

Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society

Contemplative Practice in Arts Education Meeting

Boulder, CO

February 9-12, 2006

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Photographs by Mirabai Bush

On February 9-12, 2006, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society convened its first disciplinary meeting, “Contemplative Practice in Arts Education.” Held on the grounds of the historic Chautauqua in Boulder, Colorado and sponsored by the Fetzer Institute, the meeting offered the Center’s academic fellows and associates an opportunity to expand and deepen discussions begun elsewhere about the value of incorporating contemplative pedagogy into academic arts curricula.

Three main issues, offered by CCMS academic director **Arthur Zajonc** during the meetings opening circle, served to both frame and ground the discussion. First, the question of value: specifically, what value does contemplative engagement offer the arts in general, and each of the disciplines represented in particular?

What does it add to our discipline—epistemologically, pedagogically, methodologically? Does it enhance the creative process, deepen students’ engagement with the material, or lead to specific insights that might otherwise be unavailable? Second, the question of language: supposing that contemplative pedagogies do have value, how do we communicate that value to others? Certainly this is an issue for any pedagogy, but it can be an especially complex for one rooted in spiritual, artistic, and wisdom traditions where value tends to remain implicit and, indeed, is often assumed to be beyond words. Given this, how do we put the wisdom of

this work into words? How do we translate—for students, colleagues, administration—this wisdom into the agreed upon goals of higher education in the arts?

And, finally, the question of how: That is, what are the specific practices that have been most useful in connecting each discipline to the arena of contemplation? What has worked well, and what hasn’t? Or, as one fellow put it in the opening circle, “What can I steal from you all and take back to my own classroom?”

With these words set as the groundwork for the next few days’ discussion, Center director **Mirabai Bush** added a few more, borrowed from Center fellow and poet Mary Rose O’Reilly. Though she was unable to attend the meeting, O’Reilly’s *Radical Presence* was felt from the very start, in the form of a question:

Once we begin to try to put spirituality and classroom practice together, let’s not lose sight of fundamental distinctions between them. Pedagogy emphasizes technique; spirituality addresses who we are ...Pedagogical discussion brings us into a utilitarian world of what works and doesn’t work. We habitually comment as the lecturer drones on, ‘Oh, I’ve tried that,’ or ‘I’ve done that; I’ve been there,’ but if we’re on a path of being instead of a path of doing, those comments may not be appropriate. Therefore, when we talk about teaching within a contemplative frame of reference, I think we should keep our prescriptions to a minimum. I want to sketch the lines of certain



approach but I don't want to trespass into another teacher's prayer hall ... Let methodology follow from the particular: this student, this hour, this loose spruce, rather than from the world of theory.

In this spirit of allowing methodology to follow from the particular—this discipline, this professor, this course—sessions were organized by discipline, with a full morning or afternoon session devoted to each. Sessions followed a workshop format, with a combination of formal presentation, discussion, and demonstrations that gave participants an opportunity to feel for themselves some of the practices being presented. Organizing the meeting in this way allowed fellows to go into greater depth, not just about what contemplative engagement offers each discipline, but also what each discipline, with its unique history and methodology, might have to offer contemplative engagement. Section One of this report, *Contemplative Pedagogy in the Disciplines*, offers a summary of these discussions. Yet, as is discussed in Section Two, “Taking It to the Next Level,” one of the most fruitful findings to emerge from these discussions was precisely the way the arts disciplines spoke to one another in ways that are rare on college campuses. Indeed: the further the discussion delved into this discipline, this course, this classroom, the more each became a window onto wisdom that could hardly be contained in any of them.

Section One **Contemplative Pedagogy in the Disciplines** *Architecture*

What do contemplation, meditation, mindfulness, and architecture have to do with one another? This is the question that has been on **Peter Schneider's** mind ever since, as a young architect in training himself, he encountered the work of Louis Kahn and found his thinking about architecture transformed. Early in his own career, Kahn had taken a somewhat pragmatic, ordinary approach to architecture. Then he read *The Book of Tea*. Suddenly he began to write about the discipline of architecture in a whole new way—as something sacred. He began using phrases like those Schneider quotes frequently from memory:

The beauty of architecture is that it deals in the recessions of the mind from which come all that is not yet said and all that is not yet made. . . . Architecture has existence, it has no presence. . . . Only the work brings architecture into the present and each work is an offering to architecture. . . . When you make a building, you make a life that talks to you.

For Kahn, architecture was no longer simply about technology and progress; it was something that speaks to us. A building was no longer simply a product of architecture but an offering to it.

Intrigued with Kahn's approach, Schneider began to more formally investigate the relationship between contemplation, meditation, and architecture, and the further he went back in time, “all the way back to 2200 BC in some texts,” the more evidence he found that, far from being a new-age add-on or departure from the traditional discipline of architecture, contemplative engagement brings us back to the discipline's deepest roots. In fact, the very words *contemplation* and *meditation* derive from the ancient Greek discipline of architecture. “Contemplation comes from the Latin ‘contemplo,’” Schneider explains, “which means to mark out the precinct of the temple. That act of marking out is one that is perhaps at the fundamental root of all architecture. It's the primary architectural act.” Likewise, the notion of architecture as a fundamentally *meditative* act finds its first articulation in what is often considered the first text on architecture, Petruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*, written in 26 AD. Petruvius posits architecture as consisting of two kinds of knowledge: “knowing that” and “knowing how.” Knowing *that* is the science of architecture or “the explanation of the way the thing has been made changed by its intention.” In fact, Petruvius actually uses the Latin word which comes from the Greek word ‘*medisthai*’ which means to be “mindful of,” in the specific sense of taking careful measure of the thing. And, according to Petruvius, this art of architecture, knowing how, actually comes first. Thus, if one is concerned with building a rationale for contemplative pedagogy in architecture, one apparently need look no further than the field's own canon.

Schneider found further support for a contemplative approach to teaching architecture in research from the fields of psychology and sociology, where studies have shown that the act of marking out our territory is not just fundamental to the discipline of architecture; it is fundamental to human development and civilization. In fact, one of the most universal play practices of little children (not just future architects) is apparently the practice of constructing a makeshift shelter for themselves by taking found objects such as tables and chairs and draping a sheet or blanket over them. More than merely a marking of territory, such behavior is itself a contemplative act. Schneider cites the work of psychiatrist Susan Isaacs, who, in her research on how little children behave in play settings, found that children's intention in constructing such a shelter was to make a place where they could go be with themselves, find themselves by going *inside* themselves—an act which sounds a lot like meditation. “So, again,” Schneider explains, “at a very young age, we’re linking together behaviorally the making of shelter with the finding of shelter inside ourselves.” Since his Center fellowship in 1997, Schneider has been working to bring this two-thousand-year-old tradition into his courses by designing them in a way that teaches architecture as both science and art—i.e., as a body of knowledge and also as a mindful, meditative, imaginative act. For Schneider, mindful architecture begins with an understanding of how, “as designers, as architects, we are actually messing with the world out there; it’s a big responsible thing, so we have to be careful about it.” To introduce the concept of mindfulness to his students, Schneider actually begins with its opposite: mindlessness. Drawing on the work of Ellen Langer, Schneider begins with examples of what it means to act mindlessly, for which he and his students can find no shortage of examples. From there, they begin to construct a definition of what it would mean to act—and design and build—mindfully, i.e., with an acute awareness of the interrelationship between building, human being, and world.



Meditation enters the course as a means of building this awareness. Though students do not meditate in class, Schneider assigns a series of out-of-class exercises which require students engage in a various forms of meditation and then reflect on that experience. In the first, students are asked to describe a shelter they built for themselves as children. In the exercises that follow, students are asked to engage in more meditative practices which combine walking and sitting in various settings—both outside and inside—and then reflect on that experience in writing. In their reflections, they are encouraged not merely to describe the experience, but to engage what Schneider refers to as their “design imagination.” While the design imagination begins with sensory awareness of one’s inner and outer world, it takes that awareness to the next level by creatively reimagining it, and then contemplatively imagining what else it might be.

In taking their design imagination to this level, Schneider’s hope is that his students learn not only to design more mindfully, but perhaps even realize the ideal of imagining into being a building—and a being—whose inside is bigger than its outside.

In *Design with Nature*, Ian McHarg writes, “Our life, in sickness and in health, is downed with the forces of nature, and that nature, so far from being opposed and conquered, would rather be treated as ally and friend, whose ways must be understood and whose counsel must be respected.” For **Kat Vlahos**, Professor of Architecture at the University of Colorado, this sympathetic, respectful relationship between humans and the natural world lies at the heart of architecture. It was also the driving idea behind the course she created as part of her 1999 Center fellowship, “Building in the Land,” which sought to bring students into direct engagement with the impact that ecology can have on design, as well as to the impact that building can have on local ecologies and communities. Since her fellowship, Vlahos finds all of her courses informed by this approach. In all her courses, Vlahos wants her students to consider this: “How do we, as architects, understand the impact of

our actions in our community and on the landscape within which we are building?” She wants them, in other words, to learn how to engage the landscape as “ally and friend, whose ways must be understood and whose counsel must be respected.”

Yet, respecting nature as an ally is one thing; actually learning how to do the kind of deep listening necessary to hear its counsel is another. Vlahos has been listening to the landscape for as long as she can remember. Growing up in rural Colorado, she learned early on what it was to feel a connection with the landscape, and to feel that one’s livelihood was intimately dependent on one’s ability to heed its counsel. But Vlahos finds that her students are not so lucky. She teaches at the University of Colorado-Denver, where most of the students have grown up in urban or suburban environments and have never felt a strong connection to the land. For them, “the environment” tends to remain an abstraction—something one visits on vacation, or campaigns to protect.

Contemplative practice, then, offers a means of helping students tune into the “cues . . . in the landscape and the environment” that might inform their architecture. To introduce students to what this listening might look like, Vlahos often has her students study how other cultures have traditionally worked with the elements in their own architectural design—by, for example, building in such a way as to allow the sun to mark the cycles of the day or year, or to signal harvest time. These cultural case studies offer a guide for how building might connect the human community to the cosmos in a way that is at once resourceful, efficient, exact, and mindful. With these examples in mind, Vlahos then introduces her students to what this kind of listening might *feel* like, firsthand, by taking their exploration out into the field, where they can experience the elements for themselves. This visit to “the field” might be a twenty minute sitting or standing meditation on the sidewalk or lawn just outside the classroom building, or it might be a two-day stay on ranch site miles away. In either case, students learn to attend to that

site through all five senses, beginning with hearing. “[W]e think we hear something but when you really sit down to listen, you really start to hear things,” Vlahos explains. “It’s not just the birds, you hear the wind, the movement of the grasses. [Students encounter] sensations that oftentimes they have taken for granted or not really experienced, so it’s being mindful of a place.” Students also learn to see a site in a different, deeper way, observing not just the look of the place in the present moment, but how the light changes over the course of the day, and into the night. They taste and smell the air, get a feeling for the way it moves across the land and the particles it carries from place to place. They touch the earth, the soil, the flora immediately around



them, and they begin to think about how the textures and materials already there might influence their choice of building materials. When this exercise is done in a rural setting, the observation is expanded to

include an observation of how a particular site changes over time. Students choose a spot in the landscape to visit and revisit every hour for an entire twenty-four hour period.

Becoming more skilled at using their senses also teaches students how to listen to what their own bodies can tell them about building in a certain landscape. By paying particular attention to how their own bodies change in response to the elements—air, water, earth, air, and light—they quite literally get a feeling for how the skin of a building might respond. Similarly, by tuning into the size and proportion of their own body, students learn how to “use their body to actually understand their sense of scale in relation to this broader landscape.” This is especially critical in a rural environment, where expanses can be disorienting and a sense of proportion can be elusive.

“We try to understand how [the elements have] actually formed and shaped that particular landscape,” Vlahos explains, “and then how we use those elements to form and shape the architecture we’re going to make.” As in Schneider’s classes,

however, the goal is not to stop at the senses, but to use sensory perceptions as a conduit to creativity and contemplation; the goal is not to mimic what they see and sense in the environment, but to allow it to inspire their design imagination. For example, a student might notice the way in which trees in the area filter the light in specific ways and then allow that play of light to inform the architectural expression he or she makes. Or, a student who becomes acutely aware of how wind and water tend to dominate in an environment might begin to imagine how best to work with the circulation of air and the flow of water in design. Such projects find students engaging architecture as a means of seeking shelter in and with the environment, rather than from it.

Writing and Poetics

The notion that good writing, writing that actually moves its readers to new understandings, requires an unpredictable combination of perspiration and inspiration is not a novel one. Any writer—or any college student, for that matter—who has taken notes and done all the research, only to sit in front of the computer, waiting for the words to come, can tell you: no matter how diligent or determined the writer is to get the job done, the writing process seems to have ideas of its own about how to proceed. Indeed, the best advice for writers, often seems to be simply to hurry up and wait. Yet, as Center fellows Marilyn Nelson and Andrew Schelling suggest, waiting is the one thing that students don't have time for—or, at least, don't think they do. And telling them to hurry up and wait only begs the question: wait for what? How will I know it when I see it? What will I do with it when it comes?

We know that inspiration favors the open mind. Yet, one of the first things that **Andrew Schelling** noticed when he first began teaching poetry at Naropa University was how, when faced with the task of reading or writing poetry, his students' minds seemed to do just the opposite: close down, shrink, shy away. "What I noticed at the outset when I began to teach poetry is that students would come to class with an enormous amount of preconception about what poetry was and the conventions of it and

instantly deplete themselves of oxygen, their vocabulary would become shrunken, their use of the page become very shrunken," Schelling says. Seeing this reaction made Schelling want to find a way to make students forget their preconceptions about poetry and come to the subject fresh. Contemplative practice offered such an approach.

As part of his 1997 Center fellowship, Schelling developed a course called "Poetry, Contemplative Practice, and the Bioregion," a central aim of which was for students to experience poetry as a means of opening themselves up to, and engaging more deeply with, the local ecology and environment. In developing the course, Schelling drew for inspiration on Native American and aboriginal traditions that hold the gift of poetry as just that—a gift that comes to us from the spiritual landscape, the plants and wind and animals and sun and moon that inspire us. In an attempt to get students to experience poetry as a means by which we get in touch with our environment rather than simply project ourselves onto it, Schelling developed the notion of what he calls the "language body." Just as we have an emotional body and a physical body, he explains, we also have a language body. Just as our capacity to feel and touch and sense bring us into direct contact with the world, so does the language we use to talk and write about it. From this perspective, words and sounds and stanzas become not simply a means of sending our own feelings and thoughts out into the world but also a means of taking the world in. Our capacity for language becomes a kind of "perceptual organ" itself, i.e., something we use to get in touch with and gain insight into our environment. Schelling often introduces this notion to his students by having them first connect to the language body through genres other than poetry. Not surprisingly, one of these is journaling. As Schelling also notes, journals have historically been used by natural historians, ecologists, and travelers as a way of engaging with their environment in a way that combines close attention and observation with reflection. Unlike many less contingent forms of writing, the journal entry remains grounded in, even beholden to, the specific time and place in which it is written. By locating the *I* in a particular time and place, journaling takes some of the egocentric pressure off the aspiring poet by bringing him out of

his own habitual story and into the present moment and landscape. Thus, as Schelling explains, the great question of western civilization—“Who am I?”—shifts and diffuses into “Where am I?” and “When am I?” Journals thus offer a sense of a self that evolves in relation to time and space, a self that is very much in communication with “the forces and dynamics and aspects of the ecosystem, bio-system, or watershed that you’re in.”

Another “genre” Schelling uses, surprisingly enough, is the mailing address. If any body of language would seem to “belong” specifically to a particular place or group of people, then certainly it would be their own postal address. And yet, as Schelling’s students discover, when we truly pay attention to the particular units of language that make up an address, such an assumption proves false. Schelling’s students begin with the name for the place on which they sit: The Naropa Institute (the name for Schelling’s home institution before it became a

university). Of the entire address, it turns out that only one word—“The”—can properly be said to belong to the English language, having descended from the Anglo-Saxon character called the thorn. Every other word comes to them from someplace else, some other people: “Naropa” is the name for the yogi abbot at Nalanda University in India; “Institute” derives from an old Latin word; “2130” is made up of Arabic numerals; “Arapahoe” is an old Pawnee word meaning something like “our enemies to the East”; and so on. Through this exercise in deconstruction, students learn how every body of language, from the most proper to the most mundane, embodies a rich geographical, ethnic, and cultural history to which we cannot lay claim—and which everyday use tends to erase.

In Schelling’s courses, students also explore the power of language to affect the physical world, beginning with our own bodies. Schelling leads his students through chanting exercises that enable them to experience the effects that certain vowel sounds

have on their own bodies—how something so simple as a long “aaaaaaa” can open up the chest and body and energize the body and mind. But they also explore—and, indeed, experience—not just the power of language but its limitations. In a dramatic example of this, Schelling takes his class to visit Rocky Flats, a government factory near Naropa that, until it was closed down in 1989, produced most of the plutonium used in US warheads. Before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Schelling would take his students for a tour of the factory as it was being dismantled. Before their visit, students would have been introduced to some of the ways that civilizations the world over have engaged in poetry

as a means of healing, of redressing balances, and of building community. And yet, standing in front of the factory, going through security checks, asking what stood between them and the deadly substance it created, students would find themselves confronted on a deep level with the question: What can poetry do when you confront something like

an arsenal of nuclear weapons propelled by plutonium triggers? What faith can we put in language, when poems and propaganda, truth and lies, speak a common language? Presumably, his students had a great deal of faith in poetry—and yet, Schelling couldn’t help but notice, most invested in Iodine pills before the trip nonetheless. And yet, as Schelling also notes, the poems that came out of these experiences were among the most powerful he has read.

For **Marilyn Nelson**, as for Schelling, contemplative writing pedagogy is not about sending writing students off to a garret somewhere to stew in their own thoughts and feelings. College students already have enough encouragement and opportunity to do that. Rather, taking a contemplative approach to teaching writing is about waking up to one’s inner and outer world, so that one can engage in it more fully. Indeed, Nelson’s original fellowship coincided with an invitation to teach poetry at West Point, a setting where the question of how one engages with



the world is ever-present. Since that experience, she says, she has come to see both writing and teaching essentially as acts of peacemaking. Peacemaking, not in the sense of forwarding a particular agenda, but in the sense of enabling students to engage more fully and wakefully and compassionately with themselves and their world—whether that world be a classroom, a mountaintop, or a battlefield.

For Nelson, this means sensitizing students to words, or to what Schelling might call the “language body,” but it also means—first—helping them find the silence and space into which words and poems can take shape. One thing we know for a fact about the creative process is that it takes time. It is an unpredictable, often unruly process. There are no crash courses in or Cliff’s notes to the creative process. It can’t be crammed for.

Inspiration happens on its own time, and it tends to favor spontaneity and serendipity as much as training and discipline. The art of writing, and the art of teaching writing, then, lies in knowing how and when to make the space and time for inspiration and serendipity to happen. “I encourage [students] to listen for silence and then listen *to* silence,” Nelson explains, “because poetry in my experience is born out of silence and I want them to understand that poetry is an utterance; every poem is an utterance that is defined by the silence around it in the way that a poem on a page . . . is defined by the white space around it. . . . It doesn’t matter whether you’re producing poems or [reading them], I think you have to learn how to take them in; you have to create a sort of space for them, and the space is created by finding your own silence so that there’s room for the poem.”

But as Nelson also notes, finding space and silence for our own words is easier said than done in a world where language is constantly coming at us in one form or another, through one medium or another. Our world throws so many messages at us,

and at such volume, that often we learn to stop listening just to survive. Nelson finds that, much like the makeshift shelter that children create out of tables and blankets, even a few minutes of meditation at the beginning of each class can offer students the space they need, and also teaches them how to create that space for themselves, wherever they may be—a dorm room, a meadow, a barracks. Nelson puts it this way: “I think that what I’m trying to do with my students is to help them pull the plug on all of the noise and the constant bombardment with words, the language body. . . . [W]e are so surrounded by words, we’re just constantly living in a language environment from which we have to extricate ourselves in order to appreciate the preciousness of the language. And I think of

meditation as one way of pulling back, of being silent, so that we can value, treasure, the words that are so carefully selected in poetry.” Nelson also makes space for inspiration to by resisting the temptation to overplan her classes, and learning to work with what shows up.

“Sometimes we go out and notice trees and learn, see the leaves on a tree. People tend not to do that, but it’s a way of letting the world in,” she

explains. “I think it’s an attitude, it’s teaching them openness, the value of openness, the wonder of silence, the value of wonder.”

But as Nelson also explains, it’s not a matter of throwing structure out the window, but rather of creating the container and conditions in which spontaneity, expression, and connection become possible. For example, in a course called “Writing the War,” certain days were set aside for conversation around controversial and difficult topics, such as the notion of “just war” or the “war on the environment.” Called “musings,” or “ponderings,” these days challenged students to engage in truly open dialogue, one driven by curiosity and compassion rather than the need to make a point or win a debate. Students did research ahead of time and established ground rules to ensure



a genuine engagement with one another's ideas. And Nelson says that, in her experience, and contrary to many assumptions we might make about young adults, students in fact hunger for such opportunities to step outside of themselves; they crave an invitation to explore beyond their own limited experience. By enabling students to turn toward this longing, to let it fuel their writing, contemplative pedagogy enables students to bring more of both themselves *and* the world into their work.

Art History and Visual Arts

Longing is also at the center of what **Joel Upton**, Professor of Fine Arts and Art History at Amherst College, sees himself as teaching when he teaches art history. From day one in all of his courses, Upton poses the question: In a world where art is something we visit in museums—or download from the Internet in seconds—what does it mean to engage fully with an object of art? What does it mean to truly behold a work of art on its own terms, and not just take it apart and put it back together again in our own image? Upton says that his students tend to fall into two categories: on the one hand are those highly industrious and disciplined students who are perfectly able and happy to analyze any piece of art put before them, but who don't actually feel a thing in the process; on the other are the unschooled or uninterested students who have no time for anything so heady as contemplation, yet are so happy to simply project whatever feeling they are experiencing at the time onto the painting before them. For Upton, what these two kinds of student have in common is that neither has yet mastered—or indeed, has even the first clue about—what it means truly to behold a work of art, to set aside their habitual ways of seeing for long enough to take in what Upton refers to as the “dilemma of human being” that drives its composition.

What is this dilemma? It is the paradox that many of the more traditional tools of art history cannot touch, because it goes deeper than disciplinary knowledge. Indeed, it is as deep as human being itself: namely, the deep longing we all have, simply by virtue of our existence as conscious, embodied human beings, of being at once aware of our

separateness and, as a result, to long for wholeness. According to Upton, beholding goes back to “the beginning itself,” the place and time when our body, “by way of their need for homeostatic integrity,” senses its separation and seeks to find harmony and wholeness with the world around it. In their own way, Upton's two types of students embody this human paradox: on the one hand, the ability and desire to encounter the other *as other*, as an object that can be sized up but which remains safely separate from ourselves; and, on the other hand, the ability and desire as human beings to lose ourselves in rapturous engagement with another, to allay the pain of separation by fusing with the other.

Whatever else it has become in the halls of academia or on the walls of museums, art is one of the ways we capture and communicate this terrible, wonderful paradox of human being. In teaching students not just art history but the “the art of art history”—i.e., the art of beholding—Upton seeks to rediscover for students a way of encountering art that honors this paradox. The art of beholding, then, might be thought of as a third way, a way of encountering art as full human beings, such that the fundamental human longing that brings artist and viewer together is preserved in the encounter. As he describes it, the aim of the “art of beholding” lies in “opening a threshold that will bring students into some kind of real encounter with any art—anywhere and anytime, based on as much contextual information as they can manage, but not limited to information only.” The encounter thus becomes less an act of voyeurism, an interaction between viewer and object, and more like an engagement between lovers: standing before the work of art, the beholder must wait for the work of art to reveal itself, for the experience to unfold in the moment-to-moment of encounter. In this sense, the lost art of beholding is nothing less than the lost art of eros. Who is the lover and who the beloved in this encounter? Upton cites Thomas Merton's notion that to love is one of the most difficult things to learn as a human being, but it is not the *most* difficult. The most difficult is to learn to be loved. Similarly, Upton suggests, most of us know how to love a work of art. But to allow ourselves to be loved by it—to allow ourselves to take in and, even more, *to be taken in by* the unresolvable, insatiable longing it expresses—is something else.

How to bring this ontological paradox into the realm of the experiential? Quite simply, by teaching students the habits of mind most conducive to contemplation. Upton explains:

First, disciplined contemplation provides the most effective calming and focusing preparation for any full encounter with complex works of art. Second, the very act of contemplation, on reflection, is itself the explicit embodiment of being that informs art within a genuinely abundant awareness of wholeness beyond limitation. From this perspective, contemplative practice amounts to a radical reclaiming of art at its human core.

Upton organizes his courses around three contemplative steps designed to teach students, as he puts it, “the ‘art’ (skill) of experiencing the ‘art’ (intimated wholeness) of given work of art.” The first of these is a series of what Upton calls “beholding exercises,” or writing assignments that guide students through ever closer, ever more contemplative, engagement with a work of art. Going on the idea that one has not truly seen what one cannot describe, students are explicitly asked to put into words, as precisely as possible, what they see before them. From there, they can begin to imagine how the features they notice might provide an occasion for beholding, i.e., for perceiving the particular human dilemma which the work expresses. Second, the classroom itself becomes a setting where beholding is practiced. Rather than sitting back and watching a parade of slides, students behold works of art for minutes at a time, and often over several class periods. By bringing the contemplative art of waiting to the encounter, they learn how to allow a work of art to unfold or reveal itself over time as they become more intimate with it. Finally, the course culminates in a final essay assignment that challenges students to write about a painting which they have spent an entire semester learning how to behold through a combination of preparation, meditation,



and contemplation. In addition to researching and analyzing the piece, students are required to “visit the actual work of art *in situ* for an extended period of time, during which one might enter into a genuinely grounded contemplative, that is, artistic, relation not only with the painting but with its artist and fellow beholder.”

For **Deborah Haynes**, not only a teacher and scholar of religion and art history but a visual artist herself, the spiritual, contemplative, and artistic have always formed a tight braid in her work. Haynes first began formally introducing contemplative practice into her classes in 2002, when her fellowship led to the creation of a course called “Contemplation and the Practice of Art.” Her rationale for doing so was rooted not just in her own life as a contemplative artist and scholar, but also in the lives of her students. Coming from a generation of multi-taskers, weaned with a steering wheel in one hand and a cell phone in the other, students’ lives proceed at a frantic pace, a pace that is only exacerbated by the social, curricular and extracurricular demands of college campuses. And the effects of this speed and dislocation can be especially severe for college students, many of whom are leaving home for the first time and struggling to deal with their own independence. For Haynes, this postmodern

condition meets its match in the contemplative classroom. Techniques of mindfulness encourage students to be more present and engaged with the topic at hand and also with one another, as a learning community.

In describing her experience since her fellowship, Deborah Haynes tells a familiar story: namely, that the contemplative practices she developed in that first course have made their way in one form or another into all her classes. Whatever the specific content of the course, Haynes makes mindfulness an integral component, a habit of body and mind that enables students to engage all the course material with greater presence and awareness. Every class

begins and ends with “the bow”: a simple mindfulness-awareness practice initiated by Chogyum Trungpa, Rinpoche, at Naropa University. Observing the six points of posture—feet flat on the floor, spine straight, gaze gently focused several feet in front of them, hands on their hips, tongue resting against the roof of the mouth, seat squarely on the chair—teacher and students pause, then bend forward and bow their head in acknowledgement of one another. Besides conveying an attitude of respect for one another and for the material being presented, the bow signals their commitment to be fully present to the time and space of the class. Haynes also incorporates mindfulness practices taken from Thich Nhat Hahn and Jon Kabat-Zinn. Students might go for a meditative walk during class time, for example, or spend class time peeling and eating a tangerine with utmost care. Or they might do a “body scan”: lie down and direct attention over different parts of their body to find places where they may be holding tension. Students also learn how art can itself be a contemplative practice. In a course called “The Dialogue of Religion,” for example, students study Russian icons, Tibetan works, and Navajo sun paintings in order to discover the ways in which the artistic and spiritual have historically been so intertwined as to be inseparable. In other classes, students discover the contemplative aspect of art through more practical application—by trying their hand at calligraphy, for example, or by drawing contour portraits of one another, an exercise which requires them to trace the lines and shades of a partner’s face on a piece of paper without looking away. As in Upton’s courses, students are engaging in a kind of art of beholding by exploring what it means to truly attend to a moment, a person, a piece of art.

For **Amy Cheng**, the search for a deeper, more authentic connection to the other through art raises the question not just of how we behold a work of art, but how we learn to behold ourselves as artists. As a Center fellow, Amy is currently in the process of developing and teaching a cross-disciplinary course at SUNY-New Paltz in “The Creative Process,” a course which draws on contemplative practices to help students identify their own individual gifts as artists and discover the process that will help them bring those gifts to fruition. In

order to help students become more awake to their own habits of mind, meditation is introduced at the very beginning of the course. In addition to receiving specific meditation instruction in class, students are given a CD with guidelines on how to develop their own sitting practice outside of class. Students also write three stream-of-consciousness pages each morning, as prescribed by Julie Cameron in *The Artist’s Way*, and once a week they are required to make an “artist’s date” with themselves: two hours spent alone, doing something they want to do, and, most importantly, bringing to that activity a degree of consciousness and intentionality that they might not bring to the rest of their busy lives.

The goal of all of these exercises is to teach students the habit of spending time with themselves as artists, as well as to deepen their experience of artistic creation as a contemplative act. The priority placed on solitary encounters with themselves is not meant to feed the notion of the artist as a solitary, isolated individual, however. On the contrary, Cheng is equally interested in helping students understand the making of art as a deeply social and spiritual act. After all, if creativity is a gift, then by its very nature it exists in exchange with something greater than ourselves. Students explore the implications this has for the creative process through the work of Lewis Hyde. As Hyde explains, the artistic act always takes place within the context of two economies: the gift economy and the market economy. While the two economies overlap, they are also, in many ways, in tension with one another. Rather than resolve this tension for them, Cheng wants her students to discover for themselves how to dwell within it. Even in the context of the course itself, where their own creative process must eventually produce something that can be traded for course credit, students learn firsthand how, as Cheng puts it, “every artist and every student of art struggles with this intuitive sense, this intuitive knowledge that what they are dealing with is a gift, and that somehow that gift has to be brought out and moved out in the world, and in the moving out they have to make a living and it has to intersect with the market economy.” For Cheng, teaching students how to work with this struggle, not by bypassing it but by seeing it as part of the journey itself, is one of the greatest gifts that contemplative practice has to offer.

Theater and Dance

Certainly it is true that any artist's ability to work productively and creatively within her discipline depends on her ability to work with her most essential tools—the mind, body, and spirit. But if this is true of all the arts, then it is especially so in the embodied arts, where the artist's presence is literally everything. For the embodied performer, anything outside of the present moment is something less than fully live: a memory, a rehearsal, a recording. Thus, the actor or dancer who can master her body but knows not how to listen or speak through it, or who has years of training but who knows not how to give that training over to the present moment—such a performer gives a superficial performance at best. True artistry begins when a performer brings all that she knows into dynamic relation with the unknown, when she brings all that she is into the moment of the about-to-be. What kind of training enables such artistry to take place? What kind of preparation enables a performer to stay alive to—and go live with—her body, mind, and spirit?

For **Barbara Sellers-Young**, authentic acting is embodied acting. How, after all, can one truly inhabit a character or make one's presence felt on stage if one leaves one's body behind? Yet, for most actors, maintaining a body-mind connection is one of the greatest challenges they face. To help actors meet this challenge, Sellers-Young has developed a method which she calls "somatic contemplation." Essentially, somatic contemplation entails a series of exercises, referred to as Feel-Fuse-Act, aimed at "deepening and cultivating embodiment and integrating it with psycho-physical action through focus on body states." As Sellers-Young describes it, the objective of this approach is to increase embodied performance through an experience of the relationship between breathing, exploration, and action or what wu chi master James Kapp refers to as conscious action. Specifically, the method unites



breath, thought, and action through a conception of being that moves from ordinary experience to a refinement of consciousness that includes open awareness (inclusive and expansive), interest (wonderment), attention (committed contact), absorption (relevance and cognition), and understanding (integration and knowledge).

The exercise takes place in three phases. In the first phase, actors develop a somatic memory of what feeling, fusing, and acting *feel* like. It begins with the breath. Just as life begins and ends with breath, so must conscious, authentic action. Unfortunately, just as breathing tends to take place unconsciously, so does much acting. The challenge—and the method—then, is to bring breath, thought, and action into mindful, unified, dynamic relationship with one another.

Awareness of how the breath enters and leaves the body then becomes a gateway to other sensory/proprioceptive capacities, including touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. Once they have a feeling for their breath, they "fuse" with it by absorbing it inward, literally yawning or swallowing it into the cells, joints, muscles and limbs of the body until they have they have a feeling—and a memory—of openness. This fusion then gives rise to action. For the first phase of the exercise, action takes the form of exhalation: a letting go and lying down of tensions and habitual concerns; a linking up or grounding one's body by bringing it vertical alignment with the ground; and, finally, a "standing body scan," in which one directs attention to each area of the body to discover and release areas of energy and/or tension.

Phase Two, "Exploration," takes this embodied sense a step further by bringing it into dynamic relationship with the environment. In this phase, actors are asked to find an ordinary object and use their breath to fuse with the object, forgetting its habitual function and allowing it to reinvent itself in the present moment. This fusion then leads to some action taken with the object. Released from habitual

thoughts or patterns, they find the object reinvented in their hands.

The technique in Phase Three, “Contact,” is similar, but now the interactive relationship is not between actor and object but between two actors. Partners begin by facing one another, with only their index fingers touching. Again drawing on their somatic memory of feel-fuse-act, they take in the other, fuse with the other, and then act by sending, or “exhaling,” their energy into the other. As one sends, the other receives and internalizes the energy, which fuses with her body, until it prompts an action or “exhalation” which the other than receives. Actors walk away from the exercise with a somatic memory of what true dialogue, i.e., one characterized by authentic exchange, might actually feel like.

Given how much of the actor’s performance depends on his ability to remember his lines and deliver them well, it isn’t difficult to imagine how an actor might get stuck in his head. When it comes to the dancer, however, one might expect maintaining a mind-body connection would be a no-brainer. Indeed, the very idea of a disembodied dancer would seem to take us into the realm of farce. Yet, as Center fellows Barbara Dilley, Cheryl Banks-Smith, and Yin Mei all suggest, the ability to work mindfully with one’s body—i.e., to bring body and mind together into the present moment—requires no less training for the dancer than for any other performer. Like theater, dance often tends to be so focused on outer appearances that it is easy for the artist to lose the body-mind connection that is so essential to her art. For all three dance fellows, then, contemplative pedagogy offers a way to restore that lost connection.

Historically, cross-culturally, dance has been nothing if not an expression of spirit—human, natural, divine. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a culture in which dance has not been a part of religion and ritual, or has not functioned as a means of connecting self and sacred, individual and

community. And yet, this spiritual dimension of dance seems to find little place in academic dance programs. It was in an attempt to recover this lost dimension that **Cheryl Banks-Smith** worked with two colleagues at Virginia State University to develop an interdisciplinary course called “The Path of Inner Experience.” Aimed at exploring “the esoteric and exoteric within some of the world’s wisdom traditions,” the course included a dance component which gave students the opportunity to experience the esoteric and exoteric on a somatic and spiritual level. For Banks-Smith, this experience begins with exercises designed to help students get to know their own bodies as sacred instruments of artistry. She can show them a particular movement or strength exercise which they can add to their repertoire, but their ability to do something fresh

and truly expressive with that repertoire depends first and foremost on their capacity to trust in themselves, stay connected to their bodies and the present moment. In addition to breathing exercises and simple movement khata, Banks-Smith uses guided meditations meant to connect the dancer with her sense of self as a sacred being. In one such meditation, for example, students are invited to close their eyes and visualize a self inside themselves, and then to see that self sitting on a throne—a kind of “inner dancer” to whom the dance they do is a sacred offering.



Ritual also plays a key role in Banks-Smith’s courses. In one of these, the class begins by reading and discussing different ecstatic poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, and others. Each student then chooses one of the poems and, after a time spent contemplating it, expresses that poem through movement. The dance that results is not a direct expression or even translation of the poem, but an expression of how the poem came to and through (or, as Sellers-Young might put it, “fused” with) their bodies. In another exercise, students begin by standing in a circle and then, one by one, walk into the center and say their name, while at the same time expressing their name through some improvised bodily motion. With a scoop of the hand, a twist or a

turn or a tuck or a jump, a reach up or a crouch down, the dancers in effect sign their name into space—space made sacred by the mandala of other dancers.

Like Banks-Smith, **Barbara Dilley** is similarly interested in this question of how body and mind work together as “not one but not two.” “Training to synchronize our thinking, feeling, and moving invites us into the deeper layers of heartmind,” says Dilley. “It is from these layers filled with perceptions of the inner/outer experiences that our creative inspiration arises.” Dilley describes how this wisdom is woven into the improvisational dance class she teaches at Naropa University, where students use the four postures of mindfulness—lying down, sitting, standing, walking—as a map for investigating “spontaneous dance gestures arising from impulses, imagination, and kinesthetic awareness – the complex embodied experience of ‘nowness.’” These four postures, originally adapted from an essay by Gary Snyder entitled “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,” become “themes,” or poses and positions to which the dancers can return again and again, but which also allow for unlimited variation. Through this approach, students discover not only the structure of improvisation—theme and variation—but also, more basically, what Dilley refers to as their own “kinesthetic delight,” or the felt experience that occurs in those “transient moments when we are whole—body, mind, feelings, and mystery—all there and in the moment.” Once a part of their somatic memory, this experience of kinesthetic delight can then serve as a touchstone for the other investigations in the course. Another touchstone for Dilley is the kinesthetic experience of what is commonly referred to in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition as mindful awareness, which entails the capacity to be awake to one’s own state of body and mind as well as to one’s environment. In a state of mindful awareness, we inhabit, rather than escape, the tension between self



and other, inner and outer that is the human condition. The goal is to be able to connect to this tension and work with it in a way that is, in the words of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, “not too tight, not too loose.” Traditionally, this skill has been compared to the act of carrying water in a teaspoon. In order not to spill the water, one needs to remain focused on what one’s body is doing: the extension of one’s arm, the evenness of one’s stride, the balance of the trunk. It also helps to keep both eyes on the water and the spoon to constantly monitor one’s progress. And yet, if one does not want to trip and fall, or move in the wrong direction, one must remain equally attentive to the larger picture—the terrain, the horizon, to the movement of other bodies around him—and move accordingly. To give her students a kinesthetic sense of this skill, Dilley takes this analogy quite literally. Setting two bowls of water at a distance of several yards from one another and placing a spoon in each, Dilley has her students carry a spoonful of water from one bowl to the other. Along the way, they are encouraged to

experiment—moving the spoon up and down and around, looking away, moving backwards, lowering or raising their center of gravity—all the while exploring the elastic relationship between mindfulness and awareness. Dilley also adds other bowls, and other dancers, so that individuals must remain aware of not only how their own bodies and spoons move through space but also the bodies and spoons of those around them.

The final presentation of the meeting, by **Yin Mei**, brought this discussion of body, mind,

spirit, and expression full circle, with a practice she uses to introduce students to not just using body language but to embodying language. In an exercise which, indeed, adds a whole new dimension to Schelling’s notion of the language body, Yin Mei begins by asking students to “write” in “Chinese characters,” or what they imagine Chinese characters to look and feel like, in order to get a feeling for the sweep of the brush across the page. As they do so,

Yin Mei guides their attention to the motion of the brush, to the line along the page, and finally to the ink itself, as it leaves the brush and soaks into the page. With this experience in both body and mind, students then perform a dance inspired by this activity, in which the dancer's own body moves across the floor as a brush is moved—dragged, turned, lifted, pressed—across a page. Rather than talk the participants through this exercise, Yin Mei embodied it herself—by dancing it. Participants were asked to go upstairs to the balcony surrounding the great room and watch as Yin Mei herself became the brush moving across the floor, the ink seeping from the brush and soaking into the page.

Section Two: Taking It to the Next Level

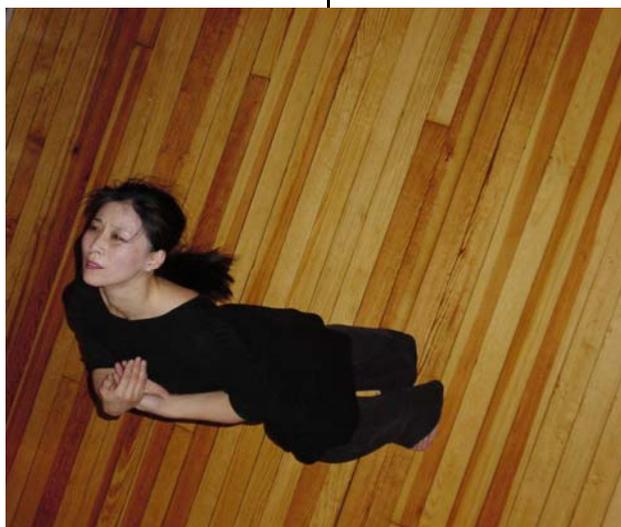
In a way, by not only demonstrating but actually embodying so many of the themes that had been woven through the presentations—beholding, presence, mindfulness, space, spontaneity, serendipity, language bodies—Yin Mei's presentation-cum-performance took those themes to the next level, to a place which was, quite literally, beyond words. In doing so, it also offered a different take on the question the meeting began with: What does contemplative engagement offer the arts? The very question already implies a separation between the two—contemplative engagement and the arts—which does not really exist outside of college campuses. For as the Center fellows discover through their work as scholars and teachers, contemplative engagement and the arts are a lot like the bodymind: not one, but not two. Historically, cross-culturally, contemplative practice has not only been one of the primary ways we have of engaging in the arts, but the arts have themselves been a primary means of contemplative engagement: i.e., one of the ways in which we as humans discover our own wholeness and at the same time express our longing to connect to something greater than ourselves. Indeed, from the perspective of the wisdom traditions that inform them, the very idea that the arts might be studied as academic subjects separate from their contemplative origins would be unthinkable. One literally cannot engage the language body of contemplation and meditation without engaging the human art of making a place

for ourselves and our place in the world—without, that is, engaging in a form of art and architecture, however primitive. And, for that matter, what is poetry, but an attempt to build bigger meaning with few words, a body of writing that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside? (“I became seriously interested in the contemplative vocation—though I didn't know the name of what I was interested in—at about the age of seven, when I covered a card table in my bedroom with a blanket, put a nightlight inside . . . and retired to think,” writes Mary Rose O'Reilly in *Radical Presence*.)

Yin Mei's performance also pointed to the essentially interdisciplinary nature of contemplative pedagogy. Throughout the meeting, not just during Yin Mei's performance, it became clear that the deeper one delves into a particular art, the more it becomes a window onto all that transcends it. If one delves deeply enough into the origins of architecture, for example, one finds a human need that transcends disciplinary division: the need to find ourselves and our place in the world. If one goes deeply enough into the origins of poetry, one discovers a language body that is not the province of poets but is shared by all. If one truly allows oneself to take in art history or a particular painting, one happens onto the deepest longing of the human heart: the longing for wholeness and connection to something greater than ourselves. And, if one delves far enough into the discipline of dance, one discovers the basic human need to bring mind, body, and spirit whole. Such a discovery may seem novel in the context of the contemporary academy, where disciplines remain housed in separate departments and crossing disciplines requires a walk across campus (which, as Nelson shows us, may not be an entirely bad thing). Again: from the perspective of the wisdom traditions that inform them, the very idea that these disciplines have nothing to say to one another—or to the body, mind, and spirit—would be unthinkable. How could a dancer move without a sense of the space and spirit inside and around her? And how could an architect possibly design a dance hall without having a feeling for the dance and the music and art that will take place there? And how could she design it without first being able to enter into that hall in her own imagination?

Along with best practices for recovering the contemplative dimension of their disciplines, the meeting also offered fellows an opportunity to talk through some of the challenges of doing so. Meditation, contemplation, experimentation, reflection, new ways of knowing: students can only learn the value of these things by experiencing them. And unless they are to be just so many more things to cram into the academic course, this often means slowing down the class, allowing the time and space for silence and serendipity to do their work. In a culture where outcomes tend to be measured in terms of units of information delivered, slowing down and doing less can be one of the greatest challenges the contemplative artist-teacher faces. For knowing the value of such things as silence and spaciousness and serendipity in one's own creative process is one thing; to know what to do—or what not to do—with them in the classroom is another. When we create space in our classrooms we also make room for what, for both teacher and performer alike, can be the most dreaded response of all: boredom. Barbara Dilley speaks to this challenge when she writes of her own development as a teacher:

The great struggle in the contemplative arts classroom has been doing less. Somehow as a teacher I consider myself an entertainer. That's what I was for many years – a performer. So I have a build in vigilance about the 'boredom' factor. I catch a whiff of it and I panic, racing to the next teaching 'trick' in my bag. Even though the instruction on meditation speaks clearly about boredom as a good sign that we are progressing, becoming relaxed practitioners, I haven't integrated this part. So the classroom becomes a place where I sharpen my understanding. I feel my fear of students becoming bored and I don't panic. I breathe. Then I address the boredom I sense in the room. I name it and place it in context, inviting them to receive it with curiosity. They relax, and we continue.



As Dilley's description of her own practice also suggests, how well contemplative practice comes off in the classroom depends in large part on the professor's ability to bring her own journey—as artist, as teacher, as student, as human being—into the classroom with her. Putting in an authentic performance as a teacher also means coming to class fully prepared and yet allowing the classroom to become a true laboratory, where experiments take place and outcomes remain uncertain. It also means not having the answers—and yet not shying away from students' longing to know. On the contrary, it means not having all the answers, and yet sparking and embracing that longing as the stuff of creative engagement. Nelson cites the Rumi story about a man who spent years and years praying, until one of his friends finally asked him, "Why are you praying, when you never get an answer?" So the man stopped praying, and he had a dream in which a guide appears to him and tells him: the answer is the longing. "I think it's that longing," says Nelson, "the longing for a

language which can name these things, which can stand against this deadly potential, which is what your students experience. Not so much that they can write a poem and make it a pat thing, but that they understand the yearning to find the language, that that's what they need, they need to be filled with this longing to express something."

If there was one longing that made itself most consistently felt at the meeting, it was the longing for more opportunities just like this one: opportunities for colleagues working with contemplative pedagogy to connect with others doing the same. Such connection is important if contemplative pedagogy is going to move to the next level: beyond the individual course or classroom, to the level of curricular change. There was wide agreement among those present that the real transformative power of contemplative pedagogy will not be realized until it is allowed to work its magic at the curricular level. Professor of Art History Joanna Ziegler, who wasn't

able to be present at the meeting but continues to work closely with the Center on this issue, puts it this way: “Until contemplative pedagogy takes root at the curricular level, we’ll all just be isolated people doing isolated things in isolated classrooms.” Many of the fellows are currently working toward such integration. As the director of a residential arts program at University of Colorado, Deborah Haynes is currently in the process of redesigning the program to give it a contemplative foundation. Professor Ed Sarath, another arts fellow who was not able to be present at the meeting but who remains intimately involved in this issue, is also working at the University of Michigan to draw colleagues and students together from across the curriculum, in part by developing an interdisciplinary seminar in Contemplative Practices. And Ziegler herself is in the process of proposing a Contemplative Pedagogies Curriculum at her home institution, College of the Holy Cross. Her curriculum would engage students and faculty together in an exploration of art as a springboard to the contemplative—and, eventually, the contemplative as a springboard to social justice and peace. Still, such efforts are in the beginning stages, and curricular transformation remains the next and necessary challenge for contemplative pedagogy. Curricular transformation, and more of what might be called contemplative collegiality. For if there was one sentiment expressed most often in the closing circle, it was that contemplative engagement, like all forms of genuine exploration, entails risk. When we invite our whole selves along for the journey, any journey—whether that journey be a career as an architect or the writing of a simple poem—the process can get messy, the subject matter unstable. All the more important, then, that the contemplative scholar-artist not remain isolated in his own classroom, his own art, his own institution. All the more important that there be forums where the value of the contemplative can be explored as generously and genuinely as possible—and the longing be allowed to have its say.

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