

Express Yourself!

Anna Dezeuze

The Guerilla Art Kit

Keri Smith

New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2007

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website: <http://www.kerismith.com>

Learning to Love You More

Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July

New York, Prestel, 2007

ISBN 3791337335

website: <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com>

If love and war are indeed opposites, then *The Guerilla Art Kit* by Keri Smith and *Learning to Love You More* by Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July appear to be two very distinct projects. While the former privileges medium over message, by providing techniques inspired by street and protest art to disrupt everyday spaces and routines, the latter encourages participants to share their personal experiences by performing a number of fixed, content-driven ‘assignments’ documented on the project’s website as well as the new book. Both projects share, however, two crucial characteristics: a focus on small interventions within the fabric of everyday life and an emphasis on self-expression – *The Guerilla Art Kit*’s principal objective, it turns out, is to help you “get your message out in the world.” Keri Smith actually refers to the *Learning to Love You More* (LTYM) website in her *Guerilla Art Kit*, and one of her proposed ‘exercises’ – to “make a poster of your day” – is very similar to LTYM assignment 10 (“make a flyer of your day”), as both involve summarizing one’s day and posting photocopies of the poster/flier in public spaces. In another ‘exercise’ proposed by Smith, readers are invited to write encouraging fortune-cookie-style messages on small paper slips, and “drop them randomly” wherever they go, while LTYM assignment 63 gives instructions for making an “encouraging banner” including a positive thought or affirmation. “You are a star,” Smith suggests as an example of a “hidden fortune”; “You are incomparable,” were the words chosen by Skye Gilkerson from Minneapolis, Minnesota, for her (his?) realization of the LTYM banner. If distributing a poster of your day involves sharing snapshots of your personal life with strangers, and making encouraging banners or hidden fortunes is about spreading positive thoughts in the world, another concern running through both projects focuses on ways “to beautify or recreate a space that is soulless or without character” (to use Smith’s words). LTYM’s suggestion, in assignment 15, to “hang a windchime in a parking lot” is a good example of this ‘beautifying’ agenda. Smith’s step-by-step guide to how to make ‘seed bombs’ aims at the same result as LTYM assignment 36,

which encourages readers to “grow a garden in an expected spot.” In addition to gardening, both Keri Smith and the LTYM authors tend to encourage the use of old-fashioned crafts – whether collage or drawing, stencils or papier maché, crochet or knitting.

Of course, as it will have now become clear, the main reason why both projects are not so different after all is that Smith’s ‘guerilla art’ bears no real connection to any political intervention, whether anarchist or situationist. Even if ‘beautifying’ the environment is only one of the three aims of guerilla art stated by Smith – the others involve the slightly more promising, if equally vague, “challenging the status quo” and “interacting” with the environment and other people – Keri Smith can be more appropriately described as a Martha Stewart on pot than any guerilla activist. All trace of violence has been excised from her definition of guerilla art as “any anonymous work [...] installed, performed, or attached in public or private spaces with the distinct purpose of affecting the world in a creative or thought-provoking way.” In her essay in the *Learning to Love You More* book, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson rightly points out that the project does not claim any ‘grandiose’ political goals of social protest or community building; LTYM’s claims are indeed nothing but ‘modest,’ as are those embodied by Smith’s guerilla art. ‘Modest’ however, does not mean non-existent, and it is the specific brand of politics at stake here that seems most relevant to contemporary forms of art and activism concerned above all with what Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt has aptly called “micro-attempts at change.”¹ And, since over five thousand contributors have sent their reports to the LTYM website, and ten thousand readers a day (according to Princeton Architectural Press) visit Smith’s weblog, the two projects themselves are as good barometers of current social trends as any other book, website or artwork around.

The projects are premised on a general sense that some vital connections have been lost in our societies. For Miranda July, we have lost touch with our feelings and our spirituality – a project such as LTYM tries to satisfy “our desire to feel more”² through “joyful” and “profound experiences” leading to a rediscovery of ourselves, and our relations to other people. For Keri Smith, we have become disconnected from our environment because we are constantly bombarded by an overwhelming mass of information. Guerilla art, according to her, can “reawaken a sense of connection of the environment” (whether urban landscapes, the natural world, or a local community) “by pointing out something I might not have seen, by adding a new image to the world that is unexpected, or by presenting an alternative

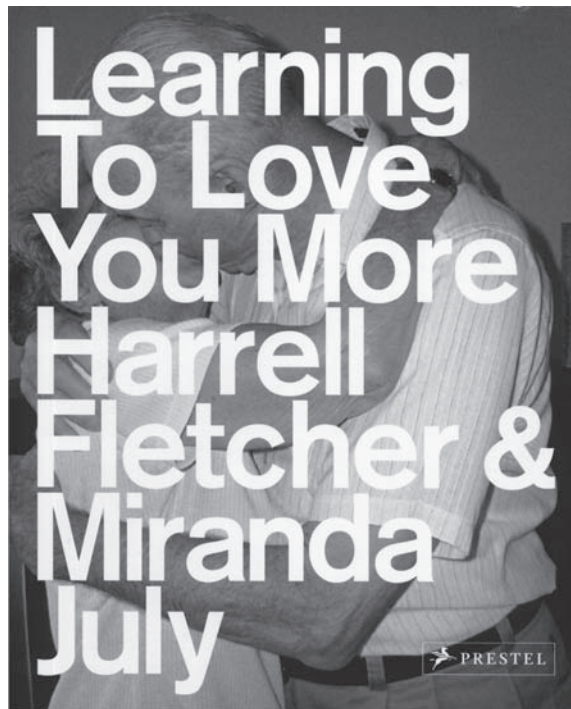


point of view.” Both projects, then, use exercises or assignments to help us ‘reawaken,’ or re-learn’ these connections within the spaces of everyday life, rather than in an explicitly political realm of social activism. Many LTYM assignments sound like psychotherapy exercises, and Smith’s ‘how to’ book points to the convergence between self-help and do-it-yourself manuals. Both are responding to a need for directions, a craving for community, for direct connections in a fragmented and uncertain world.

Small satisfactions, it seems, can nevertheless still be found within this melancholy context: the pleasure in following instructions (the LTYM assignments are compared to recipes, exercise classes or singing along to someone else’s song), the “wonderful feeling of elation” in anticipating the future discovery of a guerilla art object. These momentary losses of self-consciousness by voluntarily submitting to someone else’s orders, or by focusing on making someone else happy secretly certainly seem risk-free (Smith discourages any major infringement of the law.) One is reminded of the little tricks invented by the eponymous heroine of the French film *Amélie* (2001), who spends most of her time contriving to bring happiness, anonymously, to people around her. As in *Amélie*, the emphasis on tiny pleasures and minute acts, which can bring “a beautiful human touch” to our everyday lives (in Bryan-Wilson’s words³), can slip into a problematic cuteness and sentimentality. Keri Smith’s exercises and LTYM assignments fall into this trap because they often infantilise their readers. Smith finds it necessary to warn readers that the new blades of ‘x-acto’ knives “are very sharp.” “Go slowly,” she advises. The instructions in LTYM are usually very detailed, advising on the form and content of the assignment, including “don’ts” as well as dos, and offering reassurances and general thoughts about the objective of the task. Moreover, LTYM knowingly invites regressions into childhood and adolescence, whether by inviting participants to “make a child’s outfit in an adult size” or to

“reread” their “favorite book from fifth grade.” Meanwhile, Smith encourages us to “make ‘friends’” by pasting cut-out eyes onto inanimate objects in public spaces, and to create “miniature environments” complete with cork figurines and landscapes made out of paper clips, spools, shells and buttons. Add some instructions for making potato prints (in the ‘stamp’ section), and you have enough activities to keep a bunch of five-year olds busy on a rainy afternoon.

“We are living in a golden age of self expression.”⁴ The press release for *The Guerilla Art Kit* underlines its relation to the explosion of blogs and ‘social networking sites’ such as YouTube and MySpace, which are also obvious points of comparison for the web-based LTYM. For Smith, such ‘independent media’ provide “a way for people to take power back” in a context dominated by “a growing mistrust in corporate media” and a sense of impotence in the face of “a system that seems to be dominated by corruption and money.” Guerilla art is more than a reaction to the present American context, however: “the need” for people “to share and express themselves in a public way” can, apparently, be traced as far back as prehistoric cave painting. (I like the image of a cave painter indignantly rejecting the invitation to exhibit in a white cube gallery because this wouldn’t allow her to express herself ‘in a public way’). “*The Guerilla Art Kit* is,” we are told, “about leaving your mark,” in order to remind the world, as the Adbusters blog (cited by Smith) puts it, that “the human spirit is alive here.” LTYM encourages a similar form of mark-making through the creation of objects and stories. The ongoing flux of confiding and confessing invited by the more personal assignments (from explaining the significance of a scar or a special outfit to recording an argument, spending time with a dying person or writing down a phone conversation you would like to have) inevitably sets up a voyeurist/exhibitionist dynamic reminiscent of US talk shows. (The LTYM book even includes the ‘real life’ story of long lost siblings reunited through the website.) In this sense, LTYM is even more closely related to another web project – the hugely popular *PostSecret*, which invites contributors to send in their secrets anonymously. (With its 180,000 contributions and over one hundred million website hits since 2004, as well as a series of bestselling anthologies, Frank Warren’s *PostSecret* has in fact been a far more visible social phenomenon than either LTYM or Keri Smith’s books and blog.⁵) Like *PostSecret*, the stories in LTYM make for compulsive reading, exploiting



the same mechanisms at the root of Tracey Emin’s success, in order to present for our pleasure the neuroses not of one tormented individual, but of a whole society. Indeed, one of the reports for assignment 14 – “write your life story in less than a day” – was singled out by July and Fletcher for an award, and described by them as “The Great American Story” (complete with dysfunctional family, alcohol abuse, homelessness, mental illness, and, of course, a happy end).

In drawing a composite portrait of America, LTYM acts as a counterpart to Jeremy Deller and Allan Kane’s Britain-based *Folk Archive*, which similarly operates as both a website and a range of changing exhibitions in different locations.⁶ The *Folk Archive* documents existing rituals and objects, rather than encouraging people to make their own contributions, but Deller and Kane would no doubt agree with Fletcher and July’s claim that they are recording “the frequently wild, sometimes hilarious, and quietly stunning creative lives of a few people living on earth right now.” The fact that Deller and Kane would never express themselves in this way should not only be attributed to good old British reserve: their difficulties in articulating the aims of their project stem largely from the awkward power relations implied by their ambivalent roles as ‘outsiders’ recording popular pastimes. July and Fletcher avoid this pitfall by resolutely placing themselves on the same level as their contributors. Anyone who has watched July’s award-winning feature film *You and Me and Everyone We Know* (2005) can vouch for her sincerity: in it, she stars

as a young artist whose sensibility and activities clearly display significant features of the LTYM aesthetics. While July and Fletcher do not adopt Deller and Kane’s problematically superior position, the infantilizing and sentimentalizing drives in LTYM can nevertheless be considered as forms of manipulation. This is why, I think, the ‘cuteness’ factor of this project, like that of *The Guerilla Art Kit*, leaves me uneasy: their cheerful and friendly format seem to encourage an eager submission to orders and instructions which may not be as empowering as they even ‘modestly’ claim. The concept of the gift mobilized by both projects has become a leitmotif of critical discussions of contemporary art, and most critics agree with Marcel Mauss that the logic of the gift involves reciprocal relations which establish forms of obligations as much as pure generosity.⁷ The democratic operation and the sincerity of LTYM have the merit of making these relations more transparent: both parties, it seems, are getting something out of this exchange, although what this ‘something’ is, remains somewhat elusive. Behind its pretty design and upbeat rhetoric, *The Guerilla Art Kit* is, in contrast, as vacuous as Keri Smith’s own weblog, which, like most blogs, contributes to the mass of useless information that led us to ‘tune out’ in the first place. Why should I be interested in what kind of tea Ms Smith drank yesterday? How can “knitted ornaments hung from trees” change the world? Keri Smith provides answers to neither question, and leaves us wondering how Princeton Architectural Press came up with the notion that “*The Guerilla Art Kit* shows how small acts can start a revolution.” LTYM is certainly more effective in demonstrating that the ‘human spirit’ (to refer the Adbusters’ quote again) has not yet been entirely crushed – but is staying alive enough? I am still left wondering what kind of revolution will come out of our “golden age of self expression.”

Notes

1. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, ‘The Reality of my Desires,’ *Variant*, 30, Winter 2007, p. 4.
2. Julia Bryan-Wilson, ‘Some Kind of Grace: an Interview with Miranda July,’ *Camera Obscura*, vol. 55, no. 1, p. 196.
3. *Ibid*, p. 182.
4. <http://www.papress.com/bookpage.tpl?cart=1200332724697&isbn=1568986882> (accessed on January 21, 2008).
5. Cf. <http://postsecret.blogspot.com>
6. Cf. <http://www.mini-host.org/folkarchive/>
7. Marcel Mauss (2001) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge)