Experimenting Spirituality: Fly Your Own Kite

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Unzipping the small red polyurethane bag, I carefully take out the kite and lay it on the grassy ground of Laurelhurst Park, unfolding it section by section. Its strings are messy and entangled, like a jellyfish, washed up on the shore. I mutter to myself, “How to get this bastard into the air?” I study the kite's mealy instruction manual: “Spread the kite with the back on the floor (see fig. 1). Loosen first the bridle line of the locking wire (B). Attach two steering lines (D) with a Lark’s Head knot (see Fig. 2) to the corresponding bridle lines (E). Roll off the steering lines completely by walking away from the kite.” When I’m done fiddling with the strings, I ask my daughter to hold the kite up off the ground. I walk away slowly, as I have been told, and then I run, faster than I have ran in years. The kite stays down, refusing altitude.

A 1970s film by Noel Sheridan that I can’t remember the name of tells a true story about early European settlers in Australia communicating with a traditional Aboriginal message stick. A neighbor dispatched the message to a further neighbor, who in turn sent the messenger to a further neighbor and so on until the messenger was hundreds of miles from home. The message on the stick read: “Keep this bastard moving.” I have always loved that work, although I have never understood it. A student comes up to me after a guest lecture and thanks me for mentioning it. “Mentioning what?” I ask, thinking of the range of topics I’ve covered. “You know – spirituality”, the student says, blushing.

Surely kite + wind = flying, except that it doesn’t. I read the next section of the manual: “Stand in such a way that the wind is on your back (see fig. 4), while the second person holds the kite. As soon as the kite is let loose, it will fly up.” I learned that there was a hole in the wall of Giotto’s Arena Chapel, through which a dove would be released into the crowd to embody the presence of the Holy Spirit. My art history teacher referred to it as a work of performance art, avant la lettre. The first thing I did when I graduated was to make my way to Padua to gaze at that hole in the wall.

Looking now more closely now at the kite’s strings, it doesn’t make sense that the chord leading to the two long lines is hitched to the back. Surely if it
were hitched to the middle strings, it would pull the strings down and open the vent to allow the wind to enter the back of the kite and keep it adrift. Was this what was meant by “Please Note! Make sure that the air inlet (A) is fronting away from you when taking up”?

I go back to the manual and look more carefully at the diagrams. Richard Serra’s *The American Flag is not an Object of Worship* (1989) is paintstick on paper, an intense black texture, almost a charred surface; the nearest he can get to a burning. I know now that I have done something wrong. I should have untied the yellow strings and then attached them to the flight lines. I do it properly this time. Now my partner joins in. He can hold the kite higher than my daughter while I run with it. I give it my all, like an athlete in competition. No luck. It is assumed in the circles I move in that highly educated people have no spiritual beliefs. I have not taken the trouble to object. I read the section marked “Adjustments”: “Should the kite develop too high a speed causing you to fall, let go of one of the grips. The kite will land on the ground.”

Twenty-something year-old hipsters lounging on the grass with oversized headphones and moleskin notebooks are now following our kite-flying episodes, some of them laughing. Brian O’Doherty says nothing when I mention how much I enjoyed the mirrored minimalist sculptures at his retrospective in Dublin. Barbara Novak pulls me aside and whisper that, back in the day, the New York art world found them too metaphysical. “Make sure at all times that your hands are in front of you or alongside your body: do not fly with outstretched hands (fig 3.1).”

When your back is turned, the wind will lift the bastard into the air, whether you have read the instructions or not. I discovered in a footnote that said the Dada artists’ bookcases were filled with books on Buddhism. Zen is the art world’s religious doughnut. (It was the God in the middle bit that was the problem.) But let’s not go too far. An art student who is a member of a Buddhist movement is whispered about, has he joined a cult? My daughter takes over, throwing the kite into the air, so that at least it falls on the wind, its long ribbons fluttering in a rainbow flurry, which is enough to keep her happy for a moment. I have kept my silences about the way energy pervades and circulates all objects, and not only theoretically.
The hipsters on the grass have gone back to reading their books. They too have given up on us. Ouspensky asked people to “Think long thoughts. Each of our thoughts is too short. Until you have experience from your own observation of the difference between long and short thoughts, this idea will mean nothing to you”? Later an art tutor jokes about an Iranian student dealing with the black stone. As if he knows something she doesn’t. Does he?

I have not read Ouspensky, but I have read a memoir called Drinking the Rain in which an American feminist intellectual struggling with her emerging spirituality uses the quotation I have just cited. I have listened to Richard Spira say, “If we take either experience far enough, we end up with the same revelation. Consciousness that seems to be on the inside and existence that seems to be on the outside are identical. They are not two different things.” I didn’t get to his last and final exhibition or the talk he gave at the Ashmolean museum, in which he tried to articulate the reasons for his departure from art practice. I have asked him for a recording.

On the train home from a disappointing opening, a slightly drunk art historian jokes, “You’re Irish, you probably believe in ghosts!” I answer, “It’s hard not to believe if you have met as many of them as I have.” I am tired of talking about art as if I were writing a children’s story where not everything can be said. But what was I talking about again? “To write,” Marguerite Duras remarked, “is also not to speak. It is to keep silent. It is to howl noiselessly.” I am starting to appreciate The Cat in the Hat more every day.

We take a slow bus to the coast, where the wind is fierce and the kite takes off by itself. It soars and pulls at the strings, like an angry dog on a leash. A curator at Portland Institute for Contemporary Art writes that the current exhibition, Pictures of the moon with teeth, “is the holy spirit, is the tongue of fire, is the ghost body, is the formless thing, is anxiety, is ecstasy, is seeing through the mirror, is energy, is neither here nor there, is god, is G-D, is godS, is NO GOD ever was, is inside you, is clay, is crystal, is vapor, is hair, is sound, is gold, is light, is words, is wave, is lump, is desert dot, is geometry, is concrete, is floating, is memory, is trickery, is hawk overhead, is notion, is nature, is knowing, is never knowing, is why go on?” My daughter walks away, bored. Now that the initial thrill of getting it up there has passed, she walks off to dig a hole.