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Connective Aesthetics

Suzi Gablik

As an art critic in the 1990s, I no longer see my role as defending or promoting the work of individual artists. I am more interested in advancing a profound and necessary paradigm shift that I call connective aesthetics. It involves a shift away from the myth of the hard-edged, autonomous individualist that has formed the artist's identity, particularly in modern times. The free and self-sufficient individual has long been the ideal of our culture. Independent and self-motivated, the highly individualized consciousness seeks to impose its own images upon the world. Artists see themselves as quintessential free agents pursuing their own ends. Maintaining a deeply connected relationship with society is not how the modernist vision has conceptualized aesthetic freedom or the principle of individual selfhood. We live so much in an ethos of competitiveness, which keeps us bound to individualistic modes of thought and directed toward the making of products, that most of us in the capitalist world have never had an experience of true community.

Georg Baselitz expressed the epitome of this detached, isolated, "value-free" consciousness in the catalogue for his exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1983:

The artist is not responsible to anyone. His social role is asocial; his only responsibility consists in an attitude to the work he does. There is no communication with any public whatsoever. The artist can ask no question, and he makes no statement; he offers no information, and his work cannot be used. It is the end product which counts, in my case, the picture.¹

Currently, a new, less specialized, less monocentric mythology of the artist is emerging that affirms our radical relatedness. At this point, we need to cultivate the connective, relational self as thoroughly as we have cultivated, in the many years of abstract thinking, the mind geared to the principle of individual selfhood.

Cultural myths, however, do not die easily, especially when our personal commitment to them is so strong that it is difficult even to entertain different premises. Even for an artist like Christo, whose public projects such as the *Running Fence* (1972–76) or *The Umbrellas* (1991) require the participation and cooperation of thousands of people, the feeling of being emotionally independent and inwardly free still dominates the psyche. In a recent interview, Christo stated:

The work is irrational and perhaps irresponsible. Nobody needs it. The work is a huge individualistic gesture that is entirely decided by me. . . . One of the greatest contributions of modern art is the notion of individualism. . . . I think the artist can do anything he wants to



- 1 Dion Johnson, age 13, *Cooling Off*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in. Shooting Back Education and Media Center, in collaboration with the Washington Project for the Arts

*do. This is why I would never accept a commission. Independence is most important to me. The work of art is a scream of freedom.*²

Freedom means independence and self-determination. Christo's "scream of freedom" continues to be the unwavering, ubiquitous moral imperative that is always brandished politically as well as philosophically in the tradition of Western thought. We seem, however, to have finally come up against the limits of that particular paradigm, and now there is a real yearning for a sense of community and intimacy that has been lost in modern culture. Linda Frye Burnham recently commented that gallery art has lost its resonance for her:

*There's too much going on outside. Real life is calling. I can no longer ignore the clamor of disaster—economic, spiritual, environmental, political disaster—in the world in which I move. In that context, most art just has no "oomph," as an artist friend puts it.*³

For many people, it's time to move on and revise the cultural myths that are guiding us—to reassess our relationship to the present social framework and its practices. Institutional models based on product development and career achievement echo the stereotypical patriarchal ideals that have been internalized by so much of our culture. Art, with its

subtext of power and profit, is heavily implicated in this ideology. Individualism and freedom were the great modernist buzzwords, but they are hardly the most creative response to our planet's immediate needs, which now demand complex and sensitive forms of interaction and linking. Such relationships require a consciousness that is different from the structural isolation and self-referentiality of individualism. In the post-Cartesian, ecological world view that is now emerging, the self is no longer isolated and self-contained but relational and interdependent. What are the implications for art born of these changes in our notions of selfhood?

Art that is rooted in a "listening" self rather than in a disembodied eye challenges the isolationist thinking of our culture because it focuses not so much on individuals but on the way they interact. Such artists as Judith Baca, John Malpede, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Suzanne Lacy, and Tim Rollins use art to increase their sense of connection with the community. Art that is grounded in the realization of our interconnectedness and intersubjectivity—the intertwining of self and others—has a quality of relatedness that cannot be fully realized through monologue: it can only come into its own in dialogue, as open conversation. For many artists this has meant expanding the number of voices to which they heed or letting groups that have been previously excluded speak directly of their own experience. It can also be understood as a shift from self-assertion to integration.

- When California artist Jonathan Borofsky and his collaborator, Gary Glassman, traveled in 1985–86 to three different prisons in California to make their video-documentary *Prisoners*, they did more than simply observe and describe the conditions they found: they listened to the prisoners to try and understand their plight. They wanted to understand for themselves what it means to be a prisoner in this society—to lose your freedom and live your life locked up in a concrete box. Borofsky and Glassman interviewed thirty-two prisoners who agreed to talk about their lives—their childhoods, families, hopes, and what had gone wrong for them. In the film, some of the prisoners share poems they have written or show artworks they have made. They describe the oppressiveness of life inside a prison, where everything is programmed and where people never talk spontaneously about themselves because no one is interested. Being heard, according to Glassman, creates a sense of empowerment.
- The Shooting Back Education and Media Center is a photography project started by photojournalist Jim Hubbard in 1989. Its purpose is to teach photography, media skills, and writing to homeless children living in shelters in the Washington, D.C., area. There are now some thirty professional photographers who work one-on-one with children in weekly workshops at the shelters. Hubbard conceived the idea when he noticed, while photographing in Washington's Capitol City Inn, a two-hundred-room motel used as a shelter, how the children always wanted to use his cameras. The goal of Shooting Back is to let the children speak for themselves about their environment, friends, and society and to offer them encouragement and support. Photographs by some of the children were displayed in 1990 at the Washington Project for the Arts (fig. 1). Myra Miller, one of the free-lance photographers who works in the program, stated, "I get a lot from the program. The satisfaction of giving children who have nothing something to look forward to is incredible."⁴
- On Mother's Day in 1987, a procession of 430 older women—all dressed in black—entered the huge, glass-enclosed Crystal Court of the IDS Tower in downtown Minne-



2 *The Crystal Quilt*, performance by Suzanne Lacy, IDS Crystal Court, Minneapolis, 10 May 1987

apolis. In a ceremonially orchestrated artwork by Suzanne Lacy, the women sat in groups of four at tables covered in black. They had come together to discuss with each other their accomplishments and disappointments, their hopes and fears about aging. A prerecorded sound track of the voices of seventy-five women at the tables projected their reflections loud enough to be heard by an audience looking down from the balconies. At the tables, the women rearranged their hands in unison and slowly folded back the black tablecloths, revealing Miriam Schapiro's red and yellow geometric patterns beneath. When the ritual was over, members of the audience were invited to present the performers with scarves and to place them on the women's shoulders, as if commemorating a kind of public investiture.

Lacy dedicated *The Crystal Quilt* (fig. 2) to her mother. "The goals in my work," she says, "are definitely . . . to empower participants, to raise consciousness about certain shared conditions of being female." The message being disseminated is that older women are coming of age and occupying a more prominent place in the world. "We're no longer sitting home in the rocking chair and knitting, like you think of grandmas in the old days. . . . We grandmas aren't doing that any more," comments one of the women on the audiotape. "I think a lot of senility comes from the fact that nobody asks you anything,"

says St. Paul writer Meridel Le Seuer. "Nobody asks you to speak. Pretty soon, you lose your memory. I suffer a lot from people not listening to me."⁵

These are just three examples of artists whose work involves what Octavio Paz calls "creative participation." Modernism carried us away from a sense of community by focusing only on individual experience. Ultimately, this individualistic focus narrowed our aesthetic perspective as well. An isolated ego-subject, bent on individuation through separation, is not given to interactions that are participatory and communal and that invite empathic involvement. As Nancy Fraser notes in her book *Unruly Practices*:

*The monologic view is the Romantic individualist view in which . . . a solitary voice [is] crying out into the night against an utterly undifferentiated background. . . . There is no room for a reply that could qualify as a different voice. There is no room for interaction.*⁶

Inviting in the other makes art more socially responsive. It is not activism in the sense of the old paradigm, but an empathic means of seeing through another's eyes, of stretching our boundaries beyond the ego-self to create a wider view of the world. . . . Both are necessary. What I am suggesting is not to abandon one in favor of the other but to find a greater balance between the two.

Certainly the sense of being isolated and alone with one's creations is a common experience for artists in our culture, the result of modernism's historic failure to connect with the archetypal "other."

To see our interdependence and interconnectedness is the feminine perspective that has been missing not only in our scientific thinking and policy making, but also in our aesthetic philosophy, which has been based on traditions

of separation and heroic independence, in which other people and the world are viewed as essentially alien forces. The politics of connective aesthetics is very different: it is oriented toward the achievement of shared understandings and the essential intertwining of self and other, self and society.

Inviting in the other makes art more socially responsive. It is not activism in the sense of the old paradigm, but an empathic means of seeing through another's eyes, of stretching our boundaries beyond the ego-self to create a wider view of the world. The relational self knows that it is embedded in larger systems and tends toward integration. The independent self is invested in self-assertion. Both are necessary. What I am suggesting is not to abandon one in favor of the other but to find a greater balance between the two.

Today, the war on the canon reflects the crises of Western individualism and the modern tradition of self that derives from conquest and erasure of the other. The new connective aesthetics recognizes that we live in a time in which our need for community has become critical. Many artists now fashion their individuality out of this interconnection and weave it directly into their work. Over the next few decades, I think we will see more art that is essentially social, that rejects the myths of neutrality and autonomy, as the notion of atomic individuals discreetly divided from each other gives way, within an ecological paradigm, to a different notion of the self.

Notes

- 1 Georg Baselitz, "Four Walls and Top Lighting," in *Paintings 1960–83* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1983), p. 65.
- 2 Christo, quoted by Patricia C. Phillips, "Christo," *Flash Art* 151 (March–April 1990): 135.
- 3 Linda Frye Burnham, "Art For All People," *Utne Reader* (November–December 1991): 64.
- 4 Myra Miller, quoted in Raine Riggs "Children's Perspectives: Homeless Youths Document Their Existence," *The Eagle* (American University student newspaper), 24–30 September 1990, sec. B, p.1.
- 5 Audiotape by Susan Stone to *The Crystal Quilt*, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, Calif.
- 6 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 103.