

The Gift -- Not for Art's Sake...

by François Morelli

The Gift -- Not for Art's Sake was a two-month, collaborative project between artist François Morelli and host organization Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts (DCCA) in Wilmington, Delaware. Through the project, which ran from October 1 through November 26, 1990, Morelli investigated the limits of what art is, and explored the uses of art as a catalyst for bringing people together. The project included a four-week residency by Morelli followed by a month-long exhibition at DCCA.

In the first part of the project, Morelli designed identical sets of large sculptures and companion objects, or "gifts," which he then delivered to different groups of people throughout Delaware. These participating groups ranged from school children to senior citizens, and from executives to the homeless.

During a performance/event, Morelli discussed the objects as he unpacked them and arranged them in the spaces provided by the groups. Recipients were encouraged to participate by helping to arrange, rearrange, and add to the installation; they were told that they may include written comments, additional objects, and participate in the event via discussions or readings. The installations remained with the groups for two weeks, during which time Morelli encouraged them to continue their interaction with the objects.

In my attempt to reach out to and engage somewhat culturally disenfranchised groups of people, I had felt it imperative to remove myself from the usual gallery/studio context and pursue installation activities at different sites. Together with the DCCA, I identified eight different sites throughout Delaware. These were: the Mary Campbell Center (serving individuals with disabilities); the Delaware Art Museum; the Cokesbury Village (a retirement facility); the Dupont Experimental Station; the Dover Art League; the Newark Girls Club; Casa San Francisco (a homeless shelter, supplying food and limited lodging); and the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington. DCCA staff and I chose these sites on the basis of their cultural and social diversity.

Next, eight identical sets of objects or "gifts" were delivered to each of the sites. On the day that I delivered them, I met with group members to discuss the objects and to encourage them to interact with and alter them by adding their own creations as well as rearranging the given components.

The initial ensemble of objects consisted of: one large votive figure which, when opened, contained six bowls and cutlery; a small rattle-shaped figure (made of manila tags which were stamped with tree images and attached to a wire armature); one large, red-ink line print of an uprooted tree; several xeroxed images of hands and a xeroxed book of collages in which participants could write comments. The underlying themes of the objects were nature and ecology, the notion of communal interdependencies, celebration as an important cultural activity, and finally the dichotomy between art and life.

Challenging the usual notions of art-sanctioned environments (i.e., galleries and museums), the actual sites varied: they ranged from a corporate cafeteria serving over four thousand people to a multi-purpose room in a homeless shelter barely seating fifty. All of the locations were communal, yet few had ever exhibited art, nor were they equipped to stage an interactive event of this type.

In all cases, it was evident that the work, because of its size and presence,



Morelli prepares "rattle" figure. Photo by Della L. Johnson.

assigned it a science fiction or fairy tale-type history born of free association, populated by media figures involved in 21st century, extra-terrestrial voyages.

The congregation of the First Unitarian Church was able to bring strong beliefs to the installation, drawing parallels between their own open doctrines and rituals and the concepts they felt were represented by the objects. Their identification with the concepts underlying the installation could be felt through the celebratory tone of the performance/event and their additions to the installation, as well as through the directness of their written comments. Personified as a living being, the figure was accepted as a vital force within the collective, representing the locus of common goals and shared ideals.

The members of the Dupont Experimental Station proved insightful in their ability and desire to integrate science (i.e., pure research) and art. Their inquisitive and analytical minds were very flexible and intuitive in interpreting the performance, ritualized gestures, and symbols, extending metaphors well beyond Western logic to include Eastern philosophy, indigenous American cultures and esoteric religious and scientific concepts.

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After two weeks, Morelli returned to retrieve the installations and discuss what had happened within each group. He then combined all the objects from the various groups into a single installation at DCCA, where it remained on display for the month of November.

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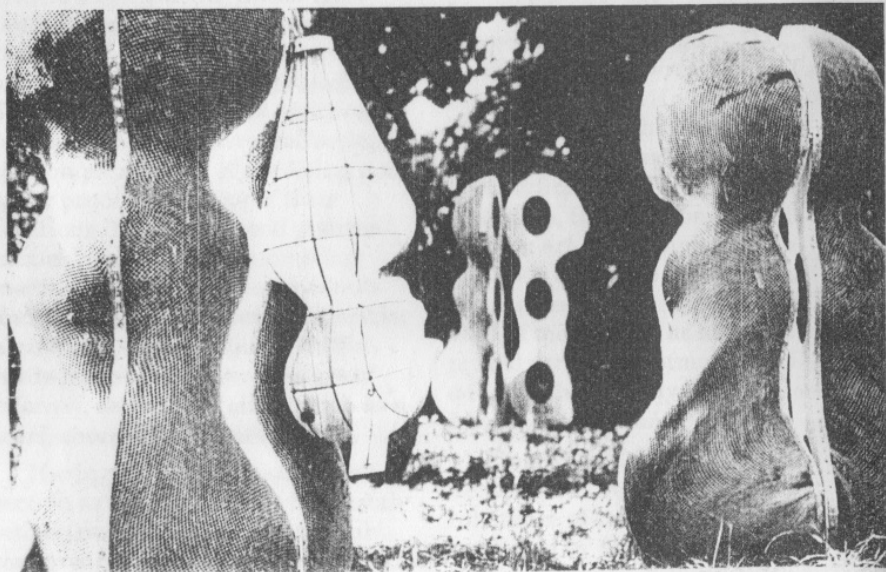
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In all cases, it was evident that the work, because of its size and presence, would somehow have to be contended with, and to some degree integrated into, the daily routine of the group. A surreal sense permeated all of the spaces, with the installations' incongruity subtly arresting the normal flow of time. It seemed, in the end, that the objects served as rallying points for encounters between people, and that the figure became a symbolic vessel or vehicle gathering experiences, collecting memory, and recording traces of these interactions. As if a witness to its surroundings and the events around it, the installation took on a familiar identity over time. This became clear

when it left the groups, as several of the participants expressed sadness at seeing it leave.

The children from the Newark Girls Club, while the most spontaneous of all the participants, were far from "innocents." Physically engaging the objects, the girls lacked the usual cultural inhibitions associated with viewing art. Understanding it as a toy, they took possession of the figure, freely transforming it and imaginatively developing an extraordinary written and drawn narrative, tracing its origins and history. They

While preparing figures at outdoor studio, Highland Park, N.J. Photo by Susan Bowman.



Morelli prepares "rattle" figure. Photo by Della L. Johnson.

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contributed to the piece and the comments they made, can be explained by the institutionalized nature of their enterprise and the sheer magnitude of the plant and the reception area where the installation was placed. For example, one individual took it upon him/herself to record daily changes to the installation using a polaroid camera, producing a fifteen-image sequential time document that was then added to the installation. Another individual brought in ceramic molds of hands or gloves performing the motions of a "cat's cradle" that had been used in laboratory tests for new product designs.

..A conceptual installation yields community involvement

The Dover Art League, located in the city of Dover but still removed from other major art centers, demonstrated the realities of an isolated yet extremely committed art community. Having included my work in a group show of their own work, the project was less of an isolated event and more an integrated part of a larger community of cultural activities. The interaction of the group showed an honest and equal exchange of ideas and information among its participants, suggesting a sense of solidarity amongst artists who were

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able to allow individual differences and celebrate personal vision. A number of their questions dealt with the intentions and purpose of my endeavors as well as the logistics of the technical processes and skills involved in its fabrication.

I quickly realized that my initial impressions of the frailty of the senior citizens at the Cokesbury Village retirement home was largely the result of my own projections and stereotyping. However, this experience was unquestionably the most

somewhat limited the "subversive" potential of the piece in terms of its questioning the function and value of modern art. However, it did accomplish reinforcing the ludic and playful qualities of the project by emphasizing the creative process. It did this by encouraging constant transformation and mutation of the objects: different groups, mainly children, were allowed to add to and change the installation upon visiting the museum at different times. It also encouraged a variety of artistic and aesthetic responses as manifested in numerous additions to the installation such as sculpture, painting, masks, and amulets.

The severity of the conditions surrounding Casa San Francisco (a facility serving the homeless and other community needs in a rural district of south Delaware) and the basic needs and demands being met by staff, made me both question and doubt the relevance of my presence. As an educated white male, I feared my language and intentions would seem largely abstract, lacking pertinent meaning or content. I, with my work, had become the "other," foreign and alien to conditions I could not begin to understand and which I wished not to trivialize.

To this day, their response remains an enigma in my mind with their gifts of a woman's robe, slippers, showercap, soap, toothbrush, perfume, towel and a copy of Better Homes and Gardens. How were they able to transcend their circumstances and their lives and integrate

artistic or human experiences. Less was for the first time more in an environment in which people were severely limited in means by physical disabilities. Yet, nowhere had I sensed urgency and immediacy to such a degree. Enthusiasm and sincerity replaced the usual banal exchanges; also, substituting for language syntax, coordinated motor activities, and locution were acute sensitivity and awareness. The density and deep thoughtfulness of every interaction was charged with reflection, bearing an essence of the sublime. Bear no mistake, nothing comes easily in their context, and this was clear in their choice of additions to the installation: three leaves, three stones, three twigs and



three "monkey" balls (spiky pods from a "monkey" tree).

For all of us as participants -- DCCA, the numerous contributors, the coordinator of the residency, Shirley Crow, and her assistant, Linda Welsh -- the scale of the undertaking remained monumental throughout the 18 months of planning and execution. It became clear, as time went on, that the residency was a pretext, not for art, but for people. I feel privileged as a human being to have had the opportunity to celebrate art, life, and community in this way.

Canadian born of Italian heritage, FRANÇOIS MORELLI was educated at Concordia University, Montreal, where he received his undergraduate degree, and Rutgers University, New Jersey, where he received his Masters Degree in Fine Arts. He currently lives in Montreal, maintaining studio space in New York City, and until recently taught at Rutgers. He is the recipient of many awards and has exhibited widely in the United States, Canada and abroad. His residency at DCCA inspired a tremendous amount of community involvement with over 1500 people participating and over \$33,000 of in-kind support generated. The Gift represents his second

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I quickly realized that my initial impressions of the frailty of the senior citizens at the Cokesbury Village retirement home was largely the result of my own projections and stereotyping. However, this experience was unquestionably the most unabashed and polemic of the eight encounters. The basic validity of the project as art solicited numerous debates. An uncensored controversy arose disclaiming its artistic merit and establishing the residents' own standards and notions of excellence.

Yet, it was here that I sensed a critical engagement: initial resistance followed by final acceptance through an active interaction with, and commitment to, the project. Their own creations and additions proved highly evocative, reflecting the complex reality of the living and aging processes. Some of their creations included several pharmaceutical containers, substituting medication for plant food, peanuts and various other natural materials; a carefully stitched pair of stuffed, white gloves joined in a gesture of offering; and other "gifts," such as a scarf, chocolate and money.

Having chosen its educational section as the location for the installation (as opposed to a main exhibition area), the Delaware Art Museum

district of south Delaware) and the basic needs and demands being met by staff, made me both question and doubt the relevance of my presence. As an educated white male, I feared my language and intentions would seem largely abstract, lacking pertinent meaning or content. I, with my work, had become the "other," foreign and alien to conditions I could not begin to understand and which I wished not to trivialize.

To this day, their response remains an enigma in my mind with their gifts of a woman's robe, slippers, showercap, soap, toothbrush, perfume, towel and a copy of *Better Homes and Gardens*. How were they able to transcend their circumstances and their lives and integrate themselves enough to find relevance in such a project? Yet they responded in very genuine and sophisticated ways; with their own realities pressing they were still able to find far-ranging historical and social references in the piece.

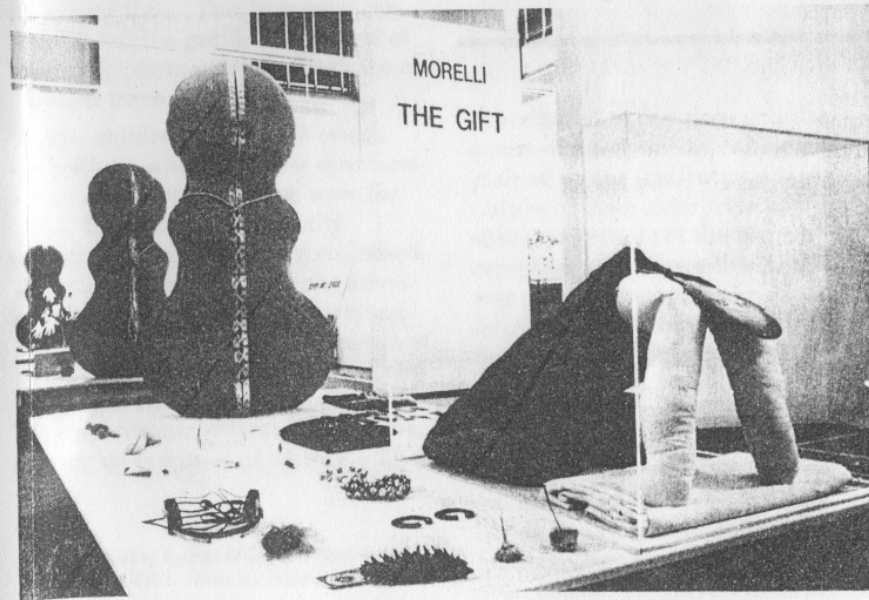
One individual remarked that the installation with its "gifts" reminded him or her of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., with its many flowers, wreaths and flags offered in tribute. In looking at the large figure, another person was reminded of ancient Egyptian rites of mummification. Through their responses, the common view of modern art as a commodity (i.e., frivolous in nature and of no social consequence), was replaced with a view of modern art as having a primal sort of investment, arising out of both necessity and the need for communication.

Finally, the Mary Campbell Center, with the economy and coherence of its members' response, surpassed by far any of my prior



Above: child with votive figure, First Unitarian Church, Wilmington, DE. Photo by Jinny McKusick.

Below: final installation of "The Gift" at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, DE. Photo by Barbara Proud.



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