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HOME ON ARTISTS WRITINGS



## CULTURAL GIFTING

This is a discussion around some words: gift, collaboration, experience...and art because art's existence is dependent on all these words. The experience of art for Bik Van der Pol is a collaboration with the public: others enter into the work and, making use of it, they complete it. Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol do not restrict but rather funnel engagement by means of the form they give the work: a library, a public picnic place, an evening outdoor hang-out.... The conditions they set up for art experiences to happen make their art a gift: 'We can be very precise in the staging of our work, but we have no control...we'd rather let it go and hope that the articulation gives enough.'<sup>1</sup> Their openness allows for a true exchange: reciprocity without prescription. The gift that is their art is offered unconditionally, without obligation or payment. Come experience without accountability. Yet it is just because they give their art generously with no fixed expectation or goal and because they give it with clear intention informed by a 'continuous optimism and trust in the function of art as a catalyst for change', that manifold, reciprocal effects are set in motion.

Take *How to disappear completely and never be found again*. Bik Van der Pol gave away one hundred books to the public 'but not actively. They are there to take, but it is nowhere mentioned or stimulated.' Certain questions stood at the core of this project: 'What is possible when you give a lot? What do others do with that? Do they take it all? What does that do with the sense of hesitation, doubt of the public? What does it do with the question of responsibility, maybe not to the artist, but maybe more to the piece, or to others?'<sup>2</sup> Their aim...here and elsewhere...is to look at the nature of our interrelationships and to create connections that might otherwise not exist or would elude us.

Art and the art experience reside not so much in the thing made as in the making of possibility for personal exchange. 'Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received,' tells Lewis Hyde.<sup>3</sup> Art experiences are a way of being in the world. Yet art often seems more a function of the art world than the world. And it seems today, in a world where we are often distanced from direct experience, that we have lost touch with the way in which our presence with a work of art leads to an experience we can take in and integrate into our lives.

A colleague recently told me that here in the U.S. museums now refer to those who enter

their doors as 'customers', no longer visitors or viewers. Consumption, as a way of daily life, defines our experience as it directs us through finely honed marketing strategies to a desired outcome. Consumption, determined by finiteness (using up something so we can consume more), is at odds with art's gift that elicits experiences inexhaustibly. And art that subscribes to the production-consumption paradigm risks diminishing its ability to affect its audience in thoughtful and transformational ways. With *Absolut Stockholm* Bik Van der Pol addressed the control which capitalist functions exert on the nature of publicness. They set up situations by which they could make connections between people in a public space. 'It was very important that this project would reach out to a wider public than the usual art public: in our opinion the issues raised by implication of this project were all very much a "public case".' Their sentiment is shaped by the era of the 1990s by which time aesthetic and social concerns had fused into a critical agenda by artists who possessed the ambition to influence the cultural climate. Thus, it was logical, even necessary that the artwork break out of its art-world box, both in terms of the venue and the viewer. And it is no wonder that this decade became an era that saw a groundswell of activity in what is generally termed 'public art': at first identified with increased frequency in the use of non-traditional, lived-with spaces for projects and exhibitions; then with a greater consciousness of those who could come to experience the work irrespective of their identification with the art of museums.

At several junctures in the 20th century, when it seemed that the art system would destroy the art experience, artists' counter actions and alternative ways of making arose in response. An earlier catalytic period that took up this mission was centred in New York in the 1970s. It led to an explosion of artist-initiated-and-run alternative spaces, much-needed venues for artists to meet, galvanize groups new to the ranks (like women!), plan arts actions and political demonstrations, present shows and events, or just find camaraderie. They played a critical role, too, by giving artists the permission to imagine what could be and alternative practices beyond tradition sprang forth: anti-form sculpture, temporary works, artists' books, performance, to name a few. These changes were afforded by open spaces - those of actual buildings and mental working spaces. This was the gift.

Gordon Matta-Clark was an undisputed leader of this period and so it is not surprising that he was the inspiration for a work by Bik Van der Pol. Their unrealized project *Good* is indebted - in spirit and name - to his project *Food*: a coop restaurant opened in 1971 in New York's Soho that was beginning at that time to be populated by artists; it was an art event-commercial venture-social system all in one.<sup>4</sup>*Good* was to be an open space for artists to make, present and discuss their work. It was to be a meeting space and workspace for artists, a 'free space or sanctuary', and maybe most of all, a safe space in which to experiment and find a way of making art, a way of being an artist. For *Food*,

Matta-Clark cut the building during renovation, employing his signature way of working, seeing in abandoned empty spaces the potential for art; the next year he displayed the extracted elements as sculptures. *Good*, designed for a rehabilitated space near P.S.1 (another alternative New York art scene) was to be carried out 'not by adding yet another new idea to the cycle of production and consumption, but by revising an existing situation. Reconstruction as opposed to destruction.' Retranslated in meaning and function into our time, *Good* recycled an idea of earlier artists. As a response to 1970s avant-garde history, it also aimed to offer information on urban development and change in New York particularly in the 1960s and '70s, 'thereby establishing connections and functioning as a laboratory for ideas and practices.'<sup>5</sup>

Maybe it is because the essence of art as an exchange - a gift - has evaporated from so many of art's manifestations that artists like Bik Van der Pol have again chosen to again take up this practice of cultural gifting.<sup>6</sup> They are reclaiming the space that art can occupy in creating human relationships. One of Bik Van der Pol's works stands as a metaphor for this open space of possibility in which art happens. For *Proposition for Reclaiming a Space* they redesigned with simple means what they saw: a space between two others that was more than empty. Using two sets of glass doors, they created a space from a non-space and offered the possibility for something to occupy it. Transitional spaces, like this one found along the street or in the mind, exist in a state of becoming. And this is where creation happens: in spaces that are empty yet full of possibility. There we find new forms. Art experiences happen in these empty spaces, too, and we can make new meanings. Thus, not only the artist's making-space but also the viewer's looking-space depends upon this in-between space because it is there that experiences can be taken in on our own terms.<sup>7</sup> The intention of cultural giving is to create a situation which generates and opens up possibilities, and which activates knowledge we possess but have forgotten, allowing it to come forward into consciousness.

Sometimes we need to create emptiness so that something can be created and fill it meaningfully. Take *Rest*. For this work Bik Van der Pol were joined by two other artists, Jeanne van Heeswijk and Hans Snoek, in the making of an open space: an apartment available to others invited for a period of time so that they might have some thinking space. To 'stimulate and support guests as far as possible', they created - right in Rotterdam - a kind of personal retreat: some food and daily needs constituted the support system; freedom from wants and a sense of remove from the everyday was stimulus enough, though surely the graciousness of their gesture was a kind of inspiration in making 'the impossible possible', as they hoped. It is not always easy to accept a gift, in this case to settle into deep reflection and quiet. So for guests there was, at times, an initial anxiety until, as one remarked, finally 'beginning to get used to the comfort that the flat *Rest* has given...' But it was the open-endedness - open to any outcome or none at all

- that made this residence a gift. The same recipient continued: 'What a relief that nothing has to come out of this; I've managed to find an insula dei in this country where I always feel hunted by obligation *Rest stop moving...*'<sup>8</sup>

Art is a gift passed on by the artist into the world. We speak of the 'gift' an artist possesses and which engenders creativity. When art is experienced, it can also engender a gifted state in the viewer or, as Bik Van der Pol have said of Rirkrit Tiravanija, 'generosity as a practice also means that the viewer/participant should have a generous approach back to the work...otherwise you experience nothing.' Audiences in collaboration, through their involvement and participation in art, benefit from the artist's gift and make use of their own innate gifts as they tap the creativity embodied in the work of art in order to locate the gift within themselves. But the gifts the viewer possesses are rarely acknowledged in the contemporary art world. Instead persons outside the art world are often viewed by those inside as 'empty', in the sense of being deficient, but everyone's life is full of experiences and their own histories to draw upon.

Artmaking and art experiences are, at their best, generous and open gestures. When art is given openly and we are open to it, it can be a transformational experience. This exchange of gifts - from artist to art and art to audience - is a collaboration and this gift-giving is perpetual. So the gift 'not only establishes concrete relations with the other, it opens up those relations to other kinds of exchange. Thus, far from limiting relations, the gift expands relations.'<sup>9</sup> Alfredo Jaar created a work called *The Gift* (it involved the distribution of 15,000 free art works that could be reformed into a money box) not only to raise funds for Doctors Without Borders, but also to make a relation between us and the people of Rwanda so that we might gain an understanding of our place as individuals in that world disaster.

In 1934 American philosopher John Dewey wrote: 'Art is a strain in experience...a matter of the interaction of the artistic product with the self.'<sup>10</sup> It is a 'means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own' and in that act, 'To some degree we become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and, by bringing it to pass, our own experience is re-oriented...'<sup>11</sup> Decades later Rirkrit Tiravanija's method of practice - fluid and part of life - aims 'to be more receptive to your own experience', and then 'to surpass our own experiences, and experience the idea of others, otherness'.<sup>12</sup> The great ability of art, its power to awaken us to other experiences, is transferred through gift exchange by the artist to the viewer.

The site of Dewey's viewing of art, of Rirkrit's making, and of Bik Van der Pol's projects is most often the museum. The vulnerability of the museum as a space of experience is on the minds of some caring professionals in this era of competing institutional concerns. My

own work as a curator took me back into the museum after being out in the 1990s, a period when I found that non-art spaces offered the greatest potential for art experiences to happen. I didn't return to organizing shows of the gallery variety, but rather I entered into deep discussion with colleagues around a shared programme that took at its heart the re-embrace of the art experience on an individual level.<sup>13</sup> Now, after that process, I can say there is a re-integration underway of art and audience. This is much indebted to the work and clear thinking of artists. Now we understand that it is not the venue that makes art public (though the street can be as exciting as it is useful to reassert the connections of art and life). It is not the social subject matter that makes work public (though artists can do much to widen our perspective on our own circumstances). It is not the viewer's demographic profile (non-art educated, lower income, whatever we might have in mind as 'other') that makes art public. The publicness of art lies ready to be activated in the work itself. This publicness is realized when circumstances allow us to give ourselves to the work. Artists like Bik Van der Pol help make this happen. That is their gift.

Generosity as a practice has been described as something 'not done simply because we think it is a virtuous thing to do', but because 'it helps connect us with others and with ourselves. Giving creates a relationship between the giver and the receiver, so acts of generosity help us to learn more about the nature of our relationships. It also develops those relationships.'<sup>14</sup> Another museum installation tells this story. In experiencing *Sleep* a participant-sleeper described her periodic awakenings over the course of one night as a way of checking in to see if the man in Warhol's film *Sleep* was still there and finding him on the screen was 'comforting...intimate almost'. The sleepers in the room and in the film were for a time...in the space of the museum...connected. Art happens when there is a true exchange: artists giving, receivers finding their own way into the experience. Then we realize a moment in which 'we too know the hidden coherence of our being and feel the fullness of our lives' - and we are connected.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

1. American art critic Michael Brenson wrote that 'The ways in which critics use language reveal whether they want to control, or limit, the art experience or instead are interested in allowing that experience to be inhabited and individually, rather than institutionally owned.' Michael Brenson, *Acts of Engagement: Writing on Art, Criticism, and Institutions 1993-2002* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), p. 15.
2. All quotes by the artists are taken from email correspondence with the author, November/December 2004, and the artists' website.
3. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and The Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 143.
4. *Food* was located at the corner of Prince and Wooster Streets. It was a collaboration with Caroline Goodden, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris and Rachel Lew. For a discussion

of this and other Matta-Clark projects, see the catalogue of the artist's first retrospective and catalogue raisonne: Mary Jane Jacob, *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985).

5. Matta-Clark has become a source of inspiration for many artists today. One of the ways in which he is today an influence on artists is his effort to make a functional space of real practical value to a community, spaces of hope to those in need, open spaces of possibility. His project *A Resource Center and Environmental Youth Program for Loisaida*, begun in 1977, was aimed to restore the community health of the Lower East Side in New York; it took the form of a recycling facility where local residents could receive cash for certain materials or acquire used goods at modest prices and local youth could be employed, while gaining practical skills mixed with critical ecological consciousness. While this effort came too late in the artist's short life to be fully operational, it foreshadows the action projects of many artists today and reaffirms Matta-Clark's desire to make art that is a gift.

6. A book on the subject of generosity in contemporary art has just appeared: Ted Purves (ed.), *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

7. As artist Marina Abramovic retells: 'If you are coming into the [art experience], and you are a butcher, gardener, shoemaker, businessman, you have to take the part that you need for your own life...they take what they need for their own life to enlarge awareness.' Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (eds), *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 191.

8. Tijs Goldschmidt, 'Letter to Roy Villevoeye', in Ine Gevers and Jeanne van Heeswijk (eds), *Beyond Ethics and Aesthetics* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1997), p. 210.

9. Clive Dilnot, 'The Gift', *Design Issues* v. IX, no. 5 (Spring 1993), p. 60.

10. John Dewey, 'Art as Experience', in Stanley Rosen (ed.), *The Philosopher's Handbook* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 271.

11. Dewey, pp. 273-274.

12. *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, see note 7, p. 176.

13. Since 2001 I have conceived and organized with Jacquelynn Baas a U.S. museum consortium programme entitled 'Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimensions of Consciousness'. The research undertaken and work of writers in several fields and artists is now compiled in a book, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, see note 7. Over 50 related museum projects are detailed on the website [artandbuddhism.org](http://artandbuddhism.org) which also states: 'AWAKE is an independent catalyst for thinking and programming in the arts in both individual and institutional realms. It is being carried out by a consortium of arts institutions, creators, performers, scholars, and members of multiple cultural communities who are working together to elucidate complex historical and contemporary relationships, develop individual projects that will make up the overall program, and bring about new

modes of public engagement with the arts.'

14. Gil Fronsdal, 'the Practice of Generosity', [www.tricycle.com](http://www.tricycle.com)

15. Hyde, p. 151.