

## **Toward the Interior**

### **Some Thoughts on a New Direction for Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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In response to the atrocities that occurred on September 11, 2001, a forum was created within the New York art world whereby artists and other cultural workers would convene to discuss possibilities for what we might have to offer our culture in the midst of this crisis. The initial meeting, held just three weeks after September 11, raised the possibility of an ongoing series of meetings for all seriously concerned denizens of the art world, with the ultimate vision of becoming a fully articulated cultural project. With high hopes for this eventuality, its organizers gave the project the ambitious title: "911—The September 11 Project: Cultural Intervention in Civic Society."

For those of us in the arts, the subject was of great and immediate interest, for in addition to feeling that basic human urge to participate in and contribute to a collective effort the magnitude of which might only be witnessed once in a lifetime, we are also, many of us, afflicted with a curiously urgent need to justify what we do. The devastation wrought on New York City seems to have brought with it the annihilation of some of our best internal defenses, foremost among these being the self-evident nature of the importance of art in culture. In the mad scramble to come to terms with and re-orient ourselves in a reality that has now fully exposed to us in America its potential for brutality, we in the arts fear we have been rendered irrelevant.

This looming uneasiness on the part of artists, this ugly specter of irrelevance, might explain a certain subtle bias I detected in the tone of the first *911* meeting, a bias having to do with a shift away from artists as makers of art toward artists as social activists. This bias, evident in the subtitle of the project—"Cultural Intervention in Civic Society"—suggests to me the high degree to which artists feel that the only way we can be effective in culture is by moving beyond the confines of our studios and out into the public arena.

The impulse toward direct cultural intervention is understandable, given both the severity of the situation at hand and what seems to be the utter entrenchment of the conventional view of art's role in culture. The organizers of the *911 Project* cite in their introductory announcement just such a view as expressed in *The New York Times* shortly after the attacks, the essence of which is that people in crisis often turn to art for comfort, relief, a short respite from (a now exceedingly-harsh) reality. Art as anodyne, as palliative, as temporary escape: this view, the conventional, trivializes art even in normal times. It seems clear that *The September 11 Project* was created at least in part to defy this belittling view of what art and artists are about. What is proposed instead is a variety of actions for the artist-as-world-citizen, ranging from the posting of crisis boards on gallery and museum websites to the waging of petition campaigns against terrorism—all of which are well-intentioned and appropriate means of effecting social change. *But what about art itself?* My own question is not what artists can do as citizens in whatever capacity, but whether there is something about art itself, something intrinsic to it—something more subtle and more meaningful than the mere pleasantness indicated by the conventional view—that it might have to offer humanity, crisis-stricken or otherwise?

What is art's role in culture? What is its function—beyond that which it serves its maker? What makes art worth doing (and experiencing) in a culture that often seems utterly indifferent to its aims, values, and aspirations? These are questions that have haunted me all of my adult life, since I have essentially committed myself to art's cause, and since I find I cannot reconcile myself to a trivial life. I came to a

career in art because to me art has always promised, at very least, a meaningful life (literally: a life full of meaning). Failing all else (*i.e.*, money, success), art, it seemed, would make life rich and full, worthy of my existence. But over the course of my life I have all too often doubted that the richness of my interior life has had any bearing whatsoever on "external reality." Has my life, my work, been little more than an elaborate exercise in solipsism? Never before have these questions pressed down on me with quite the urgency that they have in the weeks since September 11. Like every other sensitive and thoughtful person alive today, I am deeply affected by the enormity of the tragedy, I recognize that it will have far-reaching implications for a long time to come, and, now more than ever before, I want to do something *that matters*.

In order to even approach these questions about the potential of art and its relevance in culture today, it is first necessary to clear the way of several insidious misconceptions about art<sup>1</sup> that seem to hang in the very air we breathe in early 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The following five points (with the exception of the fifth, which seems to be a more recent phenomenon) can be subsumed within the category of the aforementioned "conventional view," but since they are rather specific, I feel they merit individual attention. I will begin, then, by striking them out one by one, until some kind of ground is reached from which it might be possible to build a foundation.

### **(1) Art is Entertainment.**

Art is emphatically not entertainment. Entertainment, of which there is no dearth in this culture, provides distraction or diversion from a reality that is (presumably) unpleasant. Art, by contrast, seeks to engage that reality rather than shut it out, however unpleasant it may seem to be. While the stimulation that entertainment provides fades quickly upon re-entry into reality, that which is offered by art lingers because it has reached a depth inaccessible to entertainment. While entertainment is content to glide around on the surfaces of things, art is not content until it leaves its mark, however small, as a subtle shift in one's interior organization. Entertainment is essentially therefore a rejection of reality; art, on the other hand, is its highest affirmation.

### **(2) Art is Decoration.**

Art is not decoration, although it may contain elements that are decorative. Decoration is satisfied to improve the look and feel of one's surroundings by enhancing the sensory environment with titillating stimuli. Art, even when it aspires to be beautiful, is not satisfied until it achieves meaning. Decoration is therefore one-dimensional stimulation, and in and of itself it is harmless and sometimes benevolent. Successful art is always multi-dimensional; it is not satisfied with beauty for its own sake but is rather incomplete unless its beauty, however severe, is also a vehicle for meaning.

### **(3) Art is Illustration.**

Art does not concern itself with illustrating ideas, however lofty and noble. Illustration is essentially a kind of translation: a process by which an abstraction or idea is made visible (or audible, or palpable, *etc.*). In a successful illustration, a specific correspondence is maintained between the idea and its representation. Art, by contrast, is never satisfied with such literalness; its meaning is never one fixed, preconceived idea. Art is multivalent; its meanings, references, and associations are always multiple and diverse, and fluid rather than fixed. Art's very success or failure rests on its ability to continue to generate meanings over time. It does not die when one "gets it." In art there is no "getting it."

#### **(4) Art is Propaganda.**

While there is no doubt that art activates the mind, it is certainly not art's aim to teach (less still to preach) morals, values, or ideologies. At its highest level, art offers a way of thinking—or more accurately, a way of knowing, an epistemology<sup>ii</sup>— but it is not art's business to disseminate opinions or judgements, political or otherwise. Art has no answers to give, no morals to issue from on high.

#### **(5) Art is the By-Product of a Career.**

If anything, it is the other way around: a career in the arts is the by-product of serious and sustained art-making. Art is not made in order to fashion or further advance the career of the artist. When it is, the artist ceases to be an artist and becomes instead a careerist. The difference between the two is simple: in the case of the artist, the career follows and serves the internal necessities of the art-making, while in the other case, the art-making functions as a means, or currency, by which other things are attained.

If art is none of these, what, then, is it?

In fact it is the very condition of uncertainty that is the hallmark of art. Central to this condition is a willingness to let go of definite answers, and to instead enter into and become enveloped by the questions. Answers—"facts" that we inherit from our culture—are what govern normal everyday reality, for the excellent reason that it would be impossible to function normally without them. But if there were not also questions, or exploratory probes into the murky areas in between the established facts, the accepted notions that constitute conventional reality would become rigid, mechanical, and oppressive. It is the questions that keep the answers alive.

Questions imply an attitude of openness, an orientation or a way or positioning oneself in the world, in which one has agreed to suspend judgement for a time and instead take in the evidence. I mean evidence here quite literally, as that which is evident: both that which presents itself to the senses *and* the natural processes of the mind itself as it takes in the sense data (associations are made, memories summoned, feelings aroused). In the absence of pre-conceived ideas about how things ought to fit together, the mind is free to find new connections, new arrangements, new possibilities amid the amorphous flux of apparently conflicting and non-sensical data.

Art is essentially a way of experiencing the world that is open rather than closed, inclusive rather than exclusive, and integrative rather than divisive. It begins with the impulse to transcend ordinary modes of thinking and being, such as the age-old division of the world into binary oppositions (good and evil, mind and matter, us and them, *etc.*) and moves steadily toward a full embrace of ambiguity, uncertainty, ambivalence, paradox. Everything is allowed to exist all at once, and because of this fullness the mind gains access to regions that are left untouched by ordinary thinking and being. Having faith in art means ultimately having faith in an intelligence much greater than thought, which is severely limited by logic and language and their constructs. Anyone who has ever been profoundly moved by a great work of art but is yet unable to say exactly why it affected him/her as it did has met this intelligence. Thought, however sophisticated, is simply not sufficient to grasp the most profound and complex things.

None of this is to suggest that art comes easily even to those who spend their entire lives engaged in serious art-making. Art is called a discipline because it is precisely that: it takes intense practice. Artists, like other human beings, naturally crave certainty and the sense of security it provides. They are only unlike their fellow human beings in their willingness to cast that need aside for the possibility of the greater reward that might be realized in its absence. The thrill—and the horror—of being an artist lies precisely in this unknowingness, for only in this (often terrifying) void is real discovery possible. With the removal of the

"knowns," a new connection might be made between seemingly disparate things, a new metaphor might emerge for a previously incomprehensible phenomenon, a new unity might be formed from ideas that had been divergent or diffuse.

What does any of this have to do with the world crisis in which we now find ourselves? Rather than trying to fabricate an answer, we might do well to remind ourselves that so much of what constitutes "external reality"— including all political and ideological systems and structures— has its origin in the human mind, whose capacious intelligence both contains and far surpasses "rational" thought. What art really has to offer humanity now, as always, will not come in the way of relief or solace, because it is something much more fundamental, more subtle, and ultimately more comprehensive. What it has to offer is something that will do very little to treat the symptoms of our global dis-ease, to mitigate the anxiety we suffer, or to allay our overwhelming fears about the future. Art is, and has always been, addressed to the disease itself: the human need for certainty and security in a world that is inherently uncertain and insecure. What art has to offer is the possibility of another way of being in the world: a way of heightened perception (and conception) through suspension of judgement and postponement of action; a way of really experiencing questions without seeking definite answers or clinging to prefabricated ones; a way of deeper insight and richer appreciation for the complexity and diversity of our world as it is.

Art offers this possibility, and while I have no illusions about the likelihood that art will bring about a new world order, art seems to me the most eloquent plea for the resuscitation—and then perhaps evolution—of the interior life, for it is here, if anywhere, that our hope for the future lies waiting.

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<sup>i</sup> By art here (and hereafter) I mean only art in its purest sense: fine art, which serves no utilitarian purpose but rather is created by and for reasons that transcend practicality or external necessity.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that art's epistemology differs radically from the rational approaches to knowledge such as those embodied by science and philosophy, primarily in that its "truths" cannot be verified, corroborated, or otherwise definitively proven.