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On Wearing Three Hats (1996)

These remarks were originally delivered at a symposium at Brandeis University on multi-talented women in March 1996.[1] 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.

1 Originally presented at the Third Annual Tillie K. Lubin Symposium, *Who Is She? Conversations with Multi-Talented Women* (with Mary Catherine Bateson, Perri Klass, Kristin Linklater, and Sherry Turkle) at Brandeis University / Rose Art Museum on March 17, 1996.

The first time I remember partitioning myself in order to accommodate other people's needs for an oversimplified other was in the mid-1960s. Like many others at that time, I had started doing yoga, and had gotten seriously committed to it – taking classes, doing postures at home, and reading Vedanta philosophy. During art school I then developed an interest in Western philosophy: Jasper Johns was reading Wittgenstein, so everyone else in the art world did, too. Both interests moved me to start taking summer courses in philosophy at CCNY. My first philosophy instructor, an analytic philosopher in the Anglo-American tradition, made disparaging remarks in class about »fuzzy-headed Eastern mysticism«. I responded by tucking the fuzzy part of my head safely out of sight, under my hard-nosed analytic philosopher's hat. I didn't doff that hat in a professional philosophy context for twenty-five years. Happily, it's no longer politically acceptable to be quite *that* publicly contemptuous of a foreign culture's worldview.

The second time I oversimplified myself was in order to protect my commitment to art from attack by philosophers. It was right after I'd graduated from art school. I had already established myself professionally, and had attained a certain degree of visibility as an artist. A philosopher friend had introduced me to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and this had motivated me to enroll at CCNY full-time for an undergraduate degree in philosophy. I was 21 years old. After reading a review of my art work in the newspapers, one of my philosophy professors took me aside after class to explain to me why what I was doing was not art at all. Our brief conversation established that he had not kept up with developments in contemporary art since Impressionism. He wasn't sure Picasso's cubist imagery was really art, either. Lord, please wake me up, I prayed silently. He did not want to hear about Duchamp, Dada, Surrealism, or Minimalism, and I was too immersed in the newly emerging practice of Conceptual Art to convey its importance. I found the exchange futile and enervating, a real waste of time. That was only the first of many such diatribes I had to listen to from philosophy professors who had very strong views about a field with 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 anecdotes) 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 philosophical interests around my art world colleagues for other reasons: they became restless when I discussed it, or took my interest in it to undermine my authenticity as an artist.

I don't have a similar anecdote to tell about yoga. Since Vedanta places a high priority on the values of receptivity and insight into everything life has to offer, it is generally less resistant than art or philosophy to perceived anomaly, and correspondingly more welcoming of all of my activities.

3. »How do you deal with other people's reactions?«

I have never found a professional context anywhere that was not hostile in some measure to at least one, and sometimes two out of the three of my hats. Jnana Yoga, the yoga of analysis and scholarship, is not well established in this country, so many yoga afficionados mistrust the intellect in general, and academic philosophy in particular. Like many academics more generally, analytic philosophers are often dismissive about matters of the spirit, and so tend to mistrust the more advanced practices of yoga (although of course they don't mind a good workout). Analytic philosophers, like most academics, also tend to be hermetically engaged with their particular areas of specialization, and so mistrust contemporary art. And the contemporary art world's susceptibility to transient intellectual fashion leads it to mistrust the rigor, discipline and traditionalism of analytic philosophy.

I practice yoga, moonlight in art and hold down a tenured day job in philosophy. My day job is particularly hostile to my work as an artist. But it requires me to maintain standing self-protective defenses of various kinds against attacks on the legitimacy of both of my two other essential activities: fighting for institutional recognition and support of my role as an artist, or concealing it in order to avoid institutional antagonism; or confining my interest in Vedanta to reading and exercise classes.

I have survived in each of these respective fields through camouflage. Since I am committed fully and in equal measure to all of them, I am familiar enough with the language and practices of each to present myself as an authentic »native speaker« in whichever one I happen to be in at the moment. And I have learned to blend in professionally with each, by temporarily suppressing my interests and involvement in the others. One philosopher attempted blackmail by threatening to expose my art activities to our colleagues. I called her bluff by encouraging her to by all means publicly parade her philistinism.

There's an edgy, sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach you get when you are riding with a garrulous cab driver and you both wander too close to the limits of safe conversation. You know that beyond those limits, your friendly repartee will freeze into stony silence, turn ugly, or deteriorate into a shouting match. As he nears the danger zone, your heart sinks, your pulse races, and your hackles rise simultaneously. I get that feeling a lot, with many of my colleagues, in each field. Greater conversational depth, breadth, and self-revelation set off warning signals. As my colleague innocently wanders too near the border, I have to decide whether to change the subject, lie, leave, or say what is true and thereby destroy our connection. Only the avoidance of connection succeeds in avoiding the danger.
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; each suspects 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 almost as though I had suggested group sex.

Some people are lucky enough to have multiple talents that are publicly compatible, such as being a history professor and a pianist, or a computer programmer 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 writing: poetry, fiction, food criticism, journalism. They don't need the subterfuges that are necessary when the professional communities that exercise those talents are at one another's throats.

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

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 unknown. Call this *anomalophobia*. (Some people are also drawn to it, by curiosity, attraction, or the desire for mastery. Call this *anomalophilia*.) Just as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and so forth are instances of xenophobia, xenophobia is similarly an instance of anomalophobia. Other instances of anomalophobia 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 lifestyles; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors (tans, tweeds, navy blues).

By contrast, contemporary artists are trained to seek out, discern, and transmute perceptual anomaly. So the best tend to have a high tolerance for sensory stimulation and unfamiliarity. But many artists also tend to have a correspondingly low tolerance for those uncharted highways of abstract logical reasoning that post no directional signs or geographical markers. They often live dangerously and precariously, define in their sartorial choices the fashion of the moment, choose unconventional lifestyles, and tend to be drawn to cutting-edge work not only in the fine arts, but in music, dance, literature, and theory as well. (As for me, I live quietly and precariously; prefer traditional Western and cutting-edge art, music, dance, and literature; have an unconventional lifestyle; and wear classic, tailored clothes in muted colors.)

So whereas philosophers tend to suffer from anomalophobia of the senses, artists often suffer from anomalophobia of the intellect. Present one with the creative products of the other and the reaction is usually instant antipathy. That is why I never do so unless asked, and then only with great trepidation.

Of course it can work the other way around in particular cases. I have been struck by the intellectual anomalophobia I find among philosophy students and professionals for whom 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 involvement in more than one field influence your perception of each? If so, how?«

While withholding the anomalous parts of myself from view, I rely on them in judging the one before me. I survey each community with an outsider's eye, and sometimes find it lacking in some respect the others supply. 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 undisciplined, impulsive, and gratification-oriented; materialistic, obsessed with the fashion of the moment, and fundamentally unconcerned with standards of quality – which seem to be invoked only as a rationalization for maintaining the status quo of money and power. On the other hand, the art community offers a perspective of untrammeled spontaneity and unpredictability 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-reflectiveness balances its intellectual glibness. From the perspective of art and yoga, the philosophy community seems rigid, narrow-minded and petty; emotionally stunted, obsessed with professional hierarchy, and fatally

self-deceived by its conflation of entrenched socioeconomic status 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 of what Plato would describe as the realm of pure form, achieving full physical embodiment at the expense of intellectual insight.

Finally, the philosophy community's rationalism and the art community's open-mindedness balance the yoga community's intermittent anti-intellectualism. From the perspective of art and philosophy, the yoga community seems protected, isolated, and unworldly; rejecting of interrogative dialogue, resistant to moral complexity, and overly respectful of authority. On the other hand, the yoga community offers a perspective from which the art and philosophy communities seem so preoccupied with chasing transient and illusionary goods that they seem simply to miss the basic point of being on the planet in the first place. Yoga's doctrine of detachment and nonpossessiveness counsels a critical and removed attitude towards all three communities, and belies the Marxist and communitarian objection to the foundations of social contract theory, that there is no self metaphysically independent of social circumstance. In fact there is, and the aim of yogic practice is to arrive at it. To engage in all three activities deeply, rigorously, inclusively, self-reflectively, rationally, and open-mindedly is the greatest personal fulfillment there is. It's better than sex.

6. »Does being difficult to categorize make it difficult to be recognized? If so, in what ways?«

Here I would contrast being a light-skinned African-American woman with being »multi-talented«. I consider both my white appearance and my black identity to be fourth and fifth »hats« I would gladly take off if they were not stitched to my head. The longer I meditate on the subject of race, the more bizarre and pathological it strikes me that some pink, beige, cream, tan, salmon, pale yellow, café-au-lait, mocha, chocolate, and mahogany-colored people should designate themselves as »white« and other pink, beige, cream, tan, salmon, pale yellow, café-au-lait, mocha, chocolate, and mahogany-colored people as »black« and then insist vehemently on the self-evidence of these designations. It is particularly odd because optically, white results from combining all waves on the spectrum of color – the height of mongrelization, whereas black is the absence of color – the epitome of purification. I would have thought that this was just the opposite of what devoutly white people would mean to say about themselves. Now whenever someone refers to themselves or others using these terms, I feel as though I am trapped among somnambulistic mannikins in a very bad parody of a George Romero film – and, what's more, expected to play a part. I keep on trying to get off the set, and can't.

In the case of race, I have traded greater professional recognition for the privilege of publicly affirming my African-American heritage, and so confusing those who rely on crude racial categories. I have been struck by the number of philosophy colleagues for whom I seemingly ceased to exist after my racial identity became generally known. There are many who expressed their interest and regard during my first years out of graduate school from whom I no longer receive greetings when our paths cross at conventions, nor invitations to speak at their departments, nor bibliographic citations when they make use of my work in their publications, nor even standard letters of acknowledgment or rejection when I submit papers to their journals. Of course it works both ways: When my racial identity became known to them, their true characters became known to me. So these are individuals who have largely ceased to exist for me as well.

Many others who have had the temerity to befriend me professionally, or to try to recruit me or promote my work, have been duly reprimanded – or ridiculed, or bullied, or threatened with professional retaliation – for getting out of line by those gatekeepers of the field whose self-imposed duty is to safeguard its purity against my contaminating influence. On my first job a senior professor befriended me and nominated me for membership in an exclusive academic society. For doing so he almost lost his own membership, and so I lost his friendship. Another was ridiculed for socializing with me, and put an end to the ridicule by putting an end to the socializing. Then there was the colleague of long standing who moved to a prominent department and tried to convince his colleagues to recruit me there as well. It took years for him to rebuild his credibility – at the expense, of course, of those recruitment efforts as well as of our collegiality. These are only a few of many such cases. Not one of those so pressured has had the courage of his (and it is always a »his«) convictions.

Similarly, in some ways, with my art world colleagues. I have gotten kicked out of the art world twice: the first time in 1970 when it became generally known that I was a woman; the second time in 1974 when, after considerable exposure in group shows of women artists involved in second-wave feminism, it became generally known that I was African American. After that happened I had plenty of time, privacy and solitude to pursue my artistic interests, compatibly with teaching and doing research in philosophy and keeping up my yoga practice. It was not until the late 1980s, when the topic of gender, race, and difference became fashionable in critical circles that I was rehabilitated. At that point I became very popular, and many of the individuals for whom I had ceased to exist rediscovered my existence. Our reunion was joyful. It was as though we'd never been parted. – Up to a point: many such individuals have a definite sense of how much recognition is fitting for someone of my status, and I am often reprimanded for overstepping myself.

In the case of being a Jill-of-all-trades, by contrast, having three hats to wear has not made it more difficult to be recognized, because I have no scruples about wearing only one hat at a time. I try to

adapt to each community by presenting myself in such a way as to maximize easy categorization. I do not demand any more recognition, of any more of me, from any particular specialized audience to my work than I sense it is able to give. When I am in the art, philosophy, or yoga communities, I mostly just *shut up* about the other ones. This benefits others, by reducing the conceptual anomaly I would otherwise represent; and it benefits me, by allowing me to focus fully on the task at hand.

7. »What are the costs and benefits of being multi-talented?«

I've already described some of the rewards and punishments, both personal and social. But the serious costs came when the recognition I was receiving in one field grew beyond my ability to confine it to that field. Between 1974 and 1987 there was virtually no audience to 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 prospect of being rehabilitated. But I intuitively knew that the fragile balance that had enabled me to pursue my interests in all three fields, without interference from the others, would be destroyed. I was extremely ambivalent. In the end, Jane Farver, the curator, twisted my arm into going ahead with it, by threatening to sue me in court if I backed out. (She now denies she did this, but in fact she did. I remember. I was there.)

Through this recognition I experienced for the first time the connection and affirmation with an actual audience that I had always envisioned with my ideal audience. It's the experience of trying to communicate something and knowing that, even when you are not being fully understood, you are at least being taken seriously and listened to. I used to have to do this for myself, which can lead to a bad case of egomania. So it's very pleasant to have an actual audience helping me out. It's part of what continues to motivate me, not only to do my work, but to present it in public arenas – galleries, museums, books, articles, or public fora.

Another part of that motivation is my awareness of the effect of my success on my parents. They were very proud of me. One of the most profound satisfactions of my life, and their greatest gift to me, is my knowledge that in doing what I most wanted to do and felt best suited to do, I made them happy. I have countless photographs of them in later life, laughing, smiling, hugging me, hugging each other. In earlier photos, taken when I was a bratty, bitchy teenager from hell, they looked anxious and worried, uncertain and apprehensive. But in later ones, they begin to look more and more lighthearted and content. When I look at those photos I am reminded that I lightened their hearts. That reminder lightens mine.

I also take vicarious pleasure in competing on my parents' behalf and winning the recognition and validation I receive from the audience to my work. Since I didn't have siblings, I have never felt comfortable competing with my various professional peer groups. (It took me a long time to figure out that they were nevertheless competing with me. What a revelation! All those years my colleagues were thinking of me as a competitor for professional rewards, I was thinking of them as cute guys.) The groups I am competing with, in all aspects of my work and conduct, are those branches of my family who are passing for white. Every public success I achieve gives me the very great satisfaction of proving to them that you don't have to reject your family and misrepresent who you are in order to make it in this country. After my parents died, I came to see that they, and I, are of a species that is slowly becoming extinct. In one hundred years there will be no families like ours left in the United States, and no one left who is like me and my relatives. They all will have disappeared into the white mainstream. By contrast, on my first visit to Australia I was astounded to discover that sand-colored, green-eyed, narrow-nosed Aboriginals of mixed ancestry had absolutely no interest in passing. Their pride in their Aboriginal ancestry was absolute and public. They made me feel even more ashamed of being an American than I usually do; and bereft of a community I had never imagined it was possible to have. In time, my public visibility will have become a reliquary tribute – to my parents' pride in their parents, in their parents' parents, and in *their* parents' parents – that will be even more incomprehensible to future generations of Americans than it is to this one.

My increased visibility as an artist itself increased my visibility as a philosopher. The philosophy community's discovery of my »other life« as an artist returned its attention to my philosophy research – attention that had lagged considerably after its discovery that I was black. So being a successful artist served to score back some of the professional points I'd lost among some philosophers by being African-American. Among others, it has merely increased my notoriety.

8. »How has being multi-talented affected your life?«

All this has meant an exponential increase in press exposure, invitations, demands, obligations, and paperwork from both fields that continues to this day. These constitute the language of public recognition and appreciation to creative producers in any field. But managing these expressions of appreciation is a full-time job in

itself. If there is no one to take on this job, or to pay its salary, it can consume all of one's time and energy; and this has been true for me. My increased visibility as an artist has been almost entirely due to the critical and intellectual reception of my work among writers, curators, critics, academics, and other artists. Most collectors avoid it, and some museum trustees actually boycott board meetings at which curators attempt to propose it for acquisition. 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 sock 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.

Needless to say, this is impossible. I have collapsed from physical exhaustion at least once every year since 1991. I have completed no new body of art work since 1992. And my progress on the three-volume philosophy project I began in 1982 has virtually ground to a halt just four chapters short of completion. For the last five years I have spent most of my out-of-classroom time answering the phone, filing paperwork, giving outside talks to pay for assistance, and trying to recover my health. I am aware of constantly trespassing the outer limits of my physical ability to function. This, in turn, reduces my ability to keep up the yoga practice that has been so important in helping me to cope with all of it. Now, I don't know where my hot flashes are. But let me assure you that when they finally do arrive, it would be better for everybody if I were at least doing my yoga.

Of course I could reverse this downward spiral by making work that was more palatable to those who are wealthy enough to buy it. But I am not willing to do that. This kind of obstinacy is typical for those blessed with Igbo forebears, as I am on my mother's side. You may recall that the Igbo were the Nigerian tribe whose members committed suicide rather than permitting themselves to be sold into slavery. That's why there are so few remnants of Igbo culture and ancestry to be found among African Americans now. They are also the tribe who chose to be massacred rather than cut a deal with the British in Biafra. Unlike all other African tribes, the Igbo form of government is a parliamentary democracy rather than a monarchy. And unlike most other languages excluding English, Igbo does not distinguish between the familiar and the polite forms of address, so the Igbo are considered rude and disrespectful by other African tribes. The Igbo are known throughout Africa for being daring, ambitious, resourceful and enterprising on the one hand, but proud, bellicose, idealistic, arrogant and uncompromising on the other. Like the Klingons on *Star Trek*, they will gladly die defending their honor. When you're almost as hard-wired for martyrdom as Commander Worf, there's not a whole lot you can do about it.

Since my rehabilitation I have also received many more threats to my privacy and safety than I had simply in virtue of being a black woman of the professional class. Most well known artists are available to the public only through their galleries. They thus have intermediaries to screen public access to them. Because my position as a philosophy professor at Wellesley College is public knowledge, many individuals simply bypass my gallery in an effort to gain direct access to me. They call (or write or Fed Ex or fax) me at my office in the philosophy department to discuss art-related business while I am in conference with students; or leave messages with the department secretary, and sometimes even with my colleagues; or travel to the Wellesley campus and turn up in my classes, appear at my office door during my office hours, or go to the campus police to try to get my home address.

Increased recognition has made it impossible to control my self-presentation to any particular subset of my professional colleagues. For example, my philosophy colleagues have come to know more about my artwork than they learned from me, from having read about it in national newspapers and periodicals or having seen it in major museum shows. Some have gotten confused about the kind of work I do in each field: Since I make art that targets racism and xenophobia, they infer that I must work in this area of research in philosophy as well, which is false (my primary philosophy research is in metaethics and Kant's metaphysics). Or, what is worse, they read into my philosophy research a »subtext« of commentary on race of their own devising, then respond to that rather than to what I actually say. Among others, this new information about me has elicited precisely the reactions I feared: I have lost friends in the field who had defined their relationship to me in nonpolitical or non-cultural terms, and found these new variables too difficult to deal with; or who had assumed I worked in traditional art media, and had no way of coming to grips with the »experimental« forms my art work often takes; or who have felt obligated to take some sort of stand on this other work I do, and have not known quite what stand to take. Still others pretend it doesn't exist, or accord it the status of a private hobby, or attempt actively and explicitly to thwart my success at it.

I have found similarly hostile reactions among some of my art colleagues to my professional status as a philosopher. Many are like those philosophers who assume that their general level of education entitles them to pass judgment on the specialized field of contemporary art with which they are largely unfamiliar, and then react negatively when it does not meet their preconceptions. Similarly, many of my art world colleagues reason that since they are generally well-read and intelligent individuals, and since philosophy is a discursive discipline (rather than technical and symbolic like mathematics or physics), they should be able to grasp a specialized philosophical argument or text simply by reading it carefully. Given the turgid impenetrability of the deconstructionist texts in art theory they are expected to master, this is not an unrealistic expectation. But when they approach my work in philosophy with this attitude and discover that it is not that easy, they often react antagonistically or disparagingly, or simply withdraw. One art critic

who proposed to write a book evaluating my work in both fields – and dismissed my warnings about the special training philosophy requires – eventually took the only face-saving way out of the impasse this created, by picking a fight, terminating our friendship, and thereby the book project. Others who have intuited the importance of delving into my philosophical research in order to fully understand my art work have distanced themselves from me and my work altogether; or have complained that it is over-intellectualized; or have reasoned that it can't be that significant if it can't stand on its own.

9. »Does being multi-talented cause hostility in others? If so, what do you do about it?«

The sheer numbers of people in both fields who have personally demonstrated to me (I watch what people *do* rather than what they *say*) how much they want me to fail 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, and overly devoted to The Three Stooges.

But I can handle them. When I am bed-ridden I read many, many novels, each of which provides me with a consoling narrative in which, to suit the occasion, I may appropriately recast myself as someone else. I also write this essay. (Here I envision myself as Marcel Proust, hard at work on *Remembrance of Things Past*, the coverlet up to my chin, the bedroom curtains drawn, and Mozart's *Jupiter* symphony keening and throbbing obligingly in the background.)

I have a two-volume art-related project coming out soon. This should be an occasion for celebration. Instead I feel anxiety and foreboding. I now know from experience how this event could further damage my work, my health, my safety, and my professional relationships. I anticipate disaster. I spend a lot of time mentally casting about for avenues of escape (perhaps I'll emigrate to Berlin, I fantasize; or look up my maternal Hindu relatives in New Delhi and join an ashram; or in any case give geographical foundation to my alien status), and avoiding the reality that such people are everywhere to be found. It's difficult to imagine going on this way for another thirty-odd years, so I avoid that thought, too.

Instead I remember how much satisfaction I would give these floating patches of pond scum if I were to let them win. Reading biographical accounts of historical figures who triumph over adversity is also very inspiring. 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 unending source of material for your work. 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'd been born two hundred years ago, I would've been a slave. I wouldn't be having these problems at all. So I certainly wouldn't want to seem *ungrateful* or anything.

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 brilliance, and all the soul's energy, cannot combine to produce historical impact without (...) the health and peace required to live into adulthood; sufficient social acceptability to gain a hearing; and life in a century able to understand (...)«.[2] He goes on to quote George Eliot on the pain of brilliant women without opportunity, and to comment on Darwin's good luck in being a rich, upper-class white male who had at his disposal the »pervasive, silent, and apparently frictionless functioning (...) of the Victorian gentleman's world – the clubs, the networks, the mutual favors, the exclusions of some people, with never a word mentioned.«

That world of course has an analogue in contemporary academia. It is the world of high-profile research institutions, whose primary commitment is to research innovation. Its currency is the »mutual favors« – the exchange among all of its members of the assistance, resources, contacts and opportunities – that encourage and facilitate its »frictionless functioning«. I am not now in that world, and no longer hungry for it. As the worlds in which I live multiply, combine and divide – art, philosophy, yoga, African-America, European-America, music, dance, literature, German culture and politics (of course I have *hobbies*, just like everybody else) – it occupies an ever smaller place in the larger one.

Nevertheless I cannot bring myself to condemn unconditionally this contemporary version of the »Victorian gentlemen's club« of »rich, upper-class white male[s]«. I owe 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 »the exclusions of some people« can be carried too far. When I read Budd Hopkins' and John Mack's research into extra-terrestrial abductions,[3] my first reaction was not incredulity or skepticism. It was hurt feelings at being left out. How come the little creatures aren't abducting me? I asked myself. Aren't I interesting enough for them?

2 Stephen Jay Gould, »Why Darwin?«, in: *The New York Review of Books XLIII,* 6 (April 4, 1996), S. 10–14.
3 Budd Hopkins, *Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods,* New York 1987; John Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens,* New York 1994.

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 rabidly conservative on matters of philosophical curriculum and practice. One philosopher friend has attributed my »purist« attitude toward philosophy to my having other outlets for my »creative« and »experimental« tendencies. I think there's some truth to that. It's also true that the activity of doing philosophy functions for me as a sanctuary from the issues and experiences I feel compelled to address in my artwork. Philosophy is the place where I am free to think abstractly, comprehensively, rigorously, and precisely; to indulge my need to conceive the biggest possible picture in the greatest possible depth on the one hand, and split all the hairs there are to split on the other. At the same time, if I could not address the concrete and practical issues of racism and xenophobia in my art work, my many repressive and xenophobic professional experiences in philosophy would have turned me into a much more twisted and seriously damaged person than I already am. My work in art helps me to love philosophy for what it is, and not to demand of it more than it can give.

Similarly, doing philosophy removes any temptation to pump up my artwork with large infusions of theory, theorizing, or philosophizing, and directs those impulses to a context in which I can give them free reign. This frees up my artwork to proceed entirely from intuition. I never try to force it into any preconceived theoretical framework, and resist most of those which others try to impose on it. Although the connections among all three of my central activities become clearer to me every day, my art work has its own logic and structure, which are quite independent of any intellectual meddling on my part. At the same time, if I had not pursued my philosophical and theoretical interests as a professional philosopher, my artwork would not have had the ethical, political, and epistemological focus it has. And if I were not tenured in a completely different field, I would have no independent vantage point from which to make institutionally and politically subversive art without fear of professional retaliation. My work in philosophy has given me a taste for the challenge of making art that addresses the universal issues – integrity, justice, autonomy, freedom – that connect people across cultures and historical periods, independently of the aesthetic idiolect of a particular time and place.

Doing yoga, by contrast, has influenced my work both in art and in philosophy from the beginning, in their strategies as well as their content. In order to confound crude racial stereotypes, my artwork attempts to bring its viewers into what I have elsewhere called »the indexical present«.[4] It deploys certain psychological, theatrical, or literary devices for heightening the viewer's self-awareness of her immediate and present relation to the work, as a unique and singular entity that addresses her directly. This strategy is inspired by a yogic meditation technique known as *samyama*. In philosophy, I develop a Kantian conception of the self as maintaining its internal unity and integrity through the synthesizing activity of rational conceptualization. This preserves ego-coherence on the one hand, but obstructs fine-grained perceptual discrimination and self-knowledge, and reduces tolerance of conceptual anomaly, on the other.[5] My cognitive analysis of ego-coherence, and my evaluation of its benefits and limitations, 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.[6]

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-interested component. 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 anomaly, singularity and individual complexity. My art 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 anomaly is so very difficult to achieve. My work in philosophy offers the consolation of insight when awareness and acceptance are lacking.

4 See Adrian Piper, »Xenophobia and the Indexical Present«, in: *Re-Imaging America : The Arts of Social Change,* ed. Mark O'Brien, Philadelphia 1990; reprinted in *Kontext Kunst*, ed. Peter Weibel, Köln 1994, S. 490 – 498; and in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968 – 1992,* Cambridge 1996).

5 See, for example, Adrian Piper, »Two Conceptions of the Self«, in: *Philosophical Studies 48*, 2 (September 1985), S. 173 – 197, reprinted in: *The Philosopher's Annual VIII* (1985), S. 222 – 246; »Pseudorationality«, in: Amelie O. Rorty and Brian McLaughlin, eds. *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, Los Angeles 1988, S. 297 – 323; and »Two Kinds of Discrimination«, in: *Yale Journal of Criticism 6*, 1 (1993), S. 25 – 74; reprinted in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967 – 1992*, Cambridge 1996).

6 So, for example, in part one of *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, Kant demonstrates a surprisingly detailed knowledge of Hindu cosmology in his passing comment that »in einigen Gegenden von Hindostan der Weltrichter und Zertörer Ruttren (sonst auch Siba oder Siwen genannt) schon als der jetzt machthabende Gott verehrt wird, nachdem der Welterhalter Wischnu, seines Amts, das er vom Weltschöpfer Brahma übernahm, müde, es schon seit Jahrhunderten niedergelegt hat.« Imanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, hg. von Karl Vorländer, Hamburg 1978, S. 17.

When my person or presence itself elicits a too vehemently xenophobic response, I can turn to my artwork as an intermediary for communicating with those who suffer from anomalophobia of the intellect, and to my work in philosophy as an intermediary for communicating with those who suffer from anomalophobia of the senses.

Finally, it is in my own interest to achieve with all such individuals a quality of relationship, a mode of functioning, and a level of awareness that transcend the rigid and provincial conceptualizations of experience that turn me into an anomaly in the first place. My yoga practice enables me to do this. Together, all three activities enable me to know that my experiences have not been for nothing. They are ways of transforming pain into meaning.

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 frontal gaze, discursive or compressed text, and indexical language; in philosophy, the analytic style of argumentation, detailed scrutiny of texts, and Kantian epistemological and metaethical orientation; in yoga, yogic meditation integrated with sequences of physical postures and breathing exercises as the foundation for all other practices. So whatever works pop up during these cycles are never a total surprise.

By »language« in art, I mean not only the language of images and words, but also the language of music, lyrics, and/or the body. Whether spoken, written, formed, or performed, my work usually makes many demands on the viewer to read deeply and complexly in many languages, to pay attention for an extended period, and to compute with not just one, but two and sometimes three or four channels receiving: for writing and/or speech, for musical form and/or content, and for inscribed and/or enacted body language, as well as visual symbology. Most viewers spend approximately seven seconds in front of a work of art, and can »do« a gallery in a few minutes and a museum show in an hour. By contrast, my work typically demands much more than that just to fully take in one piece.

One reason I make these demands, I think, is because of my early training as a painter. When I look at paintings, I not only look from a distance at framing, placement, and composition. Most of my looking is up close to the canvas, reading the brushwork for the history of the artist's aesthetic and strategic decisions: what parts were rubbed out? overpainted? painted quickly, with short, rapid strokes? or slowly, with long smooth gestures? What forms are rendered in painstaking detail, and which ones with broad but suggestive brushstrokes? What is the linear and spatial relation between one area of brushwork and another? and so on. It is only this kind of looking that enables me to see what is there, and it typically takes hours. The first time I went to see Cezanne's »Bathers« at the Museum of Modern Art, I stood in front of it for four hours. »Is everything all right, Miss?« the museum guard asked me solicitously. »Just fine, thank you«, I answered. And then I read some monographs on it, written language that guided me even further into Cezanne's language of gesture, and so came back and looked even longer and saw even more. I do not see many exhibitions, because when I do I know I will look until my head is splitting and my eyeballs are rolling down my cheeks. After the Met's »Painting in Renaissance Sienna« I was so teary and unfocussed that I caught the wrong bus home. By contrast with the intensity of looking and seeing that traditional painting demands, my work is a piece of cake.

Another reason why I feel entitled to demand so much of my audience is my early studies in Medieval and Renaissance musicology, which emphasized listening over the study of scores in order to detect the structure of a composition. This leads me to treat whatever music I am listening to as foreground rather than Satiean furniture music, and similarly with whatever speech I am hearing. I don't ask any 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'd 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 chorale to #110, and the humorous self-cannibalization of #178, which Bach there 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.

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

All three activities have deep roots in childhood experience. I was the only child in an extended family of four adults for whom political argument and analysis (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 exclaiming 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 sculpting in which almost all children naturally engage. And although I did not discover yoga until I was sixteen, it was continuous with earlier experiences and

habits: of spontaneously focussed awareness on the richness, 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-expression results in an impulse control problem: I often express my thoughts, um, forthrightly, at moments when it would be in my best interests to button my lip. Finally, my penchant for probing the appearances in search of deeper realities often leads me to violate conventions of polite discourse or conduct: I ask tactless questions, make hurtful or awkward observations, or pursue an explanation far past the point of comfort for anyone else.

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 impertinent young whippersnapper behaves in these ways toward *me*.) Knowing these things about myself, I work hard to sensitize myself 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 crankier I get, the more difficult it becomes. Since my only resources are the very same traits that got me in 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 three 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 correspondence, a brisk walk, a light but nourishing dinner, and an evening spent reading an edifying volume. Who are these 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 be any more specific than that. (By contrast, emotions for me are reactive, and so are among the experiential 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 realization. Then I start making strategic decisions about how to do that: in what medium they should be realized, what materials or colors should be used, how, if at all, they should be combined with other materials or media, the space 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 inner life and my outer life increases unbearably. The natural connection between idea and action on its behalf is severed, and the activity of doing my work itself recedes to a distant, tantalizing memory. I feel as though I am grieving a death.

Then I turn into a really bad person, and – even worse – an absent-minded one. This is when I start letting a lot of my professional plates drop. I forget deadlines, appointments, meetings, bills, correspondence, and a few more basic things such as brushing my teeth. I become obsessed with the proliferating contents of my mental space, and spend many bedridden or physically immobilized hours mentally envisioning the series of steps by which I would realize them if I could. This is how, in my mind, I have long since completed my three-volume philosophy project, and have made *a great deal* of art in the last four years. To envision those steps in complete detail without being able to carry them out is to be imprisoned, trapped in my body and strangled by circumstance.

When the external obstacles disappear, those natural cycles lurch forward on their own course. They are basically

addictive-compulsive drives that express my fundamental discontent with and optimism about the world, by changing and adding to it. So it is not within my power to control them, and it would be a waste of valuable time and energy even to try. When I am in the midst of a project in any one of my three areas of activity, I am fully absorbed in it, and work at it obsessively. Nothing else exists and everything else – schedules, meals, rest, other people – falls by the wayside. (Any professional plates that remained in the air will come crashing to the ground at this point.) Over the course of a week or a month or longer, I may either focus exclusively on that project, or else – what is more typically the case – alternate my focus between two or even three such projects sequentially, moving back and forth among them as they demand my attention. And sometimes as I'm doing this, connections among them will appear or influence the direction each is taking.

The more time I have to follow this through before new obstacles appear, the more the processes of realizing different works even out. They gradually become less tornado-like – more balanced, moderate, and integrated with other activities (such as brushing my teeth); and I become increasingly even-tempered and charming. Harmony is orchestrating all processes simultaneously, each at its own pace. 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 band of sound, you can hear different, ongoing strands of melody that sometimes combine to form chords, or separate to form counterpoint. You can tune in to one – i.e. turn up its volume, and bring it into the foreground. The others continue, but more quietly, in the background. Then that one may return to the background, while the volume goes up on two 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 partial 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 instrumentation. Then you just relax, and let it carry you wherever it will.