

All About How

What is important to me, and why I make art, are not about *what* and all about *how*. Yesterday, on Broadway, I stopped outside the 99 cent store. There was a girl pushing her grandmother in a wheelchair. She had two pigtails. She might have been nine. Her younger brother circulated around them like a planet in a loopy orbit. The grandmother made her stop to check the prices. Suddenly the girl began to sing. It was a strange, old-fashioned kind of singing, long warbly notes in a false falsetto, as if she were out of another time, or imitating something she thought that singing was supposed to be. It was beautiful and sinister and sad, this girl singing into the void while her grandmother picked through the irregular tube socks. There was something inexplicably poignant about it all.

I don't know why I want to give it to you, but I do. I make art to be able to do that. I make art to put a frame around things that I see—to wrap them up and offer them for your attention, for your interest, for your caring, like a favorite photo in a lovingly painted gold macaroni frame. I make art to remind you how fine-grained and odd and inexplicable the world can be. And if I can't bring you that *per se*-- the singing girl on Broadway-- I can make something like it with its own ineffable, ambiguous beauty, and bring that to you instead. Something that I can put in a theater and repeat every night.

And that is why I am dismayed with where public art has gone: a landscape of artistic one-liners, brought to you by many hard-working, budget-bending, well-intentioned cultural organizations and arts councils. Artworks whose content can be captured in one line, or at most a paragraph-- fully articulated, contained, exhausted, by those words. Concept art didn't die with 1970s conceptual performance. It became the analog of corporate sculpture—quickly accessible, self-satisfied by the mere fact of its existence, challenging no one.

What dismays me is that there is no discussion of *how*. To the public art mind, the funding panel, the civic curator, *how* never enters the picture. What matters is only *what*—the work should be an idea that is simple, clever, something that clicks. Something giant. Something placed on a historical spot. The punch of the artwork can and should be completely contained in its description. Through this lens, the incredibly moving thing I saw yesterday becomes nothing of particular interest: a girl singing poorly in front of a pile of socks.

But what is art all about? Shouldn't it reveal something to us about our humanity, our ability as people to feel and experience? Doesn't it help us notice what we forget to notice in daily life? And how can it do that genuinely and profoundly if *how* it does it isn't seen as important? Sure, that ineffable quality won't be revealed in a two sentence description. It goes beyond description. It's a matter of the artist, his or her process, skill, commitment to digging... and a little serendipity as well. The problem is, we won't know in advance whether something like the girl with the tube socks will be banal or fascinating. And those are the breaks. Art should not be reducible to the proposals written to fund it.

This is about believing in the power of art, *really*. Not just saying you do. Trusting that people can be moved by art, and not bailing and feeding them mass-produced oneliners in the name of “civic life”. Artistic oneliners are safe and easily explained to corporate boards, unsuspecting taxpayers, liberal politicians. Guaranteed to reach many and be profound to none.

But art as we know it will become obsolete if we put our trust in fast food art. And artists cannot be the only crusaders. Curators, funders, administrators, audiences have to remind people that the *how* matters, that powerful art is not formulaic or reducible to a shorthand description. And that will mean taking risks, sticking their necks out for art that may or may not work. Because that is the nature of art. It is not a product that comes with a warranty before it rolls off the assembly line. It is a search-- the product of great openness and blindness-- and we have to stop pretending that it isn't.

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