

Despite the  
progressive  
intentions of  
many of the  
great modernist  
artists of the  
twentieth  
century -  
Rodchenko's

## The Delight of Form

Despite the progressive intentions of many of the great modernist artists of the twentieth century- Rodchenko's social optimism, Eva Hesse's sensual panels- the look of much modern and contemporary art seems obscure and without interest to many people. When they can connect, art may seem to have a disappointing so-what or 'art-lite' factor (1). Critic Adrian Searle ended his review of Doris Salcedo's giant crack in the floor of Tate Modern: 'Shibboleth will mostly be regarded as entertainment. That is art's fate, and our loss.' (2)

Moving from viewer back to maker, Searle's rueful tone reminds me of a remark by St. Exupery. Looking at an exhausted worker asleep on a train he speculates he could be a concert pianist. How one gets from one to the other depends, in my experience, not so much on notions of innate genius. Relative childhood poverty may be, for example, a better starting point to indicate future learning abilities as in a recent report by various neuroscientists for the American Association for the Advancement of Science:

'The biggest effects are on language and memory. The finding about memory impairment- the ability to encounter a pattern and remember it- really surprised us.' (3)

Our students will have particular reason for sympathy at this finding. By the time they have finished their MA they will have had the opportunity of a further two years learning; from the historical resources of art, and how to construct their own formal language which will realise their subject-matter.

The subjects explored in this group exhibition are inevitably diverse. But at this level the work on show shares a sense of important, contemporary matters; the viewer should be interested in taking up the prompts of the work. It is therefore a loss indeed if the viewer has only a limited way into them.

To try to widen the access I want here to explore two aspects of art the untutored viewer may not have explicitly considered: attention and form. It seems to me that without some understanding of their role and contribution the experience of art is reduced to looking for content and being impressed with execution. These thoughts are very much informed by what psychoanalysis has to say about the experience of art.

First attention. Attention is a higher-order mental mechanism forming part of the processing of information into meaning. By the time we are about six years old we can negotiate our familiar surroundings and tasks partly sub-consciously, 'without thinking'. If we are put into a quite different environment we have to make an effort of attention. Similarly in class and lecture-hall we have to attend to what is being said (and, of course, after a while may 'wander off'). Similarly too with art and poetry, but with a crucial difference. The history teacher will be trying to be as clear and transparent as possible as she develops the content of the lesson. However, to give attention to poetry and art is to be exposed to the play of form as well as the content you are trying to understand. We now start to understand why the connection of attention with form

produces a distinct kind of understanding: because the connection is one of emotion as well as intellect. So, along with understanding (or being questioned), the viewer, having given time to the sensuous experience of form, will enjoy a deep satisfaction Freud characterised as specially that of art.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur helps us take one further step to understanding the significance of the emotional satisfaction produced by form in art. In his *On interpretation*, essay on Freud is a section entitled 'The analogy of the work of art' (4). In it Ricoeur spells out, from Freud's scattered references to art, that, for Freud's purposes there are four parallel mental phenomena in man: mental illness, dreams, jokes and art. Ricoeur situates Freud's interest in art, and jokes, in relation to his proposals about the negotiation of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. This negotiation should lead to the acceptance of the distinction between fantasy and reality which has to take place to move us into successful adulthood. The acceptance comes at a cost- of painful repression according to Freud. The interesting, and valuable status of art is it maintains the distinction between reality and fantasy; art is a fiction of form, though of course embedded in reality. The giving in to powerful unrealistic desire by the unformed child or the ill adult may be dangerous. Giving in to emotion via the formal fictions of art is not only in principle safe but reparative, satisfying, precisely because we may be, consciously or not, frustrated that we cannot cross the fantasy border in our real adult transactions in a life which is open-ended, sometimes formed, sometimes form-less.

If you find some of this interesting I recommend Adrian Stokes' *The invitation in Art* (1965), a sustained engagement with artistic form informed by proposals about early life and learning by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.

## Notes

1. v. *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, Julian Stallabrass, revised edition London 2006.
2. *The Guardian* 9/10/07 pp.21-2.
3. Martha Farah in 'Poverty mars formation of infant brains', Clive Cookson, *Financial Times* 16/2/08 p.5.
4. Paris 1965 pp.167-9 in the original.

## The delight of form, South Square, Thornton 19/4/08

A talk following on from the catalogue essay for *Are we there yet?*

Linguistic form: from representation to semiosis

As part of the exploration of the special contribution of form in art I want briefly to say something about the change in our understanding of form's contribution to meaning in language, especially the symbolic language of literature and poetry.

Plato proposed that the fundamental character of language is that it is representational:

linguistic form represents content. In addition, crucially, he firmly established which was the important partner here: content, lying beneath or beyond language, while linguistic form was a generally superficial and flawed attempt to attain to it.

This unequal partnership in favour of content was turned upside down by the research of two 20th. century thinkers in the human sciences. For both thinkers it is form which actively and creatively produces meaning, and meaning can be re-visited and modified by future generations. Meaning, let alone truth, is not a metaphysical entity outside place or history waiting to be properly represented.

First, the comparative linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Working over a period of ten years at Geneva University looking for the underlying, original key words, and therefore concepts, of all indo-european languages- probably to be found in sanskrit-, he came to the conclusion that the representational basis of his research was completely mistaken. In his lectures of 1916 he proposed that a given community's language has an arbitrary and approximate working relation to reality. Similarly, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, researching into the belief and value systems of south american tribes around the mid-century proposed that a community's cultural myths structure their relation to reality.

\* \* \*

Form in art; where does the pleasure and persuasiveness come from?

The entirely re-valued contribution of linguistic form in the symbolic creations of literature and poetry is now strongly established. It is a matter of the re-combination of this adjective with this noun with this verb and so on. But although there may be a strong material dimension in play in poetry- of assonance, alliteration, rhythm- there remains also the reasoning, intellectual, apparently 'transparent' character of language. It is here that the formal contribution in art seems to diverge in what it engages in us from what language engages.

i) Paul Ricoeur, *On interpretation, essay on Freud*, Paris 1965, section 'The analogy of the work of art' pp.167-9 in the original. Ricoeur brings together Freud's scattered thoughts on art firmly within the framework of Freud's proposals about the negotiation of the pleasure and reality principles - see the implications in the catalogue essay.

'[The] general conception of aesthetic pleasure as detonator of deep discharges constitutes the most daring insight in the whole of psychoanalytic aesthetics. The connection between technique and the hedonistic can be taken as the guiding thread in the most incisive researches of Freud and his school.'

ii) C. Fred Alford, *Melanie Klein and Critical Social Theory*, Yale 1989: split objects, object-relations.

Giving attention to the combinations of form in an image may engage very early experiences of objects still without words or pattern as well as later integrations of objects. When Freud pursued clinical regression in a patient in analysis, he would come up against a 'presentation' or 'imago' from the patient which was, as Ricoeur puts it, in/of a supra- or infra-linguistic place/character, the place of operation of the unconscious. (On interpretation p.385ff.)

Adrian Stokes, *The invitation in art*, London 1965.

'We very often associate creativeness first of all with an ability to disregard an order elsewhere obtained, to ignore an itch for finality in favour of a harder-won integration whose image may still suggest an overpowering process, no less than its integration with other elements.'

Hence the invitation in art, the invitation to identify empathetically, a vehemence beyond an identification with realised structure, that largely lies, we shall see more fully, in a work's suggestion of a process in train, of transcending stress, [...] p.16.

Roger Fry, 'An essay in aesthetics' in *Form and vision*, London 1920.

'I have admitted that there is beauty in Nature, that is to say that certain objects constantly do, and perhaps any object may, compel us to regard it with that intense disinterested contemplation that belongs to the imaginative life, and which is impossible to the actual life of necessity and action; but that in objects created to arouse the aesthetic feeling we have an added consciousness of purpose on the part of the creator, that he made it on purpose not to be used but to be regarded and enjoyed [...] p.24.'

'Retrospect', *ibid.*

'Supposing, then, that we are able to isolate in a work of art this purely aesthetic quality to which Mr. Clive Bell gives the name of "significant form". Of what nature is it? [...]

I think we are all agreed that we mean by significant form something other than agreeable arrangements of form, harmonious patterns, and the like. [...]

[...] One can only say that those who experience [the aesthetic emotion] feel it to have a peculiar quality of "reality" which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop.' p.199.

Hanna Segal, 'A psycho-analytical approach to aesthetics' in *New directions in psycho-analysis*, New York 1955.

'One of Freud's greatest contributions to psychology was the discovery that sublimation is the outcome of a successful renunciation of an instinctual aim; I would like to suggest here that such a successful renunciation can only happen through a process of mourning. The giving up of an instinctual aim, or object, is a repetition and at the same time a re-living of the giving up of the breast. It can be successful, like this first situation, if the object to be given up can be assimilated in the ego, by the process of loss and internal restoration. I suggest that such an assimilated object becomes a symbol within the ego. [...]

If psychic reality is experienced and differentiated from external reality, the symbol is differentiated from the object; it is felt to be created by the self and can be freely used by the self.' pp.396-7.

Why form in art produces an important satisfaction beyond an intellectual understanding

Art as deliberate fiction helps us negotiate the pleasure and reality principles; we enjoy the coherence of the fiction, so helping us with the relative incoherence of reality. But in addition it seems, with the experience of very good art, we enjoy having to re-go through the acknowledgement of the freely-made distinction between fantasy and reality. It is this aspect of the experience which satisfies the integration of the ego that has acknowledged that the world (initially the breast) is both good and bad, and that the work of art's fiction is an exemplary what if? of a far better world.