A Pragmatic Response to Real Circumstances

by Anne Focke

September 21, 2005, at ripe family supper, with Anne Focke, director of Grantsmakers in the Arts. Food by Naomi Pomeroy, music by Calvin Johnson.

"Especially together, the words 'executive' and 'director' imply a kind of leadership that hasn't come naturally to me. As a kid the image I had of a 'leader' never felt like me: leaders liked taking the microphone and giving rousing speeches, acting like marshals leading troops or politicians persuading voters. They were fast, articulate, single-minded, clear—fascinating traits, but not strengths of mine." —Anne Focke

The work I was actually doing

In 1975 the Moore College of Art (Philadelphia) invited me to participate in a national traveling exhibition. They asked me to submit two recent drawings of my own and to invite four other artists from the Northwest to do the same. I chose Cheryl Cone, Bill Hoppe, Chris Jonic, and Ken Leback, who were pleased to be asked and comfortable with the deadline. My response was procrastination. This might have grown from a general insecurity about my drawing, but more important, I was well into a process of shifting my understanding of what my artwork was, from objects (early on, indeed drawings, but subsequently prints, soft sculpture, and video) to something much less definable, something that involved, I thought, putting situations together—projects, organizations, focused activities. On top of that, *and/or* (a nonprofit place for artists that I helped found) was barely a year old, and finding time to produce two drawings was not a high

priority. So I contacted the exhibition's curator and told her that while the other four artists were prepared, I was not. I apologized, but told her there would be just eight pieces from the Northwest.

Not so quick, I found. Without my submissions, the other Northwest pieces could not be included; the premise of the show was "artists choosing artists," and the work of the artist/chooser was required. I couldn't disappoint the other four. So, instead of pretending an interest in working with charcoal or video again, I took the tools I used most at the time, a ballpoint pen and a typewriter (no personal computers then), and attempted to "draw," somehow, the work I was actually doing. Here's the result:

PATTERNS

a making possible
the patterns-I-make/work-I-do is functional like a
container is functional
but I know that the patterns I make are not neutral—not simply
a container for something else
a container a form-er
"patterns" somehow a useful word … designs, forms, scores

PATTERNS I make (designs) are not abstract—are patterns of
people/artists, work, concerns, activities, energies
they are structures for the people/energies/work to use, to happen in,
to be supported by—encouraged by …
Important for me to find ways to make sure the people/art/work/
energy that moves through, that happens in "my" patterns, retains
its own integrity—doesn't become "mine"

BUT, the patterns I make have their own characteristics, are
distinctly mine and not anyone else's
the forms are large, moving, alive
are between, but include people/events/ideas
visual sense (feel) of forms/patterns: soft edges, slow motion (though
containers of rapid, even frantic, activity), porous
I fear the pattern becoming rigid, clearly defined, brittle-sharp
the forms are multiple, diverse … balanced multiple-y, a balance not
simply between two
I wish that the form of this "drawing" could resemble, relate to the
form of the work it refers to

… from *and/or sketch/drawing*,
produced for North, East, West, South and Middle,
an exhibition of contemporary American drawings

I have only vague memories of the actual "drawings" themselves, and I never saw the exhibition. (It didn't come to Seattle and travel wasn't really an option then.) The pieces were lost or damaged somewhere along the tour, and I never got them back. The "patterns" excerpt was incorporated into another piece—*Making a Habit*, 1976—and was probably based on drafts and fragments, maybe carbon copies (even copy machines were not easy to come by). The exhibition catalog includes an image of one of the drawings. At least it had a kind of graphic grace on the wall. Most of the pieces in the show used drawing materials you might expect—ink, charcoal, pencil, crayon—and the catalog essay referred to a "recentering" of drawing. I imagined the disappearance of the pieces as some kind of retribution, not directed by anyone in particular, more by fate or the gods of "real art."

The idea of "patterns" has intersected, at one time or another over the years, with my thoughts about "form," both in the sense of organizational structure and in terms of creative forms. In neither case have I been interested in finding a set form that I could apply to my work. Rather I've learned about the simple value of a form and, by extension, the value of a specific form I might discover or make up for a specific instance of the work I do. I like what Wendell Berry says about form in his essay "Poetry and Marriage":

> When understood seriously enough, a form is a way of accepting and of living within the limits of creaturely life. We live only one life, and die only one death.
>
> A set form can be used to summon into a poem, or into a life, its unforeseen belongings, and thus is not rigid but freeing—an invocation to unknown possibility.
>
> Properly used, a verse form, like a marriage, creates impasses, which the will and present understanding can solve only arbitrarily and superficially. These halts and difficulties do not ask for immediate remedy; we fail them by making emergencies of them … They are, perhaps, the true occasions of the poem: occasions for surpassing what we know or have reason to expect.

Putting things together

As long as I can remember I've wanted to get things organized. As a kid I tried to organize my brothers (I have five), but they simply paid no attention. And in high school I put together a group of baton-twirling marching majorettes for a high school that didn't even have a band. I have no memory of how I talked anyone into it, but the five of us marched in patterns at halftime during our school's football

games. I wasn't the best twirler, but I made sure we had practices, recorded marching music, outfits, and "routines."

The inclination to put things together stayed with me. I arrived in Seattle in 1965 and graduated from the University of Washington in 1967, one of two graduates in its brand-new art history program (David Mendoza was the other). I've been poking around Seattle's art world for almost forty years. For the first of those four decades I functioned with "artist" as much of my public identity, though I gradually shifted my energy into making opportunities for the art to happen, to be real, and to have meaning in the world. Only rarely have the results fit the conventional picture of a nonprofit arts institution, that is, a producing or presenting organization (a theater, museum, dance company). From a legal point of view, the work has taken many different forms—nonprofit, sole-proprietorship, for-profit corporation, an arm of another organization, or informal activities with no legally defined structure (but with a definite organizational order).

While most nonprofit bylaws assume an organizational life span that is "in perpetuity," long-lasting structures are not the rule with my work. Results have sometimes been short-term or one-shot by design, sometimes short-term but not by design (they were meant to last but didn't get off the ground). Sometimes I got one started and quickly passed it to others. One I closed down because, after a decade, it seemed time. And, indeed, a few are still around after twenty years.

Very often the work has been "made" in contexts other than the nonprofit art world—in public places, as groundwork for a new residence for people living with AIDS, through the studios of a television station, as part of international athletic games, using the Internet (back when almost no one knew what it was), and with the mechanisms of city government. Even when the form was a nonprofit corporation, the result didn't necessarily look like something familiar—*and/or* came as close as any to following the nonprofit model—and, even then, you have to consider its name.

and/or, enough structure and enough openness

In the early seventies a group of artist friends took the name "Seattle Souvenir Service" and attached it to various art projects: actions at art festivals, little books, a growing accumulation of Space Needle memorabilia—plates, ashtrays, pennants, records. It was a very unstructured and convenient alias, which we used sometimes individually, more often as a group.

At some point, for reasons that escape me at the moment, I wanted a more formal structure and my mind was set on a nonprofit organization. I imagined and outlined the cluster of activities the new organization might encompass. First, we'd have a space—for

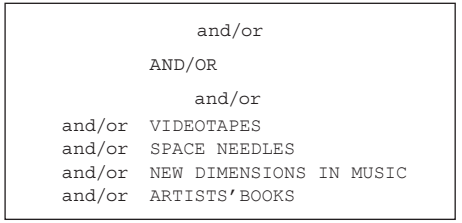
videotape and film showings, performances (experimental music, dance, and theater; electronic music, video performances, poetry readings), exhibitions (work not being shown elsewhere, conceptual and correspondence work, "environmental" work, or what we'd now call "installations," the Space Needle collection), special events for women, and workshops, discussions, and parties. Second, we'd have an art services business including production and exhibition services, management advice for organizations (think of it!), and a workshop space that I already had under lease (electronic music, carpentry, storage). And we'd have equipment—video, music, film, chairs.

After laying out the big picture, I was told by Bob Kaplan, an attorney who has given advice to many artists over the years, that all this wouldn't fit into one legal container; some activities could function under a nonprofit umbrella, but others, he said—the art services in particular—were commercial, profit-making activities. I couldn't have both. He played a good devil's advocate role on behalf of a profit-making structure, but I went with the nonprofit anyway. Setting up a legal entity felt much like a game, at least at the beginning. We were playing at being "directors."

After finding a space, I convinced my dad (who with mom had promised a loan, of equal size no doubt, to each of his children) that starting this place was as good a use of a loan as buying a home (something I didn't own then, indeed only came to own at age fifty-three). He gave me about $1,500 to $2,000 up front for labor and

materials to remodel the space, and then a monthly amount of $200 for the first year, an amount he cut back incrementally each month after that, to zero at the end of the second year—probably a total of $5,000. Knowing I had that support, I then convinced the city to let me quit half of my full-time job with the two-year-old arts commission, giving me time for the new venture.

Although pretty much the same people were involved, we decided that the "Seattle Souvenir Service" should remain loose, unconstrained by any legal structure. So the new place needed a name. Wanting it to stay open to possibilities, I settled on *and/or*. A typewritten doodle at the time put it like this:



and/or opened on April 21, 1974, the Space Needle's birthday.

Two years later, we held a staff show (there were five or six of us at that point) to let our audience see more about who made decisions and ran the place. I contributed *Making a Habit*, a daily public writing project, posting one new page every day. Since I continued to think

about the patterns I made through *and/or*, one day I wrote:

> Somehow it's fairly easy to see the initial setting up of *and/or* as an artwork—creating, making the space, making an organization where there wasn't one before, pulling ideas together that eventually became the programs, the general definition. It's more difficult to describe the ongoing of it as an artwork … One of the greatest challenges is working with an ongoing form; the "trick" is not to simply have an organization that perpetuates itself, but to have one with life, challenges, risks, and new ideas—that also manages to have a life span.
>
> I'm often involved in finding a very tricky, delicate balance between giving enough structure, stability/credibility to assure a continued existence, and giving enough openness, flexibility, free-ness to allow for real growth, surprise, significant work and change.
>
> One concern was how to make a situation, a pattern, that didn't predetermine the results any more than necessary—giving the participants (artists) the greatest possible chance to develop their own ideas … At the same time I realized that no matter what I did I wouldn't create a neutral or totally "objective" pattern even if I wanted to (which I often thought I did).

By the end of its third year, *and/or* had also become the de facto office for many of the "art services" I'd imagined as part of it at the beginning. Rolon Bert Garner was the central figure in this fairly informal business, an *and/or* staff member and my partner at the time. A big push in those days (circa 1976) was "profit-making for nonprofits." I couldn't imagine *and/or* with a bookstore or a café (ventures being tried by some colleagues around the country), but here, right in our laps, was an activity that I knew should be profit-making. So, although constraints set by legal forms caused the services to be excluded from the organization at the start, I went back to Kaplan for help establishing a business we named Artech, a fine-arts handling company with services including exhibition design, installation, art storage, moving, and shipping. It was established as a for-profit corporation, wholly owned by *and/or*.

My notes at the time show just how little I actually understood what I was doing when we started. It proves, I suppose, that you can go a long way with a vision of what's possible, a little knowledge and a willingness to learn, a big dose of naiveté, lots of energy, and the involvement of good people who actually do have knowledge you need. Like *and/or*, Artech's first financing was a loan (from a bank this time), which was assumed by the corporation when its employees (artists almost all) purchased it from *and/or* three years later. While I wonder now at the business logic, *and/or* made a small profit on the sale, and Artech has continued through ups and downs until today.

Good Night and/or A Wake

In 1978, the first gathering of "alternative visual arts organizations" took place in Santa Monica, California, attended by fifty-seven organizations, including *and/or* and the Portland Center for the Visual Arts. I was asked to contribute an essay for an accompanying publication and spoke in advance with many of the artist organizers of other spaces. I wanted to find out what organizational patterns we had developed as "new arts spaces"—how we functioned and what shapes we had taken. I was also interested in the ways our organizations had changed.

An overriding memory from the conversations, one that didn't get into my essay, was of terrific disappointment. I took on writing the essay because I thought it would give me a chance to talk with other artists who were thinking about the patterns of their organizational work. I was surprised that I didn't find anyone who thought about making the organization as an extension of their artmaking. Maybe I didn't ask the right questions. They often knew that being artists themselves was important to the work, but in most cases they also seemed to feel that the organizational work took them away from their art, and many of them longed to get back to it. Many worried about their spaces becoming institutions (though some explicitly sought that), while it seemed to me that their organizations followed existing organizational models without thinking much about it. Now, I find it curious that I didn't write about my dismay. Perhaps I didn't quite

know how to bring it up or, as likely, was insecure about being so alone in my interest. Here is part of what I wrote to my colleagues:

> As our prestige and reputations increase, as we increasingly have something to lose, it could become harder to take risks, to risk failure, to risk not living up to our own standards. Risks were not difficult when we were fairly invisible. I cannot believe that we've learned enough that risks are no longer necessary. We also need to remain fluid and flexible, to anticipate and be ready for change in ourselves, in the questions we answer, in the artists and work we support.
>
> An ability to change seems a crucial part of any organizational pattern, especially a "new" one. It also seems important to find out how our structures have changed over their three- to six-year lives. We should ask what we face now that we did not face initially, how each of our organizations deals with becoming an institution itself, and how we can retain the kind of energy and vitality that got us started.

In 1983, *and/or* received one of the biggest grants that the National Endowment for the Arts offered to smaller organizations, an Advancement Grant. This program aimed to help organizations with strong artistic programs become stronger organizationally (management, finance, fundraising, etc.). These days it would be called a "capacity-building" grant (look that up on the Jargon Files).

The award involved a year's work with a consultant, the development of a multiyear plan, and then a sizable grant (approximately $25,000) in each of the following three years.

After a failed effort to buy the building that housed *and/or*, I had one of those all-of-a-sudden moments when a new option opens up. Usually my course of action moves along incrementally, listening, making small changes, being persistent, bringing a good idea back, learning from someone else, helping the direction shift—a little like following a winding path. But once in a while a whole picture comes to mind in a flash, and then the challenge becomes understanding its implications and finding ways to act on it. I decided to close *and/or*. Something flipped over, and closing down became the way to advance.

The idea came in summer 1984, and we celebrated with a big party in October that same year—"Good Night and/or A Wake." I managed to convince the NEA that we should keep the Advancement Grant and use it to support our existing program divisions so they could develop as independent organizations.

In one of the many pages of notes I wrote to myself and others to understand why this was a good idea and what it meant, I gave a quick historical view: "*and/or* started as an artistic entity, initiating programs and seeing itself as a unified whole. Then some of its programs began to develop stronger identities and a distinction began to be made between '*and/or* core' and program divisions (exhibitions, music, library, media arts, a small grants program)." The decision to "end *and/or*" meant closing down the core, not the divisions. I recommended to the board that this be done very publicly because that would:

- allow *and/or* to end, to exist in a particular time period, and to not continue in the vague, unclear way it does now;
- free divisions to separate themselves from the history;
- be a good excuse for a party.

Reading those documents makes me conscious of how differently people can view the same events. I respect what's in all those notes as a slice of the history, though the history is bigger than that. Much tension ran through *and/or* at the time; it was loaded with internal power dynamics. As an organization, its time had run out; contention and power plays seemed stronger than vision and commitment. "In many ways," I wrote at one point, "it feels much healthier to put energy into the offshoots, the activities with more focused definition, than to spend a lot of energy trying to preserve or to breathe new energy into the original shell."

A couple of years ago there was a little burst of local interest in the death of organizations. I was invited to participate in several public conversations—"When Things Die" and "Life and Death." I became the celebrant of dying. An announcement for one such discussion outlined the three stages of death: "denial, anger, acceptance." For

my part, I amended it to add "chaos, release, rejuvenation." About *and/or* I observed:

- *and/or* was not built to last, profoundly not.
- Its energy went to doing, not to building a lasting structure.
- In the end, it seeded, divided, dissolved its center.
- It was allowed to become "myth," to have a beginning and an end.

Used by many people

Even though it was much smaller than the other divisions, the program of direct grants to artists was slated to continue even after *and/or*'s core closed. The resulting two $5,000 allocations, in 1985 and 1986, became seed money that allowed me to contract with Marschel Paul, gather together a steering committee, raise additional money, talk David Mendoza into joining me as codirector, and kick off the arts granting organization now known as Artist Trust. By 1986 I'd handed it over to David and its new board (led by Thatcher Bailey).

From the start I knew that I didn't want to run Artist Trust (I probably wasn't ready for that kind of organizational role again so soon). I could envision it, its potential and the need for it, but I knew that other people had to believe in it and know it was theirs (not

just mine). In a sense, they had to "own" it. Their skills, knowledge, resources, and imagination were essential just to get it off the ground, but their ownership was also necessary to let me leave.

Another page from *Making a Habit* included this:

> I want a structure that can be used by many people, where they each have control over what they're doing, over their work. If I'm identified as the "leader," if decisions seem always to be *my* decisions, then other people might not want to be involved. Explaining why he didn't want to work at *and/or*, an artist friend once told me that he felt *and/or* was my artwork; he had to focus on his own and didn't want to spend time simply helping me with mine. His attitude epitomized my fear. Even writing and posting this makes me nervous. I risk discovering how much control I actually have, risk admitting it and scaring someone else away.

It could be that at *and/or* the control each staff member had over his or her work encouraged the increasing independence of the program divisions. But, because authority and control weren't clearly defined (perhaps I just didn't know what I wanted or how to get there), it probably also fostered distress about where power actually lay.

Early planning materials for Artist Trust tell a little story of people's involvement. I lose track of whose words I'm reading as I review them. The words start out being recognizably mine, but then

the documents begin to contain the words and phrases of others. In early meetings, I listened to and picked up other people's language—they often had nice insights and turns of phrase that simply wouldn't have occurred to me. I began including their words in the documents. Then I began asking committee members to tackle writing a piece of it; I remember them working on the mission statement in particular. I sensed that this was also a point when some of them began to make the organization their own. As I read the materials now, it's not clear when I stopped being the principal "author" of Artist Trust. By the time I left, the words were good *and* inspiring, and no longer mine. I could go.

None in isolation

For fifteen years after *and/or* closed I worked as a freelancer, a free agent. I could never figure out what to put on my business card, so it just included my name and address. It was hard for me to say "consultant," though I sometimes did. The word sounded so "hit-and-run," coming in to advise and then leaving, not hunkering down and really making something work in the world. It might have been the times, or my early experience with consultants.

Artist Trust was only one of many ideas and projects I explored through that period. I recently found a file folder labeled "Future

work/ideas/projects (1989)." It held to-do lists suggesting that I might (among other things): organize a seminar/forum on artists and economic development; develop an "artist news service" using computer communications; work to bring artists into a new housing project for people living with AIDS; start a little "toast & coffee" shop; bring people together to talk about Seattle's regional/international connections with Vancouver; help a couple of artist friends figure out how their work might make money; put together a discussion series in conjunction with a larger civic project—The New Pacific; work with the city of Bremerton to turn empty downtown buildings into places for artists; develop a "(new) music symposium" based locally and "not for institutions but for listeners." I was also toying with a job at the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Los Angeles and with a position as coordinator of a national new music festival to be held in Texas that year. *And* I wanted "research time." There's more, but this is probably a decent snapshot of a year at that point

The number of ideas that never got any further than my notepad is amazing to me now. My projects lived and died, proceeded or not, a little like "natural selection" in the plant and animal world, as I understand it from a quick scan of Stephen Jay Gould's *Full House*. Because some things (specific animals, specific plants, or, in my case, specific projects) were successful, that is, they survived, we tend to assume they were the strongest, the best of the bunch, the ones nature *intended* to succeed—the modern tiger, or human beings, or Artist

Trust. In fact, what both *Full House* and my old notes prove is that there were many branches, many beginnings, many experiments that may have been just as interesting, just as full of potential, but that didn't move forward for reasons as much of chance (flood, drought, or grant rejection) as of merit or strength. The notes remind me of the many branches I followed. When my energy and interest connected with or intersected with the energy and interest of others, something could happen. 1985 and 1986 weren't much different from 1989. I had one foot firmly at Artist Trust, but I was also out, in this meeting or that, here and in other parts of the country, talking with these people or those, attending events of various kinds. Artist Trust grew as much from this jumbled energy and interaction as it did from careful study and single-mindedness.

One thing often led to another. The same interest that took me to and through Artist Trust led me to propose and organize a national conference, "Creative Support for Creative Artists," sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts. The conference brought to Orcas Island almost two hundred people (artists, administrators of artist spaces and services, and public and private funders) from across the country for four days of talking, arguing, imagining, and performing together. Afterward many of us were left longing for more talk, more communication. But a newsletter wouldn't do. I gave myself a little retreat after the conference and dreamed up "an artist news service," or wire service—eventually, "Arts Wire." The notion of wire services

was intriguing, and in 1989 the world of computer communications was full of big ideas and political passion. I got myself to a few conferences and meetings (in San Francisco, Washington DC, and elsewhere), learning what people in other fields and other parts of the country were doing with the new information and communication technologies. I observed at the time, "My tendency is to leap right into action—more intuitively than rationally."

Imagining and making proposals for Arts Wire was part of a life of initiating conversations and pursuing projects. Arts Wire was one that "took." I followed energy, pushed ideas forward, found a combination of people and ideas and just enough resources to cover costs—my own and gradually those of a small staff scattered around the country. To try to learn what makes projects successful by picking one and working backward from what it is now to its beginning is a little misleading and is very different from immersing oneself in those times and seeing where that idea fit among all the forces, energies, and people bubbling away. All fed an energy that was like fertilizer. Some took root, for a moment or for longer. None grew in isolation.

A pragmatic response to real circumstances

Even when it "took," some of the work was short-term or temporary by design, some could be measured in years, and some laid groundwork

that other people could take forward over the long haul. I usually didn't set out to do something temporary, any more than I set out to make something permanent. I don't start that way; instead, my action is a pragmatic response to real circumstances, one that is by nature one of a kind. Each has a cycle, a beginning and an end. Some stay, some go.

On a conscious level, at least, I avoid making formulas based on one experience to use in the next. This might be occasioned, I suppose, as much by bad memory as by conscious values, since I've seldom been able to remember the rules.

The reason for something—its purpose, its content—has been what draws me in, is what makes me need to figure out how to move it ahead. If the reason is important enough, then prescribed forms have to be set aside. It is no longer an exercise. When something's real it is unpredictable, requires attention in the moment, imagination and opportunism right then and there. Each specific example from my own past seems to have come together differently. Having varied tools and experiences under my belt can be helpful, but if I start paying more attention to a preexisting form than to the living situation, I can lose focus and lose the real opportunity the specific situation in front of me offers.

Not only have I lacked a clear description to put on my business card, I've never had promotional materials or a business plan. For the most part, I didn't seek or compete for work that was advertised or

available. Twice I remember applying for a public art planning job, but the team I put together didn't get it either time. A few times other people invited me to team up with them on a design or planning project proposal—only once or twice successfully. Occasionally I was sought out, sometimes I was in the right place at the right time, but more often I made up whatever it was or developed the next thing from the last.

My financial life was never very secure, though I was gradually becoming the primary breadwinner at home. I puzzled about my financial circumstances and wondered about the financial value of the work. It seemed that often the real work (figuring out how to get from here to there) had to be done before anyone knew they needed it, had to be done to make it clear there was something worth paying for. But the money came for the next step, not the first. A kind of scrappiness was somehow important, but I couldn't believe I had to live quite so close to the edge. The work felt valuable but not well accounted for in the economy, like the work of artists and mothers.

You could call it "leadership," but it's probably my insecurities

Six years ago, I got a job as executive director of an organization called Grantmakers in the Arts (GIA). I became the first staff person for this national membership association of grant-giving organizations.

Especially together, the words "executive" and "director" imply a kind of leadership that hasn't come naturally to me. As a kid the image I had of a "leader" never felt like me: leaders liked taking the microphone and giving rousing speeches, acting like marshals leading troops or politicians persuading voters. They were fast, articulate, single-minded, clear—fascinating traits, but not strengths of mine. Concepts I associated with "leadership"—control, power, authority—made me uncomfortable.

Early on I was interested in whether power and control could be absorbed by a larger group. Being more absorbed in the larger fabric, I thought, might help "steering" become one function among many, rather than a single, concentrated, more important and isolated position. Since then I've learned that leadership has many meanings and that many styles can be effective. Many of these are studied and taught, and too often codified. Leaders can be task-oriented, people-oriented, direct or indirect. They can be the autocrat, democrat, diplomat, advocate; the idealist, futurist, innovator, mentor, partner, star—and many others depending on who you're listening to. No doubt, some of these set forms have something to teach me.

Working with GIA pushes me to articulate some of these modes. In my first few months, I sent the board a memo about the kind of organization I hoped GIA would become. Here are some traits I described:

• It reflects the multifaceted makeup of its membership and their constituents. In its own way, it responds to Clifford Geertz's view of a whole made of "dispersed entanglements," or

… the overlapping of differing threads, entwined, one taking up where another breaks off, all of them posed in effective tensions with one another to form a composite body, a body locally disparate, globally integral.

• Its lines of authority operate horizontally rather than strictly from top to bottom. It is collaborative at its core, reflected in shared power between staff and board.

• It moves lightly. It can change and will change. It avoids codifying or homogenizing its programs. It observes a few rules of thumb from James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State:* take small steps, favor reversibility, plan on surprises and on human inventiveness.

• Its board and staff could be judged by its members to have a style of leadership reflected in this quote from Lao-tzu (604–531 BC):

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise him… But of a good leader who talks little when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, "We did it ourselves."

An inclination to get things done by listening weaves through much of what I do. You could call it "leadership," but it's probably also strongly related to my insecurities. An internal confidence in what I do and how I do it—making ideas real, listening and tying together things I hear—can easily be undermined by insecurity when facing other people. On the spot, it's hard to own up to and articulate my methods and ideas, especially if I think there might be argument or if the ideas aren't simple and easy to relate to. A respect for the person who stands out or up, who insists, who takes the microphone, may feed my insecurity, since I believe that, despite myself, I should be able to act like that. Instead, I tend to slide into things, to get things done without explicit invitation or approval from anyone else. In practice, this can be very effective, because others have to be invested in whatever it is—it has to actually work. It evolves slowly, in small, working increments.

I often help move a group along (to and through action) by listening carefully, learning from what I hear, identifying individuals who articulate some key idea well, and then emphasizing their words or helping them take a position as spokesperson. This is not neutral on my part. Maybe it's a kind of editing—for content, persuasiveness, and style. And it's often in lieu of being an articulate spokesperson myself. On the one hand, this can be very effective; on the other, it may just reflect a lack of courage.

Risk and drift

Resolution is probably illusory anyway. Around the same time I took the job at GIA, Melanie Beene, a friend who has been in and out of grantmaking herself, wrote an essay, "No Slow Fix, Either." "Quantum physics has revealed that there is no such thing as stability," she wrote. "Everything is in motion. The nature of reality is constant change. Nothing will ever be fixed, get fixed, or stay fixed for longer than a moment. There is no quick fix, and no slow fix, either … If you want to be 'stable,' move to another planet. It is not the nature of reality here." She suggested "dynamic adaptability" as a replacement. "On an organizational level, it is the ongoing readiness to respond to a dynamic environment, and acknowledges that both the environment and the organization are in motion and are simultaneously acting on and being acted on by each other."

Now—today—seems to be a moment when my environment and my work are giving me lots of opportunities to explain where I've been, what I'm doing now, and how I want to be working in the future. In the past six months, there have been several public occasions to look back on my place in Seattle. On the job, there are assessments right and left—a consideration of my leadership style, a full-staff team-building exercise with questionnaires and consultations, the engagement of an executive coach, conversations with "mentors," and

a board governance assessment. This essay itself explores ribbonlike trails winding through my past. I'm thinking about how to take advantage of being so completely diagnosed—washed, scrubbed, rinsed, and polished up.

This time around, the organization I run is stronger and tougher than most in my past; it's not nearly time for it to become myth. I feel healthier and more conscious than I did ten years ago—my dreams and imagination are lively, and as usual aren't aimed in only one direction; I'm definitely not done yet. Recently, I've imagined that the ages when risk might be easiest would be through our twenties and again in our sixties, before we have a lot to lose and after much work is behind us. In fact, Gene Cohen (MD and PH.D with a specialty in aging) says that as people move into their sixties, "they often feel free to do something they have never done before. It's a time when people begin to hear an inner voice that says, 'if not now, when?' These are powerful feelings of liberation … a counterpoint to adolescence, but with a formed sense of identity." I have no idea whether this applies to me—or, if it does, maybe "liberation" will simply be a quiet, barely audible release of insecurity and a willingness to own up to my own patterns.

Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2004), recasts this private shift as a part of something much broader:

> In important ways, little ripples of inspired activism around the United States parallel aspects of the global justice movement and the Zapatistas. All three share an improvisational, collaborative, creative process that is in profound ways anti-ideological, if ideology means ironclad preconceptions about who's an ally and how to make a better future. There's an openheartedness, a hopefulness, and a willingness to change and to trust. Cornel West came up with the idea of the jazz freedom fighter and defined jazz "not so much as a term for a musical art form but for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid and flexible disposition toward reality suspicious of "either/or" viewpoints.

I take heart from that. And Jane Jacobs, twenty years earlier in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life*, articulated a similarly widespread practice that she called "drift," a kind of work defined not by "practical utility," but by play, curiosity, and aesthetic investigation. Jacobs described an "aesthetics of drift" and said that successful economic development had to be open-ended and make itself up as it goes along. Her words gave me new ways to understand artists' work and new ways to imagine their place in the world. Now, I see that much of it also corresponds with patterns that matter in my own life. Here is Jacobs (and the ellipsis is hers):

We might call development an improvisational drift into unprecedented kinds of work that carry unprecedented problems, then drifting into improvised solutions, which carry further unprecedented work carrying unprecedented problems…