he Gateless Gate: an interview with Joel Weishaus

by Edward Picot

Born in Brooklyn, Joel Weishaus was a Junior Executive on Madison Avenue while still a teenager. He resigned soon after his 21st birthday and flew to California, where he began the peripatetic lifestyle of a writer. In 1971, Weishaus edited the Bolinas anthology, *On the Mesa*, for City Lights Books. The same year, Cranium Press published his book *Oxherding: Reworking of the Zen Text*. In the early 1980s, he moved to Albuquerque, becoming an adjunct curator at the University of New Mexico's Art Museum and a photography critic for *Artspace Magazine*. In 2004, his book *The Healing Spirit of Haiku*, co-authored with David Rosen, was published by North Atlantic Books.

Weishaus now lives in Portland, Oregon, where he practices Digital Literary Art, a strong interest since the 1990s. In 1990-91 he produced *The Deeds and Sufferings of Light*, "begun on a typewriter, and concluded on my first computer," and since then his creative work has often been designed for display on the Web rather than the printed page, incorporating sound effects, pop-ups, animated text, and animated graphics. Despite his experiments with HTML, however, his writing has always retained a strong connection with traditional literature. His latest work, "The Gateless Gate" (2009-2010), is deliberately simple and book-like in its construction; it takes the form of a series of "double-page spreads," with text on the left and a processed photographic image on the right. The texts do not describe the images and the images do not illustrate the texts, but they do share the same thematic preoccupations—notably dream-imagery, the natural world, prehistory, and prehistoric psychology.

Edward Picot: I'd like to start by asking you what gave you the idea for The Gateless Gate, and why you decided to write it in the way that you did—in more of a "book" format, and with fewer new media effects than some of your previous projects?

Joel Weishaus: The title of this project refers to the *Mumonkan* [No-Gate-Barrier], an ancient collection of Zen koans—questions that can only be answered by expressing one's self directly, without the barrier of the ego's orientation. I've been studying various translations of this text for more than half my life, and decided to use it now, at least thematically, because, in view of the hypocrisy and superficiality many political, religious, and business leaders exhibit in their neurotic quest for power, it may be that the "crazy wisdom" the *Mumonkan* teaches is about as revolutionary a path that a contemporary artist can explore.

I chose a constrained format for the pleasure of fitting texts, which are in a sense prose poems, into a restrictive space; thus, considering every word and how they relate to one another in the sentence. This also applies to the flow and harmony of ideas. Then there are the images that face the texts; still images, as opposed to the animations I've done in some previous projects, as I wanted "The Gateless Gate" to be an traditional book, but one made to be viewed on a monitor; not an "e-text," however, but a book designed in HTML code, with a cover, introduction, bibliography, etc. Which is say that there's no reason an electronic book can't be intellectually and aesthetically challenging.

EP: In your introduction, you use the word "palimpsest" to describe the way you construct your photographic images. Can I ask you to describe your working method—where you get your source images from, what software you use, and so forth?

JW: Although I've written photography critique, I didn't take my own pictures until a few years ago, when I was able to afford a digital camera. My first pictures were "straight shots," such as those in "Interdependency" and a few other projects. By the time I began "The Gateless Gate," in February 2009, my interest, stemming from years of studies of the Upper Paleolithic painted caves in France and Spain, had turned to palimpsests. Most of the source images are from around the city of Portland, Oregon, to which I added transparencies, usually from pictures found on the Internet. Sometimes the superimposed images quickly made a picture I felt on a visceral level. Other times, I had to work for days before a picture that "dreams" appeared.

As for the software, I'd rather not say, for two reasons. One is that the software is commercial, and I don't want to be a salesman for the companies. But I will say that I shuttled the pictures through three to four different programs. The second reason is that I think an artist should have some secrets, especially one who works in a medium that draws information as if from a bottomless well.

EP: It's interesting that you say you're trying to achieve a picture that "dreams." Anyone who has looked at your work at all will have realized that dreams and the unconscious are enormously important to you. Can you say why this is, and how your interest in dreams has influenced both your writing and your pictures?

JW: We spend much of our lives dreaming, so how can one not be interested in dreams! Thus, my autobiography is titled "Reality Dreams." There are different types of dreams, and different schools of psychology to elaborate them. Most psychotherapists are mainly interested in dreams that signify one's daily life; they are paid well to help people adjust to the mundaneity of their existence. Jungians are more interested in "big dreams"—these have archetypal significance that connects us to mythologies our culture doesn't propagate. This interests me, as it did the Surrealists, and some of the Abstract Expressionists.

Such dreams influence my writing because they are intimate without being oriented to the ego. When someone tells me that they are not creative, I reply, "You dream, don't you?" In dreaming we are all naturally creative. Dreams are where the psyche runs feral.

As for the pictures I make, those I consider to be "art" are an expression of that same "collective unconscious." This fascinates me, because to be a complete person means to be dynamically incomplete.

EP: Apart from your philosophical interest in dreams, it strikes me that there's a dreamlike quality in your style, both in your pictures and your writing—lots of things happening at once, one thing merging

into another, associative transitions, and so on. And your writing, rather than taking us on a narrative journey leading toward a climax, feels more like waves lapping on a beach, with a gradual cumulative effect. I wonder if you'd like to comment on this?

JW: One of my favorite teaching stories is about a cart Picasso painted with all kinds of seemingly unrelated things in it. Someone asked him why he painted all those diverse objects into one cart. He replied, "So they can learn how to live together!" That story, which I'm probably misquoting, must have stayed in the back of my mind as my work developed over the years. So that, for example, if I want to do a project based on an archaeological subject, first I'll read all the scholarly texts. Then I'll research fields that indirectly deepen, enrich, and expand the subject: poetry, mythology, geology, philosophy, literary criticism, etc. I'll take lots of notes, and begin writing between these notes—that is, between the thoughts of others.

The making of images is more instinctive, but they are made in the same eclectic spirit, giving it all, as you say, "a gradual cumulative effect." Ultimately, what interests me is the transitional energies between information and images, be they linguistic or photographic, and the surprising opportunities for consciousness their mobility creates.

EP: That brings us nicely to the subject of "invagination," which is one of the most characteristic techniques in your written work. For those who aren't familiar with the term, it basically means that from time to time you "interrupt" your own writing with a snippet from another writer. Can you describe when and why you first started to use this technique, and what purpose you think it serves in your work?

JW: My trope of invagination surfaced during the mid-1980s, from reading Derrida, Deleuze, Ulmer, Jabès, and others. The original idea was to interrupt a sentence by placing quote within quote, each one smaller and printed lighter, until they completely disappeared . . . then slowly emerged again, until the original sentence was able to continue. However, as you can imagine, that proved awkward. Yet the trope continued to be viable as single interruptions, or intrusions, within a paragraph.

Recently I read a book review of David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manfesto* by Luc Sante, in which Sante wrote, "So what constitutes reality, then, as it affects culture? It can be as simple as a glitch, an interruption, a dropped beat, a foreign object that suddenly intrudes. Hence the potency of sampling in popular music, which forces open the space between the vocal and instrumental components. It is also a form of collage, which edits, alters and reapportions cultural commodities according to need or desire." This, too, could be a definition of what I call "invagination." In essence, it is a technique for questioning literal, or literary, reality.

EP: It's also a technique for allowing other voices besides your own into the text. In one way it follows the modernist tendency to use fragmentation as a stylistic device, but in another way I feel inclined to relate it to your Buddhist beliefs, and your desire to get beyond your own ego. There are plenty of direct references to Buddhism in your writing, but I think it's also present at a deeper level, influencing the structure of your work. When did you first get interested in Eastern philosophy, and how do you think it has influenced your development as an artist?

JW: One evening in the early 1960s, after having read Alan Watts's book on Zen and some of D.T. Suzuki's books, I went with a friend, who is now a prominent psychologist, to a basement apartment in downtown New York, where we attended a talk by a Japanese Zen monk. What we found were folding chairs and an altar with flowers on it. About twenty of us were served tea—hot water with a leaf floating in it—and an almond cookie. We listened to a brief, incomprehensible, talk by the shaven-headed monk, then left, laughing.

A few years later, in Donald M. Allen's now classic anthology, *The New American Poetry*, I came across a section from Gary Snyder's brilliant book *Myths & Texts*. The spirit of Snyder's poems, and of his way of life, returned me to the study of Zen, and, in 1964, moving to San Francisco brought me to the actual practice. Then, I had the privilege of staying at a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, and later lived in a Zen Temple in my own country.

These days, I no longer participate in formal meditation groups, as I've come to see that every organized religion devolves into rituals, rites, and hierarchal power that has lost touch with the individuated creativity of its founders. However, I do still study lectures by ancient Zen Masters, as they keep me questioning and reshuffling, tuning and rethinking, how I perceive reality—and how I pass it along, in writing and imaging.

EP: You mention Gary Snyder, and you also regularly mention Bashō in your writings. Who would you count as your literary influences, and in what ways do you think they've helped to shape your work?

JW: Homer's *Odyssey* was the first book I remember in school that drove me to the public library to read the whole thing. Serious literature that was moving! This is where my journey in search of creativity began. Then there was Henry Miller, who brilliantly combined Eros and Logos with Pathos. There was also the imaginative drive, if not heroism, of Kenneth Patchen's love and anti-war poems, and the cool linguistic experiments of e.e. cummings. When I moved to the West Coast, Gary Snyder's work had a deep influence, at least until around 1968, when he returned to settle in California and began writing to attract a larger audience for his public readings.

Like the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, I favor "the slow rhythm of written poetry (where) verbs recover their precise original movements." Reading this, I thought back to the aesthetics of the Beat Poets, who composed the last popular movement in American Literature. One thing they had in common was a craving for the media, for fame, and so they developed a body of work that could be performed. Although I took a different path, some of these poets, now familiar names in most university English departments, accepted me into their midst, and instilled in that fledgling writer the ancient spirit of the bardic tradition.

These days, besides the iconic scholars, the writers who influence my work the most are those whose vision goes beyond the field they were trained to till. For example, the physicist David Peat, psychoanalyst Helene Shulman, archaeologists David Lewis-Williams and Christopher Tilley, phenomenologist Robert Romanyshyn, and post-Jungian literary critic Susan Rowland, to name a very few. My work is driven by my debt to others, which also includes what we call the "non-human world." And this debt continues to grow.

EP: It's interesting that you declare a preference for written poetry, rather than poetry designed to be read aloud, and that your current influences are "iconic scholars" and people whose vision goes beyond their own field. Those remarks tally with some of the most characteristic aspects of your own work—it's often quite scholarly in tone, and it's always very "written"—yet at the same time it's very observational, especially of the natural world, and it moves very freely from one genre to another, in a quite unscholarly, perhaps even subversive way.

But staying with the question of influences for a moment, what was it that led you to start working online and to try your hand at digital literature, and were there any other writers or new media artists who particularly influenced your style when you first made the transition?

JW: During the mid-1980s, I was an Adjunct Curator at the University of New Mexico Art Museum. My expertise was Video Art, and this opened me to media work that was going on at the time. A stepchild of film and television, Video Art was the harbinger of something new that was developing on the horizon. Meanwhile, I was writing feature pieces on photography for *Artspace*, a quarterly magazine of Southwest Contemporary Art based in Albuquerque. Using a typewriter, I'd cut, paste, then photocopy sections of the manuscript, repeating this process many times. For the paragraphs were demanding to exchange places, realigning the sequence of ideas on the page.

The last piece I wrote for *Artspace* was on the nuclear photography of Patrick Nagatani, who had recently joined UNM's faculty. After it was published, I asked him if he'd like to do a project together on New Mexico's history with nuclear weapons and the extent of its present infrastructure. He agreed, and over the next two years this grew into "The Nuclear Enchantment of New Mexico," consisting of forty photographs and forty texts that were exhibited at the Albuquerque Museum, in 1991. For my part,

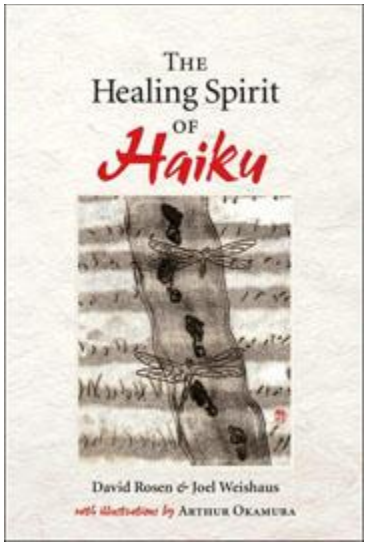
now titled "The Deeds and Sufferings of Light," the museum needed a computer disk to blow the texts up to poster-size. My first computer was a slow, bulky PC with an amber monitor, for which I quickly had to learn basic DOS and a word processing program.

Surprisingly, I took to the task enthusiastically, not knowing that my cutting and pasting technique had been preparing me for the aesthetics of this machine. Then a few years later, the university library's catalog, with which I was so familiar in situ, appeared on my desk. It was an epiphany, a truly religious experience, as immediate, and soon to be infinite, packets of information arrived in my home. While exiled in New Mexico I entered a larger world.

As for direct influences, they were, and mainly remain, not so much digital or so-called New Media artists, but writers and visual artists extraneous to the genre in which I usually work. Rooted in books, I blossom electronically.

EP: I get a sense from that reply that your interest in digital literature has taken the form not so much of a deliberate transition from one genre to another as a natural expansion, a growth process which has allowed you to penetrate new areas without losing touch with the old ones—and I know that you've continued to publish in print as well as online. I suppose this begs a question about audiences, however. Do you think the same people read your online work and your work in print, or do you think people still tend to fall on either one side or the other of the divide?

JW: Well, let's take for example *Rain Taxi*, as it is published in both paper and online editions. Fascinatingly, the content of each edition is unique. So when I write reviews for it, I consider in which medium I'd prefer it to appear, even though it's the publisher's decision. The Literary World, which includes universities and foundations, still gives more authenticity to paper publishing than to digital. However, online projects are cheaper to produce, and easier to distribute, especially worldwide. In addition, they are archived by search engines. But I don't know if a study has been done as to how many readers *Rain Taxi*'s discrete editions *ultimately* reach.



The initial distribution of my digital projects is to a few hundred "undisclosed recipients." Then there are four to six email lists, depending on a project's subject, to which I send links. Later, when researchers ask for materials, it's easy to link them to a specific project, as I eventually digitize the printed work, to save it in my online archive at the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture. Even much of *The Healing Spirit of Haiku*, which I co-authored with Jungian psychiatrist David Rosen, Google has put online. As far as I know, people who are interested in my work read books and use the Internet. The divide I see is not between books and computers, but between knowledge and information.

EP: This takes us back to a remark you made right at the beginning of the interview, where you said that you wanted "The Gateless Gate" to be "a traditional book, but one made to be viewed on a monitor . . . a book designed in HTML code." One of the interesting things about "The Gateless Gate" is that it's

emphatically booklike, and the fact that it's booklike works surprisingly well on-screen, but at the same time we might ask what's this doing on a monitor? Wouldn't it be better on a printed page? Or, if you look at it the other way round, it seems to be posing a challenge to other writers of digital literature—do you really need all that gimmickry? Shouldn't you just be concentrating on the writing? So, what do you think there is about "The Gateless Gate" which makes it belong more naturally on a screen than it would on a printed page, and how has the (technological) simplicity of this project affected your own feelings about digital literature?

JW: To simulate the pages of a book on a monitor, amidst all the hubbub about how the Internet threatens to replace books, is a visual pun. Indeed, "The Gateless Gate" is a digital version of a handmade book.

It also asks the question: What is a "book"? In *The Book of Questions*, Edmund Jabès interrogates just this conundrum. But instead of attempting to answer it, he weaves a work of art from it. So, one thing I'm suggesting is that, in the Digital Age, what a book is needs to be reimagined. It could be that the very future of our culture, and our system of education, depends on how we answer this.

So far, it has mainly been engineers electronically fabricating printed words, and commercial designers shaping plastics, neither of them understanding the *eros* of the book, who are receiving attention in the media.

As for "all that gimmickry," this was certainly on my mind. Although I do enjoy, and learn from, artists who are brilliantly implementing the range of digital techniques available to them, and I've used a few myself, here I wanted to practice the writer's, and photographer's, craft. Perhaps this is because I have reached the age in which one tends to return to fundamentals, taking joy in sounding the depths, instead of unfurling the skein of the latest illumination. Which returns us to the *Mumonkan*, "The Gateless Gate."

EP: Can I finish by asking you about your plans for future work? Have you already started a new project, or are you still thinking things over, or simply intending to take a rest for a while?

JW: The great Hokusai reportedly said on his deathbed, "If only I had another ten years, I could become a real artist." He was 89. So I'm planning another large Digital Literary Art project, which is now in the preliminary, notebook stage.

I'm also continuing Poetica, writing in the void where I'm most comfortable: floating between the standards of academia and experimental art. My primary interest here is in reviewing books of poetry in which the genre is used to expand and deepen other fields. I began with Frances Presley's, *Lines of Sight*, as its focus is the archaeology of Megalithic stone formations at Exmoor, England.

In all cases, we'll see what happens!

Rain Taxi
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