

"A Quarterly
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Works & Days

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Spring 2012

Nº 2

Against Specialization

by Luke Cissell

No, this is not a fascist call to conformity. Quite the contrary. It just so happens that in today's Looking-Glass world, *specialization* itself is that great conformer – a sort of religion that everyone has been baptized into without realizing. Our world, now so crowded with highly-trained specialists, is short on breathing room for any seeking a bold new platform from which to say, "I am here."

{Cont'd}

Sierras

by Johnny Williams



Building Three:

*Strata Comma Philo
Gramma: On What is
Emergent*
by Eric Bland

Recipes:

Seasonal Ingredients,
Perennial Methods

by Ashley Suzan and Eric Wines

Teeth

by Rebecca Bersohn



"At dawn get to your fields, and one day they'll be full." - Hesiod



Tidal Basin

by Michael Hodgson



A Call to Practice

by Sarah Marriage

Ten years ago, when I began to dream of becoming a woodworker, I didn't know exactly what that would mean. I didn't know, not for certain, that I wanted to work with wood in particular. I was drawn to the scale and to the accessibility of the material and the tools it requires, but I didn't even know what working with real wood felt like, what wood smelled like, outside the formaldehyde spiked aroma of a Home Depot lumber aisle.

{Cont'd}

Cosmography

by Luke Cissell

Gears

by Prue Hyman



Prism Series

by Field Kallop



My Own Private Bayreuth

by Arturas Bumšteinas

After enquiring at the Bayreuther Festspiele box office, I was sent a letter explaining that the wait list for tickets is currently nine years long.

{J}

Chain Study

by Penelope August



Our Trespasses

Part Two of Three

by Cara Marsh Sheffler

The bar three cornfields from Downtown was called The Manger, so named because it stood where the Nativity Scene was staged during Prohibition.

The pair arrived around 10pm and confusion was instantaneous: Gabe was mistaken for his high schooldoppelganger, who had—of course—stayed local, granting the couple immediate, completely misplaced intimacy. It also allowed for the commotion that Nat's conspicuously urban presence provoked to be put to words...

{Cont'd}

Madrone Box

by Sarah Marriage



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...to a specialist his specialty is the whole of everything and if his specialty is in good order and it generally is then everything must be succeeding.

-Gertrude Stein

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

-Robert A. Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love*

I paint. Who cares?

-Joan Rivers

No, this is not a fascist call to conformity. Quite the contrary. It just so happens that in today's Looking-Glass world, *specialization* itself is that great conformer – a sort of religion that everyone has been baptized into without realizing. Our world, now so crowded with highly-trained specialists, is short on breathing room for any seeking a bold new platform from which to say, "I am here." True, within the vast fields there are today myriad divisions and subdivisions and sub-subdivisions where one can tick to the left or right and have what he can rightfully call a proper niche. But there is something dissatisfying, something almost nihilistically hollow, in willfully submitting to occupy a position whose DNA sequence is identical to its neighbor's save the flip of a switch of one gene or another.

Specialization was once a practical form of differentiation – a business strategy whereby man said to himself, "I must carve out a unique position for myself in society so I can survive." Down through the ages this principle has compounded many times over into a thing so commonplace, so intractably ubiquitous, that the whole notion of specialization is anything but special.

Yes, oddly, it is no longer considered unique to be unique. We may differ in our ambition, yet each of us strives to bring something of singular value to this world. For most, it is nothing but a vague challenge, to be engaged more or less passively; for a few, it is a lifelong obsession.

For me, the problem with all this is a simple matter of framing. "Uniqueness" is presented to us by society as a goal that can be strived towards, rather than a *quality which we already possess* and must learn to allow to come forth. Looming like a commandment tablet, there hangs in our collective consciousness a schoolroom poster of a cartoon giraffe painted with stripes instead of the spots nature gave him: "Be original," instructs the giraffe. I worry that these words are misinterpreted from a young age and that originality is mistaken to mean a certain quirkiness of self-styling or a calculated eclecticism of taste: chartreuse cowboy boots, an aggressively asymmetrical haircut, a collection of digeridoo drone-jazz on vinyl. "Be original" is one of those well-intentioned phrases that is meant to inspire but more often paralyzes (akin to shouting "Relax!" at neurotic persons). It sends the message that we can somehow do something mystically singular in order to *achieve* originality – that we can take prescribed steps toward *being* what we already are. Better had this poster stuck with "Know thyself."

The problem with these self-conscious efforts toward originality are that they tend to get you the same product in the end. People who fancy themselves as "original" tend, ironically, to have a lot in common. (See any number of art movements, the latest trendy neighborhood in your hometown, &c.) Everyone ends up "different" in the same way.



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This happens not so much as a result of striving towards any particular concept of *originality* but rather as a result of moving away from some imaginary norm. None of us is born *normal* – that is merely an idea (albeit a powerful one) we submit to or react against. We awaken to this fact at some point, but rather than trying to get acquainted with that *self*, we expend all our energy trying to move away from this figment of a norm, or resign altogether to making ourselves over in its image. Norms are useless compass bearings because they can only be defined in terms of the relative. We reckon by these false stars and doom ourselves to walking in circles, desperate for acceptance, refusing to take an honest look at ourselves. In spite of our intentions – and because of them – originality eludes us.

On the flipside of the originality obsession is a supremacy obsession. (It goes something like: “I may not be the best at _____, but I’m a true original,” or vice versa.) More and more incessantly, we are cultured to pick one thing and to try to be “the best” at that thing. I would argue that ambition needs a few more specifics in order to work for good and not for evil. Pursuit merely of “the best,” an illusory concept as it is, is an obsession full of pitfalls because the criteria for measuring such an inscrutable superlative are always suspect (and can usually be reduced to profitability or popularity or some combination thereof, taken with the even more dubious aggregate known as critical reception). The obsession always presupposes one or another of any number of prescribed paths to this mythical “bestness.” Through success or through failure, that path is bound to dead-end. Once you subscribe to a concept of objective bestness, you have effectively signed your life and decision-making apparatus over to Baal: any and every manner of idol-worship that is all but guaranteed to get you anything but originality and little in the way of gratification, not to mention needless heartache, backbiting, and ten thousand pointless pissing contests along the well-trodden way. Consider celebrity culture—how many actors and pop stars have collected all the accolades and conventional measurements of “bestness” this world has to offer, only to end their lives in despair and suicide? Could it be that living a life measured against this myth begets a soul-sickness that becomes unbearable when there is no more myth left with which to cloud reality, when no other tools for living and learning and growing have ever been nurtured, and when the self is finally so despised that it destroys itself with the ultimate act? Surely, to covet the “best” is to despise the self. Dreams and goals are indispensable, but *bestness* is a mirage.

Speaking of goals, is not wide-ranging experience a noble one for this life? Everyone’s kindergarten teacher seems to think so. But then there come the times in life when one must Choose. These are often necessarily momentous, but convention is deceptive in that it doesn’t allow for the fact that most choices are an accumulation of options. Rarely are they the melodramatic two roads diverging sort. We each get to decide our course hundreds of times daily, what compromises we will make, and yes, what we personally value as the best in any given realm. I repeat: we each get to decide.

But oh, how flippantly we abdicate! How quickly and how foolishly we outsource our decision-making so that others might think on our behalf. Our world is teeming with people who spend their lives jumping through a series of hoops, the origins and trajectories of which they rarely if ever pause to question. Some jump at a frantic pace! Some reach very rarefied echelons of hoop jumping, until they jump through that final, most exclusive, most coveted hoop, and can say at last that they are at the top of their field, or at least at its generally respected but otherwise barren terminus. Avid biography readers, this lot busy themselves with proven method rather than genuine experience. They learn little, because they feel that they already know. The Hoop-Jumpers would have you believe that to forsake their way of life is to sacrifice all hope of attaining expertise in any one field. This is their standard comeback to all who dare not participate in their racket (participation, of course, being the best thing the rat race has going for it). Well-roundedness is for sissies, they’ll assure you.



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Call me what you will: I cast my lot with the generalists. I'll go one more and assert that the fragmentation of human knowledge euphemistically known as *specialization* is the disease of our time. It has created a society without watchdogs, a nation of bureaucratic drudges who fancy themselves to be geniuses; it handed us the banking crisis. Content with the narrowest of roles and the shallowest of obsessions, each has given up his right to question the motives and methods of others in other fields while in turn expecting a polite restraint from the nosy inquisitiveness of outsiders. We are on icebergs, breaking into ever smaller pieces, drifting ever farther apart and most of us, never having even once bothered to look up and gaze at our surroundings, don't even know it.

American novelist/essayist Walker Percy raised the alarm decades ago in his writings on language:

I make no apologies for being an amateur in such matters, since the one thing that has been clear to me from the beginning is that language is too important to be left to linguisticians. Indeed everything is too important to be left to the specialist of that thing, and the layman is already too deprived by the surrendering of such sovereignty ... only a Martian can see man as he is, because man is too close to himself and his vision too fragmented.

(*The Message in the Bottle*)

Percy spent much of his career trying to reclaim the macro perspective, describing what he saw as this general malady of a *loss of sovereignty*—man's forfeiture, not wholly unavoidable, of the ability to perceive and experience a thing in its pristine, complete state, and his subsequent willingness to merely *consume* ideas or experiences as they are presented to him. "He believes," Percy noted, "that the thing is *disposed of* by theory, that it stands in the Platonic relation of being a *specimen of* such and such an underlying principle." Percy returns to this idea no less jarringly in his fiction:

For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead. It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death ... At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. I hear myself or someone else saying things like: "In my opinion the Russian people are a great people, but—" or "Yes, what you say about the hypocrisy of the North is unquestionably true. However—" and I think to myself: this is death.

(*The Moviegoer*)

The death is surely in the realization that man wants to be told not only what to think but how to think it.

Man indeed, without even realizing it, has abdicated his virginal position as a unique observer and experimenter of things. He has contracted out his powers of perception wholly to the specialist, the theorist, the critic, and in having done so he has given up his chance at grasping the essence of anything. Today man is not only incapable for lack of practice at describing the unique and personal experience of watching a film, reading a book, or seeing an art exhibit without citing So-and-so's review or Whosit's radio program—he *feels that it would be invalid to do so*. Ironically, he seeks to authenticate his already unique experience by citing an expert experimenter, as if there can be such a thing. He deems his own experience valid only if it lines up with the expert's described version, or, conversely, if he disagrees with the cited expert and defines his position as such (here he feels even more validated).

No reasonable person can deny the advances we have made as a species because of the highly-specialized, brilliant endeavors of scientists, artists, thinkers and I am not making it my project to do so here. I assert, rather, that our quests to be generically "special" are largely misguided and that our efforts in this direction are the very thing that deny us success. We put a great deal at stake.

We must never give up our right to take stock of the big picture – regardless of our expertise – because none of us has a monopoly on this perspective. A generalist's outlook insulates us from the aforementioned trappings of fake uniqueness and the pitfalls of oversimplification; it protects us from unwittingly signing



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over our powers of perception and it opens us to discovering the infinitesimal ways we react to any number of things life has to offer. Indeed, the more ways you allow yourself to relate to the universe, the more ways you get to relate to your vocation, and the discovery may truly be unending. (I can already hear the chorus of the unimaginative clucking their tongues and going on about "the way." No matter.) We must not merely "consume" accepted ideas. We must scrutinize, we must pursue at all costs the essential perception, we must wrest sovereignty from any system or personage that would steal it from us. Our grave danger is that synthesis becomes the casualty of our acquiescence. The world needs specialists, above all, in the art of synthesis – masters of combining spheres of human knowledge to great effect, connectors of new circuit paths, integrators, both within fields and among fields.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, there is infinite uniqueness in this position: all creation is synthesis, whether or not the creator would have you believe so. The boldness of creation lies in the selection of ingredients. Some well-executed recipes will yield a big bang, others only a messy sputter. So we ask ourselves questions in an effort to arrive at a plan that will lead us somewhere new. What do I make of my surroundings? What do I make of my experience past, present, and future? What do I make of this book, this song, this theory, this field of expertise that is not familiar to me, but in which I sense a great wealth of new potential? What do I make of this dream that weighs so heavily upon me? At this late date the possibilities are still, and will always be, endless.

Consider this a roundabout plug for a liberal arts education. If we can't afford one of the institutionalized variety, then we can surely design our own curriculum. That's much more fun, truth be told. Then we might learn to challenge those outside our fields of comfort with questions – often the simple question is the most brazen, and the one that we fail to answer. Then, with a humble spirit that seeks not to transmit knowledge nor theory but to kindle curiosity and to learn in kind, we might be giving of our own experience, however modest, to laypersons – they keep the big questions fresh in our minds. It's a worthy goal that we might strive to acquaint ourselves with neighboring fields so as to be able to ask informed questions of those who tend them daily. It's a worthy goal that human beings should strive to understand their world as a dynamic whole. Life is for learning.

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Post Scriptum—Three days after drafting the above a strange thing happened. A little background: last summer following a friend's tip, I had taken a walk across the river to check out the Melville House Publishing outlet in Brooklyn's DUMBO. I came home that day with Charlotte Mandell's translation of Balzac's *LA FILLE AUX YEUX D'OR* (*THE GIRL WITH THE GOLDEN EYES*), which sat neglected on my bookshelf for months until whim, dumb chance, or a force unseen prompted me to grab it on the way out the door in a hurried search for train reading. A few pages into a description of Paris and its professional class in the early-mid 19th Century, I was transfixed by a passage that struck me as an astoundingly prescient description of a society more immediately familiar to us:

They know their profession, but they ignore anything unconnected with their profession. So, to protect their self-esteem, they call everything into question, criticize right and left; seem skeptical but are actually gullible, and drown their minds in interminable discussions. Almost all of them adopt convenient social, literary, or political prejudices so as to dispense with having to form an opinion of their own, just as they place their conscience in the shelter of common law, or of the commercial court. Having left home early in order to become remarkable men, they become mediocre, and crawl along the heights of society. Accordingly, their faces present us with this sour pallor, these false complexions, these dull, lined eyes, these talkative and sensual mouths where the observer recognizes the symptoms of the degeneration of thought and its turning round and round in the dull circle of specialization that kills the generative faculties of the brain, the gift of seeing the big picture, of generalizing and deducing.

Editorial Staff

Luke Cissell (*Against Specialization; Cosmography*) is a musician and composer who lives in Lower Manhattan. Born in Louisville, Kentucky, he was a fiddling champion at the age of eight and went on to train as a classical violinist. Cissell's recent work includes a collection of chamber music, a full-length album, and a suite for solo violin written as a companion piece to Cara Marsh Sheffler's *Guide*. He is currently at work on his second studio album and an opera based on Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. Play with his jukebox at <http://www.lukecissell.com>.

Sarah Marriage (*Madrone Box; A Call to Practice; Spring Fauna*) is a woodworking student at the College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking program in Fort Bragg, California. Conceived in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, raised in Anchorage, Alaska, Sarah studied architecture at Princeton University and has at turns worked in the fields of architecture, structural engineering, occupational health and safety, dog-walking, data management, physics, youth empowerment, and construction supply. Recent projects include the rehabilitation of a nineteenth-century townhouse in Baltimore, Maryland. She also serves as Art Director, Designer, Programmer, and Calligrapher for *Works & Days*.

Cara Marsh Sheffler (*Our Trespasses*) is a writer who lives on Manhattan's Lower East Side. In her past life as an actress, she was featured in Woody Allen's *Celebrity* and in The Looking Glass Theatre's Off-Broadway production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. A recipient of the Eagles Prize, she has most recently been working on *Our Trespasses* and another novel about the guidebook used by the Donner Party, *Guide*. She performed an excerpt of *Guide* in tandem with Luke Cissell's (*The Myth of*) *Infinite Progress* at the Brick Theater last year. Sheffler is also providing the libretto for Cissell's adaptation of *The Ambassadors*. She likes road trips.

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Contributors

Penelope August (*Chain Study*) designs interiors and furniture for an architecture firm by day. At night she makes things with her hands. She often works in mediums that require a transformation by fire or sun, where the end result is not entirely in her control. She has been working with clay for 22 years. She has 84 houseplants. She lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn with her husband.

Born in Los Angeles, **Rebecca Bersohn** (*Teeth*) is a New York based artist. She received her BFA at New York University. Her work has been exhibited at Monster Island, Charlie Horse Gallery, the Market Hotel in Brooklyn, BWAC and The Commons Gallery at NYU. Her Awards in the Arts include Bank of America Art Award 2004, an Artist's Distinction Award (2003) for an ink/water color piece at the California Art Education Association Los Angeles County Exhibit and the Governor's Art Scholar Award 2002-2003.

Eric Bland's (*Building Three*) latest play, *All the Indifferent Children of the Earth*, was described as "death-obsessed" and "awesomely eloquent." He studied Writing for Performance at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and poetry and playwriting at Princeton.

A native of Vilnius, Lithuania, **Arturas Bumšteinas** (*My Own Private Bayreuth #1 and #2*) is a composer/performer of acoustic and electronic music. After graduating from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater, he founded three musical ensembles: *Quartet Twentytwentyone*, *Zarasai*, and *Works and Days*. His various projects have been presented in dozens of exhibitions around Europe. Festival participation includes: The Holland Festival, Sensoralia/Romaeuropa, Angelica, Jauna Muzika, Sonic Circuits, Cut & Splice, Skanumezs, Wundergrund, KODY, and Full Pull. Collaborators include: Anton Lukoszevieve, Laura Garbštie, Jesse Glass, Piotr Kurek, Alina Orlova, Lina Lapelyte, Jeff Surak, Borut Savski, Pure, Vladimir Tarasov, Dominykas Vyšniauskas, Liudas Mockunas, and Max Reinhardt. His music has been published by the following labels: Belt, Zeromoon, Con-v, NUUN, Sangoplasmo, Cronica Electronica, Semplice Records, and Nexsound. From 2006-2011, he was represented by Galerie Antje Wachs in Berlin; today, he lives and works in Riga, Latvia. His work may be found at <http://arturasbumsteinas.tumblr.com/>.

Michael Hodgson (*Tidal Basin*) hails from the wilds of New Hampshire by way of Princeton, NJ and now resides in the Hudson River Valley. He is a photographer who still uses film. He mourns the pending bankruptcy of Kodak and is stockpiling his photapocalypse kit accordingly.

Prue Hyman (*Gears*) enjoys observing unexpected details and using historic photographic processes. She spent extensive time in the late aughts on the road, photographing musicians. A native New Yorker, she currently lives in Chinatown. Her work can be viewed at www.pruehyman.com and is available for sale via direct contact. She is a connoisseur of jokes pertaining to her surname.

Field Kallop (*Prism Series*) was born and raised in New York, NY. After working at El Museo de la Nación in Lima Perú, and at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Field shifted her focus from curatorial projects to making art. She became an assistant to the artist Chuck Close and established a studio practice, allowing her to devote more of her time to her own painting. Kallop recently received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where her work underwent a significant transformation. After giving up oil paint, she began exploring new materials and experimenting with various processes. While her interests remained consistent—she continues to be inspired by mathematical principles and scientific phenomena—her work started to take on a range of new forms. Kallop is now back in NYC, and lately she has been working with indigo and bleach on fabric. To view more of her work, visit www.fieldkallop.com.

Willow Jane Sainsbury (*Spring Fauna*) is an artist and illustrator, who currently lives in Vicenza, Italy. She has lived in Melbourne, Australia; Auckland, New Zealand; and Oxford, United Kingdom in the past three years where she continues to teach, learn and work as an artist. She most recently returned to education, learning printmaking at the Australian Print Workshop. She is currently working on her own illustration project and a study of landscapes. She is not on Facebook.

California-grown and a New Yorker at heart, **Ashley Suzan** (*Recipes*) is a graduate of the Gallatin School at New York University. The youngest of four, Ashley was raised in the kitchen. An avid yogi and spinning enthusiast, her creative passions include drawing, food, and beverage. Follow her on Twitter @AshleySuzan.

Johnny Williams (*Sierras*) is an aspiring furniture maker gone missing in the headlands of Northern California. He was last seen building two children's chairs at the College of the Redwoods Fine Furniture program, one in madrone, another in bay laurel. If you see him, tell him to sober up and head home to New York: his boyfriend and mother miss him dearly.

Eric Wines (*Recipes*) enjoys trolling flea markets for treasures, playing with plants, and distance running. He is co-owner of Tre restaurant in Manhattan and a member of The Skylight Group. He hosts candlelight suppers and classy cocktail parties. Wines was raised in Detroit, MI and lives in New York City. Follow him on Twitter @EricWines.