
M/E/A/N/I/N/G

CONTEMPORARY ART ISSUES

If we as individuals can set aside our immediate goals for response and sublimate them to the more generous idea of interaction, all would benefit. Really there is no personal sacrifice, it's just a matter of seeing the larger picture. I have heard of many exciting and subversive moments in the New York art-world that are made to circumvent the constrictive and overly competitive commercial scene. Your endeavor, for example, has produced a community that reaches far beyond the New York art world. I hope my response shows that the dialogue you have started there can reach far beyond a limited group; the issues you deal with are keenly felt even by those of us who don't have regular access to your world. There is a wide audience hungry for voices, and for a discourse that many of our own communities lack. There are other examples of what I'm doing around; at least four that I know of in Chicago (the Uncomfortable Spaces). We are people more interested in community than commodity, and who are willing to set aside personal goals to help create a wider set of opportunities.

We can balance our cynicism with progressive naivete. We can establish community-oriented projects without watering down the environment of healthy competition. Let self-interest have a redefined notion of Self to include the community of Selves and lift us all up. Those of us who are trying know how much better off we all would be.

Viva *M/E/A/N/I/N/G!*

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A PROPOSITION

"[L]ife is fragile and death holds the power. That life, occupied as it is with loving, hatching, watching, caressing, singing, is threatened by hatred and death, and must defend itself."—*Hélène Cixous*

I read the "Forum: On Creativity and Community" in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #15 with great interest. I was especially engaged by the last question: Are there contemporary redefinitions of creativity? This is something I've thought much about. Trained as a visual artist, I now am writing my second book about postmodern aesthetics, especially the moral and broadly religious dimensions of artistic creativity — a subject that clearly concerns some of the artists who wrote for the "Forum." Susan Bee talks about utopian dreams; Jackie Brookner about the anguish of the world and passionate engagement. Robert C. Morgan asks what the purpose of art is. But I don't agree with everyone: Daryl Chin suggests that aesthetics ("the very definition of") may be in its death throes; Bailey Doogan and William Pope. L seem to esteem isolation. I want to speak. I liked the image Mira

Schor gave for the community that surrounds (and expounds in) *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*: "a card catalogue of subscribers in a red box in my studio." I'm part of that community, but you don't know me. Here is my answer to the forum: a proposition.

With the questioning and overthrow of avant-garde values in the twentieth century, it is by now a commonplace to say that the artist can no longer be seen as a privileged or idiosyncratic visionary with special access to the prophetic sphere. This view — that the artist is possessed of a semi-divine power of genius — was held by German Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge, the French and Russian Symbolists, and members of the Russian avant-garde such as Kasimir Malevich and Mikhail Matiushin. Some contemporary artists also believe that they have a special gift related to these historical traditions. I have for many years been interested in the possible transmogrifications of the prophetic in the present.

I propose that the artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. This definition of the nature of artistic activity implies both prophetic-visionary consciousness and action. What can these terms really mean today?

We live near the end of the 20th century in a time of growing disparities between nations and even between the citizens in this country. Our present moment in the U. S. is characterized by relative economic decline for the majority of people, unprecedented public and private debt, short term profiteering, inadequate education, stubborn refusal to use resources in the public sphere, and erosion of civil society, which means the inability to transmit values concerning the meaning and purpose of life in general. Market values triumph over human values of love, community, and justice as Cornel West has pointed out in *Prophetic Reflections*. If this situation continues, we may be faced with increasing social disorder, even chaos.

In this context, the roles we define for the artist have moral and ethical consequences. When the artist is primarily an entertainer, attitudes of complacency, satisfaction, and acceptance of the status quo tend to be inculcated. The ramifications of the artist as prophetic critic and visionary move out in quite another direction.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. Who or what is an artist? Carl Sandburg once said that "artist" is a praise word, not to be taken as a self-appellation, but offered by a community to the one who creates. Such an interpretation is very far from any contemporary understanding of how an artist is formed or of what constitutes the artist's community. Our cultural milieu is pluralistic (some would say nihilistic) to the core. No consensus of opinion exists about who may be an artist or about what art is. In our era, everything about art is up for grabs. "Art" is whatever anyone wants it to be at a given moment.

I take a middle path between these two extremes, between Sandburg's conservative stance and the excessive openedness of some

postmodern definitions. Art can be defined as a process of making objects (even if they are conceptual or transitory) that transpose or translate a function, program or impulse (either emotional, aesthetic or economic) into another form. An artist, then, is one who engages in this process. So far, this definition is ideologically neutral. To be an artist does not, in my view, necessitate a specific kind or length of training or background; it does require, however, a commitment to engage in the creative process.

The structure of my proposition, however, is emphatically not neutral; it is declarative. Certainly I understand that this is not the only work an artist could undertake. But I am speaking with and to visual artists and other cultural workers who are concerned with larger questions of their responsibility as artists.

Common lore posits the visual artist as verbally inarticulate, unable to express ideas coherently, one who often simply points to the work while maintaining relative silence about its intention and meaning. In my view this is an abdication of responsibility, a form of unconsciousness difficult to justify in our world. "Our world" has become almost a code, a shorthand way of naming the reality that we live in a precarious and contingent state — existentially, ecologically, politically. To be self-critical is to ask oneself what the point of a work is, to wrestle with its content because one knows there is another consciousness out there who will respond. The artist is, in this sense, *engaged*. The artist perceives her- or himself as an agent, an actor in the world, one whose actions make a difference. The Hebrew biblical prophets were passionate participants in their own milieux. They were less concerned with foretelling the future, a common misconception of what prophecy is, and more concerned with articulating cultural criticism. Artists today may learn by considering how this prophetic process was understood and exercised. Their perspectives are diametrically opposed to all forms of nihilism and world denial.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent *in particular situations*, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. Against every claim for universals, I, like other postmodernists, acknowledge the power of the particular. We live in particular space-time configurations that cannot be inhabited, or really even comprehended fully, by another person. We act in singular and unique situations that call forth specific responses. Such a view presumes a degree of freedom and self-consciousness that is not accessible to everyone because of experiences of interlocking oppressions based on one's gender, class location, race or ethnic background, political values, or other factors.

Nevertheless, to recognize that all insight is perspectival — that there is no Archimedean point, no god's eye view — is to take the first step toward the self-consciousness and awakening of conscience that will orient one's action. We do not need universal norms or values to accomplish this orientation in life, but universal accountability is essential. Universal accountability means that we are answerable and responsible for all our specific actions in particular situations.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, *calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future* in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. To speak of reclamation implies that something has been lost. It has. Assessments of what has been lost in contemporary society vary tremendously depending upon one's ideology. I am especially concerned with the loss of awareness of the sacred and the loss of the ability to imagine the future, rather than the loss of "family values" or other such notions. For many in our largely secular context, especially those for whom the sacred is associated with the exercise of ecclesiastical power and a patriarchal God, to speak of the reclamation of the sacred and the future is controversial. What is sacred for one culture or one individual may remain profane for another. I wish to call attention to a profound sense of mystery and creativity that pervades life (and death) and all things organic and inorganic. To reclaim the sacred is to recover that sense of mystery and an awareness of the productivity that characterizes all living processes.

But I also must ask, what about the fragile, the precarious? What about the earth's ecosystem? What about humans, as individuals and as a species? Both are fragile. Any definition of the sacred that creates a bifurcation between the body, the earth, and that which is beyond human comprehension is dangerous. We are reaping the benefit, if indeed it can be called a benefit, of an attitude that has revered the sacred as something remote from human life and the environment in which it could flourish.

I have explored the nature of spirituality and how it is translated through the senses. Spirituality is a vague term. It conjures the ineffable and mysterious; it points to the beyond or to the deepest inner core. It transcends denomination and religious tradition, for there are many diverse expressions of spirituality in different traditions and cultures. Communities share forms of spiritual practice. Prayer and meditation are both public/collective/shared and private/individual/solitary. Through spiritual disciplines we reach into the greater world and into the self. Spirituality is visionary: it sees what is there, what could be and should be, but probably will not be because of our greed.

To me, spirituality and the divine are linked to the world, especially to the mysterious processes of creativity that encompass both birth and death. Such processes are ongoing; humans participate in them and we strive to give them meaning. This creativity happens, and is expressed, in matrices of relationship, interconnected networks of people loving and hating one another. Artistic creativity is a special case of this ongoing creativity in the world; and I believe that artists have a vocation to take their work seriously as an expression of the sacred dimension of existence.

What of the future? I suggest that moral imagination and conscience, as well as moral action in the world, are linked to our sense that life is ongoing. What happens when people no longer think that there will be a future? Once I heard interviews on National Public Radio with high school students in Washington, D.C. They said there is nothing worth dying for. One young woman also said that she did not expect to live a long life. When such atti-

tudes are widespread, then, as Dostoevsky put it so succinctly in *The Brothers Karamazov*, everything is permitted. All forms of exploitation and violence can be committed if nothing is sacred and the future is unlikely. Or, how is imagination of the future shaped in and by popular culture, especially through film, since the formative 1982 *Blade Runner* and up to the latest violent cyborgian nightmares? This, finally, is related to the last phrase of my earlier proposition.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in *a world that seems in many ways to be dying*. The understanding of the vocation of the artist that I sketch here is based on a particular assessment of our historical moment: ours is a situation of chronic global crises vying for attention. I began with a statement by Hélène Cixous that is related to my convictions about the importance of the prophetic function. Life — all of life, species, forests — is threatened with death, but not a “natural” death. The death that we face is the annihilation caused by human activity gone awry. As Buddhists have always understood, human greed and hatred spiral toward death. In the face of this pervasive power of death, we need to affirm life, to affirm the possibilities of the future. A fundamental change in human values and life, is necessary for both human and planetary survival.

We live and act in a contingent world. This means that profound uncertainty about the results of our action is unavoidable. Despair and nihilism often result from both our individual and collective confrontation with contingency. But even in the face of contingency and uncertainty, creativity — both in life and in art — does not end. Creativity is an ongoing, everyday, ubiquitous activity. Metaphors of birth and regeneration, of decay and death, describe physical and cultural processes of creativity. How artists participate in those processes makes all the difference.

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