

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 LaJolla.

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 the First 25 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 larger 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, 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 rigid 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. And it was not a clean break. The decision

to leave my hometown, move to Madison, and seek ‘higher education’ resulted in a lifetime of awkward estrangement from my family. I made myself into an outsider by opting for an open outcome.

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 ‘plays,’ but I never attended any of the high school theater productions. I was interested in 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.

I came to 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 afternoon in the summer of 1973, and 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 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—Art History 101. The decision to take art history classes 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’ emphasis 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 then found a job working at Walker Art Center. Also that fall I started taking studio-art classes at the University of Minnesota. And then in March 1976, in a lithography class, I met my future life-partner, Trudy Saunders.