Eileen Myles on writing and social media



September 26, 2016 - On the television show *Transparent*, created by Eileen Myles' friend Jill Soloway, Cherry Jones plays a charismatic poet based on Myles, and Lily Tomlin's character in the 2015 film *Grandma*, was based in part on Myles, too. "Last year was completely weird for me—I just started to turn up, and it wasn't even about me," Myles says. "I joke about it: there was just an opening for a lesbian poet, and the level of celebrity I had, which was not the greatest celebrity in the world for sure, but it's like poet celebrity or lesbian celebrity, you know? There were suddenly two openings in the culture for that character, and I filled it."

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1630 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Process, Inspiration.

About two years ago I got a new dog, Honey, and I was in New York, and it was the fall. She had a huge amount of energy. She was young, and so I would take these mammoth walks with her from my apartment on 3rd Street down to Delancey, to the river, around. I was just trying to run her down.

Right at the same time I opened an Instagram account. I had already been doing Twitter, and that's a whole other thing. They're not unrelated, but I think it's interesting the way they're different. Instagram seemed like sort of a companion to this dog-walking.

I was very aware of myself as being a New Yorker in a certain luxurious way, like I'm at a certain point in time in my life and in my career where I knew that I was surrounded by a lot of young people who are having to work their ass off every day just to be in New York, and I still have a rent-stabilized apartment, and I make enough money that I can do things the way I want to do them now.

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So it meant that I just had a whole lot of freedom in New York. This walk with Honey became like a new experiment. I just thought, I'm starting a visual diary of having this dog and being in the city in this different way, and wanting to say how spacious it is in the city because I'm endlessly used to hearing New York and Manhattan taken down as unlivable and this and that. All those things are true, and I'm watching things I love being taken away, but there's also this way in which it's endlessly opening, both in terms of what's there that wasn't there before, but what it looks like now that this has moved and that's moved and what remains.

I love photography, I love film, I love looking at things, and so there was a way in which it felt like a way to be sort of an articulate player. Even certain photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans, when I first started looking at his work at Index a few years ago, then started to look at him at gallery shows and see that he was doing this thing that we're all doing in different ways, which is listing. We all live in these niche aesthetic compartments, and yet part of the thing that was always interesting about New York was you would go through a period of time… like, I would go through a period of time where I would go from the dyke bar to the art gallery to the 12-step meeting to the restaurant, and you would have these periods of time where you would see this other person at all these places. You would have fellow travelers temporarily for like four months or six months or a year. You would realize that you and this other person are just on the same wavelength, you know? Then it would cease, and you never know what changed.

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I feel like so much of contemporary loneliness in motion is this compulsion to share my web browser. It's like there's a way of aesthetically stating your browser, which is kind of where you move and how you look and what you see. Even just breaking it up into close shots and long shots, and like what's at the center. It's not about a golden mean, but it's a signature as poetry—which is how I see and how I move and what stops me—and putting them together.

Even in the vocabulary of Instagram, it's just like, I've talked to people and they've laughed because young people have sat them down and told them what you shouldn't do. You know, we don't like these different filters, or whatever those are called, those aren't cool, and all that. I think that one of the cardinal rules is not to repeat a picture or repeat too close of a picture, or kind of keep trying to fix something or do something… It seems to me, it's very musical. The slight variations, just on top of each other, are really interesting. I suppose it's a way in which, if anything it feels like film to me, or video, because it's really documenting nextness in this way. It's like, okay, now I'm looking at it over this way.

In a way I feel like it's the studio of the writing. There's a certain amount of waste that goes along with writing. It's weird. Obviously it isn't just that, but I feel like there is some way in which you get to sort of occupy that space all day long. I've always felt like as a poet, my studio is my head. Even if I have a very nice writing room in my life, it's still where it happens. The idea of taking that art form, poetry, to like an artist colony, you know, is even worse.

I just took her for a walk and I'm practically choking her, pulling her up the stairs so fast. She's looking at me, and she has this giant pit bull head. I always imagine her thinking, "Fuck you, Eileen. Fuck you, Eileen. Fuck you, Eileen."

How are you looking at this thing? There's always a piece of writing or a piece of work that I should be doing. Part of what I love about these new mediums is it's someplace that I get to fuck around, and yet I always have felt like part of me is dying to work in the visual field in some way, and it's a little bit like … like when Bob Dylan used to cover Woody Guthrie songs, and then the way Bob Dylan started to present his own songs. Just for a while, he pretended he was just playing Woody Guthrie songs. You know, like he just pretended those were obscure Woody Guthrie songs. I feel like I might always stay in this pretend place, like I'm not making art. I'm just fucking around. It gives that opportunity in this way to start to turn towards something that you've always been looking at, and instantly be making in that field, and throwing stuff out. It's really satisfying.

I've always used my imagining of media as part of my source material in writing. Like, I'll be on the beach with my dog in 1996, and I'll just be like watching my dog walk around the beach, and you just start to have all these thoughts… I've basically written a whole book about this on some level. You basically start to have all these thoughts, like you start captioning your dog all the time. I'm always imagining running up the stairs because I have to go out. I just took her for a walk and I'm practically choking her, pulling her up the stairs so fast. She's looking at me, and she has this giant pit bull head. I always imagine her thinking, "Fuck you, Eileen. Fuck you, Eileen. Fuck you, Eileen."

Eileen Myles recommends:

"Intuition: A Bridge to the Conesthetic World of Experience" by Heikki Piha

anything by James Baldwin

World of Echo by Arthur Russell (Upside Records/Rough Trade, 1986)

A.I. by Stanley Kubrick and Steven Spielberg

Last Words from Montmartre by Qiu Miaojin (translated by Ari Larissa Heinrich)

Bonus Fact

Myles recently held their first art exhibition, a collection of 20 Instagram photos, at the Schoolhouse Gallery in Provincetown. I asked them how they went about narrowing it down from more than 3,000: "Picking fast as hell, and then seeing them together and pushing back certain types of things," she explained. "Sidewalk abstractions, pushing in bedrooms always. People out, people in. Trying to make a mix that feels representative but cavalier."

For the longest time I always thought of Rosie on the Beach as this opera that I would write. I would just shoot all this footage of her walking on the beach in Provincetown, and then eventually I would score it with just strange dog thoughts, and it would be a form of poetry… And yet that is what my poetry is, which is it sort of grazes from the dog thought or the human thought to a description of the beach to the car going by to the… it's like all those tracks are getting mixed as a poem.

The thing, for me, that's so hot and pure about these is that you're getting to show one track by itself. It always was that I was framing that I was looking at something—you know, strangely that gate with that confetti of shadow on the walkway, and the weird thing on the porch across the street. It has this economy that's cool.

This thing I heard John Ashbery say in an interview a million years ago, which is kind of my bible, is that I like to write as if the person were in the same room as me. I think that I definitely write as if the person were in the same world as me, and yet it's still my version of that world. Suddenly the thing that's so cool is that you're actually showing what it is that you mean.

Name
Eileen Myles

Vocation
Poet, Playwright, Writer, Performer, Teacher, Dog Owner, Onetime "Openly Female" Write-In Presidential Candidate, Instagram User, Artist

Fact

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Photo: Peggy O'Brien