



on SEX
SEDARIS
ROLAND BARTHES
and THEIR FILTHY LITTLE
COLLABORATION
“the HAPPY
WANKER”

image courtesy Bob Mendoza

the urban molecule interview series

THINK TANK

KEVIN KOPELSON & BOB MENDOZA

UM: You both recently collaborated in the limerick cycle entitled “The Happy Wanker.” how did you meet?

KK: I first met Bob in New York, in 1985. Like my partner Doug at the time, Bob was a painter trying to break into the East Village scene. Like Bob’s partner John, I was about to begin a Ph.D. program. The four of us hit it off and stayed close. But then in 1992, I moved to Iowa; Doug of course broke up with me; John died of AIDS; and Bob and I - more or less out of laziness - put our friendship on hold.

The limericks that I claim “Gumby” wrote I myself did of course. (The satire therein is directed not so much at the various celebrities represented as at academic culture in general, “queer

theory” in particular. By annotating Gumby, I also get to satirize myself.) At first, I wrote just to amuse friends. As more and more piled up, however, I realized both that the limericks comprise a series (originally titled “Sexuality Studies”) and that they’d benefit from illustration. Unfortunately, I suck as a visual artist. Bob, however, is terrific. He’s also both terrifically smart and terribly literate. (He once gave me a beautiful painting -- of a parakeet -- on which he’d inscribed a long, obscure quote from Henry James.) So I got back in touch with him after all these years, explained the satire, proposed the collaboration, and suggested he draw whatever he liked.

BM: Kevin’s right. There was a nice symmetry with the four of us, Doug

and I painters, and John and Kevin so brainy and nice to look at. But here's a secret—I faked my smarts. I wanted to impress Kevin and Doug because I admired them in many ways, even though I didn't completely understand them (in many ways). So when Kevin saw my painting of an upside-down parakeet and had to have it—I felt genuinely valued. Of course, when I gave the painting to Kevin I had quoted from an author I never read.

Low self-esteem and AIDS led me away from Kevin and Doug and John to gyms, clubs, fucking, and drugs.

So after all these years and a little clarity, I found Kevin had been right-sizing genius egos with sexual limericks. What's more is he wanted me to illustrate them adding, 'Draw whatever you like'.

UM: by the sound of it, sexuality is a big part of your work. While some readers may view men as sex-crazed and still others may take for granted that sex is just another part of art, how would you define sex in your art? Kevin?

KK: I'll just speak to the five books I've written, and not to anything else arty I may have done. My first book, which was based on my doctoral dissertation, tried NOT to deal with sex. It's about romantic love. (I thought I'd never get a job if I wrote about sex -- which was my initial plan.) My second book ("Beethoven's Kiss") is really about sublimation. It also performed sublimation insofar as I went without sex (for the most part) in order to get it down -- oops, I mean get it done. My third book was in large part about choreographic representations of either sex or sexual relationships (Nijinsky seeming to masturbate in "Afternoon of a Faune," his seeming to be in a three-way in "Jeux") and also about how those representations have been interpreted by people. My fourth book concerns, in part, how writers (Bruce Chatwin, Ro-

land Barthes) cruised for anonymous partners in real life and also for anonymous readers on the page. Most recent book (on David Sedaris) mentions that my subject may be a bottom as well as a bit of a size queen, but doesn't see that as particularly significant.

So how would I define sex ("in my art")? I've moved from considering sex much as Michel Foucault did (sexuality as a polarized "discursive construction" -- hetero vs. homo -- most central to our sense of what's TRUE about us) to considering sexuality as often one of the least important -- certainly least interesting -- aspects of our (common) humanity. That's one reason I've stopped being such a "queer theorist." Another is that so much work in the field is so awful. Another is that I simply can't keep thinking the same thoughts forever...

UM: Bob, your work is inspired somewhat by Roland Barthes, right? Using Kevin's words, would you consider yourself cruising for "anonymous readers on a page," or in this case a canvas?

BM: I had a great painting studio across from the Chelsea Piers. It had beautiful light and a beautiful view of the Hudson. I'd paint porn that was the opposite of porn. When I felt I was failing at that, I'd go across the Westside Highway and cruise. The plan was I'd bring beauties back to the studio to have sex, take Polaroids, and promise to use the shots to paint porn that was the opposite of porn. Of course it was all covert and crazy. Add drugs to this pattern and it all spiraled out of control like the rent of my painting studio.

Well I lost my studio and the ability to do drugs safely. I also thought I lost my ability to paint and cruise. I began recovering painting by doing watercolors at a cruisy gay coffee shop—the Big Cup it was called. This setup worked because I was alone with other gay men. If I even suspected I was being cruised, I'd paint harder. So we kept to

ourselves but we were together. They saw me painting porn and I hoped they thought it was not porn. Still crazy, that's how I thought about it. But for sure, the only drug involved for me was caffeine. This is how I paint now; it's how I painted Kevin's limericks.

I forgot. I also smoked a lot of cigarettes. It kills the sex drive—like painting porn.

UM: It seems as though sex and art shared close proximity during that time. By consciously using sex as a means to develop your art, did

ferent vantage point. By unraveling his process you reveal how and why his experiences might speak to us. Why Sedaris? And how exactly do you feel about “transcribing,” as one might say, the work of others? Could this project be something you might want to repeat with, say, Michel Foucault?

KK: I chose to write on David Sedaris because I wanted to explore the basic connection between literary satire and literary confession (whereas satire says “shame on you,” confession says “shame on me”), and he's the most con-

“IN THE NINETIES SEX WAS LIKE DEATH TO ME. THE MEN IN THESE MAGAZINES FUCKING REPULSED ME.”

you ever feel out of control, like you couldn't have one without the other? By bringing your art out of the context of pornography, have you been able to look at the sex act more objectively?

BM: It works like this: The experience I get from using pornography as base material in Bataille's sense of the word is not titillating. Rather than being out of control, it's the experience of the sublime. But it is not a pure state. Nor is it the “old bedfellows” subject and object. It's how Nietzsche described spirit, “ensnared, entangled, enamored”. I can consume pornography the same way I “have” sex. I can also paint—in Bataille's sense of the word—“erotically” the same way I “make” love. Think of Kevin writing Beethoven's Kiss and the times he went without sex and the times he went with sex.

UM: Kevin, David Sedaris seems to twist common (perhaps even mundane) situations into a satirist's paradise, all the while explaining through example why, in fact, we're not so crazy after all. In Sedaris, you seem to do the same but from a dif-

fessional (or autobiographical) of all satirists. True, I could have done so by writing about “Lolita” -- but who needs another book on “Lolita”?

As for how I feel about transcribing (or quoting) other writers, it just so happens that I've written an essay on the subject. Titled “My Cortez,” the essay will have appeared in the London Review of Books by the time Urban Molecule has published “The Happy Wanker.” In brief, though, my feelings are complicated, because such transcription always feels like plagiarism. And like plagiarism, it's motivated by a combination of laziness, competition, identification, and contempt: the laziness of course is on my own part, the competition and identification are with the writer quoted, and the contempt is for the whole rhetorical situation (i.e., literary criticism).

I wouldn't, in fact, want to repeat the Sedaris project with anyone else, not even Foucault (who inspired my thinking about confession). I do, however, wish to attempt Sedaris-esque essays of my own. “My Cortez,” as you can probably tell, is one such essay. And it'll be

the first chapter of my next book, to be titled either "5 1/2" (after the film "8 1/2"), "Schumann's Fantasy" (to chime with my book "Beethoven's Kiss"), or "Pomegranates in My Garden." Don't ask.

UM: how can you possibly expect to get away with not explaining a title like that?

KK: The title denotes a sexual (mis)adventure I had in Israel: some young Druse fellow picked me up on a beach in Haifa then wanted me to move to his village. It connotes the Tree of Knowledge: Eve's apple, it seems, must have been a pomegranate.

UM: This one's directed to Bob. It's fascinating to me that you've so seamlessly married an absolute (the photograph) with some other fantastic iteration of a thing (the perception of the face or action or motivation) of the subject in question. In the words of Roland Barthes, "why choose...this object, this moment, rather than some other?" is the assigning of such a meaning to the existing photograph proof that this new medium (where watercolor and photograph meet - the representation - born of association - less of factual isolation and more of boundless creation) "aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language..."? If so, what language have you created?

And how would you respond to Barthes's declaration: "...a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.?"

BM: I started using pornography as subject matter for painting around the late 80s during the height of the AIDS crisis in New York City. I'd go to this shop called Gay Treasures. It was like a gay porn archive for me. With catalogued magazines, reference books and

someone who functioned like a librarian. I'd go through stacks and stacks of old porn magazine from the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s not to get off, but to behold the truth of these men from a time past. I was moved to paint them. I once read how Claude Monet when viewing the body of his dead wife was moved to paint the various tones and hues of her decaying flesh. I understood the disgust he felt from his reaction but also his need to represent what he saw.

In the 90s, sex was like death to me. The men in these magazines fucking repulsed me. What moved me to paint them was how light in each photograph was captured by 50s Kodachrome, 70s Ektachrome, and other dated chemistries. Capturing the light on his wife's dead body disturbed Monet because he thought it intruded upon his grief for her. He had to capture that light and get it right on the canvas. Yet, when I see the painting that resulted, Monet's grief is clear to me. The old porn in gay treasures had traces of light that illuminated the sex of these men who were to die of AIDS. Like Monet, I had to capture that light on what seemed like dead bodies to me. These bodies were made available to me through pornography in the very act that I imagined caused their death. Like Monet I knew full well that we who pursue light in this way are not ourselves. In this light, there is no life and death. Here, we are not ourselves only processes. One of the processes is the fiction we entertain when we say of a photograph of ourselves, "It's me." Visual representations of the realities we share have a grammar that allows such a fiction.

How we are not ourselves is also how I tried to illustrate the way genius and celebrity become "unclothed" in Kevin's limericks. I searched pornographic web sites for parts of bodies and used them interchangeably in the manner of Roman sculptors. I also kept in mind the animism of the satyr with his constant erections.

UM: Kevin, back to the culture of confession. It's had plenty of ramifications in the development of society since the beginning of Christianity. How do you think reality television, confessional texts, and memoirs -- the Sedarisesque approach to satire -- affect that culture? if we are now allowed to so blatantly look at ourselves and ask the more difficult questions of who we are and how we got here, what could this mean for progression beyond a religious state, or at least, toward a more spiritual one?

KK: First of all, I have to amend my last answer. My working title for my next book is now "After Sedaris." Which of course brings me to this question, the short answer to which is: There's nothing

Sedaris, I think, represents another kind of discourse altogether. He plays brilliant language games, of course, but without showing off about it (unlike Nabokov/Humbert in "Lolita"). And so the reader's focus in his work is usually on the terrible things the author claims to have done. We can identify with these transgressions and then try to be better, more ethical if not more spiritual, people than we now are.

UM: so, do you think the lean is toward better ethics?

KK: Better morals, I'd say (as an Aristotelian). "Better ethics" is too Platonic. (See "Love's Knowledge," by Martha Nussbaum.)

UM: Oscar Wilde is one of your lim-

"THE CHAPTER ...DOES END BY COMPELLING READERS TO PICTURE ME JACKING OFF ...IN MY CASE, WHILE DRINKING COFFEE."

ing about the current glut of literary confession and confessional television that will (or even cares to) lead us toward a more religious or spiritual state. Literary confession, by and large, is metafictional — or metatextual, if you prefer. It's really more about the language games it's playing (its form, that is) than about any supposed transgression revealed (its content). Confessional television, it seems to me, is basically vicarious. That is to say, speakers aren't revealing anything bad they themselves have done, but rather what other people have supposedly done to them. So all they're "confessing" is their victim status, which if anything represents a kind of spiritual regression. Ironically, one model for such discourse is Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" which rather disingenuously "confesses" what Wilde let Lord Alfred Douglas do to him (i.e., land him in Reading Gaol). What the author really does, in other words, is write his victimizer's confession for him.

erick-subjects in "The Happy Wanker." given its unique form, in terms of literary confession, is your use of the limerick an example of this type of metatextuality, or "language game?"

KK: Let's see: If Gumby's limericks are at all confessional, they're only so insofar as he's indicating how fed up he is with sexuality studies; the limerick form itself, moreover, is what's really doing that confessing (treating serious subject matter in such a trivial -- and of course inherently sexual -- medium). But I'm not sure that's an indication of any TRANSGRESSION -- unless I feel guilty about abandoning my erstwhile specialty, which I don't think is the case. And so I don't think "The Happy Wanker" should be read as relating (meta- or intertextually) to things like "Lolita" or "De Profundis" in terms of its confessional content (if any). If I remember correctly, of course, there IS a limerick or two in the Nabokov. But I'm more likely to

have been inspired by the limericks in Tom Stoppard's play "Travesties" -- which has absolutely no connection to confessional discourse.

UM: So now the burning question: why name it "The Happy Wanker?"

KK: The title derives from the punch line of the Nijinsky limerick: "But wankers [in the audience] were happy they came." Came, that is, to the dancer's performance of "Afternoon of a Faune," but also -- of course -- in their pants as they watched him (seem to) masturbate on stage. The original title of the cycle, you may be interested to know, was "Sexuality Studies." That worked for me for a while, because the limericks (metatextually speaking) are ABOUT sexuality studies as an academic field, and also because each one studies a different aspect of human sexuality: kissing (in "Wilde"), masturbation (in "Nijinsky"), repression ("Stein"), narcissism ("Olivier"),

etc. But I eventually decided that "The Happy Wanker" was more appropriately naughty. Plus more visual. I guess some people may conclude that I'M the wanker here, insofar as the project, or at least the pleasure of my text, is really about pleasuring myself. Of course I did enjoy writing it. But -- I must "confess" -- that's not anything I care for the title to signify. True, the chapter on Roland Barthes in my book "Neatness Counts" does end by compelling readers to picture me (like Barthes) jacking off ... in my case, while drinking coffee. The point there, however, is that ALL writing is masturbatory.

UM: Bob, if you could leave one legacy behind for future generations, what would it be?

BM: More painting!

UM: Any burning questions on your mind right now, Kevin?

KK: Just one: Where's my coffee?



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