

ML/MZ: I



***Welcome to MZ/ML I,
a zine about identity and creativity.***

It's nice to find a friend who lets you speak about things you're unsure of, someone who is willing to help you stumble through figuring yourself out and doesn't mind you stumbling through figuring her out, too. The more unsure you are -- the more you stumble -- the nicer it is to have a friend like that. This is the way it works for the two of us.

Our friendship is rooted in this space of open conversation, and we aimed to represent that in this project. We are both currently (and nearly always) consumed with questions of identity and creative practice, which formed an unintentional but persistent theme for this zine. We hope you find something of interest -- something clarifying or confusing or intriguing-- in our conversations, too.

xo
Marissa and Madeline

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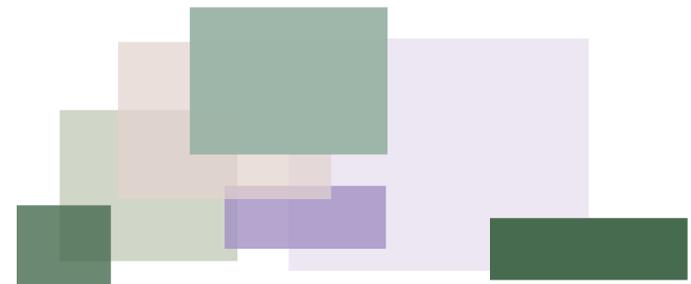
What am in the habit of lately?

I hope very much to have a stable of healthy creative daily habits that help make my day full and productive. Sometimes this feels like a total pipe dream, but other days it is easy (sometimes at the expense of other productive tasks). Here are the things I actually have been doing, regardless of whether they are on the list:

- **Checking my horoscope.** Before this summer, I never put any stock in astrology. But now I wake up and check it everyday, and look at all of my friend's daily horoscopes too. I still don't fully believe or let the horoscope dictate my actions or how I approach the day, but I enjoy the space that it takes up in my head, the ritual of it. Somehow reading it fills up a little bit in me that feels unsure.
- **Updating Selfie blog.** I started this project two years ago that amassed every single selfie I've ever taken, completely unedited, uncurated. I had some critiques and conversations about the project that were discouraging, and I got fatigued of defending it, and I let it go dormant. I decided to pick it up again recently and have been slowly chipping away at posting the two year backlog of photos. There is a 150 post limit on Tumblr, so my goal is to reach that every day to be as "productive" as possible. Whenever I'm feeling like I don't want to do other work, I just mindlessly add 150 individual selfie photo posts to this blog. It usually takes about a half hour to an hour. It always feels like a bit of a roulette, like I'm going to end the day with a stream of embarrassing photos and those will be up at the top waiting for me or the off-chance visitor, but I guess that is part of the project. I'm currently in September 2015.
- **Making my bed.** This was a goal daily habit that I set for myself that has stuck and makes me feel really put together. It is a punctuation to my day, saying like: no more sleeping, we are awake now. This is especially important because I often work in my room and on my bed, and helps me differentiate the different parts of the day.
- **Checking my blogs/social media.** I have a mental list of people whose blogs/social media I check in with daily. Not always at the same time of the day, sometimes a couple times a day. Some people who are my friends (like Marissa!), some who are just internet acquaintances, some who are writers or artists or celebrities who I admire. I used to feel really guilty about this habit, like it was a compulsive, negative, surveillance activity, but I've tried to be okay with it as a way of socializing over the web. I do feel like I have built some friendships and bolstered connections with strangers this way.

- **Measuring my time.** I use my online timesheet for my day job to measure how many more hours on average per days left in my pay period I have to work at minimum at the start of every day. The math goes something like this: (Days in the pay period x 4 avg hours per day)(this is the minimum I need to work for this job) MINUS (the amount of hours I've already worked) DIVIDED BY (the number of days left in the pay period). If the number is under 4 (it usually never is) I feel immensely relieved. If it's under 5 I feel like my workload is manageable. This happens because I have less structured time at the beginning of my week and that is when I usually do my creative work. Doing this math helps me approach my work with more vigor, serving as a reminder of how much more I need to be doing. It often makes me feel bad about myself, as if I am striving to do the bare minimum, or just a constant reminder that I am running behind.
- **Tomato Toast.** I've had a hard time eating lately. My appetite has been really irregular, and I feel constantly guilty and bad about it. Breakfast is particularly hard, because I always want to start the day off right but I open the refrigerator and there is nothing that appeals to me. Lately the one exception has been a piece of toast with heirloom tomatoes on it. It makes me feel like I'm holding on to the last of summer's harvest.
- **Looking through my art books.** I have a book buying problem. I love browsing through bookstores, and inevitably I indulge myself in buying a photo book or an art criticism book that I just HAD to have. Those books aren't cheap! To try and curb this habit, or rather, to refocus on appreciating the books I do have, I made it a goal to go through one of my art books a week and read the texts, look at and document my favorite works in them and create a little record of them on my personal blog. I'm going on four weeks now, and it's been time consuming, and definitely feels a bit self-serving (I'm not sure that posting about it serves anyone but me!) and overly structured but I think I'll keep with it.

- MZ



I'm the kind of person who is constantly on a self-improvement kick. Constantly trying to form healthy/fulfilling/peace-making/etc habits. In my mind, I tell no one about these endeavors until I have become my Most Perfect Self, or whatever, but in reality I am always telling my boyfriend/best friend/strangers how "I'm definitely going to start meditating now," or "I'm going to journal everyday" or something. (Often, also, failing to retain the habits and thus failing to become my Most Perfect Self.)

Lately I've been trying not to react to things so quickly. I can't tell if this was inspired by a sex advice podcast or an article I read about a Buddhist monk. Maybe both? The podcast advised "not losing your shit right away;" the Buddhists call it stillness. I'm trying to find some space between the negativity I encounter and my response to it, to reground myself before my pulse races. For the last few years I've been thinking about perspective; I used to blow everything out of proportion, but I think I do that less now. I think I'm getting better at realizing when this is A Big Problem vs. when it is Relatively Not Worth Getting Worked Up Over. Anyway, this is probably the next step. (Also, I've been trying to meditate.)

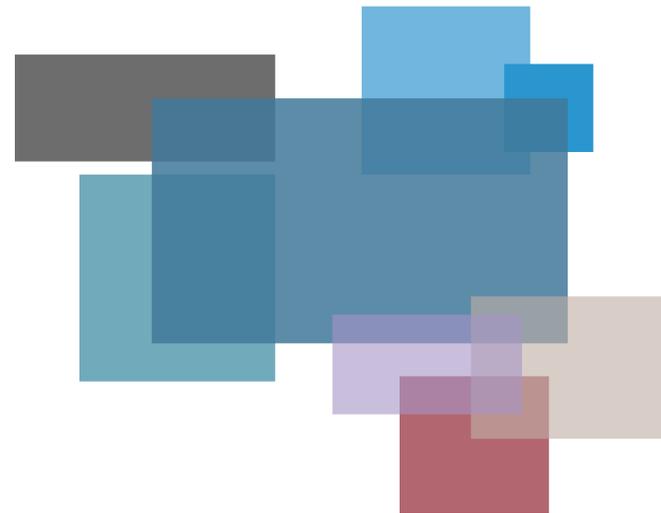
Lately I've been trying to fall in love with challenges (most of these challenges involve talking to strangers). Trying to cultivate a habit of embracing interpersonal awkwardness so I can be better at making conversation, and listening, and feeling comfortable in my own skin. I've been psyching myself up for journalism interviews, trying to make smalltalk with friends-of-friends at bars, and honestly? It's kind of working. I actually look forward to some things now that I used to fear. A friend told me it was admirable that I was trying to throw myself headfirst into difficulty just for the fun of it. His support felt almost too good; I felt guilty for his admiration.

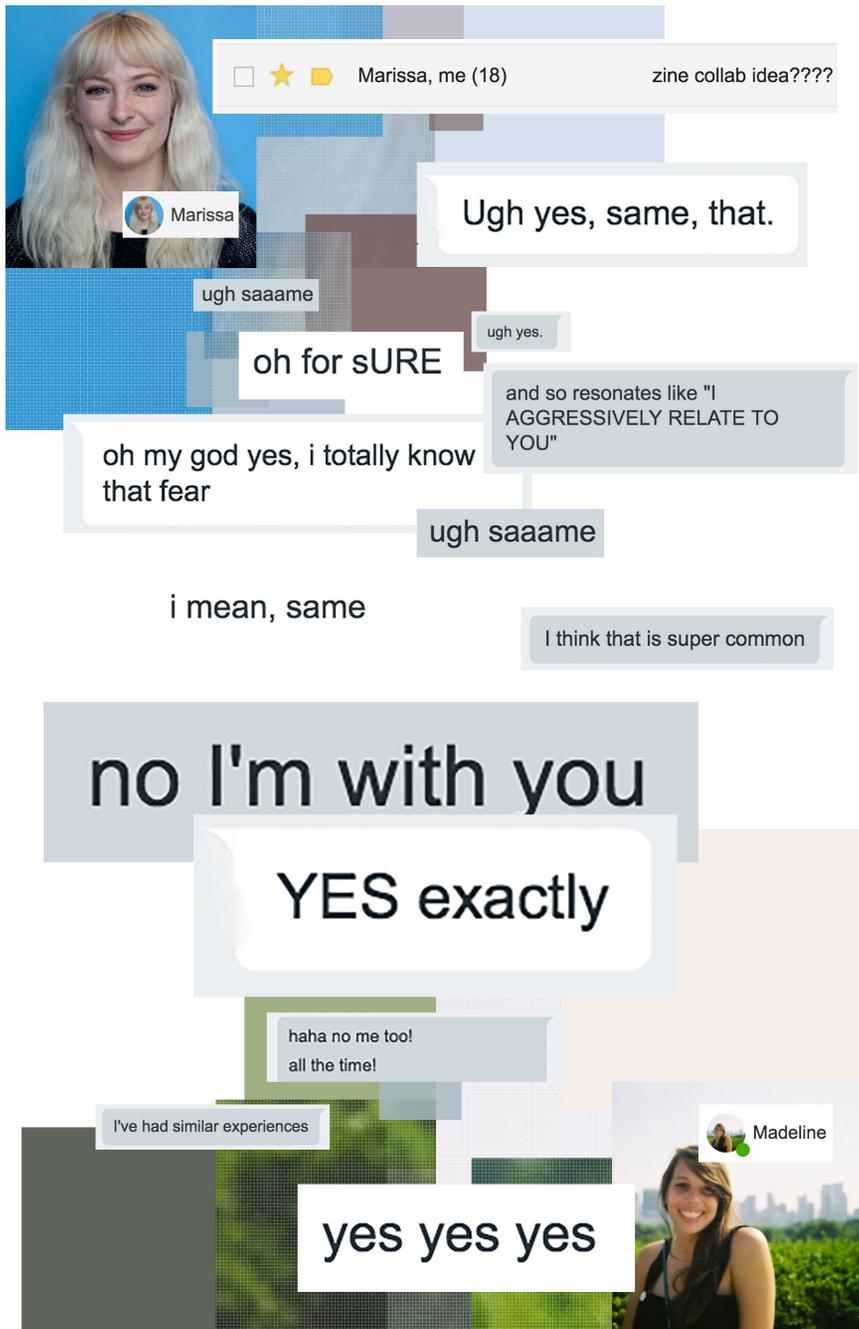
Another habit as of late: Scripting and unscripting. I used to be in the habit of imagining heated and/or emotional conversations I was definitely going to have with other people, and that usually involved a heavy dose of assigning motives to other people's actions. It turns out, I am often wrong about why people do or say certain things! So I'm trying to break that habit: no more snarky one-liners dreamt up in the shower, no more settling on assumptions about why people did what they did to me. I read something recently about how you're feeding the emotions you choose to indulge, so I'm trying to feed my anger and hurt less, and feed my compassion and empathy more. Trying to remember that most other people are also operating from a space between hurt and love, trying to take care of themselves and others simultaneously, just like I am. Trying to be more patient with other people's pain and my own.

Lest this come across like I am some kind of person with solely virtuous habits, I am also in the habit of:

- Trying to write a song in standard tuning, giving up, writing in open D or that weird low-C tuning I half-stole from Bon Iver.
- Telling myself I'm going to journal, then realizing all I'm ever going to put in this fancy notebook is to-do lists
- Over-thinking really great personal essay topics that I'd like to pitch to cool websites, and freaking myself out, and deciding not to even try writing them
- Opening too many tabs, starting too many projects or To Do items at once, and then audibly scolding myself for not staying focused
- Cooking kale and faux-sausages for nearly every meal
- Recalling something embarrassing I did and groaning audibly/covering my face à la Tina from Bob's Burgers
- Telling myself when I go to sleep that I'm definitely going to wake up and go for a run, then telling myself all day that I'm going to run in the afternoon, and subsequently not running

- ML





Marissa Lorusso - 1:30 PM

Hiiii is this working

Madeline Zappala - 1:30 PM

hii! yes! I'm here!

Marissa Lorusso - 1:30 PM

ok cool this is Really Real now!

Ok yesterday when I was reading your habits I had a billion questions in mind but of course now I can't remember what they were But I did want to say -- I have been loving your Art Book posts on your tumblr! I was wondering what the backstory was with those posts, and I feel like I am learning a lot from them

Madeline Zappala - 1:34 PM

oh man!

that makes me feel so good!

i had been feeling like, oh im doing this half assed or like not writing enough or no one cares except me so thank you!

Marissa Lorusso - 1:34 PM

I feel like I learn a lot from trying to figure out how other people think/ process things in general so like reading someone else's impressions/ commentary on a work of art feels SO GREAT to me

Madeline Zappala - 1:35 PM

me too! that's why i love song exploder or just interviews with musicians or artists

especially people who work in different creative modes that me

Marissa Lorusso - 1:35 PM

Yes!!! I feel like I'm always trying to figure out which questions to ask when I'm looking at / listening to / reading something Definitely something I realized in college -- like, paying attention to the questions is really crucial for ~learning to think~

Madeline Zappala - 1:36 PM

yeah that's a good way to think about it

after reading your habits i felt like my approach to writing mine was so like "goody two shoes"

I felt like you took a much more self aware approach

but i really relate to that like "constant self improvement kick"

Marissa Lorusso - 1:37 PM

Omg really? I felt like mine were a bit too taking-myself-v-seriously

Madeline Zappala - 1:38 PM

I had this moment where i was like oh no was i too earnest

Marissa Lorusso - 1:38 PM

Haha omg, I'm glad you felt that way because I did too, and also like almost-too-earnest is my main mode of life

Where do you think your drive for constant self-improvement comes from? (I've always attributed mine to my religious phase as a kid?)

Madeline Zappala - 1:39 PM

ugh saaame

interesting

I have a hard time placing it - I think it goes back to like not wanting to like "being a good kid"

not disappointing parents, being a high achiever

Marissa Lorusso - 1:40 PM

Ugh yes, same, that.

Madeline Zappala - 1:40 PM

*not not wanting to be a good kid - you know what i mean

I read something, I think on Man Repeller that was about how our generation is way more about self improvement than others

Marissa Lorusso - 1:40 PM

I believe it!

Madeline Zappala - 1:40 PM

I don't know if that's true, or more for women

Marissa Lorusso - 1:41 PM

Also yes, seems very gendered

Honestly gendered from so many angles

Madeline Zappala - 1:41 PM

"having it all"

Marissa Lorusso - 1:41 PM

YES exactly

Madeline Zappala - 1:41 PM

being it all

and like "purity"

Marissa Lorusso - 1:41 PM

like kindness and politeness and beauty but also strength and money and jobs and kids all things ripe for self-improvement schemes

Madeline Zappala - 1:41 PM

yes yes ah so i don't know if you saw in the google notes the stuff i added about mitski

Marissa Lorusso - 1:42 PM

Yes! But I'd love for you to unpack that!!

Madeline Zappala - 1:42 PM

i feel like that ties into the politeness etc

especially the way she references "being clean"

and neat

and i feel her channeling this like quiet resolve, a silent swallowing of emotions

which i really relate to

but also want to reject, as this instinct to avoid self-abnegating that i think is really ingrained in women

Marissa Lorusso - 1:44 PM

Ok, I feel silly for just realizing this now, but that clean/neat thing comes

up in both "A Burning Hill" and "Last Words Of A Shooting Star" which are both the last tracks on the albums they're on

Madeline Zappala - 1:44 PM

oh wow

i didn't realize that it was the last track on both

Marissa Lorusso - 1:45 PM

It's an interesting place to leave the listener, and I feel like they both totally revolve around that idea of quiet resolve

Like suffering silently, almost

Madeline Zappala - 1:45 PM

yes! to pull out the knife without questioning why

like - that line has so much power to me, but also makes me so sad for myself

and same with I Bet on Losing Dogs

Marissa Lorusso - 1:47 PM

I feel like this idea of the tension between the, like, steely resolve of pulling the knife out vs. the "instinct to avoid self-abnegating," as you put it, is really interesting

I feel like in colloquial mainstream feminism it's often talked about as "taking up space," like women should TAKE UP SPACE

Madeline Zappala - 1:48 PM

yes exactly

like with my no man's land project

a criticism that i got from like "old guard" feminists was that i was like "disappearing" myself

Madeline Zappala - 1:49 PM

like erasing my identity

and that being like negative

Marissa Lorusso - 1:49 PM

Ok yes! I wanted to ask you, from your habits, about what the critiques were that you routinely had to defend against

Do you feel like you were erasing yourself in that project?

Madeline Zappala - 1:51 PM

In the no man's land project - no I didn't - I felt like my identity was not central, I was not the subject. its like Cindy sherman's use of her body in her images, she is not the subject- identity is the subject, and the specifics of her particular identity are not necessarily important For the selfie project- the critiques were mostly that it was boring, attractive white girl, not salacious enough, no narrative, etc. Not invalid critiques, I just felt like they were overlooking other things of value in it

Marissa Lorusso - 1:53 PM

Maybe this is a weird question, but it kind of makes me wonder: What does it say about the "old guard" feminists that they could only read your work in that way, or that they primarily did: that you were necessarily the subject?

Madeline Zappala - 1:53 PM

its really narrow right?

Like woman has to be one thing (HERE STRONG TAKE UP SPACE)

Marissa Lorusso - 1:54 PM

Yeah like Ugh I hate to say this, but it makes me wonder -- if a man did a similar project, would they (or other critics, or anyone) read it as being About The Artist? I know that's such a Feminism 101 question but it feels relevant!

And ALSO, in general, why doesnt the female artist have the right to disappear in her work?

Madeline Zappala - 1:55 PM

yeah totally! I think this relates back to something we've talked about before about like making queer art or feminist art

like what you wrote about PWR BTTM

That's a good question - I think that really gets to the heart of what I've been asking myself about Mitski

Marissa Lorusso - 1:55 PM

Yes!!! Queerness as everything and nothing! As the most and least important thing!

Madeline Zappala - 1:56 PM

I think the more artists that say like "my art is queer because I am queer" is just really important

Marissa Lorusso - 1:56 PM

Why is it so hard for most people to view art as being informed by queerness/femaleness but not exclusively about queerness/femaleness

Yes!! Absolutely. Yes.

Madeline Zappala - 1:57 PM

Did I tell you that my therapist asked me if your band was a feminist band?

Marissa Lorusso - 1:57 PM

YES! I love that on so many levels

Madeline Zappala - 1:57 PM

Its interesting to think about what would qualify as that to an outsider

Marissa Lorusso - 1:57 PM

Like, I think it's a more complicated question than she maybe meant to ask!

Madeline Zappala - 1:58 PM

exactly!

How do you feel your work reflects those aspects of your identity?

Or maybe given the context of this conversation that is annoying to ask?

Marissa Lorusso - 1:58 PM

Yes exactly. Especially because we live in an age of dawning awareness that feminism means so many different things to different people. So I have to define what I think feminist music is before I can say if my music fits that criteria.

No not annoying! I don't get to reflect on it much so I'm glad to

Like, my music is feminist insofar as I write from the female perspective ? And like to center the female perspective in art is a feminist act? (that's a HUGE thing to say about my emo songs but whatever, you know what I mean.)

Madeline Zappala - 2:00 PM

no! it is!

Marissa Lorusso - 2:01 PM

And my songs are queer because they are often about queer desire -- But you wouldn't know that just listening to them, especially because they aren't all written from my perspective, and because the identities of the people the songs are addressed to are intentionally kinda hazy (for my own sake haha)

Madeline Zappala - 2:02 PM

but also queer because your are queer! like the same thing goes I think where I struggle is the outward acknowledgement - like the ways in which these perspectives can be easily overseen or erased Like I once considered applying to this queer residency and I was like, well, no one is going to think that my work was made by a queer person so why would i get this

Marissa Lorusso - 2:03 PM

woah

What made you think that about your work?

Madeline Zappala - 2:04 PM(

there are some complicated things about self acceptance and acknowledgement and stuff in there too)

Marissa Lorusso - 2:04 PM

oh for sURE

like a set of complicated things i very much relate to

Madeline Zappala - 2:04 PM

I think that's it gets to the heart of it mainly

Marissa Lorusso - 2:05 PM

Do you feel like people wouldn't think your work was made by a queer person because it doesn't fit into a set of, like, Approved Subjects Of Queer Art, like some kind of queer art canon or whatever? Like, that it wasn't explicitly a commentary on queer things, basically?

Madeline Zappala - 2:07 PM

I think maybe a bit of both Like if it wasn't "explicitly" queer or explicitly about identity

or if I didn't seem outwardly explicitly queer

which, all of this goes against everything that we were just saying about just the act of making things being enough to qualify

Marissa Lorusso - 2:08 PM

(I'm nodding vigorously but you cant see)

Madeline Zappala - 2:08 PM

hahah

Marissa Lorusso - 2:09 PM

No but totally, I feel like there's a sense of policing within and without, you know? like I could be just as guilty of looking at something and being like "this isn't queer/feminist art/music" or whatever, even though I just said to you -- just someone's identity ought to be enough thanks, internalized misogyny/phobias/etc!!!

Madeline Zappala - 2:10 PM

ugh exactly

I agree - I'm guilty of this as well

also writing things off that are so explicitly like focused on someone's identity

as being singular or not nuanced

Marissa Lorusso - 2:11 PM

how do you mean?

Madeline Zappala - 2:12 PM

I think you see this in art school a lot - like people grappling with issues of identity for the first time, so there are a lot of tropes

I've felt myself, and heard a lot of my peers criticize work for being too solely focused on like one aspect of someone's personal identity

Marissa Lorusso - 2:13 PM

Yeah ok that makes sense

Madeline Zappala - 2:13 PM

Its a double edged sword I think my selfie project actually falls into this category

Madeline Zappala - 2:12 PM

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Marissa Lorusso - 2:13 PM

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Madeline Zappala - 2:13 PM

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Madeline Zappala - 2:24 PM

i actually had this weird experience just this week, i follow a bunch of photo blogs that do like artist take-overs, and usually if i like the artist i follow them on insta too, and i was really liking this artist's work, and their name was jasper, so i thought they identified as male, and then read some of their images has being too much male gaze and it turned me offbut after a couple days of seeing the images, they kept resonating, and i investigated further and the artist is a woman

Marissa Lorusso - 2:24 PM

Woah

And I'm assuming that changed the way you saw the photos??Or maybe not??

Madeline Zappala - 2:25 PM

yeah - I was like oh I can really enjoy these nowhathat they were like, more clear, for me, or had less baggage

Marissa Lorusso - 2:26 PM

ok i feel like I can hear a straight white dude in my head being like "that's not fair" but do people still do that? like do men in the art world still act that way?

Madeline Zappala - 2:26 PM

I think they roll their eyes at that

Marissa Lorusso - 2:27 PM

i feel like that's also a weird question but like ... I am down for a world in which we look at art in its context but are there people who don't think context is so crucial?

Madeline Zappala - 2:27 PM

but I want to really reject that the male perspective is neutral

Marissa Lorusso - 2:27 PM

Ok YES that answers my question really well

You just undermined all the assumptions in my original question! Thank you!!!

the idea of a context-free zone is a lie

Madeline Zappala - 2:28 PM

yes!

and its like the same standards that apply for feminist perspective, queer perspective they apply to straight white men too

Marissa Lorusso - 2:29 PM

Ok new self improvement goal, try harder to reject my unconscious assumptions of neutrality

Madeline Zappala - 2:30 PM

haha no me too!

all the time!

its so subtle and ingrained in us

Marissa Lorusso - 2:31 PM

I feel like every damn day I am realizing new ways that I've been conditioned by patriarchy/compulsory heterosexuality/white supremacy/etc

Madeline Zappala - 2:31 PM

its fun!

ot a burden at ALL!

Madeline Zappala - 2:34 PM

another thing i was curious to discuss with you too like sharing creative stuff, borrowing

since you mentioned borrowing your tunings from bon iver

Marissa Lorusso - 2:34 PM

Haha yes!!

Madeline Zappala - 2:35 PM

its really bad ass to own it

i always feel really, ashamed when I feel someone's creative influence over me

Marissa Lorusso - 2:35 PM

No I really relate to that, too

Marissa Lorusso - 2:38 PM

I feel like I borrow a lot in my music -- like i take shapes of chords or rhythms and stuff. But I just hope people don't notice???

Madeline Zappala - 2:38 PM

I think that is super common

Marissa Lorusso - 2:38 PM

Yeah, that's what I tell myself LOL

Madeline Zappala - 2:38 PM

like we are all just sponges that absorb influence from all around us that informs us

It can be hard to discern what makes something you create yours

Marissa Lorusso - 2:41 PM

I think in the context of your visual work the influences question is really interesting. Because so much of what you do is conceptual

Madeline Zappala - 2:41 PM

it becomes so much more like.. intangible

Marissa Lorusso - 2:41 PM

I don't know how to like, word a question around that statement, i just feel like .. it's not so interesting for me to be like "yeah i discovered that chord in a Jonah Matranga song" as it is to talk about how theory and stuff impacts conceptual projects ??

Madeline Zappala - 2:42 PM

like borrowing an "idea" or an "approach"

Madeline Zappala - 2:42 PM

i think when I get really self conscious is when I'm like, oh I'm really into.. text art lately

and then i'm like

oh is that because this person makes text art and i've been spending time with them

or because I've done text work in the past

its very easy for me to undermine my own creative authority and authorship

Marissa Lorusso - 2:43 PM

Do you feel some kind of shame, or like it's a bad thing, if you become interested in some new approach or subject matter because someone around you is into it?

Madeline Zappala - 2:44 PM

Maybe, like being "too easily" influenced or not creating "authentically"

Marissa Lorusso - 2:44 PM

are you afraid of your stuff being read as mimicry? or is it a more internal/ personal judgement thing?

(or both/neither)

Madeline Zappala - 2:45 PM

both

Marissa Lorusso - 2:45 PM

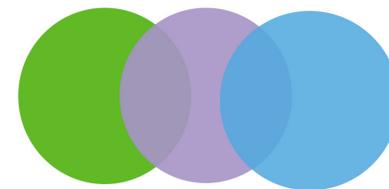
(i feel like my inner faux-journalist is really coming out here with all these questions, sorry)

Madeline Zappala - 2:45 PM

no !

don't apologize

also not FAUX



How to write a song:

Start to pay attention. Really pay attention. Usually it's just a phrase in my head that starts the whole thing: I hear something, or say something, or remember something said and it sticks, nestles into my mind and revisits when I sit down to write. Let that idea tumble around in your head for a little while. Let it burrow deep down in you. How does it make you feel? And why?

It can be an image, too: something that epitomizes a whole trying time. Make it sharp in your mind; invent what you have to. Feel it creeping through you until you embody it. Re-enact, over and over. Play the whole encounter backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. Songwriting is time travel.

Think deeply about someone you love (or someone you like, or someone else). Turn them inside out; reflect on what they are going through; project your reactions onto them. Trace the contours of their problems with your fingertips. Imagine, for a moment, that you see the world through their eyes.

(Any of these — the words, the image, the someone — can and should be used in combination with each other.)

Keep reaching inside yourself, down to the root. Let anything and everything arise. Sit deep inside those feelings, until they are all you can see, and then crawl. Crawl towards the edge or the center; whatever suits you. Try to find the very singular thing that drew you to this idea, and trace the spark it lights. Watch it explode into a million dazzling pieces. Pick the ones that call.

Edit, revise, etc.

- ML

How to take a photograph:

Keep your eyes open. Keep them soft, and stay familiar with the edges. The fuzzy periphery. Let the light catch your attention. Examine what the light reveals. Investigate what it casts in shadow.

Scan the edges. A thing a photograph does perfectly well is capture the surface of things. Graze the surface. Find where things meet.

Calibrate your tools. How will your eye's vision translate through your lens? Adjust accordingly. Bend your knees. Rock back and forth. Get closer, and lean back. Test out all of the distances, scan the perimeter of your composition, and when it feels right, pause.

If nothing feels right, get really close. If it still doesn't feel right, get really far away. How do you know when it feels right? It clicks. The composition locks into place. A diagonal intersects the edge at the perfect place. There is enough space around the subject on every side. It's not too perfect. No precise measurements. Let some things stay jagged.

Make sure the feet are in the frame. No unintended ankle amputations.

Don't hesitate. Hit the shutter, and go back in for more. Adjust, adjust and adjust. Like editing. Try again. A slightly different edge. Sometimes it clicks more than once. Sometimes for different reasons. Respond to the last shot. Respond to your subject. Respond to the wind. To the shift of time. The shutter captures the surface of a moment in time and you can do it again and again. It's like a blink. Let the world go dark and let your eyes readjust.

Look at your photograph.

Your eye will bounce from a collection of focal points in the composition, like a coded map, a non-linear journey. The eye should explore, dissolve, and expand into the image, sometimes getting lost deeper, sometimes glazing over the surface.

- MZ