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I'm going to bring it down a notch and remark that today... is a blip. Call it a pause. A day where we break our regular routines to create a bookmark—there is a before now and an after now. You made it to today! You didn't fail! It's a lot of pressure. Too much pressure honestly. But try to enjoy it, it will be over soon. If you have family here hug them. Hug each other. Because you deserve to be held. What you just did was hard. Starting to make art is hard. Because you couldn't just do what you were told. Making your way through an art education is a process of figuring out how to do something that no one can tell you how to do. You had to find yourselves, and find one another, and find the bravery and stubbornness to follow your interests and inclinations through the act of making, and then to stand by those things you made and be open to responses and feedback from one another. This is a great exertion, and a humbling process. I applaud you. It's good to feel proud.

After my college graduation ceremony my whole family piled into the car and went to a drive-through carwash. My father had never been to one, and that particular day seemed as good a time as any, all squished into each other in the car, now dark with the thuds and squishes of the suds and whirling chamois. A barrage of towels and forced hot air, emerging back out into the blinding sunshine. A fleeting moment of togetherness in that dim enclosure, an entry and an exit.

Some people might not give you much credit for what you just did. You didn't become doctors, or human rights lawyers, or cancer researchers. As far as I know, being an artist, I haven't yet saved anybody's life. But, it's hard to know... Our job, the job of artists, is to turn things over to reveal the potential on their other sides. Maybe it's on the bottom of your chair. Maybe you have capacities you have no inkling about today. Our job is to remember that there are options. And to embody that feeling of having options, in ourselves, in the objects and images of our work. Because it is very hard for human beings to stay living when the world feels optionless. On my way to the studio I often remember these lines from William Carlos Williams—

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.¹*

Maybe I'm too sensitive. I find it hard to live in the world. As much as possible, I try not to tune things out—I want to be alive for my life. But damn. We can be barbaric to each other. Imposing invented categories onto one another and giving them the status of truth. Thinking we know things about each other. Telling each other what we are. But! These young people! You are making a world that I feel like I can

live in! You are already doing it! I wrote a text to my friend after Tuesday's critiques—"Kids these days! We'll be in good hands when we are old, don't worry."

Because art, in my opinion, aspires towards transformation. Of the world, maybe of others, but especially of ourselves, as artists. Art is an embodied practice of developing and transforming one's ways of thinking and seeing. It's alchemy. It's for survival. It's something to survive for. And it's practice. It's learning different modes of perception and it's practicing them. It's learning how to see together. It's social. Even when you do it alone, it involves others. Other people are inside you, helping you make, helping you think. All work is collaborative. We inhabit each other like spirits. We teach each other how to see.

Art is also a companion. You, graduates, are at the beginning of what will hopefully be a lifelong relationship with your art practices. Try your best to do what you need to do to make this a relationship in which you both can thrive. Having a relationship with your art practice is something like having a relationship with yourself, but it isn't quite reducible to this. Because while your art comes from you and is made by you, it isn't wholly personal. It is a reaching out towards the world from the site of production. Art, even when made in private, is in some sense public, made in relation to some real or imagined public, even just a very small one. Being an artist means that you develop a discipline around the cultivation of your sensibility. I can barely express what a blessing it is to have this kind of companionship in one's work. You can be there for yourself, in your work, through all of the bullshit that life is going to dish up for you. Here's a small list of some the bad things that are likely to occur in the next decade of your lives: running out of money, having a job you don't enjoy, losing or not having studio, losing some of your friends, someone you love breaking your heart, someone you love dying, being heart-crushingly lonely, feeling sick, depressed, anxious, powerless, or, furious, being discriminated against, being pigeonholed, tokenized, manipulated, feeling aimless, unappreciated, misunderstood, or forgotten... and that's just a mini-list. But being an artist means having a room of one's own in yourself—your work can be there for you through all of this in ways that will astonish you. Being an artist means that you can have a life-long companion in your own mind and body, and this is so much more valuable than any of the achievements and career successes that you may or may not have. Your actual work is much more important than any of this.

Do I sound utopian? If I do it's because I am. My dissatisfaction with the world as it presently exists takes form in my fantasies about how things can be different both, in the future and right here and now. But fantasies are very very serious things. In the words of the great Judith Butler: "The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home."ⁱⁱ

The possible in excess of the real. This ability to imagine your own existence is a huge victory, even under conditions in which what you envision is not permitted. If you know what you want and what you need you are in a relatively good situation, even if you can't have it. Because the real danger is finding oneself in circumstances in which you cannot even envision yourself existing in ways that will make your life livable for you. People do this to each other. So do buildings, and cities, economies, images, ads, and jokes. Sometimes you can't even tell it's happening when it's happening. It's just a feeling of impossibility that sets in. If you are losing your ability to be legible even to yourself, it's time to get the hell out of there. Call for back-up. Unpack the moment. It's very important to learn to understand what people are really saying when they ask you questions. Open-ended questions are often not very open-ended at all—there are only a small range of answers that make sense as answers to many of the questions people will ask you. And these are not always the answers that you will want to give. I

now will claim whatever authority has been granted to me by being up here by giving you permission to occasionally answer as follows: “I do not feel able to answer your question, but here are a few things I can tell you about that you might interest you and help you get to know me or my work.” For years, and still, one of the most difficult questions for me and many of my peers has been one of the first ones people ask you when they meet you, “So, what do you do?” When you are an unknown artist working multiple jobs it’s hard to figure out what they are really trying to know. Are we talking about money? Are we talking about why I get out of bed in the morning? Answer this question in whatever way feels best to you. You only need to identify with the ways you spend your time that you want to identify with. The rest doesn't need to matter.

Many of these kinds of questions are actually efforts to try to decipher whether your life is unfolding “on schedule”. Are you doing the right thing for how old you are? Are you behaving in an age-appropriate manner? Are you falling behind? A day like today is mired in this kind of thinking—graduating “on-time” is your accomplishment that we do congratulate you for, and it is no small feat. But, I sincerely hope that today is one of the last days that is defined for you by a life-schedule that is not of your own devising. Human life can be long or short, and you actually can decide for yourself what you want to be doing with yourself at every age of your life.

This rejection of cultural norms around the appropriate temporal unfolding of human life is one of the aspects of “queerness” (a term I’m guessing most of your families have now heard you use to describe yourselves or your classmates...) that is less talked about but is, in my view, equally important to the interventions that a queer approach to gender and sexuality can make in the rigid ways these terms are often understood. Queerness is, in my view, an approach to ourselves and one another that makes the bare minimum of assumptions about our own and one another’s bodies, self-conceptions, and trajectories. It is the willful cultivation of our ability to keep ourselves open to the simple fact that everything, and everyone, changes. We cannot expect to know, ever, once and for all, who, what, or when we are. No one can guess better than you can what shape your life should take at what time. So, wear whatever you want your entire life. Stay home with a book. Go out all night. Hold your head up like a goddess. Slither by invisibly like a snake. Surround yourself with people who will let you change. And let each other change. As people and as artists, it is up to us to do the work of remembering that all things have a back, an inside, a top, a latent but ever present dimension of possibility. There is always a side we don’t yet know.

ⁱ Williams, William Carlos. “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 2*. New York: New Directions. 1991. (Originally published 1955.)

ⁱⁱ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.