

Working Things Out

by Sophie Hope

I would like to be a deviant like you, can you teach me? That would be a great art project, to actually be arrested, have some real life experiences for a change and then use this in my art, no that would *be* my art. I'm so jealous of you, having such a colourful life experience to draw on. Fuck. All I've got is inter-railing across Eastern Europe and pathetic teenage dabbling in hallucinogenic drugs to draw on. Everything since has been a process of learning an art language in order to find ways of being paid to dismantle it.

The water is quite still now. We were sat here in the cold dawn for some time. I think I was telling you about how my art foundation year was like an unlearning process, where you got the chance to forget all that formal crap they taught you at school. Learning through unlearning. This seems to be what I'm constantly trying to do through life, use my learning to unlearn, question and throw things into doubt. Why would you ever want to learn as if that was enough, the end point? How many times have I heard, "what did we spend all that money on your education for" ringing in my head when I constantly get general knowledge questions wrong or when I fall into an embarrassed red-cheeked silence thinking *everyone* surely knows that apart from me? You would have blurted something out, oblivious to the consequences, and damn it, you probably would have got it right! It's not that I'm glorifying ignorance, but that often the educated strive for a lost legacy of working and thinking instinctively without the baggage of analysing if it's right or wrong, justified or critically relevant. I yearn to be beyond that system and yet it is that system that has shaped my very being. I am conforming in my well-behaved artistic attempts at state-sanctioned deviance. You showed me another way of doing things.

You know what, you have been a good friend to me, without even knowing it. I've been listening to you contently over the years, like the lapping of these waves on the pebbled shore of the Thames. What joins us in my dreams is the need to develop a critical relationship with the world and that is my social responsibility, not a personal, self-help, therapeutic experience done to make ME feel better; this 'criticality' is a right and responsibility for everyone to enact. Except you wouldn't say it like that would you, you'd just get on with it. I'm learning to take this into everything I do – slowly realising, thanks to your inaudible teachings over the years, that it's not a separate thing called art that does that – art education merely creates a clever illusion that relies on you believing that's the case, but really art college is just a creative business school. Thing is, would I have realised that without having gone through it?

I must admit, it's a passive, tokenistic kind of listening I've been doing with you, I'm not really that interested in you as a person you understand, just what you can teach me, so that I may improve and become a better player in this game, learn some tactics, incorporate them as my own and you know, make the world a better place.

How can I write a list of friends to phone like I do with 'things to do this week, today, now, by yesterday'. It's almost like you, my own little 'imaginary' friend, have taken over real friendships and got lodged in an uncomfortable place between my ear and heart. We have had two different lives, and yet we are flesh and blood. I admire how you can express yourself in your actions and the way you live, with so much more artistry than I ever could in my so-called art career. You are like the artful dodger, a Dickensian character that is so mischievous to the core it hurts. You hurt me.

I don't know why I had to kill you like I did. You hadn't done me any harm. Just hang around my neck like a dead weight. Pestering me to make things better for you, as if I had the upper hand and you were this vulnerable, uneducated glitch in the system. What bollocks. You didn't know your own worth. I can't say I'm sorry for what I've done. It was necessary to engulf you, discard your shell and use you so that I could become a childish delinquent. I couldn't have done it without you. This might be the way we can change things. By me becoming more like you, not you becoming more like me. I had to get rid of you, you understand that.

The capacity to fuck up is in all of us, some of us have become quite good at it, as expert failures. And we make careers out of it, get other people to believe in us, pay for the fruits of our failures and that genius ability to unlearn. You've been rubbing off on me your slimy putrid genius puke all these years and I have managed to absorb the stuff and now I can flick you off like a little spent parasite. I don't need you any more. Oh, I'm sorry, I appear to have hurt your feelings. Oops, I've accidentally trodden on you and kicked you into the Thames, where your body now floats amongst the plastic tampon applicators, syringes, coke bottles and elderflower petals. Free your mind you told me, and your ass will follow!

Sophie Hope (June 2009)