



#### "Useless, useless" Introductory Essay

I am reluctant to share the origins of this exhibition, however, when so many of contributors have offered deeply personal, sometimes heartrending stories of their relationship to our theme, I can only try to do likewise. I have stated before that "Useless, useless," the last words of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, came starkly to mind at a friend's memorial service last year. I saw how profoundly her one life had affected so many, and it staggered me to consider Booth's inability to recognize how a single hateful act had galvanized so many conflicts. I realized that "the better angels of our nature" have a comparable capacity to accomplish the opposite resolution, even harmony. This much you know. What I have not shared so far are the griefs and joys that preceded me to this place.

The exhibition you've joined is the culmination, and turning point of a wonderful, horrible year that began when my partner of four years decided our relationship had no future. Her news was a devastating surprise, as was being told I had seven days to leave our home. That same week my employers decided that rather than manage an abusive manager, it was simpler to fire me. While this was all sufficiently destabilizing, it was nothing compared to the news that my Irishtwin brother had drawn a terminal, genetic curse. My life was a bowl of cherries compared to his coming fight, so I stayed some time with him, his wife and son until exhausting their good will. I decided to hit the proverbial road, and flee my family's increasingly shrill insistence that my own difficulties were well deserved, and that I must have some mental deficiency which prevented me from realizing this. I staggered off like Mary Shelley's "monster" into an incomprehensible void to relearn the ways of the world.

While traveling coast to coast to the few sanctuaries that were offered to me, I met farmers, anarchists, poets, painters, musicians, filmmakers, and freegans each struggling with our nation's crumbling economy, with the predations of plutocrats, and a coarsening of political and social discourse. Even thus embroiled, they were facing this madness with humor, grace, creativity, and the art that is their own lives. I have a talented friend who this same year began seeing unicorns while undergoing her own tremendous stress. I began seeing Abraham Lincoln, and the Statue of Liberty. From Lincoln I gleaned that thoughtful, positive discourse can calm stridency, and reconcile strife. The "liberties" that I began seeing everywhere, debased by a "tax service," taught me that even corrupted symbols retain vestiges of their initial nobility. I'm not one to coopt our first people's cosmologies, but I do believe in their ideation of spirit guides, that signs and wonders emerge when needed. They guide you, if you're fortunate, to greener pastures. My own guide's were insistent that I keep heeding, and elaborating upon the lessons they brought.

Three years ago I founded the artists collective "You are not a dinosaur," inspired by a moving story by Bruce Holland Rogers who in two short paragraphs delineated one man's entire life; from childhood antics, to young love, parenting, powerlessness, disappointments, senility, and then a return to wonder. I felt we had found a vehicle broad enough to convey nearly any human experience, provided only that the works we would show were affirmative to foil to a growing contemporary aesthetic that seemed to privilege decay, squalor, and waste. I started an ancillary flickr group to gather images from people around the world working in a consonant vein. This grew in time and with great care to a pool of over 17,000 images, most of which I have personally invited. I didn't then realize that I was building a virtual treehouse, a blanket fort, or some odd garden of hope that would sustain me during the coming crises outlined above. I chose Images of people and places where things held promise. To see that the world went on striving without my personal misery offered a zen like solace. The recognition of my own unimportance, seeing the essential meaninglessness of my struggles, let me stop asking why. I merely trudged ahead, taking tiny joys from anywhere I could find them, like alms in a cup.

2013 began with greater promise. I'd been allowed "home" for Christmas, and was given a legitimate tenancy an actual place to stay by a generous cousin. I grew determined to make a stand in my native state, and to meet and engage my Northeast Minneapolis neighbors. In them I found a tribe that is fiercely committed to positive change; more than I'd ever encountered. Ideas blossomed, glorious rants and ravings ensued, and then the nihilistic aesthetic mentioned above consumed my best friend, and began extending its venal reach throughout my hopeful community. After my own struggles to claw from a similar grave, I could not allow this to happen. The friendship breached, our collective reeled, and I recalled the gallery of lovely images I'd built a place many saw as a useless, selfindulgent chimera. I turned to our virtual community to propose an unconventional endeavor. I asked them to donate, print, and send their work to our nascent gallery for a noncommercial effort. Rather than placing pictures on walls, with all that walls connote, why couldn't we pore over parcels from across the globe at a community table. Why not have a potluck meal? Why not let our guests 'curate' the show themselves, building their own relationship to the images? I saw no reason why not.

Like the consistent recurrence of Lincoln and Liberty, I now find "useless" everywhere. Oscar Wilde quipped that "all art is quite useless." I could not disagree more strenuously. Charles Darwin's father derided his son's pending Beagle voyage as a "useless expedition." He was of course, wrong. I hope for our show's guests to be, as I am, initially repulsed by such declarations, to ask in whose interest is something or someone deemed without merit or value. I asked that each contributing artist consider

working in a light that affirms the value of things near to us that may seem trivial, but that hold limitless potential to positively impact the people and things which we love. The 700+ images I invited to our new group, dedicated exclusively for this show, "get" this theme on an axiomatic, visceral level. Their images communicate abundantly the one quality, the one word I would choose to describe our entire effort empathy.

It's been a long, but worthy journey. I'll end but only for now with an apt quote from Nabokov, relayed to me by a loved one who couldn't stay for the ride,

My car is limping, Dolores Haze,  
And the last long lap is the hardest,  
And I shall be dumped where the weed decays,  
And the rest is rust and stardust.

T.W. 4.21.13. Image Credit: Jeremiah Langsjoen









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"Useless, useless" is the 3rd exhibition by the Minneapolis photography collective 'You are not a dinosaur.' A potluck meal, and a literal 'opening' of submissions will be held Friday, May 3rd, 411pm at the California Building, 2205 NE California St, Minneapolis, MN 55418. Through 4.25. Contact Tim White for further information, [whitedog35@gmail.com](mailto:whitedog35@gmail.com), or visit our website here: [youarenotadinosaur.org](http://youarenotadinosaur.org).