

## CURRENT PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

From an examination of the public sphere, in which the visual experience of towns, streets and buildings have often been designed to provide a greater awareness of context, I began to look again at how art and its objects were perceived. Apart from this focus on social and political aspects of the art world, I returned to the role of the individual, making work that was made and placed in such a way that emphasised position and viewpoint, sculptures in wood, often retaining the dimensions of the original beam, plank or post. They could be seen initially as unchanged, but further examination showed an intricate process of changing forms, perspective and inner structures, the suggestion being, the more you looked the more you saw and understood. I was also looking to destabilise the viewer, visually and metaphorically. Work began to emerge that used faceting to reflect the available light, introducing ambiguity and spacial uncertainty in the viewer.

Inert matter is 'transubstantiated' into art by the spectator's point of view. This has been seen as a reassessment of the Modernist concept of the self-sufficiency of the art object in favour of a consideration of its social context.

The interiority and authenticity automatically bestowed by Modernism onto the art object, can be positioned against the externalising and 'democratic' focus of Relationalism. The audience as 'active receptors, awaiting events rather than prescribing sensations.' The artist not as autocrat but as participant.

So, the artist is not self-sufficient but a product of and dependent on, a social context.

Moving barriers between art and experience, work can be made that physically locates the viewer as an active participant and engages their gaze as well as their presence. Fried's objection (in *Art and Objecthood*, UCP 1998) was that the emphasis on the materiality of the art work in Minimalism deprived the viewer of an aesthetic experience that was 'transformative'. Is this a transformation of consciousness and of the source material?

*"One tends to see the bottom segment, or the bottom two segments, as though somewhat from above and in perspective - while at the same time one is not given enough data to locate them in a definite spatial context, in relation either to contiguous shapes or to some ground plane. Moreover, because the top segment of the Z-form runs across the upper edge of the square and is therefore horizontal, one tends to experience that segment as frontal. But this would mean that the Z-form is not only irregular in two dimensions but bent or warped in three - though it is not at all clear which segment or segments are bent or warped and which, if any, are taken as normative. The bevelled ends of the Z-form, each parallel to nothing else in the painting, compound the ambiguity by implying that the respective planes of both the bottom and top segments are warped away from, or are oblique to, that of the picture surface - though, of course, they might not be."*

Fried criticised Minimalism as 'theatrical', as being 'over attentive' to the audience and thus having a 'design function', rather than providing a transformative experience. This has been seen as a Marxist critique of Fine Art as a 'palliative'. Minimalists might also be identified as separating the artistic act away from the studio and the 'hand of the artist' and towards the factory, fabricator and the order carried out by the machine, perhaps repeated.

The viewer as an influence on the phenomenon references 'Phenomenological' approaches to Archaeology, - 'the landscape as experienced is truer than the landscape measured or excavated to actual human response.'

An interesting aspect of this idea is that you can reflect on your ability to differentiate between the representation of experience and an actual experience, as an art object might be seen. So you can examine your response and yourself as a participant in a cultural and in a natural act. Magritte's idea that perception always intercedes between reality and ourselves has been very influential. The conscious understanding of the conceit of representation and of the referencing contained in art, is an act of participation in the art work.

Perspective, viewpoint and scale can be referred to as analogous to perception. Taken literally in an artwork, how long and how carefully you look determines what you see. Also, where the viewer is physically located determines the impact and visibility of the artwork.

This is a conceptualisation of subject-object relations. Material forms can be described in unlimited ways because they can be experienced by unlimited individuals. Based on individual experience and knowledge, art works and the response they stimulate also function as cultural codes: This is an esoteric system that can protect itself by generating a framework for effective operations: you work within the system if you want to be valued by it.

Husserl's critique of scientific empiricism proposed a fundamental distinction between scientific description and human experience. Human experience cannot be quantified, measured or weighed. So any evaluation of experience must be culturally loaded. You see and feel what you want to see and feel, as your previous experiences and social contexts have taught you to do so. The human body itself provides a starting point for a knowledge of the world. (Tilley 1994; Thomas 2002).

Participant observation is controlled by the social or artifactual context. It enters into a dialectical process. Objects have an 'agency', that is an effect on the body and mind. We have an 'agenda' in the way we interpret things just as social or artifactual things are made, due to human processes. This reflective process is a dialectic one- a 2-way system of reflection, analysis and conclusion. (Renfrew and Bahn 2005). Structures allow action but also constrain action. Bourdieu proposes a relationship between 'habitus' (entrenched attitudes) and pragmatic strategies used to pursue values. Centrally, people are born into a world of 'meaningful structures' which we reinforce through our social actions.

'Practices happen within historical settings inherited from the past, including cultural beliefs, attitudes and habits' - thus actors possess values, which both help them to act out and constrain their actions. Artists are moved to add, rearrange, disrupt and critique existing systems of order, control and explanation.

*Ambiguity is usually considered anathema in Human Computer Interaction. We argue, in contrast, that it is a resource for design that can be used to encourage close personal engagement with systems. We illustrate this with examples from contemporary arts and design practice, and distinguish three broad classes of ambiguity according to where **uncertainty is located in the interpretative relationship linking person and artifact.** Ambiguity of information finds its source in the artefact itself, **ambiguity of context in the***

**sociocultural discourses that are used to interpret it, and ambiguity of relationship in the interpretative and evaluative stance of the individual.** *For each of these categories, we describe tactics for emphasising ambiguity that may help designers and other practitioners understand and craft its use.*

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And again, another abstract, this time on Abstract Art and Perception:

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The relationship between people and art is complex and intriguing. Of course, artworks are our creations; but in interesting and important ways, we are also created by our artworks. Our sense of the world is informed by the art we make and by the art we inherit and value, works that, in themselves, encode others' world views. This two-way effect is deeply rooted and art encodes and affects both a culture's ways of perceiving the world and its ways of remaking the world it perceives. The purpose of this paper is to indicate ways in which a study of abstraction in art can be used to discover insights into, to quote the call for papers for this issue, 'our perception of the world, acquired through experience' and 'the way concepts are formed and manipulated to achieve goals'.

Gombrich's 'Art and Illusion' gives insights into the production and reception of art. He suggests that an artist's training is not just in technical and professional skills but also in the ability to produce work that influences or 'trains' the viewer into believing the values that the artwork proposes. Those values he called 'schemata', strategies of interpreting and recreating the world that are learnt from other art and modified by the artist. This need to interpret and perhaps analyse the subject also demands the viewer to work out an interpretation of the artwork. Gombrich also stresses the viewer's need to work at an interpretation of an artwork: 'the beholder's share in the readings of the image, his capacity, that is, to collaborate with the artist'.

Max Bill writes :

'Art is unthinkable without the effort of the individual. Order on the other hand is impossible without an objectifying structure. (my underlining) This means that art can originate only when and because individual expression and personal invention subsume themselves under the principal of the order of the structure and derive from it a new lawfulness and new formal properties (Bill 1965)

This ordering is a keynote of Gestalt Psychological accounts of art. Kepes (1947) states 'The experience of an image is a creative act of integration. Its essential characteristic is that by plastic power an experience is formed into an organic whole.

Perceiving artworks is an active process of extracting order from a formless world.

Perceptual problem-solving is a way of attracting attention. (Tyler 1999) says 'The effort to solve perceptual problems itself forms an essential component of the artistic experience; by slowing down the perceptual processes of decoding the art work the viewer becomes aware of their evolution and interplay over time, and then experiences a sense of achievement when the full composition falls into place (or of continued mystery if it does not)'.

This slowing down also may provide a more obviously active role in the encounter. There may be a sense of bodily experience or absorption into the structure and order of the artwork.

### **CREATIVE INTENTIONS AND METHODOLOGY**

By producing sculptures and drawings that draw the viewer into an increasingly complex relationship, that offer a range of solutions, some explicit and others mysterious, I hope to put an emphasis on the viewer's own bodily and sensory position, from the specific visual experience to the contemplation of social context, valuation and sense of order.

The control of viewpoint, positioning and a careful installation of the various elements of an exhibition of this work is important in building a series of visual sensations that hold the viewer's attention, and create a sense of engagement and participation in the work. There may also be destabilisation or disorientation of the perception. The holding of the viewer's gaze and attention is intended as a ploy to extend the experience of the artworks, to set up a sense of mystery or intrigue.

Working with different scales of both drawings and sculptures would enable me to experiment with viewer placement and to explore the physical relationship of object and observer. Intimacy, detail, perspective shifts, apparent and real volume, field and angle of view, scales relative to the viewer and their emotional value. Also the lighting and visibility of surfaces, shadows and illusion.

Central also to this proposal is the presentation of process, material and control. The techniques of drawing and sculpture, the order and chance, structure both introduced and natural in the work, and the physical presence of the objects, are important aspects. There is therefore a direct, simple and immediate response to the work as well as one more thoughtful and drawn out. I see the process of engagement with the work as complex, however, and I have been trying to examine that process to understand the wider issues of the exhibition and the role of art in society.

Reflective reviews of work in progress, with photographs and analysis of success or failures undertaken monthly, would be a way of assessing progress.

### **PROPOSED FORMAT AND METHOD OF COMMUNICATIONS**

Work installed at NUCA would need careful placement and lighting, a consideration of viewpoint, sight lines and intelligibility. This is all subject to the space available. I would propose alternatives to some lighting fixtures to maximise the effect of the work, strong top or back lighting for example, probably not available in the painting studios at present. 2d drawings and photographs would be presented in existing conditions. Particularly important is the place of the viewer, but this plan is again subject to the installation site. I would find it particularly useful at this point to be able to work on the space available for the exhibition. It has always been a primary consideration and for me is a vital aspect of installation or exhibition. Without that certainty, plans have to be conditional.

Richard Bray. 17-02-09 Word count 1558 excluding quotes.