

HOLLYWOOD REALLY DOES RULE: A CONVERSATION WITH DAN ASHER

I have been in close communication with Dan Asher for the past four years. Mostly by telephone. He would phone me from Germany. London. Madagascar. Los Angeles. Iceland. Indiana (while at an autism convention). And once even while in Antarctica . . . ? . . . I think? . . . from a pay-phone? . . . well, maybe not.

I asked myself . . . what do the readers want to hear about from him? 57th St? 22nd St? D Cortez? Pig's blood? I am hardly interested in any of these things anymore. And I am sure that he is tired of explaining them, especially the 15 year-old blood incident.

Jason Volenec: I heard that you lived with the breatharians . . . or was it the fresh arians, or the Fresh Aryans . . . for awhile in the '60s.

Dan Asher: Fresh Aryans in the '90s. But it was the *breatharians*. . . these are persons who theoretically exist solely on oxygen as sustenance. I knew one, for instance, who had studied with Johnny Love Wisdom and who would fast on nothing but a little water for three weeks and then hit the Dunkin' Donut Shop for dozens of creampuffs. I guess you could call him a bulimic breatharian. But I like the *fresh-airians* better. That is a word that you just made up. That's a neologism. That's when people with twisted brains make up new words. They just pop out of their heads. I just made up a word recently. *Pathographer*.

JV: Oh yeah . . . what does that mean?

DA: Well, it's something like Nan Goldin's "enlightened" Bar Mitzvah photography. The peeping Tom or Thomasina with a *point and shoot*.

JV: What?

DA: A pathographer can also be anyone documenting this slightly imperfect universe. *Pathogenic or photogenic*, what's the dif.

JV: You just got back from an autism convention . . .

DA: Yeah, I was there for ten minutes or 15 . . . it took 20 minutes to take the taxi up there and then . . . anyway, I guess you want to get a definition of autism . . . or something like that.

JV: Well . . . I don't, but maybe the readers do.

DA: They say it's a communication disorder . . . but it has a neurological basis . . . autistics have a basic problem with social communication and social skills themselves. These specialists recommended that I pay a bunch of money and go up to Mount Sinai hospital and join a support group that deals in . . . ya know . . . where I can learn social skills . . . ya know, people skills . . . how did they get that notion? I told them that, well . . . that they could use some social skills . . . and they said, "well, you're the one who's not allowed in any macrobiotic restaurants in lower Manhattan." And I said, well, yeah . . . you got a point there. But I'm better off if I go out of the neighborhood to go have something to eat anyway.

JV: These are not isolated NYC incidents. I have received numerous phone calls from you all over the world. I would answer the phone and you would be gasping for a breath. From some scuffle that you just got out of. You could hardly put a sentence together. You seem to get thrown out of nearly everywhere . . . an airplane, it would seem, would be your only security.

DA: Airplanes. Well, yeah! I like to spend the extra 200 dollars for the upgrade to fly first class . . . you know, flying from NY to LA . . . you're up there with these . . . well . . . I don't know what they are. Once I was sitting next to some woman VJ from MTV. She had just graduated from Oxford and all of a sudden she decided that it would help her acting career if she became a VJ on MTV.

JV: You ended up insulting her, I'm sure.

DA: No. No, not really. She just had gotten to be a bore after about . . . ten minutes or so, I guess. But she probably didn't like the fact that I had slightly long toenails and was sitting right next to her without any shoes on in first class. But . . . then she goes, "I think you're crazy . . . but inspired, or something . . . so you're . . . kind of . . . OK . . . crazy."

And I said, "Well, I don't know . . . you're kind of crazy, too . . . but you're not that OK."

She was something else! I don't know who she was. It wasn't Downtown Julie Brown, that's for sure. It was uptown somebody . . . or it was Midtown Julie Brown, so to speak.

[Dan says that he should mention something about his recent exhibition. There were other things that I would rather have talked about, but after all, the forum here is art.]

JV: OK Dan, do you have anything to say about your recent exhibition?

DA: It was quite dull unfortunately . . . apart from the DVD of the fish and the arial photos of Alaska. I took those pictures of the icebergs last year and you know, you take pictures and it's mainly the experience that you get off on and the pictures are kind of a memento or a memento-mori. It is like a relic. Or a trophy in the abstract, or a trope, to use artschool "slang." I want to go back to Antarctica again. Everyone says, "wow! . . . did you hear that they're [the icebergs] melting?" I mean you can read about it in *USA Today*. "No I didn't hear that . . . I mean, how did you come up with that?" You ask a three-and-a-half year-old and they know that shit.

DJ Spooky says he wants to take his DAT recorder down there and record the melting, crackling ice shelves . . . what an original idea . . . why doesn't he just sample it off of a geologist's CD and save himself 10,000 bucks?

Anyway . . . I wanted to mix it [the show] up, ya know. But hopefully, in LA, I'll be showing photos such as the one of the guy sunning his artificial legs in Santa Monica on the promenade and the boogie-boarder riding the Big Kahuna in the form of an artificial sand dune at Venice Beach.



Maybe they will want to see the slow motion videos of this wrestler. He weighs five hundred pounds but he lost 50 pounds. He wears this thrift store leather jacket and these baby-blue contact lenses. He's this black guy and I think he has bleached blonde hair, à la Dennis Rodman, and he's called Viscera. (Out with the dictionaries, *zing* readers.)

JV: What? He has a Bachelor's degree in ...? Oh ... bleached blonde hair. Nevermind.

DA: These are some of the new videos. Slow shutter speed. Slow motion, boxing, wrestling, women's boxing, and wrestling. Stuff like that. And I also shot videos in Tokyo of these people crossing the street in Shinjuku. And I shot some boiling mud pools in New Zealand.

I like shooting off of the TV. I like how the images look and how they break up and all that. I like the disjunction ... the talking is out of sync ... even more out of lipsync than Milli Vanilli. Completely off. Disorienting ... but I think it gets the point across ... of things which I call *ex-communication*.

JV: Is this another neologism of yours?

DA: No, it's kind of a malapropism, of sorts.

JV: On my part, or yours?

DA: Well, here it has to do with using e-mail or chat rooms or whatever. And how that is not real communication ... it is disabused and rather chilly. It is really abetting in the destruction of the planet ... what they call cyber-progress.

JV: But being autistic, and also being a self-proclaimed "information junkie," I would think that what *they* call cyber progress may be in your favor.

DA: It is, in a certain way ... but I use it instead of it using me. Of course, everybody says that shit. Any crack-head, or alcoholic or foot fetishist says, "I use it, it doesn't use me."

If you know exactly what's going on. I mean, you use what's at hand. It's better than critiquing something by being a complete Luddite and saying I'm anti-technology and blah blah blah. At least if you get really involved with these things you have a better perspective when you criticize them or try to change them for the better. 'Cause in the '60s if you had all this cyber-shit, or all these computers and all this e-mail you would have had these people that weren't just these 12 year-old snowboarding, bungee-jumping hackers ... I mean, they have fun, I'm sure. And they are good at what they do, but there is no ideological component and they are not really, well, very few of them are hooked up with the others (in a constructively destructive way). Or they just put some kind of busty babe on the front page of the web edition of the *NY Times* and say Free Kevin Mitnick.

In actuality this is a post-ideological age. But there are individuals who have beliefs ... *some*. But most of those people are afraid to kind of express their beliefs or it is unfashionable or they are stigmatized. Some people say that I say things that people think but are afraid to say. When you get to know people better, then they are at ease, and they express their disaffection with the state of the world, and sometimes even in public and not only by serial or spree-killing. [This interview took place before the Seattle WTO convention and the aftermath.] I try to encourage the young people to push the envelope a little bit. Especially if they are into social change or, like, true spiritual evolution and things like that, but I find mighty few like that.

Like there was this girl and she was selling her drawings on the street for five bucks. She was a very innocent and idealistic Japanese girl from Osaka. But the people didn't relate to her. There was this guy who walked up and said he was 1/2 Canadian and 1/2 Hungarian and part this and 1/2 that. Anyway, there were too many 1/2's. But I think he wanted to pick up this girl. He had this big wad of Canadian money but he didn't buy anything from her. And this other girl from upstate NY said, "I love your drawings," and I said, "They are only five bucks!" So she had a pile of like fifteen drawings and the girl from upstate said "I'll take this pile, here's five bucks." And the Japanese girl goes, "No, no ... they are five dollars each." and she said, "Well, I don't know, I'll see you later." And then Patti Smith passed by with one of her flaks, and kept on movin', as they say.

It was fucked up, but this is typical of what goes on. 'Cause the girl was this very gentle person and just very cool, but in a way vulnerable. But they are also pretty tough, the Japanese, even the young women. I think she knows how to get by, basically ... and to deal with things.

JV: Do you feel that in Japan you have more freedom to do what you want in your exhibitions?

DA: Yeah, it is because they don't understand, um ... well, anyway ... they *do* have an intuitive grasp of the work. And also they are really just into weirdos. I used to live next to this artist Nara in Cologne for three years and I met the Japanese dealer through him. Anyhow, that is how I had the show in Japan. Then they did an interview and at the end they said that I was schizophrenic ... which is complete bullshit, but they had misinterpreted me and came to that conclusion. I didn't realize it until two years later when I was reading the translation and I saw it. Oh! It says that I'm a schizophrenic motherfucker, and I said, "Well, thanks very much." I mean ... more or less.

Kenny Schachter also did the same shit in another article. He said that I go all around the world to these autism conferences but I am a schizophrenic bastard, a delusional bastard.

No. I'm not. I'm just an overly enthusiastic-eccentric-autistic-bastard. But I'm not delusional. And neither is Mr. Kaczynski.

JV: You seem to give the diagnosis of autism to Ted the Unabomber, and many others as well ... including myself.

MARTOS GALLERY

DA: Well, it happens to be the case, at least according to the textbook definition. Kaczynski is definitely not a paranoid schizophrenic but a person with Asperger's syndrome or a high-functioning autistic, to use psychiatric parlance. But none of us are bona-fide psychiatrists . . . thank god. This psychiatrist that I went to see at Mount Sinai a couple times . . . he! . . . he! was a *psych* . . . *PATH!!* He's no longer at that august institution. He claimed that he was an art collector. His name was . . . well, anyhow, I don't want to give him any PR here.

JV: What are you going to show at your upcoming exhibition in Holland?

DA: Hopefully, I'll have a DVD of the sharks in stop-frame motion, the jellyfish and the balletic octopii and some pictures of Alaska that can remind one of abstract cellular micro-assays, which were taken from the airplane en-route to Japan. And also hopefully I'll have some of these new videos of the wrestling and the boxing, in slow motion. I also did a video in slow shutter speed of some silent movie that was on TV in the middle of the night. And then I am supposed to . . . well, hopefully in February I'll go back Antarctica.

JV: Are you going to invite Spooky along?

DA: No. Spooky is an academically-challenged fashion victim and a self-parody.

JV: You received a chapter of a book-in-progress in the mail that was hardly flattering.

DA: Well she (the author) just didn't understand where I was at. She is this very straight person from Colorado who has spent the last 15 years learning German and speaking German and thinking in German. Just doing everything in German, which I guess . . . you just as well . . . She is not a bad person, per se, but she just has a problem with what they call *theory of mind* which means thoughts about other peoples' thoughts or being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. I mean, I have that difficulty too at times with this but I also realize that I have it, and I can understand when I really fuck up and sometimes I'll apologize or I'll figure it out. But sometimes it's also . . . for instance . . . well anyway . . . she started to write a book and she wanted to have

certain chapters about her son's friendships with various other autistic people. She spent a year writing this chapter about me, but she didn't send me any of the preliminary drafts. Then one day she said, "It's finished. I'm sending you a copy. You read it and you tell me what you think." Anyhow, it was completely off the wall. Completely. In just about every respect.

Mainly it said that I have all these books here and she named about five or six books and inferred that I just had the books here and that I didn't read the books. Ya know . . . but when I am depressed I don't do anything. Hardly. This is what she implied. Then she called me a *rolly-poly* something or other . . . I am two hundred and five pounds . . . that is overweight. Yes. Right. But it is not *rolly-poly*. *Rolly-poly* is John Candy, not his skeleton or Dom DeLouise. She looks like Karen Carpenter. Ok, I'm *rolly-poly* compared to Karen Carpenter. But, plus, Karen Carpenter is fucking dead . . . so I guess I am *super-rolly-poly*.

JV: *Antarctica*

DA . . . the thing about it is that you're on this Russian boat that's formerly a research ship. First of all, I really like the rough seas. At first you get a little sea sick and then you get into to it. I like the stormy weather. And it's the most incredibly beautiful place in the world. They say that it is like climbing Everest . . . except you're kind of going horizontally. The weird thing is that the people are really drunk. The people steering the boat and the people running the tour are kind of blotto drunk but somehow they don't do a Titanic *number* and run into any icebergs. I mean if you knew how drunk they were you might not want to pay the ten grand to go on this trip. Anyhow, it was just really great except for what I call the "unnaturalists." These were the people who were counting every little penguin and every bird and everything like that but they didn't want to step in the penguin shit nor smell the penguin shit. But it [Antarctica] was really inspiring . . . even if the show was somewhat boring . . . in a way . . . I mean, the people did get inspired by the photos, which show the grandeur and massiveness and the otherworldliness of as yet unspoiled nature.

JV: *Hollywood*

DA: I would have to say that I'm looking forward to the show in LA because, well . . . it is the other side of the coin (of the realm, so to speak, the realm of the senses or possibly the realm of the senseless). And basically Hollywood really does rule, you see . . . in a real sense. In the terms of the collective unconsciousness or sub-consciousness or whatever the hell you want to call it . . . in Hollywood, . . . those people have far more influence in a "cultural" sense than the 25 year-old internet billionaires bopping along Silicon Alley in Manhattan. Anyway, it is becoming more akin to Manhattan, Kansas here, every single second.

JV: *Autism*

DA: . . . you see, they are either over-enthusiastic or too distant. There is no middle ground. They don't understand physical space, so they would either stay far away from a person or else come and speak right into their face.

JV: *Cyber-progress*

DA: The internet is good because you can get rid of your fantasies. You can actually see that Claudia Schiffer has these slightly oversized breasts and that she is a little bit fat. And then you can go, "why did I ever think that she was not like that?"

Jason Volenec
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