

artists like robert irwin and vito acconci and dennis oppenheim and sol lewitt had stopped seeing themselves as the makers of any kinds of objects whether expressive or beautiful and were now thinking of themselves as workers at some kind of project in which any objects they might or might not produce stood only as partial results and this took them as he saw it further away from the traditional way of the artist and closer to the way of science and research for which they had to prepare themselves often in a similar way and i listened and i knew that some of this was probably true but i shook my head

look even if i prepare for my performances by studying or reading which i dont always do i do that because i feel like it and its part of my life and i dont see it as "research" i see myself involved in a discourse with some kind of material and with a particular audience that i dont know till i get there and with which i hope to enter into a dialogue that i also conduct with my material and myself so what im involved in is some kind of discourse which always when its real discourse is some kind of dialogue and bill nodded excitedly but that's what i had in mind

so i asked him how he got the idea to put these particular artists together in one show and he told me that before coming out to take over at santa barbara he had stopped off in omaha to see jim demetrios to get some advice from him because he'd spent so much time as the director in pasadena and had asked jim what do you think i should show there in santa barbara and demetrios said they're probably ready for anything now except the harrisons and the antims

## dialogue

i will explain something about this piece even while doing it i got stuck with the title and i dont resent it bill spurlock for reasons more or less intelligible to me but still surprising decided to announce this piece as a "dialogue" and put it in the program under that title which i might not have done but there it was in print in the program and i decided to regard it as i've often regarded titles before kind of gift because often when i'm going to do a piece somewhere hundreds of miles away someone with the responsibility of saying what i'm going to be doing which i've often neglected to say will put something down by way of a title which will give some idea of what he thinks it is im doing which is something i'm still learning about so when i saw the word "dialogue" printed in the program of events next to my name it formalized something i had been doing but had not thought about or not thought about quite enough so i started to think about it right then and i knew that i had never thought of myself as doing "monologues"

i mean i never thought of myself as standing up in front of a crowd of people and offering a chain of words impassively generated from somewhere in back of my mouth i ordinarily thought of myself as engaging with people in talk pieces and i did think of the

pieces as somehow dialogical in a way that is i never supposed that i was talking to people in such a way that they could easily or profitably talk back to me though they could but if they do it turns out usually not to be valuable for them there is

something in the structure of a discourse in a group situation that makes it impossible for people who are quite capable of talking well and perhaps producing significant works by talking themselves which nevertheless in this situation where they have come into someone elses terrain in which someone else has been thinking of moving leaves them unprepared to undertake the work of talking and this is reasonable enough because the one who comes there and has been thinking of talking is a kind of agent provocateur he is the one who comes bringing the troubles and has been preparing to unpack his pandoras box of them and leave them with you for your entertainment and most people wishing to be entertained or willing to be in the way that ideas are entertained or entertaining to be picked up interested amused or provoked most people let this provocateur go on for a while probably for as long as he provides sufficient entertainment or interest for you to let him go on which if he stops signals the end of the piece and you have to go out and seek your own entertainment somewhere else

which im sure you can do and if at some point you feel the need i assure you i wont be hurt if you do the point of this is though that in all real conversation in all the places where people talk at all and i assure you that all over the world despite the lack of strong ethnographic reports all over the world people talk and people talk in a way that leads to the construction of new things discovery of new things and to the articulation of things that people had never recognized before somewhere

right now on guam two people are talking or maybe three trying some of them maybe one or two of them to arrive at a new way of looking at something and at this moment in bonn someone is having a conversation with a policeman trying to reconstruct his understanding of something or maybe it is the policeman who is having the conversation with that person in a very civilized manner he is holding his

club behind his back and trying to persuade that person that it is worth while to wait and to listen a while without interrupting with his or her own personal considerations to what this policeman is trying to develop through saying

now i came here with a view to thinking about some of the situations provoked by this show of which i am a part because it is a part of the local environment with which i am familiar after all im not an expert on santa barbara and i didnt come here to talk to you about santa barbara it would have been foolish but the local environment of this exhibition is something i know something about and i was amused when i looked in the los angeles times as im often amused when i look in the newspapers and see a story about something i know something about and i read a review of this show now its not terribly important that the review of the show was friendly or unfriendly but the journalist whose name is wilson appeared to have a strong sense of what an exhibition of this sort should be like and the norms that could be expected of it he had so firm a grip on it that he was able to name a whole set of other artists who might have been included in the show as well and he drew a map in his mind of the show that would have included them which was by now a somewhat different show because it included them and he expressed his disappointment and irritation for it was mostly irritation in professional terms at the failure of the artists within the show to satisfy some kind of standards professional standards of coherency and completeness the objects on the walls had not yet all been hung the video had not yet been installed the performances had not yet taken place and the catalog was not yet available as it happened on the day that he chose to come the show had not yet opened and this too was professional journalism which requires a journalist to get his story in before his press deadline regardless of the condition of the events he is reporting on or the state of his information about them and his irritation appeared also to be directed toward a kind of amateurism in the concerns of these artists in areas they were not expert in questions of land or water use or of industrial injuries or public and private identity and the languages in which

these are and could be represented and he expressed none of this irritation very directly and precisely but by implication which was also professional journalism where it is part of the profession to assume that whatever you happen to have in front of you and however fortuitous your placement in back of it all you have to do if it is interesting is to report on what it looks like or feels like or goes by like from that angle without going into too much detail that might question the value of the angle you and your reader are looking from and the nature of your interest in it because the basic issue of being a professional journalist is to speak to things that you expect your public will be interested in and in a way that they approve of or in a way you can get them to approve of because of the way it is associated with other ways they approve of

but if you speak too precisely in too much detail you may find yourself losing your grip on what is to be approved of or disapproved of and losing your grip on your public as well which is largely an image built up out of some very large number of approvals and disapprovals and one of these approvals out of which the image of a public is built is an approval of the idea of the professional that is if there is such a thing as a public one thing you would expect it to approve of and have a firm grip on the notion of is the idea of the professional

and i thought to myself that would be an interesting idea to consider because after all im not here to defend this show but i had never thought of myself or my friends as professional artists i had never thought about being a professional artist at all you know people talk about being a professional artist and it sounds like a good idea and if you think about it maybe but how many people talk about being a professional poet? think its a good idea and would like to be one? what does it mean? hes a professional poet he makes ten thousand dollars a year writing poetry hes in the majors hes a major league poet hes an all star poet a world series poet whos a professional poet? rod mckuen? rod mckuen would be one way of looking at it and you see? the reason this is a dialogue is that i propose to have a dialogue with the ideas of professionalism

now if you take rod mckuen hes a kind of language superstar he uses language and music and a lot of people like it what he does with them if you number them and he lives by it makes records with words and he speaks them and sings them when there is music attached to them and hes certainly well known hes a professional in the sense that hes someone who gets paid for doing the things that hes a professional in and paid well enough to spend all of his working time doing this thing that hes a professional in

another way of looking at it being a professional the way people look at it is to consider that a professional is somebody who spends most of his or her life doing something and spends so much effort and energy doing it day in and day out doing it independently of the others for whom he may or may not also be doing it that he has developed another relationship to that material he is working at or with which is something like a calling the idea of the vocation this comes to mind as one thinks of a theological profession i had a friend who was a lutheran in those days there were lutherans and he went to a lutheran college and his family was religious in a sincere churchgoing kind of way and he got a scholarship because they expected he was going to be a minister and he went to school there and he was very dutiful and he was interested in the idea of god though he didnt believe in one and he was very concerned with ethics and morals with people and their values and there he was at the end of his second year in this college doing well studying history and psychology and philosophy it was wagner college out on staten island which was then a lutheran school and he went quite disturbed to the board there was a kind of examining board and he said look i know im doing well in my studies but they said why not and he said "i dont have a calling" and they said thats not the way to look at it you go on and get your degree you get a congregation and you start a family and the calling will come and he went back to his studies and he tried he tried he tried very hard and he

was philosophically very involved with the issues of religion he was involved with the idea of christ or rather with the idea of jesus and he was involved with the collision of the two in fact in his mind the collision of the idea of christ and the idea of jesus was the dialogue of christianity its basic problem framed as a dialogue and a severe one between a man called jesus and a god called the christ

and this is a paradox too a paradoxical figure of the son of god who is that god and a man who is also the son of god it is a paradox in the same way that the idea of a crucified god is a paradox it is easy to consider crucifying a man he has a body arms and legs wrists and ankles for the nails to go through but crucifying a god an all powerful all knowing and immortal being you can say it "a crucified god" it fits all right in your mouth but you can't quite think it theres no place for the nails to go its like an imaginary number "the square root of minus one" which sounds all right until you try to derive it from squaring any kind of number and when you've said it theres also no way you can extract its roots so its like a kind of miraculous creation this imaginary number this dying undying god who is man enough to cry out "my god my god why hast thou forsaken me" and god enough to leave behind an empty tomb and this was one of the things that troubled him the combination of jesus and christ and the way he couldn't extract its root and he was a passionately austere gaunt faced guy who had this on his mind and a suburban congregation and he was reading kierkegaard every day and despising himself and loving himself despising himself for his doubt and loving himself for his doubt and for despising himself for his doubt and despising himself for loving himself for his doubt in this spiritual labyrinth of american lutheranism in queens in 1950 where kierkegaard was very little help from denmark in the 1830s though he loved reading him just the same the way he worried and loved worrying and finally in the middle of his third year he said look im sorry i don't have a calling and im getting out and he went to another school where he studied

literature and then psychology and finally became a psychologist and paid them back the money spent for his education and he felt free of the profession that he had set out for himself but which he had not felt up to and that was a somewhat different kind of profession

now its interesting that following his critique of the profession he had a sense a very stringent sense of the profession because the bishop didn't feel that way about it he had been to speak with the bishop and the bishop didn't think that the profession required a calling the bishop thought he shouldn't worry so much and the bishop was not an idiot he was used to passionate young people with gaunt cheeks and burning dark eyes and walter was such a young man who the bishop figured had somewhat romanticized the notion of being a christian spiritual leader for a community and thought he would learn better in time that you dont lead a community out of your passionate conviction or anything else because a community doesn't want to be led certainly not into the problems of spirit in the world you do something else for there were two different views of what a minister should do and the bishop had one and walter the other walter thought a minister of god should address the religious spirit of the people and bring it to address itself to the world for which task he was not worthy and the bishop thought in middletown elizabeth new jersey would elizabeth want that could they bear it? have room for someone who would do that and what view would they have of him this guy who had a calling and was calling on them to respond to his calling what would happen in those days in the early 50s when people still talked about integration and tolerance you remember how they talked about tolerance which meant riding on buses with black folk or letting some "negroes" live in your neighborhood they had a different vocabulary then so supposing in those days that walter decided to marry a black girl which he might have done say because he found black girls especially attractive though this was in fact not the case because walter generally fell in love with girls who looked so much like himself

that they could have been his sister who he was a little in love with for what i think was the same reason but there are very many attractive black girls and i could imagine a tall slim black girl with long straight hair and high enough cheekbones and a wide enough mouth to look like his sister or a black jennifer jones so that he could have fallen in love with her and this could have happened just after he had received his appointment to a ministry in elizabeth new jersey where he was living in a parish of rather pleasant lutheran german and dutch people alongside of many more catholic german and italian and polish people all of whom probably liked and tolerated this handsome young intellectual and poetical minister until he married a beautiful young black woman partly as an act of brotherly love and partly as an act of christian love that is his human physical love for this beautiful black girl and his love for his black fellows sort of merged in his love for rebecca the black girl and he married her

how long would he have stayed on as religious adviser to this lower middle class protestant community in elizabeth new jersey

probably not long and the bishop was perfectly aware of this that this could happen if walter chose to be this kind of minister with a calling in that place and that it would mean trouble nor was that the only kind of trouble a minister with a calling could bring

i mean walter could have decided to let the korean war become an issue of his ministry which he would discuss with his congregation most of whom were working in factories enjoying the prosperity provided during that war and supposing he took an unpopular view about the christianity of that war or simply started a discourse about what it was christian for the united states to do in asia

now its possible he might have concluded that it was very christian to prevent the communists from destroying the minds of the people of asia and enslaving their souls but once he embarked on that discourse he might have come to the conclusion that the united states government wasnt terribly interested in saving the minds and souls of the people of asia so he might have grown hostile to the american

role in korea and preached from his pulpit against our involvement in that war how long would he have lasted then?

probably not too long and most certainly the lutheran council of elders would have hoped fervently for him not to discuss it in fact they would have probably hoped fervently for a minister who was not too much like jesus he had not had a good career and he wound up on a crucifix and it is not the aim of the ministry to wind up on a crucifix its not professional there is no profession in being crucified because one of the things about being a professional is you assume there is a body of doctrine that can be taught and learned that you can have a tradition and it is not good to have a tradition that puts itself to an end you dont hope to educate people to do this and say the first step is here this is the next and then you can look forward finally to that which is your end they dont intend to teach that in the church as a profession because thats intended to create chaos which no professional wants and the intention of jesus was to provoke chaos it was not to produce peace on earth and the continuity of life jesus said i bring not peace but a sword and he meant it he got himself crucified in order to cause a great deal of trouble it was supposed to put an end to an untenable world as i remember which is why he sent his apostles around to say that "the end of the world is at hand" and he meant right away im going to produce it by getting myself crucified

now as i said thats not a professional position because a profession assumes a world that you want to continue and behave more or less appropriately within so i assume then that the ministry is not a good example of professionalism either and ive thought about this term for a while and i wonder what is it about this term

you talk about a professional a lawyer say a lawyer is an example of a professional in our society he has a certain kind of dedication to the law presumably and a certain kind of responsibility to his client and he has a client who may wish to evade the punishment of the law or to punish other people with the law someone hes against so a lawyers profession is complex he must serve his client

and he must serve the law      and this can become an interesting dialectic      like being a christian      because in being a christian you have to serve god and man which may result in a collision between your client and the order of law      which we can imagine as a system derived from principles of justice or perhaps phrased more modestly      principles of equity in principle you're an officer of the court      the guardian of the law but you get paid by your client      who wants to beat a rap

if you're the prosecuting attorney you have to enforce the law      which means in practice      to obtain convictions      and you're paid by the state to bring people before the court and obtain convictions and you have the problem of bringing to court only those cases you can win when you prosecute them      because if you don't convict the people you prosecute the state will have spent a great deal of money for nothing      so that it's a very bad business to take people to court knowing they're guilty and doubting you can prove it to a jury      so you won't take anyone to court if you don't think you can win

and so there is a professional system of law      the lawyer will only do what the system will allow him to do well      what will turn out well for him      and the prosecuting attorney and the judge will do what turns out well for them      the legal system of america is interesting and you know i'm not suggesting we should cry about these things no system in the world was ever terrific      but it seems to me worth describing so that we can see what we've got      and it seems to me the system we have is the medieval one of the hired champion

you know a lady would be accused of dishonorable conduct and shed get a knight to defend her honor      he'd get a horse put on armor and ride out to defend her against the enemy      the champion of her accuser      who in this case may be the state whose hired champion is the prosecuting attorney with whom you will contend in front of a jury who will assign victory according to rules interpreted for them by the judge

now the prosecuting attorney is on his horse he has his lance which may be the particular law he wishes to stick you with      and if you're the defending attorney you have your horse and your shield with

which you hope to deflect or crush his lance and perhaps unseat him      and you're the hired defender of the defendant who has let us say been accused      perhaps unfairly      of funneling funds out of a bank of which he happens to be president imagine this man      a san diego entrepreneur      a business man with a whole chain of enterprises      a cab company a race track a construction company      to which he provides funds from his bank      by means of loans      poorly secured or unsecured loans      or maybe even loans on the security of loans you have already provided but don't look like loans because of the artistic way in which the businesses assets have been represented      and let us suppose this is a generous man who also provides loans to friends and friends of friends who have various enterprises glamorous enterprises that also need money like country clubs where celebrated republicans and shadowy underworld figures come and play golf and tennis cheerfully together      and you have this bon vivant generous life sponsoring councilmen and congressmen and enjoying friends and relatives and children      and growing old gracefully      in the pacific climate of san diego      where you have become a pillar of society      and then something happens to your bank

unfriendly auditors examine critically your transactions and the news leaks out in your home town      where your once friendly creditors and depositors become suspicious      there is a panic      the bank goes into receivership      you are investigated for the way you've been handling these funds      and it is decided you should be brought to trial      now you're an old man and want to spend your declining years sitting by your marina      playing with your nephews and grandchildren      enjoying the company of your friends and your relatives over drinks on the terrace in the long san diego sunset and you're very tired      so you go out and hire a champion

or not one      a whole law firm of champions not so much to defend you      because as you know you're a man in your late sixties with maybe ten years to live or perhaps twelve      and you still have a lot of money in your various accounts and businesses that can be touched by this investigation of your bank      and you figure how long have i got to live how

long can i pay these lawyers these professionals to work at defending me because as long as theyre working i am free to go where i will to do what i want and enjoy the life of an honored old man so what do they do these professionals when you hire them do they rush out to defend your conjectural innocence? no theyre professionals

they begin to inspect the system of law in a special way according to the ancient tradition of gematria which is a system for associating definite values with the letters of the law that make up its text this is a kind of concrete poetic tradition that sees the meaning of the law its justice in the precise letter of the law rather than in its vague spirit and surely enough there will be in any system of law and the procedures for implementing it various specific subheadings designated by "a" "b" or "c" or their corresponding numbers detailed instructions governing the selection of judges and juries convening of sessions submission of briefs filing of writs and the order and manner in which these must be done and associated with each a certain period of time allowing for their preparation revision and so forth and there are numerous stipulations protecting the rights of defendants who may be ill temporarily hampered and generally unable to do these things that may protect their rights before the law and all of these lettered and enumerated subclauses of the law which have been designed to protect the rights of such entrapped encumbered and temporarily hampered people and their advocates who may have perfectly good excuses for not getting to court will be invoked to protect this old man from a confrontation with the champion of the state before a jury and a judge and youve delayed this confrontation for something like seven years without even resorting to appeals to higher courts to judge the procedures of the lower courts when the old man dies surrounded by his friends and loved ones receives a grand funeral which is reported by the press in a respectful article accompanied by an old photograph recalling the distinction of earlier sunnier and palmer times so this pillar of society dies and never gets to trial and then youve been the lawyer youve been basically a good professional well paid and youve done your job youve served your client and the law by the system of

gematria that is by the letter of the law youve done a very good job yet thats not exactly i think what this journalist had in mind and found missing here i dont think thats what one would accuse an artist of lacking letter-of-the-law-hood how would it apply? what sort of legalist professionalism would you look for in an art that you wanted to be professional? someone who undertook peculiar contractual disputes with the registrar of a museum they would sign papers with the registrar applying to the treatment of their works that were to go on exhibit and they would specify certain details for treatment and situation of their work in such a way that it might lead to litigation if their instructions were not carried out you wouldnt want that

besides there is another aspect of the professional that we all see as professional we think of someone who has studied a great deal is much better at what he does than anybody can usually expect to be and is well rewarded for what he does yet a plumber studies hard too is generally much more competent at what he does than you can conceive of being and nobody says that a plumber is a professional i dont know why but they dont on the other hand they say a baseball player is a professional everyone knows there is a professional baseball player and an amateur but you dont say theres a professional lover and look approvingly at that person who may be a gigolo or a courtesan and you dont turn around and say scornfully of some passing lady who may be somebodys lover shes an amateur because in love you dont want professionalism which you look at as some kind of responsible treatment of some body of knowledge or some systematic application of some comprehensive group of practices to be handed down and handled responsibly and there are handbooks of sexuality manuals to learn from systematically as there are for everything else in this literate culture that tell you complete with diagrams how to pleasure your partner and yourself in a systematic way contemplating each possible orifice and all erogenous zones sequentially or simultaneously and all possible images of pleasure to each of you

short of the destruction of the two of you or the seven of you or whatever kind of group it may please you to imagine but still you would not speak of this approvingly as professionalism you still look down on the professional lover but you dont look down on the professional ballplayer theres a professional hes a real professional i've even heard myself say "hes a professional" in clear tones of approval and i suppose i imagine someone with a passionate commitment and an exorbitant ability verging on the superbia and sometimes this is the case

when i was a kid and first got into baseball i was about eight or nine and i lived in new york in brooklyn and a young ballplayer had just come up with the dodgers he was a young outfielder named pete reiser now you may never have heard his name but it was the first time i ever went to a real baseball game and it was out in ebbets field in that part of flatbush where they have condominiums now and it was a small old ballpark shabby and worn short at the right field fence with a high screen and a banked base below the wall and a short left field fence deep only at center and there was this young outfielder almost a rookie flanked by two old slow ones in right field and left dixie walker who was slow but smart and a billiard master playing caroms off the wall and throwing out everyone at second and medwick in left who was just slow but a slugger and the two of them flanking this kid who was neither big nor tall but moved like a flame

you know how there are some guys who run like they're floating but they're flying and there are others just as fast who look like they're scrambling and then there are some others who when they move somehow send out a signal like a charge moving along a wire he was one of those seemed that everything that came off his bat was a line drive that all centerfield half of right and half of left from ten feet behind second base to the wall was his alley and he patrolled all of it full speed diving for the short ones and leaping for the ones at the wall now this was my first baseball game and id never seen anything like this guy before but i've seen an awful lot of baseball games since and

or the seven of games and the players would play lots of different ways some pitchers would pitch with just the right amount of a move to get the ball where they wanted it hit some hitters would swing with an easy level move some would wind up like a windmill and the ball would come out of a mad tangle of arms and legs ive seen all kinds of players some with wonderful easy ways others with wild eccentric ways and often they were great at what they did but it was always as if they had some clear idea of effort how much they were spending how much if any they were holding in reserve but this kid was different it was as if he had no consciousness left over that wasn't in his swing or his stride it was as if his mind itself was a kind of line drive and that year 1941 which was his first full year in the majors he went on to win the batting championship and the dodgers won the pennant and the next year he was if anything better more concentrated more intense and his team was in the heat of the pennant race fighting it out with the cardinals in midseason in st louis reiser was batting .370 and it was a tight game a pitching duel between the two aces of their staffs mort cooper and whitlow wyatt and i was sitting on the porch of 490 east fourth street with henry and lucille and her sister and we were sitting tensely listening to this nothing-to-nothing pitching duel when according to red barber wyatt threw a fastball to walker cooper who hit a long drive to center and we could see it the ball going and reiser going after it looking over his shoulder and flying and as the announcer was talking i could see it happening at full speed one arm raised leaping and crashing into the wall at the bottom of which he crumpled and did not get up they carried him off the field with a fractured skull and he came back later that year and his batting tailed off he wasn't hitting .370 anymore because its hard to hit when you see two baseballs instead of one or a fuzzy outline instead of the hard contour of the baseball so he wound up the season at about .309 which was still pretty good but not the same thing and probably not good enough for this kid who got drafted in the meantime for the world war and when he came back from the war he started a new thing stealing bases and he didn't just steal bases

he made a specialty out of stealing home if somehow he would get to third and his team needed the run and maybe had a weak hitter up at the plate the pitcher would start his windup and reiser would break for the plate six seven times that season he had the pitchers crazy the fans mad with excitement every time he got on base it would build as he'd get advanced from first to second to third and they'd all be waiting for it and suddenly he'd streak for the plate in spite of the fact that that's where the pitcher was throwing the ball and he knew reiser might go and the catcher would be preparing to block him off and usually weighed forty five pounds more and was covered with pads and still he'd slide in around him or over him or just barreling through him to score and he was being reiser again

till one time while sliding his spikes caught under a knee pad or something and his ankle broke and he had to be helped off the field again but he came back once more and hobbled around on his one good leg and one bad and hit near three hundred and played all right anyway this kamikaze professional of baseball whose career lasted seven or eight years instead of fifteen or eighteen which would have gotten him into the hall of fame if he had been a true professional and there's nobody in the hall of fame who played baseball like that because if they played baseball like that they wouldn't have survived long enough to get into the hall of fame this is a kind of baseball playing like crucifixion

it is not really playing the game professionally to impale yourself on its wall it seems to me that he was playing the game wonderfully peculiarly but it was not professional reiser was not a professional apparently or he was apparently a professional but not really professional because he didn't play the right way and now he's not in the hall of fame so if you think about it you don't want to advocate that way for anybody as professional you know im a professional art critic i guess if anybody's a professional art critic i guess im a professional art critic i used to get paid for being a professional art critic i wrote art criticism for art magazines for magazines that paid me and magazines that didn't i must be a professional art critic

now what is a professional art critic supposed to do well there are several fantasies of what an art critic should do the most popular one is that he should tell people what art works are good and what art works are bad or which ones are better and which worse and this is the idea that you're a professional piece of litmus paper you turn blue when you see a good one you go up to an art work it turns you blue and you say "that's a good one" you don't even have to say it everybody sees you turn blue and they know it's a good one that's what i would call the clement greenberg style of art criticism then you develop a prose rap that makes it seem plausible that you've turned blue for sufficient reason but basically it comes down to the idea that you should turn blue in front of a good one and this capability is based essentially on the chemicals that have been embedded in your paper and when you turn blue you've seen one so people pay you to turn blue and this makes you a professional critic now that's not exactly what i had in mind as being a professional critic being a professional critic i suppose always means that you get paid for it but people get paid for many things in this culture some of which are unspeakable so that hardly gets us anywhere but what we have in mind by considering whether they get paid for it is not whether they make money at it but whether considering the state of this society they can afford to do it full time whatever that may mean because it doesn't have to mean they spend all their waking time doing it most of their time doing it it merely means that we think they spend much of their serious time therefore working time doing it but doing what?

considering art looking at it listening to it talking about it thinking about it maybe in such a way that the doing of it overruns some of the frontiers of the rest of your life as well maybe those are professionals but what profession is it critic is a poor term maybe we should get rid of it there are art thinkers regards lovers are those professionals? maybe they're amateurs maybe the word amateur has to be rehabilitated maybe we need to restore it with the memory that an amateur is a lover someone who loves *amateur* its even more

obvious in german      *liebhaber*      someone who has love for something

now at one time the term professional split off from the amateur because the word amateur was once a noble term it signified someone distinguished by a passion for something and a knowledge of it      an amateur of music was someone who was distinguished by his passion for music      cultivated in his knowledge of it and probably quite capable in performance of it      and this passion and cultivation was admired all the more because it was not professional      because it was free and not contingent upon the circumstances or manner of reward while professionalism was dependent and contingent a kind of gigolo musician or critic

maybe what we need is an amateur artist      an amateur art but it doesnt work so neatly this division of professional and amateur whichever way you cut it because i also had this image of this devotion of a professional to some thing      some domain and i know weve all had it and what im dialoguing with you is the history of the word as i grew up with it as you did more than with william wilson and his review because there is more to it than that

i once worked with a guy who was a professional at something else      we worked together as mechanic technicians troubleshooters in a factory but he was a gambler by profession

now what does that mean "by profession"      it means he gambled on horses only and systematically      his name was carmine and he was a wiry guy a cool grey eyed italian with steel rimmed glasses who kept to himself a lot and protected his privacy amiably most of the time unless he got pushed      which happened just once that i saw it      a foreman kept bugging him while he was working over a machine      kept coming back and bugging him repeatedly three or four times that i noticed from the other side of the floor      and each time more excited and louder      waving his arms and shouting to be heard over the noise till carmine suddenly slapped him alongside the head with a wrench and it was over like that

but we used to eat lunch together or supper because we worked the graveyard shift for a long time together and we used to go down to the deserted lower floor and sit all alone at one of the long white tables in this big empty hall thats where i learned about his profession carmine was a skilled mechanic      originally an engineer      but hed given that up to follow his gambling career      and now hed get work as some kind of skilled technician and stick with it till he built up a stake      two or three thousand dollars      and usually around winter hed go south to work at his profession      which was an elaborate business involving a more and more comprehensive system that he was still experimenting with and developing as long as i knew him because      as he explained it betting the horses was not like other kinds of gambling say roulette or cards      because though there was luck in all of them      and the idea was to minimize its effect over the long run      at the track there was much more information to do it with and more privacy in the way you went about it      in fact there was so much information you had to figure out what information to use and how to use it      so it was more like a science and what you needed most of all was a system to keep track of all the variables and to keep cool while using it

now im not an expert on horse racing      about which all i really know is that there are eight or nine horses in a race or thirty six legs out of which youve got to pick the first four      the rest is only what i remember from what carmine told me as he saw it there were four basic variables      the horse the race the handlers and the crowd      and there was lots of information on all of them if you knew how to obtain it      the easiest to obtain concerned the horse      most of it was in "the racing form"      which came out every night before the races and anyone who was serious studied it carefully before going to the track      it gave you the horses performances in other races      the length of the race      the class      the horses speeds against other horses you could also check against still others      their exercise times the weights they carried      the post position the jockeys the stables the trainers      and so on

if you read this carefully you could tell whether some particular horse was a sprinter good at 6 furlongs only and only if it got a good break at the start or whether it was better at a mile or more because it finished strong and the way it liked to run horses run better on wet tracks than others apparently some on the rail some cant stand a crowd and like the outside some need blinkers because theyre shy others like to see the competition all of this and lots more is right there in the form but youve got to know how to use it and when

thats where the handlers come in the owner the trainers the jockey without being exactly what track men would call dishonest they dont always run their horses singlemindedly for a win sometimes a trainer will put his horse in just for a "legging-up" to get him ready for another race thats coming in a week or two so you have to know whats likely to be coming or maybe its a claiming race and the trainer runs him against horses of a higher class he has no chance of beating but hes just there to lose and get a poorer record so no one will want to claim him at the price or hes running him in his own class but "stiff" to reduce his handicap the weight he carries when he runs and let the odds build up against him to 8 or 10 to one or higher so that theres a nice profit in betting him and you cant learn all of this from the racing form though you can learn parts of it from there the history and some more from the paddock where the trainer goes to give his last instructions to the jockey which you watch and try to read and of course you have to read the jockey too his record and the way he rides when theres money on the line and when theres not and much more besides and then there are the races the prices the distance the type stake or handicap or claiming and much more that he told me but ive forgotten but for carmine the last and most important variable is the crowd against whom youre betting most of whom are most often wrong but you have to know how wrong because its their opinion that will make up the betting odds so no matter how bad a horse is if they like it it will be a favorite by starting time or rather

by the time the trackmen lock the betting machines and if they like a horse that you like they may bring the odds on it so far down its not worth your betting at say less than 2-1 because in the long run even if youre very good at picking winners you probably wont pick them much better than one time in three because there are just too many accidents that can happen to screw you up like your horse slipping at the starting gate or getting locked in a crowd when hes trying to make his move or just about anything else and if you pick them one in three you have to have higher odds than 2-1 to do better than break even so youll want to look for odds of 3 or 4 or 5 to 1 or somewhat better if you can because what youre looking for is some kind of overlay which means a horse you know should go off at 7-5 thats finally running in his own class at a weight he can carry at odds of 4-1 or much better and you wont bet unless you get odds like that so you try to learn all you can about racing folklore and watch to see how much the crowds betting bears it out for example carmine told me how the last race of the day is always supposed to favor a long shot and there are several probable reasons for this though in the long run this doesnt matter so much as that horseplayers believe it and it may or may not be true but in any case most bettors spend all day at the track losing money over seven or eight races betting essentially as wisely as they can but at the end of the day they want to go home winning or even and if they dont raise their level of betting they need to win at much higher odds say 10 or 15 to 1 if they're going to recoup eighty lost dollars on one ten dollar bet and there are the regulars who figure this ninth race is what they call a "jockeys race" all day long the jockeys have been sitting in the jockey room isolated from the rest of the world and waiting for their mounts and theyve been talking and reading and waiting and according to folklore by the time the race comes around two or three of them have finally come to a compact according to which two riders with sprinters will get out fast from the gate and one will set a murderous pace which the other will take over when the first one fades so that they can completely wear out a front running favorite that will battle them for the lead till the inconspicuously good late-running long

shot their third horse comes out fresh from the pack to take it all in the stretch and they all cash in on the pot

may occasionally happen because also according to folklore which is sometimes quite accurate at the end of the day the track officials are not so sharp or anyway eager to prevent marginal practices and dont mind having some long shots come up with a win and as my friend was careful to point out according to his statistics this was sometimes true because a slightly higher percentage of longshots proved to be winners in the ninth race than in all the others but what was more important was that the players believed this and their betting reflected their belief which was more intense than the number of successful outcomes would warrant so that far more money was bet on longshots than their chances of winning deserved while strong horses with more obvious chances did not get bet as much and horses that deserved to go into the ninth race with odds as low as 8 to 5 or 2 to 1 could go off at 6 or 7 to 1 a situation which if you inspected carefully would give you the overlay you were looking for

so carmine almost never failed to bet the last race of each day in which according to his records he was a long run winner and proved his point "if you're a professional you gotta bet against the crowd because they're always some part wrong" and this part of it the betting required comprehensive records and careful computations of odds and outcomes which carmine kept very carefully because he was always trying to refine his betting strategies with hedges and straddles and it was back in the fifties before the heyday of minicomputers so he used to enter all the figures in pencil in a little notebook on the spot when he was at the track calculating what he had to by hand and going back over all of it with a calculator in his room making the necessary changes in ink each night and he had hundreds of these little liver colored notebooks filled with figures and he said dozens of big charts he synthesized them on at home now i knew carmine over about a two year period and he was one of these guys who could always get a job with some outfit that needed a technically competent person at

mechanical or electrical things he would have a cheap furnished room somewhere near the plant with a sink a bed a dresser and a table into which hed sneak a small electric stove with a couple of burners so he could make coffee and eggs for breakfast grilled cheese for dinner and he used to come to work with a thermos of coffee and a bag of celery and carrots for lunch he always wore the same clothes always clean and neatly pressed a worn tweed jacket greenish gabardine slacks a blue and white striped shirt with a dark tie a khaki trench-type raincoat when it was cold and immaculately shined old pointy black shoes and one thing he always liked about these jobs was the uniform they gave you to wear at work because they took care of it and it helped to save your clothes and all this time he would be saving nearly all his money and then suddenly hed quit and disappear for six or nine months or a year and then hed be back and the company would be glad to have him because he was such a good mechanic now what he did when he went away usually in the winter was go down south to florida where the horses were running at hialeah and he would work his way north from track to track from hialeah to narragansett following the races the way a naturalist might follow the opening of buds in spring and he would go as long as his stake held out and then hed take another job figuring he started out with three four thousand dollars and he had to live for six or nine months while he followed the races and he sometimes lived much better then you could calculate he made some profit at the track scientifically as he did maybe three or four thousand more but not enough to let him keep at it all the time because after six or nine months and sometimes a year his stake would erode and with nearly all his money gone hed have to go back to some factory to build up a stake again now he was a sort of professional he was like a lot of artists i know some artists can get by making art works for a while and then their way of getting by falls apart and they have to take a job to keep things together and no one says an artist is not an artist when hes working for a living at being a carpenter say if an artist takes a job as a go-go dancer lets say shes a go-go

dancer six months of the year you dont say shes not an artist  
not if shes working on art all that time or maybe thinking  
about it when shes simply not too tired from all that dancing  
which may make this seem a little different

you probably would  
say that carmine was a race track professional only when he was  
working the track that otherwise he was just storing up  
resources for going back even though you could consider all  
the planning and analysis he was doing each night part of his  
profession

still if he was a professional at it his  
professionalism was sustained it was supported somebody  
was putting him through college so to speak the bubble  
gum business frost appliances raytheon wherever  
he worked

still he was what i would ordinarily call a professional  
working day and night at his system to make it as perfect as  
possible and he was well aware that he was far from  
achieving all that he wanted in the way of perfection but he  
was working at it with dedication getting better and better  
and maybe if he had started with a bigger stake ten or  
twenty thousand dollars instead of three or four he might even  
have been able to carry it off anyway at the state of betting  
refinement he had already achieved because hed have been  
able to withstand the periodic fluctuation of all the random  
variables

still if he made anything from three to eight thousand  
dollars a year back then over a nine month period  
youd have to say he was making at least as much money  
from his art as most artists ive ever known and then he was  
always looking to perfect himself to find the right way  
so that makes him from several points of view a professional

another friend who was never looking to develop or perfect  
himself who was what youd have to call a professional  
he was a professional hustler he was the kind of guy who  
won money doing all sorts of things just a bit better than anybody  
he was betting against hed always be getting into situations out  
on the tennis courts where someone would be missing a

partner and hed spot them and he might have been practicing  
against the handball courts looking awful as usual  
wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and basketball sneakers  
and hed look  
awkward making foolish backhands and the guy hed approach  
would be immaculate in new tennis whites new tennis shoes  
and snowy woolen socks and this guy would disdain to play  
him and yannos that was his name would tease him and  
bug him to play while the guy waited for his late coming partner  
till finally my friend would offer to bet him hed take four  
games out of any set and the guy would be offended and  
take him up on it for ten bucks at even money and theyd play  
and the guy

would look great hed have a beautifully formed first serve  
that would leap high in the air though without much spin  
and yannos would barely return it to midcourt from which  
the guy would drive deep to his backhand so my friend could  
just get there in time to chip a cheap lob that luckily landed on  
the baseline and the game would go on like this the guy in  
the tennis whites with the classic game with flat forehands  
and backhands and the power serve driving from corner to  
corner and yannos stumbling and struggling tipping weak  
little drop shots or looping soft forehands and lobs barely  
and luckily getting the ball back most of the time till the set  
would be over and the other guy won easily over my friend whod  
somehow squeaked out four games and his bet

which inevitably  
made the other guy angry and this time hed challenge my friend  
to another set which would be at much higher stakes this  
time on a plain win but the guy would offer him odds of  
three or four to one because my friend was such a stumblebum  
and somehow it would happen all over again the guy in  
the whites with classic play and the ragged jeans with chip  
shots and slices and top spins with average speed serves that  
cheap drop shots over the net with average speed serves that  
just found the corners and skidded when they came off the ground  
and when it was over my friend would be lucky again and  
squeak out a win 8 games to 6 or 9 games to 7 which everyone  
watching would agree he didnt deserve

and he could do this all  
because he  
day and it was sort of ugly looking tennis

never followed through on a shot instead of taking that nice little half step and hitch that lets you come into the ball neatly below the waist on a forehand he would reach out any which way and seem to lunge at it awkwardly off the wrong foot from wherever he happened to be standing and he never went up on his toe for a serve he just tossed the ball up and cuffed it off the side of the stringing in a serve that made everyone wince as it barely came up any which way off the ground so that even girls would bet against him and he was the same at ping pong and handball and pool

he was appalling at pool could only sink the simplest shot in a direct way if it was a hanger and the cueball was right on line with it otherwise he was just lucky hed have a slightly skewed angle to a 6 ball at a center pocket and thered be two balls in a direct line to the 6 but instead of taking a simple bankshot he would dumbly shoot into the blocking 2 and 7 and somehow they would split the 7 would roll away clipping the 6 which would somehow straggle into the center pocket while if he needed it the cueball would slowly trail the 2 till it finally dropped into the other corner

and he was a professional in bad taste all of his moves were appalling hed always manage to dig a cue into the felt of the table drop a racket now and then fall down but somehow i never saw him lose

now i dont mean to say by this he was a great tennis player or pool player or ping pong player he wasnt but he always played well enough to win though he always looked bad enough to lose and part of his skill of course meant finding someone who looked good had all the right moves was a stylist someone who placed such a high value on doing things in a certain kind of way that he was likely to forget what he was supposed to be doing in that stylish way

so my friend was a professional in being just good enough and no better and he made a living at it a reasonable living not like a tournament player he was a local professional and supported himself in this way at tennis and pool and poker and bridge and he supported himself pretty well with intelligence and

hard work because it took him a lot of industry to make his ten or twelve thousand dollars a year which is probably what a junior or middle management figure in a business might have made back then and he used all his ingenuity to do it to this day he lives in gardenia california where hes a regular at the poker tables moving around the lower and middle stake games and sometimes working up to the big ones losing for a while and beginning again and hes working at this all the time so hes a thoroughgoing professional who has none of the right moves and all of the wrong ones

now i have never gotten into this image of being a professional when i wanted to be a professional smoker except once at me but youre all successful smokers and youre all professional everybody who smokes is a professional at it you just dont remember how hard it was to achieve mastery but when i was a kid of fifteen or sixteen i went to this high school an engineering school near the brooklyn academy of music and i used to take the train to pacific street or atlantic avenue and while i was hurrying along to get to school on time which was on fulton street id be hurrying along and id see these guys high school kids too but older wiser idly coolly in the portico of the williamsburgh savings bank leaning negligently against the posters of the brooklyn academy of music gracefully smoking and though you could get detention slips for coming late to school these guys didnt look worried about a thing like that and if you were an insider on the football team or in the school government you never got detention slips anyway and i felt that i could be one like that a smoker so i bought a pack of cigarettes and

i tried now i had a very good idea of the type of smoker i was going to be a continental type so i went to a downtown tobacco shop and bought a pack of gauloises and practiced at night and if you dont remember it takes a lot of practice just to open up the pack in a professional way because you have to break the cellophane and get past the tin foil in two smooth moves with everybody watching and still make sure they can tell its gauloises youre smoking and the cigarettes are all packed tight together so you have to jar one loose by knocking the pack

against the back of your other hand or fish it out with two fingernails then get it smoothly to your mouth all the time you're concentrating on looking like jean gabin on a marseilles street corner

so i used to open up the pack at home just to avoid these problems and practice with an open pack in front of a mirror flicking the cigarette up in the pack and either moving it directly to my mouth or bringing it out between thumb and forefinger and then going back to holding it between the two middle fingers the way gabin would have

and standing there in the winter on the windy street it was a trick just to get your cigarette lighted that counted most if you could do it on the first try by cupping one hand against the wind and striking the match with the other and once it was in your mouth you had to keep it hanging there from your lower lip all the time you were talking which you managed by slightly wetting the paper so it stuck and this was particularly effective when you were talking french but mostly we were talking english which seemed to make this harder

so there was another style of professional smoking an american a western style cowboy or lumberjack which seemed to suppose you were smoking in a windstorm and which didn't require you to keep smoking while talking because in this style you didn't do very much talking mostly you kept your mouth shut and in this style you fished out your cigarette once again between rounded forefinger and thumb somehow rotated it downward over your fingers so that it wound up between your middle fingers but with the lit part inwards toward your palm where you kept it sheltered from the wind and there was a style of lighting up that went along with this method you held the pack of matches in your left hand and the match you were striking head inward between the middle two fingers of your right hand which you moved along the striking surface while pressing down the matchhead with your thumb so that if you were good at it you had your light sheltered in the cup of both your hands and if you were clumsy you would burn your palm and i know all this because i was a failure at it at professional

representational smoking and i gave it up but not right away and not completely because at first i turned to a more abstract form pipe smoking

you see toward the end of high school i got interesting in painting abstract painting it was at the end of the forties and the abstract expressionists after years of being around were first becoming visible to the outside world and i worked my way through that going to museums and galleries staring hard at paintings and it was the time of the color field painters then reinhardt and newman and rothko and for a while it was a weakness of mine i developed a fondness for the work of mark rothko you know many people have a weakness for the work of mark rothko first it has an opulent colorful look and then somehow it seems a meditative reflective work in the sense that it creates a kind of atmosphere of meditation and reflection with colors on canvas and i was attracted to it so you can see how i decided to become the mark rothko of smoking what i thought to do was to create a meditative reflective atmosphere in the air among people by smoking

you see i would light my pipe in the middle of a conversation in which people were animatedly and heatedly considering particular things and as i would light up a certain calm would be introduced now i could do this in varying degrees and with great subtlety and refinement even before i was really smoking because there is a lot to do in smoking a pipe you have to take the pipe out of your pocket the tobacco in this little pouch and then you have to get the tobacco into the pipe get rid of the pouch and get ready to light and you have this little tool with lots of small blades and spoons for scooping out old tobacco and scraping the bowl and tamping in the new tobacco which you must not pack too tight to let the air circulate and must pack tightly enough to ensure a slow continuous burn so that you must do it just right and all of this takes time while you're in the midst of this conversation which you've begun to affect long before anyone's seen the match so i bought myself a pipe of a

meditative sort with a modestly curved stem and prepared to become a meditative rothko smoker which i would do by producing this calm among people by creating a reflective and spiritual atmosphere at strategic moments i would puff on the pipe gently emitting a faint curl a subtle curl of bluish smoke the color was exquisite it was a greyish blue very close to white and articulated in regular recurring faint lines at the whorls

and i found that i could control this color so that if you looked at the smoke for a while in this hurly burly world where we are all busily concerned with things like politics or women or men if you happen to be a woman and someone in the midst of all this anxiety and passionate interest stands there and releases a small cloud of bluish smoke eyes begin to follow it unwillingly diverted from the frantic pursuits of the everyday and they are brought into a realm of pure spirit where they seek after other values refined subtle relating to a domain of pure color which somehow articulates a complex and elusive space as the smoke diffuses gently into the atmosphere

especially if you use the right tobacco because there are some tobaccos that will yield a denser darker coloration and some that produce an almost white effect as of clouds particularly if you're an inept smoker like me and your saliva gets into the stem and the tobacco steams a little and i liked to do this and i found i could moderate quarrels with minute gestures people might be arguing and angry and you could take the pipe out of your mouth and poised the stem gently in the air perhaps directing it slightly toward them and pausing before it reached them you'd find that people would often slow in their talking and even stop their eyes helplessly turning toward your upheld pipe stem you'd be surprised how it was able to create a virtual demenil chapel around you and it was much cheaper now the thing about this love for abstraction was that it didn't last long in me i got tired of it though it was certainly effective at what it did though maybe that was not enough or very much still it was an art form of a kind this pipe smoking it was nonobjective color field atmospheric smoking

and i failed in it as a professional through lack of interest and i turned to another way of working or returned to it really because i had always been interested in language in peoples transactions with it in talking as i had been interested in peoples transactions with the silences i created with my pipe but now i was less interested in transactions with silences than in transactions with language

i suppose i was always a kind of conceptual poet and as a poet i was interested in two quite different kinds of things narratives and words narratives are a fundamental part of peoples talking they are ways of representing in language the unfolding of events and something else because a representation of the unfolding of events may be merely an account i went to the store i selected a pipe a pouch a pouch some matches and a pack of gauloises i paid for my purchases and came to the museum that's an account not a narrative because i had no need for one a narrative is something more it is an attempt to bring the present to the past and let that past unfold there as the present between the two of you listener and teller as it is unfolding it takes an effort and a need and i had no need for it just now i had nothing to explain about my life in the tobacco shop but if i had the need to present you with my otherwise inexplicable sense of what happened there i would have told you a story as you might have told one if you needed to and wanted to as you probably have needed and wanted to many times before so i was and still am interested in narratives because they're fundamental parts of human transactions in which people try to exchange realities or virtualities words are not like that for one thing no one talks them though we may seem to when we say "match?" which is spoken with a little tune or a gesture that tells someone we are requesting them to please give us one or asking if they'd like to have one no we speak in utterances not even sentences and we can analyze

them into their parts into sentences and phrases and even words which we do intuitively most likely because we have to learn to speak and hear whatever language we are learning even our first one

so words are also fundamental but they are a fundamental part of our analytical intuitions or at least they seem so and were used to them and take them for natural fundamental elements of the language building blocks so to speak out of which we can fashion sentences and paragraphs and utterances and narratives because words are so familiar we've forgotten the analysis they are the products of and so i was interested in them too simple words suggestive but cut away from the utterances they might have been a part of words like "friend" "neighbor" "accumulate" "black" "savage" "nail" and because i was an artist troublemaker a poet i wanted to bring these two interests together stories and words and i had done some works poems in which i took words from spelling lists and others in which i told stories mostly my own stories of my own experience or my experience of other peoples experiences and their attempts at representing them because im interested in personal experience and peoples ways of representing it so in spite of all appearances to the contrary i suppose i am a personal poet though i am probably the most impersonal of personal poets that is of all the poets who are concerned with personal experience possibly because im as interested in anyones personal experience as much as in my own and im interested in it in a kind of ordinary way without putting any special value on it as im interested in almost all acts of the mind to come to terms with itself and the world so you can see how from telling my own stories which lay to hand and were convenient i got interested in other peoples stories and wanted to make works using them shaping them so to speak around words that were not necessarily part of them or which these people might not have necessarily considered a part of them till i offered these words to them to think about now it

happened at this time that a museum was planning an exhibition a novel kind of exhibition in some ways something like this one but in this case it was to be a show that articulated certain parallels between the working ways of artists and scientists and engineers and because it was to emphasize the mental attitudes of these artists their modes of conceptualization their tactics and strategies rather than the products that might have been the result of them the ideas instead of the objects the designs instead of the furniture and because the show was conceived in a technological setting it was called "software" partly in opposition to "hardware"

in any case this show was being put on in the jewish museum which was not really a jewish museum or rather it had started its career as a museum dedicated to housing and exhibiting traditional ceremonial jewish artifacts and art had gradually through the agency of a number of successive directors turned first toward less and less traditional art and certainly less jewish art to the point where it had achieved the reputation of being a major exhibition place for experimental modern art had given retrospectives to robert rauschenberg and jasper johns ad reinhardt and yves klein had housed the "primary structures" exhibition and so on so that now with a guest curator jack burnham a kinetic sculptor and ex-engineer turned critic and now curator with the backing of a new director and some generous help from american motors and the smithsonian institute the museum was planning to step fully into the late 60s with an exhibition dedicated to conceptual art and technological thinking and because i had a scientific and technological background and because i was the kind of poet i was invited to submit a project proposal but what i was interested in at the time was not especially technological stories and words still thinking about it i figured that a museum exhibition of this type might just provide me with an opportunity to collect hundreds of stories other peoples stories built around my words without my having to be there at all if i could work out a technological strategy for collecting them now it

so i developed a plan for a machine

a story collecting machine      an automated interactive story collecting and poem generating machine      at least that's what it was from my point of view

people would walk into a small room and hear      on tape      a word      which they would be invited to think about      and to try to tell a story with preferably a true story      and then go into the next room where they could hear the work they'd been part of or part of the work they'd been a part of      a kind of stochastic poem consisting of a chain of stories      connected only by the words i had chosen and concluding with their own story

and this was in principle all very simple      but in practice it was fairly complicated      because although i was reasonably flexible about some of the things i wanted i had very strong almost moral commitments to some details of the work

this was a time when interactive art works were fairly popular      audiences would come to an art exhibition and learn that their movements would determine the acoustical output of some speaker system say the room would be crisscrossed by beams of light coupled to photoelectric cells that the movements of the audience would interrupt      which would produce an abrupt difference of potential that might be coupled to some oscillator      controlled in various ways by signals to an amplifier derived from photocells tripped by other movements in the room      and perhaps altered augmented or suppressed or randomized by voltages derived from still other movements in the room      so that in the end a modest variety of sounds would be generated in a manner unpredictably related to a great variety of movements that in some sense produced or triggered them      this was the very type of the 60s notion of an interactive art work      and i despised it

and what i wanted to do was explore the idea of the interactive work      to see if there was something more meaningful in it      some way to incorporate the experience of others into my own      or more precisely into an art work that i was designing but that they had also had a part in designing now i had in mind the idea of making a poem      a verbal art work out of a chain of stories connected by a single word or pair of words or

triplet      and if they told me their stories that's what i would get      and i wanted to give them something in return so that they could experience the work they'd been a part of      and i decided that after each visitor recorded his story or hers they would go into another room where they would hear the two or three or four stories directly preceding theirs and then their own      because i figured i owed them something and this would give them the chance that i was also getting to consider this chain of successive stories a kind of stanzaic poem      in which the last word was always their own

this was as i said very simple but there were still other things that i wanted      i wanted each person to experience this work alone      to feel unpressured      to have time to think      to be able to decline my invitation to tell a story or even listen if they chose because i didn't want to trap anybody in my machine      and i wanted it to look as neutral or unobtrusive as i could neither hard edge plastic and cold nor warm and dark and womblike      i wanted an amiable civilized machine that would largely go unnoticed while people thought and told and listened and i set about figuring how to get this somehow one person would have to be admitted to an unoccupied room      the door would close behind him and a taped message would play which would set the tone explain the options to listen and think and tell a story or not      go listen to other peoples stories and their own or not      or simply leave      and then give the word repeat it and leave time for him to think record listen and leave      so that some other person could enter and the cycle start again now i didn't want the visitors to my machine to be constantly pushing buttons to start up one phase and stop another      because that would've necessitated tedious instructions that half the people would have gotten wrong      and i wanted to minimize all the appearance of technology anyway and that required more elaborate technology to use the doors      their opening and closing sequencing      and i designed it that way there would be three small rooms and four latching doors      opening in one direction only forward      whenever anyone finished listening in the

third room went out and let the last door close      the front door would unlock and allow a new visitor to enter      when the first door closed the instruction tape would play reminding the new visitor to take all the time she wanted before going into the second room to tell her story      when the door of the second room opened the instruction tape would be sent into rewinding and as the second door closed behind her a second tape recorder would enter the recording mode      when she completed her story and opened the third door the tape recorder would go out of record into rewind      and as the third door closed it would enter playback      which would have to stop automatically at the end of her story      and be sent back into rewind as the fourth door opened or closed

so this was now a fairly complicated project      requiring two high quality tape recorders      three small soundproof rooms closed off by four latching doors and a switching system that controlled all the operations which might prove fairly expensive      but this was precisely the kind of project the software show was designed to fund      and they had money and gave me some

i sent them plans and drawings and they assured me a few thousand dollars to buy the tape recorders and build the control system on a tight budget while the smithsonian agreed to build the housing to plans that id provide      and in the usual way for museum shows of this kind negotiations dragged out over months with several changes in the administration and consequent delays in the correspondence between me and the museum people

this gave me plenty of time to work out the details and build the system which i did with a friend      an engineer named jeff raskin i laid out the flow chart and together we worked out the system of relays      that he assembled while i completed the drawings for the smithsonian      precise drawings to a thirty-second of an inch      which i mailed off to them and forgot about      while i went about solving the precise and absurd problems of obtaining moderately sophisticated electronic equipment in san diego

this was harder than you might think for example we needed potter and brumfeld relays of a new type and nobody but nobody in san diego los angeles or san

francisco had them in stock      so i had to deal with the manufacturer      who was i think in indiana      but i had no account with them and they wouldn't sell them to me for cash or credit      they referred me to a dealer in a new building on an undeveloped salt marsh near convoy street and he was never there      only his secretary      who finally bought them from me herself c.o.d. laying out her own cash without telling her boss for which i rewarded her with a bottle of cherry heering paid for by the museum as services rendered      and we went on debugging the system sometimes regretting that i had declined burnhams offer to have the switching system controlled by one of the computers they were using for other pieces in the show though i was more afraid of the new york telephone system id have been hooked into or the programmers id have had no control over      so i stuck with my relays and went on working out the problematic details

some of which were more problematic than you might think      the first thing i realized was that the first couple of people into the machine would have nothing to listen to when they came to the last room      they'd come into the machine passing through the doors as through one way valves moving from room to room      dutifully listening to the instructions      thinking      telling their story and arrive finally in the last room to hear nothing but the story they had just told      after perhaps one other      and that's not what id had in mind

so i decided to put three stories on the beginning of each tape      and jeff raskin ellie and i went through all the tapes putting stories on      that's when i found out how long a story is      now jeff and ellie and i were all reasonably good story tellers and none of us could tell a story that was much less than a minute and a half long      jeffs ranged from one and a half to two minutes      ellies from two to two and a half      and mine from two and a half to three      i don't know why this was so but it was consistently      and if we were at all characteristic      i had visions of a line of museum visitors backed up forty or fifty deep      while each visitor spent from 10 to 12 minutes in the machine      at that rate there could be only 5 to 6 people an hour      and no more than 30 to 40 in the museums rather short exhibition day

so we tried to shorten our

stories as much as we could while still maintaining our sense of ourselves and the fullness of a story and we found that no story could get below a minute and mine couldnt get below a minute and a half which meant at least 5 to 6 minutes in the machine even if you didnt count the time for stopping and thinking and though this might have been a problem the museum said that was all right to go ahead and not worry about it just go ahead and finish the electronic part because the smithsonian had received the drawings and was taking care of the rest and they were professionals

and by the time we were through a lot of things had been worked out rather prettily we even set it up for an electric sign to light up over the front door and read "occupied" when it was closed and "vacant" when the last door closed and we figured that it was as near to foolproof as we could make it even if some joker simply jumped in and out of the doors the machine would either play its way placidly through the cycle or if the doors were interfered with cut off and reset to the starting mode all over again but with all that we still made a few mistakes like with the signal tone that we used to count off all the stories because in order to let someone hear two or three stories when he went into the listening room we had to mark story beginnings and endings with a signal that could be counted off and we did this by using a stereo tape recorder and putting a 60 cycle tone from an oscillator onto the empty channel as the third door opened just before the recorder was sent out of the recording mode into rewind then the control mechanism would count back three such tones three stories worth shift into playback when the door closed and count three tones forward the arrangement was all right but 60 cycles was a disastrous choice because house current works on 60 cycles ac and when i got to the museum the machine picked up all sorts of signals from switching on and off all over the floor till i stripped things down erased the signals and set a new standard tone somewhere between 60 and 90 that i could sing onto my own instruction tape and that wouldnt be affected by house harmonics and i made a bigger mistake with the stories id originally intended for people to

tell stories on successive days with one or two or three given words that is the first day the word would be "friend" the second "friend" and "neighbor" the third day "friend" "neighbor" and "accumulate" the fourth day just "neighbor" and go on this way in a cycle of  $1+2, 1+2+3, 2, 2+3, 2+3+4 \dots$  for something over thirty days but what i hadnt counted on was how hard people would find it to tell a story using one obligatory word let alone two or three i had thought theyd find it interesting to come into the museum and have to tell a story using the word "friend" one day "friend" and "neighbor" if they came back the second and "friend" "neighbor", "accumulate" if they came back the third back in san diego i hadnt had any trouble doing it and jeff and elly had only had a little although our stories got a bit more artificial and a little longer but i thought that was going to be interesting luckily i had the sense to try it out before the opening with some of the museum people and they were not at all happy with two words and terrified by three so i had to record twenty four new instruction tapes with single words the day before the show opened but thats what id consider normal if youre going to do anything new at all youre going to have to make some mistakes that youll have to correct at the last minute and i had counted on it

what i hadnt counted on were all the other things it was september of 1970 and new york was in the middle of a hot indian summer that frayed tempers and strained the inadequate and partial air conditioning i think only the ground floor was air conditioned and tempers were already frayed in the world of the new york art scene which was experiencing an abrasive politicization that had only begun in the late 60s as the vietnamese war was grinding on and on and as usual in such shows the money was running out and always unforeseen things kept happening les levine's video piece needed about 24 monitors and somebody bought him 24 tv sets which then cost 80 bucks a piece to modify for rf cable input the curator blamed les les blamed the curator the director blamed them both a film maker named fiore had done a looped film collage on the theme of software and introduced some footage from the war the director demanded it come out fiore sneaked into the museum and tore up all

the film loops four seconds of les levines twenty minute video piece was a videotaped slide of two people fucking the director wouldnt allow it les wanted everyone to go on strike three infant computer programmers dallied endlessly over a machine designed to carry art works by three artists the kids kibitzed hored around gave interviews and got nothing working the artists protested the computer was on the second floor of the museum where the temperature was around a hundred i remembered warning burnham the computer would lose its memory if he didnt get it the hell out of that room but his long haired technical director a high fashion ibm hippy said he would pack it with dry ice the company that had loaned another computer sent the wrong parts the telephone company repairmen had started a wildcat strike there were rumors that some of them were pulling out lines all over the city to increase their overtime the curators hotel room was robbed and his wifes jewelry stolen

and the professionals the professionals of the smithsonian were slowly getting to work at the housing for my machine and as they delivered and uncrated the parts i began to worry the whole thing was a masonite shell completely different from my designs it had two large rooms and a kind of small alcove between them which would have to serve as the recording room and they had put windows plexiglass picture windows in the first and third rooms

why the windows? i asked i didnt want windows "we had to put in windows to make sure nothing funny happened inside" they were worried about people making love in my story machine "but" i said "they're going to have to go in there one at a time" "theres no telling what theyll do in there if they cant be observed" so i had

two picture windows in my machine when the reporters asked me how i felt here in the museum i looked across at les levines 24 television monitors sitting on a wall of gray cinder blocks and i said it feels like levittown i can look out of my picture window at my neighbors television sets

then there was the soundproofing they hadnt done anything about it and when i explained that i wanted each visitor to the machine to have privacy to not be invaded by all the sounds around the museum and for their words to be private heard only by listeners in the listening room they told me it would be all right they were professionals and they were going to take care of it they nailed up carpeting all over the outside of it including the roof so that now it looked like a furry little levittown building and while you couldnt hear what the people in the machine were saying or listening to when you were outside it the person inside could hear everything that was happening on the same floor of the museum

but what about the doors i asked my latching doors? they told me not to worry their door specialist was coming the next day and i had a lot of other problems to work on in the meantime anyway because i was working around the clock i was even sleeping in the museum on a leather couch in the directors office while i worked at re-recording the instruction tapes and the new starting stories for the new single word tapes and tried to debug the control system which was still responding to signals from all the switching systems all over the museum arrived they were flimsy hollow plywood with no latching arrangements

you cant latch the doors in this kind of situation its against the code the fire marshalls will never permit it thats when i hit the roof and told them these professionals to get the hell out of my piece i would make it myself and it would work without latching doors but with doors that fitted because i would make them fit because i was not a professional and they decided i was a temperamental artist and left me alone to figure out what i could do because my whole system was supposed to work off those latching doors about which they had said nothing before and i ran down to canal street just before closing time and bought myself four sets of heavy springs to slam the doors and a set of small straight springs and

microswitches that i could install over the doors because i was going to use those doors to trip the system and then i got back to the museum just before closing and i realized id forgotten to buy screwdrivers and i didnt have a soldering iron to solder the connections and i sat down on the floor next to the machine with my head in my hands and thought

ive got three nights and two days to make this work i could be traveling the subways all day looking for tools and equipment there must be some other way and i thought there must be something here i could work with especially a museum with lots of antiquities menorahs candlesticks breastplates bas reliefs somewhere in here there has got to be some kind of shop

and it was around five thirty or six and i went down to the basement and poked around and on the other side of the elevator behind a little cage there was a cubicle where a little guy with sparse grey hair a pointed beard and an eyeshade was working over something very small he must have heard me because he looked up

"you're one of the artists up there?"

i shook my head he looked at his watch "you're working late" "so are you" i said "well when i start something i like to finish"

"so do i" i said and sat down to look at what he was working on it was a silver gilt menorah one of whose sconces was cracked and he was patiently cleaning it off preparing to braise it he was a neat worker very careful and he had a whole array of little tools laid out precisely on the workbench in front of him the shelves and cabinets were also neatly stacked with tools and materials i sat there watching him work quietly for a while "you mind if i watch" he shook his head and went on working then "are you jewish?"

because i was latches or not

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then "are you jewish?"

and when i laughed he explained that he didn't care one way or the other about religion but he expressed himself better in yiddish which i understand quite well much better than i speak it and he wanted to know what kind of show this was what kind of art with all these machines

and i tried to tell him in my halting yiddish which is much more like german than the machines were not the main thing not important really that the main thing was in the ideas in the way of thinking the way of working to find some precise thing how my machine was nothing but my way of trying to get people to tell me these stories with words of my devising and he seemed to like that somehow it amused him to be sitting here in the basement of the jewish museum fixing his menorah and hearing in yiddish how i was building a machine to get people to tell me stories and he offered me all the tools i needed and wished me luck

"maybe when its working ill come up and tell a story too what kind of word would i have to use?"

"friend" i said like "khaver"

and with all the elegant tools of my friend the goldsmith i was able to set to work rebuilding my conversational machine and by the time of the opening two days later after 72 hours without more than two or three hours sleep i had it working the way i wanted and it was one of the few pieces in the show that worked throughout the whole duration of the exhibition and i got the id expected stories i wanted or rather i got the story tapes and some of the stories were interesting and others banal and some were not even stories and i learned some things about the meanings of words some things i hadn't known before id expected people to like the word "friend" and they did but who would have expected them to get mad at me for using "black" when my own story on "black" was about a chess game and eleonors about a formal dress and almost everyone scolded me for using "savage" before telling a story except a polish lady who told her story twice once in english and once in polish and it was a horrifying account of a girl who was taken to a party by

a boy and left there among strangers who treated her savagely  
only bill seitz told a funny story on "savage" how arshile  
gorky plagiarized the text of julian levys translations of several  
edward poems for his own "savage" and passionate love letters  
and "accumulate" i would have never expected all the  
moralizing against this word even the vice-president of  
american motors was against "accumulating" and he told a  
cautionary tale of a man who accumulated and accumulated and  
accumulated until he finally came to a very bad end

to all of them almost all were in english a few in german  
and french one in polish one in czech and one  
by far the longest story on all the tapes in yiddish by my friend  
the goldsmith which went something like this

hello dovid

this is yakov the goldsmith "friend" that means "khaver"  
i had a friend a close one when i was a small boy we lived  
together in nearby houses in a small town in southern russia near  
odessa it was a famous town famous for violinists who grew  
up and went to petersburg to study and it was before the  
revolution before even the first world war my father was a  
watchmaker a good mechanic a progressive man he was  
not religious and he wanted me to go to the gymnasium to study  
mathematics and become an engineer while my best friend  
was nakhem who was the same age and was the rabbis son  
but the rabbi was also not religious he was also a  
progressive man and wanted nakhem also to go to the gymnasium  
to study mathematics and become an engineer so we studied  
together we went to the same tutors and played together.  
after lessons but our mothers were both musical and it was a  
big fight with the fathers to let the children study music with  
the cantor who had a good voice but a reputation for liking  
women and drink a bit too much but we were musical as  
well as mathematical so the mothers won out as usual  
and we went every day after lessons to the cantor a big man  
with a thick black beard and soft brown eyes and pinknas  
could play every instrument even the accordion and sing to make  
you cry but teaching violin he was very strict he made us  
play german exercises and small pieces by bach while he would  
hum along to keep us firm on pitch and beat out the tempo with a

stick which he would hit us with gently on the legs if we  
should miss a beat and when we were playing well he would  
put down the stick sit back and take a sip out of a medicine  
bottle that smelled of alcohol and swear that if he had his way  
we would finish by studying with auer in petersburg and as  
we got better he would take us with him to play at bar mitzvahs  
and weddings there it was different because he used to say  
class is one thing this is another when you are at a wedding  
and you have to play forget everything i told you and do the best  
you can this is not bach just music and you have to play  
and we played and we even made a little money that he gave  
us because he said we would need some to buy a decent violin  
auer wouldnt accept a student with a cheesebox for a violin  
but as we got better even our fathers agreed we were going  
to be violinists not engineers and they brought us a pair of  
matched violins out of beautiful yellow wood i dont know  
how much they cost but they came in fine cases lined with  
velvet with places for the rosin and the bow and we loved  
them and now the violin was more important for both of us  
than going to the gymnasium but then the war came first  
the world war then the revolution and then the counter-revolution  
in the ukraine and my father who was progressive had to  
run away to the north to escape the counter-revolution my  
mother stayed behind with the business and i got sent with  
my violin and my books to relatives in poland because you  
could still travel that way through the lines and then my  
relatives got killed in a pogrom and family friends sent me north  
to latvia where i lived with a watchmaker who i used to  
help because i had learned a little from my father and i was good  
with my hands and all this time i lost track of my friend  
nakhem who i didnt have much time to think about  
except at night when i took out my violin and i wondered  
if he had gotten to petersburg to study with auer finally  
there were people we had in america and the watchmaker  
sent me and i arrived here in new york safe and sound except for  
the violin that got lost while getting on the ship i found  
work with another watchmaker who was also a jeweler i was  
good at it and i learned the trade i married i had a  
daughter and a son shes married and hes an engineer and  
works for an airplane company in los angeles one day he

goes to get his income tax filled out and i get a letter and a package in the mail it says

dear yakov  
i am a cpa in burbank last week a young man came into my office off the street who looks familiar i ask his name which is nathan nakhem and i recognize him instantly that this is your son i hear that your wife has died but you are working and happy there i have a good business here a lovely wife and two successful sons neither of which has unfortunately an ear for music i would like to see you because there is much to tell but i have the business and my wife the other day i was looking at my violin which i have not played since 1931 your son tells me that you lost yours before he was born so i thought you might like this one

your khaver  
nakhem

so i took the instrument out of its case and it was as i remembered it the same yellow wood and i tuned the strings and played and you know its fifty years since i touched the violin and its not petersburg and its not auer and im no professional but its music and i still can play that's it yakov

not every story was like this in fact very few of them were and i have hundreds of feet of tape with hours and hours of stories most of them more or less dead because the tellers had no energy to bring them to life and no special desire or need to and so i have thirty three or four tapes with five or six hours of formalized story poems rhyming around a central word and i found that i was not very much interested in most of them so that i soon turned to another way of working and in that sense my piece in the show was a failure and a success in that i had set out to accomplish something that proved hard to do i had worked at it and i had loved my work and i had succeeded at it at getting those stories built around my words and i had made my machine so that it worked successfully for the full run of the

show and people had come to the museum and entered it some had been delighted with it others liked it some were irritated and some hated it and it was hard to tell whether the people who experienced it were benefited from it as i was benefited so from my point of view the show was a success and a failure and part of its success was that i learned what was wrong with it and i felt very good that i learned what was wrong with it what i shouldnt do again and i never will do it again i like shows like that

# t u n i n g

## david antin

also by david antin

*autobiography* (1967)

*definitions* (1967)

*code of flag behavior* (1968)

*meditations* (1971)

*talking* (1972)

*after the war* (1973)

*Talking at the Boundaries* (1976)

A New Directions Book