Living with Art

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE

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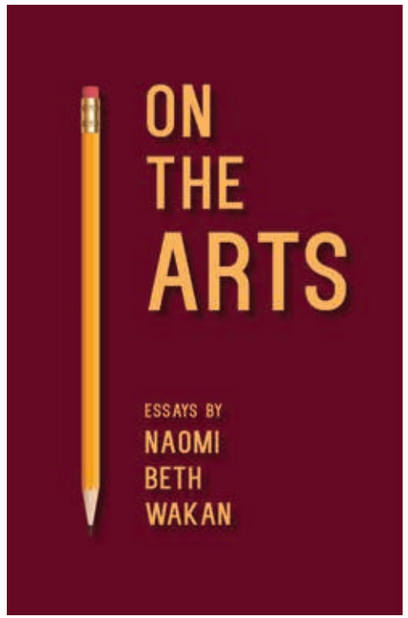
I originally conceived the theme "Living with Art" to be about public art—murals, sculptures, architecture, designs, and installations we discover as we travel on streets and sidewalks and through buildings, malls, courtyards, and gardens. But while reading submissions for this issue, the lens widened and my understanding deepened. "Living with Art" suggests that one's experiences with art objects and with art making can and often do leave a lifelong impression and even change lives.

I soon realized that there is someone in the Shanti Arts community who always speaks with a wide lens and a deep understanding and is supremely qualified to speak on this subject. In fact, she has written a book about it: *On the Arts*.



Naomi Beth Wakan's essays and poems have appeared in this publication many times over the last dozen years. But she has not limited her creative pursuits to writing; she has dipped her toe in many different art forms during her ninety-plus years and has expanded her idea of art making to include virtually all of life's activities. Artists often say that when making art, all thoughts and distractions fall away and one's awareness is solely focused on whatever they are doing. Well, imagine that happening with all of life's activities; imagine bringing uninterrupted awareness to everything we do; imagine possessing the attitude that living is an art.

With a strong creative streak and a passion for learning and writing, Naomi Beth Wakan has come to see art as the awareness of sensory action and reaction in the everyday. In other words, opportunities for making art are everywhere, and the possibilities for expressing oneself as an artist are endless. In the short essays in *On the Arts*, Wakan writes about her experiences with ikebana, photography, reading, domesticity, recycling, personal essay writing, solitude, and more. It becomes clear to the reader than Wakan has lived a rich and rewarding life by infusing every aspect of it with awareness and creativity.

Here are selections from Naomi's book *On the Arts*:

Be sure to take a look at Naomi Beth Wakan's books in our catalogue, especially her best-selling trilogy:
Poetry That Heals*, *The Way of Haiku*, *The Way of Tanka

If having twice been married to artists qualifies me for anything besides cleaning studios and helping with promotion, it qualifies me to have a keen eye for art. With my first husband, I frequented galleries in Toronto and Buffalo, New York, and learned to "see" while acting as his darkroom assistant. With my second husband, I became a photographer myself and also tried my hand at painting and fiber arts, as well as taking a closer look at sculptors, for he is one. Thanks to both husbands—and a few other factors, such as genes—I have a developed eye and a hand that has held brushes, needles, and cameras . . .

But my 1960s-art-scene self would hardly recognize the art scene today. The "art as investment" crowd is still around, but art has jumped from the galleries and museums to the streets and small stages. Art today is as diverse as graffiti, small embroidered pieces, and mimes. It has blended with craft and is, perhaps, reassuming its original meaning: any activity done with intensity that is the expression of human skill and imagination . . .

What is an old-fashioned fuddy-duddy like me to do when confronted with a piece of art by Carl Andre, who assembled different arrangements of 120 fire bricks; by Douglas Gordon, who was paid for supplying a list of people he was remembering whose names then got placed on a gallery wall; by Damien Hirst, who created an exhibition of medicine cabinets filled with pills; by Jeff Koons, who exhibited a shampoo-polisher in vitrine; by Chris Ofili, whose painting of the Virgin Mary incorporated elephant dung; or by Felix Gonzales-Torres, who placed seven hundred pounds of wrapped licorice and a pile of ten thousand fortune cookies on the floor. Are such objects really art? Part of my mind still equates art with fine art—things that hang in galleries, stand on public plinths, or hang over the couch. How antiquated can my idea be? . . .

Is art about truth? Philosopher Martin Heidegger said, "Art is the becoming and happening of truth." Truth is not necessarily beautiful, that's for sure. But maybe truth is a factor in the creation of a work of art. French sculptor Auguste Rodin also spoke about art needing to be truthful: "There is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character, that is to say that which offers no outer or inner truth."

Art could be a kind of evolutionary development that helps us deal with the complexities of life. As author George Perec rather stiltedly put it, "The aim of art [is] to provoke in the beholder some reaction that reduced his alienation from the world, to build bridges between the self and the other." Alain de Botton also felt that art's mission is "the promotion of a sensory understanding of what matters in life." He felt art should change how we experience the world. Is art's role then to make some sense out of our world?

Art historian Ernst Gombrich suggested that "art is an institution to which we turn when we want to feel a shock of surprise. We feel this want because we sense that it is good for us once in a while to receive a healthy jolt. Otherwise we would so easily get stuck in a rut and could no longer respond to the new demands that life is apt to make on us. The biological function of art, in other words, is that of a rehearsal, a training in mental gymnastics which increases our tolerance

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of the unexpected." Jean Dubuffet accentuated the shock value when he said, "We expect art to uproot us, to unhinge doors." Well, yes, shocking does seem to be a function of art, at least recent art, where all our moral values, everything we have ever held sacred, seem up for assault. Our prejudices, our illusions, the supposed wisdom that our heritage has imparted to us all shattered like sugar glass. Novelist Heather Jessup, in her Ph.D. dissertation, accentuated this assault when she listed the fundamental roles of art: "to fool viewers into insights, to trick patrons into mindful contemplation and to instill awareness into our habitualized assumptions or orientations." Is art's function then to break through our habitual reactions and make us more aware of our surroundings? Should art help us engage in a positive way with things unfamiliar to us? . . .

Art does seem to be a language used by artists to connect their thoughts and emotions with their brushes and paints and chisels and computers in order to further this personal dialogue to embrace a wider audience, and they use their craft skills to do this. But even if works of art don't communicate with anyone, don't resonate with anyone, they could still resonate with the artists that produced them; the works could be a form of catharsis for them. Could art then be a type of therapy, playing a role in our emotional and psychological growth? Is art to compensate for our gaps? The clinical neuroscientist Raymond Tallis seemed to agree: "Art is expressing one's universal wound—the wound of living a finite life of incomplete meanings."

Denis Dutton summed up some qualities that he felt a work should have before it is called art. It should "give pleasure; exhibit skill and virtuosity; have a recognizable style (according to rules of composition and expression); display novelty (surprise) and creativity; represent different realities; have a focus that is unlike ordinary life; express individuality; express emotion; meet an intellectual challenge (with a complex answer); fit into art traditions and institutions; and most important, provide an imaginative experience for both artist and audience." These characteristics of art tie in nicely with those of Hans Prinzhorn, who collected art created by the institutionalized: art should be "expressive, decorative, playful, imitative, imposing order and giving the thing portrayed symbolic significance."

But am I any closer to a definition that suits me? These days, with the art market gone berserk as wealthy collectors drop millions for branded works, to arrive at a clear definition seems less and less likely. As they make markets for themselves, artists have to be entrepreneurs as well as innovators, for God forbid they do not produce something novel with each phase of their production—something novel that works as their brand. Branded artists need branded collectors, such as Charles Saatchi, David Geffin, Steve Cohen, or Adam Sender. Their works need to be seen in branded shows such as Art Cologne, The Volta Show, or Art Basle, and at branded galleries such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, or the Tate. Most of all, in order to have their brand fully recognized, artists need to have a piece sell for millions at a branded auction house such as Christie's or Sotheby's. Of auction houses, art sociologist Sarah Thornton said, "Even if the people here tonight were initially lured into the auction room by the love of art, they find themselves participating in a spectacle where the dollar value of the work has slaughtered other meanings."

Andy Warhol was perhaps the most blatant predecessor who linked art production with money-making; he even had a show of large canvases with only dollar signs painted on them. Warhol also launched "fame" as an art form. Does this make Paris Hilton and the Kardashians artists then, I wonder? Are today's artists more concerned with their own images than the images they are producing?

And then there is Artspeak, that peculiar language used by art writers. Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara did a series of paintings consisting solely of the date of the day the work was painted, done in white on a black background. Thornton noted that Christie's catalogue presented these paintings as "an existential statement, a proof of life." What can I say! Of an arrangement of 355 pounds of wrapped candies, curator Nancy Spector wrote, "The simple elegance of the work invites contemplation, even reverie." Artspeak is a whole other vocabulary—"cutting edge" (radical), "challenging" (impossible to explain), "museum-quality" (expensive). Of Yves Klein's solid blue canvases, Christie's catalogue said, "These works allow the viewer to bathe in the infinite, in the luminous spiritual world of the Blue . . . windows into the eternal and endless world of the spiritual realm." Well, I suppose that's possible. Curator Virginia Button, writing of Hirst's stuffed shark, stated, "Brutally honest and confrontational, he draws attention to the paranoiac denial of death that permeates our culture." An open coffin with the corpse looking alive and well (thanks to cosmetics) might have been a more direct (and cheaper) artistic display for making this point, one would have thought . . .

Art is life lived awarely.

Art does seem to be more connected to the community these days, breaking out of those white cubes of galleries. Outdoor art has no entrance fee, no doors to go through, and it is often placed in marginalized places to reinvent them and to speak more readily to marginalized people. What has caused this? Maybe our increasing awareness of AIDS, homelessness, racism, classism, money inequalities, lack of freedom of expression, environmental concerns, and illiteracy make "pure" art seem like an indulgence and has caused art projects to move outside the mainstream art world, not just to give it wider viewership, but to allow it to become more involving, often asking the viewer to participate in the art process. Artworks are no longer just objects on display, and this frees them from the demands of the art market.

Until the seventeenth century, any acquired skill was considered an art. Britannica Online defines art as "the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others." This definition originates from the Latin, where *ars* means "skill" or "craft." Andy Warhol caught the drift here when he defined an artist as "anyone who was good at what he did." That would cover almost everything produced imaginatively since man, or woman, scratched on cave walls.

Art, as most lay people would define it today, is art works created from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, a time when the word *art* had limited application and usually referred to the fine arts of sculpture and painting, with the philosophy of aesthetics being attached. In the nineteenth century, everyone knew what a work of art was; when it wasn't showing the gods in their various forms, it was strictly showing reality as accurately as it could—until photography usurped that role. In a kind of defense against the threat of this new form, art withdrew, as it

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were, and moved to modernism, where it explored the nature of the medium itself, as if taking a closer look at its own very existence. Art was about art. Abstract expressionism was almost a mystic exploration of materials. But after Jackson Pollock's drippings, Andy Warhol's stacked plywood Brillo boxes and, more recently, Damien Hirst's stuffed shark, we've almost come full circle, as art has crashed through any remaining boundaries and broken all previous definitions of what it might be. As John Carey declared, "My answer to the question 'What is a work of art?' is 'A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.'" Some art can only be appreciated by its creator, some only by friends and family, some by a small coterie of people attached to a certain school of art, some by a much wider art audience, and some by the whole world. Supposing the metaphor the artist has used works for someone, surely that would be an inclusive way of considering a creation as a work of art.

I rather like my own most recent and moderately positive theory about what art might be. Certainly, it seems to me that the division between "high art" and "low art" is disappearing. Technology is enabling everyone to be a creator, and virtual and actual reality are becoming blended and confused, so almost every action can be defined somehow as art. It might well just be stated then that *art is the awareness of sensory action and reaction in the everyday*. In other words, *art is life lived awarely . . .*

Art is asking that you become more aware in the everyday—aware of how you take out the garbage and how you wash the tines of a fork. Yes, as far as what art is, I do think I have something here, don't you?

The Art of Ikebana

Ikebana [is] the practice of studying flower arrangement as a way to enrich one's life. Once you grasp the basic principles, you can be off and away on your own. The necessary requisites are not teachers but rather practice and an opening of one's being to the life of flowers . . .

Ikebana involves paradoxes, the most obvious one being that by cutting "live flowers"—the literal translation of *ikebana*—in order to recreate, in a vase, the setting from which one has cut them, one is actually hastening their death. Another paradox is that, although the Japanese love perfection, they also love a touch of imperfection—a crack in a vase, a well-worn gate, an irregularly thrown pot. Even in the most perfect arrangement, balance depends on three main elements, rather than the four one might assume when balance is under consideration. In traditional *ikebana*, an even number of branches is rarely used because, while balance is valued, a certain asymmetry is also appreciated. That is, one has to achieve balance and asymmetry at the same time. When it comes to balancing branches, four is considered an unlucky number in Japan, since "shi," the pronunciation of the word for "four," is the same as the word for "death."

Yet another paradox is that although the finished *ikebana* reflects the state of the practitioner—every time you place a branch, it is like a mirror showing you who you are—often

the material available demands, by its shape, that it be used in a certain way; students have to subdue their own desires for the arrangement's desires and let it have its own way. So *ikebana* is not just about bringing nature into the home, but also about creating a link between human beings and nature, a balance between desires and reality.

Doing *ikebana* is somewhat like construction sculpture in that elements—plant material rather than metal, wood, or stone—are assembled and then set in the desired relationships to one another. Once constructed, the inessentials of the *ikebana* are clipped away, just as carving sculptors chip away at their stone or wood to reveal an essential shape that they have seen within. Just like sculpture, *ikebana* is

concerned with size, shape, line, texture, volume, and, perhaps most importantly, negative space. The arrangement, as in the best sculpture, goes beyond mere attractiveness, for it is concerned with the emotion that has given rise to the piece. Again, just like sculpture needs its plinth to set it off, in *ikebana* the vase and even the base for the vase to stand on are integral parts of the whole design. Avant-garde *ikebana* is actually almost indistinguishable from sculpture, since plant material is often all but eliminated in its arrangements . . .

Please allow me to consider seriously the benefits of *ikebana* for its practitioner.

The art of *ikebana* is an artistic exploration of space, proportion, line, color, and the balance of these factors.

Ikebana originated as a way to placate the gods with floral offerings, and it has become a discipline to calm the destructive forces inside us. *Ikebana*, which is practiced in absolute silence, has a calming effect on the psyche. Worries have to be put aside as the arranging demands that the whole of one's being be focused during the process. The practice of art forms in Japan is often also a form of meditation, a way of stilling the ever-chattering mind. The state of mind achieved while practicing is as important as the art form.

Ikebana is a way of communicating without words. One's emotions and ideas can all be conveyed by the way one chooses to do the *ikebana*.

Ikebana teaches the ephemeralness of all things, for the moment the stem is cut, the flower starts to fade.

Matching the arrangement to the season, one gets into the rhythm of life's cycles . . . the coming into being and the passing away. It helps one live in harmony with nature rather than at odds with it.

The Art of Photography

Photographs have opened the whole world to us; barely an area is left unrecorded, hardly a group of people unimaged as we become hooked on the idea that we know something after we have looked at a photograph. But what do we know? That the world is full of suffering? Of delights? Of beauty? Of distortion? Of what have all these images actually informed us when we are photographing reality rather than living it? Or rather, hasn't the photograph become more real than the reality? Is the Taj Mahal a bit of a let-down when we finally walk its paths?

For me, photography is an infinitely sad thing—even if it records great happiness—in that it reminds constantly that this moment being captured will never come again. All is ephemeral, no matter how firmly recorded it may be. Photography is an art of nostalgia.

Early twentieth-century photographs imitated painting in their softness, but when photographers, such as Edward Steichen, started

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to photograph everyday things, such as a milk bottle, photography became a new way of seeing. The ordinary was made extraordinary when Edward Weston did his series of green pepper photographs, inspiring a generation of black-and-white photographers by showing them that everyday objects could take on sculptural forms of both interest and beauty. As he said, "Anything that excites me for any reason, I will photograph; not searching for unusual subject matter, but making the commonplace unusual" . . .

Susan Sontag is quoted as saying, "the painter constructs and the photographer discloses," but what do they disclose—their own take on the world or reality as it really is? It is true that photographers have changed the way we see things from the microscopic to the telescopic. Thanks to photography, we look more carefully at the sky, at the soil, at the comings and goings of human beings. We look more intently, but are we just looking for the novel, the exotic, the fashionable, the spectacle that will startle us from our comfort zone, or are we really looking to penetrate the everyday in order to see the magic within?

The Art of Reading

I think examining why we read is a helpful place to begin. Reading, I feel, gives a book a longer life span, if not immortality. That is, reading extends the writer's purpose to some extent. Besides informing and entertaining, books remind us of things that we already knew but had forgotten we knew. Reading reinforces our ideas and opinions. Reading informs us how others have changed themselves, their neighborhoods, regions, and, in some rare cases, the world. Reading encourages social change, which starts by improving our understanding of ourselves, and reading often gives us the necessary tools to do this. Of course, literacy itself is one of the elements that brings about change.

Reading suggests options and alternatives to help solve real-life problems. Reading, if properly done, helps us raise questions, and questions are always a good beginning for change. The experience the writer is sharing can reflect our own, and so knowing we are not alone can be a solace in difficult times.

Reading offers new ways of viewing the world, which might release us from too narrow a point of view. It can take us beyond our own experience of life, for it can introduce other cultures, other lifestyles, other ways of behaving. This knowledge can only enrich the reader, for after you've finished reading a book, you should feel changed and rewarded. You should feel you understand human nature a little better because you've lived the lives of a variety of characters and they have given you fresh ideas. Therefore, you can be open and empathetic to a wider range of people. Reading should take the reader on a journey they have not taken before . . .

Whether you skim or deep read slowly, it is you, the reader, who makes the book complete by extracting the best you can from it. In a way, you recreate the book when you read it well. The reader is as important as the writer, for without the reader to draw out meaning from the text, the text just sits on the page as a pile of squiggles. The reader gives it life. We interpret the text, comment on it, agree, disagree, associate it with other things we have read or been taught . . . oh, reading is a complex thing!

Readers have a serious responsibility. The writer provides the stimulus, but it is you, the reader, who joins the dots, expands and extrapolates to make of the text what you will. Whether you give the book your full attention or dip and bob to extract your need of the moment, the writer requires you, the reader, to make the work complete. Reading is an act of translation, the reader guessing the essence of the words, adding to it his or her own interpretation, which depends on factors such as cultural background, conditioning, and genetic inclination. As Alberto Manguel put it so nicely: "imbuing the text with the circumstances of the reader."

The Art of Domesticity

The art of domesticity, as I see it, makes the home not just a place for rest and respite from a demanding and often confusing world, but involves creating a space, a comfortable space, where creativity finds fertile soil and some kind of sense can be made of our lives. The art of domesticity doesn't just see that basic needs are met, but creates an environment where talents are nurtured and where the folks who share the space interact at a deeper level with their material surroundings—the old wooden cooking

spoons, the hand-knitted couch throw, the vase of peeled silver dollars—such things linking us to nature outside and taking us deeper into our own nature within. This art, as other arts, demands a great respect for its tools—the stove, the fridge, spades and rakes, the sewing machine, the ironing board, the darning mushroom.

The art of domesticity is the art of creating an enriched environment for society's smallest unit, the modern family, however you like to define it. It is a responsible art, an ethical art

that fulfills the Buddhist recommendation for right living. The art of domesticity is not just about designing a usable and well-run home, it is about living a useful life. Although happiness and a sense of security may be byproducts, the art of domesticity, as other arts, intensifies meaning, taking the home beyond providing mere shelter and sustenance. Its purpose is personal transformation. It is the art of being involved deeply in your own life.

Just as with any other art, you put yourself fully into the art of domesticity and tell of yourself via the environment you have created. Your mark on your home is as distinctive as a Dali or a Picasso. It is your style. And just as with any other art, there are times of extreme monotonous duties—bathrooms that continually need cleaning, endless loads of wash to drop into the washing machine, meals that may take hours to prepare only to be eaten in less than one. There will be moments of fatigue and extreme boredom, moments when we feel overwhelmed at the immensity of the art which we have chosen to master—ourselves a Sisyphus on the domestic front. But the painter, the sculptor, the potter, the weaver all have those moments too. ☙

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