

Inside the Moon Hotel:
The Art of David Dunlap

By Melissa Tuckman

David Dunlap does not compartmentalize. Everything he feels, sees and experiences, every newspaper story he reads and every person he meets, alters him, and makes its way into his art. He does not strategize, and seems to be incapable of deceit. In everything he does, he integrates joy and labor, instinct and consciousness, art and life.

Since the seventies, Dunlap has kept a series of lined notebooks in which he works on drawings and writes down memorable words. He also keeps other kinds of logs and journals: scrapbooks full of articles, lists of project ideas, and monthly calendars adorned with colorful illustrations. It is not such an unusual habit; plenty of people keep diaries, or regularly jot down phrases. It's a way of curating experience, selecting what one would like to commit to memory. This urge to document can sometimes be counterproductive; a professor once insisted to me that notetaking, far from helping us remember, gives us permission to forget. But Dunlap does not record things only to set them aside. What he puts into his notebooks flows through his psyche, leaking into his conversations and his artworks, which range from architectural constructions to paintings, painted objects and large-scale drawings that often depict his family or his surroundings.

In fact, Dunlap draws no distinctions among his notebooks, his calendars and his formal art. For "SUDDENLY a Walnut Farmer," at CUE Art Foundation, he has built a makeshift cabin out of bookcases, which hold every book he has ever made. The books are arranged chronologically, and interspersed with his calendars, a continuous series begun in 1985. Dunlap doesn't think in terms of discrete works; when a gallery asks him to plan a show, he improvises. With casual ingenuity, he finds a way to bring together his recent work and the evidence of a lifetime of thought and activity in a unified installation.

The structure of the cabin at CUE Art Foundation is derived from a shape Dunlap has been drawing since 1966: the "Moon Hotel," which he associates with masculinity, power and rationality. In 2001, Dunlap tried to construct a much larger version of the hotel, behind his home on the outskirts of Iowa City. When it reached five stories, the

city government forced him to tear it down. But Dunlap can't simply abandon an image, and the Moon Hotel is continually resurrected, in notebooks, in paintings, and now at CUE.

Dunlap works with many such forms, which fade and resurface in his various projects. These shapes tend to morph and converge in his drawings and paintings. A stack of bombs becomes a tar baby, which develops into a Buddha. Dunlap senses that forms are never fixed or finished; when we look at an object, it is never just itself. Every image evokes all the forms that it resembles, and stirs up private associations. One of Dunlap's talents is his ability to make this process conscious and concrete. In his mind and in his art, oars and shovels have the same essential structure; so do shields and wheelbarrows. His objects are never just one thing, but mutable, and nested in a broad web of idiosyncratic symbols.

Because Dunlap's mythology is so personal, it helps to know a little about his life. He was born in 1940, in Kansas City, Missouri. The city's downtown area, which is filled with depression-era architecture, deeply impressed him; though it seems to have had a dreamlike origin, he believes that the Moon Hotel is based in part on the landmark Kansas City Power and Light Building. As a teenager, Dunlap read extensively, learning most of what he knew about the wider world through fiction. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* convinced him that authentic experience, for a young man, meant fighting in a revolution. So in 1959, he took the extraordinary step of leaving his hometown for Cuba, where rebels had just overthrown Batista. Dunlap will not share many details about his experience in Cuba, but he likes to hint that it involved debauchery, psychedelic drugs, and imprisonment. The Moon Hotel, with its implications of confinement, may also be, in part, a representation of his coming-of-age on foreign soil.

In 1963, back in his mother's house in Missouri, Dunlap watched Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech, and instantly knew he was witnessing something important. He spent much of the next several years marching for civil rights, and against the Vietnam War. In the seventies, he moved to New York City, where he shared a seedy living space with the artist Jonathan Borofsky, a friend from graduate school. Dunlap was productive in New York, working on several large-scale drawings, and beginning his notebook series. But the city exhausted him. He likes to make eye

contact with everyone he encounters, including strangers on the street, and the dense population of Manhattan kept him constantly overwhelmed.

After teaching at several colleges in the Midwest, Dunlap settled at the University of Iowa in the eighties. Iowa City proved to be an animated cultural center. The university was particularly invigorated by the Cuban-born feminist Ana Mendieta, who had taken her BA and MFA there and returned from time to time. Mendieta's confrontational performances helped to shape Dunlap's stance towards the university that employs him. Although he enjoys teaching, Dunlap will not abide what he sees as bureaucratic injustice. Two years ago, he began dressing as a former student—a Chinese woman—when the Department of Art and Art History denied her an MFA. He quickly found himself banned from campus and forced to submit to two psychological screenings. He was only allowed to return after he proved that he was sane. Other acts of protest have been more lighthearted: when the art building's cafeteria closed, he began serving BLTs out of his office. Such institutional mischief is just another facet of Dunlap's art. When something afflicts him, he feels compelled to express his discontent, physically as well as symbolically.

Dunlap doesn't mind making people uncomfortable. He wants us to disburden ourselves of cynicism and preconceptions, to see how readymade meaning gets in the way of real thought. Some of his tactics can be troubling; for instance, Dunlap considers himself courageous for using swastikas in his art. On a trip to Nepal, Dunlap encountered the swastika in an unfamiliar setting, stripped of its 20th-century European context. The ancient spiraling form soon began to show up in his notebooks and painted objects. It was also the focal point of a 2007 project he undertook with several collaborators, The Men's Swastika Drawing and Sewing Club, which they dedicated to Mendieta. The Sewing Club's use of the swastika was meant to be controversial, a way of honoring Mendieta's provocative legacy on the Iowa campus. But Dunlap wanted spectators to balance their shock and revulsion—understandable given the swastika's overwhelmingly sinister significance in recent history—with an awareness of the symbol itself, its complex cultural history, and its aesthetic immediacy. When people objected, he asked them to think about their reaction: mechanical distrust, he implied, is itself a dangerous thing.

Dunlap expects a lot from his audiences. He's confident that we can puzzle out

the meaning of something that may seem strange or silly. His new work, which centers on his home in Iowa, is particularly whimsical. Dunlap took to calling his property Walnut Farms when, a few years ago, he built an outdoor swimming pool for his daughters. Before long, the chlorinated water was stained brown by dropping walnuts, and Dunlap was pleased when he abruptly realized he could use the trees to make paint. It is a simple process: Dunlap piles walnuts into buckets which fill with rainwater and attract insects. He then dips his brush directly into the decomposing mixture. The paint is a complicated medium, which can, in a single brushstroke, fade from a deep, dark tone to a watery trail.

Now, when people ask Dunlap what he does, he tells them he's a walnut farmer. Though not strictly a lie, this response seems to misrepresent what he does for a living; his occupation, in a more conventional sense, is "artist" or "teacher." On the other hand, it is an answer that's literally true: Dunlap does harvest walnuts. And it is, of course, a metaphor, a way of getting at what he does as an artist. Dunlap makes paint out of walnuts. What others might dismiss as misfortunes, he counts as blessings. In art and in life, he leaves himself open to the unexpected, with rich and beautiful results.

The writer, Melissa Tuckman, has been published in *ARTnews*, *Bookforum*, and *Our Town East Side*. She has interned at *Artforum* and *The Paris Review*, and plans to attend graduate school in the humanities. She is currently based in the Midwest.