THE MAKING OF A FESTIVAL ARTIST

BY SUZANNE KOBLENTZ-GOODMAN

Inspired by ancient rituals of celebration, Felicia Young creates 'living art' for today's causes.

When Felicia Young completed her sophomore year in college, she gladly accepted a summer internship at Christie's, the fine art auction house in Manhattan. An aspiring artist, she was sure that it would provide her with an inspiring introduction to the contemporary art scene. Instead, she was appalled.

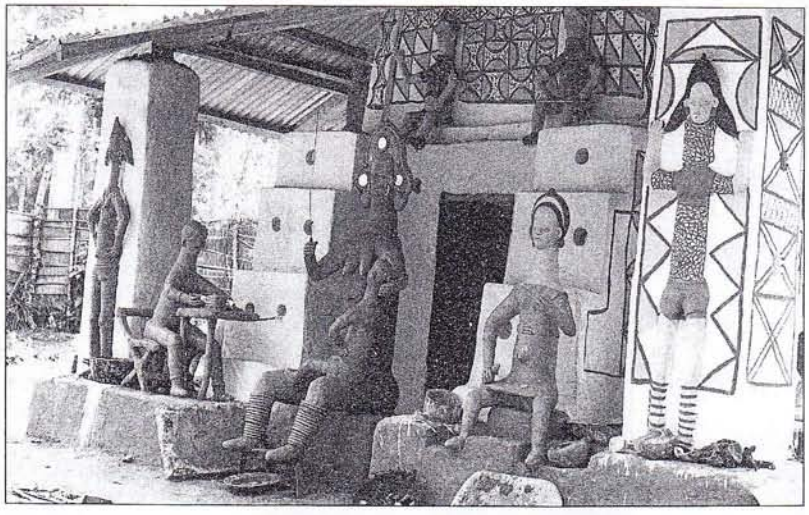
"Is this all art is?" she remembers asking. Ignorant of the commercialism that dominates so much of the art world, she was aghast that the people who came to buy the art barely even looked at it. The disappointment was so great that she seriously considered choosing another career. But still interested in the history of art, she stayed with her studies and arranged to spend her junior year in Rome and Paris.

In Rome, she learned about pagan rituals that made art an integral part of society. In France, she researched the little-known pageantry of Jacques Louis David, the painter. Through her research, Young discov-

ered that David, inspired by travels to Pompeii, roused 250,000 Parisians to dress up as Romans and march down the Rue de Rivoli in support of Republican ideals and the cause of the French revolutionaries.

Here was a participatory art form that seemed to have all the elements which Young found missing during her summer at Christie's. Unlike art that hung on a wall to be purchased, here was something ephemeral that couldn't be bought or sold.

The next summer, she flew directly from a one-month archaeological dig in a cave in the South of France to an internship at the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan. Her hope was that the non-profit museum would prove a more satisfactory setting for art than Christie's auction house had been. But unfortunately, her stay in the French cave, where she had encountered the immediacy of some of prehistoric man's first artistic efforts, underscored how isolated and irrelevant the art in the New York museum seemed. "I found myself asking, 'If I were making this object, is this how I would want it to participate in the world?' "



Top: **Water Spirit, 15' high, created by Mark Antrobus from tissue paper, bamboo, and chicken wire, for The McCarren Pool Parade; Mbari hut and clay figures, Igboland, Nigeria.**

During her senior year of college, Young studied African art, masks, and tribal rituals. The artistic African ritual of Mbari, which the Igbo people enact when their community is hit by a disaster such as drought or infant mortality, particularly appealed to her.

Mbari involves the construction of a hut compound elaborately adorned with as many as a thousand clay figurines honoring daily life, wild animals, and other elements of the natural and spirit worlds. Dances, songs, chants, and processions enliven the hard physical labor of digging, dragging, and pounding tons of specially selected anthill clay with which Mbari is built. When completed, the elaborate creation is ceremonially honored with a festival.

Then Mbari is respectfully left to decay and become part of the earth again. Meanwhile, a renewed sense of harmony has been restored to the village.

"Here was another art form that involved the community, that healed, that was participatory. I had known about Mbari before, but now it hit me. I ran around school like a crazy person saying, 'This is what we need! This is what art should be about! Can it happen? Is there such a thing? Can this exist in our society?'" She knew that Mbari couldn't simply be transplanted here, because it hadn't grown out of our culture, but she wondered whether American society could have an art that was as significant.

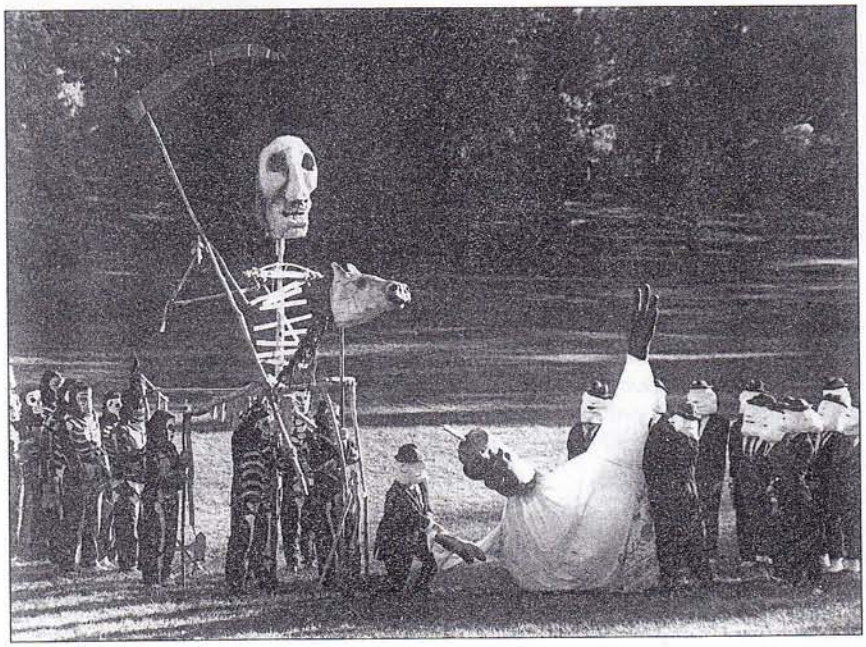
After graduation, Young worked for a year at the Alternative Museum in New York City. She was pleased that it was a museum that created exhibitions about controversial social and political issues concerning such places as the Middle East and South Africa. "But who was attending? Just other artists. Within the art world, it was radical, but I wanted to communicate beyond those walls."

Meanwhile, Young started an art magazine in video format to explore the breaking down of boundaries between art, theater, music, sculpture, and painting. This led to an interview with Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theater.

Schumann was one of Young's heroes because of his powerful street theater utilizing larger-than-life puppets which enacted dramas regarding the Vietnam war, voter registration, environmental problems, and other social issues. As a result of the interview, Young helped on a number of Bread and Puppet productions. But since she longed to be expressing her own vision, working for even the much-admired Bread and Puppet Theater soon proved too limiting.

When the Alternative Museum celebrated the Latin American holiday called "Day of the Dead," Young finally had an opportunity to put on her own pageant. By expanding the concept of the holiday to honor the departed souls of plants and animals as well as humans, she tied environmental concerns to the event. One of the participating groups represented a memorial charred forest, evoking consciousness of the slash-and-burn tactics devastating rainforests worldwide.

Soon after, Young and a friend took off for India to visit Young's mother's family and videotape Indian festivals. By chance, they hitched a ride to the largest festival on the planet, where 25 million pilgrims gather every twelve years to purify themselves at the confluence of two important rivers. Young and her friend also filmed a three-week festival created by a king in the fifteenth century to bring two warring castes together.



Top: Anonymous participant, EcoFest; *Center:* Bread and Puppet Theater: "The Same Boat: The Passion of Chico Mendes" Ohio, Fall 1989; *Bottom:* Votive Tower, EcoFest.

"One thing you realize in India is that aesthetics and culture are so much a part of their living reality. You wonder how the poor people in India have time for art, when they should be worrying about eating. But then you begin to realize that humanity wasn't created just for survival.

"People in the desert who had hardly anything to eat and drink

For Earth Day 1990, Young decided to create a 35-foot long "Trash Monster" fashioned along the lines of the Chinese New Year Dragon.

because of a drought still traveled miles and miles for pigments so they could celebrate weddings by painting their adobe huts with beautiful images. And in another place where there was a drought, people saved the drinking water that the government sent in so they could carry out the tradition

of spraying water on the god Alagar during the wedding festival of the goddess Meenakshi.

"There I was, ready to give up art because it had no meaning, and then here were these festivals that brought people together. Of course, I was also beginning to see that festivals could be used for many different purposes, so I realized that it was important to know what you were using it for."

Young returned from India with a head full of wonderful images and a conviction that she had to do more festivals. Arriving back in New York, she contacted the city's Parks Department and had the good fortune to land a summer job creating special events. One event especially meaningful to her was EcoFest, an ecological festival for endangered species which she initiated.

In that festival, she was able to bring art together with ecology and community. "I called up all the artists that I knew and found others who were also doing amazing work on different environmental issues." The 9th Street Theater did "Bodies of Water," dramatizing issues related to pollutants and the rainforest. Arm of the Sea Theatre's "A Silver Swarming" educated viewers about the dumping of PCB's. Another artist created a memorial to the animals that died during the Alaskan oil spill.

Throughout the day, workshops ranged from painting cave-style upon a giant canvas to mask-making with recycled materials. The festival's grand finale, its All Species Parade, included participants costumed to celebrate different animals and a fifteen-foot high Votive Tower to the Elements created by Young herself. At a tree-planting ceremony that concluded the event, artists Donna Henes and Beth Ames Swartz officiated in a modern day ritual of ecological solidarity.

After EcoFest, Young worked on the Annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade and also on the Eco-Theater Festival, until the latter's funds, supplied by the New York State Parks Department, were halted temporarily as part of a statewide budget freeze.

For Earth Day 1990, Young decided to create a 35-foot long "Trash Monster" fashioned along the lines of the Chinese New Year Dragon. Carried by twenty-five volunteers, the Trash Monster was thickly festooned with colorful cans and plastic containers. Alongside the beast, sparkling banners bore messages like "Recycle the Trash Monster."

The idea of the Trash Monster was to teach people about recycling through the creation—and then dismantling of—a symbolic object. Ultimately, Young's ecological dragon was fashioned from surplus fabric to which were fastened soda cans, detergent bottles, and newspapers.

The fabric came from a non-profit organization called Materials for the Arts, while the cans were from We Can Recycling, a company which pays homeless people to collect and separate cans for recycling. Young and a number of friends picked through the recycling dump, through bins and huge dumpsters, separating sticky cans according to color and then carting them home.

"We were living surrounded by dirty soda cans and detergent bottles," she said of herself and Mark Antrobus, founder of a performance group called the "Mudmen." "Even the bathtub was filled with them. We were living in a landfill! Meanwhile, I made trips to the Village Green Recycling Center and to laundromats to get detergent bottles and asked friends to collect them, too. Everybody started bringing their garbage to me. I became a recycling center!"

The cans were attached to the dragon in waves of red, yellow, orange, and blue—or rather, in waves of Hawaiian Punch, Sunkist, Coca Cola, and 7-Up cans. These would be dotted with orange Tide, green Palmolive, and red Era bottles.

Two children from the city's foster care system who were Earth Day volunteers helped Young put together the Trash Monster on the roof of her building in New York

Blue ribbon wave for racial harmony carried by community from El Puente Community Center to Festival site. ***Left:*** **Brand Name Damages Gallery artists with members of community painting giant swimmers for the McCarren Pool Parade.**

City's Chinatown. On weekends, people she didn't even know, friends of friends who had collected cans at their offices, brought their wares and helped tie them on.

Finally, the Trash Monster was done. Rolled up, it was six-and-a-half feet high and four-and-a-half feet thick. On the morning of Earth Day, Young and friends lowered it with rope down the side of the building. After the Parade, the Trash Monster was taken apart and recycled, except the head.

In the meantime, Young had started working in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with artist Phyllis Yampolsky. Their goal was to help save McCarren Pool, a facility capable of holding 6,000 swimmers, which had been built by Robert Moses in the 1930's. Yampolsky had been protecting the pool from demolition for two years, despite protests from some community residents who felt that the pool was too large to be a peaceful gathering place for the multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhood.

For months, Young and Yampolsky organized the community, encouraging members of the community to write letters to the Mayor, the Parks Commission, and the Landmarks Commission. After an important hearing, which they and their supporters transformed into a celebratory performance piece, they set to work on a festival that could rally further support.

From Young's perspective, this project was even more intriguing than EcoFest, because while EcoFest was about environmental issues in general, the McCarren Pool Festival was about effecting change on a specific issue. "If you want to open up a park or shut down a landfill or stop the dumping of toxic waste," she realized, "you can organize a festival!"

Children at a daycare center made paintings celebrating the pool, while some of the community centers planned dances. At Young's suggestion, artists from a local art gallery cut from cardboard ten giant swimmers and painted them outdoors, raising the community's awareness of the pool even before the event.

Young also led in the creation of a 990-foot long blue ribbon, the length of the perimeter of McCarren Pool, a blue wave carried by 100 people in support of racial harmony. Lastly there was a Memory House based on Young's much-admired Mbari ritual. The open-sided hut was created by architect Manuel Flores and artists Hazinat Gebel and Annette Swiersbinksi with the help of community people who donated their McCarren Pool photos and souvenirs from a happier era.

Two hundred and fifty people marched in the parade, and two thousand turned out at the pool site where performances took place throughout the afternoon. A late afternoon storm dampened the festivities but not Young's spirits. "We're thinking of surrounding City Hall with the blue ribbon in the fall!" she exclaimed. "Don't you think it'll be wonderful?!"

Looking ahead, twenty-five-year-old Young dreams of establishing a department of festival arts at a university one day. No doubt, a world that includes Young's festivals—and future protegés—will be a world enriched by imagination, joy, and purpose.