

The Gift of Water

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Introduction

This essay traces the conceptual context and process of making a biosculpture commissioned for a public site in the small town of Grossenhain, north-west of Dresden in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 2002, the town hosted a regional horticultural exhibition – the Landesgartenschau – which it saw as key to economic regeneration in an area (typically for the former GDR) of high unemployment and widespread redundant industrial plant. Preparation for the show included permanent upgrading of parts of the urban landscape, including restoration of waterside paths, and re-use of industrial spaces for changing cultural purposes including both art and the garden show itself. Something of a showpiece is a new open-air swimming complex. The bio-sculpture I designed and made functions as part of a plant based, chemical-free water treatment system for the pool.

Unexpected events after I returned to New York – the destruction of the Twin Towers – urged me to think about the persistent metonymy in my work and to explore the psychology of how we imagine our bodies and the consequences this has for our relationship to earth's life systems. Making the sculpture in Germany led me to think about such issues, but within the opportunities and constraints of making a work in another country, learning enough of a language to communicate, and dealing with technical as well as conceptual matters during a fixed time period. Returning to New York, the same issues took on a bigger reality, still personal but not only that.

Gathering in between

I sit writing at the table next to the window in my studio in New York's SoHo, where I used to see the Twin Towers – no longer there. The emptiness and stinging smell from the still burning ruin do not let me forget how bent we are on destroying our own species. In the face of this, is there any hope we might have some regard for what we are doing to other species, the background bio-terrorism and chemical warfare we have been waging now for decades? Amidst the epic scale of our self destructiveness and the acuteness with which we refine our deadly powers, is it trivial to point to the unintentional fallout of the daily round of our lives, of the extinction of fish and birds, plants and land animals, and the burdens of pollution we excrete into the world's waters and air?

I think not. It's all part of the same scenario of self destruction, depending, of course, on what we mean by self. Reasonable beings, we use our reason as reason enough to separate ourselves from other animals. But the root of the word animal tells a different story. The Latin animus means soul, air and breath, life principle. Rather than separating us, it is about what connects us to the rest of breathing creatures and to air, life's breath

itself. How can we rediscover this sense of connectedness? Can we find our way out of our destructive and atavistic patterns to imagine a more accurate sense of ourselves, where we can recognize and even celebrate our necessary immersion in the rest of creation?

Physicist David Bohm makes a distinction between intelligence and intellect: intelligence, from the verb *intelligere*, has the sense of to gather in between, the ability to make new connections and to play with new categories. It is dynamic and creative, while intellect, from the past participle of the verb, suggests what has (already) been gathered (Bohm, 1989: 114-5). It's about the already existing order, conditioning, received notions, the relatively fixed and static, habits of thought. The capacity for making connections, making new categories is so basic to our existence we usually take it for granted. To give a sense of the power of this capacity, Bohm (1989: 37-8) tells the story of Helen Keller who was blind, deaf and unable to speak since early childhood. When Anne Sullivan was hired to teach her, Helen had no concepts and could not communicate. Realizing she would have to teach her a concept, Sullivan invented a kind of game. She would bring Helen into contact with water in many different forms-- a glass of water, rain, water in a pail, taking a bath, water pouring out of the pump. As Helen was having each of these different experiences, Sullivan would scratch the word "water" onto the palm of her hand. After a long time, Helen suddenly grasped that these radically different experiences were all connected to and by what was being scratched onto her hand. This was her first idea of a name, that this stuff had a name. Keller suddenly realized everything had a name. As Bohm points out, this could not have been based on previous knowledge stored in intellect; rather it was an act of creative intelligence.

There is a clue here about how we can find the new connections we need, when it's not the concept water that is elusive but the real thing that is so in danger. It is through heightened tactile sensation, through feeling, not at first through words, that Keller comes to this powerful capacity for symbolic thinking. This is compelling for me as a sculptor. Like sculpture, it underlines how we think with our bodies. It shows how body and mind work together, even in the realm of words.

Project/Process

The story moves me, also, because I work with water and because of its relation to the project in Grossenhain. A year before reading Bohm, I was invited, with other artists, to submit a proposal for an exhibition associated with the Landesgartenschau (LGS) 2002. We were asked to link art with local history and the theme of the garden show. Grossenhain had a flourishing history producing woolen textiles well into the 20th century. However, with the reunification of Germany in 1989, and the end of government subsidies for industry, unemployment has risen to huge proportions. In the last 10 years the population has dropped from 20,000 to 17,000 as people have left to look for work in the west. Water, as a symbol of renewal, figured prominently in the plans of the LGS, which would bring the opportunity to restore two large lakes for boating and to build a new public swimming complex on a scale surprisingly large for a small town. Remarkably, the water in the swimming complex is filtered by a constructed

wetland ñ an organic solution, no chlorine, just plants. The wetland system closely relates to my own work of the past half dozen years, works that I call biosculptures. These are sculptures that are living systems and function ecologically as well as aesthetically and metaphorically. They work just like the wetland, using plant based ecosystems to clean water. Mosses and the bacteria that live in their roots transform toxins in the water into nutrients for their own metabolism. The excretions of fish, snails and other organisms living in the water are food for the plants. As in all wetlands, and all healthy natural systems, there is no waste.

My first idea for this biosculpture was based on a piece I had just finished called *Ím You*. Made of mosses, volcanic rock and cement, the image is based on the microscopic structures of certain mosses, that in cross section look uncannily like human hands. But soon another image that had been in the back of my mind for years surfaced: cupped hands reaching into water. Two enormous hands reaching from the banks into the water, holding water and wetland plants. Moss would grow over them and be kept moist by a misting fountain in the centre.

Fig. 1-- Jackie Brookner proposal drawing for Grossenhain Biosculpture 2000

A few months after the proposal was accepted I arrived in Germany to choose the site. We decided the piece would be best in the wetland pond where it could bring attention to the way the wetland was cleaning the water. The whole complex was under construction, with large excavations. It was clear the pond would be much shallower than I had expected, and my image of an intimate tree shaded grove for the moss would have to go. No tall trees could be sited near the wetland because the falling leaves would create too much decay and upset the carbon balance of the system. This meant I was going to have to find sun loving mosses. I was also told that the town wanted the piece to be permanent. Therefore I would have to build the sculpture to withstand the temperature cycles of many winters. After researching various materials, I learned that the Technical University in Dresden was developing a durable textile reinforced concrete. They invited me to make the piece at the lab in Dresden with the help of their team and equipment, and we agreed the best way to get from my 7 inch model to something over 8 feet would be to make periodic cross sections of the model as an internal structure and then build a skin over it. Using this method I built a half size armature in NY and returned to Grossenhain in July.

I was astonished to see how beautiful the finished swimming complex was, profuse with flourishing plants and flowers. My next surprise was the space I was given in Grossenhain to make the full scale model, to test the size of the piece in the pond. The studio of my dreams - an enormous empty room with a 40-foot roof. It was one of the buildings renovated for the LGS, the old foundry where textile machinery parts were cast. After finishing the model I commuted to the lab in Dresden. Initially there were difficulties fitting my schedule (dependent on public transport) to their working day, but a broader cultural accommodation was also in process. In the former GDR, life is still very important, more so than work in some ways. And life is part of work too. The lab was like a big family. Everyday at 9AM everything stopped and people disappeared into the

adjacent building for about 45 minutes to have breakfast together. And again at noon, for an hour's lunch break around the picnic table outside. At least once a week there seemed to be a reason for someone to make an elaborate feast.

Wonderful as this was, it made my work day too short to finish my project on schedule. I had planned my time to include working at nights and on weekends, but as the first weekend approached and I asked about access, the answer was no. I was told I would have to wait until the boss returned from vacation the following week. How this was resolved had great significance for me. That very night, after I had been insistent about needing to work longer hours, on the train home I noticed a red line making its way up my arm. A small puncture wound on my hand was getting infected. At 8pm I made my way to the small hospital, dictionary in hand. Next I knew, besides the penicillin, my arm was being put in a cast. The doctor said I couldn't work for a week and I had to come back the next morning. With great embarrassment the next morning I called the lab to tell them I was at the hospital and would be coming in late. Instead of the judgment I expected, when I arrived at the lab one woman asked me if I wanted a special glove. The meister, who had been keeping his distance, offered to help me bend the stainless steel for the armature. He assigned two of his assistants to help as well. Much to my surprise, my vulnerability was a bridge. It seemed to make me more accessible, less the visiting American. It was after this I was asked to join everybody at lunch.

Not having the full use of my own hands made me realize how much I take them for granted and what a gift they are. Breaking the wholeness of my skin led me to thinking about the metonymy in my work, these hands cut off at the wrists, immersed in water, overgrown with moss, parts of the body standing in for the whole, yet that insistently declare themselves as parts.

Fig. 2 Jackie Brookner *The Gift of Water* 2001 (side view)
Grossenhain, Germany 3' x 5.5' x 8.5'

This brought me to the thought that we are not so much whole as finite. I started thinking about the implications of this, wondering how our imagining of our bodies plays out ecologically, on the species level.

Fictions of Wholeness

Henri Lefebvre writes:

What conception of the body are we to adopt...as our point of departure? Plato's? Aquinas'? The body that sustains the intellectus or the body that sustains the habitus? The body as glorious or the body as wretched? Descartes' body-as-object, or the body - as -subject of phenomenology and existentialism (Lefebvre, 1991: 194)

There is the Eastern body and the Western body. I can only speak from the viewpoint of the latter. As adults we seem to take for granted that the body is an integral object bounded by skin and are unaware of what an act of the imagination this is. However,

this way of experiencing ourselves as whole within a skin is something we develop in early infancy, and is subject to disturbance:

...the skin functioning as a boundary.... this internal function of containing the parts of the self is dependent initially on the introjection of an external object, experienced as capable of fulfilling this function....Later...this function ...gives rise to the phantasy of internal and external spaces. Until the containing functions have been introjected, the concept of a space within the self cannot arise. ...the optimal object is the nipple in the mouth, together with the holding and talking and familiar smelling mother (Bick, 1988: 187-8).

The experience of body wholeness is an illusion maintained by privileging what happens inside the skin and ignoring the porousness of the boundary itself, repressing the fact that our existence is dependent upon our continuously breaking the bounds - exchanging with the world around us, taking in and letting go. The idealization of wholeness may be partly a compensation for the fragmenting conditions within which the sense of self develops.

For the Ego to appear, it must appear to itself, and its body must appear to it, as -- subtracted and hence also extracted and abstracted from the world. Being prey to the world's vicissitudes, and the potential victim of countless dangers, the Ego withdraws. It erects defenses to seal itself off, to prevent access to itself. It sets up barriers to nature, because it feels vulnerable. It aspires to invulnerability (Lefebvre, 1991: 202).

These fragmenting conditions must be particularly disorienting against background memories of symbiotic union.

In the earliest weeks of life, in the ideal situation, the baby feels at one with the mother, with whom he was indeed somatically at one prior to birth. In this state of primary identification, the baby is unaware of himself as a separate, autonomous human being: he does not realize where he begins and ends, or that he begins and ends. Subjectively, he feels completely merged in with the mother-environment (Fuller, 1980: 202).

Our imagination's pull toward wholeness may be an attempt to restore the experiences of union with the mother, both as an infant and within the amniotic skin where exchange of fluids happens quite passively.

The fiction of wholeness is thickened, and boundaries must be hardened as children are taught to control and distance themselves from what issues from their bodies. Learning to actively control our excretions is crucial to the attempt to elevate ourselves above our animal nature. Freud writes about how children find great pleasure in, and are proud of, their excreta, seeing them as part of their body and a source of self-esteem. But gradually, the child is brought up to repress this and their excreta become a source of disgust (Freud, 1939: 88-91). Facing the prospect of love's withdrawal the child learns to attach anxiety to everything about excretory materials, to their sight, and smell, and touch (Dollard and Miller, 1950: 137, cited in Perin, 1988: 137). Anxiety indeed. We must

dissociate ourselves from ourselves to be human. No wonder mastering our bowel and bladder has come to have cosmological significance. Dante's *Inferno* is a vast excremental dungeon.

Bacteria, of course, get dumped in here too, even though we cannot survive without them. Because some bacteria produce disease and are present in feces, filth, dirt, soil, earth, it might seem sensible to consider them dangerous and unhealthy. But in fact, our health itself, our ability to digest food, and our immune system all depend on the work of microbes living within us whose disregard for borders threatens our unity. Their disregard for borders threatens our unity. Experiencing this as danger, we can't risk the ambiguity, and consign them all to the realm of germs, part of the excrement of which we try in vain to rid ourselves. (Rosebury, 1969: xiv, xvi, cited in Perin 1988: 177). This expulsion creates unbearable tension. So what do we do with our disgust?

We project it onto others, though not onto any others. The Others who embody the disgusting contents must be seen as safely different from ourselves. This works on both the individual and societal levels. As society helps build the boundaries of the self, that bounded self gets projected back into society. Object relations psychology has investigated how individual development and the social world reciprocally influence each other. Drawing on this work, David Sibley, who also cites Julia Kristeva on the ambiguities of abjection (Sibley, 1995: 8), explores the ways repulsion is embedded in the construction of social space, in what he aptly calls geographies of defilement (Sibley, 1995: 75-86). A couple of examples will give the texture of his ideas. In cosmographies of medieval and early modern Europe, firstly, the grotesques (seen as imperfect, deformed, at one with nature) are banished to the edges of the world map along with uncivilized natives, the less than fully human, safely distant from the civilized centre. The grotesque was partly other, but also a boundary phenomenon in which self and other are enmeshed in a heterogeneous and unstable, hence dangerous, zone (Sibley, 1995: 51). As Sibley says, "those threatening people beyond the boundary represent the features of human existence from which the civilized have distanced themselves - close contact with nature, dirt, excrement, overt sexuality (Sibley, 1995: 57). Secondly, something akin to this happens in nineteenth century urban planning when the bourgeoisie are isolated from the smelly working class, or anything which might offend the senses - which implied the expulsion of the dirty, the poor, the unclean, the malodorous (Sibley, 1995: 57). Of course, this is not all projection. There were real sanitation issues in these growing industrial cities. As populations mushroomed in the urban centers of England, Europe, and the U.S. the cities were covered with heaps of domestic waste, stagnant undrained puddles and drinking water fouled by sewage and industrial discharge. Cholera, yellow fever, and typhoid fever were rampant, and initially were attributed in part to the moral depravity of the new immigrants. Repeated epidemics spurred sanitary reform. Water became an agent of purity. In the belief that "running water purified itself," (see Stauffer, 1999: 7) forceful streams of propelled water were used to carry away as much waste as possible. "The driving concern remained not the purity of the drinking water that entered the city, but the pressure of the polluted flow that left it." (Miller, 2000: 34)

The Finite Mirror

So we are back to the river, which today suffers such severe pollution from human wastes and from industrial and agricultural chemicals that fish populations have plummeted and drinking water supplies are in crisis. Water is our first mirror. Its surface “symbolizes the surface of consciousness and the material (concrete) process of decipherment which brings what is obscure forth into the light” (Lefebvre, 1991: 186). Can we bear the tension and humility of what the mirror tells us? Waters we thought endless turn out to be finite. As water, so we ourselves. What might it mean to think of ourselves as finite?

Instead of having an image of our bodies as a contained whole with a clear (and transparent) boundary, though a boundary ever encroachable, problematic, whose fragile hold needs the buttress of rigid denial, instead of this we could acknowledge our edges. This is difficult, in part because it means acknowledging our limits. We don't seem to much like limits. They stop us, and affront our desires for infinite power, but we literally cannot exist without them. Any individuated form, by definition, must have limits, edges, boundaries. We need to see the value of limits, and to see our edges as places of possibility, places of relationship. Every boundary that separates also connects. As in ecosystems, these edges are opportunities for heightened diversity. Our membrane, that glorious and treacherous territory we must traverse to meet the world, we must negotiate to be. The edges--the territory of exchange--where all our senses vibrate in molecular excitement, where the world scratches its being on our skin, before names. Pores where the world can enter us and leave, orifices, the issue in, and out--places of terror and delight. Membrane leaps quantum, to heart and glands, spasms us, contracting inward, releases, extending out. Considering ourselves finite means bearing the consciousness of these limits. It means apprehending that like all organisms, we cannot exist in isolation from the world we inhabit. Less autonomous wholes, we are more like pieces of an immensely complex fractal jigsaw, puzzle, entangled, interdependent with all the other finite parts for our meaning and existence. Parts reflecting the whole, yet insistently parts. Immersed in the rest of being.

Fig. 3 Jackie Brookner *The Gift of Water* 2001 with mist

Fig. 4 Jackie Brookner *The Gift of Water* 2001 (close up)

Hands immersed in water. It was time to find those rare mosses that love the sun. When the day came, I was taken to a several hundred acre site on the outskirts of Grossenhain, where the Russians had practiced military exercises and tanks compressed the soils year after year. After the Russians withdrew, the site was set aside to recover as an ecological reserve. Species that could not grow elsewhere were thriving here, among them many rare, sun loving mosses. What a delicious irony that fields dedicated to such destructive power would become home to these delicate and ancient plants, that in new intimate habitation will grow to take the shape of human hands as they transform toxins into food to yield clean water.

Fig. 5 Jackie Brookner *The Gift of Water* 2001 with mosses

Buddhist master, poet and philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh talks about interbeing. He sees a cloud in a sheet of paper, and rain and the sun, the river, the tree, space, time, you and me (Nahn, 1988: 3-5). The existence of all of these parts of being are imbedded within each other. Acknowledging our finiteness acknowledges our place within this larger context. Choosing to identify with our finiteness instead of repressing it could mean the possibility of being secure enough within that fact to celebrate our interdependence. Celebrating interdependence may sound romantic, but really doing this is anything but. It brings us face to face with our utter dependence and our ultimate puniness. For all our language, all our intelligence, our networks and biotechnology, not one of us can transform primary energy directly into food as even the smallest plant can. The ultimate insult to our fantasies of autonomy is not our dependence, material or even emotional, or our finiteness in space, but our temporal finiteness that declares how little any one of us matters. The abiding horror of the felling of the Twin Towers is not the cruelty of the acts or the innocence of the victims, but the void that screams, and the reality beyond apprehension that these two sky high buildings, the best our hubris can do, came down so quickly.

Each one of us, you, you, me, will leave. Or, we won't leave - that has too much will - we will just stop. The emptiness breathes and gives space to light and air. Finite in space, also finite in time. It is this final edge that is hardest for us to bear.

to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers,
wordsmiths--the transfigurers, restorers

(Ammons 1993: dedication)

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