I'LL LET YOU BE IN MY DREAM IF I CAN BE IN YOURS

In a January 2005 correspondence over e-mail Lisi Raskin and Marc Handelman talk about Errol Morris's film *The Fog of War*, their work, and some other things relating to killing.

MARC: You know, *The Fog of War* left me in a bit of a fog myself. I got sort of confused by all the different lessons. I've got them all written down here, but some of the most interesting things that came up were often smaller points he just touches on. One thing in particular that I thought of regarding our work was when he said, "The human race needs to think more about killing, about conflict." Strangely, [ROBERT] McNamara is coming at it from the point of view of both the "master of war" and the pacifist—an architect of violence and a humanist. You've talked a lot about your need for an imagination about death, and clearly it's right there below the surface of nearly every piece you make. But it always seems less a political or conceptual engagement for you than a psychological and deeply personal one. You almost seem to take as much pleasure in those thoughts as you do in freaking out over them. Maybe your anxiety is really about your attraction to the diabolical?

LISI: It's true that my engagement with the subject matter, that of killing and conflict, is more of a personal and psychological one. In fact, it is rooted in my search for artistic leaps that are only possible within the climate of fear of death. If I can get scared enough, then my fear becomes a conduit. I find that this desperation allows me to take chances or make moves that otherwise might not occur to me. In these moments (artistically speaking) nothing is at stake because the objects themselves would be instantly evaporated by the shockwave of a thermo-nuclear explosion. But my imagination is activated by this fear and this is as much a strategy for making art as anything else. This is also why I like to smoke pot when I think about nuclear war. Marijuana causes you to lose your short-term memory. So instantly, I can overcome the fact that I can't get as scared as I used to when I was little. Marijuana overrides the mechanisms that I have developed to keep myself from getting paralyzed by my fear.

MARC: A friend of mine recently told me about a true story that he read years ago that always stuck with him. In it there's this woman who is totally beside herself, in a state of near paralysis because she thinks there's an atomic bomb inside of her. The doctors exchange glances and smile, but of course the deepest pathology is that rational human beings made atomic and nuclear weapons in the first place. Those buffers become part of that pathology and I suppose are as necessary as they are perverse. But while we can't all just sit around immobilized by fear, you can really understand someone losing their mind in the face of the potential for that level of annihilation. A lot of us have those nightmares anyway. It reminds me of that Dylan song "Talkin' WWIII Blues." You're on the psychiatric couch and you're telling the doctor that you've had a bad dream. The doctor says "oh those dreams are only in your head," but of course your nightmares are never totally pure fantasy. McNamara's comments on how incredibly close we were to a nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis reminded me of how fragile that threshold really can be. Dylan's song gives a sense of the mixture of lunacy and normalcy created by living in a nuclear age.

LISI: I think we are in an interesting generational space, regarding the lunacy and normalcy of living in a nuclear age. I mean, we grew up during the Reagan era, when the country had long given up hopes of surviving a nuclear war. We had stopped the practice of those absurd duck-and-cover drills yet continued to stockpile intercontinental ballistic missiles that were thousands of times the strength of the bomb dropped at Hiroshima. It's almost as if we acknowledged our imminent doom and cast aside the stupidity and optimism of modernism and progress. Dylan's characterization of nuclear war, one in which there are only a few people remaining in America, is definitely a post-Hiroshima fantasy. That level of annihilation could really only be achieved by a full-on arsenal exchange. It is funny though, I mean at the height of the Cold War, eight Soviet missiles would have hit New York City and let's say ten warheads per missile—well, that's eighty blasts. So imagine if you survived that—this is so unlikely that it's comical—you'd probably only live for three extra days before you died a horrible death from radiation poisoning

and shat out your own stomach, but nonetheless you'd be one of the only ones around. I don't know if you'd be up for stealing a Cadillac and having sex with the last woman on earth.

But I agree that the prospect of the human race thinking more about killing and conflict is a compelling point. Maybe that is why I wanted to watch *The Fog of War* with you in the first place, although the film itself is sort of arbitrary. But that firebombing shit about Japan was astounding, I mean after all of that firebombing, how the fuck could they drop atomic bombs? And I think to myself, after you melt and liquefy people, can the atom bomb be worse? Well the atom bomb fucks with your genetics so now you have Japanese babies with no noses! Dropping the bomb on the Japanese killed their culture on a cellular level.

MARC: It kind of freaked me out when you suggested that my Japanese grandparents, who died young from leukemia and cancer, probably suffered the effects of radiation exposure. Strangely I never put that together. You know, my grandfather saw the flash from as far north as Tokyo. He was fishing at a lake and thought it was just beautiful. In the film *Atomic Café* that we watched last year together there's a scene of the pilots on the runway outside of the *Enola Gay* [AIRPLANE] right after dropping [THE NUCLEAR WEAPON] *Fat Man*. One of them said to the reporters: "it was pretty as a picture." And now they actually have a pretty coffee-table book of nuclear test explosions called *100 Suns* and they are unbelievably beautiful, just gorgeous.

The iconic quality of the mushroom cloud is important too. I think part of the psychology of the A-bomb was this very feature. An atomic bomb was one detonation, one blast, one light source and its simplicity in terms of how totalizing its destruction was, as a concept, becomes almost aesthetic. It was the bomb of all bombs. And as far as McNamara's lessons are concerned, unlike the firebombing of Japanese cities, proportionality was considered. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were to have saved lives. In that light it almost sounds ethical, but atomic weapons are fundamentally designed for maximizing destruction. If the technology had been available in 1945 to make the A-bomb as powerful as a nuclear missile, we cease to have such a "life-saver" of a weapon. But there are more uncomfortable ironies too, including one my dad told me about: after Nazi Germany fell, we sent in a team of American scientists to search for enriched uranium and plutonium and to see just how far along Nazi atomic capabilities had been developed. As it turns out we not only found some radioactive substance but also used it in the bomb for Nagasaki. So the actual radioactive material from what would have been the most diabolical and terrifying Nazi weapon became an American one, and one that was used.

So now that we are having nightmares about "dirty bombs" . . . I wonder if September 11 for us was like a conduit to an imagination about death. It does seem like the country has more of an imagination about death these days, maybe even more so than during the Cold War.

LISI: Yeah, apparently the Nazis attempted to send the Japanese some uranium via a U-boat [U-234] but it never got there. Maybe that is the uranium your Dad was talking about, from boat U-234. I named my most recent installation after that boat. But nightmares about dirty bombs or not . . . Was September 11 a conduit for imagination about death? Well for you and me definitely, 9/11 was an invitation to ponder all of the wonderful ways to die, but I only got to this imagination space via experiencing the horror of 9/11, being traumatized by the media, and finally resolving to ignore the media. I remember when I decided to stop looking at the news because it was around the time of the anthrax scare. I was walking down the street with Halsey [RODMAN] and there was an armed guard at the 125th street 1/9 [SUBWAY] station and I just couldn't take it anymore. I mean, I kept having these fantasies about everybody dying on the subway and some weird longing and nostalgia for my own demise. But I'm not sure what happened with the majority of the country. I mean what effect did the images of the towers have on people? I was in New York as you were. I saw the second plane hit and watched the towers start to burn from the safety of the twenty-second floor of my apartment building on 125th street. This afforded a certain perspective; I was not immersed in the hysterical unreality of Ground Zero. But I do remember this confused feeling, like a desire for a mirror for my experience. It wasn't enough for me that other people saw it too, I needed the news media to confirm what was going on before my own eyes. And boy did they. They chose one image and replayed it over and over again. They usurped it and lathered it up with a nationalistic agenda before there was even time to formulate a considered response to the tragedy. This was the first preemptive strike.

So I think a conversation about the place we're in as a country as a whole needs to begin with the removal of the firsthand experience of being in New York during 9/11 and the discontinuity of living in a place that was simultaneously the most likely and least likely target for another attack (according to the statistics of a plane crash, if one just went down the plane you are on is somehow safer). So situate yourself in another location in America. I'm not sure what happens then. But I don't think that the entire country has more of an imagination about death right now. I mean

imagination—at least my imagination—is greatly aided by images, of course, but I also need the time and space to consider these images. With 9/11, we were already told (wanted to be told) what to think about it. It was so fast and radical that there was hardly a moment for contemplation. The response by the media was too immediate. And regarding Iraq, we hardly have any images of this war. I am still waiting to see my first nineteen-year-old homeless amputee veteran—god forbid. I mean how can you invent with no muse? An imagination about death thrives on the same principles as drawing from life. Even if you are using your information in the most metaphorical and least pedestrian of ways, drawings from information are always more interesting and developed than drawings from memory. There is a triangulation that occurs between the object, your brain, and the paper. And the term "drawing from memory" isn't even accurate; it is more like drawing from a lack of information.

MARC: I know what you mean about the void of images of the war in Iraq right now. The government learned its lesson about the media during the Vietnam War. On the other hand—and this applied especially during the Cold War—the lack of images today elevates the ambiguity of the situation and how you can manipulate people's feelings about it. What McNamara really needed was a complacent populace. Today's administration needs America to be afraid, and in a way to "draw from memory." In particular, the threat of terrorism grows bigger and stranger in our minds if the only thing we can see is the afterimage of the twin towers or "Code Orange." But Ground Zero is the ultimate image of the void. Like the nineteenth-century Sublime, it replaces thought, and is beyond expression. Against all this our imaginations rush to fill out the other narratives including what could happen to us again.

LISI: But there wasn't a lack of images about the Cold War. Movies like *Failsafe*, *The Day After*, and *Dreams*, contributed to the zeitgeist, as did post-punk music, new wave pop, Kathy Acker, Samuel Delaney—I mean the list is endless of literary, filmic, and musical imagery about nuclear war. In this imageless climate what America is most afraid of is any disruption in the ease of our lifestyle—much more so than dying at the hand of a terrorist. I think people have reacted to this war in a very external way. I mean if there had been a World Trade Center attack in every state maybe it would be different but since the majority of America has not experienced civilian casualties on a firsthand basis, especially to the degree that people in other parts of the world have, it is easy to keep this war in Iraq at an arm's distance or not think about it at all. I think that images would both greatly aid the humanization of this war and up the ante on fear experienced by the public in this country.

MARC: Well, I think there is a difference between the fear of the war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism. With the threat of terrorism, like the former threat of communism and a Soviet missile attack, there is a kind of codependency of ambiguity and invisibility that stirs paranoia and creates fear. And it is the invisibility of this new threat that fosters complacency towards a war like the one we are in right now. I really agree with you though about the need for more images.

LISI: But wouldn't you say that if anyone were really paying attention, they would realize that our soldiers are being "terrorized" (for lack of a better term) in Iraq with actual terrorism (or non-conventional warfare) as opposed to the state-sponsored propaganda about a pending threat? I mean those guys can't drive a mile without someone being blown up by an improvised explosive device or a whole group blown to smithereens at lunchtime. I mean fuck, let's think about how that would feel tonight at dinner if half our dinner guests blew up. The problem with Americans right now is that we are exactly like Sam Lowry and his mother in the film *Brazil* when they're dining in that fancy restaurant and there is a bombing—nothing happens to their particular party so they just move tables and continue with their meal. When I think about the war in Iraq, I think about the insurgents and how successful their campaign to demoralize and destroy the U.S. military presence has been. I agree that on a domestic level, the administration's "war on terror" functions according to the principles you mentioned, but the ontological reality of the war in Iraq has everything to do with the kind of bricolage terrorist effect/action orchestrated by the type of factions that envisioned the 9/11 attacks—ingenuity with little means and a tremendous imagination about killing and death.

When contemplating the blind spot of the American public right now it feels really relevant to think about Henry Kissinger: the insidious character who has permeated our cultural consciousness. In many ways we have become him. We are living in an age when the American public has no conscience. Like Kissinger we will never confess, never admit anything. I guess I wanted to start with *The Fog of War* because the first time I saw it, Kissinger's ghost lingered in the living room with me, making McNamara seem more pathetic at every turn. Kissinger is diabolical because he leads a double life—on one hand he is hyperaware of the atrocities he has committed and on the other

hand he denies them and is just obsessed with his legacy and lifestyle. I find this dichotomy fascinating!

MARC: I think I know what you mean about that kind of fascination. You want to know how people are capable of the unbelievable things they do. Just how conscious are they? Or are we?

LISI: I like [STANLEY] Kubrick's caricature of Kissinger as Dr. Strangelove. Incidentally, the title of my [FEBRUARY 2005] lecture at the American Academy [IN BERLIN] is "Time and Space Travel or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb." Kissinger is on the board of trustees [AT THE ACADEMY]; maybe I will get to meet him. But regarding McNamara versus Kissinger and even [DONALD] Rumsfeld, I think it is interesting to distinguish between those who portray themselves as helpless and smart men who just got caught up in the machine and those who play the ridiculous role of the poker-faced innocent obscuring the fact that they are diabolical killers totally obsessed with their legacy. And if we make this kind of distinction, what happens? I mean is McNamara worse than Kissinger? Is Hitler worse than [AUGUSTO] Pinochet? Were the Germans living under Hitler who were complicit and ignored the slaughter of millions really worse than we are in present day America? Who is Rumsfeld? How do we evaluate evil?

MARC: Evaluating and even defining evil would get really blurry here. But this was what was so threatening and radical to many when Hannah Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.[1] She redefined the parameters of what constituted the roots of evil and dissolved the model of the diabolical and conscious mass killer into the unconscious bureaucrat. This whole idea of banality really freaked people out—it was just too extreme a notion for many to handle. Arendt's thinking was that this particular kind of evil came out of an incredible shallowness, and an inability to reflect and think critically about what one did—in essence, an inability to locate meaning in one's actions—and that this thoughtlessness was what allowed evil to spread. She uses the metaphor of the spreading of fungus, with its inability to "go deep," rootless and spreading quickly across the surface. Arendt does ask an interesting question: does examining and reflecting on one's actions conditions men against evildoing? McNamara's reflections and ultimately his lessons are his attempt on some level for redemption, but many aspects of his logic are their own undoing.

The metaphor of the fog here is a little ironic too, particularly for a modern war. Like the dreamy space in that famous Goya etching of a man at his desk with demons descending on him in his sleep, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. But sueño [SLEEP] also translates as "dream," creating very different implications. For McNamara, the idea is that in hindsight these rules might just bring you above the fog to give you some perspective, but in a way the insanity and confusion of modern war, the fog itself, seems to grow out of all of these pathologies of reason. For example, you have IBM tabulation machines calculating bombing runs for Americans against the Japanese, and simultaneously [IBM SUBSIDIARY DEHOMAG IS] customizing Hollerith tabulation machines for the Nazis to organize and map the Jewish populations, streamline transportation to the camps, and have the whole thing running like clockwork. The empirical, the scientific, and Reason as liberational truths? I mean, rationality itself begins to dissolve against something like the Holocaust, but these pathologies are much bigger than simply those of the Germans. When McNamara talks about inefficient proportionality of deaths in the firebombing of Japanese cities . . . well that kind of logic is like the softer padding they now use on lethal injection tables! On the one hand, one of McNamara's lessons reminds us "rationality will not save us" and another cautions to "maximize efficiency."

LISI: Yes, once you have McNamara deconstructing or even describing the events it is like he is right back there at the think tank reliving the glory days when the fate of the entire world was in his hands. And I love how he built his career as a number cruncher obsessed with data. So we see firsthand how even McNamara's memory has buffers, even his hindsight has dangerous implications. For me, deconstructing my ability to obfuscate fear through the rational and undo the social dose of Xanax that I was prescribed is the key to conscience. Otherwise it is too easy to feel innocent and I am not innocent, my credit card debt and CitiBank student loans are in part financing the war.

I'm really glad that you bring up Arendt! And I am glad we are co-reading the book together. I found something that I wanted to share with you, and it is the answer to the question of why no Jew revolted. According to Arendt, "There are many things worse than death, and the S.S. saw to it that none of them was ever far from their victims' minds and imaginations."[2] So this is imagination about dying that is dying being everything that leads up to that moment of death, which is actually a release. Incidentally, this year is the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and there are programs all over German television about it from documentaries to dramas.

MARC: This is an imagination about death and killing of the "master of war." But I think that having an imagination about the diabolical gives you some agency and some comfort only if it prevents you from believing the illusion that you are totally immune to those horrors as a victim, but more importantly as a perpetrator.

LISI: So Marc, when you were obsessed with the Hollerith machines and putting yourself into the role of the inventor behind things like lethal injection mechanisms, I was interested in the space you created for yourself—I mean the space that made it alright to talk and think about such horrible things because the final product was art.

MARC: There's a really long, and probably still confused answer to that. I think ultimately there was this feeling, and there still is, of discomfort, fear, and fascination of what incredible violence and destruction human beings are capable of—and I'm not talking about Jeffrey Dahmer or killers here, but "normal" people. I can remember looking through all of my dad's books on Nazism growing up, and fixating on a bowl of fruit, or a cat in the background of a photo of an S.S. office or something. It's about a kind of banality, or normalcy, only some of it related to Arendt's banality. So both of our fathers are obsessed with Hitler—like a lot of Jewish men—but I'm always thinking about the civilian population, the everyday Germans under the Third Reich, some teenagers in love, a family, carpenters, engineers, designers . . . even artists.

Anyway, fantasizing and attempting to get close on some level to those horrible things rendered them a little less elevated, a little less privileged, and it de-radicalized them. I guess I felt that if on some level you could identify with some aspect of these pathologies within yourself, well then somehow there was some kind of agency afforded, or, I don't know . . . redemption? Not from any acts committed, but from the fear and guilt I have from the simple fact of the human potential for it all. But this kind of self-implication becomes forced and always artificial in the context of art. To go back to Arendt, you can't really simulate banality. The banality she's talking about negates any process where one seeks meaning. So I started thinking more specifically about images at that point—like how could these machines be aestheticized to promote them and their pathologies, and where do certain blind spots in image making for me link up with correlating features in propaganda, like beauty, desire, and pleasure? But for the real engineers and designers it's so much less lofty—it's just a job.

So, in your work, have you left behind the roles of the scientist and businessman? What about the role of the artist?

LISI: I don't feel like I have left behind the roles of businessman and scientist. Lately in my studio, I feel like the technician who is assembling the control panels, dials and gauges for my Control Room, but for some reason I can become this technician without naming him. And tomorrow, I could just as easily become the real estate agent trying to sell you plots of land on Mars—there is no difference in the characters, really. I mean they are all about allowing for a space that is about interacting (enacting) my obsession with the diabolical. Sometimes the diabolical is really close to home, and sometimes I have to invent the specifics—they aren't so autobiographical. But my protagonists always know that they are up to no good. Maybe because this is the most subversive and powerful position until it is named—like Kissinger has been named so some of his power has been taken away.

MARC: So it's become about the mode of work or design and less about the character of the maker? In your world there are scientists, engineers, space cadets, nuclear technicians, real estate agents, soldiers . . . are there artists too? As you know, one of my favorite paintings is by Phillip Guston and is called *The Studio*. In it there's a Klansman, hooded and all, painting a self-portrait by a window. For Guston, artmaking was ethically unelevated, but very much a part of the rest of the world: drinking, smoking, reading, sleeping, and, of course, "plotting and planning." There's a bit of the "banality of evil" in that entire series of paintings don't you think? Where does "making art" enter the imaginative space of your work?

LISI: I'm not really sure. Maybe in the form of the "toxic event" as abstract expressionism. I once heard that all of Pollock's drip paintings were about the A-Bomb. Maybe it is where art and other activities overlap? I mean the tradition of bricolage sculpture and the tradition of improvised explosive devices is pretty close both aesthetically and conceptually. The imperative is to make something that works with the stuff you found or have lying around.

MARC: Well, one of McNamara's lessons is "Belief and seeing are both often wrong." I guess the bomb scare at Columbia University from your bricolage sculpture speaks pretty well to that slippery slope. Still, I know what you mean when you're just walking around and benign things start presenting themselves in really dark narratives . . . but then again those radioactive fallout shelter signs all over the city don't exactly help. ⁋

FOOTNOTES

1 [*Eichmann in Jerusalem* was originally published as a series of articles in *The New Yorker* reporting on the 1961 trial of Nazi Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann. Arendt's critics lambasted her for using the trial coverage as a front for meandering philosophical investigations of the Holocaust. In defense, Arendt added a postscript to the book, stating that her report was solely for the purposes of evaluating whether the Jerusalem court properly executed justice. First published in book form in 1963, Arendt's text remains a seminal work on the nature of justice in the modern world. Ed.]

2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem:A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Penguin Press, 1994), 12.