

The following is a three-person conversation between poet and artist Ralph Angel; artist, educator and personal friend of Ralph, Dustin Leavitt; and artist and publisher Andy Burgess. This discussion took place in Andy's home in Tucson in early 2019 as a way of providing context and insight into Angel's body of work entitled *entropia*.

**Dustin:** To what extent in making these visual objects are you directly involved and to what extent is the medium doing the work? Because it's almost as if... through the manipulations in the dark, without the ability to see, and with no revision at the end... you've summoned some sort of dark magic that exceeds what you intentionally contribute as an artist.

**Ralph:** I think what you're talking about has a whole lot to do with the making of poems, and even for me, the making of a lecture. I'm a lyric poet. I'm not telling a story. I'm not interested in the story of my life. I'm interested in the fact of my reality. For me, the discipline I've learned and that I practice day in and day out, is to be present in the moment.

So I begin somewhere. In the early days it began with an idea, but I gave that up many years ago. Now I just begin. And what unfolds on the page unfolds moment to moment. With these photographs, in a similar way, I begin with my tools. In poetry, I have the language in which I compose, and I have the fact of my reality. And here I have film and the fact of my reality, whether I'm manipulating the film with my fingers, or with a rock, or with a pencil or with some hard object.

And also, then, the question of how do I expose this film? Sometimes it's been instantaneous; sometimes I've left the film facedown overnight; sometimes I turn on bright lights; sometimes not. When I'm making poems, I'm flying by the seat of my pants, and I don't go back and revise. I revise along the way. In other words, I don't go to the next line or the next moment until I'm ready. I never finish something and go back to it later and revise it. If I finish something, I believe in it and can put it into the world. Otherwise, I don't finish it. Something stops me once and for all, jams me up forever, and I just throw it in the wastebasket!

**Dustin:** So, you've got the material: in the case of photographs you have the film and in the case of poetry you have language. That's your material. And then you have your engagement with that material. For you, it's extremely direct, like pow! right there. Whatever comes out, comes out through the process and engagement with the material.

**Ralph:** Yes.

**Dustin:** And it seems that with the photographs this is especially direct because it's manual. And with the film you're in the dark. Literally in the dark. It's all about that extremely direct engagement.

**Ralph:** Yes, and I think the fact that I walk into a darkroom to do this, that I'm in various environments with whatever particulars of darkness or lightness and all that stuff, what you're saying is exactly right. And I have the same response when it's exposed, whether it's ten minutes later, an hour later, or the next day: if I don't like it I throw it away.

**Andy:** I'd like to come at it from a slightly different angle. Almost like a therapist, I'd say to you, "Take us back to the first time you had an impulse to pick up some Polaroid film and mess with it. What happened? What brought about that impulse? Was it a logical extension of artwork that you'd been making? Was it a frustration with words and a desire to do something nonverbal? Can you recall the first time you ever used Polaroid film in this way?"

**Ralph:** Yes, I can. In the early eighties, when I made the first number of these photographs, I was doing lots of stuff. I was painting. I was trying to learn to play the saxophone. I was writing stories—incoherent stories. I was just living the life of a young artist or a young maker of art. So, it was just one more thing. It wasn't any different. I never distinguished... you know, interviewers always ask me, "What were your inspirations?" and I say, "Wow, you want me to list for you my ten thousand gods? You want me to say John Coltrane? You want me to say Mark Rothko? You want me to go through all this?" No, that's just where my life was at that time. I was doing everything! But the interesting thing to me if I look back on it is that I'd already fashioned for myself and committed myself to a life of poetry.

**Andy:** So that's interesting... you describe yourself as living the life of a young artist and at the same time as already having carved out the life of a poet...

**Ralph:** Yes.

**Andy:** To what extent are they the same thing? Like now do you say, "I'm Ralph Angel, I'm an artist" or "I'm Ralph

Angel, I'm a poet" or does it matter?

**Ralph:** If I'm on the golf course, I say I'm a plumber so I don't get beat up! Well, I moved to LA to go to graduate school and to get an MFA in poetry.

**Andy:** When you were doing that, were you making art?

**Ralph:** Yes, I was doing all those things... well, not all those things, but I was really painting a lot.

**Andy:** Was the painting quite traditional?

**Ralph:** No.

**Andy:** Was it abstract?

**Ralph:** It was. I was so influenced by the Abstract Expressionists. I felt such a connection to those painters.

**Andy:** Where you keyed into the fact that Abstract Expressionism absolutely came from the Surrealist tradition? I mean, if you look at Rothko's or Pollock's early work, that work came out of Surrealism. And all the things you talked about in response to Dustin's question were actually, in a sense, a manifesto of Surrealism... the direct nature of making art; the unmediated nature of making art; letting it speak through you almost like an interior journey, an unconscious language that was developing. And that's partly what surrealism was about: an automatism. So, it's a rejection of academia, a rejection of the academic nature of learning how to paint and how to draw and how

to do perspective or whatever, but actually allowing your subconscious to create images.

**Ralph:** I never at that time associated the two together. I didn't say to myself this is coming from Surrealism, which inspired me. I didn't think about it that way.

**Andy:** But what I want to know is, when you first picked up these Polaroids and did what you did, was it an escape; was it therapy; was it painting? What was it?

**Ralph:** It was something like everything else I was doing. It was just something to do.

**Andy:** Another thing to do...

**Dustin:** So, more to the point, though, why did this stick? I don't believe that you paint very much anymore. You listen to jazz, but I don't think you play jazz very much anymore. So, why did this stick? Do you know?

**Ralph:** Well I never did learn to play the saxophone! My paintings meant nothing to me because they weren't any good. I continued to do, though, for many, many years what I call "ink drawings," which are paintings with Japanese brushes. But they're not any good. That part was kind of cathartic. I didn't continue to make stories or write narrative prose. You're right, there were so many things I was doing back then that I abandoned. The poetry continued... I'm blessed to be in touch with my unconscious every day. To me, it's why I was put here. And poetry comes from that, and it continues to surprise me line by line, poem by poem.

And this Polaroid work continues to surprise me image by image.

**Dustin:** For me these visual images that you've been making and the poems... there's a similarity in that they are very intimate, they're very contained. They are like Dr. Who's Tardis in that they're small on the outside and infinitely huge on the inside. It's like once you get into them, there's infinite space. And I think this is perhaps what you're talking about when you talk about your access to the unconscious, which is itself, analogically speaking, a kind of infinite space. So, in a way, these are material manifestations of this mind/emotion space that you're talking about.

**Ralph:** Yes, I think that if you're talking about the fact of your reality, as opposed to the story of your life, you are accessing "interiority", without having to think about it. I don't trust the conscious mind enough. I don't trust rational thought enough. I don't trust linear reality enough. Where's that taken us? Thousands of years of bloodshed and power and prejudice. I don't trust that. I only trust my own intelligence, my own rational reality, if it is somehow balanced by or paired with my interiority, my unconscious, things that are out of my control. Then I feel real and worthy.

**Andy:** I'm curious if making these images, because they're wordless... was that a release for you; was that an escape for you; was that a downtime from words?

**Ralph:** No, it's the same thing. When I go into my studio, I go into my studio. With everything I create or have been asked to create, I go to the same place, the same arena. I

need to draw from the whole of my reality. That's how I think about it.

**Andy:** So, in a way, they're all a form of poetry? Poetry for you is drawing from the well...

**Ralph:** They're all a form of making an art object. So, I think of poems as art objects. I think of these images as art objects. I even think of my lectures as art objects. In Vermont, a graduating class a few years ago called them "po-ectures."

**Andy:** To what extent do your feelings about yourself, about your ego, about your life... to what extent is that wrapped up in your success as a poet?

**Ralph:** I just feel fortunate. I'm able to put my work into the world. People write about it. I just feel fortunate. You can be one of America's greatest poets and when you die, you're on the seventh page of the Times in a little corner at the bottom. I don't think about that. But I'm one of the few people that gets to put my work in the world, and that's all I'm trying to do. I don't make poems for myself. Otherwise, I'd write a diary. I make poems for people. I know that our culture doesn't really embrace the art form, but I'm fortunate.

**Dustin:** How do you feel about reception? Is it important to you that everybody gets your poems?

**Ralph:** That's not even an expectation. But if nobody got them, I guess my life would be different.

**Dustin:** So, basically, when you're making poems, when you're making art, it's for the thing that you're making and not necessarily for the audience that's going to receive it? How do you feel about that?

**Ralph:** Okay, now you're making it a little more complicated. Because yes, it's not purely art for art's sake, but the making of the art is purely for art's sake. But there's an act of faith involved, and the act of faith is that it may speak, and it may be encountered by other people who are alive today or may be alive tomorrow.

**Andy:** Going back to the beginning of the discussion, a lot of the phrases and words that you were using spoke of a practice, an art practice being akin, being analogous, to a spiritual practice. Many of the words and phrases you use, "unfolding" and "moment-to-moment" and "spiritual practice" and "being in the present," they're a kind of, for want of a better phrase, a kind of Buddhist spirituality. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Ralph:** Well, I'm not a Buddhist, but I totally understand the question. I'm a transitory human being. I'm alive on this planet. And if I'm not tapping into my unconscious and my conscious rational self and my spiritual reality, then I'm failing at whatever art object I'm making. That's how I think about it.

**Andy:** I'm going to persist a bit more.

**Ralph:** Go ahead.

**Andy:** Why these things, why this particular material, this Polaroid film? You know you were doing ink drawings; you were doing paintings. I appreciate that they're all of a piece, that you were making art in all these different ways. But as Dustin said, you persisted in this, and one of the interesting things that happens when an artist persists with something over a long period of time... we're talking forty years...

**Ralph:** Almost...

**Andy:** That's not to be dismissed easily. That's pretty significant, to persist in an activity as restrictive as a four-and-a-quarter-inch by four-and-a-quarter-inch Polaroid, why? What does it do for you that you can go back to it again and again and again and always find something new, a different way of doing it, a different way of pushing, manipulating, pinching, squeezing, whatever? What is it about that thing that does it for you?

**Ralph:** Yeah, it's an interesting question. Among all of those other things I was playing with at the time, back in the early '80s, was photography itself. I had a Pentax camera, multiple lenses, and I was traveling a lot, so I was taking traditional black-and-white photographs. And I can look back on them and say, that's cool. But mostly that's cool because it takes me back to that place, that person, that moment in time, that country. But this is different. This is different in the way that poetry is different for me. I didn't train myself to be a professional musician or photographer or painter. Ultimately, it's a discipline, just like it's a discipline to tap your unconscious every day, to meditate for forty years.

**Andy:** Have you meditated?

**Ralph:** Mary, my partner, is the yogi, but I've been sitting for the same amount of time, almost forty years. The discipline involved is very similar to poetry. My poems have evolved because my relationship and orientation to language has evolved. And my life has evolved. And the poems continue to reflect that, for better or for worse. With these Polaroids, it's the same thing. I'm constantly using different film, and there was a whole period after Polaroid no longer made the film when I was acquiring expired film and working with it. In the early days, I would mess with this kind of exposure or that kind of manipulation, and I'm still doing that to this very day. But it's always changing. The stuff I was working on just last month looks completely different.

**Andy:** That's a great answer, but there's one thing that stands out: there's such an interesting dichotomy between these two words that you've used, "discipline" and "play".

**Ralph:** Yes, but think about children. Rilke said work is like children at play. They can play with bottle caps for four hours. That's work. So, it's kind of like being a child at play. I think of discipline that way.

**Dustin:** Well, you know, when you mention children at play, what children playing are doing, it seems to me, is establishing a set of constraints. This is the game. And then within that set of constraints, it's self-exploration. And it seems to me that's something like what you're talking about.

**Ralph:** I think so.

**Dustin:** This idea of play is something like that. It's not like discipline is getting to work at nine and working until five, nose to the grindstone; it's not that. It's poetry; it's a set of constraints that encompasses self-exploration.

**Ralph:** But also discipline in part means going there, being able to go there day in and day out when the whole world is asking you not to go there and expecting you not to go there. We don't have that expectation with children, although more and more we seem to. We allow children to go out and arrange bottle caps for two hours, we allow a young child to go out and run from one end of the yard to the other and touch and yell and go back, for forty-five minutes. We allow children to do that.

**Andy:** If adults did that, they'd be called crazy!

**Ralph:** Exactly! And that's the discipline.

**Andy:** Actually, I want to focus in on this because it's not "poetry" per se, it's a particular type of poetry because Ralph has quite consciously rejected an academic form of poetry that's very much about the rhythm and meter and conventional forms.

**Ralph:** Correct, I suppose, but I've no bone to pick with the past.

**Andy:** And that's exactly what you said about your rejection of traditional photography. It's not that you don't

like it. It has its place. But for you, when you took pictures, they couldn't help but be a form of autobiography and you said earlier "I'm not interested in autobiography, I'm not interested in writing the memoir that will be published." In fact, it's not that you're not interested, you're anti-that; you dislike that.

**Ralph:** I don't trust it.

**Andy:** So, your poetry rejected that, and your artmaking rejected that, both of them in the same way. Your artmaking shows a form of photography in a nontraditional idiom in the same way that you chose poetry in a nontraditional idiom that was a little bit of a "screw you" to the traditional and conventional disciplines...

**Ralph:** It's not only "screw you", because I think the "screw you" part is a very tiny part of it. It's that I don't have any choice. This is who I am. So, it wasn't a "screw you" thing in that regard. It was just that over time I became myself, which is a hard thing to do. I think I just kept working, which I can say about my own poems. I just keep working. That's my mantra: "Keep working, Ralph."

**Andy:** How do they feel to you when you look at them, the Polaroids? The current work? Is it an emotional thing? Does it feel like an expression of you somewhere deep inside, bringing something out that's inside of you?

**Ralph:** They make me happy because I know I couldn't replicate them. And I only kept them in the way I keep poems I don't throw away because they retain some kind of

mystery for me or are surprising.

**Andy:** They push image-making to the limits of this gray area between what's beautiful and what's ugly, what's beautiful and what's repulsive. To me, they speak to a world as tiny as a microcosm, you know, microbiology, and as large as something cosmic and universal. So, when you're looking at them you don't know what you're looking at. You could be looking at a picture of a solar flare or an explosion in the far reaches of the universe, or you could be looking at an internal organ that's putrefying. So, there's everything and nothing. It spans image-making and it confounds expectation. And I think they are infinitely interesting from that point of view. Also, I think it's worth saying that a lot of people have played with Polaroids. It's been quite a popular art form over the last thirty, forty, fifty years. But I don't know anybody who has taken it to the limits that you have. I don't know anybody who's produced the variety of mark-making or the astonishing variety of shapes, forms, spatial feelings that are in those works. I mean, I don't know anybody else that's done that as successfully and as expansively as you, which is why I wanted to publish this book and why I think it needs to be seen.

**Dustin:** For me, I would use the word unsettling. And unsettling is a good thing from my perspective because what is happening is the gold standard for me in a work of art, which is the defamiliarization of what is familiar. I recognize spatial relations. I recognize depth of field in these images. I recognize colors, forms, all of these different things: they're familiar. But I've never seen them like this. And that's unfamiliar. And for me, that opens up the

space for being interested in an indefinite future. I would argue that this is a function of the control you've given back to the medium.

**Ralph:** Well, I see it in the way that language is more powerful than I am. And language will outlive me. And language, if it's in a pissy mood, will mock my grave. It's way more powerful than me. And this medium, too, is more powerful than I am. I'm just entering into it, playing with it, enjoying it.