assigned to cook, to clean, and to administer health services. Tending house was crucial because the police were trying to find any reason they could for eviction.

With the collapse of various national welfare systems, I think that artists will increasingly become providers of and mediators for lacking civic services. I think that they will also continue to explore new ways of being public and private and will rethink citizenship in terms of the responsibilities of an expanded notion of the domestic, one that may perhaps include a larger "tribe" or "pack," or even extend to a commons (communism).

The months after my Occupy activities ceased, I watched everything by the television producer and director Joss Whedon, who is most famous for the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Whedon's work is all about family—an alternative notion of family that is dependent not on blood relations but on shared cultural urgencies. In a weird way, his work helped me process my own cathexis of Occupy and ongoing projections about social practice and political engagement. I am still using that work to write about the problems you recognize in your question regarding how both to have a family and to feel that one is part of a commons, and likewise how

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## Shio Kusaka

to behave in such a way that family and commons become coextensive. Would you care to talk about this trajectory in your work, from the series of works in which you washed dishes for other people to your founding of an antiquarian bookshop in order to care for your family? I wonder, too, if we all are not constantly "becoming something else" in the current cultural climate, where very few artists can survive on their art alone and most culture workers have more than one job, maybe several.

1. Artist's project description: "*Sshhh*, archive begun 2002. I invited families living in Chatou, outside Paris, each to have a conversation at home, among themselves, and to consider the possibility of this conversation as a work of art. Fifteen families later notified me by e-mail to say when they had their conversation. The content and nature of each conversation remains a secret known only to them. Afterward, I made each family an engraving, recording the family's name and conversation date, in the size and color of their choosing. Each engraving functions as an art object, as something to be exhibited and circulated within the art world. For those within the family, the engraving is more; it comes out of a domestic moment and functions as an aide-mémoire for a conversation once had. Project can be reactivated. Archive in the collection of the artist."

BK: I have tried to respond to a felt sense of urgency. What needs to be said? What is missing from the discussion, what is not part of the consensus, and what is my culpability in this dynamic? I am interested in the threshold of this community, of what can and cannot be called art. I have watched various ideas come and go, from relevant to irrelevant and back again. But I would argue that, yes, we are all in a state of becoming, and that as we come to some understanding this transmutes into being and power.

2. Artist's project description: "*On becoming something else*, archive begun 2009. I wrote seven paragraphs to describe the work of seven different artists who had pursued art practices that led them out of the art world and into other things. The new things they were doing were extensions of their previous practices—they had not simply given up. In Paris, seven chefs wrote recipes to represent these paragraphs. At the Centre Pompidou, a broadside was distributed, directing people to the chefs' restaurants, where they could eat the representations of the paragraphs. The dishes were available for the length of the show. The project was reactivated four years later in San Francisco with seven new restaurants and then as a multiple with Galileo High School. Project can be reactivated. Archive in the collection of the artist."

## SHIO KUSAKA: frequently asked QUESTIONS

Q: What do you make your pots out of?

A: A lot of my work is made of porcelain. I also use stoneware.

Q: What's the difference?

A: Porcelain is really dense and more like glass. Stoneware is porous and has more sand in it.

Q: Why do you use porcelain?

A: I like how smooth it is. It feels nice in my hands when I make pots.

Q: Isn't porcelain difficult?

A: Yes, if you want to control it.

Q: Why do you use stoneware?

A: Stoneware pots look different. Stoneware also reacts differently when I do the same thing I do with porcelain. If I am making pots in porcelain, after a while I get better at it.

Then I switch to stoneware to lose my control over the clay a little bit. I then switch back to porcelain when I am able to make what I'm trying to make.

Q: Do you know what you will be making when you start?

A: I have an idea but I usually can't make what's in my head. It is part of the process to force myself to make something particular and end up with something else. Sometimes I just make pots without any plans.

Q: Do you draw your ideas?

A: Not usually. I make notes and look at images I find.

Q: Do you use a wheel?

A: Yes. I use a wheel called the Whisper, by Shimpo Ceramics. It's very quiet.

Q: Are the big ones made on the wheel, too?

A: No. I get help with the coil building. The clay ropes are rolled and then stacked up. The surface is then smoothed.

Q: Why get help?

A: I don't have the skill but I want to see my pots bigger. Big pots make my small pots look even smaller, which I like. I love my mini pots.

Q: How long have you been doing this?

A: It has been seventeen years since I first took a ceramics class. I was making pots on and off for ten years. I committed to pottery full time in 2006.

Q: How did you first get interest in pots?

A: Ceramics I looked like the most interesting to me in the class schedule at the time. I can't remember when and how I first thought making pots on the potter's wheel was magical.

Q: How long does it take to make one pot?

A: Twenty minutes on the wheel. I sometimes work on it a little more the next day. The pot dries for three hours to overnight, depending on the weather. I then flip it and work on the bottom of the pot for ten minutes.

Q: What was the first pot you made that you felt proud of?