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GERTRUDE ABERCROMBIE

by August Becker



Frank Sandiford, Oliver Merriam, and Gertrude Abercrombie, Chicago, 1952. Photographer unknown.

On meeting Gertrude:

I first encountered Gertrude - perhaps 'observed' would be a better term - at the South Art Fair. I had moved to the south side in 1952 at the end of my second year at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was 19 years old. At the art fair she did not just take a place along the sidewalk like the other artists. Instead, she installed her Rolls Royce in the center of the vacant lot, propped her paintings in the fenders and running board of the car, sitting around with her husband Frank Sandiford and other guests as if they all were at a picnic in the country. They wore extraordinary clothes: Gertrude in a sack dress and espadrilles, Frank in a kind of pyjama, also in espadrille, and their friend Guy Cardin never without an ascot tie or cigarette in an eight inch holder. My, my, they were so weird I would not have dared to get close, afraid of being thought in some way interested in or attached to any group so queer. Not just odd, but perverse. And to a young man of 19, trying to pass as straight and adult - threatening. I never even got close enough to examine the paintings, but from a distance I felt almost as foolish as the artist and her companions. Contrived, folksy, commercial.

The Rolls Royce, by the way, was a prop. Just like the ironstone bowls and pitchers and stuffed owls, and the Victorian furniture with fake leopard-skin fabric. There were actually two Rolls Royces. The first, the one that I saw at the fairs, used to be owned by Colonel McCormick of the Chicago Tribune in the '20s. Its doors were continually falling off their hinges because the bulletproof glass installed to protect the colonel in the days of Al Capone was too heavy for them to support. It was replaced later with one of a similar vintage. Her Rolls Royces were ancient machines and were purchased at prices well below the cost of an ordinary contemporary automobile. Nevertheless, they had their effect on Gertrude's public image. Gertrude, however, was never without money worries. Being an artist in the '50s, even a well-known one, did not sustain anything beyond a modest middle-class existence.

Two years later, the artist and curator Don Baum took me to Gertrude and Frank's on a Saturday night. I remember borrowing cuff links from him for the occasion because he found mine vulgar, leftover as they were from high school proms and dances in Miami, Florida. I must emphasize that I did not know who this 'Gertrude' of 'Gertrude and Frank's' was. I was startled to discover that my hostess was the Gertrude of the art fairs, and was quickly bewitched-as if I were meeting fictional characters who had come to life. I danced all night, and that night I also met Wendell and Esther Wilcox for the first time. In fact, at nearly 4am they invited me home for breakfast. Don Baum had long since disappeared with another guest.

Gertrude's residence

Today I thought of the house on Dorchester Avenue. In her biography on Gertrude, Susan Weinger refers to it as a 'row house', which is true, but the term in our time seems to denote something rather banal. The house was four storeys high. On the salon floor it was immense; there was a quite grand staircase that spread gracefully down from its first landing. Servant quarters occupied the top floor, and back stairs led down to the kitchen, which was on the ground floor. We entered the house most times at the ground level, where there was a housekeeper's ample sitting room, with a fireplace. And a bit further to the back, the kitchen led out to a rear garden. The great double outside doors to the salon floor, doors that opened from a narrow porch after one climbed up a remarkably wide staircase that spread across much of the facade, were seldom used. These doors were opened only for the grandest parties.

By the way, in the end, that lower housekeeper's sitting room is where Gertrude ended up. That is where I last saw her, shortly before her death. She sat, up on the bed that had replaced the Victorian drawing-room furniture. As we talked she reached down to refill a glass from the jug of Gallo at her feet. I thought at the time that that was the only thing never to have changed. There was always plenty of choice of what to drink at the soirées, but all the choices other than a jug of red or white were imports from guests.

An aside on alcohol and sexuality

This is an aside that I think is best to get out of the way. An important dimension of Gertrude's life (all our lives at the time) was the influence of alcohol - and especially its effect on outsized sexual appetites. There were very few preconceived attitudes as to whom one might end up in bed with. There was not a hard line drawn between straight and queer identities in Gertrude's world. We were all of us quite mixed up, and most parties even ended in drunkenness. Nevertheless, despite the free-wheeling sexual expression, there was a great deal of clandestine activity as well, the sexual ethic among us in Gertrude's circle was perhaps singular, even for Chicago. Certainly there were many social circles that were exclusively gay or straight, but at Gertrude and Frank's all melded. Both of Gertrude's husbands had homosexual appetites; Bob Livingston's perhaps not as demanding as Frank Sandiford's. There was nothing apparently gay about either. There is just enough of the gentleman left in me that I do not want to disclose Gertrude's own sexual proclivities, except to say they were focused exclusively on males, whether gay or straight.

Guy Cardin, for example, was a very bright and clever dandy, extremely well read, intellectual without visible means of support. When I first knew him, he was kept by Dana Stone, a well-off gentleman of the Near North Side who as a teen used to procure sexual companions for his mother's society bridge partners. There was a suggestion that Dana had never quite given up his sex trafficking. He had other business interests, but I cannot recall what-maybe real estate.

In any case, Guy also later lived with Miriam Andre as in her penthouse on the North Shore, under the auspices of Osborn Andreas, who even after divorcing her to marry Margot Beman was totally responsible for her. (Once when she taxied all the way from the Near North Side to Hyde Park and asked the driver to wait while she set fire to Osborn and Margot's house, he was forced to have her arrested and jailed, and then in the morning had to bail her out.) Guy was supposed to act as a check on Miriam's drinking, but that was a fantasy. While I was in the army, away from Chicago for two years, Guy Cardin was found dead and naked on a rooftop in Chicago. It was assumed his end was the result of some aborted sexual encounter and robbery. The Chicago Tribune would not write 'naked', so reported that he had died in his underwear. I can't remember how I know this. And looking back, I wonder if the rooftop were Miriam's. That would explain it to some extent.

Gertrude and art

I never knew Gertrude to talk about art. If she contributed to any discussion about art, it would be something noncommittal or cryptic, such as 'Ya gotta learn to draw', which might feel dismissive or condescending, but one couldn't tell whether it was dismissive of the art or the conversation about it. There was very little art in her house that was not her own, with the exception of work by Charles Sebree. A very large Charles Sebree shared a wall in the grand salon with one of her largest self-portraits. Sebree, whom the writer Wendell Wilcox thought the best storyteller of all storytellers, just like Gertrude Stein considered Wendell to be the greatest letter writer of the 20th century, was no longer a figure in Chicago when I was there. I went with Gertrude and others to Milwaukee for the opening of his play Mrs Patterson, which was the beginning of Eartha Kilt's career. I met Charles again in Washington years later and I always called on him when I visited there. Charles was a self-taught artist, like Gertrude claimed to be, but what Gertrude meant by that is she decided on her own what she would paint and who she would be. Wendell's take on that last sentence would be that there was no decision involved, that Gertrude simply was. Any interest of Gertrude's in the art of others would not have run very deep. However, her offering me the use of the Rolls Royce after a show to pick up my painting from the Art Institute so stunned everyone (and me)-so untypically generous-that I felt it to be a gift almost as important as the prize I just won. I wouldn't have dared drive the Rolls on my own, so Frank acted as chauffeur. My arrival at the foot of the great stairs that led up to the entrance of the Art Institute in the Rolls, with Frank in chauffeur cap and coat, caused a lot of jaws to drop. I got a taste of what it must be like to be a character rather than myself. For Gertrude I'm sure there was never a dichotomy; the two were the same. I once asked Wendell why he thought Gertrude never went to the theatre or to concerts or even to important shows at the Art Institute. 'Gertrude is simply not interested in being somewhere where someone else is on stage', he said.

Gertrude and jazz

I do not know when Gertrude switched from classical music to jazz. It might have been a gradual change of interest, but it was certainly cemented when she changed husbands. Bob Livingston was and remained a classical music fan. Frank Sandiford had had a record shop and hung out at the Beehive, an old theatre turned jazz club in one of the slummier old buildings of Hyde Park. He knew all the black musicians and singers. Charlie, Dizzy, Sarah, Billie, all of them, and he sometimes recorded their music. Frank's devotion to jazz developed in prison; jazz and blues were an appropriate complement to the pain of incarceration. He had been a jewel thief, safe robber, imprisoned twice. After his divorce from Gertrude he moved to New York and wrote jazz reviews for the Village Voice. It's also when Gertrude learned from her wronged and vengeful daughter, Dinah, that she, the daughter, had managed to seduce her stepfather into a relationship that was enacted for years under Gertrude's nose. In his last attempt at pulling together a publishable novel, this illicit relationship theme, a confession to an unspeakable addiction. But it was a nearly incoherent, unreadable, because in the end he was never not stoned on pot. Musicians coming to Chicago often needed a place to jam, especially when they had gigs and wanted to practise, or need a place with a piano, The house of Dorchester was available to them, and when they assembled to jam, we all wanted to be there.

A singular moment

There was nothing else going on in Chicago like it, period. And certainly not in New York City, which would be the most unlikely place of all to find something similar. Friendships and relationships are more transient in New York, and probably now in Chicago as well. The grind to achieve fame and success in New York precludes the existence of such a community as we knew in Chicago. Perhaps in the higher echelons of society people still give parties and some who attend may reciprocate. Beyond that, few in New York have the space or means or time for such social gatherings, and after attending one, if it did exist, it would be 'been there, done that'. There is just too much going on in the way of theatre, exhibitions, opera, concerts, for anyone to interact in such a way.

But even in Chicago, after a while rock 'n roll arrived in some of those old bars. What a trip! Jazz began to fade. I remember Gertrude remarking about Janice Joplin, 'I'm not sure what she's doing, but it isn't music'. And finally for Gertrude, her life turned into that of a sick old landlady collecting rent from the occupants of the upstairs bedrooms, none of whom were promising or talented like in the days of Ned Rorem-who remembered his residence there with affection-but just figures that came and went and sometimes defaulted on the rent.