



Mitchell Wiebe
Aaron Weldon

I met Mitchell Wiebe sometime in the fall. Looking back now, it's difficult to put events from our time in order, not just because there were so many events, or because there was so little order, but because events had such peculiar joinery, as if the grammar had been learned from painting, blending like scenes from Ovid one into another. My notes from that time are written in proverbs and verse, epigrams and riddles. Writing about his work now is like looking for something important, but when I start looking for it I come across something else, which leads me to something else, and I forget what I was looking for. That's how Mitchell works too: he starts with a distraction and connecting one distraction to another in a chain of amusement, he eventually defeats causality. Mitchell does this to such a point that classical etiology dissolves altogether into a flock of gnostic sparks. His work looks grotesque, a word from *grotta* meaning cave or *Höhle* in German, which is the root of hell in English. Mitchell is guided by a sense of whimsy through something cavernous.

[*Art vs. War*]

An earlier essay on the work begins with a quote: "Art is the opposite of War." My understanding of opposites—day versus night, yes versus no, left as opposed to right—is that opposites are like wars because one thing always opposes another. It would follow then, that if Art is the opposite of War, it's only because Art doesn't have an opposite. For example, by removing the prefix "op", meaning "against", we're left with a pose and without anything to fight against, which is very unsafe, not just with reference to Art. In *The Iliad* for instance, Achilles falls into a river and battles the river with his sword until the gods have to save him out of pity. Then in the poem's last verses, soldiers compete for spoils: boxing, running, discus and so on. The boxers can sometimes lean on each other to stand up, but in the river there's nothing to lean against. The river, an allegory of time; Achilles' quarrel against nature, aging, and death is the same struggle Mike Kelley noticed when he wrote "the first corpse was the first statue."ⁱ Kelley was describing a Greek statue, an ancient type of reflection that stands opposite a viewer—as in boxing or in a mirror—until the viewer moves.

i. “Art for our Snake”

T painted a few portraits in a studio next to Mitchell, commissions for theologians who were always at the end of their lives, posing, trying to sit still. At that time Mitchell had a series of pet portraits, a genre that painters aren't supposed to do, along with puns, malapropism, black lights and fog machines. Mitchell's “be wrong, be strong” is a clear moral logic: in his work, painting is not something a person should do. He does things even painters shouldn't do. These things people shouldn't do but they do anyway—smoking, slouching and so on—are habits, and it takes a strong will to fight against habits. Just as a painter's model sits struggling with an itch or an urge to use the bathroom, habits are in this domain of actuality and of bodies where the Will can't command the heart to beat, nor does it notice the eyelids as they open and close, and in this place of hunger and thirst we find a hidden desire of the Will too, to just be free of the body and to go on living. The Will opposes Death, so the Will wants allies in the arts. Some artists start out this way, but this domain of the pancreas; of desire; of trust, poetry, attraction and the liver, can't seem to be willed properly. Not without habit.

For Mitchell, Art isn't just a habit, it is a particularly bad habit. Art is an adversary of the Will and I suspect his reason is simple: wars need, not one will, but two wills in opposition. And if Art were the opposite of War, then after the bugles the captain of Art, its noble centurion, its *gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, would just turn around and give up and the front would follow. Historians write however that Art is at the front, meaning it turns around first, not in retreat, but because Art finds something more interesting. Now Art coming back could meet the Will dashing out and the two might bump into each other as opposites. They would have to decide who should go left and who should go right but this decision is only arbitrary, the meeting only incidental, metaphorical; and the situation here is altogether different. For Mitchell, Art is not “at” the front—it *is* the front; it's at the beginning in the song itself—it is actually a song sometimes. Nevertheless, to end this paragraph, the Will goes back to battle: brave; ready for the trumpets, but instead, from a wooden tower comes some sound the Will hadn't expected, it's not exactly discord but one song prior to discord and something that causes the Will to listen.

ii. *Changing Your Colours*

In an interview Mitchell was asked how he chooses colours. His answer (“arbitrarily at best”ⁱⁱ) is like Picasso’s “if I don’t have red I use blue.” Mitchell’s colours are not tasteful nor are they dissonant. He evades choice completely. His sense of colour reminds me of Judith Harris (“to choose/ is to follow what has already been decided”ⁱⁱⁱ), which leads me to the other poem about choice “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.” Robert Frost of course is not celebrating choice either. The poem has four stanzas and in the second, he decides on his path “having perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear;” then admits “Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same”. He repeats this again in the third stanza, that neither road was more or less traveled, so in the last lines Frost isn’t reflecting on his individual choice, he’s reflecting on how he will describe his choices later (“I shall be telling this with a sigh/ Somewhere ages and ages hence:/ Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference”). Frost is imagining what he’s probably going to say. The title isn’t referring to a path less traveled, it’s not about a path Frost chose at all, it’s about the other one, the path he didn’t choose, the road *not* taken.^{iv}

Mitchell’s path might seem less straightforward. He appears to diverge into oblivion; to take every fork, and yet in colour he meets a limit. This limit can be clarified by the term “true but trivial,” a comparative often invoked by Mitchell because, although *trivia* is a word where three roads meet (*tri* and *via*), “true but trivial” makes only one distinction. The term is very much like “facts versus values” in *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts* where Iris Murdoch agrees that truth doesn’t exist in a world of facts. She then relates facts and vision, “I can only choose within a world I can see” and gives choice a limit: we can’t see morals, “there’s nothing [...] to see.”^{v/vi} For Murdoch, Frost, and Harris, a “good choice” is a contradiction in terms. For Mitchell, colour is an arbitrary decision, not because it’s just a colour but because it’s just a decision.

iii. *“You can convince me it’s art but you can’t convince me it’s interesting.”*

“A person thinking, feeling, and perceiving which occurs all at once is whole even though the person is short of information in all regards.”^{vii} The world comes together here for Donald Judd two centuries after Friedrich Schiller noticed it had come apart in the division of labour; that people were divided, made partial then dissolved and disintegrated into polity.^{viii} Schiller’s contrast between integration and integrity reflects ascetic scripture and *The Banality of Evil* where even the title suggests that if evil is banal then amusement wanders toward virtue. These three, Schiller, Arendt and Judd, might consent to one like Mitchell—Judd who wrote that art need only be interesting.^{viiv}

iv. *“Practice Makes Purple”*

For Mitchell, painting is often a passive verb, like sitting and watching or buttering toast. His work isn’t conceived as much as it is observed. He paints passively reordering categories and cognitive connections. He works on his paintings as much as they work on him—

v. “*The Proof is in the Pudding*”

Until, eventually, the plasticity of paint expires and painting the verb dies into a noun: painting dries into a painting. If a painting is proof then painters err on the living side, the side that keeps changing its story. When an artist accepts this vital fraudulence their work becomes a schtick; the paintings, props propping up a bigger picture and when the scene ends the prop or crutch becomes trash or paraphernalia. The Yiddish *Schtick* returns to its root as a German *Stück*; a “piece” or a “thing.” Mitchell’s work becomes sovereign now without context and hollow of content; an essay could easily end there, where whimsy encounters its end, its *telos* or double. But Mitchell’s work stays tied to the scene like a piece of evidence pointing now toward a missing or misplaced crime, a proof in some cold case he pulls back again by corrupting the evidence; misusing the corpus; dressing it up for another show as if the same proof could be used in any case. It’s as if labels on Mitchell’s evidentiary files were changed so often that a shovel which had once pointed toward this crime, and a mask or stick toward that crime, point now toward the one and very same crime. This doesn’t happen by chance, however; it happens because changing the labels is, in some cases, actually against the law.

The shovel, the stick, the mask and whatever else Mitchell finds around him begin to point toward a falsification of evidence. Said differently, Mitchell simplifies several cases into one case by regularly changing the subject. Although it is a single simple case, Mitchell’s work always seems so divergent because his case is nominative. In mediaeval theology, Mitchell would be considered a nominalist.

From *nom, nomen; name*: Nominalism, the idea that there is no actual connection between things and their names; their classes or categories, is itself a name and a category. Nominalism, likely a type of paradox, is an inconclusive term, an idea without an end, something you have to follow, like a moral, and yet it’s a very difficult idea to keep up with because, without names or nouns, the reader might notice how difficult it is to know what I’m talking about. This reliable confusion appears often in Mitchell’s work as parody, a parody either of language, by mimicking its appearance, or as irony wherein a phrase takes on the appearance of its opposite. Parody defines itself differently, without opposites as *Parōidia*—meaning ‘two songs sung together’; a melody split into two like a homonym, or the word ‘parody’ itself when it’s held in your mouth, the ‘d’ sharpened by taking the tip of your tongue and tapping it to your teeth, so it’s pronounced ‘t’, so the parody becomes a parity, for no other reason but to change the subject just slightly, just enough to notice how the word sounds, how the word has qualities of its own, as if it were not always about some thing but also a thing in itself.



(Hare; Byzantine, 5th century.)

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