

Jason Dodge

Karl Larsson

SIDE BY SIDE WITH WHAT ALREADY HAPPENS

a conversation

JD Jason Dodge

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KL Is the catalogue from your exhibition, *I woke up. There was a note in my pocket explaining what had happened*, entirely set in gray nuances or does the slender font Baskerville lean towards gray, even in black?

JD Gray, yes I hadn't thought of that. That book was laying the foundation for what I would do after. I don't think that way anymore, but it was what I had done.

KL Did you re-evaluate the function of books in your practice?

JD I don't consider books to be a part of my practice. The artwork is singular to me, the most important part of me, everything I have. The books and poetry press, carpentry and cooking are essential for me to have a broad enough scope to be able to make my work. I see them as practice and a way to express not only why I love the people and situations that make up my life, but also how. Making a book is no different than making soup or a sofa. They are all ways of seeing. In my work, I find that the process is converse. I am looking for inward spirals, vortexes in singular things.

KL There are several things I would like to return to in what you have just written. But first of all, I would like to ask if you think it is relevant at all to make a distinction between seeing and reading?

JD They simply have different implications, but not different values. Both illuminate at best.

KL The reason I ask is that I have always felt a very strong literary presence in your work. Knowing that I am probably biased because of being a poet, I would still say that in what you do, there are more literary figures, expressions and forms than usually found in the field of art. Your titles often have a sober, prosaic touch, while the information they unfold when connecting with the objects becomes beautifully allegorical. Or does it? Is it really allegory? And just reading your use of a word like vortex, which to me is Ezra Pound and a feeling of vertigo—falling through the fabric of the everyday (language)—is very encouraging and exciting. Do distinctions like these interest you at all? Prosaic, poetic, etc.?

JD What a great question. I have a limited relationship to literature. I spent a little while of my childhood having my brain tested. I sat in a dark box with wires on my head and watched lights moving on a screen. The diagnosis was of its time, limited. And part of it was about how I would never be able to read in a normal way. What I have found, or noticed, is that I have very little ability to willingly suspend my disbelief over an extended time. What makes something believable is more like a personality, body

language, how someone walks into a room and where they sit. When I look at a novel, I mostly see a container of characters and situations that I don't have access to. I simply never get lost in the story. I am aware of the writer all the time and end up thinking about other things. But poetry, wow: compression, intensity, an uncertain 'I,' something that is neither true, nor untrue. I think in things, not in language. I relate to poets very much, but I can't do what my favorite poets can do. Karl, I love that my work comes alive for you, and that you see allegory in it. Some people look at what I do and don't see anything, or not very much. I am driven by what moves me as I look around and think about things like: how all of our hearts are beating; V formations of goose hearts; how ancient rain is; how all the parts of my refrigerator were most likely at one point on different ships, leaving harbors in Korea and Brazil or the Philippines, until they were assembled somewhere else, so that now they can keep my organic milk cold, so I can feed my children organic breakfast. What I make is trying to walk side by side with what already happens. I don't think it is up to me, or in the category of what I think about, if something I do is prosaic or poetic. For me to develop something in my imagination, for it to become a work, excludes this notion for myself.

KL I love how you write, "look at a novel" instead of 'read'! The story goes that Borges once got the question if he had ever considered writing a novel and his reply was: "no, neither have I considered reading one." I have the impression that the (capitalistic) world we live in is fundamentally prosaic, that it is solely built on beliefs in accumulation, narration, things with a beginning and an end, things that grow (for a purpose), etc. The human mind, on a quotidian level, is so different. We might feel an urge to complete things, accumulate capital or whatever. But when we think, ideas are more often than not jumping around, popping up, just leaving a trace or simply turning around before we get hold of them. We break solid things down and create rifts in an instant. Forbidden thoughts like, "what it would look like if that window cleaner fell down from the 20th floor on the building," and so on. These rifts are almost worthless in society, though. When you mention your fridge traveling in parts, I am struck by how hidden that story really is. The image is terrifying ... so much energy and resources. To me, the urge to reveal that is political. Would you ever put labels like that on your work?

JD Yes, I would consider what I make political. But I try to embrace a multitude of thoughts

—terrifying, sad, full of wonder and beauty. I keep thinking about how the different frictions we live with every day, in relationships, in cities, with the climate and with governments, are realistic and human. And while we should resist them or try to resolve them in one way, we can live in-between as opposed to looking for solutions.

The other evening, I was speaking with a war journalist who was speaking so eloquently about how, in conflict zones, he notices in himself a hyperawareness. He knows what everyone in a room is speaking about and how they seem. He spoke about how there are not enough bullets for war as we imagine it. The actual danger is in an unknown, tiny fraction—some seconds, some minutes. And how, the further away from the conflict our perception of the conflict is, the time spans become greater and greater, until what we imagine is a long, sustained situation of lives being lost and taken. It expands with distance, and we can read through the humanity—somehow without time—what he experienced in a fraction of a minute and is difficult for him to perceive because time slows down when people are shooting near you. An expanded, unclear time becomes a separate time, out of time or in another time. What is political seems to have a multitude of perceptions.

KL Do you think the subject of a work of art could be anything?

JD Yes.

KL And if that were not the case, what would art be then?

JD Funny, I have no idea. There are, naturally, subjects that are off-limits for moral reasons, or that are just simply unpopular. I have long been fixated on Philip Guston's late paintings. In their time, they were hard for people to digest. Smoking KKK in bed.

KL Your work seems to be in a kind of 1:1 relationship with the world. This is also why it reminds me of poetry. It's not fiction and it questions its own form. I would not be surprised if you said there are certain things that couldn't be part of art since they would have to be either metaphorically enlarged or minimized to be applicable. But then again, my question was vague, not addressing your practice in itself. It is interesting you mention the late paintings of Guston, since they seem to be suggesting that the image, the motif, has to become absurd and almost explode to reveal a reality that speaks to us, and knowledge that we already embody. Which makes me think of friction, as you mentioned earlier. That is a great subject to discuss, no? Can you tell me something more about it in regards to your practice?

JD There are many things that cannot be a part of my work, and I am never certain if this is because I don't know how to handle many things, or if there are simply many things that don't address what engages my thoughts. I look for things that do not have the capacity to be better expressed with language. I think about abstraction a lot, something I am always trying to move towards without knowing how. And I think about faces and hands, holding on, letting go. I also don't know how to make that. I love the dynamic of a single person who thinks contrary to the group, the presence of psychosis, a distraction from the common good, a struggle to keep order. I like to think of things falling from very high and falling through history. Deodorant to keep the sweat, tissues to keep the fluids, storms made of evaporated water, expansiveness and sweat. And fluids. I:1 yes, what already happens.

KL Which role does the spectator play in relation to your works?

JD The spectator is the conduit in which the work becomes specific—through their thoughts, feelings and experiences. I do not think about the spectator interpreting the work, or trying to find what it means. I am not interested in that, or knowing that. But as conduits, yes.

KL Why is it important to encounter your work 'in the flesh'—in an exhibition—and not only in an image or through a descriptive text?

JD Because presence is different than recognition. There is a relationship between a person and a thing with, or in a place. Which is to say, something totally different than a body and an object and a space. It is a convergence. A person is present where they are, where they went and where they stand. A thing is specific that it is there too, and how it is there. And a room, which can be static, but related to what is above and beneath and next to the room. Is there electricity? Where does that come from? Is there water? What city is it in? A picture can move from place to place, and is most likely in many different places all at the same time. It is like a map, but not like a place.

KL This makes me think of the map from *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. It was the first 'X marks the place' of its kind in popular culture. When trying to find the depicted island on a normal map, one would find only water. The island was undiscovered. Still, there was a map of it. And in this blank space a treasure. You mentioned abstraction earlier and some of the things you explained as being central to you in regards to your practice could indeed turn out quite abstract for a spectator.

Have you ever discovered, afterwards, that a work was not what you thought it was when you originally made it?

JD I just landed in New York today, and I realize that I have answered your questions in four different countries now, and perhaps more by the time we finish. Yes, X marks the spot. I think of maps on my phone and the glowing blue spot (me, in different places). I am thinking about this notion of things and realize that the blue dot is where the phone is, but I call it “where I am.” And I think of Mary Ruefle’s poem where she says something about hands, holding and letting go.

I consider making a work the part when I think about it. I make it with thinking, and then, with a kind of blindness, through conversations, through imagination, also devise a plan in which the work comes to exist. For me to make a work, I need for it to float through different orders. And then, when it is time to put it somewhere, it is something else, folding inwards and outwards, sometimes less or more than I hoped for. And yes, most often it is something different that what I expect. This aspect is usually what compels me.

KL Thought and blindness ... like how one suddenly loses detail and perspective when a new thought is born. Most of the time, I guess,

being a professional means that people trust that ‘you know what you are doing,’ and will be consistent in your field of work. You seem, intentionally or not, to be rather anti-anthological. Is the world around you ever having a problem with this? What I’m probably asking is if it occasionally has been difficult, professionally, to sort of keep starting over with each new work you do?

JD Mostly, my work has an emotional register in common, which is just how I am. Actually, the exhibition I am in NY to install now goes over some works from the last 10 years. But from my current point of view, the works feel completely different to me—new, but a sort of survey. I am curious about it. I will start today to install.

I think the privilege of being an artist far outweighs the professional aspect of being an artist. Markets come and go, and can include and exclude the new and old, formed and unformed. Endlessly interesting, but never interesting as a filter for making art.

KL Are you a collector?

JD No.

KL You talk about emotional registers. Do you think these are things people can share?

JD I don’t know. I think there is something that carries through, but I don’t have an explanation

for it. I like the notion that feelings are thoughts. Things have a muteness that is unspecific.

KL I have heard several authors trying to explain how a literary work, or even a passage or a fragment of one, is good (literature). Not in a moral sense, but somehow abstract-quality-wise. One writer even said he could weigh a text, that a certain density could be felt, as I understand, almost physically. In your work it seems like you constantly balance a certain physical weight and a more ... ephemeral one?

JD Oh, I really don't know. Often, I find the physical aspect irritating, and the ephemeral aspect of work actually never crosses my mind. I guess it should! Sorry, I don't think that answers your question.

KL I'm not sure it was even a question! But tell me, you find the physical aspect of work irritating—how?

JD Just friction, I guess. The manifestation of a work just leads me away towards something else, new works, new thoughts. I don't covet the physical matter of a work, but I covet the notion of it.

KL You started working with Casey Kaplan quite early, didn't you?

JD It was the first gallery that I did a show with. We started working together around '97. This was my seventh show with him.

KL You mentioned before that you were going to unpack some old works.

JD I didn't show any old works, but I was sort of re-imagining works that I have showed before over the last several years from the perspective of where I am now. Almost like how a sibling might tell a really different story than you, about the very same event. There is nothing keeping anybody from updating what they did in their past and sort of, saying again what they meant, or what they mean now if they would begin again.

KL Do your old works feel very different to you?

JD I think that the one thing that has always been consistent in my work from the beginning is the idea of the absent subject. The subject of the work is never there but is still an active element in the work. So, the work that I made 15 years ago is still very much recognizable to myself. I keep thinking about how similar it is to raising children. Our older daughter is now in school, and there is this group effort that classmates make to shake, scare and beat all of the individuality out of each other. It is heart-breaking to watch her drawings start to turn into the common idea of putting a sun in an upper corner, and how a face is drawn. How you act and respond to authority, how you do all of these things, these are learned ways of

how to be. If you choose a creative path, then you spend a significant part of your lifetime unlearning all that stuff again, to liberate yourself from the trauma of it, the strangeness of it, or whatever other sort of narratives that get picked up along the way. Like parents worrying about your future survival, or teachers who are cruel because they don't understand how your brain works. Then, that process of unlearning, re-saying and re-telling, over and over again, until you find a narrative that you can live with.

The work that I'm making now is somehow closer to my first artworks as a child than the work I made, maybe five years ago. It has to do with the progression of constantly pushing and changing. Artistically, it doesn't make sense to me to work in any other way. But I don't think that necessarily means leaving things behind. And I like the feeling of never knowing whether you're returning to something, progressing somewhere, or trying to recover something. Like there seems to be a purity to childhood. But at the same time, I don't know if there is a way of watching somebody grow from up close that doesn't invoke this significant feeling. I don't know about you, but I have never watched something develop in such incredibly close detail. The symbiosis of that experience is so strong.

KL And also sad since, as a grown-up you know about losing all that unawareness. A child doesn't seem to know loss in the same way.

JD Memory, or trying to evoke memory, trying to understand what a child remembers, is so fascinating. It is possible to associate memory with language, to assume that the development of language is the development of memory, when in fact it's not. I remember a moment at which my youngest child remembered summertime in the spring. But when it had been summer before, she was nowhere close to being able to speak. That feeling that she knew, she knew what it was called and what it was, even though we had never heard her say that before. And it sort of makes you ask a lot more questions. Like with these friends who she played with in Kita and who had such a huge role in her development—really lovely children with whom she shared very intense experiences, her first sleepovers, and Kita trips. Then, you ask her, "Oh do you remember Noah?" (whom she spent three years of Kita with) and she has no recollection of this person.

KL Cruel, cruel brain ...

JD Then, Borges's idea about the 1:1 map ... I wonder, if you did try to document your child's life as best as possible and replay it for them everyday, whether their memory wouldn't

somehow keep it all. I'm sure somebody has tried ...

KL Speaking about 1:1, how do you install your work?

JD Well, every time I try to find a new way of installing an exhibition. This time, I knew it would be a very compact and very pressured process. So I built a model of the gallery including miniature versions of all of the works. I spent a lot of time moving the works around in this miniature space, and I made the scale of the models so that if I was to put my telephone in, I could photograph it. The camera lens is at my eye height, basically, so the similarity between the model and the actual exhibition is uncanny. It works quite nicely with this exhibition, since it's a very strange sensation to be in the show. So many dramatic shifts, even when everything is in actual size—which, in part, was what interested me about this exhibition. Yet, it's hard to put your finger on, especially in pictures.

KL Is spending time with material part of a daily routine for you?

JD From time to time, yes.

I feel like when I'm doing an exhibition, I'm bringing everything into a space. Then a subtractive, not an additive, process begins. And because it's a subtractive process, there's

so much involved, physically and emotionally. It can be very exhausting. So, an event that made me more serious about building other things—like furniture—was when I was coming back from installing an exhibition, completely shattered, and decided that I really needed to do something else for awhile. I spent maybe a week of being incredibly concentrated on how one piece of wood connected to another piece of wood. I bought half of a walnut tree cut into two different thicknesses of planks, which were very rough, and went through the process of cutting them, smoothing them, thinking about how they would connect together and how we'd use them, how they'd work. I needed a creative problem with a practical solution, a physical outcome that involved following through, not just getting to a point. A million ideas are abandoned at different points because they're just not going to work or don't configure in the right way, or just aren't the right piece for the moment. I always feel like it's incredibly messy. I don't know one single way. I don't know how to work! I don't think I'm ever going to know how to work. But I always think I'm onto the solution.

KL Like there should be a final way of making your work?

JD Yeah!

KL The image I get when you say that your work is about removal is that everything would already be there; the gallery includes the whole world and then you start taking away, until certain things start to mean certain things in relation to others.

JD Actually, I think of it the other way—almost the exact opposite way, which of course, is the same way. The gallery is so elegantly disconnected from everything in the world because it's asking to be seen as an autonomous frame. Still, no room can claim autonomy from the other rooms it's connected to, the ground it's sitting on, what's above it. By virtue of that character flaw, it has the potential of becoming a kind of epicenter, a brain center of correspondence with the lives of the people who move in and out of it.

KL Perhaps this is also where art or sculpture is connected to poetry rather than prose. With prose, the reader is immersed and comforted by the story. Everything is described and you just encounter more and more things. Poetry has the same kind of quality as the empty gallery, a testing ground that you can't really get sucked into in the same way. You have to always see the empty spaces on the page and think of yourself sitting in a chair, or if you soon have to stand up to make another cup of coffee ...

Now back to poetry, I wonder—as one last thing—if you could tell me something about your work with the pine needles? For some reason, I can't stop thinking about this in regards to the poetry festival.

JD In fact, there are two. The piece in Venice started with a sculpture project in the countryside in Austria. In this apricot grove, there was an apricot tree. About half of it was rotten, so they were going to prune it. As soon as I was asked to be part of this project, all I could think of was Inger Christensen's *Alphabet*, of which the first line is "apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist." I thought that this was a cue to do as little as possible to the apricot tree. So I asked for them to just deal with the tree the way they normally would, but to send it to Venice instead of throwing the planks of wood into their barn. Then, the mayor of this town was also a pine farmer and had just pruned his trees. So I asked for that pruning too. It was all transported to Venice and put there as an entity, a correspondence between this small village in the hills in Austria and Venice.

The piece in the gallery in New York is just the dirt that was collected from Christmas, and so it's basically our Christmas in Denmark, just put there. The title of the work is *We carry our sleeping children*. You know, if one of our

kids falls asleep in our bed and then we carry them into their own bed, at some point the dog always looks up. I always think of the dog saying to herself, “now they are carrying their sleeping children.” That stuck in my mind for a long time. Seeing the amount of dust and dirt and things that we generated by having this dying tree in the house in Denmark—and kids, so many kids running around doing their thing—I thought that I might as well bring it to New York to see how it feels when I put it in the room.

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