



## **ARTS AND AGING**

### **Notes from VAN Forum, Tuesday, November 9, 2004**

#### **Presenters**

"Old Lady Art" Exhibitors: Lucy Rose Fischer & Betty Globus Goodman  
Catherine Baumgartner, Assoc. Director, Kairos Intergenerational Dance Theatre  
Pat Samples, Writer and Creative Expression Coach  
Bernie Saunders, Photographer & Director, Center for Living Art

#### **"Old Lady Art"**

The forum was held in the midst of an exhibit of glass art and photography located in the Minneapolis Jewish Community Center. The two artists/exhibitors, Lucy Rose Fischer and Betty Globus Goodman, commented on their confrontation with and experience of aging.

The glass art that is shown in the exhibit integrates Lucy Rose Fischer's professional background as a gerontologist, personal experience with aging, and current full-time profession as an artist. Lucy Rose said that the title of the exhibit was inspired by a disparaging remark from a young man who dismissed a certain kind of painting as "old lady art." He thus managed to put down both being a woman and being old, conveying a stigma of incompetence. As Bette Davis said, "Old age ain't for sissies."

Lucy Rose has invented a process for showing reversed images on glass and plexiglas. Her pieces have won awards from the American Crafts Council and have been shown in the "Art in Bloom" show at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota State Fair, etc. The images of aging that she has included in the exhibit fit three themes:

- 1) Facing mortality – reflecting wisdom from Ecclesiastes and Dylan Thomas;
- 2) Experiencing loss – loss of words, status, health
- 3) Generating vitality – through humor, social involvement

As Lucy Rose says, "Life is short and so am I." "Life is a quick trip. Enjoy the scenery."  
"Life is art. Art is life."

Bette Goodman is a professional free-lance photographer who specializes in portraiture, tending to focus on life's vicissitudes. Just as Lucy Rose was hit in the face by the "old lady art" comment, so was Bette affected when she continued her wait at the sales counter while the salesman's attention was swept away with the arrival of an attractive young woman in the line. Bette began to convene focus groups to talk about the process of aging that she herself was also confronting. They talked about:

- 1) Experiencing loss – losing the power of youthful sexuality and charm (less applicable for men, who are still treated as handsome and powerful as they age)
- 2) Making decisions that affect the process of aging – for example, about replacing body parts

### 3) Describing personal strengths – survival energy, going beyond tragedies

Betty's photographs show mothers and daughters navigating their way through time, breast cancer survivors recovering life, and hands on bodies illustrating changes brought by time. Each crisis has a loss and a gain. Her photos acknowledge the uncertainty of existence.

#### **Movement and Memory**

Catherine Baumgartner, associate director of the Kairos Intergenerational Dance Theatre, said that everyone has his or her own way of expressing who they are – their own dance. She asked the forum participants to introduce themselves: "Please say your first name and then show us how you are feeling right now by making a movement." After each person within the large circle had responded, the group repeated the person's name and movement three times. After 10 people had been introduced, the whole group would run through the ten names and movements. At the end, the whole group ran through the entire sequence, first with names and movements, and then with movements only, thus creating a group dance. The activity is used by Kairos as a get-acquainted exercise with intergenerational groups. It thoroughly engaged the forum participants, and illustrated how repetition and movement enhanced memorizing people's names.

#### **MN Creative Arts and Aging Network – "MN CAN"**

Pat Samples introduced the forum participants who have been on the design team for a new Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network: Catherine Baumgartner, Bernie Saunders, Kerry Stone, Sharon Anderson, and Jan Hively. MN CAN is the youngest of VAN's "network of networks."

At the 2002 American Society on Aging/National Council on Aging national conference, Pat was stunned by the effective presentations from arts organizations helping older adults to express themselves artistically. At the 2003 conference, Susan Perlstein, from Elders Share the Arts in Brooklyn, talked about the new National Center for Creative Aging NCCA. Later, Susan came to the Twin Cities and met with a few VAN people who were interested in creating a regional network similar to 10 or 12 others affiliated with the NCCA. At the annual conference in San Francisco last April, the Kairos Dance Theatre from the Twin Cities opened the general session, and several Minnesota representatives attended Susan's workshop to kick off a year-long "Art of Aging – Creativity Matters" campaign to: 1) raise awareness about the positive impacts of creative expression on the health of older adults, 2) encourage NCCA regional affiliates, and 3) generate collages created by elders in every state. The 50 collages will be taken to the White House Conference on Aging scheduled for October 23, 2005.

The Minnesota design team for MN CAN has been meeting since last April. After registering the MN network on the NCCA website, [www.creativeaging.org](http://www.creativeaging.org), the group collaborated with the State Arts Board on a survey of MN arts organizations. The organizations were asked if they had an intentional program to involve older adults in the creative arts and, if so, to send in a program description. They were also asked if they were interested in participating in a celebration and networking meeting of like-minded groups. 60 arts organizations responded by saying either that they already have

a program or are interested in developing one. Most expressed interest in attending a celebration where model programs would be showcased, etc.

In response, Pat is coordinating the planning and arrangements for:

CREATIVITY, ARTS AND AGING: A CELEBRATION AND TOWN HALL MEETING  
Saturday, January 15, 8:15 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Bloomington Center for the Arts

The new Center for the Arts is located in the Bloomington Civic Center Plaza on 98<sup>th</sup> St, two blocks west of I-35 from the 98<sup>th</sup> Street exit. The program is open anyone – especially those involved with aging, health care, social work, education, and/or public policy. Participants will see a showcase of sample programs, hear an NCCA leader, and talk about how a statewide network might benefit both the arts and older adults. Go to the VAN website, [www.van.umn.edu](http://www.van.umn.edu), or call VAN at 612-626-5555 for a flyer with registration information.

Kerry Stone described the new Bloomington Center for the Arts, built with public support endorsed by a local referendum, including a theater, gallery, dance studio, etc.

Sharon Anderson handed out forms recruiting volunteers to help with January 15 celebration. Call 612-626-5555 or e-mail [van@umn.edu](mailto:van@umn.edu) if you want to sign up.

Catherine told about the research study about the power of creative expression supported by the National Endowment of the Arts. The researcher, Gene Cohen, who previously wrote "Creative Age," looked at health factors for participants in arts programs (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) in different parts of the country. Checking the difference between older adult participants and a control group of seniors, Cohen found that the participants had fewer doctor visits, medications, feelings of loneliness, and a greater feeling of health and well-being. Creative expression is an important factor in vital aging.

Pat handed out flyers and a press release for the January 15 event. Just as the Kairos Dance Theater performed "Dances of the Heart" in San Francisco with dancers from ages 9 to 90, so will they do for MN CAN in January. Larry Long, from Elders Wisdom, Children's Song and others will also perform. All of the audience participants will be involved in some arts activities and in small groups planning for the future.

### **Developing a Common Vision of Creative Aging**

Bernie Saunders, photographer and director of the Center for Living Art, divided the forum participants into small groups. He asked them to use their words, bodies and other props to respond to the question, "What does creativity, arts and aging mean to me/us?" Six small groups showcased their responses for the large group. Words that were sung or spoken during the presentations included: robust, spiritual, enlightenment, full potential, energy, self-expression, freedom, connections, legacy, fun, movement, meaning, spinning into spaciousness, inspiration, discovering the soul, exploring limitless possibilities, etc.

Bernie and Jan asked the forum participants to: a) recruit nominees or apply yourselves for the VAN Leadership Group, b) come yourself and bring others to the January 15 Celebration, c) consider helping as a volunteer at the January event.

### **Finale**

Sue Meyers told about her upcoming presentation at the December 14 VAN Forum, on "Families across the Ages," where all of those who attend will begin to "explore the fluid possibilities of truth and laughter always." The forum will be held in the lower level meeting room in the St. Anthony Park Public Library, at the corner of Como Avenue and Commonwealth Avenue in St. Paul.

### **Adjournment**