

Methodology of the Marvelous

I will act as if what I do makes a difference.
William James

Every artistic excursion and theoretical venture requires that boundaries be ceaselessly called into question, undermined, modified, and re-inscribed. By its politics of transformation, critical inquiry is ever compelled to look for different approaches to the aesthetic experience, different ways of relating to it without categorizing it.
Trinh T. Minh-ha

Do you remember Suzi Gablik's book, "The Rechantment of Art?" I recalled it being an odd polemic, passionately calling for an alternative to modern and even postmodern hegemony in art practice. And with great detail, I also remembered that the book's uncanny cover-art featured an image of a figure costumed in a cloak of seaweed and standing at the edge of some exotic sea, a green Cousin It on the shores of the icy Baltic perhaps. With good fortune I came across the book again this past summer, still sporting its baffling folkloric cover.

In 1991 when Gablik's book was published, I didn't recall thinking that her position was brave. Instead I thought it was embarrassingly soft, affective, and even sentimental. Her appeal to turn away from endgame and deconstructive schemes in art was perhaps empathetically well argued but the artists and the artworks that Gablik put forward as examples of her new cultural imperatives, community and ecological orientated perspectives and work invested in spirituality through mythic and archetypal explorations, made me cringe at the time.

In my defense, this was 1991, smack in the middle of an ill-defined cultural

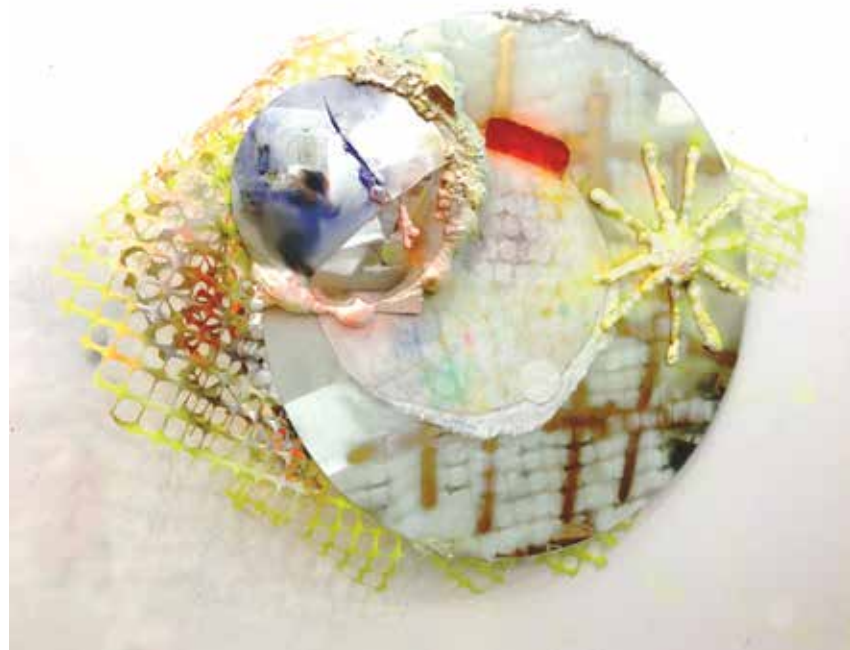


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morass that hung thickly between the Reagan and Clinton eras. And as a young artist at that time I was not prepared to let go of the postures deployed by critical deconstruction. After all, in 1991 the cold war was still warm. And I was still pulled toward the ironic, appropriated, and mass produced work by artists such as Ashley Bickerton, Sarah Charlesworth, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons and Sherrie Levine among others.

When I cracked open the text again this past summer, I was gratified that my initial recollection of it held true, but I no longer cringed. The first two sentences of Chapter One, titled "Changing Paradigms, Breaking the Cultural Trance" reads, "This book is a sustained meditation on how we might restore to our culture its sense of aliveness, possibility and magic. It is not an academic, scholarly work, but has a distinctly visionary bias grounded in what one of my colleagues, the ecofeminist writer Gloria Fenam Orenstein, calls "the methodology of the marvelous" — inexplicable synchronistic processes by which one attracts, as if by magnetism, the next piece of vital information." Like a seer, the art world has evolved seamlessly, perhaps even magically into her proposition. No longer do "we live in a culture that has little capacity or appreciation for meaningful ritual." Our current 'purpose economy' has embraced Gablik's "meaningful ritual," a framework of participatory aesthetics and "value-based art that is able to transcend the modernist opposition between the aesthetic and the social." A precursor to Relational Aesthetics with a feminist bent, it's a prescient tome.

Since Gablik penned "Reenchantment," now well over twenty years ago, many artists have critically transitioned their work from "art-for-art's sake assumptions of late modernism which kept art as a specialized pursuit devoid of practical aims and goals" to participatory practices in arenas of interrelationship, porous associations, and discontinuous parts. But Ott, who for many years has been one of the art world's most active and influential artists, intellectually embraced "Reenchantment's" ramifications and its indeterminate understanding of experience before it was even published. There is a long arc to Ott's aesthetic and material evolution yet, consistently she

entangles her political convictions with painting, video, sculpture and installation practices. "By variously integrating the personal, the poetic, the discursive, and the symbolic, [Ott's] form of address displays an elastic, layered-ness, and reversibility...thereby exploring a range of associations generally excluded (repressed?) from conventional analytic discourse." This strategy was evident early on in her tactical installations where controlled fields of color and abstract geometries co-mingled with social, historical, and political forms of inquiry. These installations possessed the mettle to juxtapose representations of emotive human conditions such as desire and empathy with late modernist tropes evoking "mastering position." Gablik 17 Ott's paintings progressed to embrace a vocabulary complete with found motifs: she moved stealthily from the gestural mark in her early painting to appropriated graphics including the lobed flower-power logo, the asterisk, a range of stenciled typeface, as well as copied diagrams and maps. Perennially, Ott's early aim as an artist was to poke at the varied ideological myths that held modernism together.

Today however, culture has given way to a "fully articulated program of interference" within the "politics of interpretation" as cultural, pedagogical and epistemological fields embrace polyvalent work. Combined with a vigorous market economy possessing a deep thirst for material, technological, and intellectual invention, Gablik's call for hybrid social energies is now a matter of course. Ott's new work reflects this condition. As we would come to expect it continues to underscore her interest in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their attraction to the rhizomatic, work that is "virtually endless, complex, densely connected series of structures and interstructures with multiple entrances, galleries, intersections, dead ends, main and side doors." Yet Ott also stretches her installations to near participatory and ecstatic collapse.

Collapse however suggests material gravity. Ott instead goads the esteemed condition of mass and scale by employing Styrofoam as her primary material. She is able to conjure impressive sizes and configurations of form and shape yet given their aerated matter, Ott's sculptural work is always in the process of disappearing. Inevitably the works will end up dissolving leaving only a small residue of polystyrene goo behind. Her pastel palette reinforces the work's lightness and because Ott applies her paint chiefly in wisps of spray, the foam base is never completely coated leaving no ambiguity as to its primary material: air.

Moreover, her objects function as volumes of adhesive assigned to roles of display rather than discrete, authoritative objects. They grip mirrors, electrical conduits, clocks and other prosaic stuff. They hold gallons of water, and the weight of people. In this way Ott is less a sculptor than a bricoleur. She suspends these spectacular domestic flytraps from the ceiling, installs them as monuments, and decorates wall with them. In her exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center Ott takes the opportunity to both play with form invention and test contemporary aesthetic and material value systems while prodding notions of sequence, narrative developments, and affected difference. In the three successive galleries at the Cultural Center, Ott reorganizes her material lexicon, at times reinforcing the space's swelling symmetry as she erects an extravagant, large-scale water fountain in the middle of the second gallery. Alternatively, an asymmetrical assemblage of works in the first gallery both accessorize and socialize the exhibition space.

Although appropriate, it would be shortsighted to exclusively frame Ott's work within the discourse of new materialism: the critical reworking of the materialist tradition that has taken hold of the social sciences and humanities. This scholarship "testifies to the critical and nondogmatic reengagement with political economy, where the nature of, and relationship between, the material details of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures is being explored fresh." Ott is acutely aware of this critique bringing notions of originality and authenticity and the cultural designations of high and low in-and-out of material focus. Drawn to the emergent and generative powers of thingliness, Ott's work eschews "the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological lever," or what new materialism scholar Jane Bennett calls "enchanted materialism."

In addition to generously deploying an abundance of visual and intellectual encounters that echo archetypal organizations, Ott worked with sound artist Joe Jeffers to further animate each of the three galleries and to reinforce the shape-shifting and allusive nature of the resplendent foam accretions. The final gallery utilizes touch and projection, destabilizing the Cultural Center's unyielding architecture with light and vibration, as Ott describes as "dark and

physical." If we sit on the centrally located bench to observe the strings of loopy text skimming the planes of the darken gallery we will feel and hear a deep, throbbing sound. The text, pulled quotes from Gertrude Stein, Arthur Rimbaud, Clarice Lispector, Helene Cixous and Emily Dickenson, slither into a seductive accumulation of multi-directional lines. Ott engages a bricolage strategy here as well. By refiguring the page as animation she brings forward the possibility for an intertext, a collection of writings that resides in



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no-space and everyplace, "a sphere whose center is everywhere and periphery nowhere...demanding a high level of participation but excludes the

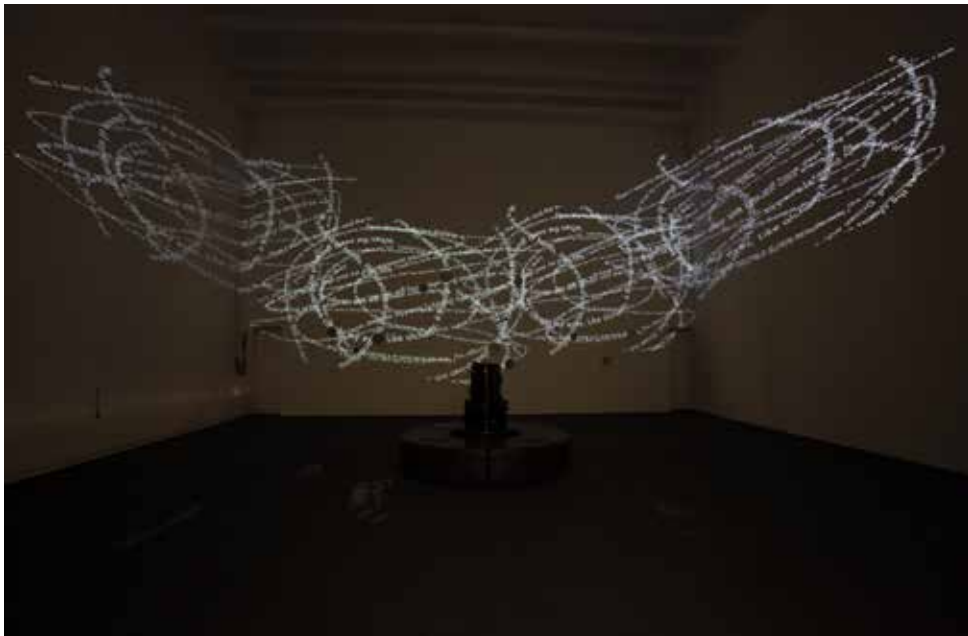


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idea of a goal and direction.”

As a teacher, studio artist, and director of the artist-run exhibition space, Terrain, set in the front yard of her Oak Park home, Ott’s critical and social endeavors demonstrate, assess and compel new forms of social and visual address. She exemplifies of Hans Haacke’s missive:

The artist’s business requires an involvement in practically everything. . . . It would be bypassing the issue to say that the artist’s business is how to work with this and that material or manipulate the findings of perceptual psychology, and that the rest should be left to other professions. . . . The total scope of information she receives day after day is of concern. An artist is not an isolated system. In order to survive she has to continuously interact with the world around her. . . . Theoretically there are no limits to her involvement.

Her obstinate embrace of fabulous aliveness and material enchantment is courageous and brings us full circle. I included an epigrammatic quote by William James to introduce this essay because in Ott’s long history of artmaking she has always enacted that belief: “I will act as if what I do makes a difference.” Gablik also employed this James quote in her book, inserting it just below a Thomas McEvilley citation that states, “It seems to me that the great question that our culture faces now is whether it’s going to have the resilience to redefine itself and take off again.” Albeit a rhetorical query, the answer lay in the dedication of artists like Ott who enthusiastically respond to and then stretch the forces shaping cultural context. Perhaps if Ott’s work graced the cover to Gablik’s 1991 tome, “Reenchantment” would have had a different reception all those years ago.

Michelle Grabner

Michelle Grabner is an artist and writer. She is a Professor in the Painting and Drawing Department at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. With her husband Brad Killam, she runs the artist spaces The Suburban (Oak Park, IL) and The Poor Farm (Little Wolf, WI).

Calendar of Events

Gallery Talk with the Artist

Thursday, October 9 | 12:15pm
Chicago Rooms 2nd Floor North

Gallery talk with artist Sabina Ott, Greg Lunceford, Curator of Exhibitions, and Shannon Stratton, Executive Director of Three - walls Gallery.

Joe Jeffers and Chicagoland Weather

Saturday October 18 | 6-8pm
Chicago Rooms 2nd Floor North

In honor of Sabina Ott’s solo exhibition, *here and there pink melon joy*, sound artist Joe Jeffers has prepared new music for Chicagoland Weather, an ensemble of two drummers and 4 dancers. Chicagoland Weather includes Havana based drummer Anthony Lester Blackhood, post-rock veteran Dan Bitney of Tortoise, and THE-ERA, an up and coming footwork collective native to Chicago’s South Side.

Jesse Malmed: Cult Choir

Saturday, November 15 | 1pm
Chicago Rooms 2nd Floor North

Artist and curator Jesse Malmed will instigate and conduct an ad hoc choir in the Chicago Room galleries. Creating a temporary and ephemeral performance, Malmed and the audience will arrange texts that have been used to produce Ott’s exhibition, create melody and rehearse. Once the song has been performed in its final form, the group is disbanded. Jesse Malmed has exhibited and performed at such venues as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

Exhibition Catalog Launch and Concert

Friday, December 19 | 6-10pm
GAR Rotunda 2nd Floor North

The exhibition catalog, featuring color reproductions of the artworks and essays by artist /curators Michelle Grabner and Danny Orendorff, will be available for sale. The launch will be followed by a musical performance by Bitchin Bajas, an electroic music project by Cooper Crain, Daniel Quinlivan and Rob Frye. Bitchin Bajas will be performing textured zonal movements with electric organ and synthesizers. They have collaborated with many Chicago artists in the experimental and jazz scenes as well as with visual artists from around the globe.

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The Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events is dedicated to enriching Chicago’s artistic vitality and cultural vibrancy.

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here and there pink melon joy

Sabina Ott

August 30, 2014 - January 4, 2015

Chicago Cultural Center Chicago Rooms 2nd Floor North

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