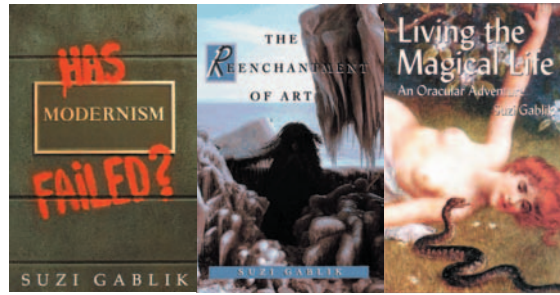


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Beyond the Disciplines: Art without Borders



Several years ago, the University of Chicago alumni magazine featured philosopher Richard Rorty on its cover announcing “There is no Big Picture.” Not only do I not believe this, I think that this philosophical stance is partly what has brought the world to the edge of systemic breakdown and biospheric collapse.

When I first began to write *Has Modernism Failed?* more than twenty years ago, what I wanted to explore was the relevance of spiritual and moral values in a society oriented around manic production, maximum energy flow, and a fixation with commodities. Since then, the art world of today appears to have bifurcated into two completely different aesthetic paradigms, each one differing sharply in their view about the meaning and purpose of art. In the first instance are artists who continue to proclaim and support the self-sufficiency of art in defiance of the social good and any form of moral earnestness—autonomy implying social separateness as the basic premise of art-making. In the second instance are artists who want art to have some worthy agenda outside of itself, and a socially redeeming purpose.

In Western culture, artists aren’t encouraged to be integral to the social, environmental, or spiritual life of the community. They do not train to engage with real-life problems. Instead they learn to be competitive with their products in the marketplace. All our institutions are defined by this market ideology—none have escaped. “Professional recognition” in the form of brisk sales and positive reviews still remains the primary pattern of thought that structures the internal rhythms of art-making. For a long time now, I have been questioning these premises; anyone who has ever read anything I have written will know that my books are meant as a challenge to our reigning paradigms of economic control and domination. They seek to expose the coercive propaganda of capitalism as a form of spiritual and ecological suicide—and they look at the Big Picture, always with a view to recovering from the estrangements of Western civilization. Instead of art-as-commodity, deprived of any useful social role, I believe that art can help us to participate in what geologist Thomas Berry deems the “great work” of our time: moving from a devastating presence on the planet to a more benign presence.

For most of my lifetime, there has been a rigid, dualistic separation between aesthetics and ethics—just as there has been a split between subject and object, and between art and life. In the same way that science aggressively rejects religion, modern aesthetics has rejected ethics, as if the truths of the two realms were somehow mutually exclusive and had little in common. Few people are willing to talk about ethics and aesthetics in the same breath.

In his book *A Theory of Everything*, Ken Wilber puts forth a world philosophy that weaves together the many pluralistic contexts of science, morals, aesthetics, Eastern as well as Western philosophy, and the world’s great wisdom traditions, to suggest that the world is one undivided whole and is related to itself in every way. The well-being of each part is the responsibility of every other part. Referring to the earlier cultural movements of traditionalism and modernism, Wilber suggests that *integralism* is the next big developmental step. “Integral” conveys a sense of responsibility to humankind as a whole and to all living beings. The idea of integralism involves some very real changes in perception and understanding that have been occurring over the past twenty years. I would claim that a more ethical artistic vision is already functioning among us. Founded in dynamic models of integralism, intersubjectivity, and transdisciplinarity, this new artistic culture no longer depends on the primacy of the dealer-collector-critic-curator network, but replaces it with very different kinds of networks.

No matter how much the notion of the artist is expanded and redefined, many people are still only comfortable with the image of the artist as a maker of objects circulated in a network of art-related institutions like galleries and museums. My own reaction to such a clear-cut definition is of course to reverse it. How many artists feel free to work outside their field? How many are willing to blur the distinctions between art and life—to muddy the waters of art and create a healthy confusion of genres?

In his *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, theoretical physicist Basarab Nicolescu argues that reality is not something that exists only on one level. Rather than the self-sufficiency of each discipline unto itself, Nicolescu advocates a transdisciplinary approach that can deal with the dynamics of several levels of reality at once. He is careful to distinguish transdisciplinarity from multidisciplinary (a way of widening the frame of a particular discipline) and interdisciplinary (transferring methods from one

discipline to another).

The point about the transdisciplinary approach is not just that it traverses disciplines, but that it deals with the dynamics of several levels of different and even mutually exclusive realities. Also, it has a unique goal: to propel us beyond either/or thinking into a co-existence of nested truths. In this model, no particular discipline is privileged, since they are all integrated into an open unity.

I believe we are slowly moving away from what Nicolescu calls “the era of the disciplinary big bang and relentless specialization.” Strategic changes are happening in which the individual artist becomes an integral component of a larger social network. Specialization may still be the most general trend we know, but a significant number of artists have extended artistic activity into social and environmental domains, transcending disciplinary boundaries. Not surprisingly, institutions have begun to follow suit. The key metaphor here is that of the *network*, both as a new pattern of organization and as a generative creative force.

My sense is that significant changes in power relations are occurring, as these decentralized network structures now offer the possibility for artists to interact with each other, and share information, in a democratic and cooperative atmosphere that was mostly absent within the hegemonic, competitive, institutional structures of modernism. The phenomenon of networks as a new pattern of organization is nowhere more evident than among the many different “communities of practice” to be found on the Internet. Virtual communities offer a collective identity for their members, who usually bring to the group a shared vision and purpose. These living networks have become so widespread that they are even breaking the stronghold of individualism in the dynamics of culture, in favor of a new communal “we.”

Included in the category of “netcentric” collectives, for instance, is Samuel Bower’s greenmuseum.org, a nonprofit, virtual museum of environmental art that serves as a highly interactive resource for artists and educators. Greenmuseum supports collaborations and interdisciplinary problem-solving, and encourages strong bonds of sharing among artists who love nature and want to create an honorable place for the idea of art as service. It publishes new writing, describes artists’ projects, promotes on-line forum discussions about eco-art, prints out course descriptions by educators, offers links to artists’ websites, and announces exhibitions.

In 2002, greenmuseum collaborated with another on-line environmental organization, [ecoartspace](http://ecoartspace.com), to produce an exhibition of environmental art called *Ecovention*, at the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati. In conjunction with the exhibit, they co-published a catalogue which offers an overview of artists who have been engaged for more than three decades with the reclamation and restoration of damaged ecosystems. These projects involve strategies drawn from many disciplines, and invite collaborations with specialists, such as architects, botanists, zoologists, engineers, and local city planners. *Ecovention* presented these projects as case studies that pave the way for “a new kind of art that can help realize needed change in the world.”

“There is a small yet growing world wide movement of artists who are actively at work finding ways to creatively solve ecological problems,” Amy Lipton writes in her introduction to the catalogue. Lipton is an independent curator who, in 1997, began a search “to find artworks that cross the line from traditional art production and institutionalization into the larger context of human and non-human communities.”

We are not used to defining art as research, or having environmental cleanup seen as its legitimate goal. *Ecovention* cannot be easily absorbed within the prevailing ideology, and if truth be told, it is a world apart from land- or site-specific art, because of the ethical issues of responsibility it deliberately embraces. “If it doesn’t actually change the world,” Tim Collins, an artist who focuses on restoring and preserving polluted rivers and ecosystems along the post-industrial waterfronts of the Allegheny County area of Pittsburgh, declares in the catalogue, “it is simply not an *ecovention*.”

All of this clearly represents a critical shift in the definition of an art object. These networking social processes, which integrate complex pluralities into an open unity and bridge many different areas of knowledge, also require a real rewiring of institutional DNA. The arc of specialization has been displaced by another organizing principle—decentralized creativity—in which the individual artist becomes a structural component in a society of selves that fit their contributions together in mutual enrichment. We have truly entered here into “the era of the integrative approach.”

Recently I read in *The Structurist*, a magazine published in Canada, that graphic designers have risen up against sterile corporate modernism and consumer capitalism, and are looking for other ways of practicing their craft beyond that of designing brand-name logos and promoting obsolescence. According to Kalle Lasn, founder and editor of the Canadian journal *Adbusters*, graphic designers want to put design skills to more worthwhile and ethical use than product marketing. Instead of trying to

become the next big “it” in the design world, these renegade designers joined up with the anti-globalization movement, wrote a manifesto (“First Things First,” published in *Adbusters* in 1999), and declared their intention to do something more interesting than just speed up the consumer purchasing cycle. They wanted to try a different tack—instead of promoting saleability, promoting sustainability. “You break out of the commercial box and start playing with the ecological and psychological dimensions of the product-in-use,” Lasn writes. “It’s an extension of your social conscience.” I view all these transdisciplinary creative initiatives and modest proposals for ethical action as small ruptures in the continuity of capitalism. As artists, museums, universities, and other cultural institutions engage in a process of reevaluating themselves, they are forming what Jean-Francois Lyotard once called “a new front.” This has brought about an astonishing breadth of practice and a new density of interaction with the world across a wide spectrum of artistic activities and institutions. The change is now perceptible: After a half-century of purist ideals, art has become purposeful again. And as Sam Bower of greenmuseum.org wrote me in an email recently: “It doesn’t really matter if they are seen as “art” or not. That they function with a degree of elegance like seeds and help carry this important evolving meme effectively is what’s important. New paradigms demand new systems to support them. Just as Modernism brought us the white box gallery, I hope the environmental art movement encourages people to see the entire world as deserving of aesthetic attention.”

I believe the great era of academic specialization and value-free experiment is coming to an end. The demarcation between professional fields is being absorbed by a new understanding of the omnipresent relevance and intimate connection of all fields to each other. Integrated organization and quantum entanglement are now understood as the underlying structures of the universe. We need to change our basic one-dimensional linear models to something more dynamic, branched, and multidimensional—something that is more in harmony with the interconnected nature of the real world. In Zen there is an old saying that expresses this: “When you pick up one piece of dust, the entire world comes with it.”