

Paper Two
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Thoughts on *The Re-enchantment of Art* by Suzi Gablik

In *The Re-enchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik takes a hard look at the underlying ethics driving the making and marketing of contemporary western art. She asks directly “what is the forward movement of art and what is the role of a truly conscientious contemporary art practice?” She exposes current beliefs and values by tracing them through history. She ties patriarchal and dualistic western philosophy together and mixes it with modernist and postmodernist ideology.

Emerging themes from the new paradigm are ecologically, socially and spiritually based. Artists have started to create work that is responsible to the earth and humanity. Her words are passionate and come from a genuine fear that we will not survive as a species. She believes art serves as a catalyst for change and can help us heal the toxic environmental and social conditions we currently find ourselves in.

While I agree with much of what she writes, her points don't follow a linear order. They radiate out from succinct declarations that may be true, are half-true or in some cases untrue. Her points hold subtle distinctions, where I find my views diverge. For example, her assessment of the existing art scene and its dire need for change is apparent and I agree. Continuing, she asks us to change the way we evaluate art when she writes, “The effectiveness of art needs to be judged by how well it overturns the perception of the world that we have been taught.” Assuming what we've learned, we've been taught, what is the difference between judging art as a reaction against, or by the yardstick of status or financial gain? Wouldn't switching one set of criteria for another, eventually become oppressive? This may seem trivial, but throughout reading her book, I became aware of how many small trajectories of thought could conclude in a position very far away from what I think.

The reader is asked to reevaluate the role art plays in our contemporary culture. Gablik calls on artists to reflect on what it means to be truly successful. She observes the current philosophy of postmodernism as anti-ecological, patriarchal and destructive. She wants us to look at what our contribution is, to this dysfunctional system and change the part we play in perpetuating it.

Literature Review

Suzi Gablik is not the only one to voice concerns for the condition of our environment. In 1992, Helen Caldicott, M.D. wrote in her book *If You Love this Planet*, “Our planet is desperately ill and must be healed”. In the chapter titled “American Media and the Fate of the Earth” she writes, “take a searching look at the media, which are, we may safely say determining the fate of the earth...corporations who own the media are out to make money and to take control of the public through a perpetuation of ignorance, not to educate” [pg 179]. This current reality is a far cry from the progressive idealism of Thomas Jefferson when he wrote, “A democracy can not be both ignorant and free.”

The art market concurrently reflects corporate values, fashion and commercial trends. It is complicit in the values that are currently devastating our earth. As a concerned member of the medical community, Caldicott wrote this book as a warning to the lay public with the same message and sense of urgency Al Gore expressed in, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

While it is true that humans have injured the earth, the earth will survive. One large volcanic eruption in the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa could send a massive landslide from the island of La Palma into the Atlantic Ocean. This could in turn, send a massive tsunami capable of wiping out most of the North American, European and the North African seaboard. I am sure the earth can shrug off human beings quickly, as this worst-case scenario illustrates, (Benfield Hazard Research Center, University College London, 1999). I'm reminded of an old bumper sticker with a whale on it that says: "Save the Humans".

Gablik writes "an individual (artist) is also an organ of the collective (society)" and I couldn't agree more. We make up this collective society, these corporations and our government; it is "we" as a group of individuals. We are social beings; we don't have sharp claws or big fangs. Our strength is in our ability to work together as a group for the well being of us all. These institutions do not exist if not for individuals, who make them up. Therefore, in order for real change to occur it must start at the individual level.

Although this is a commonly held insight, it is a significant point. Art does reach individual consciousness. It does facilitate human development and evolution as the individual interacts with the art. Art can cause the individual to change and therefore the group. Margaret Mead said, "Do not underestimate that the power of a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The relationship of the individual to the group and the dynamics of the group is key to social change. Gablik recognizes this, but her attention on the group seems at times romantic. Is the group a remedy for neglected spiritual practice or immaturity? An individual's contribution is in part, to be of service to the group. Service to the group is not at the expense of the individual or the group, as anyone who has experienced communal living can attest. Groups can be just as unenlightened as an individual.

Gablik calls on artists by saying, "Imagine what artists could do if they became committed to the long-term good of the planet". I agree and think, imagine what we all could do. This idea should be extended out to all of us. It is a heavy burden to place on artists to "fix it". The idea of freedom in postmodern values has been perverted to irresponsibility at one end of the spectrum and egocentricity at the other. Progressive educator, A.S. Neil's radical idea of "freedom, not license" says that one is truly free only when one takes responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. In applying this concept of freedom to art making, an artist makes choices on concept, subject matter, materials and message. Those choices result in a particular product. The artist is responsible for the creation. Freedom and responsibility go together and one without the other is incomplete personal development or put another way, immaturity. In this society, the word "responsibility" carries negative connotations of blame or duty and it is neither.

Our culture does promote disconnection, isolation and a lack of social responsibility, in part by requiring us to define ourselves by our differences. It supports superficiality and stifles growth at all levels except for appetite. It distracts us by encouraging co-dependent addictive behaviors ranging from obsessive shopping to waging war for oil. The isolation of individuals from significant community membership creates a spiritual vacuum. Co-dependent behaviors increase as attempts are made to fill that spiritual void.

Gablik talks about modernism as politically and socially neutral. She warns “to remain aloof has dangerous implications”. Her counsel is echoed in Howard Zinn’s “*You can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train*, where he writes, “The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory”. Gablik believes the forward movement of art is an ecological egalitarianism worldview. I agree, as this is what our time and place is in desperate need of, but disagree on the idea of limiting art production to any one worldview.

In vernacular societies spirituality and awareness of the natural world is part of everyday existence. Deep ecologists believe nature is the first ethical teacher of man. It is not the only teacher, as Gablik seems to be saying. Disconnection from our physical world causes suffering. Michio Kushi, a world-renowned macrobiotic pioneer explains his work as “the biological regeneration of humanity”. He poses the question “how can we stop polluting our environment when we continue to put garbage into our own bodies?” If you cannot change yourself, how can you expect to change the world?

The Role of Art

“The source of creativity in society is the person”, says Gablik. She deftly reminds us of our authority. Art does have power to access and move forward new values and beliefs. “We have the power. The truth is, only we have the power to transform our situation; there is no one else.” I would add to this, *all of our power lies in the present moment*. It is this moment where our power to change, is accessed. The action of change can only be through the present moment.

The late modernist premise states art has no useful, purposeful or meaningful role. It is disavowed of all responsibilities which effectively neutralizes value art has to offer. Art immersed in disconnected sensations struggling to evade the logical conclusion of purpose, diffuses the power of art into a downward spiral of despair, apathy and self indulgence. This western nihilistic attitude toward art and life in general is inevitable, if one thinks postmodern ideals and cultural degeneration is how one should live.

In purposeless detachment defined in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, purposeless serves the individual as it facilitates the experience of the illusion, of a separate ego or self. The illusion of a separate self dissolves and a knowing of interconnectedness is experienced. Meaninglessness and purposelessness transcends to become meaningful and purposeful.

In one instance purposelessness is destructive and in another, creative. Art has a dualistic nature as process and product both factor in art. Processes are neither useful nor useless, they simply are. The product of art is where we assign art its value.

Is it easier to say that art is useless rather than define its purpose? Does it come down to a subjective experience justified by an assortment of philosophy? What is art? Is it a vehicle for biocentric ecology, social justice, or aesthetic personal experience? Maybe it is easier to define what art is not.

When I was a child, it was my habit to go off into the woods and “play”. I remember going out to a small stream that had garbage in it. I spent time hauling away old tires, cans and broken bottles from the stream. I couldn’t clean it all out and didn’t know where to put the garbage I took from the stream. It had to come out and it was all right to be able to just clean out a section of it. I remember feeling like it was my stream and I wanted to see it without garbage in it. I remember organizing neighborhood kids to help. No one told me to do this nor was it written up in the New York Times Art section. The garbage offended my sense of aesthetics and moral values I had developed as an eight years old. Gablik suggests that cleaning out a riverbed is art. I disagree; I was cleaning up a mess, not making art. Is a clean river beautiful? Yes, but the river turns back into its original state, and does not add to, or move forward knowledge of ourselves or the river.

The Postmodernist Divide

Gablik breaks up the past decade and divides postmodern art production into two ideological camps. She explains deconstructivism as a reaction against consumerism and the values and beliefs of postmodernism. Postmodernist values delineate life as meaningless, arbitrary and without intrinsic value. So, life is meaningless; and it is meaningless that it is meaningless. But life is not arbitrary nor is it without value. Life does have meaning; it is the meaning we bring to it. Our lives have value to us and in relationship to each other. We are meaning makers and bringers of value to life by who we are and how we live.

Deconstructive skepticism of “subversive complicity” produces literally meaningless art that “baits us with indifference”. Artists produce work to out-shock each other at the amusement of the art critics and the bewilderment of the general public. Deconstructivism dismisses originality and formal aesthetics while trying to avoid consumerism by “a withdrawal of cathexis”. Since, when is change a modernist ideal? The rampant ‘anything is art’ is the same thing as saying, nothing is art. Gablik further explains deconstructive aesthetics tied to postmodern angst as “hovering”.

The idea of hovering was new to me. It makes sense as a strategy that does not feed consumerism albeit it’s a poor one. While not wanting to feed consumerism is sensible, the “deliberate thwarting of ones work” is not. Couldn’t artists come up with other ways to get around consumerism, one that doesn’t compromise their artwork or values? Give the work away? No, one can’t give it away as something that is free is perceived as not having value. Yet, I’d rather give my work away than suffer artistic death. Hovering is standing still and standing still is stagnation and stagnation is artistic death.

The other side of deconstructivism is reconstructivism. Reconstructivism aspires to transform our ailing culture by healing our social ills through what is considered feminine principles. Gablik defines female principles encompassing recognition of our

interconnectedness, willingness to collaborate, cooperate, with a sense of social responsibility, compassion, creativity and shared goals.

Collapsing Ethical Issues with Gender

Male qualities are expressed as external physical power, control over the environment, linear, hierarchal, rational logic, domination, confrontation, aggression, expansion and focus on the personal ego state. Jung's super-archetype for the masculine is the Hero. Gablik describes these qualities further as "heroic but belligerent, ego-inflated and alienated" from the social world with "a depreciation for 'other'".

The Cartesian picture of belief originating from Descartes "I am... only a thing that thinks" is tied to rational thought versus intuitive feeling. It positions self in opposition to objects. This separation of mind from the body in non-interactive dualism violently denies the body and mind communication with the whole. It is a western masculine trait to struggle with this oppositional definition of the self through thought. Facts and logic alone, do not answer ethical questions about how we should live.

Are "manic production and consumption, maximum energy flow, mindless waste, greed and a narrow sensitivity to moral and spiritual issues", as Suzi describes, masculine characteristics? Is she saying feminine principles are more ethical than masculine? Isn't over emphasizing one gender's principles setting up the same dualist extreme? Ethical and moral development needs to happen for both genders, it is not limited to male or female gender.

The new emerging paradigm goes beyond a personal identity, uniqueness and the belief in the existence of a separate objective self. It looks to eastern philosophical perspectives and the feminine principles including ritual, shape this aesthetic. Female energy is considered internal spiritual, ecologically concerned, collaborative, intuitive, socially connected, reverent, and nurturing. Jung's female archetype is the Mother. The earth is the symbol for the mother. In order to assuage the transgression of 10, 000 years of patriarchal rule, Gablik firmly insists the feminine archetype must be restored to its rightful balance.

In her earlier writing (1977) Gablik refers to developmental stages of human beings and compares these stages to art historic periods. In this brilliant observation she wrote; "The changes in the modes of representation in art are reflective of the long and complex development of human consciousness. Art, literature, philosophy, and particularly science are parallel and interrelated expressions of the predominant structural model of reality of each cultural period." Morality and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive. It's a big jump to go from disenchantment to reenchantment. I respect Suzi Gablik command of language, courage and honesty to look at where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be going.

This short art film significantly changed my worldview. *The Power of 10 Movie* created by Charles and Ray Eames (1907-1978).

"Eventually, everything connects."—Charles Eames