Art Collection

Part 1: Thursday, April 9, 2003, Palm Springs, California

My father shows me the six or seven rare books in his collection. Produced in the late 16th and 17th centuries in London and published by the Cambridge University Press, the books are various editions of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. My father celebrates the dawn of secularism during the Elizabethan age. No more Latin, no more mindless following of the pope, whose authority surpassed the monarchy. In order to become a world power, England needed its own state religion, buttressed by a media-wing the monarchy could control. Founded by a charter issued by King Henry VIII in 1534, Cambridge University Press published the Church of England’s liturgy. Its Chancellor also acted as a censor for all publications in the realm. Not unlike the Moscow Press established by Vladimir Lenin, it functioned as an institutional propaganda wing that brought new ideologies to the masses.

Bound in calf and vellum, with spines strengthened by a set of horizontal struts fashioned from meshed twine and embedded underneath the leather, the books, of course, are very old. The pages have that pungent, mildewy smell of things left too long in a damp basement. They are whisper-thin and graying at the edges. *Everything falls apart...* Over four centuries of use and curiosity, the
pages have come loose and have been collected, reassembled and then sewn back together. The earliest of these books are set in a heavy Saxon gothic typeface. Crude and deliberate. A type that wasn’t going anywhere. A type that summons up a world of fear and faith and ignorance, of plagues and herbal cures, seasons, weather, straw mattresses and ox carts. A cosmogony in which one might actually seek out a book of common prayer, where “common” means not ordinary but “collective.” This commonality held the promise of lifting the individual from the squalor of the village into a larger and more radiant consciousness: a nation. *World without end, Amen.*

There is a fetishism attached to objects in this kind of amateur collecting. A naive experience of substance and the material world. The object forms a link between the collector and its origins. The prairie child holds a conch shell to her ear to hear the ocean roar. There is a tactile thrill, embroidered by imagination. This imagination requires a certain literacy—*history is like the ocean*—an accumulation of references, dreams and stories unleashed by contact with the object. In this sense, the object simply functions as trigger to the real collection, which is totally internal.

Reseaching millennial flying saucer cults, I visited the rare book room of the New York Public Library and requested a broadside pamphlet about the sighting of the Divine Virgin Mary by two children in an English Midlands village circa 1425. Folded like an accordion, the pamphlet was retrieved from the basement of the library and presented on a tray covered in burgundy-crushed velvet. Outside it was 1999, but here inside the high-ceilinged windowless paneled room was proof that a band of lunatics once roamed the English countryside prophesizing salvation through the world’s first flying saucer, the Divine Virgin Mary. *It is written that she will first show herself to children,* the pamphlet claims.
Similarly, in William Gibson’s book *Count Zero* (1986), the missing unnamed Joseph Cornell box functions as the ultimate collector’s fetish. The box is totally erotic: the innocent embodiment of a world that lives outside itself. The collector Josef Virek deploys all his resources to locate it. And finally, he does. But the box is unrecoverably adrift in hyperspace and cannot be possessed. In this most modernist of sci-fi novels, the work of art is utterly implacable. It can only be perceived within its own universe, on its own terms. To view the box, Virek must launch himself into hyperspace: a destination from which, like death, there is no return. And Virek does.

In 1992, William Gibson’s collaborative performance with artist Dennis Ashbaugh at The Kitchen in New York explored this confluence of objecthood and vanishment in slightly different terms. Simulcast to several cities, *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* (1992) was the public reading of a Gibson text inscribed by Ashbaugh onto a vacuum-sealed magnetic disk. This text was programmed to erase itself within minutes of exposure to the air. Words disappeared no sooner than they were spoken.

*Agrippa’s* disappearing text may well have been inspired by the curatorial strategy for exhibiting the cave paintings at Lascaux in central France. Discovered in 1940 in Dordogne, these Paleolithic drawings were open to the public until archeologists noted their deterioration through exposure to the air, in 1955. In 1963, the caves were closed. Visitors are led, instead, through Lascaux II, a perfect simulation of the original artwork and environment, in a nearby town. Were the real caves to remain unsealed, the paintings that had survived for 17,000 years due to the hermetic seal created by a geologic accident would disappear within a single human lifetime.

Collecting, in its most primitive form, implies a deep belief in the primacy and mystery of the object, as if the object was a
wild thing. As if it had a meaning and a weight that was inherent, primary, that overrode attempts to classify it. As if the object didn’t function best as a blank slate waiting to be written on by curatorial practice and art criticism.

Clearly, this kind of primitive collecting is totally irrelevant to the object’s pre-emptive emptiness and the infinite exchangeability of meaning in the contemporary art world. I am not talking about the role of commerce in the production, valuing, acquisition and collection of art objects. Commerce was what the early 20th century dadaists rebelled against with their glossolalic rants and collages fashioned out of newsprint, trash and magazines. Sitting out the First World War in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Sophie Tauber and Hans Arp were horrified by the commodification of the “object” in Great European Art and the military’s commodification of human life. But as Lenin (who sometimes dropped by the Cabaret to play chess) might have told them, the dadaist anti-objects would eventually become commodifiable art treasures: collected, traded, bought and sold. The art world mirrors the larger one, rather than providing an alternative to it. (Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime, 1999). Commerce defined the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s, and pop art seemed like so much fun a decade later because so many glamorous and interesting people bought it. After the brief lapse into arte povera and process art during the 1970s, commerce came back with a bang with the “return to painting” in the 1980s, and there it stayed.

Art and commerce have always been two sides of the same coin and to oppose them would be false. Instead, I am talking about a shift that has taken place during the past ten years in how art objects reach the market, how they are defined and how we read them. The professionalization of art production—congruent with specialization in other post-capitalist industries—has meant that the only art that will ever reach the market now is art that is
produced by graduates of art schools. The life of the artist matters very little. What life? The lives of successful younger artists are practically identical. There’s very little margin in the contemporary art world for fucking up with accidents or unforeseen surprises. In the business world, lapses in employment history automatically eliminate middle managers, IT specialists and lawyers from the fast track. Similarly, the successful artist goes to college after high school, gets an undergraduate degree and then enrolls in a high-profile MFA Studio Art program. Upon completing this degree, the artist gets a gallery and sets up a studio.

Equal opportunity for white and Asian artists of both genders has ushered in a massive uniformity. It’s best, of course, for the artist to be heterosexual and better to be monogamously settled in a couple. This guards against messy leaks of subjectivity which might compromise the work and throw it back into the realm of the “abject,” which, as we all supposedly agree, was a 1980s excess that has long since been discredited. If imagery of a sexual subculture is to be deployed, as in the work of Art Center graduate Dean Sameshima, it’s important that any undercurrents of desire be cooled off and distanced by conflating homoerotic porn with the consumer-beauty-porn of fashion print ads. Through this conflation, the viewer is led into that most desired state of neocorporate neocorporalism: the empty space of ambiguity, which is completely different from the messy space of contradiction. “Ambiguity,” wrote Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza, seeing it all two hundred years ago, “is the kingdom of the night.”

The critics Dave Hickey, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and David Pagel, in their championing of “beauty,” as if it were opposed to “criticality,” are the new police of anti-meaning. During the mid-1990s and beyond, “criticality” (code word for the unschooled, the race and gender conscious, those driven to make art that references conditions in the social world, instead of other art) became the evil
empire that lurked outside the Los Angeles art world. All three rail against the influence of “academe,” with its emphasis on “history,” upon contemporary art production. Since all three are themselves employed within the art departments of academic institutions (The University of Nevada, Art Center College of Design and Claremont College, respectively), I think they are referring, more specifically, to the pernicious hybrid discipline known as “cultural studies,” which since the 1970s, has used feminisms, historiography, queer and postcolonial theories as lenses through which to view one’s own experience of the world.

Hickey hazily defines “the therapeutic institution” as the great spoiler of the faux-populism he’s devised. The fact that Hickey is by far the most readable, original and compelling critic of contemporary art makes his arguments virtually indisputable. No mere academic drudge, Hickey cobs together a theory of transcendent “beauty” from the most unlikely mix of beaux-art aestheticism, 19th century romanticism, car culture, Vegas showgirls and punk rock. In this way, Hickey has largely succeeded in driving out his enemies, “the feminists,” from any meaningful participation in discourses about contemporary art. He champions the work of Robert Mapplethorpe for its “Baroque vernacular of beauty that predated, and clearly, outperformed the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution.” (The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty, 1993). While Hickey does not name any particular institution, he is likely talking about the content-centric art programs at UC Irvine and CalArts. Hickey sees the 19th century emergence of social-scientific theories as aestheticism’s fall from grace: a time when “Under the auspices of Herder and Hegel, Darwin, Marx and Freud, new regimes of correct interpretation were instituted, and … works of art were recruited to do for their new bosses the same job they once did for their old ones. Paintings that previously argued for the glorious primacy of
church, state and patrimony now served in circular arguments as both symptom and proof of natural selection, the historical necessity of the class struggle, and the validity of oedipal rage.” (“Buying the World” in Daedalus, 2002)

Unlike Pagel, bound by his role as daily art critic for the LA Times to write about particular contemporary artists, Hickey and Gilbert-Rolfe are careful not to further legitimize their quarry by identifying them. Except for obvious whipping boys like Hans Haacke and Leon Golub, adversaries are referred to as “PC feminists,” “leftists,” “ideologues” and “academics.” Instead, dinosaurs of Historical World Thought are either championed (like Kant and Ruskin) or identified (like Hegel) as these “leftist’s” proxies, and attacked. Writing in Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime (1999), Gilbert-Rolfe argues that our culture is “devoutly preoccupied with the—ideological, historical and sexual (that is, political)—cultural ambitions reflected and expressed in the conversion of Benjamin, Duchamp and Foucault into a unified instrument of redemption (and administration). ... The discourse in charge of contemporary art world discourses is a new original but not disinterested application of Hegel, which has substituted for the art object and the aesthetic a cultural object meant and judged as an articulation ... of the spirit of the age.” In keeping with this zealous a-historicism, Gilbert-Rolfe declines to say just what this master-discourse is, where it appears, or who put it there.

Pagel, for his part, writing in the LA Times, upholds a cheerful banner of visual “standards” and neoformalism. Blissfully free of philosophical referents, his dislike of institutional critique, gender and identity politics is generally articulated along the lines of Fuck Art/Let’s Dance. He praises the rehabilitation of the “scathingly critical eye” Louise Lawler wielded in her early works, in favor of her new “stunning” photographs at Richard Telles Gallery. These photos force viewers to reconsider the idea that “art functions primarily
as a critique—whether of earlier styles, its institutional context or current social ills … A critique of nothing but ugliness, her captivating photographs begin to do their work by transforming a small part of the world into something that is beautiful to behold.” Conversely, he chides Andrea Zittel’s *Charts and Graphs* installation at Regan Projects for its “subjective, self-absorbed” intent and lack of visual interest. This work, he says, amounts to nothing more “… than a bit of diaristic autobiography dressed up in the garb of mediocre social science.” (*LA Times*, 2/18/2000).

Together, the three function as a Homeland Security force to keep aestheticism, as they have come to define it, safe and clean.

When collectors pay ten thousand dollars for a David Corty landscape, they aren’t purchasing a pleasant watercolour painting of a night sky wrapped around a hill. Other, more naïve artists have done these paintings more consistently, and may have even done them “better.” What collectors are acquiring is an attitude, a gesture that Corty manifests through his anachronistic choice of subject matter. The real “meaning” of the work has very little to do with the images depicted in his paintings—night skies wrapped around a hill—or their execution. Rather, the “meaning” (and the value) of the work lies in the fact that Corty, a recent graduate of UCLA’s MFA art program, would defiantly loop backwards to tradition by rendering something as anachronistic as a landscape, in the quaint medium of water-color. After all, he has all art history’s image-bank to choose from.

Similarly when Art Center MFA graduate Andy Alexander spray paints the words “Fuck the Police” on the corridor walls of his installation, *I Long For The Long Arm Of The Law* (2000), the piece is not relegated to the realm of the “political.” “Political” artworks, after all, are “the most hopelessly self-referential of all art forms … Where the work of art as such … exists to manufacture ambiguity,
the political one seeks to resolve it.” (Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986–1993, 1995.*) Instead, he is praised in a review published in *Artext* for his “subtle aestheticism,” which enacts “a dilation and contraction between psychological and social domains.” Andy Alexander is an intelligent and enthusiastic younger artist. His dad was once the mayor of Beverly Hills. Interviewed by Andrew Hultkrans in the notorious *Surf and Turf* article that proclaimed the dominance of Southern California art schools (*Artforum*, Summer 1998), Alexander expresses his enthusiasm for art school as a place that “teaches you certain ways of looking at things, a way of being critical about culture that is incredibly imperative, especially right now.” Like most young artists in these programs, Alexander maintains a certain optimism about art, that it might be a chance to do something good in the world.

Yet if a black or Chicano artist working outside the institution were to mount an installation featuring the words “Fuck the Police,” I think it would be reviewed very differently, if at all. Such an installation would be seen to be mired in the identity politics and didacticism that, in the 1990s, became the scourge of the LA art world. Writing in the *LA Times* in 1996, critic David Pagel dismissed two decades of West Indian-born artist/filmmaker Isaac Julien’s work exhibited at the Margot Leavin Gallery as “myopic and opportunistic.” “This conservative exhibition,” Pagel wrote, “contends that the social group the artist belongs to is more important than the work he makes … Art as self-expression went out in the 1950s,” Pagel triumphantly concludes, “even though this show tries to deny it. … Marketing research puts people into categories; art only begins when categories start to break down.”

Whereas modernism believed the artist’s life held all the magic keys to reading works of art, neoconceptualism has cooled this off and corporatized it. The artist’s own biography doesn’t matter
much at all. What life? The blanker the better. The life experience of the artist, if channeled into the artwork, can only impede art’s neocorporate, neoconceptual purpose. It is the biography of the institution that we want to read.

In *The Collector’s Shit Project* (1993), the artist-curator Todd Alden invited numerous curators, collectors and well-known contemporary artists to “donate” samples of their shit. Each specimen was canned, signed by the artist, numbered and given a certificate of authenticity in a very limited edition (1 of 1). *Collector’s Shit* responds, with some conceptual wit, to the prolonged buzz that radiated for a decade in the art world about “the abject,” a condition described by Julia Kristeva in 1982 in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. But, looking backwards, Alden’s project also gave a referential nod to Nouveau-Realist artist Pierro Manzoni, who had done the *same* project (*Merda d’Artista*) in Italy, in 1961. Displayed in brightly colored cans and stacked up festively like a supermarket display, *Merda d’Artista* was Manzoni’s scathing critique of post-war consumerism: a public offering of his shit. Manzoni’s work, like that of his contemporary Nouveau Realists in Italy and France, was soon to be subsumed by New York-based Pop Art, in which the same imagery was used with cheerful irony, without any of the rage. Pop Art was essentially a big Fuck You to abstract expressionism. Using consumerist iconography, it principally addressed things happening in the art world, and was surprisingly unconcerned with the movement of consumerism in the culture then, at large.

The Manzoni link and its attendant history, didn’t figure very much into Alden’s 1993 reprise. It was all about “abjection,” and was remarkably successful. Lots of big collectors sent him lots of shit. Those who didn’t, sent him letters, which would be exhibited as well. And then he had the luck to have the exhibition cancelled by its slated venue, the Crozier Warehouse. Crozier is the storage...
facility for New York’s blue-chip galleries. When the manager learned the actual content of the Alden exhibition, he was suitably appalled. “You cannot,” he wrote in a letter to the artist, which would later be exhibited, “have an exhibition of excrement.” Eventually, the whole thing was shown at Art Matters Foundation in New York. Alden, a recent graduate of the Whitney Studio Art Program, took abjection very seriously. At that moment, the Whitney Program was promulgating two things: figuring out what Kristeva really meant by “the abject,” and institutional critique. “My inability to represent the abject,” he told Sylvère Lotringer in an interview years later (More & Less, 2000) “was figured through some kind of a semiotic configuration, by presenting it in a can in which excrement is signified through language, and not, through, you know...”

“Shit?” asked Lotringer.

We are witnessing a daily life that’s so contemptible and trite that pornography becomes its only appropriate rejoinder.

Part 2: Argument

Tracing the professionalization of the art world in his book Art Subjects (1999) Howard Singerman describes the way that institutional decisions were made during the 1950s to separate art programs from the humanities faculties so that they would be experiential, practice-based. Deeply influenced by the impact of Charles Olsen’s experiment at Black Mountain, Yale and Harvard implemented new MFA studio art programs based on practice and studio critique. This was a mixed blessing. Providing a more realistic training for artists than two more years of art history, the institutionalized peer-group formation of MFA studio programs also meant two years of institutionalized hazing. As Jack Goldstein recalled, during the 1970s heyday of CalArts conceptualism very
few negative comments were ever uttered by faculty about student work. Approval was connoted by a slight nod of the head. You either got the nod, or not.

I remember watching a harrowing videotape of one Art Center MFA student, in which he “volunteered” to be trussed like a chicken and hung from the ceiling like a piñata for a friend’s project. This project formed part of the friend’s “mini-review.” The student in question already had three strikes against him. He was highly intelligent, with a non-art undergraduate degree from a prestigious Ivy League university; he was a formerly religious Jew; he was hoping to use his social and spiritual concerns as a basis for the art he made at school, and later. His agreement to play chicken was a desperate last bid to get in on the fun and be part of the crowd. I remember watching the then-Provost and a then-Graduate Advisor circle around this living “piñata” for half an hour, poking and prodding, making disparaging comments about its construction and physique, flicking cigarette ash on its papier-mâché shroud.

Nobody wants to be uncool. Still, this two-year hazing process is essential to the development of value in the by-nature-elusive parameters of neoconceptual art. Without it, who would know which cibachrome photos of urban signage, which videotapes of socks tossing around a dryer, which neominimalist monochrome paintings are negligible and which are destined to be art?

Until recently, there was absolutely no chance of developing an art career in Los Angeles without attending one of several high-profile MFA studio art programs. New York has always had a multiplicity of art worlds, each with its own stars and punishments and rewards. The game there has traditionally revolved around watching who from the alternative/experimental gallery scenes will succeed in “crossing over” from Williamsburg to Chelsea and beyond. In LA, alternative spaces like Hollywood’s Zero One Gallery, Highways,
the Santa Monica performance venue and even the more upscale but non-profit LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) have been dead-end ghettos where no one, least of all ambitious students, from the art world goes. Curiously, this situation has begun to change with the gentrification of LA’s downtown and northeast neighborhoods. Under-capitalized art spaces have opened up in Chinatown, downtown LA and Echo Park, frequented by relative “civilians”: residents who work in art-tangential fields like film and fashion, web-marketing, community organizing and law.

However, the complete hegemony of LA’s MFA programs within the city’s art world has been seen to be a plus. As gallerist Andrea Rosen remarked to Andrew Hultkrans (Artforum, Summer 1998) “What makes LA so great is that the school program is actually a vital part of the community. A big part of being in the art community in LA is being a teacher.” And as Giovanni Intra wrote about the founding of his and Steve Hanson’s China Art Objects Gallery in 1999, “the notion of the alternative space, which abstained from financial dealing, had become redundant … its coordinates … were disoriented by LA’s post-graduate school environment from which professionally enthusiastic twenty-eight year olds emerged from a boot-camp-like education with an eighty thousand dollar student debt. The graduate schools in LA were incredible environments, intellectually speaking, with brilliant students and teachers; underneath this was a layer of pure financial terror substratified with humorous and cunning levels of industrial espionage, competitiveness, and the frequently desperate encroachment of dealers, curators and critics whose vocation mandated an enthusiasm for young art.” (“LA Politics” in Circles. Individuelle Sozialisation und Netzwerkarbeit, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, 2002)

Writing in Spin magazine in 1997, Dennis Cooper drew parallels between the energy, sincerity and ambitions of young artists working in UCLA’s graduate art program and the alternative music scene. And
within the larger context of conglomeratized culture, visual art is perhaps the last remaining medium where it is still possible to build a viable career without the backing of corporate-global marketing. Compared to the hegemony of Fox, Clear Channel and Time/Warner, the dominance of several art schools and their ideologies within the art world seems incredibly benign.

Still, it is bizarre that here, in America’s second largest city, contemporary art should have come to be so isolated and estranged from the experience of the city as a whole.

Part 3. Magic

Real estate lawyer and maverick political activist David Farrar points outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office on the 36th floor of the Arco Towers at the downtown LA skyline. “That’s my building,” Farrar says, nodding to the towers occupied by Citicorp. “And that one, and that one, and that one.”

Farrar is a short squat man in a navy suit who habitually wears bow-ties in this city where everyday is “casual-dress Friday” so that people can more easily identify, and then remember him. I met him on an airplane and we decided to be friends. “Hi, I’m the guy with the bow-tie you met last week at Harvey’s fund-raiser,” he’ll open on the phone, to the Speaker of the State Assembly or the developer Eli Broad or Madeline Janise-Aparaisio, leader of the Los Angeles Coalition for Economic Justice.

In the two weeks since we’ve met, he’s taken me on several walking tours of “his” LA. “His” LA consists mostly of the projects he’s helped implement. So far we’ve been to Union Station, an ‘intramodal transit hub’ of interlocking walkways, garden space, public art and upscale restaurants, which was previously a rundown train station surrounded by some dusty, trash-strewn vacant lots.
We’ve visited the LA Vets Westside Residence Hall near LAX, a model homeless shelter housed in a high-rise dormitory that Farrar and his colleagues saved from demolition. Here, formerly homeless veterans rent rooms for modest rents and work at entry-level jobs around the airport. The property was bought by LA Vets for less than what its demolition would have cost. Farrar is a fan of “More Than Shelter”: the idea that subsidized low-income housing has to offer something more than just housing. And at LA Vets, residents attend 12-step meetings and take high-school equivalency, business and computer classes in meeting rooms converted for these purposes.

“More Than Housing” is an idea Farrar helped pioneer while serving as Special Counsel to the Century Freeway Housing Project. With half a billion dollars of federal highway transit funds mandated to CalTrans to replace housing units destroyed by the building of the freeway, Farrar and his “team” tried to put the money to some good, by building low-income residential housing complexes that included afterschool tutoring programs, community centers and day-care. Twenty years later, the buildings remain unvandalized and thriving. Century Freeway Housing worked so well, it was established as a separate entity when the freeway was complete. The corporation continues to finance new affordable housing.

“Team” is an essential word in Farrar’s operational vocabulary. Though he knows very little about sports, he sees each deal as a race to get the ball across the finish line against the blockages of powerful opponents. In 1998, Farrar’s legal “team” represented the City of LA in developing the Staples Center sports arena. The Staples Center, home to the Los Angeles Lakers, was the firsts major sports facility to be built in an American city in which city government refused to subsidize the billionaire owners and developers. During the 18 month negotiations, Farrar had a friend call him every Sunday night to brief him about weekend sports highlights so he wouldn’t be excluded from Monday morning chats with team owners and their
attorneys. Presently, he’s representing the County of Los Angeles in negotiations with an oil company and a bevy of real estate owners and developers to convert the Baldwin Hills oil fields to “shared use” with a golf course and a nature preserve.

To David Farrar, Los Angeles is a kind of magic. He grew up in the Appalachian town of Clifton Forge in a section called the Roxbury Hollow, where it’s almost always dark because the hills are clumped around it like the gap-toothed smiles of its inhabitants. The child of a railway worker and a legal secretary, Farrar couldn’t afford to fix his teeth ’til he was 30, but he knew immediately upon arriving at the University of Virginia (where he attended college and law school on full scholarships) that his future probably wouldn’t be very bright in the patrician legal echelons of Washington DC or Manhattan.

In LA, people notice his bow tie before they pick up on his fading Appalachian accent. He found that in LA, it was possible to do “anything at all” so long as you were willing to “roll up your sleeves and pick up a shovel.”

LA City Council Member Jan Perry echoes Farrar’s sentiment. Raised in a middle-class black Cleveland family, she transferred to USC from Case Western Reserve when she was 19 years old, because “In Cleveland, you really had to know people, or be from a particular type of family to get ahead. I felt that LA provided a great opportunity for someone like myself. I felt I’d get a decent job, live in decent housing, go where I wanted to go, and be friends with all sorts of people,” she told the LA Downtown News.

In 1999, a group of 70 undocumented Thai garment workers were awarded a $1.2 million final settlement in their suit against the El Monte sweatshop that had once employed them. Members of the group arrived there years ago, unable to speak English and were held as virtual prisoners with guards, behind barbed wire. Since initiating the suit, members of the group have become nurses, fashion students and beauticians. Some have teamed up with Latino worker-activists.
In LA, it’s possible to buy influence with a City Council member with a campaign contribution of just $10,000. It only costs half a million bucks to get a piece of legislation passed in Sacramento. Graft is equal opportunity, and a noted City Council member known to have a propensity for gambling likes to take his bribes in the form of bets placed on his behalf at the Santa Anita racetrack.

Luis Gargonza grew up in a one-room shack without water or electricity in Michoacan. When he was 14, he caught a bus to Tijuana, swam across the Tijuana-San Diego channel and joined his brother in LA. Illiterate in Spanish, he worked odd jobs but learned to read and write in English. Now in his 40s, he drives a white Ford 250 pick-up truck and owns a gas station.

Born in Mexico City, Miguel Sanchez crossed the border through the desert. He worked in a south-central LA printing plant for fifteen years, saved $25,000 and opened a café and gallery in Echo Park.

Part 4 : Thurman, New York, January 2003

Universal Reality has its own
Zip code: 12839
This is all it is. Write to me. Here.

William Bronk

Hudson Falls, a small town bordering the southern Adirondacks in upstate New York, is the kind of place where memories of high school days revolve around getting stoned on angel dust and watching the sunrise from a hill above the city dump. My friend, Mark Babson, told me this. He took me there one Sunday afternoon and showed me all his secret places. And yes, tucked into an elbow of
the upper Hudson River, it is a very nice dump … although the entire site was capped three years ago after a report came out declaring it the third most polluted landfill in the whole United States. Still, it’s pretty. The dirt they dump-trucked in to cover up the toxic waste is covered now with grass.

Mark was born and raised in Hudson Falls, a town that now is little more than a collection of abandoned factories and wood-frame homes with scabby yards. When the Clinton-era EPA tried to make General Electric, the town’s primary employer, clean up the PCB’s they’d dumped there in Hudson River, the whole town rallied to GE’s support.

Why, they argued, “stir up” all those toxins? Mark (and every other local teenager who could read above a third-grade level) was paid handsomely by GE to gather signatures for a “grass roots” petition to “save” the river. When the company’s 4-year and $60 million campaign proved unsuccessful, they shut down the plant and moved away.

“Drunks, welfare cases, and old people,” Mark says, summing up Hudson Falls’ recent demographics. When I suggest there could be money to be made by fixing up the town’s once-glorious Georgian brick colonials, Mark shrugs and sighs: “You can’t sell a pizza with artichoke hearts here.”

I moved back to the tiny town of Thurman (population 832) last June. Thurman is not too far from Hudson Falls, but New York City is 225 miles away. After living in LA for seven years, I missed the winter and thought perhaps I’d become a regional writer of upstate New York.

Five months later this was seeming like it might not be a very good idea. Winter came on fast: by mid-October, everyone was burning wood and putting studded snow tires on their trucks. If anything, the area was more depressed than ever. The southern Adirondacks—which I’d remembered as charmingly sleepy—now
seemed ravaged and bereft. Throughout the region, the Grand Union supermarkets had been replaced by a filthy low-end grocery chain called Tops that specialized in week-old produce. In Corinth, the last remaining paper mill was about to close. The pre-Wal-Mart Ames department stores had just filed for bankruptcy, so now you had to drive a 50 mile round-trip to just pick up a corkscrew. Old-timers who’d logged the land with horses had mostly all died; now their descendents ruled the Thurman woods with giant skidders, four-wheeler ATVs and snowmobiles.

I was spending too much time cruising websites for computer sex (which is the only kind sex you’ll have if you live up here alone); driving around the countryside listening to Frank Sinatra Classic Hits and weeping. The old Cole Porter songs evoked a world of specificity, where lovers were remembered for the hats they wore, the way they held a fork, their smile, rather than forgotten through the infinitely exchangeable signifiers of computer sex and porn.

My story is much too sad to be told
But practically everything leaves me totally cold
The only exception I know is the case
When I’m out on a quiet spree
Fighting vainly the old ennui
And I suddenly turn and see
Your fabulous face

It was around this time I met Mark Babson. Mark, at 22, was a veteran of several failed attempts at college. He was fixing up my kitchen after the vegans and their seven household animals who’d lived there in my absence, trashed it. I met Mark at The Java Shop, the region’s solitary promise of a better life that opened in Glens Falls that summer, 20 miles away. Some high-school friends of Mark’s had started it with the proceeds of some precocious
stock-market speculation. Featuring a cooled off 1970s décor, the place had magazines you might actually want to read. With his full set of teeth and deadpan wit, Mark had his pick of ex-urban female clients in the region. He’d quoted on a job for another single woman in her 40s who’d moved back from California, but when she was bludgeoned and dismembered later on that winter by a local boyfriend, we both felt lucky he’d picked me.

While Mark clanged and banged around the kitchen, I was working or not working on my book and meeting prospective sex partners on the computer. Fantasy is like a drug. What hooks you in is not the sex but the illusion of delicious intimacy. In Thurman, I was alone so much my shoulders started bunching up. I’d lived there and taught workshops at the local school ten years ago, but now nothing was the same. George Mosher, who’d entertained the local kids with his talking dog and chickens that laid colored eggs, was dead. George had lived in Thurman all his life; walked ten miles through the woods during the Depression to a job in Stony Creek. Mrs. Rounds, who’d kept the most amazing garden of perennials around her tiny woodframe house, was in the Glens Falls Nursing Home. Across the road, Old Vern had passed on his proprietorship of Baker’s Garage to his son Young Vern, president of the Southern Adirondack Snowmobilers Club. Unblanketed by a sediment of local culture, everything in Thurman seemed generic, bleak and empty. It was just another dying town. It seemed important, then, to find someone I could talk to. My crooked teeth, your comprehension.

Dear Martin, I wrote to someone I’d just met on the computer, Yes. I’m a writer; I’ve had this house upstate for many years & have just come back to it after being in LA where I taught writing in a grad program for 7 years. I like going to the gym & library, equally; am abt 5’5” quite thin jewish ashkenazy rodent features streaky hair ex punk rocker from NY. Have been playing BDSM on
& off for abt 5 years … discovered it in LA as something erotic & a way of having more than casual sex but less than terminal romance with others.

Martin wrote back right away. *In my private life I have enjoyed a mix of vanilla and D/s relationships over several years. I was married for 18 years when my wife died a year ago August. She was a lovely woman with whom I enjoyed a wide range of pleasures. During that period, I also enjoyed other relationships with submissive partners. I explored it deeply, during a period of separation, and we reunited with this as a central element of a then delicious sex life. She was diagnosed with colon cancer four years ago. It was a graceful passing.*

Presently I live with a 12-year-old daughter, who is very much the central character in my life. I'm actively involved with two partners, including a quite vanilla relationship with a local partner, and a pleasure slave who lives in Toronto, with whom I spend weekends about once a month. I've recently returned to Bondage.com after a long absence, hoping I might find a partner who moves me deeply …

*More than casual sex but less than terminal romance. Nicely said. Actually, everything you’ve said about yourself is appealing. I think I’ve detailed in my profile that I lean toward the stylish, romantic types of encounters … it is the erotic intensity of BDSM sex that draws me most strongly.*

I spent the night with him in Binghamton 180 miles away. We talked and kissed and didn’t do S/m at all and Martin seemed to find this beautiful. He said: “I feel you need my tenderness more now than my dominance.” He said: “There’s no such thing as a hierarchy of needs.” In the morning over coffee, we talked about upstate New York’s 19th century utopians and reformers, and Martin said the most intelligent, perceptive things. He said he’d like to be my writing muse and gave me several gifts before I left: his dead wife’s plastic travel mug, an ice scraper and a book of stories by Irish gothic writer Sheridan Le Fanu.
I’d like to know, he emailed me a few days later, what sort of relationship with me you might find to be most thrilling. It should be nothing less than thrilling. And then: In a world of people miserably searching for The One, two hearts soar at the prospect of finding A One. What a joy to start a relationship this way.

Martin had a responsible job that didn’t interest him in Binghamton, a place he didn’t want to live. But he was passionate about his couch. It was a leopard-plush Victorian divan, fabricated for a popular gothic horror movie. He’d bought it over eBay from an Australian art director, and then re-edited the movie’s DVD on his computer, highlighting scenes that showed his couch. Seen against the limitations of his situation, Martin’s enthusiasms seemed so moving. He’d had a drinking problem in his 20s. Like so many alcoholics, he had more sensitivity and intelligence than he’d found a way to use in life. So when Martin emailed again asking if I’d like to “share an encounter” with him and his Toronto girlfriend, I was touched.

Back in Thurman, Mark loaned me a small strange book written by a teacher at the local community college, the art historian Sheldon Hurst. The book—which was actually an art catalogue—was called The William Bronk Collection: It Becomes Our Life (2000). It was compiled to document the eclectic art collection bequeathed to the school by poet William Bronk. Winner of the American Book Award in 1978, Bronk lived nearly all his life alone in the big yellow house in Hudson Falls where he was born. He donated his art collection to the school two years before his death, in 1999. Mark remembered Bronk very well, though not for his poetry. Mark remembered William Bronk as the nice old guy whose family owned Bronk Coal and Lumber. He could always count on Bronk to buy a case or two of fruit for the Hudson Falls High band fruit drive.
It Becomes Our Life presents a handful of Bronk’s poems laid out opposite reproductions of selected works of art from his collection. The poems are shockingly direct reports of Bronk’s agnostic mysticism and the pleasures that he found in visual abstraction. Intellectually elegant, annealed and raw, the poems are tiny arguments for the power of intangibility, mounted with a gravelly kind of pragmatism. In Astonishment, Bronk writes: “It was perhaps not intended that we should speak,/ in art, of transcendent values, assuming of course/intention by anyone or anything./ Unnecessary assumption: transcendence cares/nothing about intention whether or not. …” The accompanying art is an eclectic mix of paintings, lithographs and sculptures by the poet’s friends—“minor” 20th century artists whose work eluded major movements, categories. While by themselves, the images might seem unremarkable, each of the accompanying poems draws out the subtext of the work. It’s as if Bronk saw the same thing that the artist saw and was writing through the painting.

Hurst, who’d been a close friend of Bronk’s, draws out the metaphysical nature of the poems in his introductory essay. He sees Bronk’s sophisticated yet direct poetics as a consequence of simple receptivity. “Bronk surrounded himself with art in his home,” Hurst writes. “For him the words look and listen, see and hear, were the very basis of an artistic sensibility of openness.” Hurst’s text was remarkably original and felt for any art historian, let alone for one who teaches at community college. It was extraordinary. Produced entirely in the region, there was nothing “regional” about this book at all.

The second time Martin and I met was at the Binghamton Embassy Suites Hotel on a December afternoon before the holidays. This time, he brought a digital video camera and some “adult” accoutrements for me to practice with, in preparation for our
“encounter” with his Toronto “pleasure slave,” whose name was Catherine. There is an image from that afternoon he emailed to me later. Discreetly titled “Jpg.Still,” it’s now in the trash file of my computer.

“I think it might be possible,” I’d giggled to him then, “for us to have a discrete relationship. In the categorical sense.” I felt so sorry for all the other online perverts who frequently misspelled the word “discrete,” when what they really meant was, undisclosed. The Jpg image had that silvery radiance of a gelatin print, of early black and white photography. We spent the evening at his house, and when we were on the famous couch, Martin made his first remark about my clumsiness. I’d have to change my hair, he said, and also wear a lot more make-up.

Bronk was born in 1918 on Pearl Street, Hudson Falls, in the same big yellow house he died in. He was the only son of the upstate New York branch of a colonial Dutch family who’d had an entire borough named for them: the Bronx. Bronk attended Dartmouth during the mid-1930s. He went to Harvard Graduate School; left after the first year. While still at Dartmouth, Bronk spent two summers at the Cummington School for the Arts, where he (already a young poet) fell in love with all the painters. They were so non-verbal, so intense, engaged in the passionate figuration that would later on be practiced at the New York Studio School: paintings full of blood and sweat, a kind of physical transference. Shirley Clarke painted the 19-year-old Bronk as a boho Goya Christ before she became a filmmaker. Herman Maril, Vincent Canadé and Clarke, who were all in residence at Cummington, became his lifelong friends. After Harvard, Bronk spent two years in the army and then returned to Hudson Falls, where he remained, managing the Bronk Coal and Lumber Yard on Parry Street.
As Bronk’s friends tell it, Bronk’s life in Hudson Falls had a kind of charmed Frank Capra quality. Days began with a walk from Pearl Street down to McCann’s on Main, where he picked up the morning paper. He served on the advisory board of the Hudson Falls Public Library, and the ladies there all said “Good morning, Mr. Bronk,” each time he entered. On Pearl Street, he was known as “Bill the Coal and Lumber Man” to all his neighbors. Meanwhile he was maintaining correspondences with Charles Olsen, Cid Corman and George Oppen, the great objectivist godfathers of his era. While guys outside hauled two-by-fours, Bronk stayed in the back office, curled over the big oak desk that had been his Dad’s, writing deep dark metaphysical poetry. As his friend, the writer Paul Pines remarks, “Bill’s interest in the lumber yard was minimal.”

How did Bronk survive this? It seems he was ambivalent about his entirely self-willed obscurity. For years he was content to publish volume after volume with a friend’s New Rochelle small press. When, at George and June Oppen’s insistence, New Directions Press finally published his sixth book of poetry, Bronk remarked: “When The World, the Worldless (1964) came out, I felt naked. And then I realized no one was looking.”

Biographically, Bronk is frequently compared to poet Wallace Stevens. Both attended Harvard; both worked full-time at non-literary jobs. Both waited until late in life to receive much recognition for their poetry. Stevens, who didn’t publish his first book ’til he was 44, won a National Book Award when he was 60. Bronk won the American Book Award when he was 64 for his North Point Press book, Life Supports: New and Collected Poems (1981). But after that, he returned to publishing with Talisman House, a small New Jersey press run by the friend who now acts as his executor. Like Bronk, Stevens held a managerial job, working as an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut. But unlike
Stevens, Bronk was no great advocate of the work ethic. As Stevens, a great modernist, once said, “It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a job.” Bronk had little interest in his identity as a “man,” and even less in “character.” “There is a sense in which the poem is just there and the poet simply writes it down,” Bronk told a reporter from the Albany Times Union in 1982. “When the poem comes, it comes as a surprise, and I’m delighted.”

The way you wear your hat,
The way you sip your tea,
The memory of all that,
No, no! They can’t take that away from me!

Martin’s house in Binghamton was a modestly upscale tract affair in one of those subdivisions named for things destroyed by its developer. Was it called Fox Run Meadows, Eagle’s Nook or Beaver Hills? I don’t remember. I met his daughter in the kitchen when I staggered downstairs from his room that morning. She seemed remarkably self-possessed for someone 12 years old who’d recently lost her mother. She had that unrepeatable omnipotence that comes at 12, when you’re old enough to see the game for what it is but not yet old enough to be invested in it. My presence didn’t seem to bother her at all. Martin’d put a lot of thought into single parenting. He’d explained to her that grown-ups, just like kids, like having sleepovers. He used his sex life as a medium for parental bonding, encouraging her to help him rank and rate the girl-friends. While these adult women came and went, she would always be there.
Wallace Stevens wrote that “imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos.” Bronk, on the other hand, was quite at home with chaos. A fan of nihilist philosopher Arnold Schopenhauer, Bronk’s poems loop back with shattering clarity to dazzling epiphanies of metaphysical wit, delivered brut, without any other flourish. His poems are very intimate, though they circle mostly around intangibility. Bronk examines light and form the way a small-town doctor checks for measles. Small town patrician that he was, Bronk’s rigorous brand of dark ontology is delivered slyly in a deadpan drawl. In fact he has a great deal more in common with William Burroughs than he does with Wallace Stevens.

Bronk’s “personal” (i.e., his sex) life remains a well-kept secret among the Glens Falls literary friends who survive him. They are quite discreet about this. Though Bronk stayed single, living alone among the artworks given to him by friends, he liked the company of women. He also liked the company of boys and men. During the late 1960s, Bronk made friends with Lorin French and Dan Leavy, two students at Hudson Falls High School. Leavy, French and several other anti-jocks became constant visitors at the house on Pearl Street. Through his influence, French and Leavy both went on to become professional artists, and many of their works are included in the collection.

Throughout the 1970s, Bronk went to New York a lot. He was a regular at Tin Angel, the Bowery bar Paul Pines then owned. William Burroughs lived across the street in a loft he called “the bunker,” and poets like the young Eileen Myles bussed tables. Paul Pines remembers Bronk as being “very elusive,” at that time. Later, Pines sold the bar, moved to the Caribbean, got bored and moved to Hudson Falls. He remembers the long walks he and Bronk would take along the Hudson River canal towpath. They talked endlessly about poetry and personal stuff and culture. Bronk knew every
skeleton in every closet of each house along the way. He was a tremendous gossip and prized all the personal details of his neighbors’ lives, although as Pines says, “His poems came from another place. He didn’t use it.”

Martin’s disapproval of my hair and makeup really bothered me. I’d had the hair done in LA; it cost $300. Was I supposed to look like someone from a local escort service? I’d put on the makeup (MAC) at the last thruway rest stop before Binghamton … the locations of the rest stops, I’d researched this. That morning, when his daughter left for school, he said: “I note a certain ambivalence on your part about surrendering.”

I’m a little lamb who’s lost in the wood  
I know I could, could always be good  
To someone who’ll watch over me  

Although I may not be the man some girls think of as handsome  
To her heart I’ll carry the key  

Won’t you tell her please to  
Put on some speed  
Follow my lead  
Oh how I need someone to watch over me  

Back home in Thurman I emailed Martin. No response. I left a voicemail. Five days later he emailed me the video still with this note: What music would you say went with images of a woman who pulls the chain attached to her nipples as she glides her lips up and down a lover’s cock?  

And then I was ambivalent. I wasn’t really all that interested in sex; would just as soon talk about poetry. I wondered, then, about
S/m and Pleasure Slavedom. Why couldn’t my thoughts about William Bronk be just as pleasurable as a pair of lips around his cock?

In France, there is a formal/informal structure for the perpetuation of a dead artist’s work known as the *Society of Friends*. Legally constituted as a non-profit LLC, the Societies des Amies gather up the writer’s unpublished works and correspondences, diaries and notebooks. They elicit reminiscences and tributes among themselves and all the writer’s other friends and colleagues. They collect notes taken by former students on the dead friend’s lectures, and archive all the critical reviews that appeared during their friend’s lifetime on his work. Then, they publish all this stuff in a limited edition known as the *Cahiers*, which may be drawn from in the future as the basis of new publications. Usually these friends are writers too, and they do this on a voluntary basis. The Societes exist to keep an artist’s memory alive, and ensure that his/her work will be preserved and eventually transmitted to the future.

Why do the friends do this? It can only be that they believe, in some real way, the friend’s life and work belongs to them … that despite its singularity, the dead friend’s work did not occur in isolation. It speaks for them because they shared a place in time. In this way, the writer’s posthumous reputation is created by his friends through shared activity. This practice, of course, implies belief in continuity...

Four months after Bronk’s death, before the house was sold, Sheldon Hurst, Paul Pines and Pines’ son went over to document it with a video camera. Having been entrusted to preserve Bronk’s art collection, Hurst wanted to be sure he’d remember which of the works had been hung over which desk or which sofa. The three of
them also wanted to remember their friend's home as it had been before he died. Hurst loaned me the tape. It looked like a crime scene video. Documenting the aftermath of an artistic life, Pine's camera roams over ... a half-read *New York Times* on the kitchen table ... a pair of reading glasses left carelessly beside it. Three floors of intricately ordered disarray: the house was obviously this man's brain center. Downstairs there is one desk for writing, another desk for typing letters. Bookshelves in most of the rooms, arranged by topic and theme. A special bookcase where Bronk kept the works of his friends ... a rotary phone, no computer.

Outside on the front porch, across from a gingko tree, is one of Loren French's large metal sculptures. It's spring. The gingko tree's blooming, and the back door of the house has blown open. Over the living room fireplace, Bronk had a framed charcoal drawing by his oldest friend, Eugene Canadé. A stunning painting by Herman Maril of a faceless man sitting at a modernist table with a large stuffed bird hangs above an old horsehair armchair. Upstairs, more works by Leavy, French and some of their friends have been taped up on some hideous palm-tree wallpaper.

Under Bronk's influence, these young local people became completely absorbed in the question, *why this and not that?*, which is probably the only artistic question that's worth asking. It's late afternoon and outside the sky is nearly drained of light. Bronk had a Chinese kitsch-tapestry of Chairman Mao hung up in his bathroom. Idiosyncratic and highly personal, Bronk's art collection, which is now spread out around the local community college campus, has absolutely nothing to say about art history or curatorial practice, but it tells everything about his belief in the force of artistic transmission.

Compiling the catalogue, Hurst has provided a tremendous service to those interested in Bronk's work by coupling 22 poems with reproductions of the artworks that inspired them. The collection spans many moods and three or four generations. It is both
professional and amateur, if “professionalism” is defined by participation in the gallery system.

Eugene Canadé (1914–2001), who Bronk met at Cummington, painted consistently throughout his life while working full-time in Paris for UNICEF. Son of 19th century genre painter Vincent Canadé, (whose works are also represented in Bronk’s collection) Eugene dipped in and out nearly every significant style of 20th century painting. Study for a Mural is a foray in cubism; Queensboro Bridge No. 4 is a social realist work; Birch Sketch #2 represents that loose, mid-20th century figuration. The fact that Vincent and Eugene Canadé both saw painting as a vocation had tremendous influence on William Bronk. In Life Supports, he writes in dialogue with one of Vincent Canadé’s self-portraits:

…but all
Pop’s heads look like him, each in its own way.
Practice in looking at painting show us how what
We see can be said to look: as painting looks.
And this is a reason for painting, to say it so,
To limn the real, limit, illumine it. …

On A Picture By Vincent Canadé

Bronk was fascinated by this vocational aspect of painting, and by its ability to give form to the intangible. This, of course, is an anachronistic way to see painting. The appropriationist possibilities of Vincent Canadé’s Washington Square at Night, which looks for all the world like Edward Hopper, didn’t interest him at all. Neither was he interested in “originality.” Bronk looks through the naked birch trees in Canadé’s Birch Sketch #2, (which to a different eye seems not unlike a hundred other figurative-impressionistic landscape sketches) and sees the difficulty of weather:
I love the gentle days, the summertimes, 
their mumbled messages, asking the ear 
to bare itself to hear them better.

Yet,
other poems clothe me again
in their clarities when I stand in them
as in a weather. I try the way they look.

Weathers We Live In

It is the discipline of observation that draws Bronk in. There is the world, and there is the painter, and the painting is what happens in the middle. Many of the paintings in the collection feature skies. This seems like no coincidence for a poet so obsessed with light and the proof it gives of immateriality.

Why is it that we think our lives can just be wonderful? Before my third trip to visit him in Binghamton, Martin emailed an instruction list. It was very programmatic and specific.

Sunday: I expect my daughter will be at home, and that we will, therefore, want to get personal time elsewhere. If you let me know when you expect to arrive, we can meet at the Embassy Suites Hotel. You’ll have the option of dining with us at home, or on your own, if you prefer.

Dress: I’d like to see your whites. No need to shop for a white catsuit before I’ve seen the corset and stockings, though, of course, I’ll be wanting to see you in one sometime soon. Your highest shoes, of course. A short skirt or tight dress would be nice. With skirts, I prefer blouses that button down the front.

Makeup: A tasteful glamour look is my preference, hence the reds, and the suggestion of liquid foundation, eyeliner, blush, etc. I’d like you to experiment with your hair, and will be interested in seeing what you do.
Scent: Isis prefers supplicants to come scented with rose, sandalwood, lotus and Myrrh. Any or all of these would be ideal.

Address: My Lord would be most appropriate.

This would be our last “rehearsal” prior to the threesome with his Toronto Pleasure Slave which was scheduled to happen after Christmas. He had great plans for this encounter, which would start off at the Binghamton Embassy Suites Hotel. He was laying in supplies, like new whips and purple latex double dildoes. But then again, a strap-on was another central element.

Suffice it to say, he’d written, I like it stylish but not stylized. If something turns me or my partner(s) on, I probably want to do it. C. has no need to exercise seniority, and no special position relative to you. So alpha, no alpha, you can shape how we play with Catherine to an appropriate degree. It’s my responsibility to synthesize and direct, based on what I know. I suggested the idea of you fucking her from behind because it seemed to me that this was possible. Dominance shouldn’t be an ego trip, it’s more like leadership. There are great ego rewards, and great pleasures. But the greatest pleasure and success comes from creating the experience of optimal erotic excitement in total. Catherine is lovely in many ways, and is pleasingly devoted to me. I hold her in very very high regard, and see to her development and protection as my duty.

For our third meeting, Sunday, December 22, I was to drive to the Embassy Suites in Binghamton with several garment bags of clothing: road clothes for the 360 mile roundtrip; corset, garters, stockings; the slutty secretary clothes; and a subdued and tasteful outfit to change into later on when he’d take me out to dinner with his daughter. This was starting to feel a lot like working a double shift of cocktail waitressing or whoring. And then there was the clip-on hairpiece and the manicure; the bright red lipstick, liquid eyeliner and the dreadful hippie body oils with names like Jasmine, Sandalwood and Rose.
Late Tuesday night, December 17, my friend G. died suddenly and unexpectedly in a friend’s room while he was visiting New York City. I was 225 miles away in Thurman, and all of Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoon, while I was shopping for the slutty outfit down in Saratoga, I was on the phone to friends in LA, New York, Chicago, London and Auckland, trying to figure out how to get G’s body out of the Brooklyn morgue and back to his family in New Zealand. His friend Isobel, who he’d been staying with in New York, had a ticket to fly home to Auckland for the holidays that Sunday and she was beside herself, fielding 200 calls a day, trying to raise funds to pay a Brooklyn undertaker so the funeral parlor would “release” the body. Did I mention all this happened while I was trying to write a book about the Holocaust? For a while it seemed like there might be a wake on Sunday afternoon. In that case I’d drive down to Brooklyn so that Isobel could catch her plane.

On Thursday night I emailed Martin very cautiously. Subject: possible change of plans. Dear Martin, I wrote, I may not be able to come to Binghamton this Sunday. I wrote him how my friend had died, about the body and the wake and all of the confusion. But that I still looked forward very much to seeing him and would let him know how things resolved. He did not respond. On Friday afternoon, there was a decision not to transport the body until after the Christmas holidays, and so I emailed him again: Sunday’s clear. Arrangements, finally, circumvent NYC. See you at the Embassy at 1:30. Meanwhile my friend’s body was still at the morgue, I pictured this, a tag attached to his big toe, in Brooklyn.

For several years, a scene revolved around Bronk’s house on Pearl Street. Bronk sold the lumberyard shortly after turning 60, in 1978. Paul Pines moved upstate from his island near Barbados, and there was Sheldon Hurst, and other friends who Hurst employed
part-time in the community college Humanities Department. Lorin French and Dan Leavy were there. Having established themselves as artists, they took advantage of the kinds of opportunities provided by arts councils and regional museums. Often, there were residencies and exchanges with other artists in Québec and Maine and Provincetown, and they liked to bring their new friends “home” to meet with Bronk on Pearl Street. Sometimes these visitors stayed for months, and their late-night conversations spilled over into collaborations.

The artist Jo Ann Lanneville from Three Rivers, Canada made an artist’s book of prints responding to Bronk’s poetry. Dan Leary made a woodcut called The Light, The Trees in answer to Bronk’s work in Life Supports. All these works are part of Bronk’s collection. The collection documents a kind of reciprocity that could only happen over time. For years, Bronk wrote poems evoked by looking at the paintings of Canadé, Maril and other visual art contemporaries. Later on, younger visual artists produced works inspired by their readings of these poems.

So while the works in Bronk’s collection might seem disparate, they are actually parts of one large body created by a clusterfuck of influence. “I am a husband to my work,” Bronk told the Albany Times Union, and the marriage did turn out to be prolific. Composed in many different styles, all the works in Bronk’s collection share a concern with space and emptiness, light and darkness. Living alone with them so many years, Bronk wrote to them and straight through them.

Once it had seemed
the objects mattered: the light was to see them by.
Examined, they yielded nothing, nothing real.
… In them, the light revealed itself, took shape.
Objects are nothing. There is only the light, the light!
Bronk wrote in *Life Supports*, sitting in his living room beside a painting made by Canadé. Voluntarily exiled in this backwater Republican town, Bronk came home from the lumberyard to a world of luminous ideas. The paintings helped him to create his own imaginary realm, which was transmitted, then, to others.

It’s only thanks to Hurst’s work on *It Becomes Our Life* that it is possible to see this. His commentary in it is simultaneously modest and mind-blowing. As if addressing a roomful of community college students, he describes the full range of Bronk’s intentions in the simplest terms. To look and to see. To appreciate paradox. To know what matters and not. Although my friend Mark dismisses the community college as “high school with a cigarette,” when I visited Hurst there I was amazed to see so many people working hard for very little money to give people like Mark some kind of opportunity. It’s possible to take two years of classes there for free and then transfer to a four-year university. Hurst was about to leave for Russia, where he’d talked some people into setting up an exchange program at the Hermitage. He’d be back after the semester break.

At the hotel that afternoon in Binghamton, Martin said a thing that puzzled me. He was planning to pass my contact info onto Catherine, and I said something about how great that was, his willingness to take that risk, to bring the two of us together. “What risk?” he asked. “Do you think there’s anything the two of you could do to undermine me?” Later there was a strange dinner in a restaurant with his daughter, in which the two of them observed my efforts to engage with them, the couple. I thought about the girl’s dead mother. There were no pictures of her in the display of family photographs the pair had mounted in the living room at home.

After the Christmas holidays, I emailed Martin I was having second thoughts about the “encounter” we had planned with
Catherine. I told him I was much more interested in them than catsuits, strap-ons, slutty secretary clothes or hairstyles.

He responded in the language of the office: I think it's clear that you're seeking a broader focus to a relationship than I, and that the centrality of my focus on sex, and on a particular kind of sexual relationship (as I wish to define it) is not what you would prioritize. If I see this correctly, it appears we are likely to experience increasing conflict rather than increasing pleasure following our current course. This is regrettable, but I think, beyond argument or salvation. I never heard from him again.

Cole Porter’s songs are infinitely touching because they conjure up a world that’s more “adult” than any website: a world in which “ennui” can rhyme with “see,” and happiness can be savored against a backdrop of possible loss. A world in which “I get a kick though it’s clear to me/You obviously don’t adore me,” and it’s possible to love without being loved back in return. Witty and brave, they make it bearable to live among the ugly things because they give you hope.

Discovering Bronk’s art collection proved that a life full of meaning can happen anywhere, even in this isolate town. The memory of Bronk’s life and the devotion of his friends open the door to what poetry offers us: a world defiant of bureacro-porn, where people exist and everything counts.