

writing down whatever comes to mind: thoughts on "at least i tried" by Rafaël Rozendaal

[for <http://www.atleastitried.org>]

I'm writing this after having been awake for 36 hours: having worked for 18 at my desk job, divided 12 between making art, looking at other people's art, eating, and washing everything in my suitcase in order to pack it up again, and finally having danced for 6 of them straight. By the time I finish this, I'll be on hour 44.

I'm typing this into the screen of my iPhone 4s on the train, using an app that mimics some sort of antiquated textured paper. It doesn't at all resemble the type of paper I have in my notebook. I realize that I have my notebook on me, but for some reason my phone seems more appropriate for the drafting of this essay.

I can see Rafaël Rozendaal's haiku being placed where the ads are in the train cars. I don't ride the train much anymore, but when I do I like to just stare off in the direction of the ads. Most of the time the ads I see are for low-income housing or depression; recycling or free meals; the removal of varicose veins; burlesque clubs that specialize in performances themed around video games from the 90s.

I'm writing this in my head as I walk home. I'm trying to smile at people and dogs without looking directly in their faces.

I'm writing this in my bed with all the sheets piled on top of the mattress. I plan to write this on the plane to LA tomorrow, but instead I'll end up sleeping.

I'm writing things that I probably shouldn't allow to be published. But I want to be honest, and so, what else is there to write? This is what Rozendaal's haiku seem to ask for: an unpolished collection of thoughts and reactions, brutal honesty at the risk of saying something and nothing at the same time.

Last week at an artist residency I had a two-hour long conversation about irony and sincerity in the art world, and about the questions that those of us who enter it from working class families constantly nag ourselves with.

For a long time the trend towards insincerity in art used to bother me, and I could never exactly say why. Now I realize that it irked me because only certain people can afford this kind of insincerity. If you are spending money to make art when you should be sending money home to your family, you are doing something so absurd that you can't risk not being utterly sincere about it.

Despite what others may think, something about Rozendaal's haiku leads me to interpret them as sincere. They read as direct expressions, perhaps because the syllable count has been abandoned. I've always thought that the people who really mean what they say are the ones who just say it, regardless of whether or not it sounds pretty. This is why I think Joan Baez makes folk songs sound terrible; the recordings focus more on her voice than the lyrics.

The first time I saw Rafaël Rozendaal speak was in 2011 at the Nightingale Theater in Chicago. Watching something at the Nightingale sort of feels like watching something in someone else's living room, because technically you are. I knew about his work because at the time part of my job was to read Rhizome and post links to web art on a blogging site with an outdated interface. When I inherited the task, for some reason there were no links to Rozendaal's websites on the blog.

Maybe because of the hyper-saturated color of some of his work at the time, or because the crowd of my peers that I knew I would see at the talk were exceptionally rich, glam, and fashionably ironic, I expected him to be a little more flashy than he was. I was surprised to see a fairly friendly looking guy in a white shirt and jeans that spoke about his work in what seemed like a very sincere way, and who wanted to go out to eat with a bunch of strangers afterwards.

At the time I had an ex-boyfriend named Rafael who was also familiar with Rozendaal's work. After we broke up he moved back to Santa Barbara, California. At one point he started talking to Petra Cortright on the internet because she also lived in Santa Barbara. It's a small place. He liked to tell me about it because he and

Rafaël Rozendaal had the same first name. He also used to wear white t-shirts with the sleeves rolled up and jeans. They even had the same hairstyle. I didn't go out to dinner with everyone after because knowing this made me feel like a spy.

Little things like that can remind you that artists are people too. This is something even artists forget about other artists. I was at a conference recently where after a room full of people introduced themselves with phrases like "I'm an artist," "I'm a curator," and "I'm a computer programmer," one high school student stood up and said, "I'm a person."

I feel similarly about the haiku as I read them off my screen to the artist/musician/person from Austria whom I've been sharing this residency with. Several of them sum up conversations we've had over the last few days, such as haiku 075, "america / even though it sucks / it's awesome" and haiku 074, "would you create / something amazing for us / we have no budget". A friend is visiting me who I haven't seen in over a year and I receive a text from her that reads like haiku 066, "take it easy / breathe in / breathe out."

I'm writing this now in a former thrift store. I've been told that my bedroom, which is just large enough to fit a twin size bed, is actually not a bedroom at all, but a 24-hour access studio. I assume this means that I have to make art in my bed while I am here, and so, I am in bed on my laptop, not making art, but writing about it. Or around it really.

I'm here because I am pseudo residency hopping, meaning that I am coming back home to work 5 days in between each new residency, because unlike some people, I think I could become homeless. It's exhausting. But it also feels luxurious, like pretending to be rich. Except that rich people would never do this. They would never spend weeks at a time living with a bunch of strangers three to a room, on small beds that aren't their own. It makes the airport feel like the pinnacle of privacy and concentration, and a 5-hour flight the best place to sleep. I spent 4 hours in the Piedmont Triad airport today just to write.

What I'm trying to say is that artist residencies, like attending art schools, are all about trying. It's an extension of effort towards some point, even if no one really knows what that point is. When I decided to leave home and go to an art school whose annual tuition amounted to far more than my family income I told my mother it was all to avoid "social stagnation." I don't know where I got the phrase from, but I just repeated it over and over. It goes back to the concept--or rather the reality--of art as a strange form of class hopping. You don't know what you are doing, or why you are doing it; you just know that you want to make your life different than it is. You want to try.

I think of the art students who will be living with these haiku for the coming months. Specifically I think about them staring at haiku 011, "is it good / is it bad / at least i tried."

Not just staring at it, but sleeping in front of it. The hallway that the haiku will be installed in is a strange place because it is public to the school community but often co-opted by students for otherwise private activities. I've met so many students over the years that refer to it as their "secret spot." I see students taking power naps on the grubby sofa, their cellphones in their hands, arms flung out waiting for the alarm to go off. I see students eating, crying, cramming text into their brains or into their laptops, having group meetings, and sometimes make-out sessions. This all happens in a well-lit, visible space. Somehow they've blocked out the fact that they are always on display. They are so focused on trying. Trying to get through the 2-5 year situation they've put themselves in. The same situation that will lead to a lifestyle of just trying at the expense of sleeping, eating, begin alone, being around others. They can't stop to ask themselves if the life they have chosen is good or bad, because if they do, it might all fall apart.

It reminds me of a few conversations I've had with people in response to the December 2014 article that came out in the New Yorker subtitled "Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Curator Who Never Sleeps." There is an art world trend (and, as some vodka ads I've seen on the train suggest, a business world trend) towards the glorification of not sleeping. I meet a lot of art students who claim they don't sleep. This has come to be considered an honorable and at times expected lifestyle for artists and curators. It corresponds with haiku 111, "never working / never not / working."

This is why Hans Ulrich Obrist and some of the students I meet at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who will soon be living with these haiku can take pride in the claim that they don't sleep. They have dissolved any distinction between work and not work. It's a concept that feeds into hyper-capitalism really well: the drive to always be working, to always be 'productive.' Some of us have what we call work and work-work. Or work-work and art-work. Or work and werk/werq. So for many of us the equivalent would read "always working / never not werqing."

Unless you come from a family that makes or looks at art, either of these lifestyles will lead to the confusion of your parents and siblings thinking that you are perpetually in school when you say things like "I just got off work but I have to write this essay/proposal/statement." or "I'm taking off work to install this exhibition/participate in this festival/talk at this symposium." They won't understand why you are doing these things that seem like work when you are not at work. Because artists are a species of people who are working all the time, unless you come from a wealthy family that funds your art practice. In this scenario they will understand the concept of not working, and since art is your only job, you might actually have days off.

My mother was always working and so I grew up in an office building, along with my siblings, a few friends who also came from single parents and needed a place to be at night, and the children of the people who cleaned the building while my mother worked late into the evening. This was the type of office building with maze-like hallways filled with cubicles upholstered in scratchy grey or beige fabric, and there were several of them over the years. One thing I remember is running back and forth through the hallways as fast as possible in my socks. Another thing I remember is playing with the copy-paper.

The colors of the haiku paintings look like the colored copy-paper in most offices. They speak of a sort of playfulness that is controlled, corporate or regulated. They are meant to 'spice things up' without irritating anyone's palate. I saw a lot of these colors when working in the Hans Ulrich Obrist archive; they pop up in some versions of the instruction-based project *do it* and also in the work of the artist Amalia Pica. The exhibition catalog for Pica's solo show at the MCA is filled with pages in these exact 5 colors. It is meant to look like a composition book, and many of the essays are accompanied by charts and graphs. In Pica's work this seems to hint at the elementary and at shared formalized experiences. In Rozendaal's work it makes me imagine the haiku being typed up in an office cubicle. A lot of the haiku describe long periods of staring at screens, wanting money, going to the bathroom, longing for vacations, feeling the need to exert effort in some way, wanting to come out ahead of others, fluctuations between boredom and stress. They could easily describe working a desk job and being a digital artist at the same time. Maybe one thing they show is that people who are artists and people who are not artists aren't really that different. Both spend a large portion of their time staring at screens in exchange for money, excreting, and thinking about the beach.

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