RICHARD HELL

Poet as Eternal Student of Himself

by Richard Hell

Honest to a fault.

I started keeping notebooks and journals in 1967, at the age of 17, after I left home and came to New York to be a poet. Those pages turned out to be useful, though for a long time I doubted that because, on the rare occasions when I’d look back at them, they seemed mostly full of boring angst and navel-gazing, along with fleeting enthusiasms for this or that, and ideas that were also forgotten as soon as they were recorded. I was still too close to that person to feel much but shame and frustration at his wild fluctuations. I kept at it, though, because I didn’t know what else to do with my mind.

The pages held a roughly equal mix of personal experience (journals) and bases for works (notebooks). Actually, even though I advise my daughter now, when she mentions her journals, not to talk about feelings but to report experience, I’ve come to think about it a little differently. I’m glad I have the full record of what it was like to be that tormentedly young.

Eventually the literary fragments and ephemeral work-ideas came to have value too, even though I hardly ever carried them through directly (“movie: I want to play Roderick Usher”—summer 1974, or “Book: purely commercial collection of photos of disasters”—September 15th, 1975). The spectra of scribblings eventually felt evocative enough that I published long stretches of them cold, in their full earnest inspiration (Artifact, notebooks 1974-1980, and then Hot and Cold, which included 1988-1998). The published notebooks can also be seen as a sort of mirror image of that concept, namely that they themselves are fictional: they’re like props for a movie or a play about a certain character (“me”), or they are novels themselves (which isn’t to say that they aren’t honest—on the contrary, they are Honest to a fault.)
honest to a fault). But regardless, I love the form of notebooks. Godard’s movies are like notebooks, so are Dylan’s songs, and Picasso’s paintings.

The pages here are roughly chronological. Over the years I would also cop and save images that caught my eye, and lay them into the notebooks. That enigmatic Blimpie sub wrapper is an example. The marked-up and X-Acto-sliced transparent plastic sheet that comes next was a template for use in the creation of a book I did publish, in 1971, called uh (subtitled “flip-movie dance alphabet peepshow toy enigma boring book”). It was an alphabet, one large letter per recto (like a flip-movie), reduced to so fundamental a set of curves that it was difficult to distinguish one letter from another.
I attributed the book to “Ernie Stomach,” which is consistent with the next couple of entries, written at age 19 and 21, being that they are meditations and manifestos rejecting the concept of a rigid identity, but instead affirming one’s multiplicity and continuum of selves and that the whole range of such selves should be cultivated for works (as opposed to the old-fashioned idea of narrowing down to “find your voice”).

By late 1974 I was focusing my energy more on music than poetry. I would be a professional musician for about ten years. That’s illustrated by a page here listing prospective song titles. Then comes a big work intended for the magazine, *Slum Journal*, I was planning in 1978. It was going to be a tabloid, each page of which would work both as a graphic (like a poster) and as intellectual information (words). The face there is Jean-Luc Godard. Then a few pages of journals, including drawings, from 1986, after I’d retired from music. I started giving occasional poetry readings that year.

Now the selection skips to the late ‘90s. By then the journals were pretty much limited to travel notebooks and graphics works, because otherwise my daily writing had become channeled into my novels and professional writing assignments (pages 160–161).

The present, or recent, era in art is often characterized as the age of collage. Maybe
it’s seen clearest in painting, from which not only did the original “collage” designation originate, but where the old concept of the “masterpiece” has been superseded by the artist’s streams of works investigating or embodying every passing idea or insight, often gathered in “periods” or in concurrent discrete modes of style. The medium of the notebook inherently represents that mode of artmaking too. Notebooks might be as good as art gets in our time.