

ESSAYS

Artists Dying

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Lord Byron on His Deathbed, Joseph Denis Odevaere (public domain)

The first time I saw an artist dying onstage, I was a kid. I went to see Rahsaan Roland Kirk at the Village Gate. The great saxophonist, composer, and vocalist had recently suffered a stroke. His body was non-existent inside a rumpled tuxedo. His sightless eyes were, as always, invisible behind dark glasses. He was carried up steps by two men and set in a chair. Loops of sticky tape had been wrapped around his fingertips. He sat and mimed blowing notes, the keys resolutely not moving, while the band tried to compensate, furiously breaking into one of his classics, *Freaks For the Festival*. At sixteen, I didn't know what to think. Was it theater? Was it a new kind of jazz with

I was better off not knowing.

The second time, I was a young man. I went to Saint Mark's Church to hear the poet James Schuyler. Early, killing time, I passed a basement window crammed with books. The nearby door was held ajar by string tied to an iron railing. A hand-lettered sign read OPEN. I went down the steps and found myself in an apartment with no furniture, just towering piles of paperbacks. An old, witchy-looking woman (she was, in fact, probably my age, now) came up and introduced herself. "I'm Gertrude," she said. "Take a look around." I poked at the piles, afraid of knocking one over. There was no reason why anything was in any particular place. There were no sections or subjects. The books rose high, like stone columns left by a departed civilization. Oddly, near the top of one stack I found a copy of a Schuyler collection I had not yet read, *The Crystal Lithium*, with its seascape cover by Fairfield Porter. I still have it. I can see where Gertrude wrote, in now-fading pencil, \$1.50.

At the reading, Schuyler was surrounded by a coterie of young poets who laughed at his jokes and rushed off to get him diet sodas. He looked unhealthy and glared at the assembling audience. Afraid of making eye contact, I focused instead on the one touch of color in his clothing: a pair of vibrant, mustard-colored sneakers. When he began to read, he was inaudible. The audience crouched forward, trying to make out the occasional word. He introduced each poem with a certain gusto, but the text he treated with indifference, if not distaste. It was something to be gotten through quickly. I don't think I have ever listened harder, or felt more irrationally rewarded, than when I made out in their entirety the last two lines of "Closed Gentian Distances":

Little fish stream

by, a river in water.

...a poem from the very book, I would discover later, I was clutching in my hands.

Finally, a few years ago, I saw that the British playwright Simon Gray would host a strange-sounding event at which several scenes from his plays would be performed by well-known Broadway actors. It was held in the auditorium of a public library.

Gray was tottery. A few years before, he had given up both drinking and, as I was to read later, leading what sounds like an almost-bigamous double existence. With that, his writing had gone slack. Paradoxically, this new benign style gained him a greater following than when he was so subversive and funny. He had become, in the English press and TV, a character. He read from the latest installment of his diaries. It produced a puzzling sensation. I felt I knew him from an obsessive study of such

nose, who now reminisced about his childhood on Hayling Island.

The acted scenes, ripped from their contexts, didn't have much power. I watched Gray sit at a little desk off to the side as he suffered with—bemusement? memory? pride?—these crumbs from his life's work. When, after the final excerpt, we all applauded and got up to go, he didn't know what to do. Disoriented on the bare stage, he looked all around before Roger Rees very kindly took his arm and led him off into the wings.

I don't have any grand conclusions to draw from these encounters, but recently they have insisted on grouping themselves together in my mind. I suppose as I get older and have seen and heard so much, content begins to blur. There is a sameness about even the greatest accomplishment. What I find more striking, more individually moving, are visions of such very different lives given over to art, and how they all, in the end, come to nothing. One is left only with the attempt, nobly heroic, doomed to fail. Perhaps this thought could provide a degree of cold comfort in a time when art appears to be so marginalized: that it has always been so, that these three men, dedicated makers, possessors of talent and originality, flitted through this world and left almost no trace behind, "...a river in water."

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