

Domestic Detail

1969

Drive through town

Go over the bridge

Get on the freeway

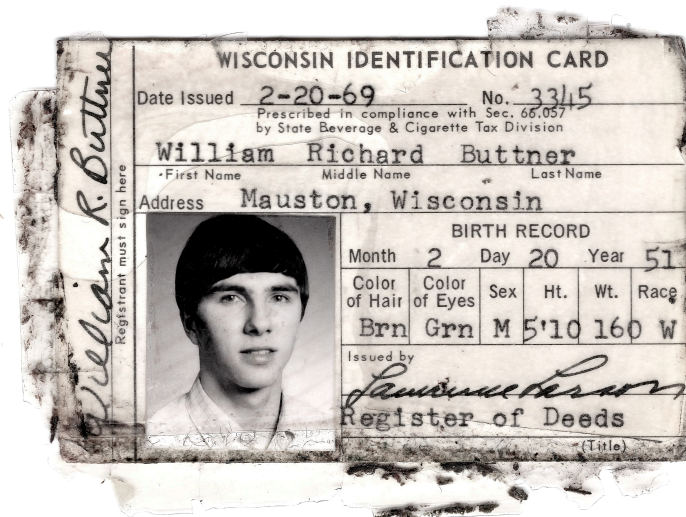
And don't look back

Preface

This document consists of a compilation of various 'notes' I've written over the last few years and is intended to augment the autobiographical information posted in the *About* tab on my website. Keep in mind that this is a work-in-progress. I am always making changes to try to clarify the content of the text. The last edit was made on June 29, 2025.

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1. Autobiographical Notes: Part 1



This is a digital scan of one of my most valued ‘souvenirs’ —the original Wisconsin ID card that was issued to me on my 18th birthday in 1969. The card itself measures 2 1/2 x 3 3/4 inches and is laminated in plastic; the small portrait photo glued to the surface of the card measures 1 3/8 x 1 1/8 inches. The last name is derived from a German occupational name meaning ‘cask maker.’ He is named after his father, but he is not a ‘junior.’ The young man in the photo has a slightly constipated look on his face that is understandable since he shares one bathroom in the small house where he lives with his parents and his five younger siblings. You wouldn’t know it from this photo, but he plays bass and sings lead in a teenage rock band; this activity makes him popular with his peers, but estranges him from his family. He appears to be wearing a black stocking cap, but this is just an illusion of the high

contrast of the photo. In fact, he is sporting a very fashionable and popular version of “Beatle bangs.’ His father is the real musician, a genuine folk artist. This young man is not a musician—he just loves music; playing in a rock band is the beginning of his ‘career’ as an artist-imposter. He appears to have a slightly apprehensive look in his eyes because he probably *senses* his life will be changing drastically over the next year. 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 attending a high school with a total of about 500 students to attending a major university with about 45,000 students. He does not know a single person in Madison. No one has helped him prepare for this transition. He is on his own with no mentors and a ‘village education.’ Regardless, I like it very much that the number 0 has encroached on the designation W in the ‘Race’ box on the ID card. I like the poetic resonance suggested here that perhaps my real ‘race’ is not ‘white’ but ‘zero white.’ For many years, from the 1970s through the 1990s, I had a recurring bad dream that I had ‘murdered’ someone and buried them in an unmarked grave ‘a little ways out of town.’ In the dream I was always stumbling around the area where I thought the grave was located, terrified that I would be ‘found out’ and then prosecuted. It took me a very long time to figure out that the person I had ‘killed’ was the young man in the photo.

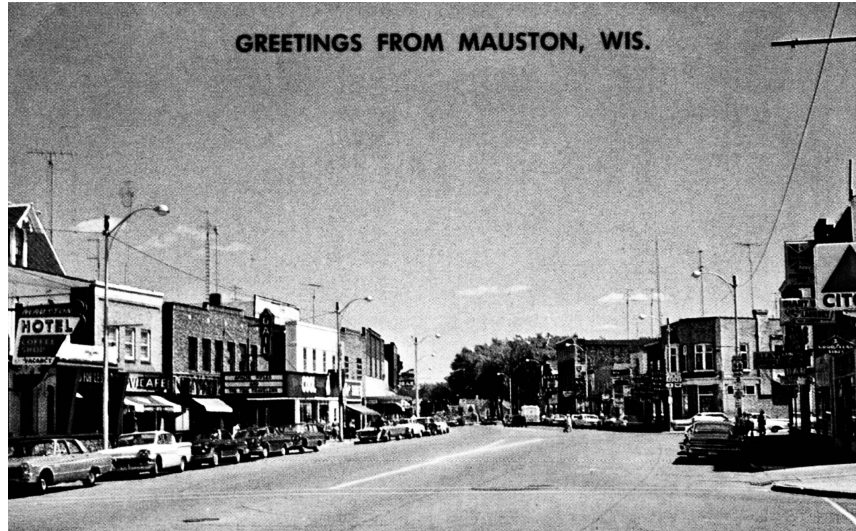
2. Notes On Creativity

On writing: I am a dedicated note-taker and I also like to compose the occasional autobiographical statement; but, I am not a ‘writer’ any more than I am a ‘fine artist.’ The ‘fine’ in the fine arts has eluded me all my life.

On painting: to it put very directly, I paint to confirm difference. And I learned early on—when I first started to paint in the late 70s—that I could not explore my own sense of ‘difference’ by trying to *illustrate* reality. I discovered early that I had a very strong aversion to illusionism, especially styles of hyper-realism. I am not against illusionism in general *for others* but, as an aesthetic style, the approach seriously does not work for me. This aversion I believe has determined my entire approach to creativity. I discovered that I was personally repulsed by trying to ‘pull-off’ the technical ‘tricks’ of pictorial realism like modeling and shading. And trying to draw a ‘scene’ on a flat surface ‘in perspective’ made me feel like a phony—as if I were trying to tell a story and the story was all lies. I experienced a palpable feeling of *nausea* when I tried to utilize any of the ‘tricks’ of illusionism. So I gave up this ‘style’ early on, and had to find a different approach to painting. I believe this problem started when I was a child: I have always had a gut-loathing for anything claiming to be ‘magical.’ I don’t know what this says about me. What kind of artist doesn’t like to fool people and play tricks on the audience?

3. Autobiographic Notes: Part 2

Unplanned/Inconsolable: Born in February 1951, I was conceived by accident in May 1950 by two love-struck teenagers. 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. 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 didn't talk about the future. They created six humans without

thinking about the consequences. They were totally devoid of 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 Sunday Mass, the Packers, fishing and hunting, jokes and gossip. 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 secular 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. There was little encouragement or financial support. 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 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.

The 50s and 60s: 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 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.

The 70s: 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's collection 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 Collage Process: I failed miserably at painting when I first started to make art in the late 70s. Although I was very enthusiastic about painting as a medium, I had no idea how to actually *make* a convincing painting myself. I had a very strong feeling for the sensibility of painting, but I had little of the craft skill that was required to make a painting. I wanted badly however to be part of the world of cultural producers who made works of art. That's where the collage process came to my rescue. Sometime in 1977 I had a personal breakthrough that I would describe simply as a *recognition* of an alternative technique that could be used for creating an image: the medium of collage. On the wall across from my desk in the business office at Walker Art Center hung six prints by Robert Motherwell from his 1973 series of lithographs called 'Summer Light Series.' The prints could be called 'hybrid' since they combined traditional lithographic printing techniques with collage elements that were 'glued' to the surface of each image. I was 'knocked out' by these prints, and was overwhelmed by a desire to try to make collages myself. From my experience of looking closely at these Motherwell prints, looking at collages made by other artists, and exploring the collage process in general, I discovered that I could use the collage aesthetic to *build* an image rather than illustrate subject matter. I had also

developed a strong affinity for paper from my experience of taking a few printmaking classes at the University of Minnesota. Trying to conjure an illusionistic image on a flat surface seemed like an impossible task—at least for me—that required ‘magic talent’ with paint brushes and paint. I had discovered that this skill—this ‘magic’—was beyond my reach in the late 1970s. I found however that I was much more comfortable with arranging and pasting pieces of paper on a support to construct an image.

Into the Woodshed: Around the mid-to-late 1990s, I experienced a bit of a crisis about my identity as a artist, so I decided to withdraw from showing my work in the ‘gallery and museum system.’ The crisis I experienced had two main aspects related to the feeling I had of being a kind of imposter. The first realization I had was that, not only was my work at the time highly imitative, but some of the work I was making was down-right kitschy. (I got caught up for a time making assemblages of wood and found metal, and this endeavor took me down a very bad road creatively.) The second factor that led to my ‘chill’ was that I was forced to face the fact that I was not skilled at either drawing or painting. Some artists get by on ‘personality,’ some are highly skilled, and some artists have both skill and charisma. *I had neither.* Generally speaking though, I was ‘liked’ for being a ‘nice guy’ by other artists and people in the art world, but the clincher was that I knew I wasn’t respected as a ‘maker of art’ by other artists. I could see it in their eyes. My work just

didn't cut it on a professional level. So around 1997 I made the decision to stop showing my work publicly and try to reassess my situation, my 'career prospects.' For starters, I went 'into the woodshed'—as the jazz musicians say—to teach myself how to draw. And then I stopped trying so hard to be a 'nice guy.' I became 'difficult.' About thirty years ago I went 'into the woodshed' and I haven't come out.



Drawing: In the mid-1990s, after trying to make paintings in utter futility for over 20 years, it finally dawned on me what the problem was: *I did not know how to draw*. It just had never occurred to me before that the skill of drawing might have something to do with the practice of painting. I was really *that* naive. So I set

about teaching myself how to draw. I bore down on this project very enthusiastically. This was the point where I withdrew from the art world so I could reassess my identity as an artist. For several years in the late-1990s, I devoted all my art-making time to drawing. I explored as many ways of making marks on a surface as I could imagine, employing a wide variety of materials and tools. Drawing can be brutal in exposing one's faults and weaknesses as an artist. Drawing can be like an x-ray of one's creative drives and life forces. So, over time, inside the process of drawing, I discovered the source of my personal drive to make visual art: I needed to express *impermanence*. Before I started drawing, my work tended towards the static and the emblematic. After I immersed myself in the process of drawing, I became more and more interested in expressing gesture, flux, and the transitory. Strangely though, because of the awkwardness of my life, it took another twenty years of searching and stumbling—until the late 2010s—for me to take what I had discovered from the process of drawing and apply it to the medium of painting.

Painting—The Slabtown Series: Over the years I have developed a serious 'fear of paint brushes.' It's an irrational thing, but there it is. This 'phobia' is really about the anxiety of incompatibility—the issue is about *touch*. I just have never liked the way a brush *feels* in my hand when I apply paint to a support. Something just always seemed wrong. The 'brushing of paint' feels way

too precious, or too refined for me personally as I try to carry out the various impulses of my creative drive. I am never able to get my hand and the brush ‘in sync’ when it comes to painting. I believe this problem of being uncomfortable with paint brushes has been the main reason why I have not been able to sustain any consistency in painting over the years. I realized I needed to make a drastic change or stop painting altogether. So in late 2017 I made the decision to stop painting with brushes, to try a more direct approach. The ‘tools’ I use now to apply paint to a surface are rags, sponges, palette knives, various types of squeegees, and my hands. (I have not totally abandoned the brush though. When I get the urge to draw, hardly anything is more deeply satisfying to me inside the creative process than applying black ink to paper with a brush. But that’s drawing, and that’s a very different story!) The ‘Slabtown Series’ of paintings, which I began in late 2017, and is on-going, is a direct result of the decision to not use paint brushes when I paint. The result: I no longer feel anxiety and dread when I work. I now paint with a feeling of pleasure and confidence.

4. Insight

Writing this at the age of 74 in 2025, I now have a broad perspective on my life that can be divided into two distinct periods: the first 37 years or so when I was totally unaware that I possessed an ‘inner life’

or, what is called, the ‘life of the mind’; and then the last 37 years or so—since the late 1980s—when I have lived in acute and painful awareness that life *can be* more than the fulfillment of biological needs augmented by noise and decoration. For the first half of my life I was not consciously aware of the ‘inner life’ of human desires, drives, and motives—the unconscious and the subconscious. I was totally devoid of reflexivity. I was just living on instinct like a feral animal. I have spent the entire second part of my life in an ongoing practice of self-scrutiny and critical thinking attempting to ‘cure’ myself of small-mindedness, shallowness, and naiveté. I have used the study of art, aesthetics, and psychology, and the process of making visual art as vital aspects of this self-analysis. And since late 2016, I have used my website as part of this process of self-assessment.

There are people, places and things that I truly love, but I don’t ‘love’ art. I have never tried to elevate art above other aspects of life. There *is something* art does for me, but it has never been about the romantic idea of giving or receiving love. For this reason I imagine that I am viewed as an imposter. I’ve never learned how to give people what they want when it comes to ‘being an artist.’ I’m just not good at playing the role. The only thing I’ve been particularly good at in my adult life is the ‘art of domesticity’—that is, practical, household management. Other than that, I’m not exceptionally skilled at anything. I’m certainly not skilled at making

art. A successful artist must have *passion* about art, and then the *skill* to translate that passion into some form of product or service that can satisfy the appetite of the public. I don't possess either of these personal attributes—passion and skill. The 'feeling' I have now is that I am viewed as a clumsy poser, as someone who does not 'pass' as an artist. But I will keep making drawings and paintings—enjoying *the process of creativity as a thing-in-itself*. At this point in my life, I can honestly say—to paraphrase Karl Ove Knausgaard—*I am happy because I am no longer an artist*.

5. A Brief Anthology of Quotations

[Homage to S. S.]

*Saying the whole truth is materially impossible;
words fail.*

—Jacques Lacan

The dog growls. He too knows his lines.

—Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*

*What can art be in the face of a technology of death
and extinction?*

—Briony Fer

*Nothing, after all, is more superfluous than
civilization itself.*

—Adam Gopnik

We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.

—Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*

Culture and refinement may be admirable qualities, but not in advertising.

—Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*

To put it generally: art (and art-making) is a form of consciousness; the materials of art are a variety of the forms of consciousness. By no aesthetic principle can this notion of materials of art be construed as excluding even the extreme forms of consciousness that transcend social personality or psychological individuality.

—Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

When you invent the ship you also invent the shipwreck.

—Paul Virilio

A concrete act makes language irrelevant.

—Rachel Cusk, *Coventry*

He had a good vocabulary except when he was talking to someone.

—Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*

and life goes on within you and without you

—George Harrison

You press the button, we do the rest.

—sales pitch for the first Kodak camera in 1888
(quoted by Susan Sontag in *On Photography*)

One of the tasks art has assumed is making forays into the taking up of positions on the frontiers of consciousness . . . and reporting back what's there. . . . It's well known that when people venture into the far reaches of consciousness, they do so at the peril of their sanity, that is, of their humanity.

—Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable. The poor image is a copy in motion. It's quality is bad, it's resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. . . . The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. . . . [poor images] testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images —their circulation within the vicious cycles of capitalism.

—Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*

My work deals with myself as a fictional character.

—Juliana Huxtable

So it was the world, the world in its entirety, I had to tackle. But world is resistant, it lives turned away from us, in blithe communion with itself. World won't let me in.

—John Manville, *Blue Guitar*

Only the shallow know themselves.

—Oscar Wilde

A photograph is a secret about a secret—the more it tells you the less you know.

—Diane Arbus

Anyone making a reproduction of my art is making art just as valid as if I had made it.

—Lawrence Weiner

Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want.

—Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*

Because I am not silent, the poems are bad.

—George Oppen

The increasingly synonymity between economic 'progress' and extinction has become hard to ignore.

—Jonathan Dee

Photography has, or will eventually, negate much painting—for which the painter should be grateful.

—Edward Weston

Being convinced we have moral ownership of the earth is the best way to make it uninhabitable.

—Jacqueline Rose

Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity.

—Vladimir Nabokov

*Knowledge is so slender and hard-won, and
ignorance so vast and dangerous.*

—Rachel Cusk, *Coventry*

*I've never been particularly fond of religion, or on
the whole anything spiritual. But if either of you
would like to sell me a tom-cat, I would consider it a
good turn, and it can be as wild as it likes.*

—Halldór Laxness, *Independent People*

*I photograph to find out what something will look
like photographed.*

—Garry Winogrand

The world doesn't care but it clings to me anyway.

—Tom Waits

*She has gone to the other side but she cannot say
of what.*

—Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

*It's hard to know where you leave off and the
camera begins.*

—Minolta advertisement, 1976 (quoted by Susan
Sontag in *On Photography*)

*As soon as man acquired consciousness of himself,
he broke away from the natural world and made
himself another world inside himself . . . vast, ever-
moving throng, constantly breeding, intoxicated
with itself.*

—Octavio Paz

You observe a lot by watching.

—Yogi Berra

In the world of the jungle it is safer to be wrong and quick than to be right and slow.

—Freeman Dyson

By nightfall the headlines would be reporting devastation.

—Shirley Hazzard

A picture which is really alive should make the spectator feel ill.

—Renè Magritte

I have no friends, and you're one of them.

—Agnes Martin

Man, the sick animal, bears within him an appetite which can drive him mad.

—Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

I would rather think that organic life is an illness peculiar to our unlovely planet. It would be intolerable to believe that throughout the infinite universe there was nothing but eating and being eaten.

—Anatole France

Silence calls out, as do the kinds of voices that can be heard only when silence is present.

—Joy Harjo

For a little while I kept my mouth open so that the agitation would leave me through my mouth.

—Franz Kafka, *The Diaries*

We lived in our bodies as in a constant state of emergency. We wore them out trying to satisfy them.

—Rachel Cusk

The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress.

—U. S. Congress, Northwest Ordinance of 1787

All the images will disappear. . . . Everything will be erased in a second. The dictionary of words amassed between cradle and deathbed, eliminated. All there will be is silence and no words to say it. Nothing will come out of the open mouth, neither I not me In conversation around a holiday table, we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the vast anonymity of a distant generation.

—Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

Addendum:

There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.

The image-world bids to outlast us all.

Photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal.

Today everything exists to end up in a photograph.

Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art.

Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph.

Painting was handicapped from the start by being a fine art, with each object a unique handmade original.

In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence.

In America, the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it.

The news that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular.

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

6. Reading

Books meant nothing to me in the early part of my life. Now, in my later years, I have become somewhat of a bookworm. For me, reading is a lifeblood and a platonic ‘social network.’ I didn’t start reading fiction for personal enjoyment until I was in my mid-twenties—during the late 1970s—when I was out of college and living and working in Minneapolis. Before that, reading meant only one thing to me: studying to pass exams. And I didn’t start reading nonfiction books for ‘enjoyment’ until after I had moved to the West Coast when I was in my late-thirties. I hadn’t kept a single sentence of personal notes I’d taken over the years until I began reading books and essays on psychology and psychoanalytic theory around 1986. At that time, I started to save my reading notes, and this practice totally changed my outlook on ‘how to learn.’ I liked re-reading and reflecting on my personal notes so much that eventually I started circling back and taking notes on my notes. It’s always about self-analysis. That’s why I like this line by Richard Powers, ‘At the end, we all become edited copy.’ I am currently reading Judith Butler’s latest book, from 2024, *Who’s Afraid Of Gender?*, and Ross Benjamin’s 2023 translation of Franz Kafka’s *Diaries*; I am also re-reading a very challenging book titled *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* by Madan Sarup. For fiction right now—although I came to the party late—I am trudging my way through the six-volume autobiographical series called *My Struggle* by Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard.

Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph.

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

7. Coda: how to look at this website

I have been accused over and over again of being an intolerably judgy and bossy person—so I might as well go on ahead and make a strong suggestion here as to the ‘frame of mind’ the viewer should be in when clicking and scrolling through my ‘artist website.’

This will be obvious to some people, but not to everyone: when looking at the images on my website, *the viewer is consuming reproductions* of edited, digital photographs—*not works of art*. In other words, the viewer/user is having another experience with ‘the screen’ not ‘the arts.’ In terms of the politics of representation, the images on my website are what are critically known as ‘poor images’—they are corrupted copies of copies. With the implication that the originals are the ‘rich images.’ The originals are smug, standoffish, elitist; the reproductions participate in the popular-culture practice of sharing tricked-out images for online, hygienic consumption.

My personal opinion is that my work looks monstrous in reproduction. I like to paint because painting is a silent medium. But the reproductions are too loud, too gaudy—they are indefensible.

Thank you for listening.