

MARY JANE JACOB

In the Space of Art

Conversation allows you to hear for the first time a thought you had.

JIM MELCHERT¹

This introduction to thoughts offered in conversation by a dozen remarkable artists recognizes the space they depend upon to make their art—work that, in turn, allows viewers to enter this space of art for themselves. This space is located in between. It is a middle ground, a transition space, a place of pause, a place to wait, to test, and then move beyond. Not a point along a linear trajectory, this space allows for movement in many ways—even leapfrogging, backtracking, or going in multiple directions at once. It’s open.

In the space of art dwells the “mind of don’t know.” The “empty” mind is the creative mind. The past century, above all others, prized the new. So a primary motivation of making has been innovation. But the new of which the artists here speak is, we might say, to see anew. The process of art-making in which the artist does not know the outcome, what the work of art will look like, or even be, is a process with shifts and changes, one of simultaneously seeing and finding a new way. Stephen Batchelor

writes of the imperative for the creative process to leave behind any preconceptions of form, to allow the image to arise, to stay open to what you don’t know and haven’t seen. This insight is not so much knowing as sensing another knowledge that runs deeply, though obscurely, within the human psyche, and bringing it into consciousness. It leads us to what we already know but did not know we knew. From this perspective, originality in art is not only not important, it is not even an issue.

Exploring the rich empty space of possibility that is the space of art requires open-mindedness. Both art and meditation depend upon this quality of mind. To participate in it to the fullest, we need to understand, with Shunryu Suzuki, that “when we emerge from nothing, when everything emerges from nothing, we see it all as a fresh new creation. This is ‘non-attachment.’”² When we resist editing and eliminating aspects of reality to conform to our previous ideas or social stereotypes, we practice non-attachment.³ The suspension of judgment and the practice of “non-discriminating awareness,” as Mark Epstein calls it, “is a state in which new ideas present themselves, in which old ideas loosen their grip, in which the force of habit can be seen for what it is.” This space of art is a mental space in which we see things as if for the first time.⁴ So the mind the artist possesses in the space of art-making is Suzuki’s “beginner’s mind,” where “there are many possibilities,” while “in the expert’s there are few.”⁵ In art, as

² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), 67.

³ Stephen Batchelor, *Awake meeting*, April 25, 2002.

⁴ See Mark Epstein, “*Sip My Ocean: Emptiness as Inspiration*,” in this volume, p. 30.

⁵ Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 21.

in Buddhism, creative potential resides in that nothing place, that nowhere of emptiness: an open space without attachment to outcome, with an aim to guide the process but the goal (the answer) kept at bay...for as long as usefully possible.

It takes much practice to know when the answer, or at least the next step, is before you. To ready the mind requires not just practice but assuming a practice. For many Buddhists, this is *zazen*—meditation practice. For the artist the word “practice” has asserted itself in contemporary usage. This may be for its professional implications (in the way doctors and lawyers have a “practice”), since after World War II the title “artist” has increasingly been conferred by academic programs. It may also be because since the 1960s the discipline identity of artworks has been so expanded and eroded that “practice” has become a more useful term than other more limited labels. But I would add practice as a daily routine and, even more, a life’s path, describing the artist’s way of working—a way of being—that is integral and ongoing.

Practice is about trying, developing, cultivating, improving. Practice connotes repetition: to practice, to perfect. Practice becomes the rituals of life, continual acts of doing. And sustaining a practice—not just surviving in the business of art, but living in the space of art—means to know that the process is of greater value than the product, that the making...and even arriving at the making...exceeds the thing made, that the experience outweighs the material form. We might amend Suzuki by saying: “It is almost impossible to talk about [art]. So not to say anything, just to practice it, is the best way.”⁶

Art-making is above all a process of inquiry. It takes skill and knowledge, valuing one’s intuition, and knowing that intuition is much more than a hunch, a fluke, or luck, that it is the surfacing of an inner knowledge we may not have known we possessed. To launch into and carry out a process without a stated outcome is to allow that process of inquiry to unfold; to trust that the right way will arise; to wait, persevering through a blank open space, looking for guideposts, listening with a level of perception that enables us to move in ways we would not have found outside this process. Though “our practice should be without gaining ideas, without expectations,” as Suzuki says, “This does not mean, however, just to sit without any purpose.... To stop your mind does not mean to stop the activities of mind. It means your mind pervades your whole body.”⁷ So to negotiate the space of art requires focused thought in order to identify the “why” of art before the “what” or “how,” to clarify the aims and come to know the essence before knowing the form.

This deep awareness of the processes of art—of self in process—is key to creation. Perception was fundamental in the modern period of art, as artists became more aware in the late nineteenth century of the way the eye works, of the way that paint can capture light. In our own postmodern era we began to perceive more critically the cultural implications embedded in works of art. But the artist’s mind-in-making is not just the result of studied knowledge (getting the facts straight) or skills acquired; it is

always determined by the actual process of making and the depth of awareness one brings to bear during that process. This awareness is what moves beyond the known for the self, for the viewer, and potentially for the society or culture at large. The work of art derives its “presence” from this heightened awareness—from the artist’s presence of mind. Buddhism’s call to be present in the moment is also the artist’s call.

It is art’s quality of presence that draws us in, commanding our attention and inspiring us to look more deeply. The viewer’s response to a work’s presence is sometimes dependent on the work’s familiarity, its resonance with our own experience. Yet it is also at times its unfamiliarity that has the most profound impact on our experience. “To some degree we become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration,” John Dewey tells us about perceiving that which stands beyond the realm of what we already know. Through perception “our own experience is re-oriented.” And it is this experience that is “far more efficacious than the change effected by reasoning, because it enters directly into attitude.”⁸ Experience of art can be transformational experience.

The process of creativity—being in the space of art-making—is risky, unsettling, troubling. So to practice, as Yvonne Rand points out, we need to be able “to rest in our own experience of discomfort” as we work in a territory that is new and, for us, previously unexplored. Through practice, we overcome the anxiety of not knowing and develop a capacity for uncertainty, a capacity to tolerate and ultimately to mine chaos. Hence the space of art needs to be a safe space in which the artist can operate. It is a buffer zone in which to practice...openly. But by “safe space” I do not mean one that is cozy or luxurious. It is a safety net for the mind as it stays open, unknowing, floating in a zone of instability. As a curator, I see my primary role as creating such a safe, critically challenging, creative place. This is something different from the conventional commissioning of artworks; it means to open up a creative space in which artists can practice.

I have now practiced curating outside of museums for as long as I did within them. In the course of my practice, I have found the nature of making site-specific projects to be one in which the need to employ the mind of don’t know is evident and essential. Since the mid-1980s many artists have incorporated site-specificity into their art practice. They have responded with sensitivity to new contexts and embraced their own status as outsiders as one full of potential for creativity. They have participated in a process founded on not knowing and its corollary: listening—to communities, to a place, to themselves—as they come to understand what it is to be in a place, not be from that place. They literally see things for the first time. Valuing this position as outsider goes against the grain of some practitioners and the wisdom of many administrators and funders who safeguard what is perceived as community history and knowledge and who want to protect audiences from perceived exploitation by artists. But, from my experience, something is always learned, exchanged, and gained when artists enter into such projects. When artists listen to and share experiences

⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁸ John Dewey, “Art as Experience,” in Stanley Rosen, ed., *The Philosopher’s Handbook* (New York: Random House, 2000), 274.

with keen attention to a site and all that it implies, when they bring to bear on a situation all their past experiences, when they trust that the process can lead somewhere if they remain open, then extraordinary and unexpected works emerge. And this can happen in studio practice, too.

“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.... In meditative art, the artist embodies the viewer as well as the creator of the works.”⁹ This idea, formulated by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa, is instinctively understood by artists who work within communities, crossing lines between concepts of artist and non-artist, professional and non-professional. The idea sometimes manifests itself in the ways artists creatively interact as collectives and collaboratives, holding back individual authorship (this requires great practice) and allowing ideas to co-arise that could not have ever come from one individual alone. And it is carried by artists who work in so-called hybrid practices, across and between media and materials as well as intersecting with disciplines and fields beyond the arts. In bringing others into the processes of the mind of don’t know, artists sustain the presence of others in the space of art-making.

Art and art’s processes are powerful manifestations of interconnectedness, a key Buddhist concept that we find an everyday expression of in popular knowledge of ecology. This concept has resonance and artistic appeal among a generation of artists exposed to postcolonial thought and its dismantling of the “us/them” dichotomy. Interconnectedness speaks to both multiculturalism and diversity, and to a new universalism—a renewed humanism—allowing for a consideration of *both* the culturally specific *and* a universal nature among all cultures. “Both/and” perception provides space for situations that are not “either/or”; it permits coexistence. Buddhism’s embrace of simultaneous, even conflicting or contradictory, states within the both/and condition allows for a more enlightened cultural understanding of the interdependence of cultures and provides a philosophical basis for concepts from a global point of view. When we understand in a deep and pervasive way our interconnectedness, compassion flows.

The artist’s path is the Buddha’s path. This was borne out in these interviews—somewhat to my surprise, I must admit. It was a revelation. Together occupying the mind of don’t know, we spoke in unscripted ways about what mattered in their art-making for each of them. It became apparent that, by different paths, each artist had arrived, like the Buddha, at the subject of human suffering. Art, like Buddhism, is a path by which we can deal with suffering. Shunryu Suzuki gives a beautiful summary of this relationship:

*Whatever we see is changing, losing its balance. The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony. This is how everything exists in the realm of Buddha nature, losing its balance against a background of perfect balance. So if you see things without realizing the background of Buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize that suffering itself is how we live, and how we extend our life.*¹⁰

Why do works of “art” play a role in human life? Let’s take off from Suzuki again, substituting the word “art” for the words “zazen” and “Buddhism” in his statement: “To understand reality as direct experience is the reason we practice [art]. Through the study of [art], you will understand your human nature, your intellectual faculty, and the truth present in human activity.”¹¹ The individual transmission of thought that a work of art embodies is a connecting thread that is greater than the individual. And, as Yvonne Rand said at one of our *Awake* meetings, we can cultivate “our capacity to be with suffering as it arises by developing our ability to be in attention: when we are fully conscious and present in the moment, we can be in the field of energy shared with others, put ourselves in another’s shoes...and have the skillfulness to develop the capacity to experience another person’s suffering.” Art is one way to develop our capacity for being with suffering, our own and that of others.

Art’s processes—for both artist and viewer—draw from a deeper, wiser place. Suzuki said: “When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe, you have fear.... Our life and death are the same thing.”¹² So Kimsooja stands down-river from a cremation site and thinks, “Is it the river that is moving, or myself?...the river that is changing all the time in front of this still body, but it is my body that will be changed and vanish very soon, while the river will remain there, moving slowly, as it is now.” Bill Viola regenerates the image of a man through fire and water. Marina Abramovic transmits energy between herself and her audiences. These and the other artists in this book communicate palpably through art to others in ways that are beyond self so that others can move beyond themselves too.

So, what is the value of art? What does art do? What happens in the experience of art? John Dewey believed that, “only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual. The first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art.”¹³ The space of art and the space of life are different dimensions of the same space. The “imaginative vision” of artists is one of the things that allows us to see and experience reality fully. Buddhist practice is another. Sometimes, as in the work of the artists interviewed here, they are connected.

⁹ Chogyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 1.

¹⁰ Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³ Dewey, “Art as Experience,” 285.