

ART FOR EARTH'S SAKE by Suzi Gablik

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A personal memoir of a dissident critic who wants to make art as if the world matters.

MANY PEOPLE over the years have asked me what caused my thinking to change and why I came to abandon the modernist culture in which I had been so extensively schooled. What caused my view of art to undergo such a radical shift?

Looking back on it all now, I realize that the very act of writing books on cultural themes has been a learning process for me. Writing is a way of testing values, principles and beliefs. During the process, my own consciousness gets rearranged.

My sense of art was radically changed, for instance, by writing *The Re-enchantment of Art*, an undertaking that led me to question the very roots of modern aesthetic structure. That book represents my epistemological “break” with the paradigm of vision and the disembodied eye as the axiomatic basis for artistic practice, and also with the figure of the artist as a lone rebel genius, an outsider struggling against society.

When I was young I thought I knew what I believed. Growing up in post-war New York City during the salad days of modernism, I belonged to a community of believers whose religion was art. At eighteen, I was a devotee of John Cage concerts and the Living Theater. In those days, I was a sophisticated innocent, part of a New York art world that defined my ambitions, my relationships, my pleasures and my pains.

I can still remember my initiation into modern aesthetics, at the time a small but doctrinaire religion, and how much it affected me. It took place in a seminar class taught by the painter Robert Motherwell, when I was a student at Hunter College more than forty years ago. Along with others of my generation, I was trained to view art as a specialized pursuit, devoid of practical or social goals. The concept of “art for art’s sake” — art’s inherent purposelessness — was not to be tinkered with, like theological law. Patriarchal philosophy declared art to be self-sufficient and “value-free”. Artists cultivated the image of themselves as eccentric and disaffiliated loners, held in suspension by art’s protective bubble.

Motherwell was a lively man with clever, prudent eyes and a sensual mouth. He would arrive in class every week, and I would shake with excitement, even though we spent a whole semester in an all-consuming study of a single essay, “The Dehumanization of Art”, sinking slowly inside its every syllable. Written by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset in 1925, this commanding text was read like scripture by the Abstract Expressionists.

From the beginning there was a kind of sublime simplicity to the way Ortega defined art as disinterested play — a sort of prodigious game whose primary purpose was in mastering the game itself. Modern art, he claimed, was “a thing of no consequence”, ill-equipped to take on the salvation of humankind; a present-day artist, Ortega claimed, would be thunderstruck if he were entrusted with so enormous a mission. If any social function could be ascribed to art at all, it was the function to have no function.

WE STILL LIVE in the fallout from this philosophy, as testified to by this exchange between the painter Georg Baselitz and an art critic from the New York Times, during Baselitz’s 1995 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. Baselitz was asked what role he thinks art plays in society. “The same role as a good shoe, nothing more,” he replied. And with an exactly similar breeziness, he declared on

another, much earlier occasion: “The idea of changing or improving the world is alien to me and seems ludicrous. Society functions, and always has, without the artist. No artist has ever changed anything for better or worse.”

Ultimately, these words became a kind of rallying cry — only in reverse — for me. On the one hand, they made me crazy, but on the other, they helped me to break new ground.

As a critic I have never been interested in writing reviews or catalogue essays. What has interested me is trying to understand the nature of our cultural myths and how they evolve — the institutional framework we take for granted, which subtly but lethally determines our lives. I first began to write about my disenchantment with the modernist myths of “value-free” aesthetics and “inherently purposeless” art in *Has Modernism Failed?*, a book that questions whether, in leaving behind the modern era, we were leaving behind a period of great success and resonant creativity, or a period of impoverishment and decline. I was, myself, living these questions as I wrote them, and undergoing my own acute crisis of credibility about the core truths of modernity — secularism, individualism, bureaucracy and pluralism — all of which, in our society, have reduced the mythic and the sacred to rags. In the art world, it had become all too obvious how the goals of manic production and consumption, and the maximizing of profits, which are crucial to our society’s notion of success, had become ultimate goals for the artist, too.

Art is not some ancillary phenomenon; it has been heavily implicated in this ideology. Italian painter Sandro Chia nailed the whole experience once in these comments from an interview in *Art in America*. “I work for a few months,” he said, “then I go to a gallery and show the dealer my work. The work is accepted, the dealer makes a selection, then an installation. People come and say you’re good or not so good, then they pay for these paintings and hang them on other walls. They give cocktail parties and we all go to restaurants and meet girls. I think this is the weirdest scene in the world.” In the problematic cultural ambience in which I was living, modern art had suffered a certain moral lapse.

Certainly it must be said that defining and recognizing an artist’s worth through the fact of showing or not showing, selling or not

selling, diminishes their capacity for constructive thought and action. Like scientists in our culture, however, artists have been encouraged not to worry about the applications, consequences or moral purpose of their activity. The critic Arthur C. Danto has referred to this state of affairs as “the disenfranchisement of art”, because the hidden constraints of a morally neutral, art-for-art’s-sake philosophy is that it has led to the marginalized condition of artists in society. Autonomy and self-sufficiency have condemned art to social impotence and allowed it to become sucked into the giant web of all our cultural addictions — to work, money, possessions, prestige, materialism — and to the whole psychology of affluence that is now threatening the ecosystem in which we live with its dysfunctional values and way of life.

By the time I finished writing *Has Modernism Failed?*, I was no longer a contented product of the old system. The modernism that had once seemed so meaningful no longer captivated me, and even seemed absurd. I had become a dissident voice.

Even though I had, in a sense, walked right out of the official culture by saying things that many people did not want to hear, the publication of the book in 1984 propelled me into the public realm. It was as if a chute gate had swung open, releasing a flood of invitations to lecture and teach. As it turned out, my own disenchantment with the modernist myths of hard-edged individualism and economic self-seeking had struck a resonant chord with artists all over the northern hemisphere, many of whom were suffering from an acute sense of isolation and from the lack of any meaningful context for their work beyond the seductive lure of the marketplace. At that time, there was still a charged silence around any discussion of the artist’s role in society, and no defence against brute isolation. There were only two options: to belong to the silent universe of the unrecognized, shut up completely in one’s own cocoon, or to scramble up the success ladder in the art world.

Since neither of these alternatives appealed to me, I was groping for something that might offer more dignity and truth. But to embody a new vision of social integrity, I saw, would require getting rid of many of the beliefs that had conditioned and defined the artist’s identity in modern culture. These beliefs, prestigious as they were, had become outmoded, oppressive, and often nullifying in their effects. To find a new direction — one that didn’t revert to social

alienation but embraced the idea of art serving cultural needs rather than being a quest for freedom and self-expression — required a willingness to abandon old programming. With its one-sided, exaggerated emphasis on self-contained individualism, modernism had managed to destroy the social self. Conditioned to live in their own world, artists frequently ended up, in Andy Warhol's sobering comment, "making things for people that they don't need"

AT SOME POINT I suppose I realized that Has Modernism Failed? was just a curtain raiser, the prelude to another book. What I was moving toward was a new interpretation of the relationship between artist and society, based on a sense of ethical responsibility towards the social and environmental communities. What I had discovered was that I was swimming in the same sea as many others, who were also turning their backs on modernity's disengaged consciousness. The socially entrenched scenarios of innovative style, fashion and competitive consumerism as a way of life were being challenged by other possibilities that included a sense of community, an ecological perspective, and a deeper understanding of the mythical and archetypal underpinnings of spiritual life. What was in the air was a new set of values, concerned with "right" living in an interconnected universe rather than with achieving success in the art world. Only an altogether different topology of art as creative work in service to the whole could encompass this vision and make it plausible — a philosophical framework for artists who see themselves as agents of social change. I didn't quite realize it then, but I was already standing at an edgy distance from my own next big venture as a writer.

One day in a bookstore in Soho, I stumbled upon a book which, like a horse galloping all over the countryside, launched my thinking once and for all in a new direction. Written by an author I had never heard of, Marilyn Ferguson, it was called *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*. The book was an eye-opening account of how well-educated professionals in many spheres were shedding the standards and values of corporate capitalism and allowing the perils and forebodings of planetary crisis into their hearts. As a result, their lives were now turned in the direction of healing and service, instead of the old position of alienation and isolated individualism. They wanted to make a difference, and they were.

Reading this book, I had a sudden, shocking realization of just how callous and harmful our “no limits” self-serving way of life is to the ecosphere — a recognition at the deepest levels of the severity of humanity’s impact on the planet. Immediate and visceral, the awakening from my own past conditioning of benign neglect was like mentally falling through a trap-door. I really got it that this beautiful world is dying, and that not too many people cared.

What linked the people in Ferguson’s book together was their commitment to personal and social transformation — not any outer organization. But something had struck home with telling effect in Ferguson’s account: conspicuously absent from this unaffiliated company of social visionaries were any examples of artists. After a half-century of refusal to think of itself in this way, it was hardly surprising to find that art was out of the loop, and that the risk and excitement of social change was happening elsewhere.

THE FULL FORCE of this perception took years to digest and to integrate into the narrative of my own life, but I didn’t drop the magic ball once it had been handed to me. Instead I went on to shed even more of my Western patriarchal baggage and began to write *The Re-enchantment of Art*. “The great collective project has, in fact, presented itself,” I wrote. “It is that of saving the Earth.” Some radical restructuring of long-standing cultural paradigms would be necessary, I realized, before artists could truly allow the fate of the world, and not just art, to make its claims on them. The contact barriers between art and life that had been so relentlessly shored up across a century of art-for-art’s-sake philosophy would have to be removed. And a more inclusive model of the self, something larger than the individual person, able to recognize its connection with the larger cosmos, would have to emerge. As deep ecologist John Seed put it, “Myself now includes the rainforest. It includes clean air and water.”

Published in 1991, *The Re-enchantment of Art* was my work-in-progress during the many years that I was teaching. It didn’t mince words about the unsettling premonitions of the future that seemed to await us. “What does it mean to be a ‘successful’ artist working in the world today?” was the central and challenging question posed by the book. I was searching for answers that were above and beyond received notions.

In my travels, I met many artists who, like myself, were making big changes in their thinking. They had stepped out of the dominant framework and were no longer pursuing the more traditional vision of brisk sales, well-patronized galleries, and good reviews. Instead, they wanted to make art “as if the world mattered”; they put the emphasis of their work on cultivating a relationship with society, and often included others as part of the process.

Even though rejecting the world-view of individualism was outright blasphemy to all that I had been taught, I had gained a new understanding of the need for interconnectedness. As a model for extending the boundary of one’s own selfhood, it is more attuned to the relational, ecological and participatory world-view that is replacing the old Cartesian view, which operates as if self and world are separate. My book, as I saw it, was giving voice to what was “in the air”, and what was in the air was a new understanding of the nature of art, as something which occurs within a context of relatedness and interaction.

Ours is a “doing” culture, however, which means that there is unrelenting pressure to produce, and to produce something visible, a saleable product, or you will get left behind. Thinking of art as an essentially social-dialogical process — as improvised collaboration or relational activity — definitely steps on the toes of those who are deeply engaged with the notion of self-expression as the signal value of art’s worth. Often, in my lectures, I would talk about artists who had shifted their work from the studio to the more public arenas of political, social and environmental life. They looked at art in terms of its social purpose rather than its aesthetic style. Many of them were exploring a more “feminine” and responsive way of working, opening up spaces for “deep listening” and letting groups that had been previously excluded speak directly of their own experience.

Cultural myths like individualism do not die easily, however. The hegemony of the eye is very strong in our culture, and art that does not originate in a vision-centred paradigm is often at variance with the orthodoxy of the status quo. And for the watchdogs of orthodoxy this shattering of old myths can be hard to swallow. One event stands out in my mind as giving me a clear sense of just how impossible it is for some people to face the implications of a new

world-view. I have described this episode in my subsequent book, *Conversations before the End of Time*.

On this occasion, I was invited to share the lecture podium in Madison, Wisconsin, with Hilton Kramer, for many years the lead art critic of the *New York Times*, well-known for his corrosive but conservative views.

I spoke first, blinking into the darkened auditorium. “Are there viable alternatives to viewing the self in an individualistic manner? Can making art include more than just ourselves? Can art actually build community?” I could sense that my questions were like gigantic, harrowing waves breaking on the beach of everyone’s inherited experience. I went on to give many examples of art which speaks to the power of connectedness and which establishes bonds; this “connective aesthetics” that calls us into relationship, that is not about power, essentially embodies the feminine approach for me.

When I finished my talk, Kramer could hardly wait to turn the hose on me. “Solutions to social or environmental problems will never take place in an art gallery,” he stormed, “because the only problems art can solve are aesthetic ones.” Art, in Kramer’s view, is at its best when it serves only itself, and not some other purpose.

In the episode with Kramer, both of us were visibly choking on our own high-mindedness, determined to incriminate the other. Since then, I have become more sensitive to the way that challenging a dominant world-view can threaten someone’s whole life and identity at its core. To change the paradigm from which art operates is to change its fundamental nature; making it service-oriented rather than self-oriented is a radical shift. In any case, it’s an old debate: social involvement or withdrawal. And it’s just as hard as ever to envisage peaceful coexistence between market- and museum-oriented art and communal, activist art, with each playing an equal role in the shape of things to come.

This article is an edited extract from *Living the Magical Life: Memoirs* by Suzi Gablik.

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Time. published by Thames & Hudson. She lives in Blacksburg,  
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from Resurgence issue 202