



Causal Observer

Notes from a Causal Observer

BY BEN JUDSON

Saying “All the good ideas I’ve ever had came to me while I was milking a cow” is not so different from saying “I had a really good chain of ideas linking up, and this made my smile about as wide as the Mississippi River watershed, but then I got a craving for a Snickers bar and a Country Time lemonade, pulled over into this Valero of the Dolls Superstore and forgot what I was thinking about.” But the thing about it is, Grant Wood said the first one after some woman threatened to bite his ear off. And Hills Snyder said the other one after having his ears pumped full of gas station Muzak. I’m not one to split hairs. Ideas are ideas, and a Valero might be as good at smothering them as the New York art scene is, depending on who you are. But let’s just say Hills Snyder is threading needles⁹ alongside some of the richest guys in Heaven.

To begin with the titling, we’re given *Causal Observer* on this side. It’s a bit odd to consider, this causal observing, having been stalked practically our whole art-viewing lives by little signs reading “Do not touch” and interpretive pronouncements handed down from on high. One day maybe we’ll find a way to put little signs everywhere that read “How to touch...” — but if this kind of sign could ever be really honest⁷, it would be like the screen door on the proverbial submarine³ — the integrity of the structure pretty much depends on there not being such an opening. And so the gallery visitor is left with that disembodied eye, the one that looks but must not touch, floating from perception to perception, hands in pockets⁶. And then, for the lazy, impatient or unde-confident eye, there are those explanations. Half the time you read these essays, it’s like someone has spent the last thirty minutes explaining a punch line to you, and you start to feel like you’re watching Andy Kaufman wrestle mid-western housewives. So don’t take any of this as an explanation. Think of it as an attempt to follow a thread¹ through a yarn factory. Because I suspect Hills Snyder’s art is actually a machine that makes ideas, not the other way around.

If you were to ask me whether I think Hills is trying to undermine something, I would say yeah, I think he is. But he’s not the Richard Dawkins of art or anything, and thank God for that. I mean, he would never have a section on his website called “Converts’ Corner.” He’s a faithful skeptic, but he’s more committed to exploring solutions than exposing problems.

This is his second show to introduce artifacts related to the Ayahuasca ceremony. There are a few textiles, a song — raw ingredients mixed in with material Snyder has been exploring for years: the smile, the cross, vintage furniture, Americana, folk songs. And as the Shipibo textile patterns reflect on the surface of the submarine, things start melting together. It’s a step forward and a leap back: Hills hasn’t made a painting in over thirty years, but for some reason, it was the right way (the only way?) to work with this new material.

Hills once told me he had two encounters with the ancient Lanzón stela at Chavín de Huántar in Peru, a subterranean carved stone pillar³, that somewhere along the way earned another nickname: the Smiling God¹⁰. It is designed to be encountered after walking some ways through dark, disorienting passages. In one meeting,

the group of visitors formed a complete circle around the figure, cutting through the enveloping darkness here and there with small flames in order to see its surfaces. By the time of the second encounter, over two years later, it was well-lit behind a glass barrier, and preceded by lighted passages. And now the Smiling God allowed only one visitor at a time.

If you were to walk through the screen door, into the hallway with the Ayahuasquero's song playing, through the Plexiglas sketch of the Carpenter Gothic window, you'd reach a point at which a red stage light would be emanating from, let's say, your forehead, outlining a smiley face¹⁰ cut out of the wall, your body overlaid on a purple cross. Now, this isn't possible, unless some magician² were to follow you through the gallery and transport you to this point on the axis, where a lot of things converge. But let's say you're there. Is this a mirror⁵ or a maze⁴ staring at you?

Now that we reach this point, I realize I didn't really explain, I don't think, how one could be a causal observer. Well, that's best left for another time. Just don't feel like you have to be a long-tail cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

Notes

1. For all the violence sprung from the official versus the unofficial book, where literature is found has less to do with its force than who we are when we find it. Are we ready to receive it? Many have come to literature from strange paths² and pieced it together to their own liking, ignoring all the established orders. Poetry is not for the passive. It is, as Mayakovsky knew, at its very root tendentious. Even the love poem agitates the beloved to fall in love with the poet.

— Jennifer Moxley, preface to *Imagination Verses*

2. "...But do you know what truly astonishes me, Sancho? It seems to me you must have come and gone right through the air, because it's taken you less than three days to go from here to Toboso and back, even though that's more than a hundred miles, which tells me that some magician who's my friend, and watches over me (because there absolutely has to be someone like that⁶, and that's what he has to be, or else I wouldn't be much of a knight errant) — I say, it must be that he helped you travel, without your knowing it, because there have been magicians who picked up a knight errant, sleeping peacefully in his bed and, without him knowing how or anything about it, he wakes up the next day more than a thousand miles away from where he went to sleep..."

— Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote*

3. A Tower in a Hole would be an accident of geography, a bad match, or a fantasy. And it would look nothing like the Voynich tower, which is simply, a tower built in a hole¹⁰. It is almost the definition of fantasy, much like a screen door on a submarine, or an ice cube in hell.

— proto57, *The New Atlantis/Voynich Theory*

4. When I was a kid I enjoyed mazes. I found that many of them could be solved by starting at "end" and working to "start". This, because the author of the maze would as often as not take such an approach into consideration. So when I began drawing mazes of my own, I would always start designing it from both ends and make the paths meet in the middle. As though anyone would ever see them besides my friends, or try them backwards! But I found it satisfying, that it would be as hard to solve from both ends. But the point is, I thought

of this when thinking of ways of approaching the Voynich problem, that there may be a value in starting from the finish, and working forward.

— proto57, *The New Atlantis/Voynich Theory*

5. Science? Nonsense. In this situation, mediocrity and genius are equally useless. We have no interest in conquering any cosmos. We want to extend the Earth to the borders of the cosmos. We don't know what to do with other worlds. We don't need other worlds. We need a mirror⁷. 5. Science? Nonsense. In this situation, mediocrity and genius are equally useless. We have no interest in conquering any cosmos. We want to extend the Earth to the borders of the cosmos. We don't know what to do with other worlds. We don't need other worlds. We need a mirror⁷.

— Dr. Snaut in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*

6. What I was trying to show in our earlier discussion was that regression to isolated body feelings after the self has split into individual body parts, in a nonhuman, machine-like, dehumanized, isolated, fragmented fashion, becomes very frightening to the healthy part of the person's awareness. The experience is of something pre-psychological, something nonhuman happening⁷, and one empathizes with the strangeness. The schizophrenic's symptoms and experiences described in psychiatric textbooks can be summed up in such sentences as, "No, I don't want to understand. I can't understand; it's bizarre; it's odd; it's different; it's something out of the ordinary." One could call this primary narcissism; it is something beyond the empathizable, beyond the usual reality world in which we live. It is even beyond a narcissistic world in which we want the reflection of ourselves in other people.

— Heinz Kohut, *Empathic Environment and the Grandiose Self*

7. I think that Kris Kelvin is more consistent than both of you. In inhuman conditions, he has behaved humanely. And you act as if none of this concerns you, and consider your guests — it seems that is what you call us — something external, a hindrance. But it's part of you. It's your conscience. And Kris loves me¹.

— Hari, in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*

9. It is as if you played the chords to the Moonlight Sonata in reverse order⁴ expecting to get the Sunlight Sonata. You won't. In other words, these quietly centered paintings are the real thing³. Their bilateral forms can suddenly spin and become cross sections of radially symmetrical figures lending them an impish, Heisenberg-in-reverse "we change when unobserved" quality.

— Hills Snyder, *Is he dead? Sit you down, father. Rest you.*

10. French academics literalized language; Minimalists literalized art; and hippies, with the aid of chemical stimulants, literalized bliss. Nonverbal communication and social interaction became science⁵, and the veracity of the smile became the obsession of psychologists. Scholars fixed the meaning of the Mona Lisa (as best they could), and Andy Warhol separated the fetish from the face. Finally, the beatific smile returned in its most archaic form: the Smiley Face.

This little icon, of course, is no more indicative of pervasive happiness in American culture than the archaic smile confirms the existence of a happy ancient Greece. Although the Smiley Face's smile is beatific, it has no secret knowledge, no hint of the erotic, and no promise of ultimate bliss. "Have a nice day," after all, is not the same as "have a sublime life." The Smiley Face is just a free-floating signifier that works as well in Sunday schools as it does in commercial stores—a dematerialized grin.

— Libby Lumpkin, *The Smiley Face*

Excerpt from Snyder's murder ballad Song 44 (1997):

I've written for my true love songs forty three
I wrote them on a banjo upon my bended knee
but I could not play my instrument so they arrested me
for scratching on that tightened skin my own filigree

Dream Narrative

When sitting through the seeds and stems of our dreams, we realize that our one legged hero just might be a mushroom. In the final act he falls from the window and onto the front porch in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. We feel discomfort in our seat as he nearly lands on the pitchfork. The rural ground where he's fallen suddenly collapses beneath him into a sinkhole, or rather an underground tunnel in the shape of a doughnut. As he dusts himself off, he notices beams of light pushing in from the hole above. This oculus frames a bright blue sky that is an ocean of gratitude.

EXHIBITION NOTES

FAÇADE:
Painted submarine, screen door.

TUNNEL:

Lamista icaro, fluorescent American Gothic window.

AMERICAN GOTHIC FAÇADE AND OPPOSING

FAÇADE:

Purple mirror cross, 1000 watts, Banjo Man smiley line cut into wall, sheetrock tailings and dust remains.

LIVING ROOM:

National Geographic map of America (Point Hope to Cape Horn, 9919 miles), Book of *The Dead* lamp, rugs and checkered chair,

American Gothic window, Shipibo textiles, Bora mask and talking stick, shacapa, books, guitar, Fuzzy Logic table with *Quijote*,

Trojan Horse of Love planeta, William Tell's 199th hat, Buzzard Rally, verse from Song 44.

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that bypasses the rationality of language. In the dark chamber behind the screen door, one hears the percussive sounds of a Shacapa, a leaf bundle rattle driving an icaro, or Ayahuasca medicine song. This song helps to cleanse the mind from verbal distraction and logical notions of time and space. The repetitious patterns of Shipibo textile design, as well as the labyrinth-like pattern within the submarine painted on the front wall, are an analog for the trance-inducing sounds. Paul Devereux, in his book *The Long Trip*, posits that this kind of entoptic visual phenomena originated within prehistoric cave rituals.

The blackened corridor behind the screen door echoes Snyder's *Book of The Dead* from 2005, which also felt like a carnival funhouse operated by Dr. Parnassus. The artist considers his *Book of The Dead*, a kind of unknown preparation for his journey to Peru in 2006, since it was imagined and finished before his trip to the ancient temple at Chavin de Huántar. When working on *Book of The Dead*, Snyder was unaware of the nature of the dark passages that he would encounter at Chavin. "It turned out to be like building a baling wire time machine only to discover that it worked."

Swole Foot's way

Since the 1970's, Snyder has had an ongoing interest in what might be called a quest for "at-the-moment" experience. In myth this is often ventured by a "hero" who becomes one legged or lame. In Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, which happens to be one of David Lynch's favorites, the detached observer watches his neighbors like an American version of the French flâneur. With his leg in a cast, his injury has left him a loafer. Using his binoculars, camera and zoom lenses, he gazes over the open windows of others, drifting in and out of a summer nap. He sees amongst others, a murderer and a songwriter.

Excerpt from the script of *Rear Window*, written by John Michael Hayes:

INT. JEFF'S APARTMENT - DUSK - SEMI-CLOSEUP

Jeff lowers the long-focus lens, and turns his head to the right as he hears the first notes of the songwriter's melody which we have heard him trying to complete.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DUSK - MEDIUM SHOT

The songwriter is at the piano, poking out his melody, slowly, note by note. He is in black tie, and from the looks of the apartment he is preparing for guests. An attractive girl is setting out trays of canapés, glasses, ice and liquor. She pauses as she crosses the room carrying a tray of food. She listens a moment to the songwriter's melody. Her expression shows that it pleases her, and moves her romantically. She comments on it to the songwriter, who starts from the beginning again, playing it more fully.



I am a pharmacist
Prescriptions I will fill you
Potions, pills and medicines
To ease your painful lives
I am a lost soul
I shoot myself with rock & roll
The hole I dig is bottomless
But nothing else can set me free

And I know what's right
But I'm losing sight
Of the clues for which I search and choose
To abuse
To just unlock my mind
Yeah, and just unlock my mind

Robert Pollard, *I Am A Scientist*



I've truly vivid memories of sitting under a porch on a ranch in Texas where an acoustic guitar is played, while friends sit lazily and watch the changing landscape from that shady spot. The sound of the spring and slam of an old screen door has a way of keeping one in the moment. I'm reminded of this by the screened doorway that splits the front facade of Hill's Snyder's new project. A screen is both open and closed simultaneously like Marcel Duchamp's *Door: 11, rue Larrey* from 1926, or the front door of Sala Diaz, another shady porch where a song might be playing. Finding a cozy place that feels like home isn't common in the venues of art galleries and museums. In several of his recent projects, both as artist and as curator, Snyder subverts the austerity of these institutions by creating a comfy place to sit and peruse a bookshelf under warm lamplight. The chosen rugs, furniture, related books, objects and pictures on the wall in these areas are inviting to any visitor that might be seeking a thoughtful respite.

There is a generous and humorous doubling in Snyder's art. One thought leads to another and the stream of related associations that follow allows for an ever-expanding field of interconnected interpretations. This project also has two similar titles — a twist that can easily cause a misreading by the casual observer. The layout of this work has a front/back and left/right orientation, reminding us of our own bicameral mind. But either/or dualities aren't the only options here. There is also a canal that goes through both sides, a current

Casual Observer

