

Consider that disturbance-driven oceanic waves have been inexorably battering coastlines since the formation of the earth. This long before the moment those aquatic, solar and terrestrial forces conspired to form that first single cell. Skip down the eons now to where trillions of fossilized cells have massed to form the platforms of living coral reefs, where rock has been ground and reground into fine migratory sands, where rivers and run-off have groomed coastlines into smooth flowing systems of matched resistance: Now picture the countless unmeasured swells generated by countless primeval storms, marching relentlessly to spend themselves on sand-bars, estuaries, cliffs and barrier reefs, churning up the fodder of life's renewal in their wakes. Wave after wave, shaped into every conceivable molecular permutation by the vagaries of wind and bathymetry and distance, rolling and crashing, on and on to this moment, and on again into the unknowable.

Any number of life forms has adapted to profit from this incessant jarring of atoms, but it is only with the evolution of the vertebrates that we see wave energy being exploited purely for pleasure. As animals climbed up the phylogenetic chain, their adaptations eventually expanded beyond the utile, and indeed, all manner of fishes, marine mammals and sea-birds have been seen harnessing the surge of that shoreward rush with no other function in view. And so it was inevitable that homo-sapiens, the aquatic ape, that devil genius of frolic and adaptability, would take this 'thing' to boggling levels of the absurd and the pious.

And I am a surfer!

There! I finally said it. ...Furthermore, said it out loud in our art world village.

To put this statement in perspective, I have to elaborate. Even as a hell-bent teenage aficionado living on the North Shore of Oahu in the late Seventies, I was very particular to point out to my bleached and burned comrades, "I am not a surfer--I surf!"

Then art school and the years in New York, it seemed better not to mention any of it. When the subject did come up, I remember well the patronizing sideways smiles, the knowing looks of condescending pity from the intelligent eyes of my 'other' tribe.

Then something changed. Was it the handful of Nobel laureates and other such mandarins coming clean as naked surfers? Was it the surfing astronauts, the major media publishers or the indelible images of Richard Feynman banging his bongo drums around the bonfires of San Onofre? More probably it was the second great wave of 'surf culture' crashing into public consciousness, this time empowered by its glamorous X-sport association. This new wave made the first one seem quaint with its unapologetic bohemianism, its rat-bag living under piers, its hula-hoops, Gidgit and "The Endless Summer". This time, surfing arrived in our collective cultural psyche fully matured and now enflamed by the muscle of a multi-billion dollar apparel industry and all that that will buy.

And the demographics have certainly tipped--no longer a bastion of gyrating pimply maleness, now, as they say in Hawaii, "everybody goes, grandma, grandpa, little sis, da boogie-board, da outrigger canoe... even the blow-up doll". Rock stars, A-list actors, drug dealers and flight attendants, no one blinks any longer as this leveled mix is thrown into the briny stew.

Only twenty years back it was an oddball treat to meet an English surfer, now you can meet three on any given night in even as improbable a locale as London's Groucho Club, that dark and sinful redoubt of the haut culturatti. Croatians, Swedes, Pakistanis, Ghanaians and Bridgehamptonites... everybody surfs now and the weight of this glamorous commerce-driven cult is bearing down hard on a very finite naturally occurring niche. Massive overcrowding, tribal territorialism and even surf rage are the dark underbelly of a lifestyle gospel dehydrated and packaged to ensnare even a Singaporean mall rat.

Throughout the 80's in New York, surfing had been my closet, my heroin. But perhaps more importantly, 'surf culture' had been my private laboratory, mine, as Gwombe was to Goodall. Within that hothouse of adolescent post-modernity, I had my own private ringside microcosm, a microcosm that seemed to encapsulate all the meaningful shifts and crystallizations of the larger culture. At a moment when my colleagues and I were attempting to drag the once-idealized art object through the filters of its own process of commodification, the outsider surf culture was itself being radically Balkanized into a series of warring corporate fiefdoms. Gone were the airbrushed rainbows and dolphins, the atavistic Hawaiian floral motifs, the competition stripes and even the extreme reductivist aesthetics of surfing's hard line contrarians. Now came a fungal explosion of sponsorship logos colonizing every high visibility surface the sub-culture had on offer. It was sprouting on surfboards, on apparel, on stickers and in minds. These once rustic and pungent labels were fast becoming the flags of empires, each with its own battle-ready stable of contracted warrior/models. Kids in Chattanooga weren't now wearing t-shirts that held direct faith with a dream of riding a perfect wave, now by draping themselves in emblazoned iconography of Billabong, Quiksilver and Oakley, they had willingly volunteered themselves as mouthpieces for a corporate hawking of that lifestyle, the advertorial embodiment of a dream bouillonized and served up as an easy-swallow, feel-good pill.

This was a goldmine when viewed through the prism of our discourse of the day. These were changes with clear connections throughout every aspect of the larger culture. In art alone the parallels were endless. The early 1950's saw Pollock acting out his existential drama across a new and expanded field at the same moment surfing's big wave pioneers were pushing into the "unridden zone"; tiny human figures set against gigantic fields of blue. In the late 60's and early 70's, surfing again offered a precise echo, this time minimalism. It was the age of 'tube-riding', a dance of absolute economy at the most critical point on a breaking wave. The mute human subject set against the raging liquid object, no frills and honed to an essence. To this day I still cannot think of Gerry Lopez cruising limp through the bowels of a thundering 'Pipeline' cavern without also thinking

of a grey human figure alone in a large white room, immobile before David Smith's '6 by 6 by 6 foot' black steel cube.

During the early 80's, I found it impossible not to entertain the same perverse idea whenever confronted by a gigantic Richard Serra 'wall'. While loving it for the intention with which it was made, I would invariably think, "What better spot for a Marlboro logo than discreetly placed in the bottom right hand corner."

It seems now that any new phenomena that have an exploitable value or cachet are instantly co-opted into this globally expanding surge, a surge that is moving irreversibly toward surface uniformity, while beneath it is exponentially multiplying in speed and complexity.

So let's remove for a second the contracted teenage superstars, the logo strewn boards; let's get rid of the gaudy banners and the Hawaiian shirt wearing hucksters with their Jimmy Buffet mustachios. Forget all the human flapping and just imagine mathematically stacked phalanxes of dancing turquoise cylinders, shimmering and sparkling as they detonate rhythmically down a long curving fringe of coral to end belched and spent in the quiet of a reef pass. This is the so-called "perfect wave". Now let's throw all that human fustigation back into the mix. As it is all drawn into our focus, it becomes isolated, an idealized form of anthropocentric bio-porn and the embodiment of godhead to a multi-million strong force of lusting human souls

The anomaly of the perfect wave is not altogether unlike those rare apexes of artistic lucidity throughout history. Painfully reliant on precise configurations of submarine topography, wind, tide and current, waves that can manage this 'perfect' form will always be a temporally transient phenomenon, appearing only in agonizingly withholding flickers, and until recently, the wave at least, unsullied and inviolable.

But riding a wave is not the same as 'surf culture' just as fulsomely desiring someone's flesh is not buying a pair of jeans.

Ernest Hemingway spent inordinate amounts of time prattling on, both in screeds and on bar stools, about the impossibility of reconciling his physical and mental worlds. Such reconciliation is no mean feat in our world of ever intensifying specialization. For the pre-historic hunter-gatherer of course the two worlds were seamless and inextricable. The long-term trajectory of my own work has always been at the mercy of these contradictory forces. Whereas on the one hand there is a periodic need to throw oneself into the bubbling cacophony that is the scream of our species just needing 'to be', there is also the periodic recoil, a reflexive demand to place oneself in an bereft mental landscape where the audibility of human voices is reduced to its lowest 'credible' level.

I guess there will always be a wave to glide upon unmolested just as there will always be a meaningful mark to be made on a surface where once there was none. Beyond that, well that's were we all are right now, isn't it?

