

Interviewer: What is your solution to artists' or writer's block?

Chris Caccamise: I never have 'artists block' but I do have the problem that all of my ideas are sometimes bad. The only solution to this is to make the terrible things that I am thinking about and then to be haunted by them forever.

PART I: ON PHANTASMS

By David Graeber

1.1 Medieval psychologists had a problem trying to figure out how it is possible for the mind to perceive objects in the material world, since they assumed that our minds, the seat of reason, partook of the divine, and thus had nothing in common with material objects. To explain it, they posited an intermediary system, between mind and matter, made of a substance they called pneuma, which was the same material as the stars were made of, and was the seat of the imagination. Images of material objects and the like enter through the eyes, form impressions on the pneuma, which is constantly flowing through the body, becoming phantasms—and in the process, become emotionally charged. Phantasms are always passing through us. They flicker in and out. Sometimes they recombine, fertilize one another, breed. Alternately, the pneuma can just generate new phantasms all of its own accord. One common theory of erotic love, for example, is that one is in fact in love not with a person but with a phantasmic image that comes to so dominate one's imaginative system that it sucks all the emotional energy from everything else (which can have deleterious effects as one might imagine; especially if one does not offset it by having one's own image invade someone else...)

1.2 Poets felt the highest pleasures were to be found in such phantasms: the image of one's beloved, it was assumed, was always going to be a finer and more beautiful thing than the material reality of the beloved herself, who rarely lived up to expectations and even if she did, would eventually grow old and die. (I used "herself" advisedly. Medieval poets, even female ones, always took the male point of view.) Mystics used such images as a way to attain knowledge of Platonic forms and ultimately, God. Experts on memory techniques looked to create a system out of them, a kind of code whereby vivid images could be arranged around imaginary rooms or along the path one took on one's daily walk as a way of learning poems and speeches by heart. Magicians tried to master them as a way of manipulating other people's passions.

1.3 One thread running through all this is that in every case, phantasms were seen as somehow more profound than mere material existence; the pleasures or truths to be found in them were higher and more enduring. The belief that it was possible to obtain true fulfillment by actually obtaining and possessing the material object of one's fantasies was often said to be the symptom of a kind of melancholia, an inability to break out of the mundane world of "space and size" and recognize what was ultimately important. If one really takes this idea seriously, it has some disturbing implications. For one thing, it implies that our entire civilization might be considered to be a form of clinical depression.

1.4 Consumer society, after all, is nothing but a vast apparatus for the production of day-dreams and fantasies. We are surrounded by a sort of global pneumatic system, increasingly shared by just around everyone on the planet (this is why the average American teenager is just as likely—in fact, if anything, even more likely—to know how one would go about killing a vampire than say the average resident of Transylvania), but we've also come to see imaginary phenomenon as somehow second-rate. In theory, those who produce the endless day-dream material we watch on TV do so in order to get you to watch the ads, and those who produce the packaged fantasies of what it might be like to have very white teeth and perfectly shaped hair while driving in an SUV do so with the understanding that anyone who limits themselves to

fantasizing is, essentially, a loser; that the whole point is to actually sell cars, toothpaste, and hair care products; even though they are also aware that if such sales ever did provide most people anything like the degree of life satisfaction they appear to promise, the entire consumer economy would rapidly grind to a close. Similarly, even when phantasms are marketed as values in themselves (a movie, a video game), we must feel they are slightly ridiculous, as must certainly be anyone (a trekkie, a Cultural Studies professor) who looks in them for anything profound.

1.4.1 If you think about it, this is a terrible comment on our conditions of existence. Our most intense imaginary experiences, our most vivid fantasies and aspirations, are ones we do not feel we can take seriously, to which we feel we can attach no enduring value. It seems absurd after all to attach enduring value to anything produced for commercial purposes. Commercial fantasies in turn are ostensibly only valuable if they are translated into some actual purchase, allowing experiences that we are usually perfectly well aware will almost certainly fail to live up to the fantasy.

1.4.2 Part of the problem, no doubt, is that in our obsession with seeing desire as a matter of phantasm becoming flesh, we rarely seem to notice the other side of this: the desire to become image, to turn ourselves into phantasms. Increasingly, this is becoming the true basis of our civilization. We wish to turn ourselves into phantasms, to join the pneuma. Much as in Medieval and Renaissance theories of erotic obsession, where the only antidote to being consumed from within by emotionally charged images is to become such an image in the imagination of someone else. Or perhaps, any number of other people. (The experience of having white teeth, to take an obvious example, is hardly particularly pleasurable in itself. The pleasure lies in the thought that you are thus able to colonize others' imaginative systems, whether to enchant or annoy them.) American society in particular—America always tends to lead the way in such things—appears to be increasingly becoming a kind of a game where victory is to appear on television, in no matter what capacity. It's hard to think of any other explanation for the fact that on reality cop shows, for example, even the arrestees, no matter how tawdry their crimes or how drunken and embarrassing their behavior, are reportedly in 85% of cases willing to sign the releases giving legal permission to present images of their humiliation on national television.

PART II: THE LABOR OF EPHEMERALITY

2.1 Such then is our predicament. We have established what Medieval psychologists would have recognized as an increasingly global pneumatic system, endlessly pumping out striking thoughts, images, and daydream material—which, however, with limited exceptions (certain news items perhaps?) all of us—purveyors and consumers alike—see as having virtually no enduring value. Even thoughts that ought to be profound, or that probably actually are profound, are aggressively trivialized.

2.1.1 The existence of a category “art”, which most people know to exist but about which they otherwise know almost nothing, obviously plays an important role in maintaining this situation. It's as if most of us felt the language we actually know how to speak was completely incapable of saying anything important; that other languages exist in which it would be possible to say something truly meaningful, but that we don't know them.

2.2 Chris Caccamise's sculpture is best considered as emerging from this dilemma. His work is not really, as some have suggested, “about” pop culture. It's about mind, imagination, images, reveries, thoughts, desires—phantasms—which is of course, means that a great deal of it is necessarily drawn from pop culture. There are plays on movie titles, song lyrics, reflections on zombies or the need to kill them, toy trucks and neon signs, but jumbled indistinguishably with others that are entirely personal: an apocalyptic vision, a despairing sentiment, an evil mountain, a spoof, a car speeding off a very steep ramp that might have been from some movie but probably isn't, a book one was thinking of reading, a watch

ones was considering purchasing...

2.3 This effect is enhanced by the fact that it is almost impossible to guess how the sculptures were actually made. Just about all of them are made of just three materials: paper, glue, and enamel paint. To look at them though, one would not necessarily be able to know this, let alone to guess how they came together to look like that.

2.31. To expand on this point slightly: Certainly there are many works of art where the process that went into the object's construction is meant to be visible; works that are a model in fact of the labor that went into them; others that appear to have emerged from within themselves in a long and almost ecological process of exchange between mind, hand, eye, tendons, tools, materials, so that just to look at them is to retrace the process through which they came into being. These sculptures are not like that. Even once the observer realizes they are made of paper, it is almost impossible to imagine what it must have taken to get what started as sheets of paper to end up looking like they do, to reconstruct for example what techniques and processes that took something so eminently flat and straight and turned into things so elegantly rounded. (The artists' occasional provision of videos illustrating the process using time-release photography just serves to underline this really: without being actually shown, one would not have been able to guess.)

2.4 The result is that each piece gives the impression of having emerged in a flash, or better from a flash. Each is an instant, a thought, a fantasy, a joke, a random phrase, the kind of thing that ordinarily enters one's mind for no apparent reason and soon drifts off again into the stream of imaginary substance from which it originated. Only in this case, that original passing reverie, instead of passing away, has been seized and captured by an intention, then brought carefully, painstakingly, meticulously into being (through a process one does not fully understand) as a physical object—if, at the same time, one that is so extraordinarily delicate (it is after all made of paper), that it therefore cannot help but suggest in its own fragility the very ephemerality of the original thought it embodies.

2.5 So there's a tension here. One can think of it as a tension, anyway. Or one could think of it as a paradox, or perhaps a kind of joke.

2.5.1 This tension relies partly on constantly reminding the viewer that there's something they have forgotten; even if they're never entirely sure what it is, or whether they actually have forgotten it, or just weren't supposed to consider it important, or never actually knew what it was.

2.5.2 Most of what's ordinarily forgotten has to do with work.

2.6 It's not just the artists' labor that managed to turn a fleeting thought into an object to begin with. It's also the work that allows that object to continue to exist. This is ordinarily even easier to forget, since while we are always vaguely aware that most of the objects that surround us had to be made at some point, it rarely occurs to us to put much thought into what is required to maintain them. In fact, when we look at objects unreflectively—particularly human-made objects like chairs and trucks and DVDs—or even if we ponder them philosophically (“what is the nature of the thing-in-itself?”) we tend to treat them as if they existed outside of time, and therefore, as somehow implicitly eternal. We tend to see them as Platonic forms—that is until they rot, or explode, or we eat them, but when this happens, we quickly go on to think about something else. All the more so for objects designated “art”: which, to the degree to which they are seen as essentially objects and not, say, performances, do not normally rot or explode at all but are assumed to be more or less eternal. Obviously this assumption is particularly strong in people whose experience of art is mainly of very old objects in museums. But that tends to color perceptions of any object designated “art”.

2.6.1 The monumentality of a work, its presumption of eternal existence, is of course directly related to its value. If art can be conceived as a matter of degree and not just of kind, then the more an object can be considered art, the more enduring (as opposed to passing, ephemeral, phantasm-like) value it is presumed to have. Therefore, by implication, the longer the object can be expected to exist.

2.6.2 This is of course a tacit economy: you're not supposed to think about it consciously.

2.7 It follows that works of art are always in a sense treated as monuments, unless there is some specific reason not to. Sculptures are ordinarily made of enduring materials that embody this presumptive eternity, or anyway, seem to urge one to consider it. They thus make it especially easy to forget that very few things really continue to exist entirely of their own accord; that in fact what we take to be "objects" are actually processes, and these processes are constantly changing them into something else. If they stay the same, this can only be affected by the continual application of human labor, care and attention. People have to work to maintain things: clean them, watch them, move them, keep track of them, maintain their environment, make sure they don't get wet.

2.8 A sculpture made of folded paper, on the other hand, is something that would ordinarily dissolve away quite quickly. Under normal circumstance, most things made of paper last for at most a couple days. If left outside, they're destroyed by the first rainstorm. Left inside a house (already an environment that requires constant maintenance), they'll ordinarily be crushed or thrown away, get lost, spilled on, eaten by pets or torn apart by children. If they endure, then, it is not only because of the efforts of somebody who convinced people they were valuable, but also because of an endless resultant labor of preservation. We tend to forget this work exists, or that it even is work. In fact it's the most common form of work (in the sense of expenditure of human energy that is not an end in itself): not the work of producing things, of bringing them into being, but of preserving, cleaning, tending, and maintaining them. Not of transforming materials but of striving to keep them the same. It's much of what we do most of the time, from brushing our teeth and washing dishes to trying to troubleshoot problems with our computer. The reason we don't tend to recognize such work is that we don't really value it; and the reason we don't really value it is because such work is always a way of recognizing, or constructing, the value of something else. (In the examples above these would be: our teeth, our homes and the people we share them with, our ability to access the internet, respectively).

2.8.1 As the previous examples make clear, the objects we spend most of our time maintaining are things we value primarily as a medium for relations with others, of some social world, real or imagined (as we've already seen, this is to some degree true even of teeth). Art is part of that somewhat more unusual class of objects that we see as values in themselves, valuable as objects rather than as ways of creating or maintaining relations with others. (I will not here enter into the question of whether this is true.)

2.9 It thus emerges there are really three types of labor at play here. There is the original, creative work of the artist. There are the efforts that establish the value of the work—not only by the artist, but by other artists, critics, gallery owners, collectors, curators, readers of art trade magazines, people who write essays like you're reading now. This might be considered the work's audience in the broadest possible sense, but most are in no sense passive spectators. And finally there is the labor of maintaining the object and its environment in recognition of that value. One is generally speaking, individual; the next, social; the third, almost entirely anonymous and self-effacing. All of them must necessarily lie behind anything considered a work of art. What is so provocative about Chris Caccamise's work is that at each of these three cases they tweak the viewer, remind us, in however good-natured and whimsical a fashion, that there's something we ordinarily forget. How can sheets of paper turn into the same shape as water would have if magically lifted from a swimming pool? How does an apparently random phantasm of just the sort we ordinarily feel is almost utterly without enduring value when it passes through our head turn into a work of art, something which we take to be the very definition of enduring value? What does it take to get it there? What does it take to ensure something made out of paper continues to exist—if not forever, then anyway, until the Sun burns out?

3.1 Perhaps it is only by tearing something from the pneuma in this way—gently, methodically, playfully, even—that one can ever become aware that it exists.