

Artistic Intrusions (essay for How Magazine, June 2000)

When I moved into my newly converted workspace recently, I faced what everyone who has ever had any construction done for them faces: it wasn't finished. On top of that my builder, still banging away while I was trying to work, expressed his dismay that I didn't have any music on. I always give the same reason: there's no music, because I might actually listen to it.

This is odd, because while I'm unable to listen to music and write or draw at the same time, I do believe that having two (or more) jobs going at once is a benefit—the jobs feed off one another in sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious ways. Right now I'm working on a manual for a sailboat company (how to set up the rigging, and so on), a logo for a new dot com start-up, a short animated film explaining the relative size of the national debt compared to this year's federal surplus, an explanation of how to find and set up the perfect campsite, and two self-help books on diagnostic tests for men and women, as well as this short article.

My mind wanders (and wonders) about all these projects while I'm working in detail on any one of them. And unexpected links show up. What made me think of putting mountains in the background of the camping diagram? It seems fairly obvious now that there should be mountains in the picture, but they weren't in the first sketch I did. Perhaps an answer is that I'm using mountains as a size comparison in the film about the U.S. budget. This kind of thing has happened too often for it to be a coincidence.

But the brain will do more than make connections among current jobs. Rather than looking at the latest annual of design for inspiration, I am continually collecting all sorts of "reference" that's interesting, but doesn't appear to have any connection to anything I'm doing: paintings, photographs, sculpture, sports stories, poetry, graphic history. (History shows me what's been done before. A quick summary: everything's been done before). All this stuff goes haphazardly into scrapbooks. Then when I half remember something I've kept, I have to look through almost everything to find it, and in so doing glimpse other things that I'd forgotten about.

Sometimes we turn our imaginations off and restrict ourselves to the given parameters of a project. Let's not turn into job robots that can't make room for all manner of lovely connections that are out there waiting to help.

I'd add music to that list of connections, too. I'm not talking about background mush; our brains can filter out Musak and tell us not to bother with it. But what if it's jazz pianist Thelonius Monk playing? Now there's a real conflict for the brain: shouldn't it pay attention? Listen, didn't that sound like a "quote" from a Miles Davis track? Monk had listened. And added to his work.

But what connection is there between music and graphics? Between a Bach fugue and a Quark page? More than you might imagine. But you'd have to listen to find out, not just have it playing in the background.