

On the importance of asking questions



Artist and author Steven Warwick on exploring social architectures, embracing off-days, solving creative riddles, and staying curious.

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As told to Ruth Saxelby, 3461 words.

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Your new book, *Notes On Evil*, starts with the physical architecture of the Middle Ages—gargoyles on churches—and later moves into the digital architecture of today to explore how different contexts shape us culturally and morally. Have you always made these sorts of architectural connections?

I guess it's always been on my mind to some extent when I make work. Not explicitly, but when I made the *Déviation* record [in 2012], I was thinking a lot about when Baron Haussmann was commissioned to reshape Paris [after the French Revolution]. He was the architect who introduced the *grand boulevards*, and part of the reason for that happening was the streets used to be smaller and were easier to barricade. [They were] replaced with huge streets which were more difficult to barricade and military force could be brought in quicker. If you go on a big boulevard, it's kind of made to make you feel small. You're a fly on a billiard table. Whenever I visit a place, I always think, *how is the architecture used here?* And what it's implicitly telling me how to act and behave.

In a more recent iteration, I've been making these performances, like *The Riddle of the Imp on the Mezzanine* [2019]. I was thinking about the symbol of the Lincoln imp. It was very omnipresent when I grew up [in the UK county of Lincolnshire]. It's on the Lincoln Cathedral, you'd see it on South Lincolnshire county council signs, you'd see it on football teams. I always found it quite funny that the de facto symbol of Lincolnshire was this devil because, as a side note, where I grew up also had the biggest Leave vote in the [2016 UK European membership] referendum. That wasn't a direct commentary but I thought it was a funny coincidence.

I was thinking a lot about the architecture of a church. It's kind of like a proto-mall (which, in turn, is like a proto-website or media platform) to attract people and show off its power. There are parts of the church that have a social function of protecting the poor, giving sanctuary, but then also being very oppressive and scapegoating. My parents were never really religious when I grew up. I wasn't baptized. I always had this kind of outside fascination with these structures, how you interact with them, and what their function is. I went on a tour of the Lincoln Cathedral and they showed us the Little Hugh monument, a child who'd been killed and it had been blamed on the Jewish community—that was in the 12th century, so literally coming out of blood libel hysteria [an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory]. I thought it was interesting how I didn't know anything about this but I knew about this pretend demon, and I thought that spoke for itself in a weird way.

I was reading Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and I was really interested in the introduction where they were talking about how Victor Hugo was a royalist, he was anti-the French Revolution, and he was very sad about how Notre-Dame was in disrepair and was being used as horse stables. There were discussions at the time to maybe tear it down. So he created the Quasimodo monster to basically do this Edward Bernays style PR spin and ironically save the cathedral.

I was very interested in this methodology of creating a monster to preserve a structure. That was something that really resonated with me and made me think a lot, and then I thought about how that plays out across society and culture in general. That's why I started the book with that analogy of a gargoyle—it has this dual function to ward off evil spirits but also scare people in or out of a church. In the meantime, there have been horrific abuses of power in the name of the church. It's almost like the lightning rod goes onto this small singular personification of what we frame "evil." So I was very interested in using that analogy or metaphor to explore how that keeps repeating itself in the book but also in how we experience the world.

I called it *Notes On Evil* because I wanted to keep it slightly performative because I come out of performance, so it's like a script. But also make it a bit playful because I didn't want it to be straight-up pedagogical or propaganda. I wanted it to have this slightly poetic quality, where you're not telling someone how to think but you are making them think.

Now that we exist in this largely digital architectural realm, a considerable chunk of day-to-day life is conducted via a screen: work meetings, socializing, organizing, sex, dating, entertainment. What does all this screen time, or the "logic of the screen" as you phrase it in the book, do to us?

I think a bit sometimes about the artist John Miller, who did this series of work in the late '90s where he was mimicking and appropriating personal ad sections. He made work which looked like it could be a personal ad but it was a strange collage. When he talked about it, he was saying personal ads used to be for marginalized people who couldn't meet anywhere else so it was this last resort. You would create this kind of profile of yourself, reduce yourself to certain words and an image of yourself, and paradoxically that model which belonged to more socially ostracized people has become the default way that we interact and present ourselves now.

I found that very fascinating but also quite worrying because whilst we come more together, actually everyone just becomes more and more ostracized from each other and yourself. You present how you want to be online and then you're kind of alienated from yourself. I feel that's not the sole reason but one reason why people tend to act out or want to have this strange desire to transgress again but in a very reactionary way. People's anxieties are played out in a way that is so monetized. Everyone is so hyper-aware of how they are being used by a platform and what is happening, that there's been this incredibly rapid speeding up of how we process information, which, of course, isn't in itself bad.

There was this funny thing the other day where I was sick with a cold so I had a few days in bed, and I rewatched *Mad Max: Fury Road* from 2015. When I saw that at the cinema it was so fast I could barely parse it or comprehend it, it was just this relentless overload of image and sound. But then I watched it now and I was like, *Oh, I get it*. Because the time we live in is so sped up, you've kind of become very acclimatized to that. If you think about Ryan Trecartin's films, which were bonkers before, and now you have TikTok.

Do you think growing up in the agricultural East Midlands—in the middle of the UK between the North and the South, which have more distinct cultural identities—helped develop your creative approach?

I've not thought about it before but you're right in that you essentially don't exist in this North/South divide. I have debated this with friends before who'll identify as Northern or Southern, and you're like, well, I don't exist in this narrative. If I don't exist in this narrative, what else don't I exist in?

When you grow up in a very rural place there is something to be said about [being] confronted with actual boredom, with not having access to everything. If you are not following the status quo, then you'll also quite quickly recognize that you don't fit in. In a way, you know your place. That also happens to people in urban areas — with what access you have, materially, to where can I go? Where am I fenced in, where am I not allowed to move, where am I allowed to be myself or express myself?

When I was reading *Notes On Evil*, I was hyper-aware of news stories that employed the processes you explore in the book: how evil is often personified by those in power as a way to maintain the status quo via a process of scapegoating and distraction. It leaves us in this endless video game where there's always a new nasty to combat, which distracts from addressing systemic issues. How do you try to break out of that?

The endless scrolling of end-of-level boss or whatever. When I was editing the book with Camilla Wills—she's an artist and an editor, she has her own publishing house called Divided—we were talking a lot about this idea of the super-ego. You're incentivized by a platform to post something to show that you are participating—to show that you care or to show that you are in a collective bid to solve a problem—which of course, that's what we do. On a certain level, that's a very human process, an almost biological response because it's fight or flight and you want to look after other people because otherwise who is going to look after you? And also, moral and ethical purpose. But we were thinking, that's very different to becoming aware of all the evils in the world. It's maybe important to realize, it's endless. The only way is to become this keyboard warrior or clicktivist and then in turn, you'll have this moral dilemma of do I have fatigue of this? Is it okay to show fatigue with this? But ultimately, how I behave on an everyday level is more important than how I present online trying to fight problems.

When you're working on a creative project, how do you deal with distractions?

I'm definitely guilty of using my phone as an excuse to not work on something. But I also accept that if I'm having an off day, like the classic writer's block, just embrace that. *Okay, today I'm just going to watch a load of junk on YouTube or whatever. I'm just going to watch whatever makes me feel good or makes me turn off.* Because when you turn off, you can turn on again.

I joined this gym the other day because they had a half-price offer, and they were basically like, you can either lose weight or you can gain muscle, but you can't do both at the same time. But actually, you can't do either if you're stressed. Stress and fear are counterproductive in most cases. Of course, in small doses, they can make you survive, they can make you function, they can produce a lot of adrenaline and help you push a car out of the way of a child that's about to be run over. But, more or less, [stress is] counterproductive. I accept that if I'm not feeling something, it will come again.

Sometimes you just have a funny day or a funny week. And that's very normal: everyone has an off day, everyone has a weird time. It's good to acknowledge that to yourself and to others: *Sorry, I can't be constantly productive. If you let me not work for a bit then I'll work way better because I'll be happy to.*

What is your writing process like?

I write a lot on the go. I have a notes or docs app on my phone. Also voice memos for when I'm doing music or I have ideas for something. Very much on the go, I just leave snippets of things. If I'm making music, I'll suddenly have an idea and as fast as possible I'll say a lyric or say a melody, and then when I'm in the studio I'll recreate it. Then I'll record that one track or one take so you have a bare minimum demo, so you at least have a repository of that. Then you can build on it. I like to do things very fast because I'm excited about it and then I get it done.

With writing, [my publisher] Aaron [Bogart] gave me the option of, "Hello, I'd like you to write a book, what would you like to do?" This was the end of 2019, and I was like, *I think I'd like to write about evil because it's this thing that we talk about again but no one actually knows what it is.* I'd like to know for myself, what actually is it? So then I just explored a lot and thought about different structures and ideas and how it's presented. I guess I made a lot of notes — notes on *Notes On Evil* — but I have a general flow for narrative. When I first went to university, I wanted to be a filmmaker and I always think that I approach everything I do like a filmmaker, directing something. You think of a story, you think of a narrative, you think how you want to present that. So you have a flow and you have a story, but then you will also think about the editing and what you want to cut out, what you want to leave in. It also doesn't have to be A to B, it can also be a bit all over the place but it will also have its own logic; it's just that the logic might not be immediate.

When an idea starts scratching at your consciousness, do you immediately know which form you want to explore it with?

I usually trust my instinct, I think I'm quite good with that. I'll be like, *this should be in this direction*, and I don't know why at that time but then I continue and it usually reveals itself and I work out why I wanted

to make that choice. Obviously if it's not working, then you're like, well, I think I have to do that in another way. It's funny, I was doing a lot of arts criticism over the last year, and I did that in parallel to when I was writing the book. Some people were like, "You're writing a lot of reviews." And I was like, actually they're all quite savvy exercises in me exploring how I feel about X artwork in terms of my sense of evil and my sense of my practice. So they're all a way for me to process by thinking about someone else's work. Which I feel quite a lot of people do anyway.

As a gig worker, it's not like you have a place to go where you can talk about that. Basically there's never any real switching off. It's always in the back of your mind. You might not even realize you're doing it half the time. I also think it's not a bad thing. I'd say 9 times out of 10, if you ask someone, "What do you think of...?" they like to tell you their opinion. And it's also nice to listen. For me, I quite often ask people questions all the time. It benefits me but it also makes people feel good so that's great.

On that note, I have to ask you a question that you didn't answer in the book. In the chapter that explores the work of Detroit techno artist and Drexciya co-founder Gerald Donald, you mention that he asked you, "What is the future of sonic potential?"

At first, I was like, is this a weird rhetorical question. I felt like it was a performance. I think I said something like, *Oh, I've never really thought about that, what do you think?* And he was immediately talking lasers traveling through water. I was like, you've obviously thought about this a lot. I'd been reading this book about pure math and we were talking about that. Then we were talking about dolphins being used by the CIA. What I liked about talking with him was it was very fast, the conversation went all over the place but it was hyper interesting, and he was genuinely interested. He was like, "We use these synthesizers which were made in the '80s and the '70s. What would a synthesizer be like now? How would we want it to sound?" I was like, "That's a really good question." If anything, his questions made me think and I couldn't immediately answer them but I kept thinking about them, which I think is probably one of the best things that someone can do. I think about these questions quite often, actually, still. And it's 10 years later.

What do you find the most challenging thing about leading a creative life?

Supporting myself. Financial concerns float around my head constantly. Jesus, under the pandemic, I had to go on the dole. I've been on the dole for two years and I'm just coming off it. It's just a reality. The day of the first lockdown was the day I was supposed to be playing a gig in Berlin and that was going to pay my rent for a few months. I just remember running into the job center and being like, *My whole existence has just been canceled and I need money.*

So yeah, creatively, I'd say material things first and foremost because I need to continue what I do, but I feel like I always manage to get by. The weird thing is it's very stressful—I might be up in the middle of the night, being like, *oh god, what's going on*—but something always comes along. So I'd say in terms of a process, you just have to go through it. You have to go through any self-doubts or anxieties because you just have to keep doing it because actually stuff does come along. It's not easy and it's never going to be easy but that's just part of that parcel.

I've talked to people who've got secure incomes and non-creative jobs and they're just like, "I don't know how you could ever live like that," and you're like, "Well, I do and that's my reality. Thanks for telling me it's crazy to live like that." You know, I'm doing what I want and I like that. I'd rather have that and maybe earn a bit less money than you but I enjoy my work. I wake up in the morning early because I'm happy to get up because I'm doing what I want to do.

If you have a side job, it's fine. My mum always told me this story: she was a civil servant when she was younger and she did the tax return of Michael Palin and she said that there was a year when he was working in a glass factory. Even Monty Python didn't save him. Don't worry. You have rough patches but they're not the be all or end all.

What is the most satisfying thing about leading the life of an artist?

I think the fact that I'm still doing it. I'm in my early 40s now and I'm just like, "I'm still here." That's in itself a small miracle. I'm always satisfied when I solve a problem or a creative riddle for myself because there can be moments where if something is too difficult, you're like, *Oh fuck it, I don't want to do it*. But I do find myself coming back, I don't fully give up. I postpone and I procrastinate but I don't give up. I guess that's what keeps me here because it's this curiosity or also this slightly egotistical thing of not wanting to give up. I have a thirst for reading and researching and watching. If I go to a gallery or a museum or a concert, I am genuinely interested. I want to see what's happening. I think as long as I've got that, I'm happy. If I just did this for purely just money, then obviously I'd get a bit bored because money jobs are boring. But if you're excited about what you do, then it's interesting for everyone.

Steven Warwick Recommends:

Ágota Kristóf - *The Notebook Trilogy*

Harmony Korine - *David Blaine: Above the Below*

Émile Zola - *The Kill*

Chester Novell Turner - *Black Devil Doll from Hell*

Leonard Cohen - "I'm Your Man"

Samuel Delany - *Mad Man* and *Hogg*

Bob Dylan - *Saved*

Rick James - *Glow: The Autobiography of Rick James*

Possessed - *Seven Churches*

Alan Clarke - *Scum* and *Christine*

Jacques Rivette - *Out 1* and *Celine and Julie Go Boating*

Claude Chabrol - *Violette Nozière*

The X Files - *Home* and *Tooms* episodes

Name

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Vocation

artist, author, musician

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