

## Source:

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**Conversation by David Byrne**

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### I. Uncommon Sense

RM: *True Stories* (1986) was the most influential film for me during my formative years; the deadpan absurdity resonated. I had recently discovered Dada, my favorite art movement, and I drew parallels between the two. That film is so close to my heart that throughout the years it has served as a litmus test for evaluating new friends—you either get it or you don't. You probably don't want to talk about your old work, but would you mind telling me about your interest in the absurd and the surreal?

DB: I'm flattered that you like the film. The key, I guess, is that it mixes stagy, artificial scenes and settings with documentary stuff that often appears equally artificial. For me, much of the world is pretty surreal—in the sense that its veneer can be seen through or peeled away fairly easily. Often what appears normal is pretty odd if you take two steps to the side and view it from a slightly different angle—it just gives me more to love. The script, though, might have the strongest Dada connection: The jumps from scene to scene are what some folks say are like collages or found text.

RM: So, the film was a precursor to reality-infused fiction—I like that mix. And yes, the collage-style cuts, especially in the “Puzzling Evidence” scene, are like Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99* [1991], at times.

DB: I don't know that film—I'll look it up... okay, just added it to my Netflix queue!

RM: It's of the J. R. “Bob” Dobbs's Church of the SubGenius school. That clip-art-driven work was a big influence on me at one point. And talk about copyright—they were really pushing it with *The Sacred Teachings of J. R. “Bob” Dobbs* [1987].

DB: Yeah, there seemed to be a little window before everyone got all crazy about copyright. I was in touch with the SubGenius people, as they were a big influence—obviously—on the “Puzzling Evidence” scene. It was a moment when a lot of stuff flew under the radar; we could clip, sample, and appropriate and no one cared. Maybe that was pre-the-great-wide-Internet.

RM: I was thinking, though, the film parallels Dada more in its anti-capitalist stance, in its reflection of the surreality of capitalism—the way many of the Dadaists reflected the senselessness of war with seemingly senseless art, rejecting logic and ignoring aesthetics (which in turn gave rise to a new kind of aesthetic). I love how the main character takes a very neutral, almost objective view of everything (“from the side,” as you say) by pointing out the obvious as if an alien in a strange land—“It's a multipurpose shape... a box.”

DB: There is a little bit of an anti-official attitude towards art in the film—shiny metal buildings are presented as if they were minimal sculpture—or at least equally valid and interesting. Do you see the play of icons in your work as related to Dada? I can see a connection in your emphasis on the creative process as repetitive, almost assembly-line like—though your decisions are intuitive, your process is quasi-mechanical.

RM: There's a connection between my work and Dada formally, but not conceptually. My work is certainly

not political in content—however, the act of taking a formal iconic language used by an anonymous authoritative power, assuming that power for myself, and giving authorship and accountability to these kinds of forms can be considered a political gesture. There is something Dada-inspired, Tzara-esque, in creating my own ingredients, which are then cut up and reassembled. I use a form of normalcy (signage) as a tool against itself—which raises another topic concerning the inherent paradox of making art that is anti-art: If you are opposed to a system, what is the best strategy for changing that system—subvert it, ignore it, create an alternative? How can you make an anti-anything in the context of that thing?

DB: Can you change the system from within? Pretty damn hard to do, if you ask me. I'll stick with Gandhi: "We need to be the change we wish to see in the world." Can you talk about that great *Sponsorship* [*Sponsorship: The Fine Art of Corporate Sponsorship, The Corporate Sponsorship of Fine Art* (2003)] book you organized?

RM: *Sponsorship* accompanied an exhibition I did in L.A. at Shepard Fairey's gallery. I solicited as many corporations as I could to sponsor the exhibition, for which there was no content. Instead, the gallery was filled with the enlarged logos of the sponsors, and at the opening we gave away all the swag they had given us. The sponsorship was the exhibition, of course. I think it was a hotter topic when I conducted all the interviews in 2002. It was a time when a lot of corporations were trying to get down with the cool kid artists coming from the subcultures of graffiti and skateboarding. After I concluded the book, I resolved my own position on the matter: I decided that I needed to protect my work, which wants to stand on its own, independent of any agenda that tries to attach itself. It's key for me to preserve authorship and accountability. So, if a company wants to work with me (and galleries and museums are companies, too), they have to be willing to step into and support my world, not vice versa.

DB: Yeah, that particular group of artists may have been extremely cool for the culture vultures then—I can't imagine that some of you aren't still attractive to them. Now, though, there are more established artists working with fashion designers, etc., where the sponsorship is superblatant.

## II. Form Follows Feeling

DB: Do you run into any negative attitudes because your art is made with screens instead of being painted by hand? Do people assume that the partial involvement of software is a bad thing?

RM: No, I think people are more baffled by my process than anything else. The production is just as layered as the imagery—there is a lot of behind-the-scenes work—especially when I'm layering the same image on top of itself several times in different colors, with different degrees of legibility and fragmentation. It's like a secret code sent out to those who know about silkscreening—only those who are intimately familiar with the process can begin to understand how the images were made.

Your art-making practice flows from form to form—I see it as a solutions-driven approach to materializing concepts. You have an idea, and your problem is how to best express that idea—or, you have a feeling, and your problem becomes how to express that feeling. How do you decide what to make, and at what point do you decide to explore many forms versus investigating one form deeply?

DB: My brief time at art school must have indoctrinated me with the idea that there is an almost ideal material expression for each idea. Some ideas should be materialized as video and not graphic work, some should be songs instead of dances. The most obvious example is politics. I agree with Sam Goldwyn, who said, "Pictures are for entertainment; messages should be delivered by Western Union."

RM: Yes, I agree that sending a message is different than sending a feeling, or a mood, or a concept—which is more what we hope to do when we make art, I think. Stickers, buttons, and t-shirts are better vehicles for sharing messages. These are things I like to make, but I haven't positioned them on the same end of the spectrum as paintings and sculptures, until recently with something like the button pieces [*Island Universes*

(2007)]. I never really thought about this differentiation between messages and whatever we think the content of art is—this is assuming art strives to communicate something more than just a message. Otherwise, you—and Sam—are right: Let’s just send telegrams (or bumper stickers).

However, my original point was that you seem rather fearless in tackling many different forms. I remember when you were on the cover of *Time* magazine [October 27, 1986] and declared a Renaissance man. That actually gave me permission and made me realize, “Oh, I really can do many different things.”

DB: The “Renaissance man” tag was flattering, but I got a lot of, “Who does he think he is?” as a result—as if I had tagged myself with the label. When art separated itself from craft, way back in the—well, it might have been the Renaissance—we were given permission to use mediums in new ways and to use whatever medium seemed appropriate to an idea, feeling, or subject. An artist can make a movie, and sometimes a filmmaker can be considered an artist. Photography, needlepoint, taxidermy, software programming... all became valid mediums.

I know you’ve been diving deeper into 3-D pieces and some video as well. Do you begin to conceptualize something and then realize it wants to be a 3-D piece rather than a silkscreen?

RM: I’m trying to work toward creating total environments. When I close my eyes, I feel like I’m swimming in my own world, and I want to create that same kind of total immersion for others (how can I invite people into my head?). So yes, when I’m conceptualizing an exhibition, I’m trying to figure out how I can control the entire experience—how I can extend the world in my head to the real world, and those extensions are always morphing into different forms depending on what each part wants to be. As a result, the environment/work includes everything down to the bottles of water. I always assumed that this desire to share one’s world with others is at the core of all artists’ work. Is it the same for you?

DB: Tentatively. I assume if something moves me that I have enough in common with others that maybe the experience will translate. It often does, but just as often something gets lost or skewed in the translation. I then ask myself how I can fix that. I realize there, in that gap, is where the skill lies these days—not in traditional artisanship, but in achieving a successful transmission.

RM: Which is to say that in this age of information, artists need communication and transmission skills more than anything.

Many of your works on paper are sketches, plans, or ideas for what I imagine could be more finished or realized works, but perhaps you don’t find it necessary to further formalize those ideas. At what point is an expression expressed or most fully expressed?

DB: I could ask you the exact same question. I was in school when a lot of the conceptual artists were doing work that was in the form of a text or series of instructions. Art was thought of as mainly an idea, and eventually we saw a whole group of artists who felt they didn’t have to realize or manifest the idea physically—the dealers probably were tearing their hair out. For me, there’s something immediate in your preliminary sketches for the icons—most people would assume they were all computer generated, and yet, here they are as drawings! I sense that, for you, part of the content of those lines and shapes is that they approach the cool look of mass-produced signage and logos—that because flatness and slickness are part of the content, leaving them as sketches wouldn’t work.

RM: You’re absolutely right; that is the idea. Furthermore, I find myself standing in opposition to what appears to be lazy or effortless work. I have to go through this process of sketching, resketching, tweaking, developing, and reworking my drawings. I also take a sort of blue-collar pride in working hard to make something presentable and as perfect as I can. Still, I know what you mean about those sketches, and I agree.

There is something immediate about them... I have been enlarging them onto the gallery wall to create a place in which to locate my paintings in an exhibition, and even using them as the ingredients for some prints. Just last week someone was in the studio and made the same observation as you—he liked the sketches and was curious about what would happen if the work stopped there. The sketches, for me, are only part of the process, a means to an end. But still, if the means were the end...

DB: Yeah, I like seeing your sketches, but I sense that since the subject and content are bound up in the reference to signage and slick logos then the sketches can only be a part of the process.

Lately I've fabricated some of my chair drawings and drawings of imaginary bike racks. Sometimes, I can picture the finished thing just by looking at the original sketchy drawings—and so making a large physical object seems like it's being done more for other people... The anxiety-producing part is that, knowing what the work wants to be, I can only ruin it from there if I'm not lucky or careful. Have you ever had stuff start off right and then you ruin it?

RM: All the time—from artwork to relationships. I tend to be self-destructive on all fronts, perhaps as a way to challenge myself. I actually enjoy ruining a painting by pushing it too far, and then having to figure out how to save it. That struggle is often reflected in the finished piece—there's a trace left of an imperfect, organic path from beginning to end. For me, the process of making a work should inform the work.

DB: But then there's the part of music and visual art that is referencing, sampling, quoting. Your icons are like tweaked logos and refer to signage. To some, they might seem like sampling even though they're not. Do some people assume you've simply lifted the shapes and symbols from somewhere else?

RM: Yes, some people do assume that I've lifted the shapes and symbols and repurposed them. This is the inherent irony in making drawings that are designed to look anonymous—they are designed to look like they come from somewhere else, so I can't really complain if people make that assumption.

### III. Piles

RM: This may seem boring, since it has to do with a very pragmatic/practical concern. However, it's of interest to me as I struggle on a daily basis to stay on top of everything that is going on in my studio. You also work on a variety of projects at the same time. How do you, literally, stay organized?

For example, I have to make a pile on my desk for each active project. This way I create a constant visual reminder of what is currently on my plate. I must physically get through each looming to-do pile in order to remove it from my life. I also make lots of lists—which are flatter versions of the same concept. I think people's working process reveals how one brings order to an inherently chaotic universe.

DB: I think that way, to some extent. I can compartmentalize various projects and keep a few balls in the air at the same time—some projects naturally evolve more slowly and incrementally than others—so it's nice to not have to rush those. (In the past, I suspect that ability might have been applied to my personal relationships as well, which is not always such a good thing.)

I also came to realize that the creativity and organizational skills of the folks who work in my studio or who I work with on music contribute a lot to my being able to keep multiple projects going. Over the years, I've learned to delegate a little bit—I can trust that they'll keep on top of stuff and I don't have to keep it all in my head—what a relief!

RM: So, delegation and collaboration are key for you—that means a fair amount of people-management skills (which I lack). But what specific tools or strategies do you use? Scraps of paper, writing on your hands, paper or virtual calendars?

DB: All of the above. I had a diary/appointment book, then a few years ago I got a PDA that links to my computer calendar and addresses. I got pretty used to carrying it everywhere to put in appointments and reminders—it's not good for ideas and sketches though. For that I still carry a pencil and notebook. This past month, my office/studio (of three people) figured out how to have a calendar that automatically updates whenever anyone adds an appointment. I guess I'm pretty nerdy in that I can write an appointment down and then forget about it until the PDA or my calendar reminds me, and I can keep projects separate yet going simultaneously.

RM: I'm interested because I am constantly trying to develop a systematic framework for myself in which I hope to eventually find a fluid solution for staying on top of everything. I use exactly and only five kinds of pens. I use an online calendar I can share with others in the studio, and I'm currently creating a calendar/to-do-list pad designed specifically for an end-user of one (me), but which will actually be published and available to the public. (Am I revealing how obsessive-compulsive I am?)

DB: So what's the problem? It sounds like you're completely on top of this stuff. And yeah, I get a bit OCD at some stages, too. When I'm writing lyrics I use a number five mechanical pencil on metric graph paper—how's that! It's a system I've fallen into for keeping the ideas, verses, and choruses all separate and organized. Guess we all have our little systems.

#### **IV. Failed Projects**

RM: One topic I'd like to address—both because I find it interesting and also because it is often a topic that no one wants to publicly reveal—is failed projects. We learn from our mistakes—I have not failed to learn, and I have made many. What are some of your failed projects?

DB: A big one is a film based on *The Forest* [1988], the collaboration I did with Robert Wilson. It was to have been shot in Germany and would have had the same starting point as his stage interpretation, but it would have diverged from there. When we had a draft of the script and a budget, it turned out it would have been way too expensive for an art movie. There was another project—a mafia version of *Snow White* that never got realized. I may have chickened out, because I couldn't see how to solve some of the creative problems—so it's more unrealized than a failure.... And some of my recordings didn't have the lightness and sense of play that may have existed when I first wrote them—I overproduced some, I think. As much as I've learned from all of that, thinking about failed or unrealized projects is still a little painful and embarrassing—is it the same for you?

RM: That Snow White project sounds amazing! It's absolutely embarrassing—especially when failing publicly. I choose to show and share my work whenever and however possible from early on as opposed to developing in private and then waiting until I felt ready to debut—I don't think I'll ever feel ready for my flawless close-up. I hope to be continually embarrassed by my past work—not really embarrassed, but work that comes before a breakthrough or evolutionary development always seems not as good as the new stuff—I hope that will always be the case. Do you cringe when you look at any of your past work?

DB: Absolutely. There's some artwork that I prefer not to see and some songs that I hope never to hear again. Luckily, we keep going—and luckier still, we're sometimes forgiven for that crap work—or at least it seems that way. I read that someone did a study and found that people who succeed are those people who are willing to fail. When I'm asked if I miss the days at CBGB, I usually say I don't—which is true, but I do miss the possibility of failing in front of a relatively small number of people. That absolute passion and don't-give-a-shit attitude are a great combination.

#### **V. Liquid Imagery**

RM: Some of your work exists solely as digital information. This is most obviously true of recorded music

(making a clear distinction from performed music), but the same idea applies to your ongoing PowerPoint project, *E.E.E.I.* [*Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*]. I don't know if you edition any of your PowerPoint pieces, but it would seem most logical, to me at least, to treat the commodification and distribution of digital artwork the same as recorded music. What do you think?

DB: Good question—completely unresolved, too. The PowerPoint pieces I did played differently on every computer, depending on the speed of the CPU. So, I recorded them and made them into a DVD—sort of one digital form acting as a recorder of another digital form. Then—though in the past I'd tried to make my books as cheaply as possible and in limitless editions—for this project I thought, “What happens in the middle ground? What if this edition is not as limited (and expensive) as an artwork, but more expensive than a simple DVD or book?” Besides, I realized that, like any digital artwork, there was a good chance that the DVD would get ripped and that content would eventually be available free for anyone who was interested. So, we made an incredibly fancy DVD package in a limited edition of 3,000 [*Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information* (2003)]. People who love, and can afford, the sensual and wacky visual experience of the lush book/package can have it. Others can get a copy of the DVD from their friends.

RM: Objects are mysterious vehicles that have personality and even mystical powers. Have you heard of the Serial Killer Sweater Experiment? (That's just what I call it, so perhaps not.)

Essentially, people were offered money to put on a perfectly clean, new-looking sweater and most of them agreed. But then when they were told that the sweater had been worn by a serial killer, most could not bring themselves to wear it. A similar experiment was done when people were given a pen that they were told was used by Einstein, and then when they were told later that it was not, most were disappointed.

DB: Wow, those are great stories. You don't hear of people getting those kinds of attachments or superstitions about digital files.

A whole lot of what I do is digitized at one point or another. The music is recorded digitally these days, the photos I take are now all digital, DVDs, the PowerPoint pieces, the HD videos I've begun playing—even the bicycle diaries I've been turning into a book are written on a laptop. Only the drawings and sculptures—of which there are more and more—are truly physical. The books I think of as objects, but they are written and designed digitally—oh, I forgot—live performances are not digital.

RM: And do you try to edition those digital projects or do you assume they just leak out eventually?

DB: I assume that eventually someone, somehow, will access everything digitally—not just what I do, but everything in the world. Don't you think that eventually every movie, book, photo, piece of music will all be available online and/or digitally? It seems inevitable, and a little sad, because part of the information one gets in a book, for example, is how it feels and what it's made of, not just the words. At the same time I can't complain too loudly about all the cool stuff I can find online. This will mean that digitized information (images, books, movies, music) is all essentially worthless—in the sense that anyone can have it for free. You can edition and artificially limit signed objects, but I guess you have to also make the edition an object that is somehow different from what someone can print out on their home computer, burn on a DVD or CD burner, or listen to/watch online. The object, in that sense, is back.

Your paintings are unique, but with videos it becomes an issue—I don't know of anyone who's fetishized a videocassette. I just read an interview with Warhol where he said he didn't care if people made copies of his work as long as they didn't sign it.

RM: I had made some videos, because they were the best medium for the expression of some simple ideas I had. They were eventually compiled on a DVD by a company in Japan and sold together for about \$30 in

an open edition. I liked the idea of packaging the videos together and making it the same price as any other DVD. They are no more special because they're art. I would have no problem if they were copied and distributed. I actually don't make final pieces in digital form, even though the creation of digital files is a step in the process of making my work. I can't feel files and therefore I can't put much faith in them. And for the most part, art operates under a faith-based system. My mother told me that when I first encountered TV, I sat in front of the screen and outstretched my arms while grasping at the air complaining that I could not feel it while asking, "Where is it?"

DB: Some of your paintings with their deep layers of silkscreened images remind me of images from science or the Internet and digital technologies. It's pretty nice to imagine there might be a shape or pattern there—sort of a pattern without content.

RM: *Networking Is a Skill* [1998] is a piece that I did that specifically relates to brain network images. The information patterns are based on mapping everyone I know and my network of relationships to them—but that was ten years ago. Now I feel like I'm trying to make a twenty-first-century *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.

DB: Funny that Mondrian's New York work seems almost African—like African textiles—Mr. Anal Retentive ended up making art that is almost funky. Wikipedia describes them as cartographic, and says that he worked on these paintings "until his hands blistered, he cried, and he became sick."