

Something to Do

IF YOU MAKE things, if you are an “artist” of whatever stripe, at some point you will be asked—or may ask yourself—“why” you act, sculpt, paint, whatever. In the writing world, this question never seems to get old. In each generation, a few too many people will feel moved to pen an essay called, inevitably, “Why I Write” or “Why Write?” under which title you’ll find a lot of convoluted, more or less self-regarding reasons and explanations. (I’ve contributed to this genre myself.) Only a few of them are any good* and none of them (including my own) see fit to mention the surest motivation I know, the one I feel deepest within myself, and which, when all is said, done,

*My current favorite is “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow” by Toni Cade Bambara, written back in 1980, which has the advantage of having a no-bullshit title and very little bullshit in the body of the piece.

zadie Smith

stripped away—as it is at the moment—seems to be at the truth of the matter for a lot of people, to wit: *it's something to do*. I used to stand at podiums or in front of my own students and have that answer on the tip of my tongue, but knew if I said it aloud it would be mistaken for a joke or fake humility or perhaps plain stupidity. . . . Now I am gratified to find this most honest of phrases in everybody's mouths all of a sudden, and in answer to almost every question. Why did you bake that banana bread? It was something to do. Why did you make a fort in your living room? Well, it's something to do. Why dress the dog as a cat? It's something to do, isn't it? Fills the time.

Out of an expanse of time, you carve a little area—that nobody asked you to carve—and you do “something.” But perhaps the difference between the kind of something that I'm used to, and this new culture of doing something, is the moral anxiety that surrounds it. The something that artists have always done is more usually cordoned off from the rest of society, and by mutual agreement this space is considered a sort of charming but basically

Intimations

useless playpen, in which adults get to behave like children—making up stories and drawing pictures and so on—though at least they provide some form of pleasure to serious people, doing actual jobs. The more utilitarian-minded defenders of art justify its existence by insisting upon its potential political efficacy, which is usually overstated. (Artists themselves are especially fond of overstating it.) But even if you believe in the potential political efficacy of art—as I do—few artists would dare count on its timeliness. It's a delusional painter who finishes a canvas at two o'clock and expects radical societal transformation by four. Even when artists write manifestos, they are (hopefully) aware that their exigent tone is, finally, borrowed, only echoing and mimicking the urgency of the guerrilla's demands, or the activist's protests, rather than truly enacting it. The people sometimes demand change. They almost never demand art. As a consequence, art stands in a dubious relation to necessity—and to time itself. It is something to do, yes, but *when* it is done, and whether it is done at all, is generally considered a question for artists alone.

zadie smith

An attempt to connect the artist's labor with the work of truly laboring people is frequently made but always strikes me as tenuous, with the fundamental dividing line being this question of the clock. Labor is work done by the clock (and paid by it, too). Art takes time and divides it up as art sees fit. It is something to do. But the crisis has taken this familiar division between the time of art and the time of work and transformed it. Now there are essential workers—who do not need to seek out something to do; whose task is vital and unrelenting—and there are the rest of us, all with a certain amount of time on our hands. (Not to mention an economic time bomb, which, for many people, exploded within the first few weeks—within the first few days. One of the radical political possibilities of our new, revelatory expanse of “free” time—as many have noted—is that it might create a collective demand to reassess and reconfigure, as a society, how we protect the rights of those whose work exists only in the present moment, without security or protection against unknown futures, the most obvious unknown future being “sick leave.”)

Intimations

The rest of us have been suddenly confronted with the perennial problem of artists: time, and what to do in it.

What strikes me at once is how conflicted we feel about this new liberty and/or captivity. On the one hand, like pugs who have been lifted out of a body of water, our little limbs keep pumping on, as they did when we were hurrying off to our workplaces. Do we know how to stop? Those of us from puritan cultures feel “work must be done,” and so we make the cake, or start the gardening project, or begin negotiation with the other writer in the house for those kid-free hours each day in which to work on “something.” We make banana bread, we sew dresses, we go for a run, we complete all the levels of Minecraft, we do *something*, then photograph that something, and not infrequently put it online. Reactions are mixed, even in our own hearts. Even as we do something, we simultaneously accuse ourselves: *you use this extremity as only another occasion for self-improvement, another pointless act of self-realization*. But isn't it the case that everybody finds their capabilities returning to them,

zadie smith

even if it's only the capacity to mourn what we have lost? We had delegated so much.

It seems it would follow that writers—so familiar with empty time and with being alone—should manage this situation better than most. Instead, in the first week I found out how much of my old life was about hiding from life. Confronted with the problem of life served neat, without distraction or adornment or superstructure, I had almost no idea of what to do with it. Back in the playpen, I carved out meaning by creating artificial deprivations *within* time, the kind usually provided for people by the real limitations of their real jobs. Things like “a firm place to be at nine a.m. every morning” or a “boss who tells you what to do.” In the absence of these fixed elements, I’d make up hard things to do, or things to abstain from. Artificial limits and so on. Running is what I know. Writing is what I know. Conceiving self-implemented schedules: teaching day, reading day, writing day, repeat. What a dry, sad, small idea of a life. And how exposed it looks, now that the people

Intimations

I love are in the same room to witness the way I do time. The way I’ve done it all my life.

FOR ME, THE cliché is true: only way out is through. Trying to preserve some “space for yourself” in the crowded domestic sphere feels like obsessively cupping your hands around thin air. You carve it out, the time you need, after much anxiety and debate, and get into the separate space and look between your hands and there it is—nothing. An empty victory. At the end of April, in a powerful essay by another writer, Ottessa Moshfegh, I read this line about love: “Without it, life is just ‘doing time.’” I don’t think she intended by this only romantic love, or parental love, or familial love or really any kind of love in particular. At least, I read it in the Platonic sense: Love with a capital *L*, an ideal form and essential part of the universe—like “Beauty” or the color red—from which all particular examples on earth take their nature. Without this element present, in some form, somewhere in our lives, there really *is* only time, and

Zadie Smith

there will always be too much of it. Busyness will not disguise its lack. Even if you're working from home every moment God gives—even if you don't have a minute to spare—still all of that time, without love, will feel empty and endless.

I write because . . . well, the best I can say for it is it's a psychological quirk of mine developed in response to whatever personal failings I have. But it can't ever meaningfully fill the time. There is no great difference between novels and banana bread. They are both just something to do. They are no substitute for love. The difficulties and complications of love—as they exist on the other side of this wall, away from my laptop—is the task that is before me, although task is a poor word for it, for unlike writing, its terms cannot be scheduled, preplanned or determined by me. Love is not something to do, but something to be experienced, and something to go through—that must be why it frightens so many of us and why we so often approach it indirectly. Here is this novel, made with love. Here is this banana bread, made with love. If it weren't for this habit of indirection, of course,

Intimations

there would be no culture in this world, and very little meaningful pleasure for any of us. Although the most powerful art, it sometimes seems to me, is an experience and a going-through; it is love comprehended by, expressed and enacted through the artwork itself, and for this reason has perhaps been more frequently created by people who feel themselves to be completely alone in this world—and therefore wholly focused on the task at hand—than by those surrounded by “loved ones.” Such art is rare: we can't all sit cross-legged like Buddhists day and night meditating on ultimate matters.* Or I can't. But I also don't want to just do time anymore, the way I used to.

And yet, in my case, I can't let it go: old habits die hard. I can't rid myself of the need to do “something,” to make “something,” to feel that this new expanse of

*There needn't be anything fluffy or falsely positive about this concept of love through art: the most apparently nihilistic or antisentimental art has still committed itself to shaping time into something other than itself, and to the process of having that something witnessed or experienced by another person—the audience—and this, to paraphrase Kafka, is “of a faith value that can never be exhausted.” In the remarkable cases of Yukio Mishima and Édouard Levé, even the act of suicide—that most complete and final rejection of the idea of doing “something” available to us—was yet capable of being refashioned into a work of art.

zadie smith

time hasn't been "wasted." Still, it's nice to have company. Watching this manic desire to make or grow or do "something," that now seems to be consuming everybody, I do feel comforted to discover I'm not the only person on this earth who has no idea what life is for, nor what is to be done with all this time aside from filling it.