



You Are the Printmaker

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1. Birds

Here's an experiment: A biologist isolates several dozen two-week-old white-crowned sparrow nestlings in soundproof cages. A first group is left in silence. A second group hears, for three hours a day, complete recordings of adult white-crowned sparrows singing their song. A final group also is allowed to hear the adult song, but only in phrases: a few whistles, some overlapping trills, and long seconds of silence in between. Sometimes the phrases are played in reverse; sometimes the order is mixed up.

Sixty days pass. Which hatchlings learn to sing? The ones left in silence eventually do sing, but their songs are uniformly simple: repeated one-note whistles. Nothing more. The hatchlings who heard the song in its entirety learn to perform it perfectly, trilling away like wild sparrows.

And the group who heard snippets of the song with gaps between the segments? They too, astonishingly, sing perfect adult songs. They *order* the phrases. They take the fragments they are given and assemble them into unified, flawless melodies.

2. Children

One more experiment: A developmental psychologist puts thirty-two twenty-one-month-olds in a waiting room. Sixteen boys, sixteen girls. She makes sure all the children know the following four words: doggy, baby, birdie, and kitty.

One at a time, she sets the toddlers in front of two blank television screens. At regular intervals, a recorded voice asks each child a question. "Where's the doggy?" Or: "Can you see the baby?" As the question is asked, one television displays a picture of a doggy (or a baby, birdie, or kitty). The other television displays something else: a car, a boat, a mouse. The first image is called the "target" picture, and the second is called the "distracter" picture.

Meanwhile the psychologist videotapes the baby's eyes. If the child is looking at the

distracter picture when the target word is spoken, the correct response is for the child to shift his or her fixation immediately to the target picture. If the child is already looking at the target picture, the correct response is to continue looking at that picture.

In a subsequent round, things get tougher. This time the recorded voice doesn't finish her questions. Now the four target words are abbreviated to *bei* (baby), *daw* (doggy), *ki* (kitty), and *ber* (birdie). Rather than hear the entire word, the toddler will only get to hear an extremely short burst of it: the first three hundred microseconds.

So. Here comes a picture of a kitty on one of the screens. Here comes the voice: "Where's the k—?" Again the results are videotaped and tabulated.

Did the toddlers recognize whole words more quickly or more reliably than partial words? No! The psychologist found that there were *no significant differences* in either correct responses *or* reaction times. The children responded reliably to both whole words and abbreviated ones.

This implies that even as babies, we can recognize spoken words using partial phonetic information. Before they are two years old, these little brains can assemble scattered, partial information and transform it into something meaningful.

Give a baby human the hint of a word, and she'll fill in the rest. Give a baby sparrow the broken pieces of a song, and it will make music.

I think we evolved to see structures even when only the faint contours of structures exist. Give us a face and we see a story. Give us brushstrokes and we see apples, pears, skulls, gods. Give us a family, some photographs, some printmaking tools, and a view, and we can re-create the world.

3. Where's the Printmaker?

A scaled-down reproduction of Simon Dinnerstein's fourteen-foot-long, breathtaking painting *The Fulbright Triptych* hangs beside my desk. Every time my eyes drift to it, they get stuck on the table in the center panel. A big, black two-drawer table, covered with tools.

The table stands on a floor that's wrecked and worn—a floor that has known labor, varnish, chemicals, a floor with history. My eyes rise to the twin windows gazing



c. 1972

like rectangular eyes onto a town as orderly as the room they peer out from, lived-in, lived-upon, Dutch or German, farmed and tidy, the sky a wash of pale blue, the hills a bucolic green.

Eventually the windows send the eyes back inside, onto broad hardware store peg-board walls, textured and smudged with paint, a spectrum of yellows and reds showing through their holes. An eccentric album of photographs is fixed to these walls, along with letters, postcards of classic paintings, poems, child's drawings, something from Melville, something from Wittgenstein, even matching houseplants; it's as if an artist's memories and influences and aspirations have been turned inside out and slathered, with enigmatic symmetry, in front of us. Everything is framed, everything is a fragment.

My gaze scatters. It skids between an airmail letter, a nude couple kissing, a Russian visa. Always, for some reason, it returns to the table. The table seems to hold its print-making tools out to the viewer in the way a nurse might hold out a tray of instruments to a surgeon. Here, it seems to say. Here is what you need.

But where's the printmaker? Where's the person for whom these tools are intended? Whose mind is indexed up on that wall; who's going to assemble something meaningful out of all of this? Is it that half-relaxed, half-intense man in the velvet shirt, hands folded, staring at me from the right panel? Or could it be the woman—looking a bit trapped, a bit tired—holding the baby in the left panel? Is *she* the printmaker?

The eye travels back and forth between the man and the table and the woman and the table. Man, table, woman. Father, table, mother. Artist, work, family. One hears the beginning of a word, fragments of a song—one hears a piece of a Phillip Booth poem:

*I seesaw on the old cliff, trying
to balance things out: job,
wife, children, myself.*

The baby sits on her mother's plaid skirt: alert, intelligent. In the old triptychs the baby was usually given the center panel, wasn't it? God, Jesus, a haloed infant in a manger, drenched in a column of light. The side panels were for shepherds, attendants, supporting actors. In the hierarchy of the triptych, the protagonist should be in the center. Right?

What's in the center of *The Fulbright Triptych*? Tools on a table. Scissors and etching needles, scrapers and scorers, twenty-seven tiny pencils in the back. And in the very center, a copperplate, aswarm with leaves.

In the table I see Booth's seesaw, both chasm and bridge between mother and father, husband and wife, artist and family, and in such a choreography the art-making apparatus seems to swell outward, until the copperplate has become a sun, and the humans in the side panels seem almost provisional, distant planets, as if they too, like the photos and drawings and paintings on the pegboard, have been pinned to the wall, merely three more data points in a great fragmented constellation left to be assembled by the viewer.

Where's the printmaker?

The printmaker is standing in front of the painting.

4. Pegboard

When I'm writing a novel or a short story, I accrue things: photographs, drawings, leaves, pages from books and journals, maps, notes, similes, and I pin them to a big bulletin board in my office. The bigger the project, the more things I tack up. A drawing of a fossil, a photograph of fighter-bombers in formation, a postage stamp, a page copied out of Sebald, a little translucent envelope filled with seashells. To me these disparate things form the dimmest outline of a map. They are the scraps of songs; the beginnings of words; the posts for a long, disorderly pier I'm hoping to cantilever out into the ocean.

Eventually, if things go well, my brain manages to cram many of these seemingly divergent things, gradually and idiosyncratically, into a single narrative. I try to draw lines between the dots. In a sense, a successful project presents a great pastiche of memory and imagination and research, the genesis of which I eventually lose as I press forward into the darkness.

With my bulletin board I map the initial points, and with pen and paper I start to move the points around, dreaming up the connections. In *The Fulbright Triptych*, it is as if Simon Dinnerstein has rendered this process exactly—he has presented the tools and materials with which a storyteller might make meaning out of the world. But he has left it up to you to put it all together.

5. You Are the Printmaker

We each have eighty to one hundred billion neurons in our brains. That's as many stars as there are in the Milky Way. From the ends of each neuron sprout off synapses, slender hairs corkscrewing off into neighboring neurons. A vast, entwined welter of these neural junctions is crammed into our skulls—a private, damp, snarled jungle—from stem to frontal lobes, alive with electricity, soaked in neurochemicals. Each of us has as many as five hundred trillion of those synapses up there, lacing our neurons together into one of the most complicated, dense, and interconnected substances in the universe.

Our brains are meaning-making machines. They seek meaning everywhere, inscribing an intensely idiosyncratic latticework across the landscape. We live in multiple places, lead multiple lives. We stumble into a good book, a dark theater, a rich painting, and the complaints of the day scatter and we fall, we drift, we lose ourselves. We find ourselves looking through the eyes of people we have never met, never could otherwise meet. We ask ourselves: What does this mean?

Look at *The Fulbright Triptych* for a minute and the mind begins to fill in the blanks, sketch lines between data points, assemble a story out of pigment and air. Is this about Judaism and Germany? Is this about family and work? Is this about learning to paint and learning to be a father? Ten million brushstrokes of color touch three huge canvases and we see a woman's eyes, a pair of windows, a baby's cheeks. Two dimensions become three. A table surges into the room, loaded with tools, waiting for you to come and pick one up.

The best paintings are like dreams. They convince you they are real, they fold you into their worlds, and they hold you there. Only then, when you're anchored in the moment-by-moment detail of an experience, when your eyes have extended across the room, when the copperplate is shimmering in front of your hands, can you let yourself reach out into the space between brain and image, into the great mystery of what it means to be viewer and printmaker, reader and writer, listener and singer.

That's where our brains find meaning in the world. That's where art exists.