Ballast Quarterly Review, v08n1, Autumn 1992

Roy R. Behrens
University of Northern Iowa, roy.behrens@uni.edu

Copyright ©1992 Roy R. Behrens
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ballast

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

This Periodical is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ballast Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Finding the door of my study closed, I cannot shake off the psychotic notion that I am sitting in there at my desk working as I usually am when the door is closed. Hesitant to face my double, I have to master a bit of courage before I turn the door knob.


Not long ago, but before World War II was over, a young Negro girl was asked how she would punish Hitler. Answer: "Paint him black and bring him over here."

The Yale Puppeteers, who performed around the country in the 1940s, had a puppet Mae West, who said: "You don't have to come up and see me any more; I'm living on the ground floor now."


A Chinese soldier in Tibet who tried to tear off a British woman's "Sergeant Bilko" T-shirt has become the first known case of someone mistaking Phil Silvers for the Dalai Lama.

As Kris Tait, 25, described the scene to British newspapers, a crowd of Tibetans apparently agreed about a likeness between the late American comedian and Tibet's exiled god-king.

Miss Tait was in the town of Gyangste when a soldier noticed the shirt with the likeness of the character Silvers played in the 1950s television series, the *Guardian* reported Friday.

She said he accosted her and tried to rip off the T-shirt while a crowd of Tibetans pointed and chanted "Dalai Lama!"

The tourist, from Seaton in southwest England, said she wrenched free and fled to find a change of clothes.


On the first day of the boy's [referring to himself] attendance at the junior high school in Palo Alto there is a free-throw basketball contest. Boy reluctantly joins the line of contestants; he has never thrown a basketball. He comes to the throw line; he hefts the ball and is surprised by its great weight. He throws—a good one. Another good one. Still another basket. On and on, he can't understand it. He is a machine,...13, 14,...24 hits out of 25. The boy is famous for an hour, his only sports-connected achievement.

One winter when I was in grade school, a friend named Larry, whose nickname was "Moe," came over to my house to play. My small dime store turtle was hibernating in a shoe box in the kitchen, buried in the sand, its head and legs inside its shell. Trying to be funny, he picked up my turtle and bit it in half. I was horrified, and that was the end of my friendship with Moe.

Anon, from the editor's journal.

Our black cat lay on the window sill, against the black night outside. When his eyes were open, his body was visible, dimly outlined; but as soon as he closed them, the whole cat vanished, leaving only the unbroken darkness of the window.


W.A. Dwiggins, quoted by Paul Hollister in “Note, To Be Filed in a Corner-Stone” in Paul A. Bennett, ed., Postscripts on Dwiggins. Volume 1. (New York: Typophiles, 1960), p. 3. Later, Bennett qualifies the quote by saying that Dwiggins “uses literally neither the alcohol nor the coffee, but he jumps up and down with each task corked in his skull, and presently there drains off onto paper through his fingers a pattern, a page, a letter, a graph which puts new life into old thoughts.”

Highly Recommended: Edward T. Hall, An Anthropology of Everyday Life: An Autobiography (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Our interest in Professor Hall began in the 1960s with The Silent Language (1959) and The Hidden Dimension (1966), trailblazing introductions to nonverbal communication. This delightful autobiography is an informal and candid account—often hilarious, sometimes upsetting—of a mixture of willful and fluky events that shaped his outlook and compelled him to nurture his interest in cultural diversity during the first 50 years of his life.
Highly Recommended: Jerry Jankowski, *Shelf Life: Modern Packaging Design 1920-1945* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992). The author is a California art director and design instructor who for years has been picking up antique packages (tins, boxes, bottles, labels, and bags) at flea markets, antique shops, and collectible shows. This elegant, beautifully photographed book is a showcase of some of the things that he's found, including labels and wrappers for games, cigarettes, condoms, laxatives, razor blades, and buttermilk.

Gertrude Bell (in a letter to her family, from Iraq, on 4 March 1911): None of these Arabs had ever seen snow. The Mudir of Shethatha told me that the people there when they woke and saw it lying on the ground, thought it was flour.

There is one image from my first days in the army [during World War II] that remains with me still: that of a small wiry cowboy rapidly descending into catatonia, standing naked and mute, insulated from the milling mob of boisterous recruits by a small circle of space as we awaited our turn during one of the many mass physical examinations. There he was, body twisted and scarred, a visible record of the hazards of his profession. He had been caught in the web of the draft, lugged unwillingly into the forced proximity of strangers, and forced to stand naked in front of people he had never seen before. The cowboy hat was gone, but I could see the sharp line where the sunburn stopped in the middle of his forehead. Red face, neck, and hands were sharply demarcated by a line separating his public person from the pale skin of his private, hitherto covered body. He looked humiliated and exposed. I feared he would never make it. The adjustment would be too violent and the transition too great. Here was a man who thought nothing of taming the wildest bronco or confronting a bear in a scrub oak thicket. But by standing naked, not just the body but the soul was exposed. I had known others like him and how they felt about the privacy of the body, but I have seldom seen anyone so totally bereft of the familiar supporting structures of his former, and only other life.

In his book *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel C. Dennett describes a neurosurgeon he knew who had worked on an epileptic's brain. Brain surgery is sometimes done with local anesthesia and a conscious patient, so the surgeon can gently stimulate the brain surface to make sure he's not going to cut out anything important—the patient tells him what thought or memory each "poke" activates. During this particular operation, the surgeon roused the patient’s memory of a Guns'N'Roses song ("Out Ta Get Me," off the first album).

Author Dennett, hearing the story later, asked the surgeon why he hadn't had the guy sing part of the song, so that the surgical operation (taped, as is customary) could be compared to the original record (Dennett wondered if the key, tempo, and so on would be changed in the patient’s memory). The surgeon replied "I hate rock music." But then, Dennett goes on,

"Later in the conversation the neurosurgeon happened to remark that he was going to have to operate again on the same young man, and I expressed the hope that he would just check to see if he could restimulate the rock music, and this time ask the fellow to sing along. 'I can't do it,' replied the neurosurgeon, 'since I cut out that part.' "It was part of the epileptic focus?' I asked, and he replied, 'No, I already told you—I hate rock music!'"

Angus P. MacDonald, in the *California Entertainment Review* (April 1992), page 3, an offbeat quarterly available by sending a first-class stamp or an SASE for each issue desired to California Entertainment Review, Box 561, Concord, CA 94522-0561.

...my second son turned out to be distinctly nonverbal. Verbality being the name of the game, I of course assumed he was a bit slow, and reconciled myself to a situation I could do little about. And then, one day when he was three or four, I came into his room and found him with his back toward me, swinging back and forth, in a slow, regular rhythm, from one foot to the next. I watched for some minutes, trying to figure out what was going on. But finally I interrupted and asked what on earth he was doing. As he turned to answer, one hand raised to stop further questions, I could see that he was facing a small electric clock. "Sssh, Daddy," he said urgently. "I'm counting by fives. I'm up to 3,760."

Highly Recommended: Ronald Ley, *A Whisper of Espionage: Wolfgang Köhler and the Apes of Tenerife* (Garden City Park, NY: Avery Publishing Group, 1990). A founder of Gestalt psychology, Köhler studied problem solving in chimpanzees (*The Mentality of Apes*) while stationed in the Canary Islands during World War I. According to this book, however, that’s not the whole story, since Köhler may also have served as a spy, using the research station as cover while transmitting radio messages to German submarines off shore. True or not, this is a riveting account, as suspenseful and surprising as a good detective story.

Fritz Heider [*A History of Psychology in Autobiography*, Vol VIII]: A good friend of mine told me that when he talked with Köhler he always felt that he himself was a chimpanzee.

[In 1929, a German surgeon named Forster was] operating on a patient suffering from a tumor in the third ventricle—a small cavity deep down in the phylogenetically ancient regions of the mid-brain, adjacent to structures intimately concerned with the arousal of emotions. When the surgeon began to manipulate the tumor, affecting those sensitive structures, the (conscious) patient burst into a manic flight of speech, “quoting passages in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He exhibited typical sound associations, and with every word of the operator broke into a flight of ideas. Thus, on hearing the operator ask for a *Tupfer* [tampon] he burst into [a stream of puns] ‘*Tupfer...Tupfer, Hupfer, Hupfer, hupfen Sie mal...*’ [Tampon...tampon, jumper, go and jump into the air...].’ ‘On hearing the word *Messer*, he burst into ‘*Messer, messer, Metzer, Sie sind ein Metzel, das ist ja ein Gemetzel, metzeln Sie doch nicht so messen Sie doch Sie messen ja nicht Herr Professor, profiteor, professus sum, profiteri [Knife, butcher, you are a butcher in a butchery; truly this is a massacre; don’t go on butchering, take measurements; why don’t you measure, Herr Professor, profiteor, professus sum, profiteri].’ These manic responses were dependent on manipulation of the tumor and could be elicited only from the floor of the third ventricle.”

Highly Recommended: Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992). This is a lavish, magnificent book on the history of two spheres of theory and practice where art and science sometimes blend—linear perspective and color—from the Renaissance to the 19th century. Enhanced by more than 500 historic illustrations, the text is a dazzling, luxurious look at a wide range of issues related to optical science and art, including anamorphosis, drawing machines, stereoscopic photography, apparent movement, color theory, and others.

Highly Recommended: Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, eds., *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992). Born in Mexico in 1907, the painter Frida Kahlo was crippled by polio at age six, then further disabled twelve years later in a streetcar accident in which she was pierced through the pelvis by a handrail. As if 32 surgeries were not pain enough, she lived with a passionate, volatile man, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whom she married, divorced, and then married again, and whose work was a raspy distraction from hers until she was recently championed by women art historians. This book is a haunting collection of black and white photographs of this important artist, with a fictional memoir (in Kahlo's voice) by Mexican novelist Elena Poniatowska, and a biographical essay by Carla Stellweg.

Pope John XXIII: It often happens that I wake at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the pope!
Recommended: Lawrence B. Slobodkin, *Simplicity and Complexity in Games of the Intellect* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). A fresh look at a familiar topic, this is an essay on the role of simplicity (economy, parsimony) in scientific and artistic creativity, games, play, dinner parties, and closure. Designers may find it of interest because of the low density tendencies of Modernism and the recommendation (a la Mies van der Rohe) that "less is more."

(During a brainstorming session with Niels Bohr at Princeton University, in which Bohr paced around his office, he) then asked me if I could note down a few sentences as they emerged during his pacing. It should be explained that, at such sessions, Bohr never had a full sentence ready. He would often dwell on one word, coax it, implore it, to find the continuation. This could go on for several minutes. At that moment the word was "Einstein." There was Bohr, almost running around the table and repeating: "Einstein... Einstein..." It would have been a curious sight for someone not familiar with him. After a little while he walked to the window, gazed out, repeating every now and then: "Einstein...Einstein..."

At that moment the door opened very softly and Einstein tiptoed in [from an adjoining office]. He indicated to me with a finger on his lips to be very quiet, an urchin smile on his face. He was to explain a few minutes later the reason for his behavior. Einstein was not allowed by his doctor to buy any tobacco. However, the doctor had not forbidden him to steal tobacco, and this was precisely what he set out to do now. Always on tip toe he made a beeline for Bohr's tobacco pot, which stood on the table at which I was sitting. Meanwhile Bohr, unaware, was standing at the window, muttering "Einstein...Einstein..." I was at a loss what to do, especially because I had at that moment not the faintest idea what Einstein was up to.

Then Bohr, with a firm "Einstein" turned around. There they were, face to face, as if Bohr had summoned him forth. It is an understatement to say that for a moment Bohr was speechless... A moment later the spell was broken when Einstein explained his mission and soon we were all bursting with laughter.

Highly Recommended: *Shakes the Clown*, 1992 film, available at major video stores. Color, 87 minutes. Written and directed by Bobcat Goldthwait. Starring Bobcat Goldthwait, Julie Brown, and Paul Dooley, with cameos by Robin Williams (as a mime instructor) and Florence Henderson (believe it or not, as a floozy). In one of the funniest films in recent years, an alcoholic clown is framed for his manager's murder. The angina attack dialogue is especially memorable, as is the assault on the mimes in the park ("Learn to talk!"). Three thumbs up; morose buffoonery at its best.

Suggested by Craig Ede, a reader from Minneapolis.

---

How to find four-leaf clovers: It's a matter of training the eye to pick out the break in the pattern, to see the aberration. The best source is a field of clover meant to be hay or pasture, not the clover that grows in city yards. Use a slow walking pace. Drop to your hands and knees only when you actually find a 4 or 5 leaf clover. Expect many false sightings because of a leaf overlay onto a 3 leaf clover.

Once you spy a 4 or 5 leaf clover, don't immediately pinch it off in the joy of discovery. Be calm. Trace the stem down to the base of the plant and examine the other stems from the same plant. Many times you will find other 4, 5, 6 or even 7 leaf clovers.

When I was growing up on the farm and had daily access during the green season to clover fields, I found multi-leaf clovers readily. City living brought a stop to clover collecting. But last year while visiting a friend, I had some waiting time in a parking lot next to a field of clover and, using the search method described above, I found both 4 and 5 leaf clovers.

Advice on clover-hunting, submitted by Rich McDonald, a reader from Champaign, Illinois.

---

Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die.


---

The balopticon [opaque projector] is an evil, inartistic, habit-forming, lazy and vicious machine! It is also a useful, time-saving, partial and helpful one. I use one often—and am thoroughly ashamed of it. I hide it whenever I hear people coming.

My father grew up on a hard-scrabble farm in Virginia and was often appalled at my effete city-boy's ways. Concerned about my immaturity, he once asked me how old I was. "Ten," I replied. "Humph," he grunted, "when I was your age I was fourteen."

Submitted by Luther Gore, a reader from Charlottesville, Virginia.

God, the sky is blue, and the air is shot with gold. A moment ago, we passed a farmyard where a girl about twelve, wearing a blue-and-white dress, stood waving, dwarfed by a lilac bush whose blossoms were already rusted. She seemed to beckon, but of course she was just waving at the world—us—passing by. She would have been alarmed if we'd stopped. But the impression remains that she was inviting us in.

Patricia Hampl and Steven Sorman, *Spillville* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1987), prompted by a postcard from Dean Schwarz, a reader from Decorah, Iowa, suggesting that we read the book.
Last week, I started piano lessons under a pianist who performs with the Philadelphia Orchestra. It looks as though progress will be painfully slow. I’m very impatient, and want to create music now. Also, as you might suspect, many [Glenn] Gouldian-like eccentricities have crept into my playing—all of which annoy my teacher and are very hard to break. Starting at the beginning, of course, my teacher has me practicing on twelve-notes-in-all compositions, with titles such as “Here We Go” or “Off to the Circus” or “Fishing.” Meanwhile, I stubbornly try to memorize pieces like Chopin’s “Funeral March” and Prelude No. 4, Op. 28, excerpts from Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” (the opening aria, and variations 15 and 25), and Beethoven’s Sonatas Nos. 14, “Moonlight” (opening movement), and 30, Op. 109.

Joseph Podlesnik, a reader from Margate, New Jersey, in a letter to BALLAST (September 1992).

Understanding a thing is to arrive at a metaphor for that thing by substituting something more familiar to us. And the feeling of familiarity is the feeling of understanding.


Highly Recommended: June Sprigg and David Larkin with photographs by Michael Freeman, *Shaker: Life, Work, and Art* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991). The Shakers (or “Shaking Quakers,” because of their dancing and singing in tongues) were one of the most unusual religious groups in modern history, in part because of the practice of celibacy by all members of the sect, not just a few, like priests and nuns. But equally odd is the fact that they made strikingly beautiful functional things, such as furniture, baskets, textiles, and architecture, as if they had all taken design courses. This spectacular array of hundreds of full-color photographs, escorted by a cogent text, is one of the finest introductions to the subject.

If you tilt the whole country sideways, Los Angeles is the place where everything loose will fall.

Frank Lloyd Wright (attributed), suggested by Richard Dysart, a reader from Santa Monica, California (that’s right, he’s the actor on *L.A. Law*).

Left Pencil drawing by Gary Kelley

Recommended: Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Following earlier, similar books by Alexander Alland (*The Artistic Animal*), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*), and Nicholas Humphrey (*Consciousness Regained*), this is a complex and earnest attempt to explain aesthetic activity using research findings from biology, ethology, and anthropology; to argue that art is essential because it answers basic human needs. The thesis is fascinating, but the text has the stiffness and density of an arcane doctoral dissertation.

A singular custom prevails here [on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts] among the women, at which I was greatly surprised; and am really at loss to account for the original cause that has introduced in this primitive society so remarkable a fashion, or rather so extraordinary a want. They have adopted these many years the Asiatic custom of taking a dose of opium every morning; and so deeply rooted is it, that they would be at a loss how to live without this indulgence; they would rather be deprived of any necessity than forego their favourite luxury. This is much more prevailing among the women than the men...though the sheriff...has for many years submitted to this custom. He takes three grains of it every day after breakfast, without the effects of which, he often told me, he was not able to transact any business.

Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Letters to an American Farmer, 1782

Highly Recommended: Alan and Isabella Livingston, The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of Graphic Design and Designers (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992). A splendid, affordable paperback guide to modern graphic design, including such subject categories as art directors, illustrators, graphic designers, typographers, periodicals, movements, styles, typefaces, and technical terms. Supplemented by 445 illustrations, this is a reliable sourcebook for design history students, teachers, and professional designers.

I played with the idea of becoming a writer and later of becoming a painter, but my father discouraged the idea of either writing or painting as a career. "Do not treat the muses as cows to be milked," he said...

BALLAST is published in Iowa in a region increasingly listed among the most desirable places in which to live (okay, so why not move here soon before we all go stir crazy!). All subscriptions (including gift subscriptions) must be mailed to the following address:

BALLAST Quarterly Review
Attn: Reader Service Sap
2022 X Avenue
Dysart, Iowa 52224-9767

BALLAST is published in a limited edition and back issues are not available. However, the magazine may be xeroxed to provide others with copies, but the copies must never be altered or sold. Our readers are encouraged to suggest offbeat examples of visual or verbal insight of the sort that the journal might publish. Original material must be explicitly labeled as such. Material that is not original must clearly make note of its author and source. All contributions are unpaid, and unsolicited material will be not returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

BALLAST doesn’t have a budget really. For eight years, it has operated at a loss. Even if we demanded stamps from everyone who receives the magazine, we would still lose money on printing, without beginning to cover the costs of rummaging for new material, design, typesetting, correspondence, woolgathering, cantankerousness, torpescence, monkey business, and stagflationary reverie. Such losses are currently offset by donations from enlightened subscribers and generous deductions from the Reader Service Sap’s paycheck. If anyone is foolishly philanthropic (foolish because such contributions are surely not tax deductible), we will sometimes accept a check (made payable to Roy R. Behrens), examples of photographic bloopers, or letters as warm as the winter is cold.

If a man could walk edgeways, he mought possibly gitt through a square or two of Boston ‘thought gittin nocked off the side-walk more’n a dozen times. Why, they ain’t much wider than the space between the rows of a pea-patch and then they are so twistified, that its as much as a common sized body can do to keep both feet in the same street at the same time. And then what makes it worse, is the way the Boston people walks. They all go dashin along like they was gwine to die, and hadn’t but a few hours left to settle their business.

William T. Thompson,
Major Jones’s Sketches of Travel, 1848