

# APPROACHING THE ART EXPERIENCE

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## Introduction

Generally speaking, there are two methods of approaching the art experience: 1) analytically, and 2) sensually (i.e., concerning ourselves with our responses to sensory stimuli). There is a major difficulty in applying either method singularly. In the first case, the underlying problem is that one needs to employ reductive tools to disassemble what is essentially an holistic intellectual/sensual experience: a meaningful amalgamation of expressive form and concrete information, and in the second case, that one is susceptible to simple intoxication. I will explore the problems arising from the over-emphasis of the first approach, and the consequent misinterpretation and rejection of the second through an integration of principles of symbolism, perception, language and creativity.

## Symbols and Symbolism

In attempting to discuss these particular differences in communication, it is important to recognize the distinctions between two types of equally valid and communicative signifiers: conventional concrete ones such as words or emblems (the swastika or the Christian cross, for example) and the more nebulous or natural signifiers; those that communicate through expressive form. Suzanne Langer, in her book Problems of Art, expresses this difference as that between the symbol used in art, and the "art symbol":

"The difference between the Art Symbol and the symbol used in art is a difference not only in function but of kind. Symbols occurring in art are symbols in the usual sense .. they have meanings that .. enter into the work of art as elements in a composition .. The Art Symbol on the other hand is the expressive form. It is not a symbol in the full familiar sense, for it does not convey something beyond itself. Therefore it cannot strictly be said to have a meaning; what it does have is import .. the art symbol is the absolute image - the image of what otherwise would be irrational, as it is literally ineffable: direct awareness .. the matrix of reality." <sup>(1)</sup>

Symbols, in this sense, are patterns formed around sensory chaos to facilitate psychic incorporation, organization and transformation. By this definition, a symbol is not simply a conventional signifier, but is more akin to a natural one, resident in the human psyche in the form of an archetype, as theorized by Carl Jung. Granted, words are symbols, but they are of another level: comparatively crude material devices, arrived at by convention, to advance inter-personal communications of complex and abstract ideas through structured divisions into definite components.

Jean Klein, an American philosopher writes: "Symbols are a necessary part of culture. They express reality more deeply and suddenly than words. .... They pierce the mind and reflect its own ground in wholeness. Symbols take you beyond complementary." <sup>(2)</sup>

Symbolism in this broader sense, then, is a powerful tool of expression. Symbols are transmitted to the sub-conscious directly, and so are by their very nature beyond the grasp of didactic language. If we embrace these propositions, then we can also accept that the imaginative elements of art making and the abstract comprehension and appreciation of imagery are inspirations of the sub-conscious, which naturally operates through a system of symbols, not words.

## Art and Intellect

One may argue that the making of art is, at its root, an intellectual process, and so it follows that the end-product may be looked at in a similar manner. The great deal of contemporary art and criticism is a testament to this doctrine. There is of course, little doubt that art has intellectual elements; it is, after all, produced as a result of accumulated experience, knowledge, and intense insight on the part of the artist. But there is a great difference between the extremes of what can be described as an intellectual pursuit in the arts. There is the imaginative application of aesthetic and academic knowledge on the one hand, (poetry) and the systematic and didactic usage of a given set of conventional signifiers on the other (analysis). If the latter method is applied in precedence to or to the exclusion of the possibly greater aesthetic, emotive, and expressive aspects of art, we wind up with a problem: we become bound to issues which *speak of* art, or are related to art (political issues, subject matter, artist's technique etc.) and we comprehend the work on a verbal material basis only. This working method has seen increasing popularity since the last century and our ever greater infatuation with the scientific method. As an example, modern musical composition (since Anton Webern's distillation of Schoenberg's twelve note serial method of composition prior to the First World War) has stressed the breaking of traditional rules in western harmony as a first priority, rather than the inspiration of an "uninitiated" audience. Webern advanced the use of musical structure per se, allowing expression to become strictly an incidental by-product and a function of construction. <sup>(3)</sup> Brian Eno, a leading figure in the progressive music scene, comments:

"Avant-garde music is a sort of "research music" - you're glad someone's done it, but you don't necessarily want to listen to it. It's like the North Pole: it extends my concept of the planet to know it exists, but I don't want to go there myself." <sup>(4)</sup>

Eno suggests that not only does an overwhelmingly systematic, analytic working method result in a loss of purpose and tradition; but the process itself, being restrictive, seems inappropriate to the artist, and is in danger of transforming artist's work into an intellectual pursuit. The result is a (possibly misplaced) contribution to the scientific process; research divorced of a sense of (artistic) responsibility, and "truth" a title granted only to the measurable. I am not professing an outright rejection of such a working philosophy; we can and do respect the works of many theoreticians, writers, and philosophers who work well under such restrictions; only they are not necessarily artists. I *am* suggesting that there is some validity in the fashionably rejected Romantic notion that the artist must remain attune to the expressive and intuitive nature of the human spirit, and that this philosophy applies directly to pursuits in the arts. I wish to support and qualify this statement within the context of the visual arts by examining one aspect of the psychology of the comprehension of visual information.

## Assimilation and Digestion

Just as there is a difference between hearing and listening, there are several levels of comprehension with regard to seeing. Symbolic imagery may be thought of as being not so much "seen" as **assimilated**; implying an ingestion and digestion of information in the following fashion: via a immediate path from the senses to the sub-conscious, with the conscious (analytical) functions acting in parallel to this process, not intersecting it. That there is little or no initial intervention in the process of assimilation is critical, simply because the conscious mind is imaginatively bound by the limits of the language(s) through which it functions, and so inadequate if used as an initial basis for comprehension. The possibility of this limitation can be more easily accepted if we consider that existence of entire cultures that

cannot distinguish between various colour hues because there is no verbal differentiation available, or for example, that persons with no knowledge of the German language can make little of the concept of "gemutlichkeit". If we attempt to paraphrase the corporal, sensual experience through active conscious intervention, the process of assimilation and transformation of inherently *symbolic* forms of information in the psyche is impeded. We are consequently left with a wealth of visual information denied access to its natural avenues, and driven towards an incompatible receptor, incapable of dealing with a multi-dimensional stream of information.

If our attraction to the analytic method is powerful enough, or is re-enforced continuously, as it is in a society where data is equated with truth, the point is reached where the work of art (be it in its production or acceptance) can no longer be perceived as an autonomous symbolic whole, but is only recognized for its components: materials, subject matter, potential content, or worse yet, for what that content could "mean", as asserted for example, by photographers such as Alan Sekula. This is not intended to allege that a work cannot be expounded on through dialogue or written commentary, or that it is not necessary for the work of art to withstand valid criticism; only that *immediate, habitual* analysis though dissection must be recognized if creativity and sensitivity are to survive. The art experience can be completely curtailed or derailed if the exclusive means of production and/or consumption is through the fully conscious, and therefore verbal, process. In doing so, the object or image in question is irreversibly damned to the comparatively shallow and more mundane world of undiluted material data. When we invade the realm of the abstract (and all things contain base elements that are not definite) with cognitive tools, we find only nonsense, or at best, parts of the delicate and illusive mechanism may be uncloaked, and knowledge gained, but at the expense of the joy, wonder, and mystery of watching the entire ticking thing. Quite contrary to Sekula's argument that his didactic documentary format is a move away from elitism, by denying the existence of mystery and the unknown functioning elements within the constitution of the art symbol he exposes an arrogant and antiquated presumption of the adequacy and omnipotence of literal data as an expression of reality.

By attempting to define and label an experience, its breadth and depth are reduced to that of its limited linguistic counterpart, or it must be wholly disqualified as irrelevant. Were it not so, there would be little need for the poet, who works within the outer limits of this very system in an attempt to break the stranglehold of words over comparative insight, through the use of a richer communicative sub-systems of metaphor (as tool), and symbol (as creation). These devices are irreplaceable, because when we name, we move from nebulous abstraction to recognizable shape, like a cookie cutter stamping a pattern from a great dough. In so doing, we gain power (knowledge through definition) but we narrow our perception and restrict our imaginations (wisdom through abstract association); a procedure seemingly quite antithetical to the primary needs and goals of the artist in a society infatuated with the first, and sometimes altogether lacking in the latter.

### **Analysis, Art Criticism, and the Art Symbol**

"However distinct may be our views, however vivid our conceptions, or however fervent our emotions, we cannot but be often conscious that the phraseology we have at our command is inadequate to do them justice." - P. Roget, Roget's Thesaurus <sup>(5)</sup>

If the art experience could actually be fixed within the confines of a few pages of factual type, there would seemingly be little need for the art, or conversely it would mean that the art in question had become nothing more than an intellectual statement, political comment or personal opinion, the "meaning" of which could be communicated verbally. Yet this method of analysis and production is attempted on a regular basis and we, as patrons of the arts and as

artists, have become accustomed to expect and even rely upon it. As an example of the extent to which such literal methods have become accepted in the visual arts, I give an excerpt from a recent article in *Parallelogramme* by Ray Cronin, who could in complete confidence review a billboard work by Michael Fernandes depicting a huge hand, the words "Inhabited by a spirit, worshipped by Savages" written on either side of it, in the following way:

"There was a hint of didacticism, a playful exhortation to think, and to question." <sup>(6)</sup>

Consider also the great number of gallery visitors who immediately gravitate more towards examinations and explanations of the works rather than to the works themselves, as if searching for some means of understanding what confronts them, perhaps even their own experience. Whether this is due to some breakdown in our ability to identify with our own senses, the failure of the work, or a symptom of our limited attention span, the question must be asked: Do we as artists continue to contribute to and condone a system of production, analysis and criticism antithetical to what must surely be one of our major concerns?

Unrestrained reductive analysis can degrade any experience, and in extreme cases, render the work experientially impotent; the examination becoming an autopsy - and death a prerequisite for the dissection. To experience a work of art, we must be willing on occasion, to lay aside our knowledge and so perhaps our ego, and allow the work to function in a symbolic fashion; i.e., imparting sensual, corporeal and cognitive experiences, just as when listening to jazz for example, it is necessary to free our minds of the technical knowledge of chord progressions, modes and key changes if we are going to fully appreciate and incorporate the experience of that music. I am not suggesting that we must somehow dismiss and abandon any previous knowledge we have strived to obtain; this would be ridiculous if not impossible. We should instead allow that knowledge to rest where it resides, so that we may attend to our reactions, and allow ourselves the freedom to perform the function of integrating the experience spontaneously, just as in faith we allow ourselves to walk without conscious muscular control over our limbs, once we have mastered the technique as children. (We are simply aware of our feedback to retain stability.)

I would like to use one last musical parallel, simply because music holds only the most obscure referents, and is an accepted alternative to language as a communicative system. Can or should the emotive mechanisms of music, be it a Schubert Quartet or Robert Fripp solo, be explained? If so, what is to explain? We enjoy our engagement with the work precisely because it stimulates in ways which our non-musical world does not. The joy that is evoked in us when we enter into such an experience rather than analyze (and so intervene) is indicative of how genuine our need for non-verbal stimuli is. So called "primitive" cultures are more attune to this, no surprise considering that music and art are a more integral and necessary part of everyday life. Through a heightened appreciation for the more instinctive, non-verbal communications systems analogous to those of the sub-conscious comes an understanding that transcends words, and an expanded awareness. Conversely, singularly didactic art, such as in the recent exhibition at SAW Gallery, "Drawing the Line", <sup>(7)</sup> is limited to functioning for the most part, across a verbal (material) plane, while conversely attempting to address problems in human (spiritual) depth. Sadly, this is perhaps now a more effective method of communication within a society where desensitization through media bombardment and constant exposure to shock imagery is an everyday norm; but it functions within the restrictive and limiting parameters of that (analytical) system, and so condones and supports it. The alternatives cannot be dismissed as not being socially engaged. From a dry and literal vantage point such as Allan Sekula's, B. Newman's *Voice of Fire*, for example, could be seen as three evenly spaced bars of flat colour causing certain optical effects, i.e., a re-affirming self-referential modernist statement. Granted, Newman worked within the parameters of the system inasmuch as he painted in a the then-current style, yet he produced work with much wider implications, ones that subverted that same system by daring to incorporate more eternal notions of spiritual emotivity and communication through sublime form i.e., through the use of archetypal symbolism.

Looking through the eyes of socially concerned artists, our society suffers from the effects of a severely stunted awareness - a lack of understanding of deeper holistic relationships. Can this be attributable to a lack of use of our own processes of symbolic incorporation, imagination, and realization? A connection between these disparities can be made if one imagines that our own thought processes are best described as ones of whole transformations of symbolic information, as opposed to the processing of data fragments. <sup>(8)</sup>

In an art-depleted, information-based, materialist environment, we function mostly within the confines of a system where the accepted experiential limits range from the superficial to the factual (i.e.: data of low or high quality). Unhappily, the alternative processes of exploration, with their inherent high risk of failure (or provocation) are hardly encouraged; even, it seems, within the supposed safety net of the artistic community. There is a great fear, upheld and re-enforced by our peers, of acknowledging that which we cannot define or decipher. In attempting to deal with the fallout of this deluded stance, this imaginative "scurvy", is it not the artist's function, as the self appointed shaman of our time, to offer an orange (or a lemon), rather than:

- a) point out the number of dead and dying
- b) list the symptoms,  
or worse yet,
- c) perpetuate the illness though acceptance?

In other words, does not art that functions *constructively* itself better contribute to the discussion and/or *resolution* of the human crisis' which didactic "issue art" attempts to critique? A concerted effort to avoid our habitual reliance on immediate analysis as a prerequisite to construction and comprehension results in a fuller realization and greater sensitivity to our surroundings, be it art or our social or natural environments.

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"I guess we're all, or most of us, wards of that nineteenth century science which denied existence to anything it could not measure or explain. The things we couldn't explain went right on but surely not with our blessing. We did not see what we couldn't explain, and meanwhile a great part of the world was abandoned to children, insane people, fools, and mystics, who were more interested in what is than in why it is. So many old and lovely things are stored in the world's attic, because we don't want them around us and we don't dare throw them out." - John Steinbeck <sup>(9)</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- (1) Suzanne Langer, ~~Problems of Art~~ p.139
- (2) Jean Klein, ~~Who Am I?~~ p.107
- (3) Martin Cooper, ~~The New Oxford History Of Music, The Modern Age~~ p.375
- (4) Brian Eno, taped interview
- (5) Peter Roget, ~~Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases~~ p.13
- (6) Ray Cronin, "Parallelogramme" Vol.17 no.3, p.42
- (7) (Kiss and Tell, SAW Gallery, Ottawa Ontario, Nov. 1992)
- (8) Suzanne Langer, ~~Philosophy in a New Key~~
- (9) John Steinbeck, ~~The Winter of Our Discontent~~  
Middlesex G.B.: Penguin Books Ltd. 1961 p.80

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