

The Prisoner's Dilemma: Artist In the Mirror

Dorit Cypis

"Art and life are not simply co-mingled; their identities are both uncertain."

Allan Kaprow, Great Bear Pamphlet Manifestos, 1966

- While we live in a culture that puts value on exclusivity, uniqueness, certainty, objectiveness and resolve, many artists function as more open and sensorial, sensitive to subtlety, ambiguity and contradiction. Artists must constantly negotiate their internal capacity for uncertainty with the culture's inability and refusal. While artists may be highly creative and inventive, unless they evolve self-knowledge, criticality, form, discipline and choice, artists are highly vulnerable to instability, alienation, isolation and mental breakdown.
- Artists typically thrive not only on expression but also on the public reception and reward for their expression. As artists often hold their deep identity within their artistic expression, an artist is prone to mistake his/her expression as synonymous with her identity and experience of self, just as one may mistake one's reflection for one's true self in the utopia of a mirror. While their manifest expression may thrive in the world, exhibited, collected, archived and historicized, artists themselves may not.
- While an artwork may be interpreted to reflect on public issues of culture and aesthetics, this same work simultaneously reflects on and is generated by the private life of the artist herself. Art is of and from the artist, yet is not the artist. Art, like a mirror, is utopic and heterotopic, present as form yet absent, reflecting there were it is not. Art is simultaneously objective and subjective. Roles of public and private, always implicitly present in an artwork, are inter-reflexive, inseparable and infinitely uncertain.
- Artists who share sensibilities are likely to form peer relationships, sharing ideas not only through language but also more subtly through gesture, image, sound, movement, etc. Artists may be highly competitive with each other or utterly playful and merging, surrendering ego for the sake of creation.
- When recognizing oneself in the other, the human psychological phenomenon of experiencing merging is common. When merging is unconscious, projection of one's identity onto the other can develop into disputes. Conscious and choicefull merging demands self-knowledge and recognition of the other. The creative and highly reflexive person may be more prone to getting caught in a web of cross projection/reflection and sense a loss of self. Self-knowledge is a hard won claim.

A struggle for, a struggle against, a struggle for yes, a struggle for no, a struggle to spit it out, a struggle to swallow, a struggle to refuse to refuse. Never, my angel, have I felt such an immense spiritual repulsion. And, ever since: hunting, harrying, I track you down, run away, I hunt your soul in every corner of your body....But this is not always possible. Sometimes where you hide is inside me, I have to reach to search myself to drive you out of hiding...And that is the cause of our drama...Our drama is that we live in a state of mutual invasion."

Helen Cixous, The Book of Promethea, 1983

Case Study

In my experience as an artist and professor of art the past 25 years and more recently as a mediator, I am amazed at the number of times I have met either my own or another artists' dilemma upon recognizing her artistic voice reflected in another artist's work, sensing a loss of self and leading to irreconcilable dispute.

As example, I take a dispute experience I had with an artist I was working with in 1988, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In January 1988 I was commissioned by the Whitney to produce a work for their Film and Video Gallery. I spent 1987 developing "X-Rayed", evoking relationships between a woman and herself, a social/aesthetic history of how "woman" has been seen in western art, personal memory, myth, fantasy and desire. X-Rayed was a multi image projection system utilizing 300 slides in 8 slide projectors, a 24 track synch sound score, mirrors and props...all computer triggered to project onto 3 architectural areas of the gallery in a 30 minute repeating cycle.

I structured the work around a central question, "How can a woman, who knows she is being looked at, accept that gaze and at the same time stay fully present within her own body?" In other words, how does a woman stay present when she has been socialized to give herself to the one looking? This is a question of power relations including the relationship between internalized power and externalized power. I commissioned another artist, a friend and past collaborator, to take the role of the woman being looked at as I photographed her. Her challenge was to stay present within herself as the camera/I watched and recorded her. In the exchange of seer and seen there was a palpable dynamic of psychological merging and cross identification.

She and I together edited the final images in to an approximate 70 images, which became part of an immersive installation I continued to develop during the remainder of 1987. When the work was installed for public interaction at the Whitney Museum in January 1988 all hell broke loose. These very same images, which were created in a spirit of collaboration and mutuality, became the subject of litigation threat by the artist photographed, she, against the artist photographer, I. She claimed that the images of her were hers alone and that they should be given to her or be destroyed. I could not imagine destroying a work I felt so personally invested in and identified with.

I was convinced that not only were those images mine but that they were jointly of me as they were of her. We had created the images through a surrendered sense of empathy, but now, in the light of daily life, there was no empathy left. Boundaries of public and private, self-identity, authorship, subject and object and psychological merging had been crossed. The artist/subject felt violated. The artist photographer felt betrayed. I returned to Minneapolis disheartened. The artwork lay in suspension. What on earth happened?

In the next weeks she threatened me with litigation. Her very aggressive lawyer would call me at 6 AM from New York with incriminations and threats. I was made aware by

legal counsel that I could have preceded with counter litigation. As an artist, I did not want to treat this deeply personal and cultural issue as a legal phenomenon with lawyer's charges and counter charges. I wanted to focus on the social and psychological cultural realities buried under the aesthetic issues, which so violently resulted in unresolved dispute and rupture between two artists, leaving the artwork and us mute. To this day, this rupture has never been resolved between us.

What would have happened if we had entered into a mediation process? How would we have engaged with our conflict?

Artists are inclined to understand process-oriented interactions as they are personally and professionally committed to creative process. A cyclical, repetitive process of information gathering and exchange, an assessment of information and adjustment of creative strategies are part of every creative process. At the same time, the creative process is a developmental process which shifts, grows, adapts to and within a time and space continuum. Such is the inherent process of creative mediation as well.

Mediation is a **strategic** communication process of professional and personal skills that focuses on process and decisions made in the face of uncertainty. It is a process, which can be made as creative as are the negotiating parties. It is future looking and looks out to satisfy the interests of all parties. Mediation is a ready-made structure for artists to be able to engage with and resolve their differences.

There is a paradigm in Negotiation, which is called the Prisoner's Dilemma in which neither party wants to co-operate but all would benefit if they did. The description of this paradigm reminds me of the situation between myself as photographer and the other artist of X-Rayed. It is as if we were each looking in the mirror but could not recognize the other and only could see ourselves. The question I would pose is, "How can I see you without seeing me?"

In our circumstance, I was dealt a competitive demand and chose to offer a co operative one. I held my ground of refusing to enter into a litigation process while she kept threatening litigation if I continued to make the images public. I felt utterly beaten until one year later I was inspired to recreate the original work X-Rayed as X-Rayed (Altered). I myself took the position of the subject and replaced images of the other artist with images of my own body. Believe me, this was easier said than done as I too was not spared raw emotions, mine of shame, guilt and self-repulsion, at seeing my body represented as photographs. I learned that the question I had originally asked as the impetus for this work has deeply engrained psycho -physical roots in the bodies of women, myself included.

There are no guarantees in Mediation; there is only the willingness to remain open to engagement and to continue towards resolution. To decrease the uncertainty of the process, we would have had to be guided into a trust relationship where a balance of

co-operation and competition between us would be managed, including clarity of our intentions, and a willingness to forgive. Through Mediation we could have agreed to allow each other the space to speak and to be actively listened to.

In the continual exchange of information between us we would have shared attitudes, strategies, strengths, weaknesses and expectations. We would have listened for where the emotional tensions were, where perceptions were distorted. We would have looked for the contextual placement of information, when and where in the process specific information was conveyed. In giving and receiving information, we would have assessed the content for the degree of truth, fact or opinion; what may have been conveyed unconsciously; what was absent. We would have been flexible and adapted our bargaining in light of the information.

The issues we each would list would have bargaining values attached to them. Value is not only attached to items of substance, i.e. money, photographs, but also to interests, which we would have uncovered below the stated issues. Perhaps these would have included each one's reputation, public and or private apology, future collaborations etc. These interests have value within the negotiation process and can often be linked to each other to expand the options of bargaining.

There are many types of interests, which can be worked with. Process interests involve fairness, cooperation, openness, etc. Substantive interests may cover undisclosed terms like time. Relationship interests may pertain to future working relations between the parties. Interests of principle are ethical, political or moral. To discover these interests each parties would have to be guided below the line of her stated issues and positions.

We would have made concessions to each other in order to affect each other's offers closer to where we each would have felt comfortable.... towards a Zone of Agreement and away from impossible demands which would make agreement impossible. We would have learned what each other's frame of reference was. In using Integrative Bargaining, soft on people, hard on the issues...we would be guided to separate the person from the problem. Between artists this may be more difficult as one's identity is closely identified with one's professional product. Building trust all along the way is of critical importance as are distinguishing interests from issues, focusing on the interests...asking questions and listening for the unstated. Watching for body language, facial gestures, tone, and demeanor is key to reading what may be unstated...getting to know whom you are negotiating with.

In conflict engagement, when a party is angry or fearful they will often miss communicate as emotion may distort their intention. It is important to try to see the problem from the opponent's perspective rather than what may be stated through emotion. If emotion comes up it is important to recognize it, identify it and discuss it openly. Always check out an interpretation you may have before acting out on it. You may be projecting your own feelings onto your opponent's and miss what he/she is feeling entirely.

The goal is to bring up options, which will be of mutual gain to both parties. This process requires open brainstorming where all alternatives are looked at from as many vantage points as possible. This is an opportunity to be creative and inventive and develop potential solutions, which may have never been thought of before. Go outside the box.

One option I continue to think about in my case with the artist of X-Rayed, is to have used our mutual aesthetic strategies through which to communicate our selves to each other. For example, as we each use movement, kinesthetic techniques and images in our respective artwork, I would have offered that we engage in a studio session to actually communicate through movement and images. Our sensitivities were particularly attuned to these modalities. There is no reason why a negotiation session can't take place in a space other than around a table. I imagine that we would have communicated a great more detail of our underlying interests if we could have left the words behind.

We then could have come back to the negotiation table clearer of conflicting emotions to proceed with the task of evaluating our options towards a resolution. I certainly believe that we would have accomplished this goal, that we would have remained friends, that X-Rayed would have survived as a work of art and that we would have continued to collaborate on future projects.

Every artist's imagination holds up a mirror to reality, both the outer and the inner, but how those two realities will end up mingling in the reflection, the owner of the mirror may not even suspect. It's because the devils inside us are all poets, and so, luckily, are the angels.

Charles Simic, *The Devil is a Poet*, on Bosch

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