

March 2, 1971

Dear Sally,

I had thought to call you tonight and let you know that 1800 feet of the film had finally dribbled into Western Cine, 600 feet yesterday, 1200 feet today, some of it 4th class, some 3rd, some Air Mail, but finally all (but 400 feet) safely arrived: I could have kissed even the guy who mailed it (Sen is it?) because I was THAT relieved it had at least arrived (tho' I still worry about the post office putting 4th class ANYwhere, including radiators, in the sun, etc.: but now there's no point calling you with this happy news because Western Cine just phoned me that a ball bearing got stuck THIS particular day's processing and that some (they don't know how much, maybe ALL) this footage was damaged, some completely destroyed. I honestly don't know how I'll survive the night: I write because I am too upset to do ANYthing else but punch these keys in horrible frustration. Jane says: "Let the angels have their way, do their editing." I keep trying to trust that: I had managed to trust that, even say something similar to you when you were crying on the phone last Saturday because of the way the film was mailed: but now, somehow, I've been thrown up and then down too quickly to catch any breath of hope. This whole project has exhausted me more than anything else I've attempted. I'm still having nightmares about the open-heart surgery: last night was the first full night's sleep without such terror. One dream found me in a hill town (a cross between Bisbee Arizona, ~~and~~ of my childhood, and Pittsburgh) among friends desperately attempting something seeming failing: and I, in the dream, was running out of ~~some~~ Skoal Snuff, down to half a box, wondering how I'd manage to continue whatever-it-is-we-were-doing with so little snuff left: I thought then, in the dream, of giving up my chewing habit but decided against it: then, on opening the dream-box of snuff, I discovered that there were tiny white worms spread all thru the tobacco leaves; and I tried to separate them from the tobacco, scraping away at the brown substance, raking worms aside, only to uncover a beating heart in the bottom of the box. In another dream a midget man dressed all in white was ordering me to do something, seemed to have power over me, and finally ordering me to pass thru a network of stainless steel poles: my chest couldn't make it: I was gasping for breath: he was screaming at me. And so the dreams went, torturing even small naps. It began to seem desperately crucial to SEE THAT FILM, something desperate beyond any measure of what I might, further, do to it: something in all this I've got to face, something personal almost beyond belief. Maybe that's the trouble, that my desperation becomes 'beyond belief'. Maybe that's the trouble with my whole spiritually tortured life: you see, I know that angels make no sense whatsoever without demons in contradistinction. I know one cannot lean on faith anymore than one can lean on the U. S. Mail Service. I'm now, tonight, exhausted with the whole process of creation from its very beginning in me, completely exhausted with this particular film, and as tortured as I've ever been inasmuch as I canNOT let ANY of this wide-world GO, and cannot either LIVE except thru the specificity of creation, nor create except thru the ephemerality of film: I am trapped in a mass of confusions and haven't one single Pollyannaism left. This is a spilling-the-guts letter: and I feel free to do thus inasmuch as I WILL phone you and let you know the 'good' or 'bad' news long before you receive this. This is then the track-of-tonight, the lowest moment I can remember. They say that they 'break' prisoners under interrogation by offering them 'relief' from torture and then taking that 'relief' away from them.

I think that these difficulties I'm experiencing are those which are seldom referred-to in writings by or on Artists and their workings: for these conditions are the UNglorious ones we share with all human beings. The specific terror for an artist is that he KNOWS he canNOT succeed without some form of angelic intervention: he KNOWS that creation is completely dependent upon forces beyond his control. He also knows that he is so premised upon the necessity to create that he cannot possibly survive, nor remain half-way sane, unless that process of angels, Muses, Gods, sub-consciousness, what-have-you, manage to pull it/Art off thru him. I actually feel madness scratching at the back of my mind, fingernails of it in the hollow of my skull; and I think this too romantically put (as if I was clutching for company from a host of 19th century Artists) to do justice to the feeling of it. I type frantically here to bury the sound of dust-motes landing on the table bulb beside me.

I have had to believe, all these years, that this gift to be able to create were MORE than a life and death matter with me, that it was some specificity arrived-at by way of myself which concerned all life on earth. I have nurtured it as if it were the substance of life itself given momentarily into my hands. I have struggled to get it out of these hands of mine, once shaped/contained, yet clearly visible, into the surrounding air, the eyes of The World. I have kept it clear to myself that I am no more than a canning factory (in competition with Mr. Heinz~~h~~ himself, if it come to that!), or a farmer, say, as I stumble along thrashing about with my camera. I have taken it, this gift of the ability to create, as a trust. But I am, these days, as all artists in this society, stuck with that same impass which makes The Farmer a businessman rather than One Who Receives The Gifts of The Earth, makes canning factories Poisoners rather than Kings, in the sense of Kingship: He Who Distributes. I fight to maintain the conditions most open to creation, yet my whole life is inevitably ~~suck-up~~ sucked-up into Politics, speech-making, teaching, writing, ALL activities which damage the creative process. "Rather it be damaged", I say, "than destroyed outright", continuing as best I'm able to manage survival and still clear space in Time and in my mind for the auras of utter uselessness where the visions of creative instruction flourish. The voices the poets attend, the visions the painters and film-makers depend upon, these (which can be called cosmic signals) exist in NOtime, nowhere: thus, if one cannot literally clear enough space of Time so that all attention to it can cease, the voices and visions cannot speak! I KNOW I managed it, in that damn hospital, with ALL its specificity of place and timeliness: I managed to lose ALL sense of time and, mostly, sense of place as well. I managed it because the shock of being open to so much wretchedness obliterated all but those sensibilities possible to immortality: either be shocked to death or beyond it to the endless realms of revelation -- THIS the instruction I could trust from my whole life's work in Art. And how wonderful that I can, then as always, trust MOST so mundane a sign of success as a streak of sweat down the cheek, followed by another, and another from under the armpit, the crotch, the BACK of the head, the TOP (most clear sign of all): would it be too effete to speak of a 'quality of sweat'? suffice it to say, I've learned the signs and have come to have good reason to trust them. But then there is a BIG/little and very EXACT/unspecific WORLD out there beyond that difficult state of creation: it marshals almost all its forces against any such cosmic escape -- no, NOT 'escape'. . . cosmic inscape -- any such cosmic inscape as The Artist, for instance, is absolutely dependent upon. Many people have asked me why it is that Artists seem to live most individually in this Time and to have ESCAPED the social machine now chewing up almost everybody else, except perhaps gangsters (of the '30s style) and revolutionaries: it is, I think, simply because The Artist cannot function at all without this cosmic

awareness (for lack of a better term), this very awareness which the whole total Social Machine is set to destroy utterly on earth, its antiseptic needle-point the brunt of Politics itself: The Artist has no choice in the matter: he either evades Time and Place and Type, etc., or else he ceases to make and, most often, then dies. Thus he STANDS for the last outpost of that whole proclivity in being human, that whole proclivity which would merge with all animal, stars, rocks, dust of them, and wave-particles (and all other such nebulosities as cannot even be referred to as having-been and/or always-being and/or even so loosely self-conscious a word as 'being').

But what a sorry mess I am to write of these things in midst of feeling anything but them. It is, then, at best a prayer. If it is your will, destroy this film and/or let it be destroyed by some natural process of demonology. Otherwise, I will trust whatever state it is when it arrives, NOT trust on faith (interesting Freudslip) -- yea, not trust Father NOR Faith . . . but rather, as always, look to SEE what all previous seeing and Post Offices and Processing machines have wrought . . . rather to SEE what it has become until my sweat runs down, as when shooting, and my sense of all before is obliterated in whatever utterly useless track of chemicals on celluloid is left to me.

I resist editing these days, as you know, because -- ah well, I would have the visions fresh off the farm, if possible . . . have come to distrust the impositions of historical aesthetics -- distrust all but the most home-style canning most lovingly prepared: (not that they can't poison you too but that they aren't deceptively poison, and totally thus, as most of the rest: it is not fear of death which makes one opposed to factories but, rather, the blasphemy involved ultimately in ALL commerce as we have created it in our time).

What will I have to look at tomorrow: I shall not sleep tonight: but what is that, finally. Yes, I've talked myself into 'taking it' via writing this letter: but, then, what other choice did I have? I have one hope, like a small but very familiar raft in a stormy sea: faulty processing has OFTEN given me visions beyond anything I had been given while photographing. All of the above process (which I remind myself about in writing it to you), my yeilding to that process (which is, finally, so simple a thing as being true to myself), all my yeild then into the realm of uselessness and timelessness has enabled me to SEE what the lab sent back to me rather than to insist upon what I thought I had when photographing AND to accept getting nothing back at all. But I have HAD so much hope for this film: this final blow (especially that Western Cine called me tonight when, in fact, they won't know specifics of destruction or whatever until tomorrow) was perhaps happily aimed to BREAK me ENTIRELY from the whole process of photographing -- (end my nightmares too, please, if that be so . . .) I cannot help but wish, now, that the faulty processing will grow a vision of its own: I have some good reason to hope for that (a hope that should do no harm to the process because I cannot possibly PREimagine what it would be). I recently shot a roll of Ken Jacobs and Flo and Nisi in which they struggled to extricate the child from a trapping toy dept., one of those ridiculously expensive kinds in an airport: this film was "ruined" in processing because some technician opened the door at the 'wrong' moment: I couldn't bring myself to look at the film for months; and I finally managed to do so the night before I left for Pittsburgh: the rythmic light 'frames' were marvelous and set up all kinds of possibilities in my imagination for further working, thru print and re-printing in the lab.: I 'smell' a great new envisionment of Light itself via this little film, if it be one. As a matter of fact, I'm going to stop typing now and go look at it again -- there were some things in it I remember that possibly . . . I do NOT trust it yet . . . I will not, probably, trust it even to beginning to think of it as a possible film until I seen it a hundred times --- mightas well begin looking now.

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