

POEM

You could do a lot worse than art.
I like plaid flannel shirts, but maybe
you're into cute dresses or deerskin.
Maybe you're into hopped-up IPA's.
Maybe when I say hopped-up you think
of rabbits or you think of crank.
It's all okay. Associations are always
okay. But have some intentions
for your work, if only after the fact
of making it. Don't leave meaningfulness
to chance. Chance operations are fun—
especially removing the spleens
of your friends. You can try this
at home, but for you it may work better
in a bar or an ice skating rink. Find yourself
a process that works. Or find many of them.
Think about what you've done, what you want
to do, and what you're doing. No one else will
do it for you. Don't make yourself ignorable
by not making decisions. On the other hand,
nobody knows what art is, and
anyone who says otherwise is merely
limiting your possibilities. Turn tail and run
in the other direction when you can.
When you can't, turn into Grendel
and wreck the mead hall. Making art

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is a value in and of itself, and if your art isn't like what some supposed authority on the matter, X, thinks art should be, that only goes to show how little they know about the history of art, not to mention things like imagination, creativity, and vision. Remember Van Gogh. Read Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Read *A Giacometti Portrait* by James Lord. Read the "Ryme of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Read *HOWL and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg for god's sake. These are all books about faith and perseverance in art. You will need them to continue. Setbacks will occur, and you need to be ready. If somebody tells you can't include: stars, trees, birds, the human heart, leaves, grass, dogs, babies, etc. in your art, immediately make a great piece that includes all of those things to prove that they are wrong. If the first piece you make which includes all of those things isn't to your liking, then make another one and another one until you make one you like, OR, alternately, make a whole body of work where you include the "impossible to use" or "impossible to use well" things one at a time. As for originality, forget about it. You will be original because you have been able to tap in to what makes you uniquely weirdly, brilliantly who you are, but it's important to note that who you are has been shaped by all the art

you've been astonished by, all the experiences you've had, the music you've listened to, the books you've read. Nobody creates out of a void. The poet Dean says that the highest achievement of the human consciousness is the imagination and the highest achievement of the imagination is empathy. I say additionally that through empathy we find our feet with the world, connecting the self to the other viscerally. These connections are our finest sort of human entanglement. The imagination—and thus art—allows us to recognize and be moved by the similarities between us—which is the basis for appreciating difference. Make your work payoff meaningfully in proportion to the amount of work you expect a viewer to do to get it. Be as worried about avoiding hermeticism as you are about avoiding the sentimental and saccharine. You could do worse than humanity. When something works for you, celebrate wildly, then resist it in future works. People like to be understood and listened to. Be genuinely interested in other people and what they're doing, and they will be genuinely interested in you and what you're doing. If they aren't, too bad for them. Not everybody's kind, and there are so many thousands of people making art whom you can be friends with and build a community with. You can do better than mean, snarky people. Also, everybody needs a nemesis—a nemesis that isn't themselves or their mother—so you can choose one (or a hundred) from among the mean people, but you should do this mostly only to ignore them. Don't waste time being angry and negative, and complaining. Instead make more work. If any of this is contradictory, that's par for the course. Welcome

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to art. You could do worse, e.g.
Welcome to Syria 2013. Welcome to the Lord's
Resistance Army. You are five or you are
seven. Remember: Ambiguity isn't vagueness
anymore than Justin Timberlake is a landfill.
Association and disjunction are entirely different things.
Just because there's a story *behind* your painting—
because a story was the impetus for your painting—
doesn't make it narrative. Sometimes form *is*
content. This may or may not be something
you're comfortable with. Go to dances. Do karaoke.
Be willing to look stupid. Nonsense really is serious
business. There is such a thing as called the soul,
but probably not in the way that I or anyone else
thinks about it. Forget about business. Forget
about jobs. An art education is about getting
a creative education—one that will allow you
to deal imaginatively and resourcefully with any situation
life throws at you, any materials, any instructions,
any employer. The creative mind is a mind on fire.
The mind of the artist is a valuable thing to everyone.
Often even artists' failures are brilliant. In art,
your genius is your error, because art must be
“a debacle of the intellect” (Breton). You can't be
out of control-in control, but in art you have to be

a bad artist not to be. I said that somewhere else. Also, don't obfuscate. It's annoying. Don't expect others to be able to interpret your work if you haven't put the time in to make it about something, On the other hand, not everything needs to be solved, especially not (in) art. Works of art aren't puzzles, secret codes, or witnesses beholden to the facts. Swear to tell the Truth, including all the lies. Sabotage, thievery, and failure are three of my most favorite artistic values. Maybe they're yours as well. "Always do the opposite of anything I tell you" is something I wrote elsewhere as well, but I think it applies here more than ever. You can't do better than art.