

Will Buttner

Born in Mauston, Wisconsin in 1951; attended St. Patrick Grade School and Mauston Area High School.

Graduated from high school in 1969 and moved to Madison to attend the University of Wisconsin.

Began studying art history in 1974.

Received a B.B.A. in Management in 1975 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Began making art in the summer of 1975.

Moved to Minneapolis in the fall of 1975 and attended studio-art classes for two years at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities; focused on printmaking.

In 1976 in Minneapolis, met and began living with Minnesota-native and fellow artist Trudy Saunders.

Worked for nine years—from 1976 to 1985—as an administrative assistant in the Development and Membership Office at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Moved to San Diego in 1985; worked for a year as an administrative assistant in the Office of Development and Public Relations at the University of California, San Diego in La Jolla.

In 1986, to augment reading in art history and art theory, began studying psychology and psychoanalytic theory.

Exhibited work publicly from 1990 to 1997 while living in Arizona (using the pseudonym ‘Will Saunders’).

Lives with Trudy in Portland, Oregon.



Partial Notes on My First Twenty-Five Years

I was conceived by accident in May 1950 by two lust-struck, small-town teenagers who were dating at the time. The couple married in September 1950, and I was born the next February. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in a working-class family in a conservative, rural community in Juneau County, Wisconsin. I am of northern European heritage: roughly 9/16 British, 6/16 German, and 1/16 Norwegian. To borrow a phrase from the poets, I would characterize my DNA inheritance as 'mire-smirched.' My four grandparents and their families were farmers, laborers, homemakers, carpenters, and soldiers; their ancestors were predominantly colonists and settlers. I come from people who sat down at the table with dirt, shit, and blood on their hands.

My parents were salt-of-the-earth, working-class heroes. They lived their lives with minimal planning, and they were very good at living the unexamined life. They created six humans without thinking about the consequences. They made-do; they had no large aspirations. They just lived day-to-day and made decisions the way their parents and grandparents had lived and made decisions. Life was ready-made for them. Free thinking was never an option. Life was lived with dogmatic certainty. They submitted and obeyed. Education meant reading, writing, and arithmetic. Culture meant jokes and gossip, fishing and hunting, Sunday Mass, Chet Atkins, Walter Cronkite, and the Packers. Family meant children

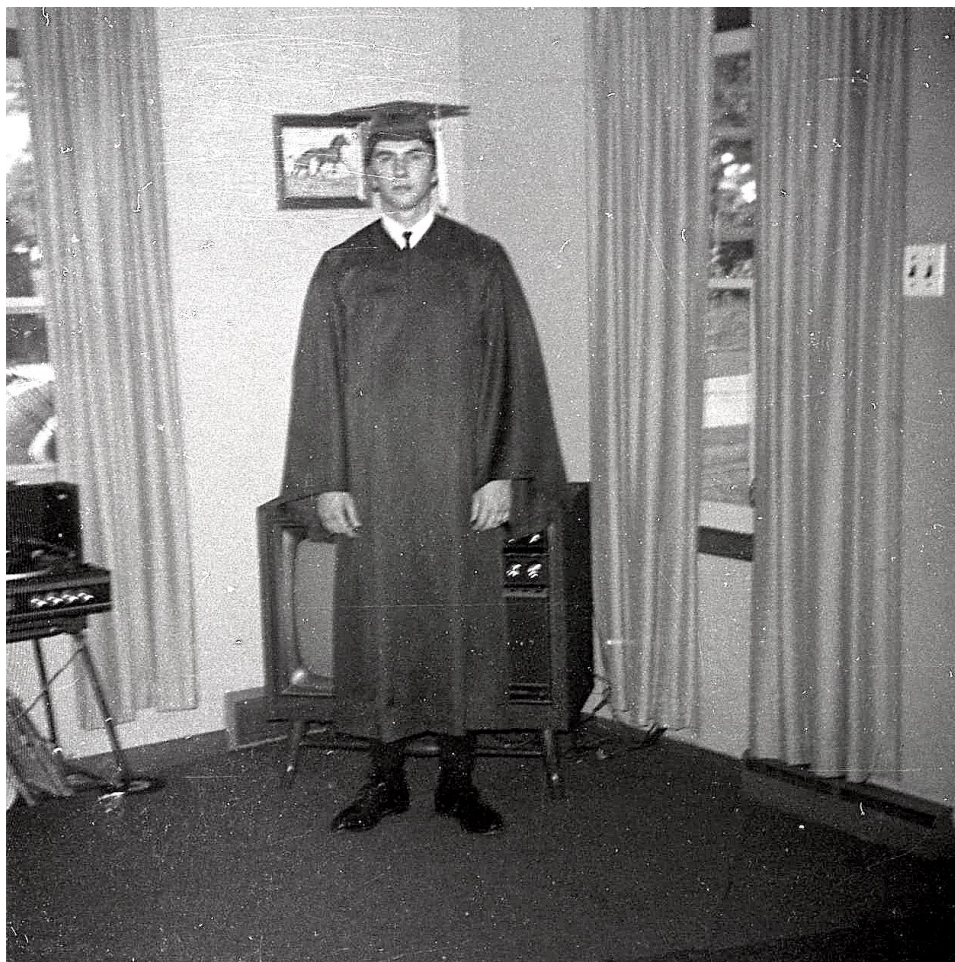
and grandchildren. Death meant heaven or hell.

My maternal grandparents were casual Protestants who attended church just for special occasions; my paternal grandparents were devout Catholics. My mother, who had been raised Lutheran, converted to Catholicism when she married my father. I was raised Catholic. However, by the time I was seventeen, inspired by the open-minded and promiscuous vitality of my peers, I rejected the Church's dogmatic and punishing version of spirituality. Over the years, as an adult, I gradually washed superstition off my life like it was a toxic, temporary tattoo.

And considering the topic of formal education: of my two parents, and my four grandparents, only my maternal grandmother and my father graduated from high school—two of six. I attended a Catholic grade school, and a public high school. As far as I can tell from doing extensive family-history research, I am the first in my entire family tree to attend a four-year college and *graduate with a bachelor's degree*. My parents were not against higher education; they just had no precedents in their lives for people 'going off to college.' And they were just too burdened by the problems of daily life to think about the future. I had very little encouragement as far as higher education was concerned. So it is one of the great mysteries of my life why I broke with my working-class origins and went off to college in the 'big city' after graduating from high school in 1969. Inside my family's insular culture, this decision was a *radical* break with

tradition. It was not a clean break. The decision to leave my hometown, move to Madison, and attend college to try to 'better myself' resulted in a lifetime of awkward estrangement from my family. I made myself into an outsider by opting for an open outcome.

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Here is the black and white photo that was taken in his parent's living room on the night of his high school graduation on June 5, 1969. He is waiting patiently for his

mother to snap the photo so he can get on with the rest of his life. He appears to have a slightly apprehensive look on his face because he senses his place in the world will be changing drastically over the next few months. He has been accepted into college at Madison. He will go from a town with about 3,500 people where he has lived all his life to living in a city with a metro-population of over 200,000; and he will go from a high school with a total of about 500 students to attending a Big Ten university with an enrollment of about 45,000 students. No one has helped him prepare for this transition. He will be on his own with no mentors. He does not know a single person in Madison. And he will take with him only a second-hand suitcase packed with half-baked notions and ill-formed aspirations.



While I was growing up in a blue-collar family in a small town in Wisconsin, the idea and practice of art was never talked about. The subject wasn't taboo or banned, it was just that no one in my family knew anything about art or had anything to do with art. Popular music—yes, but art—no. I don't blame my parents for not knowing about art—

how could I blame them for not knowing about a cultural and social phenomenon they never had any contact with? When I was in high school I might have been vaguely aware that art classes were available to students, but I never considered for a second enrolling in any of these classes. I didn't think they had anything to do with me. I knew that a few of my classmates participated in high school theater productions, but I never attended any of the plays. I was instead preoccupied with sports, rock music, and girls—very normal concerns for a heterosexual, teenage boy growing up in a blue-collar family in the rural Midwest in the 1960s.



In the spring of 1966 when I had just turned fifteen, two older boys from my high school approached me at a dance and asked if I wanted to join a rock band they were trying to put together in our town. They were juniors and I was a freshman. These boys were both guitar players and suggested to me that I could maybe play bass. I immediately said yes—although I had never touched a bass guitar in my life. But I came from a musical family on my father's side, and I myself loved all the new pop and rock music that was overtaking the culture. So we started our band, and then for the next four years I was continuously involved in playing gigs in rock bands in and around my hometown. We played covers of the popular rock songs of the sixties. At first we played gigs at high school

dances and street dances. As we got better, we progressed to being invited to play at local bars and taverns. By the spring of 1969, during my senior year in high school, I was performing in a three-piece rock band with a boy from my class who played drums, and a boy from a nearby town who played guitar. I played bass and did most of the lead singing. We fashioned ourselves as a power-pop trio and played covers of Cream, CCR, Jim Hendrix and the like. Being pretty happy with ourselves and wanting to make some extra pocket money, we contracted a booking agent that operated out of Madison to secure gigs for us. Over the course of the summer of 1969, the agency was able to book two or three gigs a week for our band; we played gigs in Wisconsin, Minnesota and also into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. We drove from gig-to-gig with our instruments, amps and PA system in a Dodge panel van that was loaned to us by the drummer's father who happened to own a car dealership in our town. My recollection of that summer is very hazy, but I do remember we had a great time playing some of the 'hits' for the people. We drove the van to our gigs, sometimes hundreds of miles away. We never stayed in motels. We set up, played, packed up, and drove all the way home again. How I survived the summer of 1969 I will never know. In the fall, after I had started college, we still managed to play a gig here and there on the weekends. I knew at heart that I was not a very good musician, but I loved the camaraderie of the group—driving around together and playing rock music. My real joy in playing

in the band was watching the people having a good time and dancing to the music. Long story short: the Vietnam War draft put an end to our band. Our last gig was played in February 1970 at a bar on the north shore in Two Harbors, Minnesota. The last song we played together was a cover of Santana's *Evil Ways*. That was the end of my career as a rock musician. I have never set foot on a stage since that night.



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Playing music in a rock band was my first creative experience—I came to visual art late. It wasn't until 1973 when I was already 22 years old that I 'accidentally' discovered the art world. At the time I was living in Madison and attending the University of Wisconsin. During a trip I took with a friend to visit his sister in Chicago, I was exposed to some of the best art in the world at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was taken on a tour of the museum one after-

noon in the late summer of 1973—the experience changed the course of my life. The paintings I saw at the Art Institute of Chicago that day made a deep and lasting impression on me. Beginning in the fall of 1973 in Madison I started to visit the Elvehjem Art Museum on the campus at the UW to look at paintings on my own. And then for the winter semester of 1974, I signed up for my first art history class. The decision to study art history launched me into another major stage of my life. As I was working towards getting a bachelors degree in business administration, I took a few more art history classes and changed my career focus to arts administration. By the time I graduated in the spring of 1975, I had made up my mind that I was going to get a job working in an art museum. Another major shift occurred during the summer of 1975 when I was still living in Madison: I decided to move to Minneapolis and enroll in studio art classes at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities—and look for a job. Apparently, I went from wanting to work in an art museum to also wanting to make art myself—but how I came to this decision I'll never know.

The stretch between September 1975 and March 1976 was one of the most important periods in my life. I moved to Minneapolis in September, and started taking studio-art classes at the University of Minnesota. Also that fall, I found a job working at Walker Art Center. I turned 25 in February 1976; and then a month later, in March, I met my life-partner, Trudy Saunders, in a printmaking class.