"It was a tough life, but magical things happened..."
THE LIFELONG COLLABORATION OF TWO ARTISTS
AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW CASTRUCCI ON MELVIN WAY

By Aurélie Bernard Wortsman

Andrew Castrucci is an artist who discovered Melvin Way and his talismanic drawings in 1989 when he was teaching at a homeless shelter on Wards Island in New York City. Castrucci sat down with Aurélie Bernard Wortsman, Director of Andrew Edlin Gallery, to relate the story of how he met Way, how their friendship developed, and to provide insight into understanding this revered artist's work.

Melvin Way, Electreal (verso, feat. photo of Way), 2004-2014
Ballpoint pen and xerox on double-sided paper with Scotch tape, 11.5 x 4 inches

Aurélie Bernard Wortsman (ABW): I'm going to start with the most obvious question: Where and when did you meet Melvin Way?

Andrew Castrucci (AC): So, I met Melvin in 1989 when I was working for the Healing Arts Initiative (HAI), which was an organization that provided art workshops for people in prisons, shelters, nursing homes, and hospitals. They would always send me to shelters, the roughest places because they thought I was tough but really, I would beg them to stop doing that because I wasn't as strong as they thought. These places were like halfway houses, filled with guys from Rikers Island who went from there to Keener Men's Shelter on Wards Island. Manhattan State Prison, with infamous prisoners like David Berkowitz, the serial killer known as "Son of Sam," were there too, right next to Melvin's shelter. At Wards, there were 800 beds, and about 300 were for residents who suffered from mental illness. I taught art workshops there in the basement and that's where I met Melvin.

ABW: Tell me more about that environment, working in a basement in a men's shelter on Wards Island! You must have seen a lot.

AC: Yeah, it was pretty rough, you know? There was bad ventilation; the AIDS epidemic was peaking. And there was also a TB (tuberculosis) outbreak, 40 percent of the shelter had it. It was dangerous too, because of the crack epidemic, so these young kids would cross the footbridge at 103rd Street from Harlem to Wards Island and prey on the guys from the shelter.

There was a famous incident there too that happened on the footbridge, where they murdered two guys, Melvin's people from the shelter, and threw them off the bridge. I always had to flash my I.D. to let any thieves know I worked at the shelter, so I wouldn't get robbed, and also wouldn't get accidentally mistaken for a resident.

ABW: Woo! And what was it like meeting Melvin in this environment? When did he start participating in your art workshops and showing you his own work?

AC: He wouldn't necessarily participate in workshops. Sometimes I would just have a conversation with him and show him books. He was very paranoid, you know - he always felt like his drawings were secret formulas, and that only certain people could look at them. There is some truth to that. It's his private artwork and I always felt that they were his talismans of protection too, you know. So that's why it was always important that he had a lot of drawings on him. They were sort of like his weapons of protection, I guess.

Melvin Way, MUSPELHE NIFELHEIM, c. 1997
Ballpoint pen, marker on paper, Scotch tape, 2 x 4 inches

ABW: Interesting, so he showed these drawings just to you? Seems like you developed a close friendship early on. Did Melvin move around between shelters? How did this affect your working with him?

AC: So Melvin went from Wards Island to Columbus Hall, which is a Bowery residence on 116th street where I also worked, and then to Fort Washington Men's Shelter. This spans twenty years. With HAI - I would argue, it was important that I worked with Melvin, and they were supportive of that. So whenever Melvin moved, they made sure there was a workshop there for me.

ABW: And these drawings he was creating, did they travel with him as well? Where did he keep them hidden?

AC: Yes, Melvin would always buy clothes with lots of pockets. That was important for the drawings, to keep them on him at all times. He has this coat he wore when he was at Wards Island, where he kept his drawings hidden in there and he also had this briefcase, with some 100 drawings inside and xeroxes and references to cases and secret codes, all grouped in different parcels wrapped in rubber bands. It's an interesting story actually; I had him mail the coat to Andrew Edlin Gallery for the show and then I thought, let's pair it with the briefcase. This installation has actually become part of a series, a collaboration Melvin and myself, which includes a coat and briefcase from each of the six shelters Melvin spent time in since 1989.

Melvin Way, Melvin's Coat and Briefcase from Wards Island, c. 1990-2020
Way's trench coat and briefcase with 111 drawings and various xeroxes by the artist
(first installation from a six part series)

ABW: These drawings, which you allude to as his weapons, how did Melvin refer to them? Did he see them as art or did you introduce this notion to him?

AC: Well, he has hundreds of different names for them. I don't know if he considered them art; they were just his notebooks, his notes. But then again, maybe he did - you know, art is life, as Joseph Beuys said, right? And well, what is art? He would occasionally participate in my two-hour workshops, but mostly, we would just have secret meetings, and he would show me the work off to the side. My job was to feed off of that. I would show him Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. A lot of graffiti artists too, I would bring in books about that,

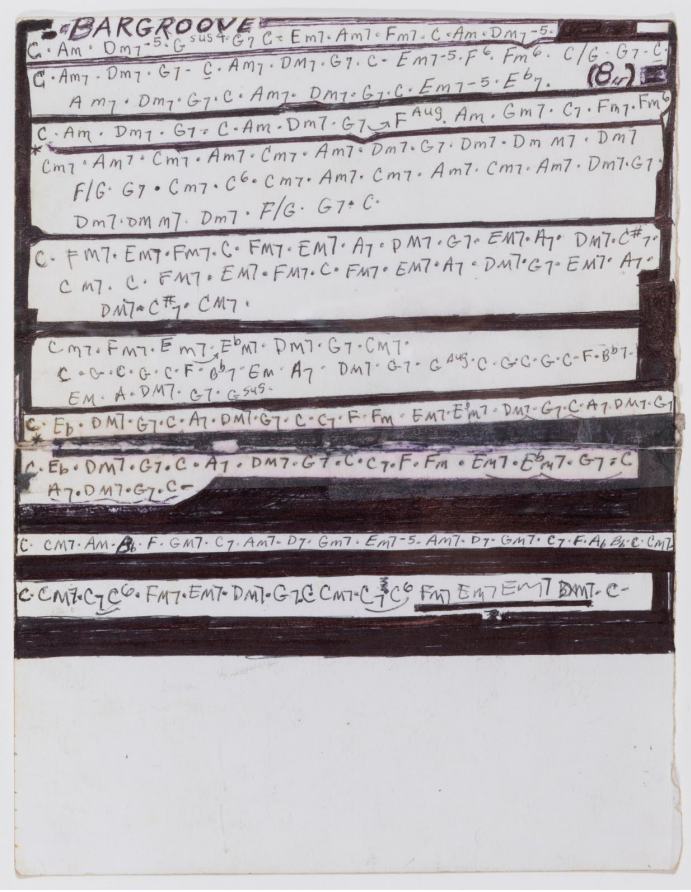
since it was part of my upbringing. Melvin was fascinated with da Vinci's notebooks and different maps and diagrams.

ABW: Can you expand on this? In your opinion, what are Melvin's main references? Perhaps you can help elucidate what some of the signs and symbols in his work might mean?

AC: He did diagrams and notes all the time. I was reflecting on his lexicon of imagery and just enhancing it, showing him things he could decode. In high school, he enjoyed chemistry, math and science and was, according to his mother, Flossie, an above-average student who even helped teachers out as an assistant in class. He was extremely intelligent, he could've gotten a four-year scholarship to a good college before his breakdown.

But his background isn't really school; it's music, references like Sun Ra or Acid jazz and Funkadelic. That funk music, R&B, Aretha Franklin, Barry White, everyone from Stax Records that came out of Memphis - or Motown - even just pop culture with the early Jackson 5, the list goes on. That's what shows up in his imagery.

But he's obviously created his own language. You know, there is meaning to it. It's very abstract, so to look for a literal definition is a little absurd. People get confused, asking "what does it mean?" Just relax, listen to the music, you know? It's really music. I hate it when people call him crazy or insane. I always defended Melvin with social workers who would constantly send him to Manhattan State Hospital, like every other month. He would say violent things but he wasn't a violent person. He was just misunderstood with his illness. I would always tell his social workers: "Listen, this guy's a great artist! Look, he's in an exhibition!"



Melvin Way, Bargroove, n.d.
Ballpoint pen on paper, 8.75 x 6.75 inches

ABW: That's an interesting point, so you've been defending him all along, seemingly acting as his interlocutor with the outside world. When did you start getting him shows and introducing his work to the artworld?

AC: Well, it took a long time. I introduced his drawings to Margaret Bodell around 1994, and she started showing the work. It took a while for HAI to figure him out. And even at the Outsider Art Fair, when it was held at the Puck Building, abstract elements like in Melvin's work were rarely seen. What was popular was typical outsider, folk stuff, like Howard Finster. Melvin, you know, it took a while to catch on.

ABW: When did he get his big break, so to speak?

AC: We slowly got him exhibitions, and then in 1997 his work was featured on the cover of the Outsider Art Fair catalog. So the artworld starts to get to know him, Anne Doran becomes interested and the first serious article comes out in Grand Street Magazine that year. Then Anne Doran and Jerry Saltz make a studio visit. At the time, I was living in a squat, a former homestead, and I had a suitcase of Melvin's work under my bed. So I pulled out the suitcase and opened it, and that was the first time Jerry Saltz saw Melvin's drawings.

There was a criminal element also at these shelters, Melvin would constantly lose his drawings, so I would try to preserve them and hold onto them.

ABW: This constant moving and lack of personal space in Melvin's life, can this explain the size of his pieces?

AC: So the work is always small. It's rare that he will do anything over 8 x 10 inches, and they are always folded up.

ABW: Is that because Melvin wants to keep them hidden and close to his person?

AC: Yeah, that's part of it. Just storage also, it's an economic thing. I always felt the work had to be baptized. Like he would give me drawings too early and I'd say "Melvin, man, hold em. Work on them more." And when I say baptized, he had them in his pockets for six months, sometimes a couple years, wrapped in rubber bands so when he'd get caught in the rain, his clothes would get soaked. The texture on these drawings - the sweat of his body and getting caught in a couple rain storms - I always saw that as a form of baptism for his drawings before they got released into the world.

Melvin Way, Brown Paper Bag, 2020
Ballpoint pen and marker on paper with Scotch tape
7 x 4.75 inches

ABW: I like this idea of baptism, it's true some of the pieces really have an archival feel to them, like an old sacred text.

AC: Yes, that's very important, this talisman-like ritual. He's more than just an artist, he's a shaman, he's a priest, he's a homeless guy, he's a prophet.

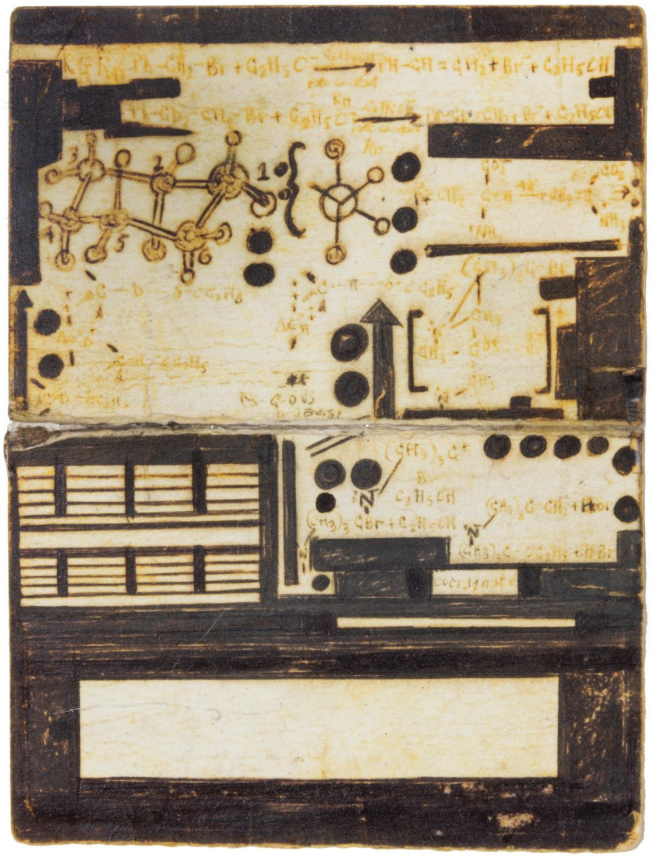
ABW: And tell us more about some of the symbols in the drawings as well as the overall shapes of the works. I know you had mentioned in the past that there is phallic imagery?

AC: Well, if you look at his drawings, you'll see ovaries that show up, occasionally parts of the male body as well, but that's mostly the pen. His pen is the male. I guess it was his way of communicating with the female species. It's hard for these guys to talk to women. The social workers or art teachers - that's the first time these guys are having a respectable conversation with a woman. I was more of an art therapist there, even though we didn't like to use those words, because HAI wasn't an art therapy thing. I was the messenger sent to go to these marginal communities and it was really emotional and intense. I was living on the Lower East Side in a squat without heat or hot water, and then I had to go to the shelters two or three times a week. It was a tough life, but magical things happened in these shelters.

Like meeting Melvin. I do diagrams and I'm interested in self-taught art, and after going to art school my whole life, I feel I learned more working at HAI. Melvin is my teacher at the same time as I'm his teacher and we collaborate a lot.

ABW: It's unusual just how close your bond is with Melvin, the fact that you help decide when a work has been "baptized" is an interesting example. In what other ways have you collaborated?

AC: I do diagrams as well, so there's that. And sometimes when Melvin was in a rut, I would trace his hands and ask him to "Fill this in," and we'd both start filling it in, nibbling at it for years. I was trying to get him to broaden his vocabulary: besides just his diagrams and numbers, occasionally he does something figurative. And sometimes I couldn't get him to do anything for weeks. My job was to inspire them in the shelter to be more productive, you know?



Melvin Way, C2H2CH, 2010
Ballpoint pen on paper with Scotch tape
5.5 x 4.5 inches

ABW: Were any of Melvin's artistic blocks linked to medication he was taking? Or to his diagnosis of schizophrenia?

AC: Well yes. There was one psychiatrist who said the medication, the antidepressants create structure in your brain. So you create patterns that reflect the structure. He's been on and off medication, at times he's not taking anything.

To tell you the truth, I don't think he needs it. But you adapt, you learn to ride the waves of your illness. And sometimes it's bad and sometimes you still function. The worst thing for Melvin is living in New York City, where the drugs are accessible and where guys are preying on him. Melvin's been in a kind of voluntary exile down south with his mother, Flossie, and relatives for the past ten years.

ABW: And then, if you contextualize his work in terms of Art Brut and this notion of horror vacui, or the fear of empty space in artistic compositions, the scale he is working in might make sense.

AC: That's a good point and it might be part of his illness. To work too big is too confusing. He did often fold up paper in the workshops. And then drug culture is part of Melvin. I had a folder called "Crack Cocaine," which was basically people making art on crack, because crack cocaine was a huge problem on Ward's Island. I don't know if that relates to how they fill up every inch of a piece of paper, but that obsessive behavior, when you're on speed or cocaine, you do have this OCD thing.

ABW: Since Melvin has been in "exile" for the past ten years, how has his work evolved? Is he still creating?

AC: His basic work is black and white, but in the last ten years, the drawings have become more colorful. Ink is his best tool, but since he is losing his sight, he works with a big fat brush now once in a while. I try to encourage him that it still works, it's still great art. I spoke to him about Monet's last paintings, which were his best work, his Water Lilies series. We actually went to see them together, because I was trying to prove a point to Melvin.

It's an amazing story, you know? He's like a real movie star when he comes to my painting classes at SVA (School of Visual Arts, where Andrew currently teaches) and people look up to him. He's in the shelter environment for twenty years, I'm working with him, and then I invite him to be in my painting class and he's an art star. It's an amazing story, he's been in prisons and shelters his whole life and then all of a sudden MoMA buys two of his drawings.

I always joke with Melvin: "You made it on Broadway, if you make it in New York, you'll make it anywhere," like that famous Frank Sinatra song. And then we joke, "Hey, Melvin, you're back on Bowery man. How does it feel?" At Andrew Edlin Gallery now. Oh man, thirty, forty, fifty years later, I'm back on Bowery hanging with this wino. It's full circle.

Melvin Way, New Sunbeam, 2020
Ballpoint pen and marker on paper with Scotch tape, 6.75 x 8.25 inches