

HOWE, PAUL M., M.F.A. Sculpture As a Strategy For Living. (2012)  
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I have never attempted a coherent articulation of my intuitive need to make art.  
An inarticulate theoretical groundwork for the production of my art becomes problematic  
when sharing that art.

Relentless studio practice under the critical lenses of the art and art history  
faculties has afforded me direction in seeking and formulating my articulation.

Art making is a logical and rigorous strategy for improving the quality of my life,  
and potentially the lives of those that I share my life with.

SCULPTURE AS A STRATEGY FOR LIVING

by

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## SCULPTURE AS A STRATEGY FOR LIVING

### **Introduction**

I intuitively took to sculpture as a strategy for living six years ago. I did not understand it then. I only loved it stupidly and inconsiderately like a teenager would. I am for the first time beginning to articulate this strategy I have chosen.

I am still uncertain about many things. I will stick with what I know about my sculpture, and what has been helpful to me in the studio. I will attempt to organize the fleeting fragments of my wisdom into something useful here.

### **History**

My father always told me to make sure that I loved what I did to earn my living. He loved what he did with all of his heart, and it showed in the quality of his step and smile, so I could always take this advice of his very seriously. My father was a mason of exceptional talent, and hard physical labor always seemed to me to be his source of joy in his work. His is my model, and I have found that I love hard physical labor too, in spite of the fact that I am intelligent and educated enough to avoid it for the rest of my life if I wanted to. Some people have called me crazy for this. Hard physical labor is typically reserved for those without an education. I do not accept that thinking. Although it is sometimes punishing and brutal and despite the fact that it is not a financial necessity, I cannot survive spiritually without it. It is the source of romance and creativity in my life.

The money I earn by my sweat and blood is worth ten times more to me than the money I earn through more bureaucratic, professional, disembodied forms of labor. When I weld all day in the hot sun I not only earn money but I earn a hard won discipline, a healthy body, an appetite, a thirst, an endurance, a clear head, and a sure sense of place in the tradition and legacy of a trade. The ethos of hard, tangible work and of visceral physical engagement with the environment is something I hold near and dear and always have.

This forms the immutable core of what I have come to call my practice, and it is where my earliest sculpture was born. However, as I have matured, I have found that this attitude alone is simply not enough. A more nuanced look at what I do is called for. My definitions of “practice” and “sculpture” and the relationship between these two complex terms may prove helpful here.

### **“Practice”**

My practice no longer consists wholly of hard physical labor. It has evolved considerably through the years. I can build a fire in the rain, pilot a canoe, sharpen a blade, cook meals, fix, maintain, and modify automobiles and bicycles, cut hair, lay up fiberglass, build furniture, sew, fix and make my own tools, fabricate and erect steel, lay stone, brick, and block, pour concrete into any shape, paint, frame a house, tie all sorts of knots, demolish things safely, cast various metals, move heavy things, move dirt with a shovel all day if I have to, throw and fire pottery, draw, design, grow vegetables, and roll my own tobacco – all very well. I make time to read many books a year, listen to music

that demands patience, take long walks, study and play chess, watch films, go to museums of all kinds, have meaningful romances and friendships, and climb trees.

This is a slice of my practice as it stands today, a representative cross section. I have expanded my definition of my practice recently, to include anything that I do for the pleasure taken in the act of doing it, as long as these actions provide me with physical and/or spiritual sustenance. Anything that I do with deliberate and effective positive effort, *for myself*, is my practice. My sculpture is in large part a distillation and codification of this practice of mine. This much is clear to me.

### **“Sculpture”**

My sculpture is the part of my life that I am struggling the most to elucidate. My sculpture may be anything that I do with deliberate and effective effort *for others*. Being for others, my sculpture is *a translation or abstraction of my practice into forms more diplomatic and accessible, and therefore potentially more useful*. We all have practices, no matter who we are. My sculpture serves as a medium or conduit for dialogue and exchange between my practice and other individuals’.

For example, fixing an automobile engine is a part of my practice that requires a particular kind of patience and attention in order to create the right kind of focus to do the work correctly. I want to share this with others and to let them know that this kind of intense experience exists, since I find it artful and therefore worthy. But to appreciate directly this patience and attention and to grasp its resulting focus, one has to have an understanding of how an automobile engine works, how it breaks, and how it can be

fixed. Not everybody has this knowledge. I do not have time to teach it to everybody. I do not really want to, and not everyone cares to learn it in the first place. However, this need not stop me from expressing effectively the patience and attention that leads to the effective focus that is at the core of having the artful experience of fixing the automobile engine. Instead, I can take a tangential approach. I could translate it. Perhaps I might painstakingly wrap string around a carefully constructed conical frame. Over a mile of string maybe, with not a single gap or overlap, all of it laid perfectly against itself in one, long, continuously focused spiral, down to a point. The form of a cone offers a physical embodiment of the act of focusing while the finished product makes evident the patience and attention required for its realization. The sculptural object allows a space for viewers to reflect on their own patience, attention, and focus, as it relates to their practice of everyday life. If this happens, I have done my job well and have effectively conveyed a subjective experience and personal value by way of abstract form. This is at the heart of abstraction no? Its purpose? A red square means something different than a blue circle. A straight inked line means something different than a curved or a kinked painted one. Finding new and effective ways of abstracting my private experience, of objectifying by way of material form, is at the heart of my enterprise.

This example, however, is misleading in its oversimplification of the process. I need to take my own example apart and explain further. Any idea of what my sculpture is “about” and what I am trying to “communicate” often comes in retrospect. My previous description of string wrapped into a conical form loosely corresponds to a sculpture that I have made, but it is not a sculpture that I had set out to make exactly “about” the

patience, attention, and resulting focus required to fix an automobile engine correctly. These are just verbalizations and abstractions attached to the sculpture after its completion. I am sure I could come up with a lot of other ideas of what that sculpture is “about.” All of them might be true, and no answer would stand out. I am sure other people could come up with a lot of other ideas about it as well. All of them might be true, and again no answer would stand out. I do not think about how to supply these kinds of exact ideas, explanations, and descriptions of my experience or where they come from. I do not think any one particularity of my experience is even worth consciously objectifying into sculpture. I only think about how best to make sculpture that will act as a provocative prop to promote any kind of meditative and thoughtful space for people to bring their own experiences and ideas into. It is not exactly clear to me how I accomplish this, if I even do.

I wonder if, as in the case of fixing the automobile engine, many of the other activities in my practice require patience and attention to arrive at the narrow focus that gets a job done correctly. And I wonder if, since I spend a lot of time having these kinds of experiences, they become a significant part of me, they become a larger construct or model concerning how things should be done. Perhaps through my practice I form habits of experience and perception that get reenacted in the studio. If I am going to define my sculpture as a translation of my practice, it would make sense for me to translate ideas and attitudes I know well, (perhaps so well that I take them for granted) so that I can stand behind them throughout the protracted process of making a large sculpture in order to ensure an unequivocal result.

I am using patience, attention, and focus, as just one an example here. They do not make up the entirety of the attitudes surrounding my practice. An attachment to hard physical labor, clever problem solving, and thrift are some other highly prized qualities, and there are many others. The important point to note is that any and all attitudes I have developed through my practice will inevitably find their way into my sculpture, since these attitudes are the raw material of my mind and act as anchor points in the studio.

### **Strategy**

While I have set forth a rough approximation of my strategy, something else is happening too. This something else might explain my reticence in telling others what my sculpture is “about,” and points clearly to the inadequacy of my first example of arriving at sculpture. While making sculpture, something might happen I did not expect, or I am moved emotionally in an unfamiliar direction. There is this “gut” feeling always present while in the studio that I have to rely on to make decisions when these kinds of tough-to-swallow things are happening. Perhaps some unfamiliar part of me creeps in, or some repressed part of me. It is sharp and I can not ignore it. I am compelled to follow it tentatively towards its consummation. This is an example of my sculpture revealing to me something I did not know about myself. Here is where my sculpture translates itself back into my everyday practice.

I find this happening more and more as I set out to make sculpture. It is not simply that I impose my will on my materials as I make sculpture. At a certain point, I find myself face to face with the stark truth that materials themselves impose their will

upon me. Materials have limits, I often run into them, and they push back. I also have my own limits, my own thresholds that are often reached. Here then, there is a real dialogue, a real exchange happening. I am learning something, because when this happens I must make a critical compromise in one direction or another, or I must adjust my reason, or even invent reasons. My practice of daily life and my sculpture now become mutually dependent. One informs the other. They are constantly mingling, conversing, and bumping into each other. This can leave me very raw and uncomfortable, but if I can manage to adjust my practice and my sculpture in accordance with each other, I can move both myself and my work forward.

This is where my decision to make sculpture becomes a very rigorous and logical strategy for living. If I can maintain in my life both a personal practice and a public sculpture for others, and if they are informing each other constantly, I can draw a great deal of strength and flexibility from this arrangement. I can remain dynamic, curious, responsible and engaged. Above all, this arrangement will allow me to remain honest. My sculpture is a strategy for honesty.

By holding my sculpture separate as something created for others and by going to great lengths to make it available, I gain great insight from my audience about myself and my personal practice. This feedback allows me to adjust my practice and thinking accordingly before creating new work. I am constantly refining myself in this way, constantly whittling away dross or else carefully constructing new understandings as future points of departure.

Any way I cut it, my decision to make sculpture is my strategy for living the honest, hardworking, dynamic, and fruitful life that I want for myself, and for all of the lives that my life touches, no matter how difficult the challenges may be.

### **Further Acknowledgement**

My father probably could have been a sculptor, and a good one, but he was never exposed to the possibilities it would have offered his talents. He knew nothing about it until I started making it. While he did draw a great deal of joy from his work, for him there was always something missing. Hard labor is all very well and good, but the monotony of laying one-thousand bricks in a single day in a flat wall is enough to make a man feel empty from time to time. If he did not find a way to shake this emptiness he could become bitter and acrimonious about his work, and he sometimes did. Although he never seemed exactly aware of it himself, and was never able to articulate it, he intuitively refreshed himself from the routines of his commercial work through the personal work he did around his home. In his private work he embraced the tools and materials of his trade yet eschewed the traditional methods and standards. I imagine that whenever he found himself on a flat wall with one-thousand identical bricks to lay, he might have gotten to wondering what else might be possible with bricks and mortar, trowels and levels. Using highly unconventional building methods, he would invent new contexts and forms in the construction and landscaping of his home. All of it has proven itself sound over the years, and all of it was quite attractive. He always revered the curve in his home brewed masonry. He always loved the curves he could make with bricks and

stone, sometimes complicated compounded ones. We don't often see well-built curving and undulating masonry in the world do we? So much of it is trying to be flat and plumb.

While my father found balance through his private work, his public work was imposed upon him, and he had very little control over its outcome and appearance. In my case, being exposed to the art of sculpture and making its possibilities real, my public work is not planned out for me by other people. Both my public *and* my private work is largely by my design. The exchange between the two is at the center of my life, instead of at the periphery as in my father's case. I have inherited my father's history of making things, of being creative, and I have adapted it to the art of sculpture, focusing it, taking a greater degree of ownership over it.

Martin Puryear, Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse, Gordon-Matta Clark, Rachel Whiteread, Bruce Nauman, Marcel Duchamp, Mark DiSuvero, Bernar Venet, Chris Burden, Ursula Von Ryndingsvard, Judy Pfaff, Louise Bourgeois, Ledelle Moe, and Alberto Giacometti, to name just a few, are all sculptors I have looked up to and learned from. They and many others are my artistic parents. I am inspired and supported by their work and their lives, forever indebted to them. They all take over where my biological parents have left off. There are no blueprints for artists to follow, and navigating a career in the arts is largely trial and error. Success comes in fits and starts. The paths these artists have taken and their respective philosophies serve as important examples for me. They help me persevere through the inevitable failures, catastrophes, and emotional hazards that are a part of making sculpture.

Most important to me are my peers: the sculptors of my generation whom I have met and worked with. In their own way, they are trying with great effort to find the right forms for their talents and predispositions while also helping others towards this end. They are my artistic brothers and sisters. I am delighted, hopeful, and intensely honored to be part of such a strong and intelligent community of sculptors. We are making the future, and we are there for each other, no matter how difficult the challenges may be.

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