

"One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious." C.G. Jung

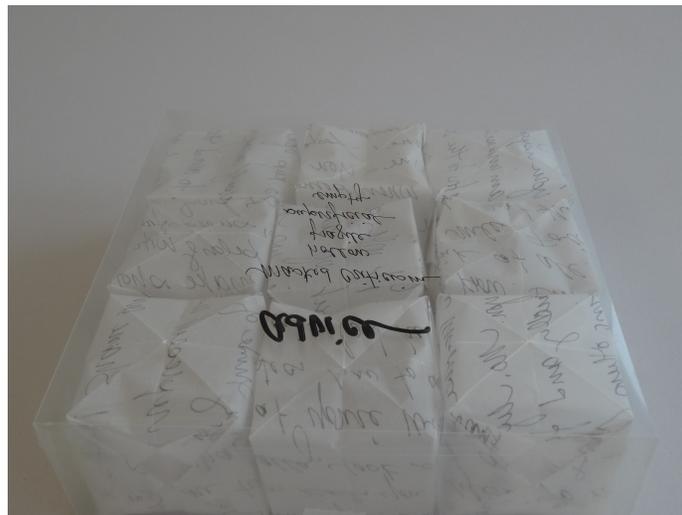
Overflow

Installation by Sylvia Eichmann-Suess, 2012-2015

This project was born in 2012, in Roncovetro (RE) Italy, at Casacorra Bed and Breakfast. It was an Artist book entitled "Masked Criticism", part of the "advice" series started a couple years previously, and created with origami-balloon folded pages of messages from my Inner Critic.

Yet the dictations and folding of the Inner Critic's messages continued long after the book's completion, and as they slowly filled up two large blue Ikea bags on the Atelier's floor, I borrowed a couple moving boxes from my sister so they'd be protected from routine vacuum cleaning. So they finally received a home in two black boxes with the promise that I would stop only after 2'000 pages. Each page was counted with a white ink stroke, 1'000 pages per box.

The intent behind the careful folding of each dictated page was to give each negative criticism loving attention and acceptance, even value. I'd already attempted all kinds of techniques to rid myself of a particularly strong Inner Critic, so why not try just giving her space and acceptance?



Original "Masked Criticism" Artist Book

100 pages.

I find that having a number of written pages stacked but not yet folded, weighs heavily on my heart and mind, so pages are folded within 24 hours. I can keep them folded and un-inflated for several days, that seems fine.

Sometimes, the criticisms come so fast, I can hardly keep up with writing. There's criticism about how I write, how I fold, how I breathe. Some critiques are recognized from childhood. I write and fold as fast as possible, yet the voices keep saying how I'm unproductive. How I will not finish this project.

Sometimes, the inner critic is hiding. Sometimes I sit at my table and no words come. My mind is blank. The negative voices hide under blankets of silence. I feel close to a breakthrough when this happens. The IC is afraid. So am I.

There is a cut-to-size block of draft paper in my purse. It accompanies me everywhere, along with a pigment pen or two. Whenever I find myself waiting, at the dentist, perhaps with a coffee, on a park bench, I am waiting for those ugly words to come pouring out, black on white.

200 pages.

Yesterday, 3-months into this project, and after realizing that I awake each morning already criticizing myself, I put paper and pen next to my bed, intending to write balloons before sleeping and again upon waking. After writing my nighttime pages I lie awake unable to sleep for hours. I awake early, suddenly, in the middle of a dream... a woman lying contorted in bed, possessed by an angry demon. I am afraid. My morning pages read "... you think you can do this alone? ..?.. No one can help you...." This bedtime writing will resume at another time, perhaps.

On my altar a Novena candle has burned half-way down next to my self-destruct SoulCollage® card surrounded by positive loving cards. The flame keeps going out. I've used these blessed Einsiedeln altar candles for many years, and this has never happened before.

about **300** pages now.

I notice being testy on days of writing more than 5-7 pages, and sometimes this leads to arguments, or sadness. When the smoke clears, I have a burning question: Who am I really? Who am I beneath the layers of criticism and past wounds? Beneath patterns of defense, inherited tendencies and habit? Who am I naked, shorn of routine politeness and attempts at conformity?

And, should I manage to shed these stifling layers, could I survive in this world?

I have found an ancient Persian proverb quoted by Lawrence Sterne : "*God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.*"

Boy, I sure hope so.

400 pages

Although the criticisms continue, quite cruelly at times, I notice a slight change in the content. There are actually some good suggestions which I've been able to glean from the pages. For instance, the IC mentioned that "it's no good trying to change yourself, it doesn't work, as you know. If you could just

learn to redirect instead of change that characteristic, maybe.....”.

Also, at this point I ask myself if this is still art? Should I contemplate ever exhibiting this work? It is very personal, intimate. Trying to imagine the final project as an installation, I see people walking through a graveyard of criticisms. Each negative thought has been acknowledged and cared for, and then, in the loving of it, in the giving of light, it died, two thousand little dead bodies. I would like others be witness, to attend this funeral, this wake, and herein would lie the intent of an exhibition, which fills me with real joy and excitement, and a bit of anxiety ... food for more Inner Critic work!

My artist felt pens clog up really fast, I've changed brands and the new ones, although somewhat thicker, are lasting longer.

500 pages

I notice that, already, I am less tortured by the IC during my usual day. These last 100 pages have come fast and furious as I pull them out. This is new, this feeling of pulling out negativity, the way one would suck out the venom from a snake bite. Today, as I finish the 500 mark, the IC is hiding again, but as I insistently pull, the IC finally dictates this to me: “You want me to come out and give you my complaints... why? So you can write them down here and love them to death? You think I'm stupid? Why don't you take a break and be more positive and optimistic.”

600 pages

As I contemplate a form for this finished piece (balloons overflowing from a coffin?), I realize how absolutely scary it might be to walk through a room filled with negative criticisms. How much courage does it take to face, and face lovingly and without fear, the emotional malignancy that is our hurt-formed inner critic?

700 pages

I have just discovered something about my goal of healing. Being healed or, for that matter, achieving “Enlightenment” or “Christ consciousness” or whatever one might call it, is not light, ecstasy, joy, and all those wonderful states, but it is the ability to hold, to embrace, both darkness and light with love and understanding.

I've been exceeding the seven-a-day quantity of balloons, and the first black box is almost full. Hopefully, the minimum goal of 2000 balloons will be reached before spring/summer vacations begin.

800 pages

The IC and I are starting to feel something akin to friendship. a few jokes, sarcastic but funny, and a lighter, less cruel tone than 600 pages ago.

Nowadays as I sit down to write, the sentences start ever so slowly and speed up as I continue. I look forward to these moments, and wish I could be more assertive person like my IC.

900 pages

Today, as I begin placing the last 100 balloons into the first box, the pages just pour out, I write down the IC's dictation as fast as the words enter my mind, uncensored. As I look around the apartment at my pile of ironing, at my overflowing drawers, the IC has a party. I allow and make room for all that comes, feeling curiously relieved to write down all the worries, the criticism. I will be folding these pages all afternoon!

1,000!!!!

The half-way to minimum mark, which made me jump up and down and clap my hands after marking the last scratch on the boxes side.

I have given importance and meaning to this project myself, yet, although self-determined, it is developing a life of its own. The last few days I did not find time to do more than a few balloons, and felt the resulting stress tighten my neck and shoulders. How will I ever end this after a thousand more pages? Well, there's plenty of time to decide that, isn't there? Or has this project become a living entity in its own right? Will it fight for its life when the time comes?

1,100

An interesting twist ... up to now the ICs dictation went something like "... no matter what you do, it will not be enough ... you will not do it correctly ...". Suddenly, today's dictation reads "... when will you ever be good enough for yourself ... ?".

1,200

The IC continues on this new way, explaining that a good critic knows her subjects and tells it like it is, not just complaining or giving negative feedback.

"What makes a good critic?" I googled today.

One of the top results is an article in *TheAwl.com* by Maria Bustillos

Quote

It has ever fallen to critics and journalists to create new ways of looking at new things, to relate the message of art to audience. The artist (or the scientist, or the politician) is necessarily absorbed in his own craft. The critic's concern by contrast is the audience, which includes himself. He's the citizen, the moviegoer, the diner, the art lover. He fashions his own experiences into a kind of bridge to new places we might not otherwise have cared (or maybe even dared) to visit. He creates or extends the shared experience that is the real purpose of culture....

... we don't want to trade away what some might consider the deeper satisfactions of formal, painstaking analytical criticism for the casual, quick-and-dirty recap

What we really need is a critic who has *got something interesting to say*. Who is *writing something that*

we would like to read. Whose aliveness just comes out and grabs you by the throat and makes you think, or go pop-eyed with amazement, or throw your monitor across the room in a fit of rage. As a lover of good criticism, I am asking, or demanding (more like begging, really), that this passion and immediacy be the first quality that should recommend a critic to public notice

Unquote

1,300

Today the IC feels like a friend, she reminds me of a decision, saying “ ... and I will keep reminding you of it until it has become a fast and secure habit. You can thank me later.”

The negative internal dialogue that accompanied me throughout each day until several hundred pages ago, is now silent. Often, however, there is a vague uneasiness present, and I wonder if this last 200-page friendliness is genuine or just blanketing something more sinister.

1,400

These last hundred pages before hitting the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark are slow in coming... I am very busy and finding it impossible to put the usual one or two hours aside per day ... or am I avoiding ...?

I've tried purposely starting pages with negative criticisms, yet as soon as the words flow as dictation, they become this new wiser critic.

1,500

I've been particularly moody lately. Instead of the old negative criticisms talking in my head, I have this feeling of unease that preoccupies me, as though I had a bad conscience. Just sitting there, not saying a word.

Hal Stone's book “Embracing your Inner Critic” has found it's way into my Kindle library.

1,502

Immediately after writing the above comment, the IC started boasting about being able to go underground and pretend to be this intellectual ethical critic, the whole time, working deep behind the scenes with the usual negativity.

Fifteen pages later I received this dictation:

“again and again I will come out of the darkness, from the very darkest and deepest depths of your psyche. I am immortal. You can neither ignore, kill or love me to death. Nor do I transform.”

I am hoping the “.... nor do I transform..” bit was just wishful thinking.

1,600

Between the last above journal entry until this 1,600 mark, at least eight weeks has passed. The longest period of inactivity since the project's start. This back and forth of the IC, the games, subterfuge and uncertainty about where the dictation was coming from, discouraged me so much that a break was called for. Now, starting up again and entering the last stretch before reaching the goal of 2,000, dictation is, albeit not as cruel, once again negatively critical, which is strangely comforting.

Despite this lack of clarity, there is a new factor: Me. I seem different. I am not as hurt by the criticisms that previously demotivated and sucked me dry of energy. There is a stronger, more relaxed and self-trusting part of me showing up at our writing sessions.

1,650

There is still a feeling of unease, of doubt about who my Inner Critic is. I am resisting, avoiding my daily dictations, and these last 50 pages were pulled from me with much effort.

It was a dear friend whom I confided in that has given me a key that might help. She said that when we accept responsibility for another person's shadow (a dark side of them, a destructive pattern) and carry it around with us, it will not respond to any work we do to transform it. It cannot respond, because it is not ours to change. We all need challenges, we need shadows, they give us our life tasks. Mastering them is the greatest of achievements! In effect, I have stolen someone else's (and I know whose) life challenges. My friend calls this foreign shadow "The Assassin", and it hides behind and pretends to be the Inner Critic, which, of course, leads to confusion and worse. The first step to ridding myself of the Assassin, is to recognize it.

1,660

I am afraid to write, avoiding the dictations I've learned to love along the way. Perhaps it is not only fear, but embarrassment. Embarrassment that I have been doing this project full of the foolhardy, innocent enthusiasm of the ignorant. Perhaps this is too dangerous. The deep dark endless hole of hopelessness and depression is familiar, and I have learned to navigate these depths, yet something about this project calls (or called) from darkneses that are foreign and unknown to me. I know my strength, but right now, this challenge tests me.

Still, I push myself to write, and several pages of dictations are piled up beside me. They came so fast and furious that their contents are a mystery, and now here they lie, unfolded, wanting to be read, needing to be lovingly folded. So, I state my intention here, formally, that as I turn back to my daily practice, my attention goes to the Inner Critic, MY Master of Quality Control, and not one molecule of energy goes to the confusing and foreign parasite, who shall starve to death if it stays with me and hasn't gone home yet.

1,700

What a relief! I am braving the phase of reorientation and not giving up. The IC and I are once again getting to know each other, and without the interruptions and without the spooky presence of issues that

are not my own. Now, of course, the IC still gets on my case and points out faulty thinking, yet based in at least some truth, as opposed to the dishonest cruelty that left me reeling 200 pages ago.

1,800

After submitting this project for an exhibition at the local museum, and subsequently being rejected, it took a few weeks to recover.

Then, after a month-long retreat in a small hillside Italian Hamlet, a relationship that I valued highly ended. A couple years ago, before this project started, the IC would have had a field day with this situation! Through deep pain, anger and grief at the loss and depression calling my name, I still managed to pull myself up and start writing again. Victory! I am proud of myself, and even the IC had to exclaim "Welcome Back!".

1870

These last pages have taken a few months to write, witness to how slowly I'm mending from the double rejection. Now, at 1871 pages, desire to complete this project and start new ones sprouts. It is springtime 2015, six months later than the original planned completion date.

1900

I am back in the game, writing regularly. Many criticisms are similar to those at the very beginning of this project (the eating too much and exercising too little, the doubts and taunts about whether this project will actually ever get finished, etc), yet with the difference of being less severe, less aggressive. I can listen to them with some detachment, without drowning, without being pulled down into negativity. There are boundaries developing which were not here before; for instance, certain subjects, sprouts of dreams, of hopes, that seem off limits. Amazing. I've even tried priming the pump by starting on such sensitivities, but no dictation comes to destroy these baby hopes.

2,000

The completion of these pages finds me packing, moving back to my land of birth, and is almost an anticlimax. It feels as though they were finished a hundred pages ago, that writing and folding these last hundred pages was the Ego just wanting to finish a project completely.

In the Ancient African tradition of the Orixa, Elegbara is the quality of the fiery core of the earth, who absorbs our shadows and transforms them into light. A garbage collector of sorts, and it is to her that the two filled boxes were given, after a good-bye and thank-you ritual with several dear woman friends, where we danced upon the origami balloons, flattening them with our bare feet, laughing and singing.

Post-note, beginning 2016

Much has changed. Not just my Country of residence, but the Inner Critic has become softer, less cruel, quieter. Life seems less dramatic, and even though still a indecisive Libra, choices seems less grave and errors reflex less negatively upon the image I have of myself.

Yes, life has become brighter. Love really does heal.

