On Wearing Three Hats

These remarks were originally delivered at a symposium at Brandeis University on multi-talented women in March 1996. The organizers and audience of the symposium posed certain questions of the participants, and we did our best to answer them. I mention this at the outset because the questions were in some ways like the polite query, »How are you?« and the following remarks like a certain kind of answer to that query. Under some circumstances »How are you?« can elicit a sudden self-awareness of how one in fact is that one may not have sought; and an overwhelming desire to unburden oneself of that uninvited self-knowledge, expressed – at least internally – with a snarl: Oh, yeah? You want how am I? I’ll give you how am I . . .! It can thus elicit a kind and extent of answer the interlocutor did not really mean to elicit; the kind it would have been even worse manners to volunteer unasked (and that I, as a well-brought-up middle-class person, would never dream of volunteering unasked). So in responding to the symposium questions, I had to choose between indulging my desire to unburden myself of sudden and unwelcome self-knowledge on the one hand, and observing good manners on the other. Then I realized that to answer these questions would also be to elucidate certain dimensions of my life that many people find enigmatic or disquieting, and so to reduce my risk of getting burned at the stake. A pox on good manners, I decided.

1. »Do you keep your different selves separate, or do you integrate them?«

There are no discrete selves to separate or integrate. My variety of professional activities are all different, equally essential expressions of one self. When I am alone in the solitude of my study or studio, I am completely out of the closet: I move back and forth easily among art, philosophy, and yoga (my third hat). It’s the only time I feel completely free to be who I am. So I will go to almost any lengths to protect my privacy. If I lose that, I lose everything.

Often when I describe the dilemmas I will shortly outline to some individual in the helping professions, their first response is, »Well, you’ll just have to stop making art«; or »Well, you’ll just have to cut down on the time you spend working on your philosophy project.« This response makes me see how different from them I am. They view making art or doing philosophy the way I view parenting or relocating – as a choice I am free to make. What is a choice for them is a necessity for me, and what is a necessity for them is a choice for me. Art, philosophy, and yoga are parts of me the way their children and their roots are parts of them.

I learned this about myself after having repeatedly and instinctively resolved conflicts between partnering relationships and my work in favor of my work. I instinctively perceive anyone who tries to interfere with or compete with my work as an enemy. I think this means that my work is my self, and that I read a threat to my work as a threat to my existence. I defend my self against such threats instinctively, either by counterattacking (fight) or escaping (flight). I prefer escaping because it is, all things considered, more energy-efficient.

And when I was considering having children, I interviewed friends of mine who did (they didn’t realize they were being interviewed, of course, but they were). I like other’s people’s children very much. But if I were to have children, I would get exactly the children I deserve. I saw, from coming to appreciate my parents’ efforts as well as from interviewing my friends who had them, that raising them properly would have to be any parent’s central preoccupation, just as my work is for me. I was not even tempted to try, and feel no regrets for lost options.

The activities of art, philosophy, and yoga themselves determine the life choices I am free to make – to have children or not, to relocate or not, to be in a relationship or not. But I am not free to choose to be a different person than I am; so I am similarly not free to choose not to engage in the activities that make me who I am. Not to be able to realize or express the self I am in action is to die a slow and painful death.

2. »How do other people react to your different selves?«

When I am with other people, I do keep these different activities separate, and those I am with help me to do that. They engage with the activity with which they feel most comfortable, and withdraw from others they find strange. If I insist on presenting more of myself than they prefer, their withdrawal may turn to resistance, rejection, or aggressive attack.

The first time I remember partitioning myself was in order to protect my commitment to art from attack by philosophers. I had already established myself professionally, and had attained a certain degree of visibility as an artist. When Vedanta professors admitted me to the Ph.D. program at Harvard, I was Correspondingly more welcoming of all of each to present myself as an authentic resource that might be shared with the philosophy professors who had very strong views about a field within which they were largely unfamiliar. After a time I simply refused to take the bait. The third time (since there are three hats, you get three anecdotals) was in order to protect my work in analytic philosophy from the art world. The attacks came from male artists who had earlier defined their own art practice in relation to analytic philosophy. But as I became more deeply involved in it, and particularly after I was admitted to the Ph.D. program at Harvard, they became progressively disenchanted by it, and quite vocal in their criticisms of its academic and class elitism. Some of them ignored me when we met on the streets of New York, or made pointed remarks about not needing a Ph.D. in philosophy to make good art, or dropped me from the anthologies and group shows in which we had, up to that point, exhibited together. Later, I learned not to mention my philosophicaI interests around my art colleagues for other reasons. Since Vedanta professors admitted me in order to accommodate other races, and your hackles rise simultane ously, define in their sartorial choices the Western art, music, dance, and literature; have an unconven tional lifestyle; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors (tans, tweeds, navy blues). By contrast, contemporary artists are trained to seek out, discern, and transmute signs of xenophobia, and to have a high tolerance for sensory stimulation and perceptual anomaly. They often live quietly and conservatively; prefer traditional Western art, music, dance, and literature; choose conventional styles; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors. These manoeuvres, particularly between art and philosophy, make me feel like an adulterous spouse. Each field demands my full energy, attention, and commitment, each resents my involvement with the other; eachsuspects such involvement when I am absent; each feels personally betrayed when this suspicion is confirmed; and each is absolutely and unconditionally unwilling to concede any legitimacy to that involvement, much less make any accommodation to it. Each field is morally outraged by the suggestion that I am a resource that might be shared with the other, to the ultimate advantage of both. It is as almost as though I had suggested group sex.

4. »How do the members of each field differ from each other?«

Hegel thought art and philosophy were a good combination. If it's good enough for Hegel, it's good enough for me. But the practices of art and philosophy are also diametrically opposed in certain ways. Everyone is to some extent afraid of what is strange, unfamiliar, or un known. Call this anomalophobia. Some people are also drawn to it, by curiosity, attraction, or the desire for mastery. Call this anomolophilia. Just as racism, sexism, and class prejudice are sometimes fostered by the intellectual anomalophobia xenophobia is similarly an instance of my own. But instances of anomalophilia include a philosopher's experience of anxiety, violation, or disorientation in the presence of contemporary art, and an artist's experience of anxiety, violation or disorientation in the presence of philosophy. Because philosophers are trained to navigate the highways of abstract logical reasoning, and to clear away the underbrush in order to pave new ones, the best tend to have a comparatively high tolerance for logical complexity and conceptual unfamiliarity. But philosophers also tend to have a correspondingly low tolerance for sensory stimulation and perceptual anomaly. They often live quietly and conservatively; prefer traditional Western art, music, dance, and literature; choose conventional styles; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors (tans, tweeds, navy blues). By contrast, contemporary artists are trained to seek out, discern, and transmute signs of xenophobia, and to have a high tolerance for sensory stimulation and perceptual anomaly. They often live quietly and conservatively; prefer traditional Western art, music, dance, and literature; choose conventional styles; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors. These manoeuvres, particularly between art and philosophy, make me feel like an adulterous spouse. Each field demands my full energy, attention, and commitment, each resents my involvement with the other; eachsuspects such involvement when I am absent; each feels personally betrayed when this suspicion is confirmed; and each is absolutely and unconditionally unwilling to concede any legitimacy to that involvement, much less make any accommodation to it. Each field is morally outraged by the suggestion that I am a resource that might be shared with the other, to the ultimate advantage of both. It is as almost as though I had suggested group sex.

Some people are lucky enough to have multiple talents that are publicly compat ible, such as being a history professor and an archaeologist, or a math professor and a swimmer, or a nurse and a poet. I know of several academics who, in their time at the computer, sometimes do other kinds of things. It is also paradoxical to find abstract logical reasoning that post no directional signs or geographical markers. They often live dangerously and precari ously, define in their sartorial choices the Western art, music, dance, and literature; have an unconven tional lifestyle; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors. The yoga community's depth balances the art community's shallowness, and the philosophy community's rigor balances its vagaries. From the perspective of philosophy and yoga, the art community looks unidisciplined, impulsive, and gratification-oriented; materialistic, obsessed with the fashion of the moment, and fundamentally uncon cerned with standards of quality—which arts to seem to be invited only as a rationaliza tion for maintaining the status quo of money and power. On the other hand, the art community offers a perspective of untrammelled spontaneity and unpredict ability from which both the philosophy and the yoga communities seem staid and controlling, achieving depth and rigor at the expense of inventiveness. Similarly, the art community's inclusiveness balances the philosophy community's provincialism, and the yoga community's self-effacement balances its intellectual glibness. From the perspec tive of art and yoga, the philosophy community seems rigid, narrow-minded and obsessed with the resources of venturing into the alien territory of an author's mind, by reading, attending to, and analyzing closely her or his written work is so threatening that they cannot bring themselves to do it at all. Similarly, some artists' perceptual anomalophobia is expressed in rabid avoidance of the cutting edge, and in work that celebrates, replicates, or permutes artistic convention.

While withholding the anomalous parts of myself from view, I rely on them in judging the one before me. I survey each community in which I find myself in the process of venturing into the alien territory of an author's mind, by reading, attending to, and analyzing closely her or his written work is so threatening that they cannot bring themselves to do it at all. Similarly, some artists' perceptual anomalophobia is expressed in rabid avoidance of the cutting edge, and in work that celebrates, replicates, or permutes artistic convention.

5. »Does your influence in more than one field alter your perception of each? If so, how?«

I find among philosophy students and artists a certain degree of elation in the process of venturing into the alien territory of an author's mind, by reading, attending to, and analyzing closely her or his written work is so threatening that they cannot bring themselves to do it at all. Similarly, some artists' perceptual anomalophobia is expressed in rabid avoidance of the cutting edge, and in work that celebrates, replicates, or permutes artistic convention.
self-deceived by its conflation of entitlement on the subject of race, the its philosophical worth with philosophical worth. On the other hand, the philosophy community offers a perspective from which both art and yoga communities seem blind to the pleasures the philosophy community offers a greater professional recognition for my work in art, and I was for most of that time either a student or an assistant professor with relatively low visibility in philosophy. Under these conditions, it was easy to avoid the antagonism of each community toward the other. I instituted the policy of not engaging in professional art activity in the area where I live and teach philosophy, so that neither community would have to deal with my involvement in the other, and I would not have to deal with their hostility to that involvement. For thirteen years this arrangement allowed me to pursue both activities in relative peace.

My visibility as an artist took a sharp upward turn in 1987, as the result of my first, twenty-year retrospective. When the Alternative Museum asked to do this retrospective, I was very pleased at the possibility of not engaging in professional art activity in the area where I live and teach philosophy, so that neither community would have to deal with my involvement in the other, and I would not have to deal with their hostility to that involvement. For thirteen years this arrangement allowed me to pursue both activities in relative peace.

My increased visibility as an artist also gave me the privilege of publicly affirming my African-American heritage. I was very pleased at the possibility of not engaging in professional art activity in the area where I live and teach philosophy, so that neither community would have to deal with my involvement in the other, and I would not have to deal with their hostility to that involvement. For thirteen years this arrangement allowed me to pursue both activities in relative peace.

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ward spiral by making work that was if I were at least doing my yoga. arrive, it would be better for everybody to cope with all of it. Now, I don't know my health. I am aware of constantly pay for assistance, and trying to recover trespassing the outer limits of my physical my work among writers, curators, critics, and other artists. Most collec- ers, and other artists. Most collection ---ers avoid it, and some museum trustees actually boycott board meetings at which curators attempt to propose it for acquis- tion. Since increasingly, America's rich people feel that they are not rich enough, this trend among collectors and trustees is likely to worsen. If there is a case for my work to be made, most would prefer to please just put a soak in it. So I am famous without being rich. This means that I must manage my visibility- connected professional and administrative affairs more or less single-handedly, in addition to teach full-time, do research in philosophy, produce my artwork, and raise money to pay for materials and assistance. Since my rehabilitation I have also found similarly hostile reac- tions among some of my art colleagues to my professional status as a philosopher. Many are like those philosophers who have been found guilty of the practice of regarding their discipline as the only one with real importance in the world. This can lead to an ever smaller place for my art at my work – or go off somewhere else, do something else, or just plain disappear from their line of vision – is staggering. It is also deeply demoralizing. Really, sometimes these people behave so badly, so clumsily, and so shamelessly that it is impossible not to speculate on what must have been done to them in early childhood. One suspects at the very least youthful schooling deficient in Austen and Tolstoy, of pond scum if I were to let them win. Reading biographical accounts of histori- cal figures who triumph over adversity is also very instructive. Besides, you can learn a tremendous amount about human nature from being on the receiving end of this kind of thing. Plus you get an extra measure of sympathy for those people who are doing the same thing. So I protect myself by doing my work and staying as far away from such people as possible. And I remind myself that things could be much worse. If I had been born two hundred years ago, I would've been a slave. I wouldn't have these problems at all. So I certainly wouldn't want to be born in the 1950s. I recently read Stephen Jay Gould's essay on the multiple and nonstandard types of intelligence that enabled Charles Darwin not only to formulate his theory of natural selection, but to publish and gain recognition among his peers for it. He comments that all the world's bril- liance, and all the soul's energy, cannot facilitate its »frictionless functioning«. Nevertheless I cannot bring myself to condemn unconditionally this tempo- rary version of the »Victorian gentlemen's club« of »rich, upper-class white male[s]«. I love the most crucial opportunities of my professional life to the generosity and support of upper-class white males: John Rawls and Roderick Firth in philosophy, Sol LeWitt and Hans Haacke in art. It is not their fault I turned out so differently from what they might have expected. Besides, I think the business of harping on such exclusions of some peoples can be useful. John Dewey, Donald Hopkins' and John Mack's research into extra-terrestrial abductions, 2 my first reac- tion was not incredulity or skepticism. It was hurt feelings at being left out. How come the little creatures aren't abducting 3? I asked myself. Aren't I interesting enough for them?

10. How does the strengths you develop in each field affect the others?

As to the effect of multiple strengths on each part, the effects themselves are multiple. My artwork has a purifying and strengthening effect on my philosophy work. For example, I am rationally conserva- tive on matters of philosophical curricula- tum and practice. One philosopher friend has attributed my «purist» attitude toward philosophy to having other outlets for my «creatives» and «expressional» tenen- dencies. I think there’s some truth to that. It’s also true that the activity of doing philoso- phy functions for me as a sanctuary from the issues and experiences I feel com- pelled to address in my artwork. Philoso- phy is the place where I am free to think abstractly, comprehensively, rigorously, and scientifically. I am compelled to conceive the biggest possible picture in the greatest possible depth on the one hand, and split all the others to split out on the one hand, but obtrude fine-grained perceptual discrimination and self- knowledge, and reduces tolerance of concept- al anomaly, on the other.4 My cognitive analysis of ego-coherence, and my evaluation of its benefits and limita- tions, is partly inspired by the yogic tradition of Vedanta philosophy that seeks to relax and transcend the constraints of the individual self. Kant was familiar with this tradition.4

11. What do you personally get out of pursuing such a variety of interests? What makes it worth the trouble?

As you can see, my concerns in all three fields have a large self-interest-com- ponent. I am a conceptual anomaly who elicits xenophobic responses from most people. So it is in my own interest to confound crude stereotypes and bring the viewer to a greater awareness and acceptance of ego-coherence, and individual complexity. My artistic practice is a tool for doing that. It is similarly in my own interest to be able to understand the structure and functioning of the individual self in such a way as to explain why that awareness and acceptance of ego-coherence is so very difficult to achieve. My work in philos- phy offers the consolation of insight when awareness and acceptance are lacking.

12. These fields are very different from one another. What are the constants?

In each area of activity there are certain basic elements or vocabulary that are constants. In art, I almost always deploy the language of images and words, but I do not rely on written language that guided me even further into Kantian language of ges- ture, and so came back and looked even more. I do not see many exhibitions, because when I do I know I will look until my head is split- ting and my eyebrows are rolling down my cheeks. After the exhibit “Painting in Renaissance Sidney” I was so teary and unfooted that I caught the wrong bus home. By contrast with the intensity of looking and seeing that traditional paint- ing demands, my work is a piece of cake.

Another reason why I feel entitled to demand so much of my audience is my work typically demands much more of my audience than I am prepared to give as an audience to someone else. Lately I have been having the humbling experience of going back to some of Bach’s more obscure cantatas that I thought were not very good the first time I heard them because I hadn’t listened closely enough, and realizing, after repeated and attentive listening, that I just hadn’t been ready to hear what was there. I’ve discovered the piercing sweetness of Kurt Huber’s tenor, the celestial majesty of the opening choral to #110, and the humorous self-cannibalization of #113, which Bach carries to new and outrageous lengths. This reminds me never to delude myself into thinking I’ve grasped a work — in art, music, or literature — just because I’ve skimmed it once; and so never to dismiss what I’ve skimmed with some easy rationalizations that happened to come to mind.


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All three activities have deep roots in childhood experience. I was the only child in an extended family of four adults for whom I was a favorite child (of McCarthyism and racism in particular) were the dinnertime conversational norm. There I learned quickly that reasoning rationally and logically was the best way to command attention, authority, and respect for what I had to say. One of my earliest memories is of my mother ex- claiming to me in exasperation, “Does there have to be a reason for everything?” and my vehemently retorting, “Yes!” My maternal grandmother kept an eye on me while both of my parents worked. She encouraged the drawing, painting, and sculpture in which all children naturally engage. And although I did not speak English until I was sixteen, it was continuous with earlier experiences and

13. Where in your life history do these multiple talents and interests come from?


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habits: of spontaneously focussed awareness, vividness and mystery of some present but otherwise unremarkable moment, and of the meditative discipline of certain kinds of physical activity such as dance, playing catch, or jumping rope (which, at the age of six, I once did for eight hours nonstop). The deep-rootedness of all three activities has seriously undermined my successful socialization. They have fashioned adult personality traits that complicate or thwart my relationships with others in a variety of circumstances.

Part of the problem, of course, is the way I look. What people see is a nice white lady, and what they get is another difficult black woman. But philosophy, art, and yoga make the problem even worse. My reliance on rationality in communication makes me insensitive or blind to other kinds of social nuance in interpersonal interactions. I often respond to transactions of power, assertions of hierarchical superiority, or signs of emotional investment inappropriately, with rational analysis or argument rather than diplomacy. Similarly, my ingrained disposition to self-argument rather than diplomacy. Similar traits make me extremely reactive, and so are among the experiences I would love to transcend, but rather than avoiding them, I have learned to transcend them, fortuitously, for the best interests of my social well-being.

These traits make me extremely difficult and irritating to work with. And the more irritated others become, the more baffled I become and the more I act out these traits in an attempt to find out why. (Of course I feel deep indignation and outrage whenever some imperious young whippersnapper behaves in these ways toward me.) Knowing these things about myself, I work hard to sensitively manage my ingrained reactions to social convention and cultivate empathy, by imagining what it must be like to be the other person. But the better I get at this psychological exercise, the more disturbing and painful it is to do. And the older and cranker I get, the more difficult it becomes. Since my only mastery of the very same traits that got me into trouble in the first place, it is usually a losing battle anyway. I am accustomed to moving through most social interactions in a particularly challenging yogic posture, i.e. with one foot planted firmly in my mouth.

14. »Does one role or talent take priority over the others?«

When I am free of the constraints imposed on me by each of the communities of which I am a part, none of them do. I have no professional discipline whatsoever. I have always mistrusted those articles or interviews with writers that describe how, six days a week (they rest on the seventh), they get up early in the morning, work for hours, then eat a hearty breakfast, go jogging, then get in another two solid hours of work, after which they have a nutritious lunch, then a good nap, followed by two hours for answering corres-pondence, a brisk walk, a light but nourishing dinner, and an evening spent reading an edifying volume. Who are those people? I wonder to myself. What planet are they on?

My creative life consists in multiple pro-active processes – intuitive, conceptual, visual, verbal, auditory, and kinaesthetic – that are in operation simultaneously and at all times. These processes have something to do with grasping and forming. I can’t say any more specific than that. (By contrast, emotions for me are reactive, and so are among the experi-enmental data these pro-active processes operate on.) Ideas or images or words or arguments gradually coalesce in my mind, or sometimes appear fully formed. As they become sharper, clearer, and more intense, they thereby become more demanding of realism. Then I start making strategic decisions about how to do that: in what medium they should be recorded, what materials or colors should be used, how, if at all, they should be combined with other materials or media, the place or context in which they should be realized, etc.

This process – of gradually forming and realizing a work, in whichever field, and then leaving it behind me while I go on to the next one – proceeds in natural cycles I cannot predict. These cycles, too, are multiple and simultaneous in nature, since more than one work of more than one type is usually in some stage of the process of formation at any particular moment.

When external pressures obstruct the natural course of these cycles, I simply accumulate more and more unrealized ideas and visions, of all kinds, in my mind. These ideas exert increasing internal pressure on me to realize them, to transcend them by putting them out into the world. When I don’t have the time to realize all of them, this can cause painful internal conflict and sometimes paralysis. When I am too exhausted to realize any of them, the tension between my work and reality grows unbearable. The natural connection between idea and action on its behalf is severed, and the activity of doing my work itself becomes a form of therapy, of rehearsing memory. I feel as though I am grieving a death.

Then I turn into a really bad person, and – even worse – an abandoned one. Bliss is being able to give each the measure of attention and energy it needs at that moment, while the others purr quietly in the background.

Then the relation between all three kinds of cycles of work can be compared to the process of recording and mixing an early Renaissance mass by Johannes Ockeghem. Ockeghem’s method of composition was polyphonic, in which each voice or instrument was scored to a different melody, and all played more or less simultaneously. The relation among them was musical, and numerically proportional, but not strictly harmonic (since the harmonic scale had not yet been discovered). Listening to this kind of composition is a little like mixing it in the recording studio: within an ongoing, complex, continuous, and somewhat haphazard process of work, one cycle may or may not dominate the others, and you hear the shifting sequences of chords and counterpoint they form in combination. And sometimes you can hear all of the individual melodies, chords, and counterpoints, distinctly and in part and full combination, even though all are playing simultaneously.

When that happens you are floating in a billowing, rushing stream of sound, composed of rivulets of voice and instrument. Then you just relax, and let it carry you wherever it will.