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“In zwei Stunden die Welt notieren”

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DM: You once said: “I experience Freedom through the limitations I place on my work.” Why did you choose limitation as the medium for you to express your freedom?

CH: If I had all the money in the world, and I could do anything, I wanted to do, would I be able to accomplish that? No, it would be impossible. I could not see the whole world. I would have to make choices about what I would like to see?: I love to eat fine food. So maybe I would choose to go to Europe, and find the eight or ten best chefs there, and try to eat all of their food. That would be it! The less choices I have, the more freedom I can have to experience those choices. As an example, a teapot on the stove really rocks and moves and makes noise when the heat is on high, because the aperture where the steam comes out is so small on the teapot, that it jumps all over the stove, but a normal pot doesn't jump when the heat is on high, because there is a big huge opening at the top of the pot.

DM: You just mean concentration...

CH: Limiting your choices gives you power.

DM: Do you feel that a limitation placed on your work is like a form of meditation?

CH: No, I don't meditate. But it could be thought of as one form of meditation, maybe the fact that I am doing what I do repeatedly is a meditation, though I don't think of it that way.

DM: You started doing your work almost fifty years ago. How did you start?

CH: I went to art school in the early 1950's for one year and then I got married and had children. When the children were in school I went back to study art. I was in school for three years and then left when I started to ask my own questions.

DM: For almost 50 years?

CH: Yes, I started to ask serious questions after leaving school in 1963; I had my first show in 1969. I started to ask important questions at that time...

DM: You don't mean academic questions?

CH: No, I questioned the empty canvas, such as ‘What would happen if I?’ I attempted to answer that question on the canvas. I always looked for answers that led to other questions where I could find the answers in doing the work.

DM: What did you do next?

CH: By limiting my choice of questions the questions become more powerful...

DM: I think I am starting to understand...

DM: We are talking about freedom of choice and how you came to ask your own questions. Asking your questions as an artist, as a female artist, and not being forced to do what all the others do is quite an autonomous act. Couldn't you, in a way link that whole thing to women's liberation?

CH: No, as an artist I needed to search for what I wanted to say. What I said as an artist had to do only with my questions and the artistic answers I could find through my work. I was not interested in doing what anyone else had done; I wanted to create something that had never been done before. I wanted to create new ideas in art and pave new paths to follow.

DM: Asking your own questions and making your own choices –doesn't that have something to do with your growing need for freedom?

CH: My search had to do with my work and where my questions took me in my work.

DM: A few months ago I interviewed Verena Pfisterer, an artist from Germany. She told me, that she stopped making art, because she was lacking the "mirror", the feedback ...

CH: Oh, yes, Feedback is so important, unbelievably important ... and I had none.

DM: But you – in comparison to Pfisterer – kept working. How?

CH: I was so desperate for feedback about my work, that when the mail-lady came up the hill to deliver my mail, I would ask her if I could show her what I was doing: Simply because there was nobody else to talk to. My first husband thought that what I was doing was crazy. My second husband on the other hand absolutely loves that I am busy. But he knows nothing about art, anymore then I know anything about his involvement in politics. I mean, he is so happy that I am busy, and I am so happy that he is busy, because I leave him alone to do his thing and he leaves me alone to do mine and we come together to share that.

DM: That's just romantic.

CH: Oh my god, that is the best! he shares everything with me and I share everything with him. And he is so encouraging ... I mean I am 77 and my career is just taking off.

DM: Did you think, after all this time, that your work would be appreciated?

CH: I thought that my work would be appreciated after I died. I knew that my work was important – because I work in truth, my work is honest.

DM: Yes, you go on with almost the same theme, of "variations" for almost half a century now. How have you been able to maintain this line of questioning for so long?

CH: After leaving school I limited my choices, I limited my choice of color to black and white, and circles and squares became my motive for all shapes... I started reducing my choices in the middle of the 1960ies. And some years later, in 1968, I did a proposal for the Art and Technology Show at the L.A. County Museum of Art. I did a sculpture with 8 moving parts, and 8 light beams...

DM: There's that number, the eight! A number, you always use that number in your work.

CH: That's just because of the graph paper I use. I had a choice between 5, 8 or 10 lines per inch on the paper. Aesthetically I liked 8 lines per inch, by repeating the use of the grid of 8 to the inch made it part of my language. I chose 8 colors, that I am still using.

CH: For the light sculpture, I wondered how the eight beams would look in a given length of time, so I notated the eight beams on my graph paper, showing ten minutes of time..., it was so fascinating to me that I could notate motion. That's how the notation of sound and motion started, I was really into the idea of notating movement, the fact, that I could describe motion simply by using graph paper was very exciting to me.

CH: Soon after I went on a vacation with my first husband. One day, he wanted to play tennis and I asked for permission to please stay in the hotel room and not watch him play just for a couple of hours. „you know, that is the life I lived, I had to ask for permission to do anything different from the norm. “Well”, he said, you're not being very social, but ok, just two hours.” So I was in my room alone with a pad of graph paper and a couple of pencils and I came up with my “compositions”, Number 1, 2 and 3. And I realized back then, that simply moving the little squares on graph paper I could show anything: I could show motion, it could represent notes, it could represent color. The notations could represent any of the arts! They could describe words, or categories, anything could be expressed through the notations. I felt I had discovered a new language, one that could talk to all of the arts. So, when the two hours were over I had to go to the tennis court, but I took my material with me. When no one was looking I was secretly coloring in all of the little squares on the graph paper. At some point, this lady who organized the tennis games came over, I was trying to hide what I was doing from her. But she asked: “What are you doing there?” And I showed her this little square of 64 colors ... and she said, “Oh, my nephew made something just like that” and I got really excited and asked: „what did he make?” and she answered: “An ashtray”.

DM: Harsh. And stupid.

CH: No, I thought that what I was doing was really dumb, I went from this high feeling of having found a common language that spoke to all of the arts, to feeling really dumb, about what I had created. I had this brand new concept, but I couldn't really handle it.

DM: You still didn't give up.

CH: I went back into my studio and I continued exploring. And at one point, I decided, that I wanted to show this new work at my next exhibition. I showed the very first of the notations. I had a performance with dancers, I had the notations, and I showed sculptures called, “Breathers”, I had slides ... in short: My exhibition was a complete multi-media-show. That is when I first started to call my notations “Sonakinatography” which means sound-motion-notation.

DM: How was it perceived?

CH: A critic from the Los Angeles Times wrote: “Pretty Notations by Valley Housewife” and another critic ... when I showed my work to her, said: “Channa, I really don't believe that what you do is art!”

DM: But, how did you continue with your work with comments like that?

CH: Because I really believed in what I was doing. And I don't need other people to say that what I do is great. I just need to believe in what I do.

DM: But what struck me, is, how did you do that for so many years, without any recognition. How did you manage that?

CH: I was very lucky, because I had a husband that really supported me to do my work. From the very beginning I had an incredible studio, and all of the supplies I needed. With all of that I could do anything I wanted to, I could invent the world! And approval? Yes, that's important, but approval only tells me what I already know. I couldn't go on working for as long as I did without knowing that what I was doing was important. Without feeling it. I don't know if my work is good or not, but it is truthful, and it's honest. Maybe I will never realize any acceptance for it, but I felt that my children would. So I felt that my work was an investment for them. And that's why I took care of it. And then, one day, Michael Solway found me, the gallerist from Los Angeles. He came over to see my work.

DM: When was that?

CH: Maybe nine years ago ... Michael came over to my studio. He sat down on my drafting chair and was swinging around a little. Then he said: "You know, Channa, normally, when I umm meet an artist your age, I love their old work, but never their new work. But with you, I love your old work and I really love your new work." I thought:... I waited my entire career to hear that, and now that I heard it, I can go on, I don't need to hear that anymore.