

Questions to Elizabeth Block about *A GESTURE THROUGH TIME* (Spuyten Duyvil Press, 2005)

Greta Nintzel

Do you meditate?

Though I practice t'ai chi at a sub-standard level, I am *by association* tangled up in meditation. I am married to a man who was raised in a Zen Center, i.e., by the age of 7 he was up at 5 a.m. meditating in a Zendo. I feel my meditation practice is my writing—albeit an agitated allegory of meditation. Writing is my one steady focal point, a *mantra-langue* I have been rambling about most of my life.

How often do you frequent coffee shops?

Almost daily. An urban morning refuge.

What is your favorite billboard?

“it’s better to be ruined—”

Or, at least, that’s what *I* would say.

Is Beck derivative?

Isn’t he derivative of Fluxus, an heir to some of the most intriguing process/conceptual art? What a lucky guy.

If a room full of radiologists looked at an MRI will they see the same thing?

I imagine certain “abnormalities” would be definitive, but then again, get a bunch of radiologists or any doctors in a room together, and just like between literary critical debates, nothing would look exactly the same. Dare I say that?

The thing about radiologists, though, is they get to access some of the most cutting edge or beta technology. Now wouldn’t that be fun?

What will replace guns on the street as weapon of choice?

I wish it were public libraries.

How might brand names and self-identity evolve in the next 50 years?

I think identity is all about (and will continue to be about) consumer branding; I guess this gets more and more complex in a global economic frame. I don't comprehend it, and I don't know how I can ever fit into a brand or turn my writing into one, though I wouldn't begrudge a wide readership.

Your favorite vodka is?

Not a vodka drinker. Makes me sick.

Do you relate to your brain as a thing or a thought?

Both. I am fascinated with neuroscience, perception, and psychoanalysis (which is obvious in my book) so I have both an intellectual and fetishistic curiosity about the brain. It is not from the perspective of an expert, but from the novelist's professionally dilettante (or poem-y cloud) perspective. That you could study, ravage, explore, entertain, and tease the meanings and mechanisms within the brain and never truly really ever get at a precise answer, that an element of not-knowing and surprise always hovers, despite repeated attempts to figure out, problem solve, and understand the complex mappings of the brain—but you can never really arrive—that is what intrigues me most. The best prose writing and black comedy should equally linger at that precipice, because black comedy is always about valuing irony and ambiguity.

Did you see Stephen Colbert's performance at the recent White House Press Corp dinner? I watched it on the web. Not only a wonderful example of how the mainstream has almost entirely co-opted the cultural avant-garde, but the form of irony that is rarely applied (even though so much schlock in the art world gets center stage for its supposed clever young white male irony) without even coming close to what Colbert eloquently achieved.

Colbert's sketch is the work of a brain I like to see. I would like to read the transcript of his performance.

Do the eyes or brain function as the center of perception for you?

I think perception is precisely implicated in the relationship between the eye and the brain (and so much more, such as the question of time and narrative); though I am not a scientist, so please don't quote me on it.

I aim to implicate the process of writing as a perception-action itself.

Whereas I didn't even think about them while writing my book, I have very recently been reading William James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, pondering how they both sought to articulate or redefine consciousness/perception in relation to lived experience and body (even phantom limb). Earlier, James worked against the "metaphysical," and (later) Merleau-Ponty defied the "empirical." But for both men, the very biological body

stands—and that is rather contrary (or perhaps tangential) to many post-modern philosophical-literary-critical theoretical thinking that has dominated the late 20th century, including the writings that educated, cajoled and launched me as a writer/poet and fueled my first book. But reading James and Merleau-Ponty has reminded me that biology cannot be discarded from these issues of perception, Crit.Th., and I am trying to go further in that direction in my current (unpublished) writing. We shall see where I land at some point. For now, I am spinning, nauseous, and dizzy—but I haven't thrown up yet.

What is your own personal best experience of justice?

Getting my first book published.

What is diagnosis?

Well, I am not a doctor, but I seek—at the level of language and moral ambiguity—the realms of diagnostic inquiry that fail to answer, that expose the “expert” at his most vulnerable. Obviously, if a large tumor is found in someone's brain, it is empirically dangerous (though even that could be argued, and surgery is equally dangerous). But at the realm of mental process itself, subjectivity has to will out. And as in James, I follow a pragmatics/lyric of un-knowing.

Life. Movies or memories?

In terms of writing, which is my life, I think film as a time-based material *intersects* with the idea of memory as a literary articulation of time. In terms of the structure of *A Gesture Through Time*, this certainly preoccupied me for many years of research and writing.

Love. Movies or feelings?

Both. But again, I come back to this theme in literary forms simultaneously abstract, obtuse, imagistic, and confessional. I am particularly obsessed with (linguistically and in pure content) the edges of what is socially acceptable, tolerable, and pleasurable.

Is Detroit more Motown, more Kid Rock or more automobile?

Detroit, while a sad place for too many years now, has reached a new low with the recent eruption of the American car manufacturers. The automobile industry is pretty much dead, and that has profound economic consequences on many lives, many families. While such upheaval has historically ebbed and flowed in the auto industry—and while my book addresses this motor city phantom limb pain—is symbolic of our larger American economic super power collapse.

It's too bad Kid Rock is republican, since most of Detroit is UAW-dominated democratic anyway.

Is it the wine in Napa that draws you there or something else?

I like the mineral baths, and I like to get out of the foggy city when I am stressed out and need a break.

What is prima donna?

A ridiculously spoiled idiot from Texas employed as President of the United States. Lock him in jail and throw away the key.

What is the role of prescription drugs in the 21st century in America?

Mostly profit, but that is only a tiny tale. I am repulsed-intrigued by prescription drugs and the pharmaceutical industry, particularly since 1997, I believe when the FDA approved television advertising for prescription drugs. Capitalism at its most efficient, *you could say*. I have a short story coming out in *Fiction International* (Winter 2006), *Opium for the Masses*, that engages the pharmaceutical industry, advertising, Sir Thomas de Quincy, sexual indiscretion, and pain medication. Check it out.

What will become of celluloid?

“They” (was it Douglas Crimp?) used to say painting was dead. But that was just mean art world politics. Painting lives on, with a fever. Celluloid, on the other hand, is truly moribund. Sad sad sad: but its geriatric status, also capitalism at its most spic and span. To try and cope, I bask in the nostalgic poetics of celluloid gerontology while keeping an eye on the more current time-based arts. Lynn Marie Kirby (who recently had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art) is an artist whose works conflagrates the categories between painting, celluloid, poetry, and new media, gives me something to be hopeful for in terms moving images in the trouble-rubble of celluloid’s ruins. Do you know that the production of Super-8mm Kodachrome film has been discontinued? Now that is just pure discrimination against magical chemical color dyes. Don’t you just love language?

Elizabeth Block, after the publication of her first novel, performed her writing at bookstores, art spaces, and colleges across the United States. Her writing etc. has appeared in/on print, film, stage, radio, CD, cable television broadcast, and podcast. In August 2006, she presents her newest writing (etc.) at the Lab, in San Francisco.
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Greta Nintzel’s poetry has been published in a variety of national and international journals. She has performed her odd version of spoken word with many illustrious Seattle musicians. She is thrilled to have been able to interview Elizabeth Block for *How2*.