



12 Questions of Art

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During the spring semester of 1990, I visited the Yale University Graduate School sculpture studios for twelve weeks and conducted a Fine Arts Seminar at the School of Visual Arts in New York City for six weeks. For both of them I prepared this set of 12 questions and a short introductory paragraph.

o. Introduction

This workshop is an exploration of the conditions within which we, as authors, approach the making of art. It consists of twelve questions. We should consider the questions as open matters and seek neither confirmation nor negation of them and expect no specific solutions. Rather, I suggest we seek only an awareness of the contradictions and references contained in each.

I shall try often to step away from the "objective," removed position and speak instead of my personal dilemmas, passions, and desires, in the hope of prompting equivalent responses. "Objectivity" and its pseudoscientific stance is often a cause of manipulation in the arts.

The title of my position in Yale is "Senior Critic." Such a title could imply an objective authority which I consider uninteresting. I prefer

the critic in every artist to be the manager of the permanent crisis creativity cannot but be in. "Critic" and "Crisis" share the same root in Greek: *Krinein* = to judge (to understand) the passing from one condition to another.

1. Style

A misinterpretation of style, originality, consistency, and novelty has become a ruling dimension of artistic exchange. These attributes are thought of as conditions an artist must not only seek but be bound by and more often than not program him- or herself into.

A signature style is often considered to represent a guarantee of aesthetic value for an artist's production. But a signature style is most of the time the result of an artist's censorship of her or his contradictory creative impulses in favor of formulas. These result in the Product Recognition needed to facilitate easy marketability of the art objects.

Formulaic style diminishes the creativity of both the author and the receiver of art because it introduces the apparent accessibility of trademarked homogeneity into the art.

Rigid agendas for the development and distribution of formulaic art produce the culturally totalitarian regime of Consumer Orthodoxy. Under the appearance of pluralism, Consumer Orthodoxy actually regulates the exchange of visual data at the expense of intellectual research and, especially, of emotional feeling.

All aesthetics sharing Consumer Orthodoxy's practices, even those, such as neo-Marxism, which many believe to be opposed to them, submit to the unregenerative course it ties culture into. Indeed, both Consumer Orthodoxy and neo-Marxism discourage the single experience in favor of generalization and both foster the typecasting of every artist in a specialization.

Only by conceiving of style, originality, consistency, and novelty as unintentional byproducts (recognized a posteriori) of an earnest research which disregards prescriptive rules but favors probing methodologies, can we establish creative discourse in the arts.

2. Exhibiting

The exhibition of art objects, transported from where they were made, assembled, or found to a site where they are put up for public sale, is a

fairly recent development. Before, art was displayed either publicly or privately *after* it had been acquired from the artists.

The current practice of regularly exhibiting artists' new work exacerbates the eternal conflict between private impulse and public stance.

The sites where art is exhibited have become a facet of the media structure which now *mediates* the sharing of aesthetic experience. While the media appear to be democratic means of exchange, they also inevitably prescribe its conditions, thus affecting both the authorship and the receivership of art.

The media, mere instruments per se, are, in this period and in this society, signals of Consumer Orthodoxy, which, like all orthodoxies, represents a specific ideology characterized by specific rules of operation. Within the scope of these rules, exhibiting one's work implies a sort of declaration even when one does not mean to make one. The pieces in a show always seem to have their singular power reduced under a general umbrella statement, at the exclusion of their ramifications.

For the artist, working toward an exhibition often means being prompted on the one hand into an occasionally useful shortening of decision time, and on the other into an undesirable censorship of contradictory creative impulses, so as to comply with orthodox rules of marketability.

The exhibition streamlines contradiction—the very source of regenerative thinking. The selection of what is to be exhibited, whether it follows the gauge of fashion or of an assumed standard of quality, seldom succeeds in presenting the true richness of an artist's art. It resembles the loss of magic engendered by the narration of a dream.

I know many artists who exhibit only a fraction of what they do, so as to keep a chosen image of their art in the public eye. Others lend great importance to timing. They feel artistic value is not so intrinsic in the work as much as a function of when the stance of a certain artistic approach is introduced to the public. A brown painting exhibited today could appear to derive from an obsolete concern to everyone, but, if shown tomorrow, it could be called fresh and new.

The research artists who desire to share with their audience the flow of thoughts, feelings, and inventions they pursue, become like publications unfit to the post office mailing standards. They must either choose marginality or elitism. Maybe both these positions are more desirable than mainstream conformity.

3. Privacy

In the modern movement there has been controversy about the private dimension. Some have promoted the primacy of the public, others of the private. Technology, the machine age, and mass society have been cited as the reasons why the private should be subordinated to the public. Several artists¹ have flaunted depersonalization in their art as a response to modern society's reality. Depersonalized art, they feel, better represents the one-dimensionality of men and women's lives and, by indulging less of the egotistic concerns of an individual artist or the cultural elite, it offers a common denominator of access to mass culture.

In contrast, technology, the machine age, and mass society have also become an incentive for a radical emphasis on private activity by other artists. Their opinion is that as the means of social intercourse become homogenized, private idiosyncracies become more important. As a quantified exchange dominates collective life, quality is to be found there where proof and verification are impossible: in the unfathomable personal sensibility of every individual. These artists² purposefully cultivate misunderstandings, mistakes, and incompleteness as the mental areas where authors and audience can meet in not completely predictable creative terms.

4. The Social

Everything one does in art has social significance. The questions, however, being discussed about the social aspects of art are mostly about the relevance, impact, or effect achieved by certain strategies, specific actions, or works.

Before modern times, artists were aware of the social content of their art, but would rarely and indirectly address it with the explicit purpose of social reform or improvement—in other words, within an overt and pointed critical agenda. The social fabric was somehow assumed as a given. A challenge to it was considered to be more a task to be carried out, in the theoretical field, by secular and religious philosophers, and by the military in the practical field. Not by the artist, who was encouraged to a stance of detached wisdom. Around the time preceding the French Revolution, the idea of socially active art began to dawn in the mind of many.

We have, since then, witnessed the exchange of innumerable opinions about the social factor in art, and many times seen harsh and even persecutory disagreements in the matter. Polarized, "either/or" thinking has made sure that it would be so.

Now that many of us understand that polarized thinking and the binding setting of priorities feed the short-cycle market of goods and ideas at the expense of intellectual speculation, we are faced with trying to find long-term methodologies of art which might indicate alternative thinking approaches.

The social question is one of many operational dilemmas for the artist today. It is to be singled out and used the same way as mathematicians deal with sets they know no answer to: by giving them a name and operating with their unknown entity as a unit in which unsolvability is implied.

The apparently unbridgeable polarities of activism and contemplation in art are to be dealt with by the establishment of a range of variables between them. Extreme activism for an artist could be: to renounce the making of art and enter social or political work. Extreme contemplation could be: to renounce the making of art and live the ascetic meditating life of the hermit. Between the two are myriads of opportunities offered within their range of variables.

Among these, the artist should allow him- or herself free choice to engage in those s/he desires or feels the necessity of, without privileging either of them. Designing a targeted political poster, for instance, or engaging in a community collaboration might stimulate the artist who designed or initiated them to next make a simple nonutilitarian thing, and vice versa, and so on. A flexible method reaches deeper and achieves in the long run more critical effects than the specialized repetitive production of either applied, sloganistic, or absolute, remote goods. What matters is *how* the art is approached, not *what* approach might be best.

Last year, members of OPUS B (Original Performances in Unusual Settings in Baltimore) invited me to conduct a painting workshop in a nursing home for the elderly, the mildly deranged, and some paraplegics. The mere presence of art in deprived circles can contribute a lot with no need to explain, theorize, discuss, or publicize. I came away with a plan to encourage art students everywhere to contribute a few hours every year, on a voluntary and private basis—to collaborate in visiting projects with any available institution.

5. Play

The puritan dismisses play as an unacceptable component of the creative act. But play is also sometimes used as an alibi for people to reduce the frank exploration of their feelings.

The study of play in religion or in innumerable circumstances ranging from the artist's studio to the jail, from childhood to death, is the subject of too vast a speculation for me to even try to summarize it here. We can nonetheless hint at some of the conditions by which we might want to consider play within our decision-making process in art.

The concept of play can be associated with two contradictory practices: 1) play a game according to consensually accepted rules; 2) transgress the established rules of any set. In the latter case, play is linked to transgression (as caprice, fun, arbitrariness, pun, joke, humor, irony) and to flexibility (as alternative, leeway, range, tolerance, scope). While in past times fulfillment of consensus was sought by art in several societies, the modern movement has favored transgression, but only as a passing from one inflexible methodology to another just as rigid one. In the modern scenario, consensus is found mostly only among members of a restricted group of people who try to supersede other groups as masterful representatives of their societies' aesthetic culture.

The inflexibility of modern transgressive sequences, and the exclusive connotations of their propaganda or promotional actions, have led to the Academy of Transgression, an institution as substantially totalitarian as the Academy of Conservatism. The Academy of Transgression, after a few decades of tangentiality to the mainstream of culture, is now embraced by Consumer Orthodoxy as a reliable, predictable partner for the sequencing of fashion.

In the face of such imperious forces, all the critical artist can do, I feel, is to interiorize both polarities of structure and transgression so that neither ever becomes a rule but both participate as ingredients of the specific decision-making process of his or her art.

To "just play" while making a piece of art is as necessary as it is to acknowledge the limits within which one has chosen to operate. The artist becomes nowadays both the king or queen *and* the jester, the clown *and* the shaman, the sane *and* the fool. Artists who follow this line of thinking oppose to the monolithic and standardized production of art a relativistic network of possibilities among which they play. It is

important however to remind ourselves that play is a matter of method and not of forms: there are no certain colors or shapes nor any arrangements of them one can prescriptively identify as playful. In the creative decision-making process, play is active in the trespassing of expectations (even of the expectation of play, should play have become a norm) and in the mental leaps an artist may trust her- or himself into, while engaged in the making of a work of art.

6. Fabrication

Deus ex machina was the Latin definition of a classical Greek theatrical device by which the solution of a play's quandary would come through the apparition of an all deciding god (*deus*) from the stage's machinery. By the same token, ever since ancient times, many artists have sought the unraveling of their unresolvable contradictions through the use of machines in their art.

With the development of industrialization and now, of electronics, artists have begun not only to legitimize the machine as having artistic validity equal to that of other techniques, not anymore as having a value of escape, but to simultaneously also construct a dichotomy between the machine and the hand as discordant instruments in art-making. The machine has been identified as, alternately, advancing the cause of the future, of progress, mass production, or as furthering dehumanization, one-dimensionality, loss of identity in the arts. The hand has been understood to represent either a detrimental nostalgia for past craftsmanship, for the personality cult and oligarchic uniqueness, or as the saviour of humanistic values, individuality, and spontaneity. The machine has represented democracy for many, while the hand has represented elitism. For some, the machine was alienation while for others the hand was health. There has been futile debate about whether photography, film, television, advertising, or industrial design are complete arts or not.

Today, the question is complicated by a practice common to the production of art once an artist begins to experience a reliable market for his or her work: the fabrication of the whole or of parts of art by others following instructions given by the author. This practice is analogous to that of the architect or of the composer.

Of course, Consumer Orthodoxy nurses the apparent unbridge-

ability of this as of all other dichotomies by encouraging artists to specialize so as to market faster the goods they produce.

How can we find a heterodox model applicable to the question of fabrication? In the last century, at the start of the industrial revolution, John Ruskin bemoaned the loss of group participation in the modern creative process. He recalled how the construction of a Gothic cathedral had been an anonymous collective enterprise, which offered creative opportunities to every individual participant. Nowadays, as well, the fabricator, printer, or assistant can contribute original ideas to the making of art if the author allows it, but, instead of communal anonymity, the author's name is the only one finally attached to the work.

I think we can accept art to be made by hand or by machine, by one person or by many, depending on *how* its making is engaged in. It is a matter of ideological and aesthetic approach. After all, most tools used to make art are primitive or complex machines themselves, and most materials are milled by machines even before we manipulate them (*manus* = hand; *mani-pulate* = handle by hand; *manufacture* = make by hand).

Standardized, linear thinking can be found in both the hand party and the machine party. It can lead to undesirable homogenized results in both.

The artist might do well to entertain no prejudice against any of the tools s/he perceives as being of interest for the setting up of a situation. By developing in him- or herself a form of regenerative critical thinking, the artist might avoid the prescriptive connotations our civilization presses us to attach to our activities. Even though some of us might react to such pressure by favoring the hand over the machine, we should nonetheless beware of the pitfalls of mechanistic thinking in exclusive favor of either, more than of those potentially inherent in the use of any one technique or other.

7. Situation Specific

Site-specific art has taught us to incorporate contextual ingredients in the making of a piece. But this concept is often understood in too restrictive a manner, because by site we often mean the sole physical plant of the place in which we set up a work. The concept is often used to support an aesthetic negating the validity of less localized practices such as transportable paintings and sculptures.

I'd like to extend the concept of site-specific art to become that of the situation-specific. Situation-specificity may include not only physical contexts but also wider and important contexts of individual and collective memory, feeling, technique, and social circumstances, with no exclusions.

Rather than privileging the specific environmental scale of a parking lot, for instance, over the apparently less specific intimate one of a small painting, situation-specificity calls for us to pay equal attention to the parkinglotness of the parking lot and to the paintingness of the painting, each inclusive of all the emotional and historical layers and ramifications they imply.

8. Intentions

In a dynamic and critical scenario of creativity, it becomes impossible to statically and hierarchically conceive of intentions as a monolithic, binding component of artistic decision-making. Intentions become mere ever-changing, ever-updated, flexible instruments for the conduction (not the definition) of the art being made. They are a springboard for a flight or fall one never knows the end of. It is impossible to compare works of art to the original intentions of the artist. One may do so only for conversation's sake, but one can not believe such comparisons lead to an explanation of the art. The deeper (departure) intentions and the formal (arrival) meaning of the art are often unknown to the artist him/herself and a matter of continuous, unfinished, unending cultural discourse for its audience.

This opinion runs counter to that of the heirs of Freudian or Marxian positivism, who believe that the referential network surrounding art is not only fathomable but must also objectively, intentionally be addressed in the creation of art. As positivism remains captive to the territorial demarcations which generated it, its careful and justified approach leads more often than not to an unregenerative artistic routine which feeds Consumer Orthodoxy and the short cycle market precisely what they want: recognizable goods whose declared intentions are used as marketing boosts.

While an analytical assessment is useful at the start, it often becomes detrimental once the creative ball is rolling. As an author, jettisoning part of my intentions when they reveal themselves to be of no further use in my creative process, enhances my art. As a spectator, I feel often

excluded by the self-serving explicitness of positivist art, whether it be "splashy" or "neat," while whatever attracts me in it is that which escapes the author's and my descriptions and engages my unexplained intellectual emotion.

9. Ineffable

The ineffable is that which can not be said in words. This could imply the concept that that which can not be said in words can be expressed otherwise. The visual arts and music are among the means we use to probe the dimensions of the ineffable, but also the word arts, like poetry or theatre, seek it.

Since what it is can not be said—since the very word which defines it, defines it in the negative by outlining its territory from the outside as the threshold beyond which description and interpretation can not go—when some written musings such as these are addressed to it as an ingredient of art, they can but be circumstantial (*circum* = around; *stantia* = stand), i.e., standing around its periphery.

We find that our theories stop short when reaching out to the ineffable and that only emotion or feeling or intuition can approach it. It is in the field of the ineffable that metaphysical quandaries such as beauty, validity, and quality should be mentioned as forever a subject of debate, forever unresolvable.

What distinguishes a merely competent rendition of a Webern quartet from an inspired one? Is an audience's consensus about its value an indication of absolute value or is it bound geographically and historically by the social context generating it? What difference is there between a black square painted by a merely accomplished practitioner of contemplative painting and a similar square painted by an intensely lyrical personality?

The concept of the ineffable can be extended to the unfathomable—that which can not even be conceived. Is that which is ineffable or unfathomable for one civilization obvious for another? Should unfathomability be construed as a qualitative attribute of a certain art object, or, because it escapes consensual understanding, should that object be considered outside cultural discourse?

The modern movement, intermixed with the avant-garde, resulted often at first in artistic statements unfathomable for the society at large to which they were presented. This kind of historically bound un-

fathomability, however, is losing power because modern defamiliarizing techniques have now become nothing but selling devices—the surprise factor is of ever shorter duration and many earnest artists avoid it as much as they can. Also, as we understand better the aesthetic relevance of the myriad cultures now merging in the global network our ease of information is fostering, many of us have the feeling that, compared to the past, less is now unfathomable.

Yet, even among those of us who fully accept the contextual factors affecting our creativity, many feel that there is an undefinable, unfathomable magic to some art, which is lacking in some other art.

I often find myself tentatively attributing this magic to the effort *striving* which every artist has engaged in while in the heat of creativity. This effort, which is both intellectual and emotional, one may find in any manner or technique for the making of art—it transcends the specific conditions within which the art is made, and it creates a corresponding, as undescrivable, effort on the part of the viewer.

10. Professional

To profess, from Latin *profiteri*. *Pro* = ahead of time; *fiteri* = to avow. To declare in advance what one is about to do. Is “to profess” a contradiction in terms with creativity? How can the creation of something which did not exist until it was created be professed beforehand? Is it still created when its terms are already known?

The professional may avow the direction her or his research is oriented toward and still, within that direction, engage in creative endeavors. But how much is the professional submitting to the avowed confines of his or her exploration to the degree that the explorations end up not being explorations at all but mere confirmations of that which was already certified within the scope of an original declaration of intent?

The arts, like the sciences, have suffered from assuming degrees of predictability to exist as qualifying givens in their practices. And they have reduced their possibilities even more by seeking logical, sociological, political, or ethical proof and verification for artistic events. Are there alternative referents we can muster to avoid engagement in a professional practice dependent on predictable conditions? Or, is it interesting at all for us to find such alternatives?

Assuming that the decision of producing art and the choice of mate-

rials confine us to a program, and assuming also that everything today ends up becoming an institution, I still find myself attracted by a desire to observe that which happens to the creative mind between those point-of-departure choices and those arrival institutions.

I know the mind does not proceed in a straight line. If it allows itself the opportunity, it stumbles upon personal discoveries which are akin to sheer illumination. These discoveries inevitably divert it from the programmed path it had set for itself. The mind goes from tiredness with the data it has involved itself in to enthusiasm for new data, in an apparently disordered kind of spiral process of growth through which it then returns again to the data it has already touched. What leads the mind to permit itself creative alertness? It is erotic, sensuous, and intellectual desire—the unstoppable curiosity about the next and other steps it envisions.

Through this model of the thinking and sensing process I have attempted to describe above, I have found myself seduced by impermanence and insecurity, as alternatives to the false certainties my culture offers. Conventions have become interchangeable codes for the process of experience rather than rules one should conform to. Analytical structures have become instruments—never binding, never prescriptive—upon which I play the intuitive leaps I trust my desire in. Theories are deduced from art making rather than being its hypothetical guidelines. Art has become for me an emblematic testimony to itself as a personal and social entity, and it is not a goal-oriented activity.

11. Sources

From ancient Greece through Rome and in the Renaissance and beyond, some city artists and intellectuals have drawn, in their poetry, theatre, painting, and sculpture, from an idealized vision of rural or pastoral simplicity. Recurrently, periods develop in which the roughly hewn or the rustic are also revived and revered in architecture and design, because they are believed to echo realities more pristine than the ones entertained by urban decadence.

Today, we have made an ever greater variety of sources for art available to ourselves. We started taking from the realms of the machine, the folk and popular arts, science fiction and colonial exploration, advertising and crafts, and

We have not only lost the central traditions outside of which we could pursue the exotic (*exo* = outside, in Greek) but also have even lost the reassuring certainties of progress. All that is left is an endless quest for chimeric outer sources. Basically, now all is exotic and nothing is central.

Art has become dial-a-source. Inevitably, all approaches have become quite legitimate and choice derives not from objective conditions, as some of us still would wish, but, willingly or not, from referring to the fluctuating international clubs of taste which are substituting for all previous standards.

The club of taste I find myself sharing the views of is attentive to artistic process as its own source, as Félix Guattari puts it: an organic growth incorporating memory, feeling, society. Process never achieves prescriptive certainty and its results are never fully consumable. I see life as rooted in uncertainty and gauged upon existential aimlessness. I am reassured (not frightened) by this view because from the innumerable orders of experience, in conflict or syntony, derives the creative drive.

Art, to me, is nothing but a testimony of a flow where order and disorder are interchangeable and where the darkness of inspiration and desire fulfill unknown purposes within the appearance of time and space.

12. Quality

row row row your boat, gently down the stream
merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream

So many voices: the agitating mess of a mass world. It's strange that so many of us live here and don't burst. Why do we take it upon ourselves to call ourselves artists? In the bustling flow, we choose almost at random some substance to activate, and from that first matrix we spin a lifetime of things and words and mysteries.

Looming under or above or behind or in front of it all—maybe actually entwined in it—is a yearning for quality.

We touched upon it a few times in these twelve exchanges, especially when circling around the concept of ineffable magic. Yet I am mentioning quality at the conclusion of our untargeted forays, because it is

perhaps the most controversial topic we could discuss, because it is a subject one can never discuss, because only absolute silence or total noise represents best its infinite constellation of possibilities.

I find quality in a toy made of sticks and nutshells by a child in a valley of the Caucasus and in a pie cooked by an old man in Lima. Quality is found in a gesture a person might address to another in a Beirut cellar under bombardment as well as in a corner of a most vulgar millionaire's apartment in New York.

In Europe, in all the countries being ravaged by World War II, one business which never ceased flourishing was the sale of flowers.

Quality is mourning. It is the celebration of birth. It is to admit the fragility of life and the intensity of passion. Quality can be destructive as well as constructive; it is optimistic and pessimistic. It is a genius, a tutelary spirit, a demon we sense the presence of not in ourselves but as ourselves, and yet ever escaping.

I lace my tragedies and joys with the calm and pressing tide of

Notes

- 1 For the early part of this century, one could cite, for instance, El Lissitzky or Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In more recent times there is a whole line of practitioners of depersonalization from Don Judd and Andy Warhol to Peter Halley and Jeff Koons.
- 2 Giorgio Morandi or Paul Klee could be examples to mention in this regard for the recent past, while maybe Louise Bourgeois, Saint-Clair Cemin, Kathy Muehleemann, or Robert Grosvenor could be counted as such in the present.
- 3 During the discussions, an interesting objection was made to using the word *effort*, because for many it implied an association with a feeling of burden. It was suggested to use words such as *striving* or *yearning* instead.