

## RECIPROCAL GENEROSITY

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This word—*generosity*—that is taking different shapes throughout this publication and seeking a form in recent art practice, has simultaneously well-intentioned and problematic connotations: positioned on two sides of a moral equation, each seemingly dependent on a uneven power relationship between parties. Inserting the question “for whom is the generous act intended?” can raise disturbing implications of beneficence along a route from haves to have-nots. Does this need to be so?

To give and to help; to provoke, catalyze, and enable; to be of service, to be responsible, to better and to improve, to contribute to betterment; to give food . . . to give “voice.” In the social contract that is the art experience, the audience member, or viewer, is a recipient of what the artist makes: the artist gives, the audience receives. Exactly how generous the artist is, is determined by the use-value of the thing received: Can I eat it, wear it, trade it, collect it? Does it give me a platform or exposure for my cause, further my way of life or that of those in my community?

I am moved to think about the personal, unspoken, unseen, uncountable and unknowable, latent, or even unrealized benefits offered by art. This demands trusting in the processes that art objects, installations, and actions set in motion, and recognizing the timeframe that an art experience can occupy. An effect that can be launched with as little as one work of art, one moment, can span as much as a lifetime. When museum director J. Carter Brown reflected on his mentor Bernard Berenson, he located this quality of art in the idea of “living life as a work of art.” According to Brown, the elder art historian “found, at the end of his life, that his great experiences came in his daily walk, which he did at the end of the day up behind *I Tatti*, where, he said, the fruits of a lifetime of looking at art objects allowed him to look at nature in a newly meaningful way.”<sup>1</sup> Was Berenson experiencing the essential generosity of art, a generosity that does not have as its product a gift, or thing given, but rather exists as art’s intrinsic goal of giving meaning to life?

By contrast, generous art as a free commodity became commonplace in museums and public spaces in the 1990s, being catapulted into mainstream art consciousness by Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s candy piles and poster stacks and Rirkrit

Tiravanija's food-events. Other artists of a more social reform variety provided ideas, solutions, and structures for change. This is seen in, say, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Tele-Vecindario: Street-Level Video* (1993), a program of youth training in technical and critical skills and outdoor media installation, or Christine Hill's 1997 *Volksboutique* installation-cum-used-clothing-store. Both projects also provided forums for discussion and social exchange. Indebted to the 1970s democracy-in-art movements that led to free or cheap artists' books, mail art, performance-exchanges, and other give-aways, as well as politically motivated practices manifested as performative social actions, these works are a new generation of engagement and, here, fall within the realm of generous art.

The full breadth of this art-as-offering—from a meal to a skill—is perhaps most succinctly foreshadowed in the catalytic and generous art of Gordon Matta-Clark. Not only was Matta-Clark key in the pioneering of the SoHo district of New York with the collaborative restaurant/art project *Food* (1971), but he also designed a scheme of social purpose with *A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida* (1977). Initiated at the end of his short life and never fully realized, it was to have been a recycling facility where local residents could receive cash for certain materials, or acquire used goods at modest prices. The local youths maintaining it would have acquired practical vocational skills and a critical ecological consciousness in return for their labor.

For me, it is easier to see the good side of generous art in social examples. I admire artistic routes that are two-way streets. At times I wonder what motivates other artists and what they get from the generous processes they initiate. Personally, in knee-jerk fashion, I am halted from disregarding a “generous” artwork as just another gimmick when the thing given away gains importance by being useful to someone in need. Why feed another art group and call it art? Yet I realize that I have used the same method myself in several projects. Still, for me, the aims of the work distinguish the practice and are at the conceptual core of works I produce, though I may not recognize them clearly in the intentions of others.

So when Suzanne Lacy staged *Dinner at Jane's* in 1993 as part of her project *Full Circle* for the experimental public art program “Culture in Action,”<sup>2</sup> it was not to offer food, but to create both a metaphoric image and a conducive mode for exchange. This gathering of fourteen female world leaders whose service to their communities parallels the global import of the work of Jane Addams and her circle met in the very room where their turn-of-the-century cohorts met to share a meal and reshape society.<sup>3</sup> When the Italian team of Federica Thiene and Stefania Mantovani organized *Chow for “Conversations on Culture,”* they crafted menus and sites for a two-week series of dinners according to the evening's theme. The inspiring settings played a fundamental role in these discussions on art and social subjects, designed in collaboration with Michael Brenson as a major discursive thread. They were also one of a series of international artists' projects comprising “Conversations at The Castle,” which I curated for the Arts Festival of Atlanta as a counterpoint to the 1996 Olympics.<sup>4</sup>

While artists in this publication have spoken about their work and practice, my understanding of “generosity” centers around examples of artworks brought about through my curatorial practice. Motivating my engagement with this concept is a critique of the arts institution’s relationship to its audience. My interest arises from the class implications of the prevailing concept of the “art audience” that is so embedded in our professional practice. Museums by mandate and mission operate from a position of power (called variously “knowledge,” “tradition,” “authority,” or “prestige”). Charged with giving, the receiver—their audiences—is seen as being in need, lacking, or deficient. Museums offer enlightenment, education, experience, and entertainment.<sup>5</sup> Even as museums have claimed to open their doors to the masses, there is little expectation that among the offerings they will take seriously, and in a sustained way, the critical issues of contemporary art. A driving question for me, as I initially moved from the context of museum gallery to public site in 1990, was: How can artists be more generous and encourage an experience of their art that is more open, allowing “others” entry and equally appreciating their experiences? How can art be an exchange?

My critique is exercised through exhibition programs—as I like to call my work, since “exhibition” seems too confined to visual presentations, and does not encompass the active exchanges that I feel exhibitions can, and should, engender—in which artists are commissioned to undertake projects, and posit questions, around a place and a set of circumstances. A complex of core questions develops in the process. In the end they are embodied in the work and, at best, they emerge from the work with greater clarity as questions of public urgency. Thus, these works offer not only art experiences, but also new ways of thinking about audience. They seek to challenge the premises of the institutional mindset about “audience” in ways that can shift our perception of the public’s relationship to contemporary art.

I am interested in developing a consciousness of a wider public as a *valid* audience for avant-garde and critical contemporary art and ideas. Testing the concept of audience, I have found it necessary to locate exhibition programs in meaningful local contexts outside museums. Removing as much as possible the institution as the “middle man,” or mediator, of art has allowed me to decrease the distance between art and audience. Another basic strategy is identifying what the non-art-world, non-art-professional audience *knows*, hence what they bring to the art experience. Rather than subscribing to a deficiency model, I do not believe such audiences are lacking, that they are empty vessels that we need to fill with art history and art criticism information. In fact, in commissioning public projects, such audience members are always the initial resources that inform the work. At times they co-produce it. They offer ideas and bring issues to bear that give the works meaning. They reflect on the work after it is created and elaborate its interpretation as well as inspire further steps in the artist’s work, in mine, and theirs with regard to the issues with which the work seeks to grapple. Thus, I believe we can learn from these audiences and, by listening to them, find out how they can contribute, and even at times surpass, our own narrative of the work of art.

While the artist, the artwork, the arts institution, or art vehicle has been nearly always cast in the role of bestowing, it is perhaps in these moments of exchange that the deepest sense of generosity exists. So is there another equation for art in which both artist and audience each give and receive, in equal—or unequal—parts? And, if so, don't we need to consider more fully the identities of the recipients of the art experience since they play an important role, too, in this process. Acknowledging, identifying, meeting the audience face-to-face, we begin to eliminate the barriers of distance, difference, and power, that anonymity otherwise allows.

Can generosity be a reciprocal practice? Can we reconsider the division between artist and audience? Chogyam Trungpa wrote: "The basic problem in artistic endeavor is the tendency to split the artist from the audience and then try to send a message from one to the other . . . No matter how well-intentioned or technically accomplished such approaches may be, they inevitably become clumsy and aggressive toward others and toward oneself . . . [I]n meditative art, the artist embodies the viewer as well as the creator of the works. Vision is not separate from operation . . . We give up aggression, both toward ourselves, that we have to make a special effort to impress people, and toward others, that we can put something over on them."<sup>6</sup>

In Chicago, for "Culture in Action," the collaborative group Haha extended their ranks to include others from inside and outside the art world, enlisting them to volunteer in the AIDS healthcare network, each participant engaged in the generous act of giving and receiving. Their operations were centered in a storefront installation, *Flood*, which was dominated by a hydroponics garden. *Flood* participants tended the garden, too, donating the regularly harvested, toxic-free produce to an AIDS hospice—a beneficial outcome of art. But the spirit and practice of this art project extended beyond to the youth and surrounding community, through education programs on safe sex and hydroponics, and to the *Flood* members themselves, who shared and aired, in weekly discussions, their experiences in a field which they had (at least temporarily) adopted and reflected upon social aid systems. Thus, generosity became the medium, or methodology, and the subject, or product, of this project. How can we be of service to others with food and with our time, and what do we, the giver, get in exchange as volunteers?

All the works in "Conversations at The Castle" were acts of generous conversation—an exchange between artists and audience. Visitors offered German artist Regina Frank, for example, a personal thought through email (still at that time a novel, foreign mode of communication) and in return she "gave" them a glass bead, sewing it within a kimono that was the focal point of the installation (its cloth made from the pulp of all the books dear to the artists in her lifetime) so that it became a cloak of communication. Senegalese artist Ery Camara and the Brazilian-Swiss team of Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg each took up residence locally and worked with community groups on collaboratively produced installa-

tions. Other works, like *Chow*, had less tangible results. The Irwin group traveled from Atlanta by RV to cities across the United States, facilitating exchanges between a Russian artist who joined them on board and American artists at each location. Irishman Maurice O'Connell divided his residency into two parts: six weeks of talking to social service workers, and lending an ear; and then six weeks at the exhibition headquarters, The Castle, ensconced in his own office for his created-for-the-occasion agency, "Brothers for Others," where visitors could come to chat.

Generosity exists in exchanges, like conversations, and within temporal experiences shared by a social or communal body, which are conceived as art, crafted by artists, though these generous acts might not look like art, or in fact be art but become art-like moments. In exhibition programs, I often find that art is the means of facilitating a dialogue or exchange in which all parties have something to contribute, and gain. Everyone is in possession of something valuable and it is critical to respect their knowledge, as we gain from it in order to ensure that it will not be exploited, coopted, or devalued, once offered. A mutual relationship to facilitate generosity has often, for me, taken the form of listening, speaking, and reflecting. The openness upon which these interactions depend—a generosity with the other—is possible only when trust has been developed by getting to know, one-to-one, what is of deepest concern to others and what they hold dear. So for "Evoking History," a multi-year curatorial project that I co-curated with Tumelo Mosaka for the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina, the exhibition aspect is threaded together by "stakeholder forums." These are comprised of local persons from different walks of life who have a stake in the artists' objects because the issues they evoke matter to their lives. Perhaps most importantly, it is within the creation of open exchanges that an understanding of others can begin to be engendered and the potential for change can arise.

Discursive exchanges can even approach or be art themselves. By this I do not mean because they are couched in artful trappings (props and plates, settings and table settings) that look like art. I do, however, mean experience that embodies what art can do. This is revealed when New York critic and writer Michael Brenson, reflecting on a moment in the 2001 installment of "Evoking History," spoke of the "participatory audience" that we cultivated and included at the table:

Their belief in art is probably connected to their sense of its ability to actually deal with or accommodate that history . . . So for them to keep struggling and imagining and re-imagining themselves and their worlds, there have to be ways in which they can continually work with that history and explore and expand it. Art can be indispensable here—particularly your way of working—because, within the complex textures of his-

torical situations, it makes room for process. It encourages not holding onto one's history for dear life, but exposing as well as asserting it, letting one's responses and beliefs be engaged by others, and also testing it and stretching its limits so that it is possible to grow.

Then, in speaking of the meeting staged at the end of a passage through ideas and art, a weekend-long conversation between these local stakeholders and national visitors—in and about Charleston—Brenson asked me:

Would you say that the discussion that took place over two or three hours on the porch at I'On last June was an art experience? . . . It was an experience, and it was made possible by art. We needed to pass through [the work of artists] Lonnie Graham, Neill Bogan, and Ping Chong. Their engagements with the amazing and often painful histories of Charleston, and by implication of the United States, created a ground or texture that allowed this opening up and this beginning of trust to happen. It didn't feel to me fundamentally different from a really important art experience. I don't know where I would draw the line and I'm not sure I would want to.<sup>7</sup>

So does this discussion qualify as generous art?

Another participant at that forum was former Charleston resident and playwright-poet-author Kendra Hamilton, who wrote six months later:

So I never got to tell you how I felt. But that experience seems to have completely healed the wounds that I've been carrying around in my heart from growing up in that sick and seductive city since childhood. When I return to Charleston now, to visit my family or do research, it's without that dull ache that used to start throbbing as soon as the pine barrens gave way to the low marshy flats surrounding the city. That is a gift that you have given. And I only wish there were something I could do to repay you.

How do we locate the gifts that art—and the public programs and personal exchanges that surround it—can bring?

With so much to gain in the process, I have departed from the conventional curatorial model of presenter and arbiter of quality, trying to locate my practice in the task of articulator of art within visual and social terrains. In developing this position, I am inspired by cultural critic Lewis Hyde's metaphorical comparison of the artist to the legendary figure of the trickster, the boundary-crosser and "joint-worker" who shifts the joints or workings of society.<sup>8</sup> "The possibility of playing with the joints of creation [is] the possibility of art," Hyde writes. Thus, the artist or trickster-artist "chang[es] the manner in which nature, community, and spirit are joined to one another," shifting patterns in relation to one another, disman-

tling the hierarchy, decentering it, and making evident the divisions or joints of society, keeping those lines or joints flexible, porous, and receptive to change, rearticulating them, and even bridging or translating differences. I like to extend this concept to the role of curator. For those of us who value the place of audience in art and in the practice of exhibitions, taking on this role has value. It evokes the possibility of change in the culture, so that through exhibitions it might be possible to shift ideas and work the joints of what art “is,” who the audience are, and what their place is in art.

Opening the process of art-making to others previously held at a distance is demanding. It involves inserting them into the process and being accountable to them, while they—having become thoughtfully and constructively engaged—become accountable to us and to the art. It is not a passive giving and receiving, and responsibilities exist for each party involved. But the dialogue that is engendered—whether art or part of the process of making—is evidence that in the experience of art, we all have something to gain. The more openly and generously we listen to each other, and encourage other perceptions, the more we will hear, and the greater the work of art will resound.

#### Notes

1. Recorded at the June 2001 consortium meeting of “Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness”; see <http://www.artandbuddhism.org>.

2. Inigo Manglano-Ovalle’s *Tele-Vecindario: Street-Level Vide* was also part of “Culture in Action”; see Mary Jane Jacob et al., *Culture in Action* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

3. See Jacob et al., *Culture in Action*.

4. See Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson, eds., *Conversations at The Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

5. These are the four current meanings of *education* in museums identified and discussed by Lisa C. Roberts in *From Knowledge to Narrative* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

6. Chogyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996).

7. *Reflections on Evoking History: Listening Across Cultures and Communities* (Charleston, South Carolina: Spoleto Festival USA, 2002), 42-43.

8. Hyde establishes this link etymologically through a lineage of words with the ancient root *\*-ar*, from the Latin *articulus*. He assembles a large group of related terms whose original meaning encompassed “to join,” “to fit,” “to make.” Artisan is an *\*-ar* word meaning a joiner or maker of things. The Latin noun *ars* from

the same root means arts or a work of art. Also from the same root comes *articulate*, which meant joining bones together or, in today's usage, words well-joined or a "joint-worker" who shifts the joints or workings of society. See chapter 11, "Trickster Arts and Works of Artus," in Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998).