

ARTIST'S AND LANGUAGE

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THE PROBLEM OF HAVING TO WRITE A THESIS.

APRIL 1976.

The problem of writing a thesis has been with me for many months now. Initially, I accepted it as a necessary requisite to gaining a diploma in Fine Art. My first thoughts were what would I write about. I have a great feeling for art, and its evolvement. Apart from confronting myself with paintings and sculptures in reality, and picture images, I have pursued the written thoughts and opinions of many artists, art historians, philosophers and thinkers, in their concern with art, the individual and society.

To choose a subject unrelated to me, and my work, would have been entering the realm of the art historian. Whatever subject I chose it had to concern my relationship with it. It would be an essay less about the knowledge of any particular subject, but about my appreciation of it. My problem seemed to be my inability to choose a subject matter from the immense range of possibilities that art is, and has been concerned with. For two months I groped about, momentarily resting on one aspect or another, until I realised that the problem was far greater than one of choice, it was one of language.

The recognition of this conflict between the aesthetic idea, which is central to modern and contemporary sculpture, and language, is by no means new.

In his thesis Critique of Judgement, Kant establishes
".... by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation
of the imagination which induces much thought, yet
without the possibility of any definite thought whatever,
i.e., concept, being adequate to it, and which language,
consequently, can never get quite on level terms with,
or render completely intelligible. It is easily seen
that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of
a rational idea, which conversely is a concept, to which
no intuition (representation of the imagination) can
be adequate" (1).

When trying to articulate my feelings and understanding
of art, and what it means to me, I am trying to rational-
ise what is essentially aesthetic. My efforts to do this
frustrated me, as by rationally scrutinizing my relation-
ship with a particular aspect of art, I was finding my
concern being taken from my grasp, and becoming merely
a play of unsympathetic words.

" Translation is generally imperialistic, at best
producing a creative hybrid, but more frequently
destructive, turning what is translated into hash or
comedy, or a mirrored image of the translator. Translat-
ion rarely achieves the translucency that the word
implies. Obviously, if the underlying structure of the

1. Emmanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, trans. J.C.
Meredith. Oxford 1952. p.49.

translators language, medium and sensory profile are all compatible with the form translated, it is easier to retain the effect of the original" (2).

The artists language is not the written word. It is a medium whose structure is wholly different. Even an immense knowledge of the history of art, and the verbal capacity to express it logically, does not signify that the student has learned to appreciate and recognise a work of art. This sensibility to appreciate art does not necessitate the ability to articulate or write about it. In fact, to ask one to write about what is essentially a highly individual aesthetic sphere of expression, will only serve to tighten the students mindscape(*), by reducing the experience to words. The artists commitment is to awareness on many plains, that words only succeed in numbifying and depersonalising.

Charles Gillespie said " the scientific act of knowing is an act of alienation" (3). It is a forcing of experience out and away from the grip of the personal. Art is not a verbal expression; it is not a telling experience; it is not compatible with the scientific act of knowing, which is language.

2. Edmund Carpenter. Oh What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me.
Paladin 1976. p.38.

*. Theodore Roszak. Where the Wasteland Ends. Faber & Faber.
London. 1972. Ch.3. p.74.

3. Charles Gillespie. The Edge of Objectivity. Princeton
University Press. 1960.

This being so, why is so much emphasis placed on an integration of word language into an area which is a totally different 'language' as titled 'Fine Art'? Perhaps written work is introduced to direct and standardise our approach, to give an intellectual respectability to art. To reduce it to the same rational as science.

Herbert Read observed that art is fundamentally an instinctive force and instincts are apt to recoil into a shell of unconscious if treated too deliberately. (5). I know this to be true in respect to my own work. Henry Moore has similar sentiments towards verbal expression with regard to his work. " It is a mistake for a sculptor or a painter to speak or write very often about his job.. It releases tension needed for his work. By trying to express his aims with rounded-off logical exactness, he can easily become a theorist whose actual work is only a caged in exposition of conceptions, evolved in terms of logic and words." (6).

The artist wants to give form and substance to what he has divined of the emotional content of the world. It is an autonomous activity influenced like all our activities by the material conditions of existence.

5. Herbert Read. Art and Society. Faber & Faber, London 1936. p.3.

6. Henry Moore. Notes on Sculpture, in The Listener, XVIII 449, 18th August 1937.

Thus, Ruth Benedict explains, "The practice and appreciation of art is individual, art begins as a solitary activity, and only in so far as society recognises and absorbs such units of experience does art become woven into the social fabric." (7).

The works which are created leave the artist when finished. They exist then as physical expressions, to be interpreted, understood and accepted by society. How is this accomplished?

Otto Baensch says " the acceptance usually proceeds in the following way. At first the new works of art are 'incomprehensible' to us, we see no rhythmic formal structure in their physical composition, or, making false connections, misconstrue them and read wrong sense into them. Meanwhile their essence, their emotional content remains completely closed to us. Then it begins to dawn on us, persons with insight point out to us the true rhythmic formal relations, or know how to bring the emotional content closer to us by aptly chosen words. At last we see the light the form becomes clear, the content opens up, the works of art begin to speak to us, and only now are we able to appreciate them aesthetically, and to take a philosophical attitude toward them." (8).

7. Ruth Benedict Patterns of Culture. London 1935.
p.253.

8. Otto Baensch. Logos Vol.X11 (1923-24) pp 1-28.

It is as difficult for me to understand why I make the sculptures I do, as it is for me to explain why exactly I appreciate other peoples work. Otto Baensch suggests that there is a definite understanding and appreciation that each work strives to make known. Perhaps he is right, but it is very hard to know if what you feel and understand towards any particular work is universally felt and understood. Particularly as Edmund Carpenter rightly observed, words rarely achieve a compatible translation. Art is a mode of envisaging the individuals perception of some aspect of universal truth, but to understand decisively what that aspect of truth is, is impossible. As hopefully children realise when Francise Ruane asks them in the National Gallery "Do you see what I see?", there are many ways of seeing. There are many ways in which each of us open to others new visions. Aptly chosen words is only one way.

Carlos Casteneda's character Don Juan in "A Seperate Reality" explains to his apprentice,

" Once you learn, you can see every single thing in the world in a different way "

" Then, Don Juan, you don't see the world in the usual way anymore "

" I see both ways. When I want to look at the world I see it the way you do. Then when I want to see it, I look at it the way I know and perceive it in a different way "

" But....whats the advantage of learning to see? "

" You can tell things apart. You can see them for what they really are " (9).

I am learning to see. My work is part of that sight. It is the outward plastic and sensuous expression of inner intuitions and emotions. The greatest offering of an art college is time to develop that sight, by encouragement and contact with other artists and individuals, whose concern is artistic expression.

Phillip Hughes suggests " Art education is concerned less with a mastery of technique than with an examination of the goals for which those techniques are acquired. There is no established 'artistic' method in the way that there is scientific method. No already discovered truths which will lead to more advanced truths " (10). So the pursuit of art is what is significant to the student, and this is not to do with the systematic pursuit of knowledge.

Hebert Read distinguishes between two aspects of art education, " the education of the individual as an artist, and the education of the individual in the appreciation of art " (11). However, I think educating the individual as an artist will awaken a simultaneous appreciation of art. For there is not the struggle to break through the barrier of 'single vision' as the romantic poet William Blake would call the objective rational thought.

9. Carlos Casteneda. A Seperate Reality. Simon & Schister.

1970.

10. Phillip Hughes. Goals in Art Education. One No.6.

August 1975.

11. Hebert Read. op. cit. p.105.

" Now I a fourfold vision see,
And a fourfold vision is given me,
'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And threefold in soft Beulah's night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From single vision and Newton's sleep " (12).

However the antithesis is not the case. A person who appreciates art is not necessarily an artist. To educate 'non artists' it is only possible to relate the physical or tangible realities of the evolvement of art, its technical externals, and with aptly chosen words, its possible emotional and aesthetic content. But these data do not ensure an appreciation of art concerning its inheirent truth and expressiveness. This is an individual experience that an open sensitive mind will comprehend and feel. We all can, if we learn to see as Don Juan. (13).

I am not disputing the necessity of a history of art course. Perhaps its content is debateable, but in essence the existence of such a course holds great possibilities in awakening the students awareness, and introducing him to, as yet, fields of 'undiscovered' art. The documentation and availability of art history is extremely important. It has been important to me in the past few years, in enabling me to experience

13. Carlos Casteneda. op.cit.

a visual world, which is bigger than I am. As an artist it establishes me in an historical framework, grounds my validity, and solidly stabilises me. For the roots of my concern cover all past ages and are prehistoric.

A student's appreciation of art is not discernible in an examination. But since we all must be graded this is achieved by testing our accumulation of knowledge. The diploma is seen as an objective criterion by which others may judge us. In the area of Fine Art a thesis must be the most positive means for academics to academically assess the student. It is not possible to grade our awareness and appreciation of art, so our accumulation of knowledge is tested.

Here a question arises. Is the artist involved in the communication of the appreciation of the History of Art? I think the artist is the 'history of art'. His/her work is the communication. It is necessary for art educators in the college to be sensitive to what art is, to understand it to be an intuitive faculty, and not an intellectual judgement. The emphasis must be taken off written work. There are other forms of expression, such as photographic essays, social projects, video tape, music, etc., which would surely be more compatible. I am not denying the power of expression

or communication of the written word, merely placing it in perspective with our main concern and there, it can be extremely limiting.

In an article on Beckett by Alec Reid, Billie Whitelaw was quoted. " There is nothing to understand in Beckett beyond what you see or feel. If you come out of the theatre not having felt anything, then you can't understand." (14).

14. Alec Reid. The Irish Times. Tuesday, April 20th 1976.



Ring of Brogar TOP PICTURE.

Hagar Qim BOTTEM PICTURE.

EDINBURGH ARTS '76

A Journey from Hagar Qim to Ring of Brogar

Monteith House
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Scotland

Telephone 031-557 0707

Edinburgh Arts '76 was announced in London today. It is both a journey from Hagar Qim in Malta to Ring of Brogar in The Orkneys and a series of exhibitions. It is organised by the Richard Demarco Gallery Limited of Edinburgh, in association with Imperial Tobacco Limited and a number of private donors.

The Edinburgh Arts '76 journey exists for artists who wish to extend their work into new areas, outside the facilities usually offered by a contemporary art gallery. Participating in the journey does not compel the artist to actually make art either on or subsequent to the journey, but the journey does provide the opportunity for art to happen under experimental and occasionally unique conditions.

The journey also enables participants to convey both something of the language of the contemporary visual artist and of the experience and relevance of Edinburgh Arts '76 to laymen and artists whom they encounter on the journey.

The 66 day, 2,500 mile journey is in two sections. The first section, on mainland Europe, starts from Hagar Qim in Malta on 8th June and passes through Sicily, Italy, Yugoslavia and France, to arrive in England at Plymouth on 3rd July. The second section, within the British Isles, passes through South West England, Wales, Ireland and Northern England, to arrive in Scotland on 18th July. The journey eventually reaches Edinburgh on 10th August.

Participants may join the journey for any length of time from the whole 66 days to just one day.

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Organised by The Richard Demarco Gallery Ltd.
in association with Imperial Tobacco Ltd.

Following the journey, the Edinburgh Arts '76 Festival Exhibition will be staged at The Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh. This should reveal, through the work of the participants, a multi-national view of the Edinburgh Arts experience.

The principle Edinburgh Arts '76 exhibition will be presented later in the year at the Scottish Arts Council's Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh. It will consist of art works, such as paintings, sculptures and film which will have resulted from a period of work in the artists' own studios. This exhibition will tour the British Isles. A programme of other Edinburgh Arts '76 one-man and group exhibitions will be presented from January to May, 1977.

A 1976 Edinburgh Arts Scholarship Fund has been established with donations from Imperial Tobacco Limited and a number of private donors. The Fund is to give financial support to outstanding artists or students who wish to participate in the Edinburgh Arts '76 journey. An international jury has selected the 41 successful scholarship winners.

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Press Enquiries: Please contact: Mr. Julian Bannerman
The Richard Demarco Gallery Limited
Tel: 031-557 0707

LETTER CONCERNING THE EDINBURGH ARTS FESTIVAL.

MAY 1976.

18 Whitton road,
Terenure,
Dublin 6.

Towards the end of March, 1976.

Dear Richard,

I was mesmerised by the pilgrimage you took us on, when you were here in the college. I don't think I could have talked to you about it then, for I was still deeply involved in feeling it. It takes me a while to put words on my feelings and ideas. When time removes me from the impact of experience I can verbalise it a little better.

I was very surprised to hear that you had been in the college looking at our work, and more so to get a letter from you. You had so little time when you were here that somewhere in my mind you were not unlike a travelling salesman. But salesmen push their products indiscriminately and certainly are'n't concerned with the possibility that they are creating rather than fulfilling needs. That is why I was surprised you stopped and looked around, thought about people like me, with whom you had exchanged no words, but touched eyes and then wrote to touch thoughts. Thank you for

not breezing through, for confirming your commitment. I think as you call this journey a pilgrimage you are perhaps a missionary. Its only the ideas you live out that have any value.

I have been thinking a lot about the concept of the Edinburgh Arts 76 particularly since I got your letter. Willoughby Sharp interviewed Jack Burnham in Arts (Nov. 1970). I will just quote an extract.

W.S. " So you think art is at an impasse ? "

J.B. " Yes, in terms of breaking rules...

W.S. " Do you see art dissolving into nothingness
in the near future ? "

J.B. " No, its dissolving into comprehension. The reason art exists in the first place is that it is a mystery."

Its very frightening how scientific rationality is dissolving deep feelings within us. The repression of our sensory awareness and organic integration was as necessary to social and economic progress as class oppression or physical exploitation. Most people see the evil of mental indoctrination, physical deprivation and social conditioning, and can therefore be active in revolution to change the situation. But few people have experienced or understood the enormous loss to our mindscape which this sensory repression over the past few decades has achieved. Perhaps we really only escape from this corrosion in our dreams. But its not only

in dreams that we can fully reach a wider mindscape. It is possible to do so consciously, and its very necessary for people to regain the ability to do so. A sensitive minority of people do realise that there is more in the human mindscape than can be articulated. In the onslaught of this sensory repression most people have become disenchanted with religion, and view their rational scientific questions to unanswerable faiths as a mature approach, and the abandonment of unscientific beliefs as a necessary step in the history of our evolution. And yet today away from the corrupt small minded framework of institutional religion, from the politics of industrialisation and capitalism, a scattered religious renewal is happening. This renewal is in many forms, yoga,transcendental meditation, etc., and is evidence of the necessity of our minds to dwell on other plains. Plains of awareness and sensitivity unreachable by science, unhindered by rules, but based on faith. A faith as unquestionable as instinctive as the possibility that tomorrow will exist. Faith, even the sound of the word is fay, fairy, flighty, physically untouchable. Perhaps, but people must regain the ability to be mystified, not to be afraid of mystery, to trust themselves. Learn not to be aggressive and afraid of art, but to feel it. Dissinterest, yet another ailment of this sensory repression that people do not even realise exists.

I can give clues about my work, but I can't explain it. If I could perhaps it wouldn't exist. So its strange, although understandable, when people frustrate themselves trying to rationalise each place, each line, each concept, and the real capacity of art to mean is at another level of consciousness, which eludes words. Why try to substitute words for experience ?

In " Fragments of an interview with P.A.Norwell, April 1969 " Robert Smithson said "people are convinced they know what reality is, so they bring their own concept of reality to the work.....they never contend with the reality that is outside their own, which might be no reality at all."

I think the plausablity of todays art criticism should be severely questioned. The coverage in national papers by art critics is usually only a subjective like or dislike of particular pieces and a physical description of them. I think they should realise a greater responsibility to people than merely making dogmatic statements. Surely ^htheir main credential should be an active sensory awareness, and their aim to somehow awaken and encourage people to more fully participate; to make us aware how we limit ourselves with our rational single vision. Its not that art critics try to explain art, they are not naive, but usually they are dry and insensitive. They are not hearlders to the experience, they try to be it, perhaps unintentionally.

Carl Andre said " Art doesn't come from the mouth. It is not a telling experience. We want experience to tell us something, but I don't think understanding has to do with telling anything.....science is creating and comparing, and art is creating conditions that do not quite exist "

Lucy Lippard says " The Edinburgh Arts tentatives towards a re-integration of the arts and social consciousness are much needed." Yes, definitely this re-integration of the arts and social consciousness is much needed. We cannot conceive of how in the years ahead anxious artists and philosophers will integrate and awaken starved and dormant sensibilities. But they will, in individual roles that are as yet indescribable and only stirring into existence.

And on, and on.....

How strange you should notice something so simple as putting the slides into your box, goodnight.

APPENDIX A

I hope you will be discerning enough to realise and understand how ridiculous the concept of a two hour written examination is to me, having read the preceeding pages. If you would like to talk with me about the thoughts and understanding I have sketched here for you, it would be more acceptable to me.

APPENDIX B

1. Arguelles, Jose A. The Transformative Vision. Shambhala Pub. 1975.
2. Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. BBC/Pelican. 1972.
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9. Graves, Robert. The White Goddess. Faber & Faber 1961.
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15. Lippard, Lucy. edited, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, from 1966 to 1972. Praeger, New York 1973.
16. Malraux, Andre. The Voices of Silence. Paladin 1974, First Pub. 1954.

17. Pondro, Michael. The Manifold in Perception, Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.
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19. Read, Herbert. The Philosophy of Modern Art. Faber & Faber, London, 1951.
20. Roszak, Theodore. Where the Wasteland Ends. Faber & Faber, London 1972.
21. Sharkey, John. Celtic Mysteries. Thames & Hudson, London 1975.