

## Q-A: AN AUTO-INTERVIEW

James Hugunin  
 JEF Books  
 www.experimentalfiction.com  
 138 Pages; Cloth, \$45.00

As a young, unsuccessful artist unable — and quite honestly, too afraid — to get my foot in the door, I once picked up a book co-authored by David Bayles and Ted Orland entitled *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (2001). Desperate for the counsel of someone I wouldn't have to show an ounce of vulnerability to, it was convenient, to say the least, that I could get what I needed from a cheap little paperback whose title alone seemed to have a finger on my pulse.

The following is one of the first sentences I underlined: “To all viewers but yourself, what matters is the product: the finished artwork. To you, and you alone, what matters is the process: the experience of shaping that artwork.” This wasn't

exactly the information I had hitherto not been privy to, but what made it powerful was that it repackaged something I already knew in a way that made it suddenly more relevant. Moreover, this is at the heart of what James Hugunin's latest book, *Q-A: An Auto-Interview*, addresses: how making an effort to recall the processes in the past that have rendered successful results can be instrumental in enabling the artist to regain momentum moving forward.

### Q-A: An Auto-Interview justifies one-hundred times over the auto-interview approach.

However, to guys like Hugunin, a step or two ahead, the process is rarely just the means and the end, but a fundamental part of the product that holds considerable aesthetic value. Watching Hugunin play both roles, interviewee and interviewer, as he discusses the subjects of both his literary works and the large body of experimental, conceptual pieces he has accumulated throughout the last four decades is a testament to how putting the spotlight on various methodologies employed over time can potentially

result in more than just insights into the mechanics of artmaking.

Wasting no time, Hugunin responds to his first question — “Can you provide a ‘backstory’ for this 2013 critical monograph, *Wreck and Ruin: Photography, Temporality, and World (Dis)order?*”— with a heavy response, relating that his parents' back-to-back deaths along with the trauma of his cancer diagnosis, surgeries, and experimental treatments (one which involved his being “trapped in a horribly confining plastic mask”) all contributed to the creation of both *Wreck and Ruin* (2013) as well as *Case-X* (2015), a “docu-fiction experimental novel ... divided into thirty radiation treatment sessions (in place of traditional chapters).” As both of these books make use of images to not only illustrate text but to serve as active speakers that “‘dialogue’ amongst each other,” it is interesting to note that, conversely, many of the “scripto-visual” conceptual pieces Hugunin created in the seventies also employed text as the focus of his photography. Among these, perhaps the most amusing inclination of his at the time was the inclusion of a notary public stamp and signature on many of his pieces to

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verify the work had been made official through the proper bureaucratic channels, addressing the absurd notion of documentation as an infallible means of certifying “truth” and adding something of the Kafkaesque into the mix.

As an educator himself, and one with a genuine interest in pedagogy coupled with a witty sense of humor, Hugunin goes on to playfully rib himself for incorporating into his pieces what has perhaps become the universal symbol for all the repressed pain and dread associated with the academic institution: the blackboard, where the “professor puts ‘knowledge’ up for young eyes to scan and jot down notes from.”

One piece entitled *Immediate---Intuition* shows the following printed toward the top:

This is to certify that James Richard Hugunin has on 24 February 1974 received the following immediate intuition: “*There is no surer way of killing a joke than explaining it.*”

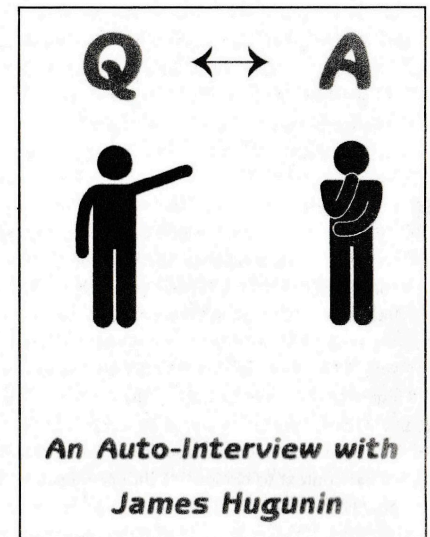
Underneath this is a photograph of the sentence I italicized above, which is written on a blackboard as if it had been the focus of a lesson taught in a traditional classroom setting. Below the photograph is the notary stamp, signature of the artist and the signature of a notary public acting under the approval of the state of California.

Other pieces in this series insist on more active participation on the part of the viewer. *Multiple Choice Question*, for example, displays a series of photos taken of Hugunin — “mock gestures imitating grief” — and asks the viewer to determine the cause of his apparent dismay:

- I found out that my best friend had committed suicide after he was given orders to Viet Nam. He gassed himself.
- I was trying to work out the artwork you are now reading. The implication being that art is hard work.
- none of the above.
- all of the above.

While the inspiration for this particular piece was derived primarily from the desire to demonstrate “a more Structuralist embodiment (of) Phenomenological-Existential (principles),” as evidenced by mocking the notion that one can somehow arrive at truth when presented with limitations in the form of “choices” and intimating that one consequence of conceptualizing direct experience through language is that life becomes “one large set of multiple choice questions,” the work also implies something of the incongruous in the relationship between the supposed aims of a traditional classroom and the means by which opportunities for critical thinking are most often facilitated.

While certainly not intended to serve as some kind of *Ecce Homo* for Hugunin, *Q-A* does justify one-hundred times over the auto-interview approach to uncovering past inspirations, fixations, et cetera for those of us wishing to revisit the headspaces we were in when motivation was abundant and momentum alone seemed to handle the heavy lifting. I would even go as far as to say this book has answers for those who may currently find themselves at that awkward intersection of inspiration, constipation, and fear of putting their



noses back to the grindstone. With layer upon layer, Hugunin, like a good teacher does, instructs through example, showing us that the right questions all but sharpen the tools and put them in our hands.

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