

# Open Systems: Incompleteness, Participation and Elasticity

## Curatorial Statement

By now, it's pretty clear that "the issue of the nineties" is mobility (beauty has always been an issue) and with that comes fluidity, flexibility and adaptability, values espoused by the feminist art movement since its inception. In a sense, the current atmosphere harkens back to 1910, the year the Italian Futurists wrote their first manifesto. "We must draw our inspiration from the tangible miracles of contemporary life, from the iron network of speed that enwraps the world, from the ocean liners, the dreadnoughts, the marvelous flights furrowing the skies, from the depth-dark feats of the underwater navigators, from the convulsive struggle for the conquest of the unknown."<sup>1</sup>

The Futurists acknowledged scientific progress, but sought to embody its resultant energy, utility and hope, rather than apply its technologies. Granted, the Futurists became eager Fascists and met their demise (W.W.I), but their insistence on subjectivity, dynamism, constant shift and change, appearing and disappearing, individual liberty, and belief that motion and light would "destroy the material nature and look of solid bodies"<sup>2</sup> seems to be the most relevant historical antecedent for the ephemeral and mobile '90s. However, the Futurists weren't arguing for art that's forgettable, but art that captures the energy of the human life-force. In fact, contemporary society's rapid pace makes art's function to slow down the viewer all the more apparent.

Today, we draw much of our mobility from the most popular and accessible interactive technology, the telephone, which also facilitates faxing and the Internet. It's not surprising that the most popular interactive technologies enable users to produce content, rather than merely entertain or occupy time. Perhaps, the children's games which encouraged individuality and creativity, such as Lego, Tinker Toys, erector sets, Lincoln Logs and Colorforms have manifested a more viewer friendly culture. As a result, some artworks now function similarly. When a viewer physically activates an art object, wears it, or configures its components, as in kits, the viewer participates in the creation of an artwork's meaning.

Although the artist enables the viewer to participate, the viewer doesn't become the artist. Rather, the artist is very much present, only some roles become reversed. In a sense, when one creates objects meant to inspire viewer curiosity and desire, the artist

plays the role of the muse. However, the artist must strike a balance between enticing the viewer in want (the viewer who already desires) and the one in need' (the viewer who is always looking, but is never satisfied). Otherwise a paradoxical relationship ensues, whereby the artist denies his/her pleasure in order to initiate viewer desire. This trap recalls the French Feminist Luce Irigaray's observation: "When she is asked to maintain, to revive man's desire, what this means in terms of the value of her own desire is neglected."<sup>3</sup>

The Futurist critique of Cubism's static nature parallels Fluxus energy in the wake of Minimalism's passive theatricality, and today's flurry of artistic activity on the heels of post-modernism's nihilistic theories. Los Angeles artist Terri Friedman has remarked that her goal is to oxygenate, or breathe life into, the rather dead art world. Similarly, the 29 year-old Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni remarked "Today, with our lives becoming shorter and more intense, mobility and velocity have taken the place of the fixed and static and the present exists only as a transition to the future; what we have called pictorial dynamism is one of the most brilliant artistic intuitions of our time. We want physical forces to be diffused into the environment and to superimpose over one and the other like vibrations, caught in the vortex of those vibrations that together intensify the overall light in a painting."<sup>4</sup>

### Incompleteness/ Feminist Subsistence

The notion of objectivity presumes a direct visual experience, which led Stella to insist "What you see is what you see."<sup>5</sup> Contrarily, the works in Action Station exalt subjectivity by encouraging each viewer to reflect, to perceive, and most important, to construct meaning. By facilitating each viewer's desire to locate his/her place, these works embody the formlessness of the invisible female genitalia. "Although woman finds pleasure precisely in the incompleteness of the form of her sex organ, which is why it retouches itself indefinitely, her pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallogormorphism."<sup>6</sup> However, the multiplicity and plurality of viewer subjectivity is not to be confused with the artist imposing his subjectivity, whose extreme case is the hyper-personal.<sup>7</sup>

What does it mean to be an open system? In Thermodynamics, an open system is irreversible, that is, the "transfer

of matter between system and surroundings can occur."<sup>8</sup> In art, an open system is one that can never be completed (the feminine state of incompleteness). There is no finality, neither the process nor the end goal are fixed, so the artwork remains in a state of mobility, or constant flux. Open systems, or unfinished works, imbue art with variability and layered meanings. By respecting one's desire to project oneself onto the work, the artist trusts the viewer's capacity to participate. While indeterminacy is implicit with open systems, such works contrast with 20th century composer John Cage's project of using chance operations to create an essentially closed system, a musical score or composition.

Masculist and feminist no longer correspond to gender. Rather, they are attributes or dispositions. Because open systems maximize art's potential to be dynamic, flexible, interchangeable, mutable, and indeterminate, they manifest a truly feminist art practice. "The feminist qua sphere rolls around with ease, while the masculist qua cube remains steadfast. It's no wonder that the self-assured and right-minded level butts heads with the ambidextrous and resilient spring."<sup>9</sup>

Another relevant model for the feminist lifestyle is the electron cloud portion of the atom. The masculist disposition is the proton, the tiny dense speck at the atom's center, while the feminist disposition is the super light electron (the proton is 1835 times heavier than the electron) floating around in the ultra-spacious electron cloud. Luce Irigaray's model of female sexuality parallels this model. "But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere...one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in her differences, more complex, more subtle than is imagined in an imaginary centered a bit too much on one and the same."<sup>10</sup>

French Sociologist Jean Baudrillard's model of the feminine is often problematic. He retreats her to a quagmire, asserting that since the feminine can never reveal her desires openly, she must employ games of seduction, which means that she will never be herself. Nonetheless, his model of the feminine as flotation resembles incompleteness.

In sexual mythology, the transition toward the feminine is contemporaneous with the passage from determination to general indetermination.

The feminine is not substituted for the masculine as one sex for another, according to some structural inversion. It is substituted as the end of the determinate representation of sex, as the flotation, the law that regulates the difference between the sexes.<sup>11</sup>

Because of the significance of remaining incomplete, only some Fluxus kits and Event-Scores (recipes for performances) are open systems. Most Event-Scores have rather specific instructions that the viewer is asked to follow, which makes them closed, since following instructions completes the work. Cage's late-50s experimental composition course at the New School for Social Research was an important Fluxus breeding ground, so Fluxus works influenced by Cage were quite closed. "Linked with Cage's chance methods for producing indeterminate results in music, the Event-Score, though often, rather precise in its instructions, as it evolved tended to leave almost everything to the interpreter. It bound all the cooks together through shared interpretations, creating an interactive antiphonal system of mutual interest and dependency."<sup>12</sup>

It's not surprising that one of the most open Fluxus works was made by the token Western woman. Alison Knowles' 1962 "Proposition" simply instructed "Make a Salad." When she performed this piece, she mixed it in a large pickle barrel and served it on paper plates. Its openness depends on the number of salad chefs worldwide (about 6 Billion)! Today, this piece stands as the vital antecedent to Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai cook-offs, though Tiravanija's cooking projects are open in a different manner. Rather than invite anyone to make the dish, he invites anyone to eat the dish. The unanticipated experiences surrounding enjoying a delicious meal within the context of an art gallery has inaugurated zillions of chance exchanges among the participants.

On a similar note, Brian Eno has remarked that West African drumming patterns have influenced his music the most because they offer free float.

African Music underlies practically everything I do-even ambient, since it arose directly out of wanting to see what happened if you unlocked the sounds in a piece of music, gave them their freedom and didn't tie them all to the same clock. That kind of free float-these peculiar mixtures of independence and interdependence,

and the oscillation between them- is a characteristic of West African drumming patterns.<sup>13</sup>

#### Participation/Reclaiming Feminine Space

The notion of space as a feminine attribute dates back to the 19th century poet/painter William Blake who regarded time as masculine and space as feminine. Paradoxically, twentieth century art has manifested two rather polar goals, art movements which effectively dismantled the artist's authority (Dada, the Situationist International, Fluxus) and those which functioned primarily to entrench the artist's superiority (Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism). In Anna Chave's groundbreaking "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", she concludes that Minimalism's denial of subjectivity acts to distance and isolate viewers, rather than integrate them into the cultural (and so the economic) system, as more obliging works would do.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding Minimalism's elimination of space, art historian Michael Fried argues that "the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation, one which, virtually by definition, includes the beholder... including, it seems, the beholder's body."<sup>15</sup> Fried viewed such viewers as subjugated, trapped in the grips of the art object's gaze, by an experience "outside the viewer, rather than self-generated."<sup>16</sup>

Merely couching artworks as honest, direct, and unadulterated, as the rhetoric of Minimalism pretended, was not enough to ensure that an autonomous art object would exemplify such values. Rather, Carl Andre's 1965 proclamation "I wanted very much to seize and hold the space of that gallery- not simply fill it, but seize and hold that space"<sup>17</sup> is the tell-all account of the Minimalists' obsession with power and authority.

Alternatively, there have been myriad art movements whose scale, ambitions and intentions have proved quite humane, especially those that reclaimed feminine space by actively engaging the viewer in the creation of meaning. Perhaps the first object to involve the viewer was Dada artist Marcel Duchamp's "Le Bruit Secret (With Hidden Object)" dated Easter 1916. This ball of string, sandwiched between two glass plates, contained an object unknown even to Duchamp, because American patron Walter Arensberg placed it there himself. As a result, this object makes a noise when it is shaken. There have been subsequent shakable works, most memorably, American artist Joseph Cornell's hand-held boxes contain-

ing balls and moveable parts, which had once amused viewers before coming to rest in museum collections.

The Situationists took participation to an even higher plane, the realm of political action. The legacy of Dada and Surrealist antics, the Situationists created ephemeral situations ("moments of exhilarated living...described not as ends in themselves but as passageways to an entirely new kind of life"). Their aim (if they could be said to have had an aim, other than that of recuperation) was "to disrupt the spectator's habitual passivity and instill instead an attitude of critical engagement. ...By May '68, such ideas exercised considerable influence among the French student insurgents at Nanterre and elsewhere."<sup>18</sup>

Brian Eno expects music's future to be equally participatory. He envisions unfinished works, modifiable music boxes, "systems by which people can customize listening experiences," either by recreating a composer's music or hybridizing several composers together.<sup>19</sup>

So, in that sense, musicians would be offering unfinished pieces of music, pieces of raw material, but highly evolved raw material, that has a strong flavor to it already. I can also feel something evolving on the cusp between music, game and demonstration. I imagine a musical experience equivalent to watching John Conway's computer game of Life or playing SimEarth, for example, in which you are at once thrilled by the patterns and the knowledge of how they are made and the metaphorical resonance of such a system. Such an experience falls in a nice new place-between art and science and playing.<sup>20</sup>

He opts for the word "unfinished" over interactive, because "finishing implies interactive: your job is to complete something for that moment in time." Eno also views subjectivity to be an important aspect of open systems. "Our own identities are products of our interaction with everything else. Now a lot of cultures far more primitive than ours take this entirely for granted- surely it is the whole basis of animism, that the universe is a living, changing, changeable place."<sup>21</sup>

Eno views the breakdown of the singularity of a musical event (the fact that there can be six different versions of a single and then 12 different remix-

es of it) as proof of existing "unfinished" works. "It becomes a description of a listening space that can be explored in different ways."<sup>22</sup> To design a computer that really works, Eno suggests assembling a design team "composed of healthy, active women with lots else to do in their lives and give them carte blanche."<sup>23</sup>

One must be careful, since many art works wear the guise of viewer engagement, but are just as autonomous as Minimalist works. For example, one can hold or own Sol LeWitt's instructions for wall drawings, but he ultimately requires the owner to hire his well-trained cadre to install such pieces. Felix Gonzalez-Torres shares the Action Station artists' tacit desire to disrupt patriarchal order by empowering desire and subjectivity, as his empty surfaces satisfy each viewer's fantasy and lived experience.<sup>24</sup> However, writer Jan Avgikos qualifies: "each act of consumption is, in fact, also an act of completion," which is why his work differs markedly.<sup>25</sup> Inviting the viewer to take something home completes the work, but never alters its meaning, especially since the loss is always replenished. Similarly, Martin Kersels' recent works are binary, that is, the viewer switches them on and off, but the meaning isn't manipulated.

Not all participatory works have had innocent intentions! At the 1920 DadaVorfurhling exhibition held in Cologne, Max Ernst "attached a hatchet to a chain and invited guests to destroy whatever works they did not like. Many did."<sup>26</sup> In a 1961 effort to elude the forces of "cultural assimilation and domestication," the Situationist International declared any art works made by its members as "anti-Situationist."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Ben Vautier's "Total Art Match-Box" from 1965 instructs the user to "Use these matches to destroy all art...as I Ben signed everything work of art-burn-anything."<sup>28</sup> Though varying in practice, these acts serve to rebalance the artist-viewer relationship and challenge art's commodity status.

#### Elasticity/Engendering Beauty

It's interesting that Boccioni painted "Elasticity" in 1912, while he was engaged in an argument with Apollinaire and Delaunay concerning "simultaneous contrasts and dynamism." For this reason, "Elasticity" stands in historical opposition to Cubism's static vision, which the Futurists programatically set out to undermine.

In 1991, Michael Anderson and I curated "Essentially Raw," which featured a group of seven artists (naively referred

to then as Essentialists, but later renamed Rawniks to avoid confusion with heinous Essentialist Theories) whose art extended the Post-minimalist critique of minimalist values—"monumentality and timelessness." The Rawnik's success at pushing further can be attributed to their exclusive use of elastic materials and each work's unfinished state (manifested by using raw materials), which links them to the values of Action Station artists.

Although the Post-minimalists sometimes used elastic materials, they grounded the works and emphasized the process, reducing for permanent elasticity. Contrarily, any posited intentions are inevitably subverted by the elastic materials the Rawniks prefer: flexible fabrics, disintegrating wood, terracotta and flour. As a result, Rawnik works remain visually dissonant, elastic and wholesome.

As with Situationist "ephemeral-situations," Happenings, and Fluxus Event-Scores, many post-minimal works took their cue from performance-related events. Although Rawnik works remain in constant flux and are actually more fragile than most Post-minimal works, the Rawniks intend their art to survive as objects, not merely as remnants of some sculptural performance. Similarly, Action Station works have performative features (the process that inspired such works) that are complementary components (the icing on the cake) to these visually stimulating objects.

Elasticity is significant, because it is perhaps the clearest notion of Beauty. Beauty occurs every time an individual makes a new picture, by stretching accepted conceptions of reality into desired alternatives. "And what are these conceptions?—wisdom and virtue in general. And such creators are poets and all artists who are deserving of the name inventor."<sup>29</sup> With invention (as opposed to visual pleasure) in mind, Diotima requests Socrates to remember that if he "beholds beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but [new] reality."<sup>30</sup> Irigary views the feminine as inventor, so open that she embodies irreversibility. "Ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. For when she says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means. Moreover, her statements are never identical to anything."<sup>31</sup>

Further, our elastic language makes simultaneous constructions of multiple pictures of reality possible, as "language can be stretched to construct any picture once the mind, under the spell of an open heart has either conceived of an

alternative picture or is ready to grasp an existing one."<sup>32</sup> Effective communication multiplies language's elasticity, as speaking stretches it once, listening stretches it again, and responding to the listener stretches it even further, facilitating "the third stretch."<sup>33</sup> Human communication depends on our capacity to stretch the language, to bridge diverse pictures of reality.

Richard Rorty has remarked that anything that philosophy can do to free up our imagination a little is all to the political good, for the freer the imagination of the present, the likelier it is that future social practices will be different from past practices.<sup>34</sup> Action Station engages the viewer's imagination in stretching reality, the making of new pictures, because open systems embody incompleteness, participation and elasticity. New pictures of reality engender new knowledge. Only when language has been stretched to accommodate the altered underlying beliefs which inform knowledge will we begin speaking and acting differently.

-Sue Spaid, Los Angeles 1995

1. "The Futurist Manifesto," Boccioni, 1988, MMA, p. 229.
2. "Technical Manifesto Of Futurist Painting," *Ibid.*, p. 231.
3. "The Sex Which is not One," *New French Feminists*, 1988, p. 102.
4. "Futurist Painting," Boccioni, p. 237.
5. Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *ARTS*, January 1990, p. 50.
6. Irigary, p. 101.
7. see "Skirting the Perils of Representation: Subversion, Idiosyncrasy and Temporality" and the Appendix from the catalogue for "Under Construction," Pasadena Armory Center of the Arts, 1995.
8. Levine, *Physical Chemistry*, 1978, p. 2.
9. Sue Spaid, "Destination Existence," 1993.
10. Irigary, p. 103.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 1990, p. 5.
12. Jill Johnstone, *Art In America*, June 1994, p. 74.
13. Brian Eno, *Wired*, May 1995, pp. 148-149.
14. Chave, p. 61.
15. Michael Fried, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1968, p. 127.
16. Jan Avgikos, *Artforum*, February 1991, p. 80.
17. Chave, p. 44.
18. Christopher Phillips, "Homage to a Phantom Avant-Garde," *Art in America*, October 1989, pp. 186-187.
19. Eno, pp. 150-151.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
24. Avgikos, p. 82.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Francis Naumann, *Art in America*, June 1994, p. 68.
27. Phillips, p. 187.
28. Johnstone, p. 77.
29. Plato, *The Symposium*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Irigary, p. 103.
32. Sue Spaid, "The Third Stretch: Duty, Knowledge and Divine Beauty," 1995, p. 24.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Richard Rorty, "Some Theses About Pragmatism, Deconstruction and Feminism," 1992.

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