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### Art, Artifice, and the Rebirth of the Real World: Pottery, Tupperware, Bread and Song

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We know that women's religious rites were never separable from a totality of art, magic, and social and physical realities. The matrifocal group organized its power into a religious and cultural human expression through the medium of art. Art was the tool of connection, the manifest vision, expressing experience of a single life-giving principle conserved in the changeless Otherworld of the deep caves — where there is perpetual darkness, and time becomes spatial: resonant and static... The inner recesses and womb-walls of the caverns were alive with magic pictures of [the Great Goddess'] beasts. Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor.1.

What characterizes the art of the *Upper Paleolithic* still characterizes all true art today: it is the tool of connection. True art reflects a personal or cultural outlook in which "art" cannot be divorced from any of the following: craft, spirituality, ceremony, community, individual power and creativity, tradition, future, work, play. True art exists on a continuum encompassing humor, reverence, social comment, an aesthetic sense, interspecies connection and equality, and ecology in the largest sense of the word.

If something pretending to be "art" can be separated from any of the above, it will (for the purposes of this essay) be called "artifice". It can be one-of-a-kind elitist artifice or crass mass-produced artifice; its medium can be visual, musical, theatrical, or any of multitudinous others. But whatever form it takes, artifice-masquerading-as-art reflects a culture that has lost its sense of connection. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, appropriately enough, defines this concept well: "art [sic] n. 1. Human effort to...counteract the work of nature."

#### **Art**

True, healthy art, as "the tool of connection", is inherently ecological. And in the everyday life of a healthy culture or of a healthy individual true art is indistinguishable from any other element of living. So much so that, as Jamake Highwater has observed, most primal peoples have no word for "art". "For Indians everything is art...therefore it needs no name."2.

I saw some elements of this firsthand during my year-and-a-half with the Hopi. Among traditional Hopi, every element of work, play, ritual, prayer, involves "art" in some form: the art inherent in creating kachina dolls, pottery, baskets, clothing, dances and other

ceremonies — in growing and preparing food, in initiating members into community life, in passing on stories, in making music. Every aspect of daily living involves symbols, images, ways of doing things which reaffirm each person's sacred relationship with all others, with the land, its inhabitants and spirits, and with the cosmos.

Hopi art is inseparable from Hopi agriculture and Hopi religion, inseparable from personal spirituality, community life, natural cycles, and the continuity of evolution from past into future. Everyone is an artist; everyone participates. Art is not a static, "different" thing, to be put on a pedestal or a stage and gawked at. Art is the living flux of individual and shared experience, reborn every day in the simplest acts and most elaborate ceremonies. Art is both reverent and outrageously humorous — the most sacred prayers during a kachina dance can be followed by clowns pretending to urinate on the villagers from the plaza rooftops. Art not only honors the sources of Hopi existence — sun, rain, earth, plant (especially corn), and animal — but provides social commentary. Laughter and prayer, supplication and celebration, conscientious observation of tradition and the cultivation of vision-born-again in each person, are never far apart. The Hopi believe that their art, which returns thanks for the sources of their existence and provides cohesion for them as a people, is necessary for their own survival, and in fact for the balance of their world.

This sensibility exists in all native cultures. "When the Indian Potter collects clay," the Cherokee/Blackfeet Jamake Highwater tells us,

she asks the consent of the river-bed and sings its praises for having made something as beautiful as clay. When she fires her pottery, to this day, she still offers songs to the fire so it will not discolor or burst her wares. And finally, when she paints her pottery, she imprints it with the images that give it life and power — because for an Indian, pottery is something significant, not just a utility but a `being' for which there is as much of a natural order as there is for persons or foxes or trees..3.

True art reflects the natural order. For native and non-native alike, it is shared experience, shared prayer, shared connection. *Art and the attitudes it expresses have made us who we are.* According to Sjo and Mor,

A sacramental bond between our earliest human ancestors and the natural world was the primary factor in our evolution — not simply as a physical species, but as conscious beings. For this bonding set up a resonance in which all art, all religious ritual, all magic-alchemic science, all spiritual striving for illumination was born. As primal people have always experienced it, when you look and listen to Nature, something appears, something always speaks. Animism is still a valid relationship. If `modern man' neither sees nor hears, the fault is in his dead sensorium..4.

## **Artifice**

And the fault is also in artifice, "the tool of disconnection", which distracts and removes us from what is real. Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater describes the essence of artifice well in his account of a visit to a modern museum:

When we played our *Tree-Crucifixion* in Boston's Fenway Park last fall, our bus sat right in front of the Fine Arts Museum and I went to see their special offering, a show with the modest title, `American Painting in the Late Eighties' (or was it: `The Real and Only, Definite and Ultimate, American Painting'? because that is what was meant.) What I got to see in the genteel atmosphere of that noble edifice, oozing luxurious exquisiteness

out of every pore, was the profound representation of our culture's dehydrated extract of the art of painting as conceived by a clique, distinguished by its thorough professionalism, which conceives such things for the rest of us. The successes of its judgements are well-documented: they parallel the successes of the stock market.... The approximately one dozen customers strolling through the exhibit looked like twelve too many, disturbing the otherwise harmonious balance between the slick 19th century architecture and the slick 20th century art, both expressing our culture's prolonged and deep non-concern with saying anything in particular..5.

Devoid of meaning, artifice is also numbing, personally disempowering, and anti-democratic. This holds not only for the elitist artifice described by Schumann but also for the mass-produced variety, including all the everyday objects once made at home or by friends and informed by the artistic spirit, but now synthetically fabricated and purchased from the faceless "global shopping mall". A single piece of Tupperware hardly appears insidious, but when one considers the historical forces that produced it (or the nature of the work that probably earned money to buy it), and compares it with, for example, a piece of native pottery, one understands some of the loss inherent in that historical trade-off.

For until what Sjoon and Mor call men's "industrialization" of women's ancient crafts and tasks, everyday life was full of opportunities for artistic-spiritual connection and expression. Art and utility became separated when,

men began not only to learn the skills and crafts of the women, but to make improvements in tools and methods, always in the direction of...speed-up, mass-production, quantity over quality, the factory and the assembly line.... The more 'advanced' tools and techniques developed by men interposed themselves between the body of the worker and the body of the mother substance; they objectified the task and secularized it..6.

Predictably, whether marketed to the "few" or to the "many", the artifice produced by this historical legacy is inherently unholistic and anti-ecological, both in its attitudes and in its material manifestations. We no longer pay attention to the "mother substance". Many visual and tactile "art [sic] supplies" (as well as many of the byproducts of photography, computer graphics generation, electronic media, etc., which have largely taken over from "hand-made artifice") are toxic, carcinogenic, mutagenic, or otherwise hazardous not only to us but to other life forms. Our anthropocentrism has apparently become so intense that we would rather have human-created representations of the world (no matter how ecologically disharmonious the process of making them) than the living world itself. We seem to want to imprison experience rather than experience it, construct illusions of permanence rather than face our mortality.

But like it or not, we are equal members of an earth community in which the cycles of death, birth, growth, decay, regeneration, change are the only physical "constants". As William Blake observed two centuries ago,

He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the joy as  
it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

Our attempts to prove otherwise would be comical if they weren't so costly in so many ways.

Our consumerism is fueled in large part by the insatiable want created when artifice is substituted for art. Instead of knowing through our art that we are co-creators, and part of creation, with a sacred relationship with the cosmos, we in the world of artifice are

bombarded with messages to buy what pretends to be art and what takes the place of art. "In the absence of the sacred" (to borrow the title of Jerry Mander's excellent book), we look to artifice to provide us with status, "power", entertainment, diversion, and short-term pleasure and utility. Artifice, in short, finds its role in trying to fill the holes in our lives that (by displacing the art of living in sacred relationship with the world) it itself has generated.

## The Rebirth of the Real World

It takes very little to awaken our dulled senses. The innate art impulse, the "marvelously ordinary capacity for vision",<sup>7</sup> will rise to the surface in anyone, native or non-native, who makes room for it.

What Pete Seeger writes about singing could be said about any of the many forms this impulse takes, but it also points out the special roles that music and movement can play in our artistic- spiritual rebirth:

Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life? As much as talking, physical exercise, and religion. Our distant ancestors, wherever they were in this world, sang while pounding grain, paddling canoes or walking long journeys. Nowadays we tend to put all these things in boxes. Can we begin to make our lives once more `all of a piece'?...Don't say, `I can't sing.'...When one person taps out a beat while another leads into the melody, or when three people discover a harmony they never knew existed, or a crowd joins in on a chorus as though to raise the ceiling a few feet higher, then they also know: there's hope for the world..<sup>8</sup>

Art is our own inner voice, our body rediscovering its place in the cosmos, our selves remembering our bonds with one another, ancestors, planet. When we strip away artifice we find that the process of living is itself an art, and that we are all artists. Organic farming, "voluntary simplicity", social justice or ecological activism, or simply speaking from our hearts can be much more valuable art forms for our times than creating static physical artifacts. Rediscovering community ceremonial life is art; rediscovering our own individual experience and expression is art. As in most primal cultures, art can inform everything in our daily lives, and thus need "no name". Art can be once again the "tool of connection".

The frivolity, superfluosness, antagonism to Nature, and elitism/consumerism of artifice can give way to the meaning, utility, ecological vision, and self-empowered democracy of art. The Very Fine Art Peter Schumann encountered in Boston can be replaced by something more closely resembling the kind of art espoused in the Bread and Puppet Theater's "Why Cheap Art? Manifesto".

Like our lives, art, the "tool of connection", is a gift we receive freely when we enter existence, more valuable than anything we could ever "earn" or "buy". When we allow it once again to permeate our lives, we rejoin every other manifestation of the earth's diverse and prolific creative impulse, and know: there's hope for the world.

## Notes

1. *The Great Cosmic Mother*, M. Sjoog and B. Mor. Harper and Row. San Francisco, 1987. p. 79.

2. *The Primal Mind*, J. Highwater. Harper and Row, 1981, p. 13.

3. *The Primal Mind*, pp. 77-78.
4. *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 80.
5. "Very Fine Art Versus Hodge-Podge Art". in *Bread and Puppet Soviet Gazette*, 1988, RD #2, Glover, Vermont, 05839, p. 2.
6. *The Great Cosmic Mother*, p. 239.
7. *The Primal Mind*, p. 16.
8. Introduction to *Rise Up Singing*, edited by Peter Blood- Patterson, Sing Out Corporation, PO Box 5253, Bethlehem, PA, 18015, 1988 edition, p. iii.

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