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“From the Study to the Studio: Creating Contemplative Art”

**SLIDE – Introduction** My gratitude to those who brought me here to participate in the yearlong symposium on Art and Contemplation! Focus of talk on 3 questions: Just what is contemplative art? How do we study it? And how do we make it? I will explore these 3 intersecting questions in what follows.

**SLIDE —0-10 Exhibition photo.** But before I get into these questions, a few words about why I decided to take this particular approach to the topic of the yearlong symposium. When I began graduate study at Harvard in religion and art history, I was working on the art of the Russian avant-garde, from Vasily Kandinsky to the monumental sculpture of Vera Mukhina. But I focused especially on the art of Kasimir Malevich, whose *Black Square* of 1913-15 initiated the development of abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And I was especially fascinated by Malevich’s statement that *Black Square* was an “icon” for our time.

**SLIDE —** During my initial grad art history seminar at Harvard, I was profoundly affected by Professor Oleg Grabar’s exhortation [*his voice*]: “you people, each of you training to become an art historian should study at least 10 monuments of world cultures and not work in some art historical backwater.” He never exactly what that meant, but this was a jolting and powerful statement. I took his suggestion quite seriously, and I incorporated what I learned into my teaching over many years. How can we be citizens of conscience in this troubled world of ours if we do not reach out to understand and engage the lives, including the suffering, of others. I believe that the world needs this, the world begs for this. Just now I’m thinking of the poignant and painful 2014 film *Timbuktu*, which was nominated for an Academy Award last year. (Thinking also of Kim Vrudny’s work in South Africa.)

**SLIDE: art examples** So, with this in mind, what do I mean by “contemplative art”? Think with me about this from two sides. First, we could say that contemplative art is work that engages the viewer to *be* contemplative or to practice contemplation. There is, however, no single way to describe or engage in contemplative practice. The Latin *contemplari* means to observe, consider, or gaze attentively. This definition gives clues about the varied forms of contemplative practice, which include sitting, standing, walking, and lying down; using attitudes of not doing; deep listening, pondering, and radical questioning; guided imagery and active imagination; exercises with the body; focusing techniques such as those developed by Eugene Gendlin; concentrated language experiments with freewriting, poetry, and journals; beholding (which we practiced this afternoon); and creation of visual images to represent such experiences. The word mindfulness is often used to describe contemplative practice. In its most basic form, it means moment-by-moment present awareness, which is available to everyone, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation.

Second, we could say that contemplative art is created by artists working in a contemplative mode. Traditional religious artists such as icon writers and thangka painters were and are engaged in practices of inner purification through their work. In this regard, the artist has to be committed to transforming the self through cultivating virtues such as attentiveness, detachment, patience, humility, and silence. These artists give form to religious and moral

teachings within a particular tradition. As such, the artist's work can be seen as expressing a sense of calling—a vocation—to make spiritual teachings available to various publics. For artists already dedicated to a particular practice such as Christian prayer, Hindu yoga, or Buddhist meditation, this working process makes sense.

But I believe that this inner dimension of art as contemplative practice is also accessible to all artists, regardless of religious or spiritual orientation. What if, as a regular part of education in the arts, artists and art historians were taught how to meditate or were trained in the techniques of visualization? What about the role of silence? In the howl of contemporary life, where do we have the time or the space for silence? Certainly, there are a few such places, such as the artist's or writer's studio. Having just concluded 100 days of meditation and art in my own studio, I can say that one of the most significant aspects was spending so much time in solitude. Fostering silence allows one to experience time and space, form and color, differently. Especially given the information overload and speed of contemporary life, contemplation helps to quiet inner and outer chatter and to increase the ability to visualize and imagine. In particular, if speed cauterizes the imagination, as I have argued for years, then slowing down is an effective means for cultivating imagination and creativity.

The word “practice” is both a verb and noun, and it means making, doing, and acting. But more than this, it implies discipline, repetition, and habit. The word derives from the Late Latin *practice*, which refers to the practical as against the contemplative life. How curious that we use this word now to engage the contemplative life once again!

**So**, let's look in a little more detail at some of these monuments of world art, all of which might be called examples of contemplative art. There is so much to say about each one, so feel free to ask questions about them later.

**SLIDE** --The Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi in India was built between 100 B.C.E. and 100 C.E., and like most ancient stupas it is a shrine for the Buddha's and saints' relics. Massively decorated with secular people, the stupa cannot be entered, only circumambulated. By carrying out prayer rituals around the exterior of the structure, a viewer is blessed. Through these rituals, a person would reenact the Buddha's birth into the world of form, his enlightenment and separation from the world, his first act of translating ineffable truths, and his attainment of *nirvana*. Studying the Stupa at Sanchi was instrumental in my developing understanding of the ritual power of art, and it provided the impetus for a series of 50 paintings of stupa that I exhibited in 2013.

**SLIDE** -- Ryoanji, a Zen monastery in Kyoto, Japan, is the site of one of the most famous Zen gardens. It was probably designed by the fifteenth-century Zen priest Tessen Soki, who wrote that, in it, thirty thousand miles seem to be reduced to the distance of a single foot. About the size of a tennis court, the ground there is covered by carefully raked quartz sand. Fifteen stones are arranged in five groups, so that only 14 can be seen from any one vantage point. The garden has been called "the ultimate ideal landscape, a garden of the mind." The idea that architectural structures and physical environments could describe and literally embody ritual space and time helped to shape my evolving understanding of the function of the visual arts. I locate here the beginnings of my intellectual and aesthetic commitment to creating contemplative space, an interest that has continued to the present. I especially worked actively in this arena between 1999 and 2013 in Jamestown, Colorado.

**SLIDE** – The *Spas Nerukotvornyi*, the Savior Not Made by Human Hands, is now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, along with 2 other of the most famous Orthodox icons, the Virgin of Vladimir and the Holy Trinity. The *Spas* is traditionally venerated on the first Sunday of Lent, when the church celebrates the dogma of the Incarnation and the victory of the use of holy images at the Nicean Council of 787. As art historian Sherwin Simmons observes, "the *Spas nerukotvornyi* is the ultimate example of the iconic tradition just as the *Mona Lisa* had become the supreme image of Renaissance-based Western painting." The icon was painted (or more properly, written) in the town of Novgorod in the late twelfth century, and was for many years in the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin. The story on which this icon and all versions of the Veil of Veronica are based is fascinating. Plus, this icon invites much formal consideration. The nature of the *Spas* as a religious icon prevents the viewer's complete identification with Christ. The stylization of his face and the rich gold material used in its construction suggest otherworldliness and transformation. The eyes especially look out into this world and into another world.

I had instruction in icon writing in the early 1990s, preparing birch panels, then painting 8 layers of gesso, sanding between layers to create a smooth surface. I painted the Christ Pantocrator with bible and teaching gesture (demonstrate gesture: thumb touches ring finger of right hand). I have not made icons since that experience, but seeing the original Savior, Virgin of Vladimir, the Holy Trinity + Malevich's Black Square at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1995 was an astonishing experience.

**SLIDE** -- Carved in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century, this stone (called an *atal* or *akwanshi*), is 29 in. tall, carved from basalt (the hardest stone other than diamond!), which is rare in sub-Saharan Africa, esp. in Cross River area of Nigeria. About three hundred works have been documented from the forested region of central Nigeria. The Ejagham peoples, who live in this region, call them *akwanshi* (dead person in the ground); neighboring groups refer to monoliths such as this one as *atal* (the stone). Perhaps intended to memorialize the dead, their ovoid forms were carved from volcanic boulders by grinding or pecking with stone tools to create a human face and a simplified body. This ovoid stone monolith has a face carved in low relief on front. Face consists of long nose, deeply-carved round mouth, and small eyes with multiple brow lines. The face is framed by raised lines with smooth domed top and spirals and angular lines carved below. I have speculated about what these lines indicate, and will talk more about how this stone inspired a marble sculpture that I worked on for 4 years.

**SLIDE** The Tibetan *Wheel of Existence* thangka has many exemplars dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The word thangka means, simply, flat painting. The Wheel of Existence is a didactic painting, an overview of Buddhist principles. In particular, it depicts fundamental Buddhist teachings about the origins, causes, and alleviation of suffering. Traditionally, every temple, monastery, or abbey had this thangka in its vestibule.

**SLIDE** To "read" the diagram, you start at the center and move outward through four concentric wheels. Look at the diagrammatic version.

**SLIDE** Take a look at the center, where we see a black pig, a red rooster, and a green snake that symbolize the three poisons, three qualities that literally poison experience, perpetuate suffering, and cause rebirth in samsara. Samsara is the name given to this world where we live. The pig symbolizes ignorance and confusion; the bird desire, attachment, and greed; and the snake hatred and aversion. At a fundamental level, this thangka seems to be saying that

ignorance drives our lives. We assume that phenomena exist, that they are solid and permanent, but this is not true. All phenomena arise through interdependent processes, and therefore are not intrinsic in themselves. All phenomena are impermanent; nothing is permanent. To paraphrase Buddhist scholar Jeffrey Hopkins, because of our confusion we misapprehend the status of persons and things. We are drawn into desire for and attachment to what we like or want, and hatred and aversion for what blocks our desires. If we could eradicate our ignorance, hatred, and attachment, we would be enlightened. And that would be nirvana, liberation from samsara.

**SLIDE** The original *Black Square* is in such bad shape that it is not exhibited (this is an old slide of the original), but a later version from the 1920s in the Tretyakov: Malevich's painting presents a considerable challenge to an interpreter. I truly believe that it remains one of the great ptgs of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.! On the one hand, it seems as though there is little to say about such a minimal painting. Its otherness and seeming non-referentiality aroused antipathy and curiosity when it was first exhibited, and the painting continues to arouse such responses today. On the other hand, it is a vivid painting that in many ways refers to and parallels the *Spas*. In his writing about this and other paintings Malevich focused on the "supremacy of pure feeling," trying to rediscover a more "pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of 'things'." Suprematist feeling, however, was never meant to be synonymous with personal emotion. Rather, Malevich referred to a supra-personal or spiritual feeling to be conveyed through the work. Interestingly, xrays of this painting show that the original composition contained several crosses, partially visible here. When it was first exhibited in the *krasnyi ugol* of the "0-10" Last Futurist Painting Exhibition in Petrograd, Malevich's *Black Square* was seen as a contemporary icon.

**Slide--*The Artist Is Present, 2010***: Along with artists such as Rachel Rosenthal and Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramovic is one of the grandmothers of performance art. *The Artist Is Present* took place over 600 hours in 2010. During this period she sat in a chair, first at a table in the museum atrium where visitors would come, one at a time, to sit facing her. Near the end of April, however, she had the table removed in order to simplify the setting. As she said in an interview at the end of the exhibition, "I had a man with a wheelchair and in the middle of this piece I realized that I didn't even know if he had legs. . . . So I decided to remove the table and . . . then the piece started making sense to me. I know now that I'm really interested more and more in immaterial art" (Stigh and Jackson 2010). This work of art was, as Abramović said, "about stillness and about literally doing nothing and being in the present."

**SLIDE.** Just before beginning my studio retreat, which ended one week ago, I saw artist Laurie Anderson's 2015 film *Heart of a Dog*. (Note youtube video URL.) I sat in the small dark theatre scrawling on an index card throughout the film. On one level the film is an extended meditation on the deaths of her beloved animal companion Lolabell, her mother, and her husband Lou Reed. Yet, *Heart of a Dog* offers its viewers pith instructions for living and for contemplative practice. "What are our days for?" she asks. "To wake us up." "Let me learn how to feel sad without being sad," she says at one point. What is a worthy life goal? "To live in the gap between thoughts, feelings, and experiences, which is luminous and empty, recognizing everything as the play of your own mind." Anderson intones: "Recognize this . . . recognize this . . ." "Life," she says near the film's end, "is a pilgrimage towards death and death results in the release of love." I left the theater in an altered awake state. Anderson used a narrative method to express and evoke meditative wisdom.

This is certainly only a partial list of what I'm calling the "monuments of world art" – admittedly a very personal selection based on my interest in and commitment to the contemplative arts. We can talk about other examples later if you are interested.<sup>1</sup> I'm curious what some of your own favorite monuments are!

Several of the monuments I've just described have inspired my studio work, so I'll turn to some of these works now. And I need to make a clear disclaimer here: in no way do I mean to call my own art "monumental" in the sense that I have used this term.

**Slides** -- My series of more than 50 stupas were painted over 2+ years, and the first ones were based on the Great Stupa at Sanchi. I could say that the series had a long and unusual incubation. In Fall 1969 I took an undergraduate course on Indian art, and no other historical artifact gripped me like the Great Stupa. In the early 1980s, I made a series of drawings inspired by its structure. Later I studied and taught about it. Then, in 2011 while working as a hospice volunteer, I had the privilege of being with a 100-year-old man as he died. We gazed wordlessly at each other until his eyes lost focus and his breathing stopped. A day later in my studio, I mused about how to give form to this profound experience. Suddenly, without forethought, I was making imaginative images of Sanchi with eyes and words on the paper.

For me the stupa is an image about death, veneration, and power in nature. Stupas exist in most Buddhist cultures of Asia and have migrated around the world, including Colorado. Essentially, the stupa is a reliquary, not unlike medieval vessels for a saint's relics, for it often holds the ashes and remains of a holy figure.

**SLIDE** These are 2 examples of traditional Tibetan stupas, at least in outer form. In ancient Tibet—a land of altitude and bitter cold, snow and wind—stupas were sometimes constructed in the landscape in order to quell natural forces. Here, a crystal stupa & an invisible stupa . . . say more if time.

**SLIDE OF MAP**-- Some of you will be familiar with *Book of This Place: The Land, Art, and Spirituality*, which I published in 2009. This book is about the first decade of my work to create a contemplative garden, work that was inspired by Zen gardens such as Ryoanji. The 1-acre site included:

1. a circumambulation path,
2. a medicinal garden with about 53 species of plants,
3. a garlic "necklace,"
4. fruit trees, and
5. a stone yard where I carved marble sculptures, most of which were placed on the site and contained text. This book ends with descriptions of what my husband and I had planned, but sometimes vivid dreams vanish overnight, and so it was when the site was destroyed in September 2013 by extensive flooding.

**SLIDE:** The 38" tall marble PRACTICE CHAIR rested on a steatite base in a grove of 9 willow trees. Four of its faces were carved with text. The back of the chair was highly polished, with gleaming gold veins. The reverse side of the upright back displayed the outline of a snake, left from the original rotary blades that cut the stone. I thought of this as the spirit of the stone. The title of the chair, which is carved below the seat, is a double entendre. PRACTICE CHAIR provided me with practice in making a chair, yet it also was a place *for* contemplative practice.

Three other faces of the chair were engraved with text: the seat of the chair read TAKE ONE SEAT; one side of the base said EMPTINESS, the other NO SELF.

This marble seat, titled the “SIT stone,” is carved from a chunk of marble that had large two-inch holes left by the core drilling equipment in the quarry. On its back the word "sit" was engraved in Roman italic letters, which were inlaid with gold leaf. One of the eight auspicious symbols, a wheel of dharma, was carved in bas relief. The seat was comfortable, with a thin marble slab on which to rest one's folded legs. Sitting there I would observe the flow of the river, or the mountain above.

**SLIDE** -- ALTAR was the most anthropomorphic sculpture that I have carved and it was inspired by the *atal*. [Describe drawings/details.] Nine shelves with rounded edges dipped and glided around three sides of the stone. A single abstracted breast emerged near the top, a reference to a beloved friend's death from breast cancer. A text was inscribed on one polished side. When completed, it stood on a turning pin, atop a sandstone base and gorgeous onyx pedestal, five and a half feet tall. Like 2 other monoliths I had carved, *Altar* could be rotated by the viewer with the lightest touch. The impetus for carving this stone was the experience of six deaths in an eight-month period that I already mentioned. *Altar* was meant to honor these individuals and I also hoped that viewers might put small objects on its shelves, the way visitors leave offerings at a kiosk near traditional Buddhist stupas. With its engraved text declaring "*This Precious Human Life*," it definitely served me as a daily reminder to contemplate the fragility and value of life and the inevitability of death. It took more than 4 years to complete the ALTAR stone, and it disappeared in the flood. 15 of my sculptures were broken or buried. But losing that particular stone . . . well, I'm sure you can imagine the impact. To put it mildly, this is one of the most powerful experiences of impermanence that I have yet internalized!

**SLIDE** – a couple of examples of inspiration from Buddhist thangkas. First, some time ago I began painting a thangka of Padmasambhava, who reputedly brought Buddhism to Tibet. He is considered the Second Buddha. **Speak a little about the process:** stretching pima cotton on a traditional frame, about 12 layers of toned gesso, many preliminary drawings, how slow the painting is with detailed stippling and careful brush work.

**SLIDE** Recently I created a series of 108 practice cards; and here are a few. I first encountered the idea of artists creating 100s of images in a series when I studied the art of 19<sup>th</sup> c. Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, both of whom painted or printed 100 views—Mt. Fuji, the work of 100 poets, views of Edo. Artist and Naropa University professor Robert Spellman inspired my first series of 100 drawings of Ivydell, the site where we lived in Jamestown. Later I painted 108 *Cantos for This Place*, some of which were exhibited at United Theological Seminary a few years ago.

These Practice Cards, which are related to a particular meditation practice, certainly act as meditative aids for me. After I had been painting them for a while, I realized that the cards are similar to *tsakli* or initiation cards, which are miniature Buddhist paintings, usually produced in sets of 6 to 100. Traditionally used in ritual empowerments and in the training of monastics, they also can be used to create mandalas, transmit teachings, act as visualization aids or substitutes for ceremonial items, and they can be used to help a dying person through the death process. A wide range of subjects are depicted in *tsakli*—from main deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and protectors, to their various power attributes and appropriate offerings. Whereas thangka paintings usually

depict such subjects in detail, tsakli are unique in that they generally focus on just one item at a time. Subjects are similar to thangkas, but simplified due to their small size.

**SLIDE** For instance, my thangka of Guru Rinpoche shows him with all of his attributes, but one tsakli might have just his robed body. Another card might depict his khatvanga, another his dorje, another the offerings, and so on.

I'd like to show you three other fairly recent examples of my studio art that are less directly related to historical art. Each of these is quite large; and each involves various kinds of contemplative practice: especially walking, sitting, lying down, and reciting prayers.

**SLIDE--Practice Map:** During about 4 years of an intensive so-called "preliminary" practice, I created a visual record of my activities – meditating on the cushion, prostrations, walking while reciting mantras, and more. I stopped making that visual record after nearly 2 years, before I was done with the daily practice . . . the result was a 35-foot long scroll that I have exhibited twice.

**Slide--Compassion Practice:** During another period, also about two years, I worked on a drawing called *Compassion Practice*, reciting and writing prayers over and over again on a 5' x 6' sheet of black paper, 21 layers in all. This turned into quite an arduous practice in itself! There were 3 prayers. One prayer is called the Lovingkindness meditation, and I think of it as an ecumenical prayer: "may I be filled with lovingkindness, may I be well, may I be peaceful and at ease, may I be happy. May you be filled with lovingkindness, may you be well, may you be peaceful and at ease, may you be happy." May we be filled with lovingkindness may we be well, may we be peaceful and at ease, may we be happy." This past year I began another such large drawing, this time writing aspiration prayers.

**SLIDE** Finally, this is *Everything I Know 2*, the second in an ongoing series of attempts to draw and paint virtually everything I know! I finished it last fall and am working on #3 now. We looked at and talked about this drawing earlier today during a session of visio-divina, or what I have call "beholding" in my secular university context. I'm not sure what to say about it here, except that it contains maps of where I've lived and where I've traveled, images and texts related to my meditation practice, a map of Ivydell, the site I described in *BoTP* and a representation of the 2013 floods that destroyed so much.

**SLIDE:** So, with all of that as background, let's talk!

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<sup>1</sup> Other examples from my list of world monuments: the *Nike of Samothrace*, Remedios Varo's 1955 *Creation of the Birds*, Navaho rituals and sandpaintings, Aboriginal dreamtime paintings, and Ndebele painted houses.