On remembering to touch base with yourself

Writer Lauren Elkin discusses research as collaboration, the value of keeping a journal, being aware of yourself and your surroundings, and how parenthood affects creativity.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2804 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration, Time management, Identity.

You've written and published a lot of nonfiction, often centered on women's bodies in space and your own body in space, so I'm curious to just know a little bit more about how you feel your body exists in space, especially when you're writing or thinking about writing. Are you very aware of your body while you're writing or while you're thinking about writing?

I probably am more than most because I have chronic headaches, chronic tension headaches. And so writing for long periods of time, or even just reading or doing anything that involves being focused, takes its toll on my shoulders and my neck. For example, I have recently put together a little desk space where the computer is lifted off the surface and I have a wireless keyboard and a mouse, and I'm trying to get used to writing at the desk because I think that that will help my headaches, instead of hunching over the computer on my couch. But I think for a long time, when I was younger, I would just write and forget that I had a body and had to do a lot of yoga when I wasn't working to ground myself back in it. I'm lucky enough to not have, knock on wood, any real chronic health problems aside from these headaches.

I get headaches, too, migraines with aura. I should probably do what you're describing. I'm actually sitting on the couch right now. I always sit in the same spot on the couch and hunch over.

It's funny, I can't really work creatively in any other position. But I know for my own health I need to change my habits, I guess.

This is a related question: Do you want to be more aware or less aware of your body when you're writing or thinking about writing? Do you like to get lost and to not be aware?

I think that's the goal, oblivion. Just a mind and a keyboard.

Are you able to write in public, around others? Are you interested in doing that?

I do like to write in cafes and on buses and any kind of public transport, really. I think I get something from being in that kind of white-noise environment. I wrote about it in *Flâneuse* and in the bus book [*No. 91/92*]. Life gives you different stuff, obviously, than when you're sitting at home on your couch. You see people you wouldn't ordinarily see. I think just the fact of being in movement somehow dislodges thoughts that you didn't know were there. I think it's very, very useful to be in movement somehow or to be in a setting where there's lots of other people talking around you.

I started recently listening in on people's conversations in the UK because people say the craziest stuff. I'm sure it's no different from anywhere else I've ever lived, but we moved to London a couple of years ago, and it coincided with a time in my life when I was starting to look and listen more to what people were saying around me. So I've started keeping a diary of things overheard in London. And I don't know if I'll ever do anything with it, but it is hilarious to look back through it and see the crazy things people say.

You're gathering raw materials for potential collages.

Yeah, exactly. And it's London-specific. The rule is I can't be in another city in the UK, or on an airplane going back to London. It has to be in London.

Your most recent book is a survey of feminist artists called *Art Monsters*. How do you define the term "art monster," exactly?

I think of it as a sort of practice that helps to build a world that involves creating more freedom for as many people as possible. So it's a really kind of large, ethical agenda, but it begins with a figure who is, in my early definition of it, an artist making work against expectations.

You've written a book that has the word "diary" in its subtitle, and you mentioned your journal in *Art Monsters* as well. Do you still keep a diary? And if so, what purpose does it serve for you?

I do still very much have a journal. I have an actual paper one, a Moleskine, and I have a file on my computer that I change every season. It's just a way of cleaning out the pipes, cleansing out the system. It's a detox. It's important for me to keep touching base with myself, with my writerly voice, because I have a small child and life tends to center on him and his needs and really boring administrative things for his school, or has he had his hair shampooed in the last couple of days, just basic things like reminding my partner to wash his ears when he gives him a bath. Daily life can swamp me, and I can get really caught up in that.

It's just crucial to my sense of self and well-being to be able to push that stuff aside and just be with myself and think about whatever's obsessing me and think through it, work through it, or to keep a diary of what's been happening so I don't forget things, what I've been reading, what I've been watching. It's an important way to keep my critical voice alive.

Are you aware of any audience, including your future self, while you're writing in your journal?

Probably my future self. I think the case with the bus book was specific in that it felt like performative writing that you might do on the internet, even though it wasn't meant to be a public project. It wasn't super introspective necessarily. But the stuff in my journal, in my daily journal, is not for public consumption.

Often, I will go back and take stuff and borrow it for books I'm writing or articles I'm writing. So it may end up eventually somewhere else, but I wouldn't want anyone to read them. They're so bad. It's not like Woolfian elegance. It's barely articulate, but it's important to me anyway.

You've mentioned your responsibilities as a parent. I don't want to assume that you consider being a parent a constraint as a writer, but I want to ask more generally which constraints you feel you're working within or against most often.

Parenthood really is a big one for me. I know some people don't like to talk about that, and that's fine, but I think it's true that having to think all the thoughts that I have to think about my son and his life and what's going on with him, and then just the sheer fact of being interrupted—. Even on a weekend, my partner and I will split the time. I'll take my son for two hours, and then he'll take him, and even in that time, he'll be coming in and seeing what I'm up to or needing a hug or whatever, or he'll get hurt and I'll have to go see what's going on. So I think that the constraint is that I no longer have these long expanses of time to just sink down into some creative place and just be there and swim around there. Now, I'm constantly close to the surface and coming

back up and checking in with my kid.

So I do miss those days, and just having long weekends with nothing to do, or going to see a museum show. The way that stoked my creativity isn't necessarily accessible to me anymore. So now if I want to go to a museum show, I have to do it while my son's in school. I guess I could go on a weekend, but it would be like cashing in my work chips to go see a show, and I'd rather be working. So I don't see as many exhibitions as I used to. For instance, I haven't been to a movie in five years. So it's a big constraint on my creativity, but I think it stimulates it in other ways.

I saw that you're publishing a novel next year called *Scaffolding*. Could you tell me a little bit about the book?

Well, it's set in the same apartment in Paris in 1972 and 2019, about the two different couples who live in the apartment at this 50-year distance from one another, and there are all kinds of interrelations between them. They're both dealing with the idea of pregnancy, with wanting to have a baby, with difficulty getting pregnant, with fidelity, and trying to reckon with how to live with someone else in a long-term way and how to respect their alterity without trying to erase it or possess them. One is a psychoanalyst, and the other is training to be a psychoanalyst, the two main characters. So there's a lot about Lacanian psychoanalysis and desire and lack and the compulsion to repeat.

In *Art Monsters* you write a little bit about the power, even the radical power, of the first person. Is Scaffolding written in the first person?

It is. It is. It came really naturally. I'm not very good at writing in the third-person. It feels very novel-y, or fiction-y. I feel like I'm announcing to the world, "Look at me, I'm writing fiction." It feels really artificial.

I'm curious how your fiction writing practice compares with your nonfiction writing practice.

They're so different. Really, when I was writing *Art Monsters*, I was super nostalgic for fiction, and I thought, "Oh, fiction. Look at all these people doing their 1,000 words each day in the summer and keeping each other on track for their writing schedules." 1,000 words in one day seems like a lot when it comes to nonfiction, or at least researched nonfiction, where you're drawing on your own response to a subject, but also collating it with the other voices that have intervened in that discipline.

Then when I had finished *Art Monsters* and turned back to *Scaffolding*, I was like, "Oh, god, fiction's hard. You just have to invent it all, make it all up, and it has to have significance and heft. I wish I could just go back to writing about art." So I think they're both challenging in their own ways, and I don't really prefer one over the other. Although, I have a couple of other fiction projects in the very early stages on my hard drive, and I'm kind of itching to get back to them, but I have a nonfiction book I have to write now. I think my younger self is like, "Oh, cry me a river. That sounds terrible. I would hate for that to be my life." So, I'm very happy with my writing conundrum.

Is there a genre in which you feel free—or more free, or even compelled to be—monstrous, as you define it?

Probably in the kind of writing that I was doing in *Art Monsters*. It's funny, I have felt over the course of the previous three nonfiction books, from *Flaneuse* to the bus book to *Art Monsters*, a loosening up of my sense of obligation to what a text is supposed to be, and I'm approaching a sense of what I want it to be. So that feels internally like I've made progress, even though *Art Monsters*, and a couple of people have called me out for this, has all of these footnotes and is very carefully researched and very much rooted in citation.

In addition to writing fiction and nonfiction, you've translated many writers from French. So I'm curious how your philosophy of monstrousness and of spilling beyond boundaries might apply to your translation philosophy or practice.

That's a really good question. I hadn't really thought about that. Translation is maybe a slightly different case because you do have a responsibility to be accurate. But there was a chapter that I was thinking I was going to write about Agnes Martin and all of her grids, because there seems to me to be something monstrous about that level of detail and obsessive repetition. Then I just ended up feeling like the book was getting long enough and I needed to just close the canon and be like, "That's it. These people are in. Everybody else, I guess I'll just write an essay about them down the road." So I didn't get to really home in on that element of monstrosity, that it doesn't all have to be messy and excessive and abject, but it can be extremely meticulous and exacting. So I think I would probably classify translation under that heading, with the caveat that it also depends what kind of work you're translating.

I just did Louise Bourgeois's biography for Yale, and that, I think, contrasts pretty radically with a work of fiction. I've just done Colombe Schneck's books for Penguin Press. So when you're doing fiction, you have a lot more freedom with the text to be inventive and think about your own rhythm, what you want it to sound like, what that rhythm evokes for you.

How do other people or collaborators figure into your work, and what is most helpful or unhelpful about working with others for you?

I've done some work collaboratively. For instance, in translation, definitely, because sometimes there's so much work to get done that you need to turn to someone else to do it. So I've worked with Charlotte Mandell on a biography of Jean Cocteau, and I worked with my friend Natasha Lehrer on Colombe Schneck's book, which was three short books translated as one. I did one, and she did one, and then we did one together. And that was really productive and useful because Natasha's a great translator. She's British; she grew up here, and we met in Paris, where she lives. And she's slightly better at one element of translating than I am, which is carrying over the French into English that sounds like English, like it was written by someone who'd been speaking English all their lives. And my translations, if I don't heavily revise them and read them out loud and have people read them for me, can read a little bit like someone who's speaking English, but not well or not with a lot of comfort. And I don't know what that's about.

As a writer, I don't think I really have done anything collaborative. I talk a lot to my friends. I have a good friend called Joanna Walsh, who's a writer as well, and for years she's been a really important sounding board to talk things through and see how things strike her. She read *Scaffolding* and gave me notes.

Then there's the sense of research as a form of collaboration because you're never alone in a room with Carolee Schneemann. It's you, Carolee Schneemann, and then all the other people who've written on Carolee Schneemann. So I do think of my research as being a form of collective work on a given subject.

I'm curious how, in your view, the concept of the art monster as you define it has changed in very recent years, or whether it hasn't. You included plenty of analyses of contemporary works in the book, but the heart of it really seems to be with artists and writers working in the 70s and before that. Many of them began their practice pre-internet, for example.

Obviously, the form that monstrosity takes is historically determined, and it depends what we're looking at and where and when. Julia Margaret Cameron was written off as an amateur in the 19th century because she refused to touch up her photographs. She wanted them to be a little bit messy and imperfect. She wasn't aiming for photorealism to the extent that that existed as a concept in her day. And II think similarly, the response to, say, Kara Walker's work has often been dismissive because of her medium. She works within silhouettes. People have had a lot of problems with her silhouettes because of their content, sure, but just as often the problem is only that she's using silhouettes, which is a "debased form." Why isn't she doing something important, like painting?

Lauren Elkin Recommends:

Critical-creative non-fiction

Chicanes by Clara Schulmann (Co-translated by Lauren Elkin with seven other women)

Madness, Rack, & Honey by Mary Ruefle

MOTHERs by Rachel Zucker

Blue Mythologies by Carol Mavor

Index Cards by Moyra Davey

Name

Lauren Elkin

Vocation

writer, translator

Sophie Davidson