

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre
Kingston, ON

I Am Because We Are... and in order to

Some thoughts about Heart-to-Heart, the St. Valentine's Day 2004 performance event hosted by Kingston, Ontario's Modern Fuel Artist Run Center

by Devora Neumark

Inspired by a passage from *The Social Figure in Art* as it appears in Dorota Glowacka's and Stephen Boos's *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, I want to point out how the accent on the word 'work' (in artwork) serves to express why the writing has taken the time that it has. This active sense of working that "deemphasizes the static concepts of form and content and draws attention to the temporality operating in art," refers not only to that which solicits the audience, but also – and perhaps foremost in the context of Heart-to-Heart – that which works primarily on the person(s) creating the work. This writing has worked on me as surely as I suspect that the gestures performed by the artists participating in Modern Fuel's Heart-to-Heart project worked on them.

The project was co-conceived by Saskatoon-based artist Cindy Baker and Julie Fiala (then Program Director at the Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre) as a participatory performance coinciding with St. Valentine's Day 2004. It included a preliminary workshop during which local artists (who for the most part had no prior experience with performative relational aesthetic practice) described the gestures that were to be performed later that day throughout Kingston's Swamp Ward District.

Kyle: Won't you let me in and play Lego with me?

Christine: Working as I do for Cyrano Services, I can help you write a love letter: We can spray it with perfume if you like.

Andrea: Let me give you a kiss – my lipstick tracing the shape of my love transferred onto glass for you to keep.

Julie: I'm prepared to shovel your walk, clear your stairs or driveway of snow.

Cindy: I've declared my love for the citizens of Kingston will you declare your love for me?

Jennifer: I have these coupons for goods and services in the local community – can I offer you one, no strings attached – well except that you will become part of this art project. Is there someone you know who

might appreciate a coupon – I could bring one over to them after I leave here.

Koren: I will make a snow angel on your property with the imprint of my own body and leave a flare to light up the space I have carved with my body as the sun goes down.

Sandra: Would you take my picture? I would like to take a picture of you. If you like we could be in the photograph together.

While paying homage to the New York-based Love Commuter Project (a Valentine's Day project that consisted of a number of donative interventions at subway stations), the goal of this public performance was as Julie described in an email to me back in October 2003 “to set up a forum wherein to discuss the degree to which relational or connective practices in performance art can generate real emotion and meaningful people-to-people connections.” And although this project was meant primarily to stimulate discourse within the arena of performance art, “in fostering exchange between artists and the community,” it was also intended – according to Julie, “to contribute to the discussion on artist and community collaboration activities.”

I have often considered that artistic activities are referred to as artistic practice because they provide the artist(s) and participants/audience with the framework to practice dealing with issues that in real life may be too difficult to approach and handle directly. Given my own experience and observations, I suggest that not only is art itself inherently a process of conflict, for some engaging with art, is a deliberate engagement with conflict as a structured and relatively ‘safe’ means of dealing with challenging issues and inviting change.

Artistic practice, often through its inherent repetitive nature, invites the possibility for validation and integration as old stories are witnessed within a social holding ground. Artistic practice can also create the conditions in which the new stories can be constructed and told. Art can teach us, with the use of symbolic language, to bring flexibility to our memories. And with the authority of memory being such an integral element in revealing (to ourselves and to others) who we are and what we value, this transformative element is powerfully healing. Translating risk into symbolic language – as becomes possible with creative practice – can serve to make the risk more approachable and the resolution more apparent.

When I first read the project description for Heart-to-Heart, I was troubled about the underlying assumption of contextualizing acts of generosity within such a specific and limited Christian framework. However commercialized and removed St. Valentine’s Day is from its origins, it still remains a day dedicated to at least three different Catholic saints named Valentine and contains vestiges of ancient Roman traditions.

Though I was assured by Julie that a predominant number of individuals within Kingston’s Swamp Ward District could relate to St. Valentine’s Day, my own non-

Christian background and study of Buddhism kept me questioning the presumption and associations made between aesthetic (relational) practice and cultural norms and behaviors related to gift giving. However murky the history of Valentine, for who this day is named, what becomes obvious in the construction of this history is the emphasis on the romantic, even heroic nature of the character while the social issues that surround the emergence of this figure are often obscured.

After more than a year working on this text it became possible for me to articulate what I have known intuitively for some time: conventions of conduct and the imposition of moral norms are not meaningful without an individual spirited, critical, and ethical commitment to exploring values and beliefs. Late last week I finally understood that part of my motivation for taking a look at religious and cultural codes of benevolence and in particular the Zulu worldview Ubuntu (implicating the nature of interpersonal relationships, and economic interdependencies) was to provide me with the distance enough to perceive how the artists were creating conflict through their relational gestures not only in order to critique and challenge relational practice within Kingston's Swamp Ward District – especially its art community – but also within the norms of the Church. It was this critique of how people relate to each other within North America's dominant Judeo-Christian culture that begged for the context of a religious day – however much St. Valentine's Day is no longer celebrated for its religious connotations, and maybe especially because it is not.

Now that I have seen this, it seems so evident. But having grown up in a tightly drawn religious orthodoxy that enforced behaviors (mostly without explanation), I could not name this without going outside of what I knew so intimately as to seem invisible. And despite the fact that I have not adhered to Jewish orthodoxy for the past 3 decades, naming the failure of religion's rule in a public way is still fraught with anxiety. It seems so often that we cannot enter into the most frightening of conflicts unless we place our attention on some related, but more neutral subject.

“I am because we are” is one of the ways in which the Nguni / Zulu word Ubuntu (humanism) is commonly translated into English. Ubuntu describes an African worldview that is as much a factual description of interdependent behavior and guide for social conduct, as it is a philosophy of coexistence. More than simply an appeal to treat others with respect and decency, this maxim holds significant religious meaning referring to personal and economic connections and cultural considerations that reach beyond the grave.

As with other standards of behavior that favor the community over the individual, agreement and conformity are likely to be cherished while innovation and difference spurned. Yet there are those who would argue that this is a false distinction based on a misguided disassociated concept of the individual. In *Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other* Dirk J. Louw of the University of the North states: “Ubuntu directly contradicts the Cartesian conception of individuality in terms of which the individual or self can be conceived without thereby necessarily conceiving the other.” And it is this intention to create the social dynamic based on individuals valuing communal wellbeing

without forfeiting personal sovereignty that I find significant with regard to relational/connective aesthetic practice.

Yet South Africa is currently experiencing a post-Truth and Reconciliation crisis of major proportion, one in which even Ubuntu is not functioning to create the kind of harmony it professes to establish and maintain. That codes of conduct are inscribed in religion and culture is already a sign of personal and social distress. Religious and social conventions of benevolent behavior, such as Zulu Ubuntu and Judaic Tzedakah for example, are no more than empty gestures if taken as fixed rule rather than as an invitation to consider and make manifest the ethics and creativity inherent in the dialogical processes of individuation and interdependence. Little of what underlies great personal and communal significance will be addressed in the imposition of moral guidelines and a rote transition through the stages of any and all processes (including those of creativity, healing and conflict resolution). Looking at Ubuntu and its recent disappointments, I can more easily reveal how the Judeo-Christian codes have failed to provide the kind of guidance they promised. Religious dogma and spirituality are no more similar than morality and ethics. It is the more challenging ongoing dialogue and individual intuitive and analytical struggle with ethical questions and the experiences that jolt and disturb us that reveal who we are and what we desire to be.

Considering how Heart-to-Heart artists attempted to disrupt the commercialism of St. Valentine's Day within the framework of an artistic event one can surmise that in addition to the motivations named by each of the participating artists, they were also troubled at least to some extent about their agency as working artists and uneasy with dominant artistic and cultural beliefs about love and gift giving. That their gestures of kindness and generosity were repeated several times during the course of one day can be seen as the artists' attempt at practicing what may be otherwise difficult to embody within our current culture. As with anything unfamiliar, conscientious practice can hone skills and strengthen abilities. If, as this project suggests, economic relations and acts of kindness, generosity – even love – need to be re-examined, then performance and performance practice might indeed be an appropriate way to stimulate dialogue and practice individuation and interdependence.

The danger of such practice is however twofold. On the one hand, given the degree of conflict inherent with such an intervention it would be prudent to mind Deidre Comb's warning about the tendency to act out or play the hero in reaction to the anxiety of such a conflict's challenge. On the other hand – as with the repetition of any gestures – after a while, practice easily slips into habit, and as such may become a hindrance to living moment-to-moment mindful presence.

A video documentary tracing the Heart-to-Heart performative gestures and interactions between the artists and residents of Kingston's Swamp Ward is available through the Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre. Participants included Maureen Addie, Mary Akenson, Cindy Baker, Koren Bellman, Kyle Bishop, Andrea Doggett, Julie Fiala, Tina Hagberg,

Elizabeth Hanson, M. Harrison, Matthew Hault, Sandra Jass, Christine Kim, Jenny Keith, Neil N., Jennifer Roche, Brenda Shantz, and Kama and Aron Wilson.

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