

CONNECTIVE AESTHETICS: ART AFTER INDIVIDUALISM } *Suzi Gablik*

As a critic in the nineties, I am not really interested in writing catalog essays or art reviews. What I am concerned with is understanding the nature of our cultural myths and how they evolve—the institutional framework we take for granted but which nevertheless determines our lives. One question that has preoccupied me, for instance, is what it means to be a “successful” artist working in the world today, and whether the image that comes to mind is one we can support and believe in. Certainly it seems as if that image is undergoing a radical re-visioning at this time.

The dominant modes of thinking in our society have conditioned us to characterize art primarily as specialized objects, created not for moral or practical or social reasons, but rather to be contemplated and enjoyed. Within the modern era, art was defined by its autonomy and self-sufficiency, and by its isolation from the rest of society. Exposing the radical autonomy of aesthetics as something that is not “neutral” but is an active participant in capitalist ideology has been a primary accomplishment of the aggressive ground-clearing work of deconstruction. Autonomy, we now see, has condemned art to social impotence by turning it into just another class of objects for marketing and consumption.

Manic production and consumption, competitive self-assertion, and the maximizing of profits are all crucial to our society’s notion of success. These same assumptions, leading to maximum energy flow and mindless waste at the expense of poorer countries and of the environment, have also become the formula for global destruction. Art itself is not some ancillary phenomenon but is heavily implicated in this ideology. In the art world, we are all aware of the extent to which a power-oriented, bureaucratic professionalism has promoted a one-sided, consumeristic attitude toward art. Institutional models based on notions of product development and career achievement echo the stereotypic patriarchal ideals and values that

have been internalized by our whole culture and made to pervade every experience. It is not hard to see how the institutions and practices of the art world have been modeled on the same configurations of power and profit that support and maintain our society’s dominant worldview. This “business as usual” psychology of affluence is now threatening the ecosystem in which we live with its dysfunctional values and way of life; it is a single system manipulating the individual into the spiritually empty relationship of the producer to the product.

Many people are aware that the system isn’t working, that it is time to move on and to revise the destructive myths that guide us. Our entire cultural philosophy and its narrowness of concern are under intense scrutiny. Among artists, there is a greater critical awareness of the social role of art, and a rejection of modernism’s bogus ideology of neutrality. Many artists now refuse the notion of a completely narcissistic exhibition practice as the desirable goal for art. For instance, performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña states: “Most of the work I’m doing currently comes, I think, from the realization that we’re living in a state of emergency. . . . I feel that more than ever we must step outside the strictly art arena. It is not enough to make art.” In a similar vein, arts administrator Linda Frye Burnham has claimed that gallery art has lost its resonance for her, especially gallery art by what she terms “white yuppies.” “There is too much going on outside,” she says. “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.” Perceptions such as these are a direct challenge to the artist’s normative sense of his or her role in the world: at stake is one’s personal identity in relation to a particular view of life that our culture has made available to us.

That the art world’s values, structures, and behaviors are in great ferment has been evident for some time, and the deconstructions of the eighties continue to reverberate profoundly. A climax in these upheavals was reached for many with the controversial 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art—the first multicultural and political Biennial—which demonstrated that the art world is undergoing a dismantling of its professional elitism and that its closed, self-referential ranks are under

heavy siege. Much of the new art focuses on social creativity rather than on self-expression and contradicts the myth of the isolated genius—private, subjective, behind closed doors in the studio, separate from others and the world. As I shall argue in this essay, creativity in the modern world has gone hand in hand with individualism and has been viewed strictly as an individual phenomenon. I believe this conception of art is one of the things that are now changing.

As the work of artists who are discussed in this book makes clear, there is a distinct shift in the locus of creativity from the autonomous, self-contained individual to a new kind of dialogical structure that frequently is not the product of a single individual but is the result of a collaborative and interdependent process. As artists step out of the old framework and reconsider what it means to be an artist, they are reconstructing the relationship between individual and community, between art work and public. Looking at art in terms of social purpose rather than visual style, and setting a high priority on openness to what is Other, causes many of our cherished notions to break down: the vision of brisk sales, well-patronized galleries, good reviews, and a large, admiring audience. As Richard Shusterman writes in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, "The fact that our entrenched institutions of art have long been elitist and oppressive does not mean that they must remain such. . . . There is no compelling reason to accept the narrowly aesthetic limits imposed by the established ideology of autonomous art."

In February 1994, I had occasion to tape a conversation with the art dealer Leo Castelli, in which he commented about the Whitney show: "It was a sea change, not just any change. Because I had to accept the fact that the wonderful days of the era that I participated in, and in which I had played a substantial role, were over." In *Has Modernism Failed?* I wrote, "Generally speaking, the dynamics of professionalization do not dispose artists to accept their moral role; professionals are conditioned to avoid thinking about problems that do not bear directly on their work." Since writing this a decade ago, it seems as if the picture has changed. The politics of reconceptualization has begun, and the search for a new agenda for art has become a conscious search.

In considering the implications of this "sea change," one thing is clear: to be able to see current aesthetic ideology as actively contributing to the most serious problems of our time means breaking the cultural trance and requires a change of heart. The whole framework of modernist aesthetics was tied to the objectifying consciousness of the scientific worldview; like scientists, artists in our culture have been conditioned not to worry about the applications or consequences or moral purpose of their activity. It is enough to generate results. But just as the shortcomings of "objective" science are becoming apparent, we are also beginning to perceive how the reductive and neutralizing aspects of aesthetics and "art for art's sake" have significantly removed art from any living social context or moral imperative except that of academic art history and the gallery system. We are beginning to perceive how, by disavowing art's communal dimension, the romantic myth of autonomous individualism has crippled art's effectiveness and influence in the social world.

The quest for freedom and autonomy has been nowhere better summarized for me than in these comments by the painter Georg Baselitz, published in the catalog of his exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London 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.

More than a decade old, these comments by now may sound hopelessly out of date, but in a more recent interview in *Art News*, it was clear that the artist had in no way altered his views. "The idea of changing or improving the world is alien to me and seems ludicrous," Baselitz said. "Society functions, and always has, without the artist. No artist has ever changed anything for better or worse." Hidden behind these comments is the personal and cultural myth that has formed the artist's identity in the modern world: the myth of the solitary genius whose perfection lies in absolute independence from the world. "Life is so horrible," Gustave

Flaubert wrote at the beginning of the modern era, "that one can only bear it by avoiding it. And that can be done by living in the world of art." For Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential truth of the human situation was its contingency, man's sense that he does not belong—is not necessary—to the universe. Since life was arbitrary and meaningless, Sartre advised that we must all learn to live without hope, and the English writer Cyril Connolly summed up a whole cultural ethos of alienation with these now legendary comments: "It is closing time in the gardens of the West. From now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair." Writing about this form of ontological distrust, this vote of "no confidence" in the universe, Colin Wilson in *An Introduction to the New Existentialism* refers to the paradigm of alienation as the "futility hypothesis" of life—the nothingness, estrangement, and alienation that have formed a considerable part of the image we have of ourselves.

My friend Patricia Catto, who teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute, now refers to this particular mind-set as "bad modernism." In a course she gives on reframing the self, her students are instructed about the danger of believing that humans (whether they are artists or not) are somehow outside of, or exempt from, a responsibility to society, or to the environment. We have been taught to experience the self as private, subjective, separate, from others and the world. This notion of individualism has so completely structured artistic identity and colored our view of art that even for an artist like Christo, whose public projects such as *Running Fence* and the more recent *Umbrellas* require the participation and cooperation of thousands of people, inner consciousness is still dominated by the feeling of being independent, solitary, and separate. In an interview in *Flash Art*, Christo commented:

The work of art 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 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.

Christo's scream of freedom is the unwavering, ever-present moral imperative that continues to be brandished politically as well as philosophically in all the modern traditions of Western thought. It reverberated loudly in the intense controversy that raged for several years over the proposed removal of Richard Serra's commissioned sculpture *Tilted Arc* from its site at Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan. Although conceived specifically for the site, the seventy-three-ton leaning curve of welded steel, which was installed in 1981 by the government's Art in Architecture Program, proved so unpopular and obstructive to local office workers that they petitioned to have it removed. As one employee of the U.S. Department of Education stated at the time: "It has dampened our spirits every day. It has turned into a hulk of rusty steel and clearly, at least to us, it doesn't have any appeal. It might have artistic value but just not here . . . and for those of us at the plaza I would like to say, please do us a favor and take it away."

Serra's response, awash in the spirit of "bad modernism," was to sue the government for thirty million dollars because it had "deliberately induced" public hostility toward his work and tried to have it forcibly removed. To remove the work, according to Serra, was to destroy it. Serra sued for breach of contract and violation of his constitutional rights: ten million dollars for his loss of sales and commission, ten million for harm to his artistic reputation, and ten million in punitive damages for violation of his rights. In July 1987, the Federal District Court ruled against Serra, and in March 1989, the sculpture was removed from the site.

What the *Tilted Arc* controversy forces us to consider is whether art that is centered on notions of pure freedom and radical autonomy, and subsequently inserted into the public sphere without regard for the relationship it has to other people, to the community, or any consideration except the pursuit of art, can contribute to the common good. Merely to pose the question, however, indicates that what has most distinguished aesthetic philosophy in the modern paradigm is a desire for art that is absolutely free of the pretensions of doing the world any good. "I don't know what public art is, really," the sculptor Chris Burden once said. "I just make art. Public art is something else, I'm not sure it's art. I think it's

about a social agenda." Just as disinterested and "value-free" science contains no inner restraint within its methodology that would limit what it feels entitled to do, "value-free" aestheticism reveals nothing about the limits art should respect, or the community it might serve.

Modernist aesthetics, concerned with itself as the chief source of value, did not inspire creative participation; rather, it encouraged distancing and depreciation of the Other. Its nonrelational, noninteractive, nonparticipatory orientation did not easily accommodate the more feminine values of care and compassion, of seeing and responding to need. The notion of power that is implied by asserting one's individuality and having one's way through being invulnerable leads, finally, to a deadening of empathy. The model of the artist as a lone genius struggling against society does not allow us to focus on the beneficial and healing role of social interaction, nor does it lend itself to what philosopher David Michael Levin calls "enlightened listening," a listening that is oriented toward the achievement of shared understandings. As Levin writes in *The Listening Self*, "We need to think about 'practices of the self' that *understand* the essential intertwining of self and other, self and society, that are aware of the subtle complexities of this intertwining."

Certainly the sense of being isolated from the world 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. As Nancy Fraser puts it 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." "The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy," states film director Ingmar Bergman. "Thus we finally gather together in one large pen, where we stand and bleat about our loneliness without listening to each other and without realizing that we are smothering each other to death." "Art cannot be a monologue," the French writer Albert Camus once wrote. "Contrary to the current presumption, if there is any man who has no right to solitude, it is the artist."

All of which brings me directly to the question of whether art can build community. Are there viable alternatives to viewing the self in an individualistic manner? And if so, how does this affect our notion of "success"? Can artists and art institutions redefine themselves in less spectatorially oriented ways in order to regain the experience of interconnectivity—of subject and object intertwining—that was lost in dualistic Enlightenment philosophies, which construed the world as a spectacle to be observed from afar by a disembodied eye?

When California artist Jonathan Borofsky and his collaborator, Gary Glassman, traveled in 1985–86 to three different prisons in California in order to make their video documentary *Prisoners*, they did not go in the mode of network reporters intending to observe at a distance and then describe the conditions they found. Instead they went to *listen* to the prisoners in order 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 cement box. Borofsky and Glassman invited prisoners to talk about their lives and about what had gone wrong for them. In the video some of the prisoners share poems they have written or show artworks they have made. Conversing with the video makers, they describe the oppressiveness of life inside a prison, where everything is programmed and people never get to talk spontaneously about themselves because no one is interested. The knowledge that one is being heard, according to Glassman, creates a sense of empowerment.

In Suzanne Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt*, performed in Minneapolis on Mother's Day in 1987, a procession of 430 older women, all dressed in black, sat down together at tables in groups of four, to discuss with each other their accomplishments and disappointments, their hopes and fears about aging, in a ceremonially orchestrated artwork. A prerecorded sound track of the voices of seventy-two women at the tables projected their reflections loud enough to be heard by the audience. "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 anymore," comments one of the women on the audiotape. "I think a lot of senility comes from the

fact that nobody asks you anything," states another. "Nobody asks you to speak. Pretty soon, you lose your memory. I suffer a lot from people not listening to me."

Empathic listening makes room for the Other and decentralizes the ego-self. Giving each person a voice is what builds community and makes art socially responsive. Interaction becomes the medium of expression, an empathic way of seeing through another's eyes. "Like a subjective anthropologist," writes Lacy, "[the artist enters] the territory of the other, and . . . becomes a conduit for [their] experience. The work becomes a metaphor for relationship—which has a healing power." When there is no quick fix for some of our most pressing social problems, according to Lacy, there may be only our ability to witness and feel the reality taking place around us. "This feelingness is a service that artists offer to the world," she says.

After Mierle Laderman Ukeles became the unsalaried, self-appointed artist-in-residence at the New York City Sanitation Department in 1978, she went on rounds with sanitation workers and foremen from fifty-nine municipal districts, talking with them and getting to know them. Her first piece of art was a performance work called *Touch Sanitation*, which went on for eleven months. During that time she visited the five boroughs of New York and shook hands with 8,500 workers. "It was an eight-hour-day performance work," she states. "I'd come in at roll call, then walk their routes with them. . . . I did a ritual in which I faced each person and shook their hand; and I said, 'Thank you for keeping New York City alive.' The real artwork is the handshake itself. When I shake hands with a sanitation man . . . I present this idea and performance to them, and then, in how they respond, they finish the art." *Touch Sanitation* was Ukeles's first attempt to communicate as an artist with the workers, to overcome barriers and open the way to understanding—to bring awareness and caring into her actions by listening.

Art that is rooted in a "listening" self, that cultivates the intertwining of self and Other, suggests a flow-through experience which is not delimited by the self but extends into the community through modes of reciprocal empathy. Because this art is listener-centered rather than vision-oriented, it cannot be fully realized through the mode of self-expression; it

can only come into its own through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices. For many artists now, this means letting previously excluded groups speak directly of their own experience. The audience becomes an active component of the work and is part of the process. This listening orientation challenges the dominant ocularcentric tradition, which suggests that art is an experience available primarily to the eye, and represents a real shift in paradigms. As David Michael Levin states in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, "This may be the time, the appropriate historical moment, to encourage and promote a shift in paradigms, a cultural drift that, to some extent, seems already to be taking place. I am referring, of course, to the drift from seeing to listening, and to the historical potential for a paradigm shift displacing vision and installing the very different influence of listening."

New models put forward by quantum physics, ecology, and systems theory that define the world in terms of interacting processes and relational fields call for integrative modes of thinking that focus on the relational nature of reality rather than on discrete objects. Lacy states, "Focusing on aspects of interaction and relationship rather than on art objects calls for a radical rearrangement in our expectations of what an artist does." It calls for a different approach to making art and requires a different set of skills. To transcend the modernist, vision-centered paradigm and its spectatorial epistemology, we need a reframing process that makes sense of this more interactive, intersubjective practice which is emerging. We cannot judge the new art by the old standards. "Informed by an interactive and receptive normativity, listening generates a very different *episteme* and ontology—a very different metaphysics," writes Levin.

Modernism's confrontational orientation resulted from deep habits of thinking that set in opposition society and the individual as two contrary and antagonistic categories, neither of which could expand or develop except at the expense of the other. The free and self-sufficient individual has long been the ideal of our culture, and artists especially have seen themselves as quintessential free agents, pursuing their own ends. But if modernism, and the art that emerged with it, developed around the notion of a unique and separate self, the art generated by what I have called

"connective aesthetics" is very different. As I have argued in *The Reenchantment of Art*, radical relatedness has dramatic implications for our understanding of art and contributes to a new consciousness of how the self is to be defined and experienced. For one thing, the boundary between self and Other is fluid rather than fixed: the Other is included within the boundary of selfhood. We are talking about a more intersubjective version of the self that is attuned to the interrelational, ecological, and interactive character of reality. "Myself now includes the rainforest," writes Australian deep ecologist John Seed. "It includes clean air and water."

The mode of distanced, objective knowing, removed from moral or social responsibility, has been the animating motif of both science and art in the modern world. Objectivity strips away emotion, wants only the facts, and is detached from feeling. Objectivity serves as a distancing device, presuming a world that stands before us to be seen, surveyed, and manipulated. How, then, can we shift our usual way of thinking about art so that it becomes more compassionate? How do we achieve the "world view of attachment"—attachment to and continuity with the world—that archetypal psychologist James Hillman talks about? To see our interdependence and interconnectedness is the feminine perspective that has been missing not only in our scientific thinking and policy making but in our aesthetic philosophy as well. Care and compassion do not belong to the false "objectivism" of the disinterested gaze; care and compassion are the tools of the soul, but they are often ridiculed by our society, which has been weak in the empathic mode. Gary Zukav puts it well in *The Seat of the Soul*, when he states that there is currently no place for spirituality, or the concerns of the heart, within science, politics, business, or academia. Zukav doesn't mention art, but until recently there has been no particular receptivity there either.

Not long ago, I had occasion to share a lecture podium with the critic Hilton Kramer, who proclaimed, with the force of a typhoon, that art is at its best when it serves only itself and not some other purpose. Things that in his opinion have no relation to art are now being accepted and legitimized as art when, according to Kramer, art is incapable of solving any problems but aesthetic ones. I would argue that much of the work

included in this book contradicts, absolutely, these comments. However, there is no denying that the art world subtly disapproves of artists who choose interaction as their medium, rather than the disembodied eye. Just as creativity in the Western world has been based on an understanding of the self as autonomous and separate, the hegemony of the eye is very strong in our culture. We are obsessed with the gaze. At this point, to challenge the vision-centered paradigm by undermining the presumed spectatorial distance of the audience, or by empowering others and making them aware of their own creativity, is to risk the complaint that one is producing not art but social work. Personally, I have never heard of a social worker who was interested in shaking hands with 8,500 sanitation workers, or who tried to orchestrate a public conversation among four hundred older women about aging. Social workers proceed quite differently from artists in what they do.

To all these objections, I can only say that comparing models of the self based on isolation and on connectedness has given me a different sense of art than I had before and has changed my ideas about what is important. My conclusion is that our culture's romance with individualism is no longer adequate. My own work and thinking have led me to a fieldlike conception of the self that includes more of the environment—a selfhood that releases us into a sense of our radical relatedness. It seems that in many spheres we have finally come up against the limits of a worldview based only on individualism. In the field of psychotherapy, to give just one example, James Hillman, in his book *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World's Getting Worse*, castigates therapy for encouraging us to disengage from the world. He maintains that therapy increases our preoccupation with individual fulfillment and personal growth at the expense of any concern for community or the communal good. Many hackles have been raised in the therapeutic community by Hillman's assertion that therapy has become a self-improvement philosophy which turns us inward, away from the world and its problems. Psychotherapy is only working on the "inside" soul, according to Hillman, while outside, the buildings, the schools, the streets, are sick—the sickness is out there. The patient in need of healing is the world.

Connective aesthetics strikes at the root of this alienation by dissolving the mechanical division between self and world that has prevailed during the modern epoch. World healing begins with the individual who welcomes the Other. In Ukeles's work, for instance, empathy and healing are the parameters, the test of whether the work is, in fact, being carried out paradigmatically. The open hand, extended to each worker, evokes qualities of generosity and care. We need to cultivate the compassionate, relational self as thoroughly as we have cultivated, in long years of abstract thinking, the mind geared to scientific and aesthetic neutrality. As more people acknowledge the need for a new philosophical framework, we are learning to go beyond our culture of separation—the gender, class, and racial hierarchies of an elite Western tradition that has evolved through a process of exclusion and negation.

With its focus on radical individualism and its mandate of keeping art separate from life, modern aesthetics circumscribed the role of the audience to that of a detached spectator-observer. Such art can never build community. For this we need interactive and dialogical practices that draw others into the process and challenge the notion, in the words of Gary Snyder, that "only some people are 'talented' and they become artists and live in San Francisco working in opera and ballet and the rest of us should be satisfied with watching television." Connective aesthetics sees that human nature is deeply embedded in the world. It makes art into a model for connectedness and healing by opening up being to its full dimensionality—not just the disembodied eye. Social context becomes a continuum for interaction, for a process of relating and weaving together, creating a flow in which there is no spectatorial distance, no antagonistic imperative, but rather the reciprocity we find at play in an ecosystem. Within a listener-centered paradigm, the old specializations of artist and audience, creative and uncreative, professional and unprofessional—distinctions between who is and who is not an artist—begin to blur.

To follow this path, I would argue, is more than just a matter of personal taste; it represents the opening of an experimental space in which to institute and practice a new art that is more in tune with the many inter-

active and ecological models emerging in our culture. I believe we will see over the next few decades more art that is essentially social and purposeful, and that rejects the modernist myths of autonomy and neutrality. This book bears witness to the increasing number of artists who are rejecting the product orientation of consumer culture and finding ever more compelling ways of weaving environmental and social responsibility directly into their work. In this complex and worthy endeavor, I sincerely wish them well.

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*In keeping with the nonacademic format of her previous two books, the author chooses to eliminate footnotes from her writing.