

Listmaking and Other Daily Distractions

Cece Wheeler

In spite of a persistent fiction, we never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on.

Michel de Certeau



I am a lover of the inconsiderable things in life, a scrupulous monitor of the ordinary. It is the stuff that surrounds us, the mundane parts of life usually ignored, that are my humble delights and daily preoccupation.

I am both a compulsive list-maker and list-saver. I consider these efficient and self-contained documents to be autobiographical objects, imprints of a life's trace, a memory of the day and the duties assigned to it. These records and personal inventories provide compelling detours into the details and minutiae of one's life, so poetically expressed by Franz Kafka as "the little faded common thing that is, in fact, much more interesting because this common-ness shelters and underlies so many stories."

Sometimes banal, as in the recording of the endless array of daily errands to be performed [milk,

eggs, bread, pick up laundry from cleaners], occasionally hyperbolic and ambitious, as in the grandiose optimism of new year's resolutions [lose weight, exercise every day, write my mother weekly], lists become inventories that chart our journeys. These sedate records of domesticity reflect the symmetry of the everyday, an ordering of the everythingness of life.

They are promises of future activity and memories of past experiences. Their redundant and regenerative characteristics reflect the quotidian of a woman's daily repetitive rituals and obligations, the perplexities of domestic despair and the alienated nature of household labor.

Searching through my massive array of old lists became an excavation of my history and daily experience, reminders of the duties and events that inform me as a woman and give authenticity to my

art practice. These ordered sets of data developed into a form of self-representation, a 'museum of the self' as Jennifer Gonzalez calls it in her essay "Autotopographies."

Many times my listmaking serves as a cure for the ambivalence that pervades a day. It forces a structure or routine upon me when I otherwise would be well satisfied to spend the day gazing in indecisiveness. There is immediate satisfaction from completing the task and crossing it off. I feel I have achieved something. These tendencies reflect the feminine dilemma; the social task of organizing and caretaking that encompasses the life of a woman, wife and mother. They are a justification for existence.

These small artifacts of domesticity further serve to thwart threats of randomness. The compulsiveness found in the very activity of

listmaking helps to organize and order, serving as a mask for chaos. Impulse is the enemy of the compulsive person and lists signify and reflect a woman's rigid chronology. These everyday artifacts arrange, categorize and classify; examples of the feminist art practice of mining daily experience.



Why I make lists

it is unthinkable not to the reason it must be is
because, or else the day won't work there is an
overpowering need for this writing writing writing, a
need I am unable to stop there is no choice here
ramblings must be placed into written words neatly
or not so neatly on pages of clean paper ready for the
evidence yes embrace it I am obsessed with
this need to write massively the voice in my head
becomes greedy and demands this endless string of
fragments of my everyday living it focuses the
stuff that really matters, the endless things that fall
into and out of my head unless documented
methodically sometimes haphazardly listmaking
has become my regimented ritual

Where I write lists

on white lined legal pads in the large boxes
in a month-at-a-glance calendar because the day-at-a-
glance boxes are too small on little yellow
pieces of paper that can stick to the wall and the
computer and the telephone in a massive
inventory of notebooks placed strategically around
my house two on the nightstand beside my bed
four on the bed five more on a shelf in my
bedroom on the table beside the big chair by the
window stacked in piles on my desk near my
computer covering my worktable in my studio
in scraps of paper stuffed into coat pockets on
clean sheets of white paper ripped into four separate
squares with a metal ruler in the back of my
checkbook on the deposit slips when I have run out
of paper

What I write on my lists

grocery items that have run out people that
need to be called and their telephone numbers
letters that need to be written ideas for a video or
projection books to be read one day any song
that suddenly inspires possible projects quotes
and beautifully written words revealed while reading
thoughts that come into my head when driving
because if not written immediately they will
disappear to do items, chores, tasks and things
that must get done to maintain daily order
pro/con items when forced to make a major decision
all the things that compete for my attention every
day

Words that have a meaning related to LIST

Database, enumerate, give, identify, itemize, position, register, spatial relation, agenda, agendum, bibliography, blackbook, blacklist, calendar, calorie chart, catalog, catalogue, character set, checklist, class list, computer menu, contents, corrigenda, criminal record, directory, docket, empanel, enumeration, free list, honors list, impanel, index, inventory, key, mailing list, menu, necrology, numbering, order of business, post, price list, push-down list, push-down stack, queue, record, roll, roster, schedule, short list, sick list, slate, stack, stock list, table of content

Lists I don't want to be on

Wait-lists lists of dead people shitlists lists
of people waiting for organ donations lists of
assassinated persons lists of people who have
disappeared lists of people who died on their
birthday lists made by the FBI, CIA or IRS
telemarketer's lists

Distractions

There is something at once uplifting and terrifying about the idea that nothing in the world is so unique that it can't be entered on a list.

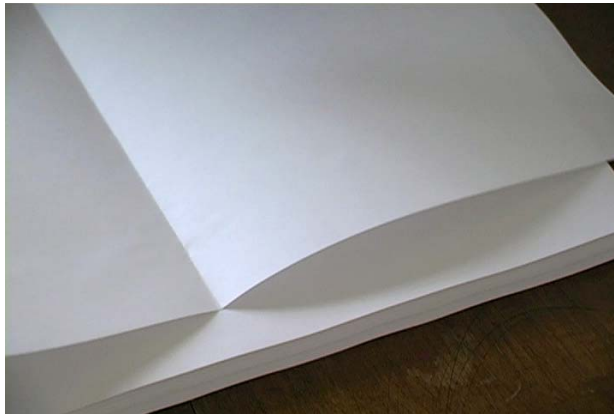
Everything can be listed.

Georges Perec

List-ing (lis'tin), n. 1. the act of making a list.

List-less (list'lis), adj. 1. feeling only indifference to what is going on about one

It's the list of undone things that concerns me most. Those parts of life thrown away as undo-able, impossible, unbearable, unbelievable – discarded tasks, ideas, hopes, dreams, possibilities – the maybes and what-ifs.



Traces

Living means leaving traces.

Walter Benjamin



There are few events which don't leave a written trace at least. At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or of a diary, or some other chance support – on which, at varying speeds and by a different technique depending on the place, time or mood, one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed.

Georges Perec

My extensive collection of worn and crumpled lists isn't visually arranged in careful display, as are many heirlooms and memory objects. Instead they can be found in careless arrays – stuffed into already too full kitchen drawers, paper-clipped into stacks and lingering on tables and desktops, crammed into boxes that lay dusty under the bed. They serve as nostalgic souvenirs of a life's particulars; a way to once again travel through days already lived. As

diverse and wide-ranging in their memories as they were in their formation, they encompass the complexity of the domestic agenda. They recall swim meets, baseball games and carpools; they organize Christmases and birthdays and daily suppers; they reflect the creative urges and reminders of the woman-artist I have begun to acknowledge and empower.

Considering the idea that memory is less found than fabricated, I wonder what it is I am looking for when perusing these listed memoirs. Susan Stewart considers nostalgia a subjective state, a looking back upon the past with the hope of finding an identity that never really existed. She writes in *On Longing* that nostalgia is always ideological; “the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.” Am I trying to coax

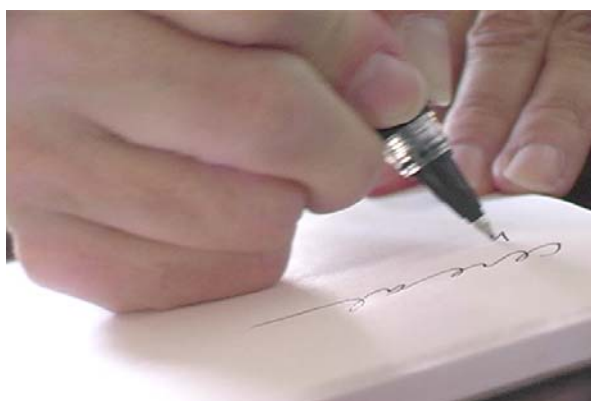
that younger incarnation of self to look up and reflect on the state of her life? Do I remember her frustration and intensity, her feelings of alienation in a life surrounded by busy-ness?

The lists I make today take on a different character than those made as a 30 year old woman with 3 children under the age of 5. Those earlier lists were contained documents of necessity, efficiency ensuring the economy of the day and the sanity of the mind. Today's lists tend to have a more spontaneous affect, attaching themselves to the rush of creative thinking and impulse of action I now seem to allow in my life - spurts of thoughts and projects, unconscious responses to books read, poetic ramblings of a mind constantly seeking to know itself.

My current lists describe me completely and simply. I am still compulsive, organized, dutiful and

thorough; conscious of the impact carried by even the smallest task in the chaos of everydayness and eager to reflect that impact in my art. I am indulgent in my need to observe and reflect upon the predictable and trivial, fascinated with the singularity of the mundane event, the why, how, when and where of this import of dailyness. Henri Lefebvre confirms the importance of the daily when depicting the action of a woman buying sugar as an event that reverberates with the social and psychic desire of national and global exchange.

But my compulsive list making of today also regards the experience of me as a vital and necessary event, a phenomenon neglected in my earlier years. I have begun to give myself permission to regard myself in the deepest of terms, no longer a mere attachment to another life, another duty, another task waiting to be completed.



*This is how space begins, with words only, signs
traced on the blank page.*

Georges Perec

