

**Michel Ned Holte-The Grit And The Oyster (The Bricoleur-NGV Catalogue, October 2009)**

I

In *20 Lines a Day* – a book titled more or less accurately – the American author Harry Mathews records a daily practice, spanning from spring 1983 to summer 1984, of unplanned improvisations that preceded the more ‘serious’ work on his novel *Cigarettes*, and pushed Stendhal’s dictum for writing ‘twenty lines a day, genius or not’ to an almost absurd degree of literalness. ‘It’s a good warm-up exercise I’ve given myself’, Mathews reminds himself on the Day of the Dead:

There’s no conceivable reason not to write twenty lines about anything or something, and twenty lines are enough (would ten or five be equally so?) to banish the hesitancy that breeds telephone calls and household chores and prolongs the reading of newspapers, L. L. Bean catalogues, and articles in *Raritan*.<sup>1</sup>

My reading of Mathews’s book coincided with preparations for writing the essay you are now reading – an essay regarding the recent sculpture of Australian-born, Los Angeles-based artist Ricky Swallow. Maybe it was the unexpected mention of L. L. Bean, but I immediately began to draw connections between Mathews’s nose-to-the-grindstone routine and Swallow’s labor-intensive approach to sculpture (as well as my own tendency to procrastinate about writing).

With Stendhal providing the only rule, so to speak, Mathews’s daily passages, most written in a single sitting, cover an enormous range of ideas and impulses, from the names of birds to descriptions of rooms to the dread of looking into the mirror to the recent death of his close friend Georges Perec. Some of Mathews’s warm-ups are surely bagatelles – ‘throwaways’ retained in order to stay true to the initial premise – but what emerges through an accumulation of glancing blows is a side-winding, profoundly unhurried (and often profound) meditation on *the grand themes* – life, death, and the complicated sandwich of time in-between. This, to me at least, parallels the uncanny charge or gravitas of Swallow’s precisely carved sculptures that gradually emerge from raw blocks of jelutong or English limewood.

‘I still think the time invested in a piece’, Swallow has noted, ‘is somehow contained or embalmed in the object in the final result’.<sup>2</sup> But, how does that actually happen? At what point in the gradual process of a work’s becoming, I wonder, does the essence of that thing reveal itself?

## II

*Bowman's record* is a cast bronze sculpture of an archer's cardboard target that Swallow found in a field near his home. Rectangular and wall-bound, it occupies the space of a painting; with its pocked, monochromatic surface, one approaches it – almost inevitably – like one approaches an abstract painting. The mystery of the target's punctured surface is resolved by the straightforward title of the work, if not in attention to its visible details; abstraction quickly slips over to representation. As Swallow explains:

I like [the targets] because they are made by incident rather than purpose, which is so opposite to what I do in the studio. Yet they are produced with this traditional, even romantic practice of archery in an attempt for the individual to better their skill. So, they are records of this anonymous endeavor made plastic.<sup>3</sup>

*Bowman's record* is indexical: it reveals a process but little other information. The order in which the marks were made is impossible to discern, but it hardly matters. Like many of Swallow's sculptures, a found target is an accumulation, a quiet monument to repetition and time passing – what the artist calls a 'preserved readymade'.

Still, I wonder if it is indeed possible to set 'incident' and 'purpose' apart as binary opposites. Like Mathews's writing routine, what may seem incidental or improvised in the heat of the moment often reveals its target – or a larger sense of purpose – over time.

## III

'Woodshedding' is a slang term for practicing guitar. Another is 'noodling', but noodling implies aimlessness whereas woodshedding suggests industriousness, if not tangible results. Perhaps no one better fits that description than British guitarist Derek Bailey who wrote the book – literally – on improvisation.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming majority of Bailey's recorded output – spanning nearly forty years of playing on acoustic and electric guitar, alone and in a wild assortment of group contexts – is freely improvised. The trick for keeping improvisation fresh, I'm guessing, is in negotiating the perilous terrain between incident and purpose without getting completely lost in the wilderness along the way. 'What are you improvising with or around?' Bailey once asked aloud.

You've got to find somewhere where you can work. If there are no difficulties, it seems to me that there's pretty much no point in playing. I find that the things that excite me are trying to make something work. And when it does work, it's the most fantastic thing. Maybe the most obvious analogy would be the grit that produces the pearl in an oyster, or some shit like that.<sup>5</sup>

Swallow, who paid tribute to the guitarist with a carving of a man's right arm, *Unbroken ways (For Derek Bailey)*, recently described him as 'Buddy Holly's cooler brother'.<sup>6</sup> But for a listener unaccustomed to improvised music – or occasional outbursts of abrasive atonality – Bailey's idiosyncratic twang might initially sound like somebody who just picked up a guitar for the first time. Recordings of Bailey preserve what is, in essence, a confrontation with the everlasting now. On repeated and careful listening, however, one can hear the gentle scrape of the grit inside the oyster.

## IV

Acorn barnacles begin as feathery, free-swimming creatures distantly related to shrimp. Unlike shrimp, however, the barnacles soon relinquish the swimming life and settle down for the long haul by supergluing themselves to a hard surface – a dock, a ship, a buoy, the shell of another being. Once attached, barnacles construct a rock-hard limestone shell that appears somewhat like a sprouting succulent (or the punctured hole of the archer's target, scaled up) and, when necessary, extend their delicate tentacles into the water to grope for passing plankton. Barnacles are hermaphrodites but mate with their neighbors, and therefore tend to gather in dense colonies. This accumulation of barnacles is often rapid and exponential, and several tons of gathered barnacles can drag a massive ship to a slow crawl in just a few years.

## V

*Caravan* is a bronze trio of balloons, plump but grounded. Each balloon is covered with a cluster of acorn barnacles. The title seems to refer to both the barnacles and the balloons and the tendency to encounter each of these objects en masse. (One can imagine more balloons at rest around the corner.)

*Caravan* recalls Swallow's *Younger than yesterday*, a sculpture in which a human skull is adorned with outcroppings of barnacles. The skull, like the balloon, rests on the floor; the balloon in size and shape approximately recalls the skull. In the earlier sculpture carved English limewood brings together human bone and the barnacles' limestone exoskeleton, but the materials are already not-so-distant, calcified cousins: unlikely, but not unlike.

But with *Caravan*, bronze casting unifies the unlikely and improbable: slow-growing, hard-armored sea creatures budding from short-lived, thin-skinned objects. The airiness of the balloon is made dense, heavy and monumental in bronze, but the paradox operating here is as much one of time as one of material: balloons, prone to flightiness, sudden escapes beyond reach and even more sudden explosions of self-annihilation, are coaxed into a lasting relationship by the tenacious barnacles.

## VI

Swallow is a collector – of records, of books, of Japanese hand tools, of ceramics, of furniture and lamps, of T-shirts and denim, of backpacks and tote bags, of parkas and quilted vests, of inflatable rafts, of hardwood, of button badges, of bandanas and other textiles, of hats and caps, of sunglasses, and of scuba fins, among other things. Many of these objects – or images of them – appear on Swallow's blog, *Ready for the House*, which he updates on an almost-daily basis, or they accumulate above the desk in his studio (alongside notes, reminders and song titles written in ALL CAPS on Post-it notes with a thick black marker).<sup>7</sup> Some of these things – or exacting replicas, translated into materials like wood or bronze – eventually appear as 'the work', but one gets the sense that the meticulous examination and placement and reorganization of all this beloved stuff is as much a part of his everyday labor as woodcarving, filing or bronze casting, if not more so.

## VII

John Fahey's steel-string acoustic guitar music, self-defined as 'American Primitive', is usually found in the 'Folk' bins at the record store, but could be placed just as awkwardly in at least a half-dozen other inadequate containers. Fahey, who recorded his first album using the name Blind Joe Death, was born under the sign of Pisces in 1939 and died just six days short of his 62nd birthday in 2001 while riding a new wave of recognition by a generation of younger fans discovering his inimitable approach to woodshedding.

While no stranger to improvisation or atonal explorations that find kinship with someone like Derek Bailey, Fahey's playing is largely guided by a different star: radical compositional structure, along with a musicological (even museological) reverence for sonic passages extracted from the recent and distant past.<sup>8</sup> Fahey is a collector, a *bricoleur*, who can jumpcut together two or more strange bedfellows in a single song like a mixed metaphor that somehow rings true. In the paradoxically titled 'Stomping Tonight on the Pennsylvania/Alabama Border', for example, Fahey gathers a blues lick from Skip James, a motif from the Gregorian chant 'Dies Irae', and a passage from Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sixth Symphony*.<sup>9</sup> Other Fahey tunes likewise draw upon raga, bluegrass and military waltzes; he returns to certain motifs over and over, like a familiar kit of parts, but the organization of the motifs keeps changing. The mastery of Fahey's fingerpicking approach allows the guitar to unify these discrete fragments while leveling any hierarchy between them.

It comes as no surprise that Fahey's music often haunts Swallow's studio. Swallow's sculptures usually take familiar objects from the world (balloons, barnacles, backpacks) and often specifically or allusively borrow from art history (skulls, snakes, Donatello's praying Mary Magdalene) and put these things together in unforeseen ways, using materials such as wood or bronze much like Fahey uses the guitar to unify 'this' and 'that' (skull and barnacles; balloon and barnacles) into a new whole that looks astonishing, uncanny. We're not talking about hybrids here, or Frankenstein monsters, but specific things-in-the-world that are brought together to form a marriage of sorts where the individual things somehow maintain their identity and autonomy.

As I'm writing this, Swallow is carving a complex linear arrangement in which an assortment of seashells, a desert rose and some pocket change all nestle in a hooded sweatshirt draped over a long wood block – a multipart still life the artist describes as 'a scattered tomb of sorts [...] akin to a group of offerings left, grave tokens or personal effects'.<sup>10</sup> As with the relatively simpler juxtapositions, the components are individually recognizable, but the whole is unified in material – if not as a concept. The trick that both Fahey and Swallow accomplish is making the transition from 'this' to 'that' seamless and startling at the same time.

## VIII

The human skull – a familiar figure of death that looms over pop culture and art history alike – appears so frequently in Swallow's body of work you might call it a recurring character: in the aforementioned *Younger than yesterday*, barnacles sprout, symbiotically, from a skull's complex topology; in *Come together*, a skull is deeply embedded, tragicomically, in the seat of a beanbag, as if hurled from across the room like a shot put; and in *Everything is nothing*, the skull, lying on its side, is partially wrapped in a hood cut cleanly from a sweatshirt – just as the skull was severed from its body. Other works point to the skull without directly representing it – for example, the bone-like bicycle helmet upended and holding writhing snakes in *The arrangement*. 'There's empathy in death and to monuments specifically, that I'm trying to reach', Swallow has asserted. 'Something beautiful beyond decay, within a structure both poetic and formal'.<sup>11</sup>

In *Fig. 1* a rounded but aspherical object is loosely shrouded in folded, crinkled paper – all masterfully carved from a single block of limewood – but never clearly identifies itself as a skull. At first glance one might see *Fig. 1* as an ‘abstraction’ – much like *Bowman’s record*, with which it was first exhibited.<sup>12</sup> But, the fidelity of the paper sheath is too exacting – too papery – to trust that initial impulse.

So, what’s lurking in there? Given Swallow’s ongoing, almost-magnetic attraction to the object, it’s impossible to see it as anything but a skull, the figure of death wrapped in time. As Swallow has observed:

When something ends, it becomes sculpture, a commemoration of a prior life or energy, fixing it against a perishing time. There is both a sustained time period within the narrative of my sculptures and the sustained time period through how they’re produced as carvings in the studio. It seems time is still the main thing looming over the works.<sup>13</sup>

The act of apprehending *Fig. 1* hardly matches the amount of time Swallow invested in making it, yet the viewer is pointed to an unfolding process of discovery, one in which the sculpture’s secret keeps death at the door until that charged moment of inevitability.

## IX

Is there some levity in discovering that Swallow learned to carve such intricate and haunting memento mori by reading a how-to book titled *Carving Realistic Birds?*<sup>14</sup> Swallow did indeed carve a life-sized bird – his namesake – and nested it in a Gola-brand sneaker carved from matching wood in *Together is the new alone*. But, following this glued union, he created seamless juxtapositions in the act of carving each sculpture from a single (or laminated) block of wood: an addition by removal.

*Fig. 2* is a backpack carved from a block of jelutong, but is a somewhat anomalous work for Swallow because there is no such juxtaposition of objects. Swallow has a remarkable gift for making wood look uncannily like canvas or paper – soft, pliable. The backpack is filled, but not quite to capacity: we don’t know what’s inside it; there is no suggestion offered. There is some hint of a narrative, but no proverbial breadcrumbs to follow – only form, exteriority.

The titles *Fig. 1* and *Fig. 2* imply textbook illustrations – and Swallow has surely seen his share of them – but they also refer to the human figure. *Fig. 1* veils its skull; *Fig. 2* calls forth a torso in its very absence.

## X

In 2005 Derek Bailey died of motor neuron disease, anticipated by the onset of carpal tunnel syndrome. No longer able to grip a pick, the guitarist decided against surgery to relieve the constrictions of the disorder (not to mention retirement), resolving instead to adapt his approach to plucking the strings – essentially relearning the instrument in the seventh decade of his life. A recording of this process – Bailey’s last – made over the course of twelve weeks and bluntly titled *Carpal Tunnel*, clearly intimates the struggle of a virtuoso after losing his ‘chops’. But the results in this case are somehow more bracing than depressing: Bailey’s approach to the instrument was always one of openness and fluid exploration; the notion of failure was not denied but deferred in favor of delineating the very precipice from which one might fall. And that precipice is the reason one listens.

## XI

Like *Unbroken ways (For Derek Bailey)* before it, *Rehearsal for retirement* fragments the human body – a right arm in the former, two bare feet in the latter. Both sculptures are carved from limewood with chisels and knives, but are left unfiled and therefore somewhat rough – akin to a traditional German woodcarving that, according to the artist, ‘maybe even pushes it back in time a little’.<sup>15</sup>

The right foot steps on the prone left foot, or perhaps the latter props up the former. To imagine the whole body is to imagine simultaneous movement and stasis. The feet are accompanied by a desert rose, a crystalline gypsum form that accumulates in sandy environments and resembles a grooved piece of fruit.

The work’s title is borrowed from the Phil Ochs album *Rehearsals for Retirement*, issued in 1969. With gallows humor, the album cover features a photograph of a tombstone with the singer’s name carved into it, positing the word ‘retirement’ as a grim understatement. On the song ‘My Life’ Ochs sings, paradoxically, ‘My life is now a death to me’, and on the grave marker his death is dated to

August 1968 – coinciding with the violent protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and preceding the singer’s actual death, by his own hands, seven years later.

## XII

*The man from Encinitas* is not a skull, but perhaps it works the same way. The human head upon which it is based belongs to Cranston Montgomery, the strikingly named craftsman with whom Swallow works when casting bronze. The sculpture is chalk-white plaster, an interstitial material in the process of metal casting – the part that usually gets thrown away. Held aloft from a raw onyx base, the head is far from polished, at least by Swallow’s standards; it’s complete and resolved but *somehow not yet finished*. This may be the intended figure of speech.

Montgomery suffered cardiac arrest while surfing and lost consciousness. Underwater, he was revived by the repeated crashing of waves that slammed his body to the shore and, with an accumulation of powerful oceanic blows, jostled his heart back to life. *The man from Encinitas* is a death mask, in other words, but one of death deferred. With eyes closed but chin held up defiantly, the figure exists between life and death, both in and out of time’s grasp: at peace on the precipice.

## Notes

- 1 Harry Mathews, *20 Lines a Day*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, IL, 1988, p. 60.
- 2 Ricky Swallow, quoted in Justin Paton, *Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings*, Craftsman House, Fishermans Bend, 2004, p. 13.
- 3 Ricky Swallow, email to the author, May 2009.
- 4 See Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1980.

5 Phil Freeman, interview with Derek Bailey, *Jazziz*, March 2002, online at <http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001106.html>

6 Swallow, email.

7 See <http://www.ready4thehouse.blogspot.com/>. The title 'Ready for the House' is taken from an album of the same name by a mysterious Houston-based musician using the moniker 'Jandek'. Initially attributed to The Units and released by Corwood Industries in 1978, *Ready for the House* was later re-issued, re-attributed to Jandek, and is the first album of his sprawling discography. The album cover features a photograph of an easy chair and window in a living room that is generally presumed to be Jandek's. Swallow notes that 'fans have tried to piece his life together from details gleaned from the covers – in this case, identifying the novels on the window sill and coffee table' (email to the author, June 2009).

8 Fahey received a master's degree in folklore and published a well-regarded dissertation on bluesman Charley Patton. Fahey's later recordings veered away from the vernacular song form to more fully embraced noise and atonality. In 1997 Fahey's Revenant Records released Derek Bailey's album *Music and Dance*, a freeform collaboration with Japanese dancer Min Tanaka. It's also curious to note that late in his own career, Bailey recorded *Standards*, an album of interpretations of old jazz and pop classics for the Tzadik label.

9 British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was, like Fahey, a scholar of vernacular music.

10 Swallow, email, June 2009.

11 'Gerald Matt in conversation with Ricky Swallow', in *Ricky Swallow: Younger Than Yesterday* (Kunsthalle Vienna), Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, Germany, 2007, p. 65.

12 Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles, 2008.

13 'Gerald Matt in conversation with Ricky Swallow'.

14 See David Tippery, *Carving Realistic Birds*, Sterling, New York, 1996.

15 Swallow, email, June 2009.