

Personal Essay

Art and Wild

Exploring the concept that freedom is the basis of all creativity, whether in the consciousness of an artist or in the process of nature.

by Trent Thursby Alvey

"An artist has to be free to create whatever he or she wants."

Ric Collier, Director Salt Lake Art Center

"In wildness is the preservation of the world."



At the June "Art Too! Art Not!" debate, as I listened to people talk about *what is art*, I was reminded of other discussions on *what is wild* (wilderness). I was suddenly intrigued by the likeness of these two discussions and decided to explore the similarities further.

Ric Collier's statement, "An artist has to be free to create whatever he or she wants," prompted me to position Collier in lofty company by comparing his quote to that of Henry David Thoreau. Collier has dedicated his life to art and artists and has spent a good deal of time thinking about the primary trio of questions: What is art? What is the job of the artist? What is the job of the viewer? With the intent of inching closer to an answer to these questions and to compare the concepts of wild and art, I'm writing this contemplation.

As educators and art historians go about trying to answer the question of what is art, artists go about their business of creating art. Correspondingly, scientists, philosophers and writers go about trying to define wild. Luckily, neither artists nor nature await the definitive answer. The answers to *what is art* and *what is wild* seems to be the same. Art is best when produced without management, interference, imposed guidelines, or moral and aesthetic dogmatic restraints, just as it is with wildness. Wildness isn't wild if it is not free to create and evolve at will.

As with the wild, there is a larger consciousness that guides art. Nature appears random, but responds to

a higher consciousness that we cannot perceive in our short lifetimes, with our even shorter attention span. Likewise, the genius of creative art may not be readily observed. It may take a perceptive viewer or a future society to appreciate it. Unfortunately for the artist, his or her brilliance may not be discovered in their lifetime. And, finally, even the artist may not know the future implications of their work.

Unseen forces drive the creation of art and wild. Art and Wild are not goal-oriented. When an artist announces that they are "pushing the envelope," a ubiquitous phrase I hear often (the only phrase I tire of more is "thinking outside of the box"), they are paradoxically stifling the wild experience. They are subconsciously derailing exactly what they are setting out to do.

Art and Wild are about being and doing. They are elliptical and nonlinear. In the wise words of a Buddhist Monk, in order to reach enlightenment you must "strive to quit striving". You must strive to quit creating art in order to create art. This is the paradox.

Turner points out: "The idea of wildness is littered with paradoxes — 'wildlife management', 'wilderness management', 'managing for change', 'managing natural systems' — what we might call the paradoxes of autonomy.

Geneticists believe that humans evolved into the ability to speak quite by accident. This ability has allowed us another trait unavailable to the other animal species: introspection. Contemplation of

Why do we persistently try to answer the unanswerable? As humans, we distinguish ourselves from the other species by virtue of one tiny genetic mutation, the ability to speak (and communicate with a written language).



The parallel paradoxes for art may be:
“art critics”
“art administrators”
“art teachers.”
Can art be criticized or praised?
Can it be administrated? Can it be taught?

ourselves has become a major pastime since we first jumped down out of the trees in Africa and started” walking upright. There are drawings of hunters and shaman in Namibia (Africa) drawn on rocks by the Sans Bushman, a culture thought to be thirty thousand years old.

I believe there are no genetic accidents, but that humans were given this linguistic capability as either a gift or a curse, to be destined to constant introspection. Jack Turner, a philosopher and brilliant mind, writes meditations on nature in his book *Abstract Wild*: “This great feeding body is the world. It evolved together, mutually, all interdependent, all interrelating ceaselessly, the dust of old stars hurtling through time, and we are the form it chose to make it conscious of itself.” Thus, we will continue to contemplate questions about art, wild, freedom, creativity, and spirituality because we are conscious of ourselves.

When defining wilderness, I cite Thoreau, who noted that “wild is the past participle of ‘to will’: self-willed land.” Gary Snyder, an award-winning writer, beat poet and activist for more than forty years, also extracts the root word “wild” from wilderness-- “wildness is a self organizing system, needing no management.” It is a simple definition, but encompasses much. He writes that wildness constantly comes under the assault of anthropocentric guidance -- managing by park administrators, government bureaucracies, self-serving recreation groups and well-meaning scientists. Likewise, it seems the artist needs to remain free and wild, unmanaged and untamed, despite the expectations of critics, art administrators, gallery owners and social norms. Artists moving beyond nameless boundaries will further the creative process, as well as advance the net-creative-worth of

society.

Turner writes a lot about what we are in danger of losing as a culture if we lose wildness. What happens to wildness if it is managed? How many anthropocentric overtones should we layer on wildness, before the wild becomes tame? Do we still call it wild? “A place is wild when its order is created according to its own principles of organization – when it is self-willed land,” Turner says. Try substituting the word “art” for “wild.” A thing is art when its order is created according to its own principles of organization – when it is self-willed art.

I believe the artist is the vehicle to great art. The artist prepares herself with skills, sensitivity, awareness, and insight and then relinquishes control, allowing something larger to take over. Thinking too much about the outcome of one’s art can defeat the process and get in the way of success. Being in the moment is the path to allowing the tistar to transcend his or her own ordinary consciousness, arriving at a place greater than what could have been conceptualized through cognitive thinking. Art is not destination driven. Art cannot be obtained by grasping. It has to visit you, like the answer to a Zen koan.

like to consider minimalist Donald Judd when contemplating creativity. I believe that his elegant restraint is pure creativity. Physics and geometry are at work in relating objects to space. Judd intentionally avoids imprinting himself onto the work, as object/time/space become the dialogue. The restraint and simplicity speak volumes about non-narcissistic awareness in transcending everyday chatter and allows the viewer to contemplate geometry and space without imposition of any personal commentary, bringing the whole

artist/viewer relationship to a new, creative high ground.

Speaking of creativity, David Bohm, the German physicist who conceptualized Quantum Physics, defines creativity as “the ability to observe new similarities and new differences.” That brilliant simplification for thinking creatively is the process by which scientists, teachers, artists, statesmen and spiritual practitioners all progress to higher levels of insight and understanding.

In looking at the whole art experience, I consider the viewer as part of a holy art triad: the artist, the art and the viewer. The job of the viewer is to see without thinking for a moment as he or she looks at a piece, giving the art a chance to communicate on a cellular level rather than an intellectual level. I believe that is why it is so hard for some viewers to relate to abstract art. They have not been trained to just look and see and not think — to allow a more visceral response.

Viewers somehow have the idea that they have to judge immediately and be able to intellectualize about a piece of art. They should verbalize -- about their response to color, shape, texture -- but it is not necessary for them to find a logical, contextual meaning. The viewer must grant himself or herself the freedom to enjoy without anxiety, to bring their own experience to the work, and be comfortable with what they may not understand about it.

I think of the artist Kadanoga, (see photos) who was introduced to this community in a 2001 Salt Lake Art Center exhibit curated by Ric Collier. Kadanoga's work embodies spiritual simplicity. Using

natural materials such as wood, paper, bamboo and glass, he allows a dialogue to emerge with the viewer. This non-verbal dialogue took me to a new level of understanding, both of the materials and of my relationship with them. It allowed me to expand my awareness of new similarities and new differences in these materials. I had a creative experience, that is to say, a learning experience.

This, for me, is the ultimate answer to the art triad question. Does the piece allow the artist, the art and the viewer to communicate? Does it allow the subject, the object and the process to become one? If that happens, then it is art. Viewing or experiencing Kadanoga's pieces allows us to make a leap toward understanding ourselves as well as our relationship with nature.

I will conclude with one last comparison of wild and art: Turner writes, “Wildness is out there. The most vital beings and systems hang out at the edge of wildness. The next time you howl in delight like a wolf, howl for unstable aperiodic behavior in deterministic non-linear dynamical systems. Lao Tzu, Thoreau and Abbey will be pleased.”

In comparison I offer this — Art is out there. The most vital artists hang out at the edge of wildness. The next time you howl in delight like a wolf, howl for unpredictable outcomes of art, howl for unseen order hidden in chaos. Kadanoga, Rothberg, and Hesse will be proud.

We need more anarchist art advocates, less dogma, more freedom for artists, viewers and community. And then when you do choose to respond to art, consider HOWLING.



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All images courtesy of the Salt Lake Art Center. From the Installation of Kazuo Kadanoga, "Wood, Paper, Bamboo, Glass"