

From starlight to pixels; the luminous world of artist Lily Yeh

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Grass-roots, community art is typically not discussed in terms of the sublime because it aims to alleviate not provoke feelings of terror or shock, regenerate rather than exploit the disturbing vastness of landscapes of privation in which it often is made. Whilst much contemporary art co-created with disenfranchised communities is intentionally subversive, designed to overturn stereotypes, preconceptions, and oppressions; these projects are accomplished over time through interactive processes rather than a single instantaneous insight provoked by an object or image (Kester, 2004). This article suggests that as these community-based projects extend the role of art; the works themselves, the murals, sculpture, gardens, performances, happenings and exchanges may reclaim the sublime from the self-referential, closed narratives of the avant garde, and give it back to everyday people. Three decades of work by international artist Lily Yeh shine as examples of a co-created sublime, the physical and aesthetic inversion of despair to hope, periphery to center, and mundane to sacred. The magnanimous scale of the works, their powerful local mythology and dazzling luminosity, made possible by Yeh only through mutual exchange and collaboration, ripple out to the world beyond through images, from starlight to pixels. The photographic representation of these collaborative projects might turn out to be an equally powerful frame for change of the community art movement. As distillations of larger processes, these powerful aesthetic pieces are capable of provoking an instantaneous insight in to the significance of the work, offering a breathtaking glimpse of an alternate and exalted reality brought to life. To overlook the sublimity of Yeh's work out of partiality to process over product, or for lack of new direction beyond the avant garde's dead-end, would be to miss attending to one of the greatest living artists and most important modern re-inventions of art.

Key words: Lily Yeh, communit art

While Lily Yeh has dedicated her professional career to the hands-on healing and transformation of some of the world's most devastated communities through collaborative processes of art, photographic images of her work and that of the two non-profit organizations that she has founded and directed serve to distill and distribute these transformations through the universal ethereal portal: www.barefootartist.org. The radical transformations both psychological and physical that she orchestrates through dialogic¹ practices and collaborative installations of paint, mosaic, and concrete sculpture are flattened and simplified in this two-dimensional image format. However, the triumph of scale, luminosity of spirit and capacity to overturn entrenched preconceptions and institutions is not lost and perhaps even magnified by the clarity and focus of the frame, such that these humble works of community art merit a reading in terms of the sublime.

Does an encounter with three-story mosaic Ethiopian warrior angels composed of broken glass in the midst of a dilapidated inner city neighborhood in Philadelphia provoke ontological shock? a reorientation with oneself and the world, and a new understanding of the capacity of art to move life? I will argue that the scale, luminous quality and direct translation of local imagery to larger than life mythology, employed in Yeh's work have the collective impact of bursting the boundaries of the possible, in both the community of which they are a part, and the distant observer, and in so doing, create an exalted sense of reality. The imagery is not always, and not only *beautiful*; nothing lovely, or harmonious about either the paintings of animals, flowers, or people, or the garden walls which seem to be exploding like shooting stars, alive with power and light. With the expressive magic-realism of Rousseau and Chagall, Matisse's mastery of color, and the chutzpah of Du Champ, Jeff Koons or Jenny Holtzer, Yeh works to reclaim gathering spaces, entire city blocks, whole villages, as meaningful (joyful, meditative, sacred, performative) and productive ground with and for the local community.



These first two images are from the Village of Arts in Humanities which has evolved over the last 20 years in partnership with members of the Germantown neighborhood of Northern Philadelphia. Beginning with a commission in 1986 to transform the abandoned lot of Arthur Hall, founder of the African-American Dance Ensemble and The He Ife Black Humanitarian Center, Yeh successively expanded the boundaries of her own canvas painting and installation art practice through encounters with local children and neighbors. The neighborhood at the time was gutted and derelict, gaps between buildings where fire or deferred maintenance had brought down a structure, trash and weeds accumulating, drug-related violence and crime part of the landscape. "I walked in and I had no design", explains Yeh, "no idea of how to make a place in this context. I wondered how we would create a sense of space in an abandoned lot. Abandoned lots all look the same; they are disorienting, and chaotic. Drawing on my studies of art history, religion and so forth it occurred to me that first we must establish the center. So literally, I went there and felt the space. I picked up a stick and just drew a center, and then we started to construct there¹."

Though Yeh did not know her company at the time, she rolled up her sleeves and joined a cadre of artists more interested in remaking the world in partnership with fellow citizens, than in depicting a world of ideas within the confines of galleries or the academy. In fact, she has moved so thoroughly and responsively in to the realm of dialogic practice and community development that no attempt has been made on her part to present the artifacts of this collaboration back to

the art world from whence her training came. In true dialogic practice, what has mattered most has been the ethical, empathetic, co-creative, mutual learning process and exchange between participants in these experiments of grass-roots democratic action, self-definition and place-making.



What began as a single lot, and a giant learning curve in terms of both relational and construction practices, has evolved into a 260 square block area united by a collection of parks and gardens, community spaces and communal housing projects. Now known as the Village of Arts and Humanities, the non-profit organization is a major provider of arts-inspired programs, including education, land transformation, construction and economic development. The Village includes a nursery that grows thousands of trees for the city of Philadelphia, and is the recipient of numerous grants and awards.

Several key articles² document the methodology that Yeh has developed over the years, and she now finds herself among the ranks of the most progressive community-based arts program directors in the states and around the world. Certainly this has to do not only with the success of the program, but also with the quality of the art. The following image is from Korogocho at the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya where as a Lila-Wallace Arts International Fellow, Lily conducted a 3-month residency beginning in December of 1993. Situated adjacent to a huge city dump, Korogocho is a settlement of 100,000 people, children and adults who visit the dumpsite daily to scratch out a living by recycling trash. They are referred to as Mukuru people (Swahili for "garbage"). During her initial trip, Yeh engaged residents in transforming a barren church courtyard into a vibrant environment filled with huge brightly painted angels, flowers and sculpted guardian figures. She worked with Eliimo and Philda Njau of the Paa Ya Paa Art Center and Father Alex Zanotelli of St. John's Catholic Church in Korogocho during the trip, setting the foundation for a decade-long partnership.



In the following 10 years, she collaborated with many visual and performing artists to engage community residents, especially children, in art projects that included painting, mask-making, creative drama, photography, mural-painting and sculpture-making. Yeh worked closely with social workers in the community and local groups such as Boma Rescue Center and the Korogocho Street Children Center. In 2003 she worked with another Korogocho-based organization "Education for Life" to create large-scaled visual tools such as painting and banners to warn young people about the danger of HIV and AIDS and to educate them about preventive practices. As a part of the educational activities, they launched a teach-in festival including a ceremonial procession through town, communal songs, dances, an art exhibition, and theatrical performances. The group felt empowered that they could produce images that really reflected who they are and their deeply held beliefs.

Reflecting on her experience in Korogocho, one particular moment stayed with her. She was looking for a home for the newly sculpted angels that she co-created with Kenyan artist Lawi Moshi. She found an abandoned concrete platform with exposed spikes piercing through the concrete. Situated near a wooden fence over which laid the vast garbage dump and a latrine on its left, the huge concrete block held a flat plate on its lower left side where people burned trash every day; this was a place of abject filth and lowliness. She suddenly realized that this was exactly where the angels needed to be, in the place of abandonment and disdain. Beauty and angelic guardianship and blessings would bring dignity and hope to places of darkness and despair. When people burned trash, the smoke from the trash would become the offering of incense to the angels; it all fit together. "I feel that on that day, through the transformative power of art and through people working together, we pushed open the heavy dark steel gate of hell and let in some sunlight and air. That day, hope came to the people of this hellhole place³."



The visual record of these processes, even in their extracted state, the photograph, or digital image, offers the opportunity to discuss the work on an aesthetic level, something which Grant H. Kester in his seminal book *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, is less interested in than building a critical framework for the evaluation of dialogic practice. This is partly because this new realm of work is so fraught with potentials for abuse of power relations on the one hand and so ripe for analysis in terms of emerging methods of practice on the other.

Kester's discussion of the dialogic aesthetic reaches a critical impasse with the avant-garde, and the emergence of a sublime that is characterized by a violent shock. This self-reflexive monologue on art (the shock of art that upsets our preconceptions about art), invites

no interaction or participation, is alienating rather than boundary-dissolving. Kester explains that while the dialogic projects he considers in the text "encourage their participants to question fixed identities, stereotypical images and so on, they do so through a cumulative process of exchange and dialogue, rather than a single, instantaneous shock of insight precipitated by an image or object. These projects require a shift in our understanding of the work of art—as durational rather than immediate. (2004.12)"

Kester, and the post-modern discourse on which he bases his discussion, leaves us with virtually no recourse for considering the aesthetics of this wonderful new realm of art in terms of the power of the sublime, which as Yeh's work demonstrates may be durational and relational, but is still manifested as images and objects, whose power is significant not only internally in relation to the community of which they are a part, but to the world beyond. Additionally, while each project is significant, from class room projects to garden ceremonies, the final artifacts have an important lasting significance for the community that created them and to those that encounter the work through its documentation. The problem lies not with the sublime, but with leaving this powerful agent of shock and transcendence in the hands of the nihilists, or those bound and determined to watch themselves work. For of course a momentary catching of breath in one's throat, a pulling out of the rug from under one's feet, is temporary. In fact, a defining quality of the sublime is that it does not kill us.



And so, as we recover from our shock, we have something humungous to talk about, and this is where Nicolas Bourriaud, offers some guidance in the form of Relational Aesthetics in which he postulates that this new politically and ethically motivated community-based art must in fact be considered aesthetically for these works like the living history of all art, are defined by their temporal-spatial, formal, representational construction. He gives us confidence in this endeavor, reminding us "that these artistic proposals [have] to be judged in a formal way: in relation to art history and bearing in mind the political value of forms (what I call the "criterion of co-existence", to wit, the transposition into experience of spaces constructed and represented by the artist, the projection of the symbolic into the real)... For these approaches do not stem from a "social" or "sociological" form of art. They are aimed at the formal space-time constructs that do not *represent* alienation, which do not *extend* the division of labor into forms. The exhibition is an interstice, defined in relation to the alienation reigning everywhere else. (pg82)⁴"

Again, until now, Yeh's work has never returned home for exhibition; she has no time. But before we rush on we must return to the photographs of the gathering of children around the angel sculpture installed at a threshold between the Korogocho community and the dump beyond, and the image of people walking towards the church adorned with the larger than life

protective angels envisioned and painted together. If Yeh's work can be considered sublime, it is in the physical manifestation of the local spirit of the community. The scale of these angels transforms the viewers perception of what is possible, initiates a dialogue between community members, and with viewers around the world about the present and the future of Korogocho.

With the forming of Barefoot Artists, an international non-profit, in 2003 Yeh has embarked on her current long-term project to help the people of a small Survivor's Village near the city of Gisenyi, Rwanda build a Genocide Memorial Park and plan for a sustainable future, including preserving local cultural history and memory, educating children, attending to health needs, water collection and purification, building soil health, planting trees, and creating joy into and for the future.



The completed Rugerero Genocide Memorial Park with a monument and a bone chamber

The Rwanda healing Project expands the boundaries of art as a vehicle for social change under crisis conditions. One hundred female headed households and several hundred children are involved in transforming their displaced survivors' village and creating a Genocide Memorial Park. Both youths and adults participate in village construction, mural painting and the creation

of other public art. The skills they acquire are applied in building other parts of the village, tending and raising animal stock, and planting fruit bearing trees.

Luminosity is Yeh's aesthetic medium of the sublime, a quality that only a master can bring to life through art; Rembrandt for example. However, in the luminescent waves surrounding the Genocide Memorial Garden, the power of light must not only describe, but act; to define and protect the sacred ground as if with moonlight, to honour and preserve memory, to create a place for peace. Viewing this work from a distance, we are confronted with the aesthetic power of art that is co-created. Yeh's "criterion of co-existence" has taken her from the meanest of human landscapes, to human landscapes of devastation and terror. The work she coordinates is meaningful in that it serves the community and makes alternate futures possible, but the guidance that Yeh lends as a painter, renders the final creations truly sublime- a quality that adds power to the artifacts in place, and in transmittance to the world beyond. Her art is alchemical, and her works radiate a light that denies the totality of darkness and engages a dynamic yin-yang relationship, of ugliness becoming beauty, death becoming life, the sacred brought forth from the mundane.

Yeh now finds herself in a milieu of contemporary artists devoting their life and work to this shocking revision of the role of art in the world, the life or death call for art to intervene, not only in the interstices, but in the very center of our relationship with each other and the earth. Lily Yeh explains, "My work is about the power of acting from the heart and the impact of grassroots action. It is a testimony to the capacity of art to transform people and society. In my search for the sacred in everyday life, I am able to create opportunities for others to participate in this quest. Through working together, people are reconnected to their inner light of creativity. This inner light illuminates our landscape and guides us through our daily lives, especially in dark times⁵."

Notes and references

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| 1 | Grant Kester uses the term dialogic, in his book <i>Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art</i> (Thames and Hudson, 2004) to denote processes that are empathetic and reciprocal, practices that catalyze dialogue and facilitate conversation, and an aesthetic of art that must be viewed ethically from within its local specificity, its individual and historic context. | | Humanities," <i>Journal of American Folklore</i> 117(466):446-454, Moskin, Bill and Jill Jackson, "Warrior Angel, the Work of Lily Yeh", 2004 and Leggiere, Phil; "Lily Yeh's Art of Transformation", The Pennsylvania Gazette, July/Aug 2000. |
| 2 | The following three articles detail the methodology that Yeh has refined over years with the Village of Arts and Humanities and now uses to guide her international work with Barefoot Artists: Miller, Rosina S. (2004) "Unhaunting the Village: Critical Regionalism and 'Luminous Place' at the Village of Arts and | 3 | Yeh, Lily, "Creating a Sense of Place" presented at the UC Davis Design's Diaspora Symposium, 2005. |
| | | 4 | Bourriaud, Nicolas, <i>Relational Aesthetics</i> , les presses du reel, 1998 |
| | | 5 | Yeh, Lily, "Creating a Sense of Place" presented at the UC Davis Design's Diaspora Symposium, 2005 |

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