

## AN INTERVIEW WITH AMY BENSON

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*Jessica Wilson*

Jessica Wilson: Would you tell us about the genesis of the essay? What was your role in the installation project you describe, and what gave you the impetus to write about it?

Amy Benson: My husband was invited to create a piece for the festival I describe in Rumlingen, Switzerland, and I tagged along as his manual labor, as I often do when I'm able (I'm good for many hours of *repetiti ve*, low-skill work). We spent a week installing the suspended wooden blocks in our allotted shipping container as other artists and crew members worked on their own projects.

I recently began writing short essays and fictional pieces about art — art-making and art-perceiving. When I started working on this essay, I knew I was interested in at least these two things: 1) The physical context of the festival was really interesting to me. Unlike their immediate neighbor, the Alps, the Juras, at least where we were, are green, rounded, older by far. The contrast between the gentle mountains and the strange metal, clanging village erected so briefly was intentional and striking. But I was interested in trying to locate the continuity between the two things, as well. And 2) Since the work that my husband does is largely installation-based, we've talked a lot about art that's stamped with an expiration date from the start. I think it's filled with contradictions. Such projects are intentionally fleeting — you literally “had to be there,” you had to be present with all of your senses, taking in the whole. But the artist who doesn't document the hell out of these projects is a rare bird. Street art in museums, video footage of “interactive art.” It's all caught up in that powerful tug between experience, which is necessarily internal, individual, and perhaps inarticulate, and the desire for communication, dissemination, endurance.

JW: The ideas of endurance and storage are really interesting to me here — in the senses of preservation and interment alike. Museums, graves, caves, cultural and ritual memory, ‘warehouse minds,’ secrets, and of course the lovely irony of using empty storage containers as installation sites, and then packing away the disassem-

bled pieces of the installation in separate storage containers entirely.

AB: Yes, I liked the idea, too, of these storage containers as our temporary caves, which may have turned into tombs had we sought shelter in them during the electrical storm.

JW: Art becomes what happens in the interim between periods of storage, what happens when we are right on the verge of passing back into storage once more. Burial interments a body and enables — what? Remembrance, or the lack thereof? Is art the interment of a moment, or the enabling of a moment? Or both?

AB: I love the words you've chosen here: storage and interment, both of which carry with them a sense of the future, the idea that relevance will be retrospectively conferred. And this is what the "art world" banks on, literally — money is made (and lost) wagering on futures. Culture is made by bringing works in and out of storage over and over.

I think your last question here is exactly right: perhaps the best art is both the interment and enabling of a moment. I have become more and more interested, though, in the second part of the formulation — the moments of perception and presence in the company of a work, particularly work that cannot be preserved.

JW: And in the case of performance art, those moments of perception and presence must somehow be shared between (co-created by?) artist and audience. But towards the end of the essay the narrator tells us about what happened after the visitors left: "... the installation needed this joy and this privacy." Which implies that performance with and without visitors reflect two opposed transiencies. If the installation needed privacy, what (if any) artistic role did its audience play, earlier in the day? Were they superfluous, or did they fulfill a separate kind of need?

AB: The visitors to the festival gave the installation its purpose--viewers capable of surprise, able to react to and interact with the spectacles. They could see the entirety of the installations-- much like a theatergoer sees the whole play at once, in its final form. The artists and crew for the installation had a different experience, seeing the pieces come together over a week, hearing the construction,

making rounds to see everyone set up, watching the somethings come out of nothing. This is akin to the crew and cast experience of a play-- they see everything behind the scenes, with greater intimacy and full awareness of the levers behind the curtain.

I think it's difficult sometimes for creators of interactive art to let the visitor truly have his or her way with the piece. That's the idea, of course, but in reality it's difficult to cede control. Do you create a piece that thrives off of the chaos of an open system or do you create a piece that must be approached in one way? The equivalent might be a teacher who asks an open ended question and one who asks a questions that seems open ended but he or she is actually angling for the right answer. It's difficult to truly leave the latter model behind and create work that requires the creativity of viewer. But in the end that's all there is, the private moment between the viewer and the piece, so the artist has lost control either way, the moment a work is publicly displayed. How best to use that loss of control is often the most interesting question for artists. My own related challenge in writing is how to create a piece that is an invitation and not simply a display.

The dancing in the mud at the end of the festival was intimate, the kind of thing that could happen between people who have worked together in slightly extreme conditions. A kind of "We can wrangle strange electrical instruments and clod-hop in the mud" revelation.

I think we can turn rather viciously on works that once struck us as vital and necessary and then "didn't age well." As if endurance is the only consideration. As if, in the moment of engagement, the piece (of art, writing, or music) didn't work its way into us and help us to shape our future in some way, large or small.

Perhaps the corollary in writing is that there are approaches to writing that enable moments (attention to form, for example) in such a way that one finds oneself inside a piece of writing as opposed to reading it, studying it. It has worked on the reader, rearranged the mind, the breath, the reader's way of seeing. And then there are those approaches that are more about content, capturing and showing, appealing more directly to the conscious mind of the reader.

JW: For a piece largely about art — its purpose; its permanence

flush up against its perishability — it's striking that the title makes no overt reference to it. Could you talk a bit about the title?

AB: I guess I meant to imply art in the word "Form." That is, even many thousands of years ago, the desire for a "useless" but evocative object or image lived alongside our most basic needs and instincts.

JW: A (problematic) dichotomy, then: form with and form without function.

AB: I hope it's not a dichotomy, actually. That perhaps good art of all kinds obliterates the idea of use and simply feels necessary in ways that don't need to be justified. We are constantly at pains to argue for the use value of art (for funding, for the expenditure of time-- my husband and I joke that a successful grant application always has to have a "it's for the children" clause). But moments of lightness arrive when you look, read, listen to something and forget your personal or social economy.

A line in the essay that feels to me like an intersection is: "The easiest thing to say is that art cannot help him" about the man who lost his mother while we were staying with him in the nearby village. And that's true. But it's also meant to be argued with. Contemporary art is ripe for farce, dismissal; fish in a barrel and so on. Everyone loves to make fun of, importantly, contemporary artists and writers, sometimes with good reason. Yet there is still something necessary there. At its best, obviously, art can be the wonderfully scary combination of primal urge or function and delicate articulation of what the artist thinks we must notice and care about now. In other words, we tend to look back and say isn't that wonderful that cave people were making art, isn't that folk tradition noble and worth preserving; but then we look around at contemporary work and often say isn't that silly or pretentious, what a colossal waste of time and resources. And I think we need to ask a lot of questions about those dichotomies.

JW: The essay's flush with intersections. Caves, for example: shelter, carved by water, containing the detritus of food, with forms painted upon the walls. When you were writing the essay, did you structure it intending to play up particular intersections?

AB: Definitely. I was interested from the start in comparative scale--the Jura caves as transitory shelter, stable and recurring enough to foster "culture"; and then the present-day massive scale of ephemeral culture. Perhaps we are so very (comparatively) stable in terms of water, shelter, and food that our forms must be endlessly novel. Among other confluences, I was interested in the valley as a faded industrial center, having once produced watches and clocks. Time, eternal; time piece production=, blip. And the shipping containers arrive empty and leave empty, repurposed.

I'm also interested in how Tinguely's work responds to his environment. When he was first asked to do a piece in the festival, my husband assumed that he could find most of the materials he needed as scrap when we arrived. Walk down just about any street in America on garbage day and you'll find all the materials you need for an installation. Wood, electronics, plastics, upholstery, etc. We were told this is not so in Switzerland or much of Europe. The bounty doesn't spill out onto the streets in quite the same way. Yet here is this founding figure of junk art, repurposed materials turned into industrial (or purposeless post-industrial) dreams, in the heart of the country, having sucked up the culture's remnants. Thus the irony at the end of the essay: everything, every block and screw and string and staple back in its proper bin.

JW: To go back to the theme of form and function in art, how do you see form and content interacting in the essay itself? Do you find that the lyric essay as a form specifically lends itself to your chosen topics? Or, if not, how did you arrive at the essay's final structure? Did it 'drop into [your] mind fully formed'?

I've been concerned for a long time with the conflation of the "I" of the essay with the author of a piece of literary nonfiction; it's a bad business and I know I do it, often unconsciously, and I suspect, based on the way literary nonfiction is reviewed and spoken about, that most other readers do it as well. Pieces that fall under the "lyric essay" heading as a group do an excellent job of reminding our brains not to go on auto-pilot: oh, essay, narrator/author, personal, biography, trust, etc. When an essay begins with facts, say, or hypothesis, and we're not sure where or who the "narrator" is or what sort of architecture we've stumbled into, we might be more

willing to let the essay surprise us. I think lyric essays, working as they generally do against auto-pilot reading, allow us to enter a wonderfully strange space.

But recently I've been thinking less consciously about form and more about voice. I've been trying to find a way of being in an essay that is particular but not personal. A voice that might feel intimate or familiar but not due to autobiography or "personality on the page." I've been trying to work out a way of getting at the things that interest me without getting bogged down in minutia, biography, or narrative.

In this case, that led to a form that, I hope at least, is suggestive but not exhaustive — a collection of images and ideas that are geographically connected (the mountains, the festival, the Tinguely Museum just a short train ride away) and might be considered together in the space an essay provides. A kind of get-in-and-get-out, gesture-but-don't-harangue form.

JW: What else are you working on now?

AB: As mentioned, I'm writing other pieces about art, art-making and art-viewing. Right now, it's an essay about an installation I saw this year, a faux archeological site of purported remnants of a settlement on Governors Island off of NYC that died out in the 1950s. I loved the concept and was terribly disappointed with the execution, so this essay is about what the project could have been.

JW: There's something wonderfully ironic there — in proposing a hypothetical alternate history to a hypothetical alternate history. A whole new kind of perishability, the alternate history: something that ended before it ever began.

AB: Yes! The best thing about the exhibit was the street lights and telephone poles sticking half out of the ground. How much you can learn about our invisible scaffolding by half-burying it! Suddenly it's very very visible and sort of shocking. A really successful fiction-that's-truer-than-truth. But the rest of the show took a sharp turn toward whimsy, the kind that seems more satisfying for the artist than the viewer.

JW: At the very end of 'The Sparkling-Eyed Boy,' you write, '...here I am, unfurled, trying to be glad that seasons collapse in on themselves and living things die.' There's an aching sadness to the line, as though the attempt to be glad, in and of itself, neither guarantees nor signifies success. That book engaged the notion of the incompletely knowable self and the limitations of memory and narrative; this essay, in engaging the perishability of certain art forms, raises some of the same larger questions about transience and mortality. The essay's voice, however, seems to me to tilt slightly more sweet than bitter by comparison with the book's voice. Do you agree, or am I misreading? How do you see the themes of the two pieces converging?

AB: Our obsessions will out, no? I absolutely agree with your reading of tone. While both works are interested in meaning within a temporal existence, the book examines nostalgia, the clinging response to loss, and the new work, this essay included, are more neutrally curious about that which passes. I have much more of a sense of wonder now, I think, particularly about the strange intersections between what we know of all life — the "we're pebbles in a glacier" formulation — and our massive efforts in the face of that knowledge.

JW: How did it develop, do you think — that newfound sense of wonder?

AB: I think this was partly a function of age — I've become less interested in nostalgia and preservation the older I've gotten. But it's largely thanks to my husband who is the most optimistic person I've ever met. It's as if he has a large "Yes!" tattooed to his forehead. It's impossible not to be changed by that.

JW: Earlier, you talked about how readily we tend to dismiss contemporary art; why do you think that is? Where does the satiric impulse come from?

AB: I read a great book a while back titled *The Unfolding of Language*, and one of the things it makes clear is that every generation throughout a culture's history thinks its language is degenerating and soon all will be lost. The kids are not alright. But it's simply change — language changes, morals change, aesthetics change.

The pain of that change may be what provides for scorn and satire.

Also, I don't want to overstep here, but I think there's a pretty strong (and perhaps culturally unspecific) pull to venerate the past and what has been proven, what comes to us with the weight of approbation (value, beauty, cultural significance, etc) and distrust the unread. (This is perhaps why English Departments and creative writing programs often turn out to be poor bunkmates, scholars sometimes having little respect for contemporary works.)

I often wonder how I'd respond if I got a box of books with not a shred of packaging on them — just the title and the words inside. How would I read them? Would I even want to read them? If that were a test, I might fail it.

JW: We depend on context to assess the sense and value of things — and something brand-new hasn't had any time to acquire a historical context.

AB: Very true, and context is often crucial. But sometimes I think it's also a crutch and it weakens some basic muscles or senses. Can we simply be with a piece of art or writing or performance. Can we pay close enough attention to what is actually happening in our brains or sense perceptions as we read or see or hear something new. I find my mind always racing ahead to try to classify or contextualize or critique. Again, all important functions, but something delicate and difficult is lost if I skip over that first step of simply getting quiet and trying to listen. It's something I'm trying to learn.