

Raw Art in the Mind of Lateral Thinkers

ROMINA A. GONZALES

I like the idea of a thing to describe a feeling. . . . You expect [the shark] to look back at you.

—Damien Hirst

Old photographs of the interior of a house in Los Angeles, 1972, are projected on the wall of a gloomy classroom. These pictures are stunning. On top of the stairs, a smiling mannequin bride looks like an offering on an altar. Aprons with sewn, stuffed mouths are suspended on pegs along the walls. Spongy-looking breasts attached to the kitchen's ceiling transform into sunny-side-up eggs as they reach the stove. A female figure made of sand lies petrified in a bathtub. Upstairs, an entire room, full of crocheted webs hanging from the walls, emulates a womb. More than one hundred phallic lipsticks stand on the shelves of a bright red bathroom. A decapitated mannequin struggles for liberation from between the stifling sheets of a linen closet. Visible through a sheet of suspended gauze, ten thousand tampons and other feminine hygiene products stand defiant in "Menstruation Bathroom." Even though these are just photographs, the rawness of the work depicted runs deep.

This bold installation, *Womanhouse*, was a project carried out by Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and their twenty-one female students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (Sider). In the classroom where I am seeing these photographs, the lecturer explains the message the artists were trying to convey, their aims, their process, the outcome, and the public's general reaction to the finished project. She moves on to the next set of slides. I sit frozen, deeply intrigued, and while listening to this lecture on Feminist Art in the '70s, cannot help wondering why this art is so powerful. Why does it generate this effect on others and me?

In her essay “A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness,” Terry Tempest Williams uses art as a filter to question the transcendence of wilderness. She explores the meaning of art, its purpose, and the effect it has on the spectator by analyzing the same subject in three different conditions. She looks at a living shark in the Monterey Aquarium and admires its energy; she looks at a dead shark in the American Museum of Natural History and imagines it alive, “in motion” (481). She later goes to the Brooklyn Museum of Art to “confront” these two experiences and encounters the “most harrowing of all the requiem sharks” she has seen so far. Artist Damien Hirst has suspended it, jaws open, in a turquoise formaldehyde solution inside a glass and steel rectangular tank. It seems “neither dead nor alive.” Williams, too, is besieged by a “*Sensation*” (481).

This encounter with the shark, the sensation of it, causes Williams to wonder why it is more enthralling as a piece of art than in other settings. The first two sharks belong to reality, the former alive and the latter dead; but the third one, the one made art, doesn’t belong to either of these categories. Art fills the gaps in reality, creating gray areas, generating sensations instead of just displaying facts. Williams is very aware of art’s power to alter her perceptions and challenge her previous thoughts: “How am I to think about a shark in the context of art, not science?” (481). Her imagination is “quickly rearranged.” She also comes to see that the same object in a different place has different meanings: “Damien Hirst calls the shark suspended in formaldehyde a sculpture. If it were in a museum of natural history, it would be called an exhibit, an exhibit in which the organism is featured as the animal it is” (481). The shark in Hirst’s sculpture is not featured merely as the animal it is. It is something more.

This is why, looking at the shark, Williams says, “I do not think about the shark” (481). Instead, Williams reckons with what the shark means to her. Gary Tinterow, the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, interprets Hirst’s sculpture and explains this reaction, saying, “Sharks throughout history have been a signal for danger and simply by placing it in a container in a museum setting, he creates the conditions for a work of art” (qtd. in Reichling). Because this “condition” is fulfilled, the work of art makes Williams look into herself, even leading her to consider the sculpture as an “image of [her] own mortality” (481). At this point, her “mind becomes wild in the presence of . . . the artist’s creation,” sparking many thoughts and questions about her own existence: “I think about the killer whales kept in tanks . . . how they go mad, the sea of insanity churning inside them, inside me as I feel my own captivity within a culture—any culture—that would

thwart creativity: we are stopped cold, our spirits suspended, controlled, controlled sensation” (481).

As a passionate environmentalist, Williams is deeply interested in wilderness, and her main concern is to find “the solution to preserving that which is wild” because “the natural world is becoming invisible” (481, 484). Her efforts are focused on generating consciousness and creating social awareness to breed change, to create a “sensation where people pay attention to the shock” (484). She is perplexed and made envious by the instant shock generated by the rawness of Hirst’s sculptures and comes to the conclusion that “it is easier to create a sensation over art than a sensation over the bald, greed-faced sale and development of open lands, wild lands, in the United States of America” (483). Unsure of how to generate this sensation, she hesitantly suggests, “Perhaps if we bring art to the discussion of the wild we can create a sensation where people will pay attention to the shock of what has always been here” (484). Art can potentially be the solution.

Edward de Bono would agree with Williams on the necessity of bringing artistic thought into other realms for consideration. In his essay “On Lateral Thinking” he explains: “There is about creativity a mystique of talent and intangibles. This may be justified in the art world where creativity involves aesthetic sensibility, emotional resonance and a gift for expression. . . . More and more creativity is . . . coming to be valued above knowledge and above technique” (545). To de Bono, creativity is the key to problem solving, and the way to acquire it is by engaging “lateral thinking,” which “is concerned with the generation of new ideas . . . [and] with the breaking out of the concept prisons of old ideas. This leads to changes in attitude and approach; to looking in a different way at things which have always been looked at in the same way” (545).

De Bono’s theory of “lateral thinking” suggests Williams’s aspirations in “A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness.” She evidently engages in lateral thinking when she tries hard to see wilderness in a new way by declaring that “wilderness exists like art” (483), and that it is possible to designate it as an installation just like Hirst’s conceptual art pieces. She states that wilderness is a “true sensation that moves and breathes and changes over time” and can be seen “as dance, as a painting in motion,” or even as a performance (482). She tries to help the reader see wilderness from a different perspective to break the old ideas. But her attempts are unsuccessful, as they fail to create a sensation strong enough to raise awareness and generate the change she is looking for.

As much as Williams is thinking laterally, she needs to go further. De Bono explains that “the only available method for changing ideas is conflict . . . a head-on confrontation between opposing ideas, [or] a conflict between new information and the old idea. . . . The most effective way of changing ideas is not from outside by conflict but from within by the insightful rearrangement of available information” (544). Even though Williams literally rearranges information in her essay, giving birth to a beautiful and complex work of literature, she fails to create a conflict that really confronts ideas on wilderness, so she creates no change. Wilderness needs to be presented in a radically different way than it has ever been seen. This paradigm shift is exactly what Chicago and Shapiro did; they radically rearranged the conception of female gender, giving birth to a revolution that established a milestone in history.

When *Womanhouse* opened its doors in January of 1972, it immediately generated powerful public reactions. The project was meant to create awareness about the overlooked female condition and the oppressive social pressure on women (Sider). At the time, women were, to an extent, still considered housewives meant to carry out domestic tasks; the female body and female sexuality were mostly taboo subjects. Women reacted emotionally as they saw other women talking about experiences that they had previously hidden, tackling day-to-day issues familiar to most women with the raw honesty of visceral images. Among men, discomfort and embarrassment were tangible as they faced the inevitable conflict that the images aroused (Sider). For both men and women, though, the piece was an awakening: they *felt*, as Williams does when she encounters Hirst’s shark. *Womanhouse* was the first feminist-directed artwork to gain national attention, and it sparked a female revolution against the male-dominated society, resulting in greater awareness and changes towards the more progressive society we currently live in.

When we place *Womanhouse* beside Williams’s essay, it becomes even more obvious that it is vital to think of groundbreaking ways to achieve desired social change. Talking, lecturing, and giving conferences on ethical matters such as taking care of the environment does not work anymore. Stubbornness begs for a radical change in perception, for a shake-up, for something to take people out of their “vertical thinking.” Just as with *Womanhouse* and Hirst’s work, a new vocabulary is needed in a social context to express things that the current one isn’t strong enough or wise enough to say.

Every year in Denmark, nearly one thousand whales and dolphins are killed in a festival for young men to prove their adulthood. The sea turns red, and the shore becomes a marine graveyard (Opiko). Thousands of e-mails,

conferences, and web pages have called for a stop to this bloodbath and awakening the general public regarding the massacre, but in vain. What would happen if all these dead whales were placed in the middle of Times Square and left there to rot and decompose? This sight might shake up people and incite them to act. What if, instead of giving lectures on global warming, we built a dome surrounding Manhattan to increase its temperature and force all its inhabitants to live in the situation they ignore?

As impossible as these radical methods may seem, they are not far from reality. Installation artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the entire cliff-lined coast of an Australian bay with thirty-five miles of rope and one million square feet of fabric. They surrounded eleven islands in Florida with 6.5 million square feet of pink floating fabric. Even in New York, they installed saffron colored nylon panels along twenty-three miles of paths in Central Park (National Gallery). “Lateral thinking involves restructuring, escape and the provocation of new patterns,” making a living experience out of art (545). Forcing awareness, as Christo and Jeanne-Claude do, causes the conflict Bono prescribes. This is exactly what Damien Hirst does, too, the “bad boy of British art who dares to slice up the bodies of cows, from the head to the anus” (Williams 483). And this is what *Womanhouse* did, at a time when the issues it addressed were rarely mentioned. This is “the solution” to Williams’s concern for “preserving that which is wild”: as de Bono puts it, “Lateral thinking can be deliberately perverse” (Williams 481, de Bono 549).

Dead whales in Times Square. A shark in a box. A heat dome surrounding Manhattan. Breasts on the ceiling of a kitchen. Why is this art so powerful? Why does it produce such a deep reaction, and why is it such an efficient means of generating awareness?

Josefina Ayerza’s theory on the dialogue between Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis and art helps us come closer to an understanding. According to Ayerza, the artist’s desire to “solicit the gaze” is at the root of a solution: the work of art generates an anxious state of wanting to see more. The shark in formaldehyde is enthralling and more striking than the others because of Hirst’s intention to generate a strong reaction in the viewer—uneasiness, thought, and desire for confrontation. Art’s exceeding power becomes evident when placed beside nature; in opposition to nature’s function to enable existence and survival, art seeks to express and challenge the spectator. “There is always an absence in the painting that will suck your eyes,” explains Ayerza, something incomprehensible that forces the viewer to keep looking with intent and searching for an answer. During this eager quest, it is actually “the painting who is looking at us and making us the picture” (Ayerza).

We become the painting; we are made the picture. The work of art makes us look into ourselves, forces us to *see* ourselves when we are looking at it. Williams wonders, “How is the focus of our perceptions decided?” (481). Unknowingly, we decide to focus on ourselves. Our knowledge, perceptions, and experience are the only sources of information we have available. Williams was not looking at the shark, but at what she *saw* in the shark: herself, her own history. The same happened with the spectators at *Womanhouse*.

Awareness occurs when something is deeply touching, strong enough to compel us to look into ourselves. Change—the change Williams desires and de Bono explains—can only happen as a result of this understanding. Art is the catalyst, and the reaction resulting from the conflict art generates *in* ourselves *with* ourselves is the most honest mirror, the way to really become aware of our relationship with our surroundings. No wonder, while standing paralyzed in front of Hirst’s defiant sculpture, “you expect [the shark] to look back at you” (Hirst qtd. in Williams 481). But it is very difficult to *imagine* wilderness itself as art if you are not there confronting it while it looks back at you. An essay describing the reciprocal process cannot engender the necessary persuasive power.

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