

The following is a transcription of a 10-minute audio recording taken on November 24, 2019 on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, New York.

Dear Keith,

Dear Keith,

12:45 pm

Tomorrow is my twenty-first birthday and I'm home in Brooklyn, now. It's raining and that makes me happy since I like how the streets reflect light when they're wet. I've spent the past month or so replicating a painting of yours and I feel close to you, now. I guess I'll start this the way I started the first draft since I like to think that the first time around is more honest, which I suppose is counter-intuitive to the idea of emulating a painting, given that—in that case—how could mine ever be considered honest? Honesty is something I've been thinking about a lot since it became apparent that your paintings are gestural and therefore immediate in a way that I don't think could be replicated. Your kind of immediacy is very of the eighties, and it's something I see my friends struggling to find these days, and so I'm not surprised that we look to a generation like yours and we think that in some ways you had a greater sense of purpose—you had it more honest and more immediate. But I think that leads us to be really stupid and irresponsible. Some of my friends just don't use condoms because they've just . . . made that concession to themselves, that that's something they're willing to do. And in a way, I don't think it's fair for us to honor your legacy, or anyone else's, with that kind of gesture.

When we talk about immediacy, it's about agency, really: the ability to give yourself the agency to be immediate and to be honest, present, in the moment. That's how I've felt while emulating your painting and that's why I say that I feel close to you now, despite the fact that we're so different. I think I'm coming to terms with what it means to try to live in an immediate way, and to enjoy the things I have that you didn't, and that you couldn't have. I hope you wouldn't be jealous of those things, that you'd be happy for us, for me and for us and for your brothers. The kind of safety I have now, the kind of security, I try not to be jealous of you and the immediacy that you had, just like I hope you aren't jealous of (*exhale*) the way that I'm able to relax and to be myself. I think . . . I'd like to think that none of us wants to feel powerless, but at the same time, I think that's kind of hot (*laugh*) and I think we're all into that a little more than we want to admit, not necessarily in the context of submission per se, but in . . . the weight of everything.

You know it's easy to just . . . to live on the edge when the platform is so large. You can dance around the edge and still feel comfortable and I wonder, I would imagine you just didn't have that, that space. But then, in a way, you were carving out that space, the products of which I see now when I look through all of these library books I checked out. Keith, they've got your journals in here! You physically—no, metaphorically—built a platform! Not in the way that people speak about fame, but in taking public space and making it your own, and in building community while doing so. One of the books mentioned how it was important for you to talk to passersby as you created and I think that action creates immediacy for everyone else, not just for yourself but for others to see it and to engage with it and that's so special. So to paint in my bedroom and to have friends over while I do it—to watch them watch me watch you, is how I feel close to you.

I wonder if this was something you were initially uncomfortable with, or if it's something you've always enjoyed. I don't know how any of us develops this feeling that we want to be watched in what we do. You can say that that's a kind of powerlessness . . . or you can say that's power: that all powerlessness is some greater sense of oneself and one's position. That's exactly what I said when I started doing street art, that I wanted to let the street have authority over what I could do. Let the rain come down on me, let the people say what they will, let the surfaces be sticky and dirty, let my markers die! But, even now as I think this, I'm not sure. I, um, I suppose that's why I'm sitting here in the rain on the longest avenue in Brooklyn, one which extends beyond Brooklyn. I wonder if you came around here, I imagine you did one time or another—that you danced down these streets. I like to think this avenue never ends, that my walk down it could go on forever (*pause*). Today is my last day of being twenty years old, Keith. Oh, I found a penny. But it does end, it does. And maybe that makes it all the more special. I'm just as excited to stand back and to look at your finished painting as much as I've been excited to see it in its incompleteness.

It's . . . hard to imagine an unfinished image feeling finished no matter what. I think that's the kind of authenticity we're all looking for, that even if we don't finish an image, the essence that it brought forth could be honest, can be enough. So what is it then about finishing the image that you created that I started again, but about feeling honest in doing it and knowing that there was intention and integrity, that I could rip it off its frame, rip it and shred it and step on it and put a foot through it, but that feeling I hope, that feeling will still be there in some way (*pause*). And maybe I should shred it, but part of me wants to put it up on the wall and to look at it. I think a good deal of my intention in creating it was to hang it on a big white wall one day and to have a spot of color and a sense of connection. So, that's something too, and I'm not gonna deny that—as much as you may have hated that, or maybe you'd be excited by it, excited that I get to sentimentalize your image, understand it, and grow with it, alongside it. Hopefully, that is. Or maybe you're jealous that one day I'll get to live with and to enjoy this otherwise temporary image that maybe you forgot about. I couldn't find it in any book, I wonder if even (*laugh*) I wonder if it's even one you liked all that much, or if it just happened! By my standards, the fact that you made a sixty by sixty inch painting means you must've liked it a whole damn lot, but who knows. But I still wonder if you're jealous that I'll grow old with it—assuming I don't grow sick of it. I'd like to think that you'd be happy about that, too. I think even in a bit, that image will still matter to me, one way or the other. It's hard to say, like getting a tattoo, only a little bit less personal, of course (*pause*). No, I think it'll still matter to me in a bit, I hope. I think it'll matter to me . . . in a bit. It will, I know it will . . . well, it's really cold out here and I um . . . I need to get on . . . with it all. Signing off, Third Avenue . . .

Love always,  
Jack Adam

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12:54 pm

In reflecting on what I wrote moments ago, I feel like I'm beating around the bush. But at the same time, I wonder if that's the power I'm looking for, if that's the point of it all: that I don't even want to say the three letters because I just don't want the story to be about that. But then what do I do with this history I've inherited, with the story of my people? What do I do with this privilege I've been given, that I don't have to talk about HIV, but of course we have to talk about it. And I don't know if you'd hate that or not, that we still have to talk about it, but we do! Because to not talk about it . . . is to deny that it still matters, of course, it still matters to a lot of people, it matters to me! But I want the story to be about the hope and love behind . . . beyond it all. Not just the reason that we need to be hopeful—but the hope itself, and not the thing we hate and how we can overcome that, but about the love and hate and it all (*pause*). The love and the hate of it all.