

ARTIST'S NOTE

During early years the richness of human vision and spatial awareness were unconscious drivers behind my drawings which were often executed using figurative forms and influenced by a conventional desire to capture the spatial and the tonal, as a directly observed reality. All of these works were of course undertaken without any awareness of 'art theory' or different modes of representation. Understandably, these received and rather conventional approaches to drawing were critically interrogated whilst undertaking an undergraduate course at Reading University in the 1970s.

My undergraduate experience increasingly led me to become aware of the dominance of abstract painting, and how its ascendancy was impacting on students' creative development in much the same way that a political ideology (c.f. 'McCarthyism') or an obscurantist theology can stultify human potential. This influence was truly pernicious because it engendered a student fashion for the slapdash, the mystical and the irrational, all of which went hand in hand with a machismo male-dominated professoriate of abstract painters, and the organisational vilification of both figurative art and of anyone who embraced the rational in their approach to art, a situation which was profoundly disturbing, stigmatising and anti-intellectual yet curiously this attitude was then widespread and very influential in British art schools (e.g. Steele 1982)[1].

At that time (like several students) I was very fortunate to have met and to subsequently study with Terry Pope, a constructionist, who was developing optical instrumentation that enhanced visual perception, either by altering inter-ocular distance (via extended parallax), or by everting visual space "...So the surface against which an object is seen becomes the transparency through which it is seen" such that "reflections behave like shadows and perspective is reversed" (Pope 1978, p.89).

Pope always shared with students the results of his own experimentation from which he realised the possibility of making work so well that it concealed the means of its own making. Pope's reason for using "...an anonymous surface was to make an object which contained a record of its origins, not a confession of them, to have a window so clear it could be seen through without itself being seen" (Pope 1978, p.89). Pope's stated method, which utilised anonymity and aimed to produce a 'record' as opposed to a 'confession' of its production, demonstrated to students not just that artists could develop rational approaches in their practice which were based on their own phenomenological and sensory experimentation, but also that the intrinsic quality of materials and choice of production techniques could be of enormous significance for the intended perceptual aim of the work; this was important learning which was often eschewed by others at Reading as the department's 1970s organisational culture subtly steered many students away from rationality and rational approaches to art practice.

As a result of the validity I sensed in my reactions to all of these formative influences and experiences, my work was becoming transformed through an engagement with a more rational approach in order to explore the perceptual conventions governing sight and vision as a means of actively enlisting prospective viewers.

I began 2/3-D studies that appropriated what were traditionally 'painterly' concerns, such as perspective, foreground and background; using both square and cube as units of composition, and with industrially-manufactured materials so as to test out their intrinsic processes without literalism or emotionality (after Wise 1968). For example, *Intersecting Grid* (1977) used black and white lines made of Letraline which intersected in foreground and background planar positions across a flat (coloured) Perspex sheet. The machine-produced uniformity in the Letraline enhanced the intended visual interplay of foreground-background in a way which transcended manual techniques. I also began to relocate these concerns towards 3-D formations within a rational approach using diverse media, including metal, painting, screen printing and computer/digital graphics. For example, *Interlocking Planes* (1977) transposed the 2-D foreground-background interplay to a 3-D form, constructed from anonymous grids to produce alternating cubic volumes; whilst *Oblique Interpenetrating Planes 1 and 2* (1978) both delineated spatial volumes with linear elements constructed from steel and Perspex. I also began to research the literature on visual perception in order to begin to understand the physiological basis of sight and vision in order to underpin my research, submitting a final year dissertation on visual perception, language and creativity alongside the requisite assessment exhibition.

Commencing postgraduate studies at the Slade's 'Experimental Media' studio, I began to integrate several aspects of these visual concerns into unitary pieces which incorporated light, electronics, mechanics and real time computer outputs. For example, *Orthogonal Light Construction* and *Oblique Light Construction*.

I also developed a critical understanding of the political utility of conceptualisation of art in different media and practices like 'painting', 'sculpture' etc., such that the ideas are, in essence, the constant information but their media realisation is malleable such that the physical manifestation of a particular concept is more akin to 'boundary objects' (after Star and Griesemer 1989) where visual information can be used in different ways by different art communities such as 'sculptors', 'painters' etc. Whilst 'boundary objects' may be malleable, and interpreted and interpretable differently across such diverse communities, they have enough immutable content to maintain integrity. For example, the pieces *Orthogonal 2D* (1980) and *Perspectival Relief* (1980) were constructions specifically designed for a two week thoroughfare exhibition followed, by deconstruction, and this short lifespan, which was an uncontested characteristic of those pieces, also implied the validity of a performative categorisation.

A characteristic of such material fluidity and conceptual malleability was that the 'outputs' of this 'research' did not lend themselves to easy categorisations such as 'sculpture', 'painting' or even 'performance art'. Inside of the organisational cultures of the 1970s/80s art school, such boundary-less practice could suffer a crisis of longevity, as one may not have gained access to important scaffolds to seed a professional career from within those organisational systems; which were often based on a demonstrable sycophancy on behalf of those less powerful (students) towards those more powerful (artists/tutors), and conversely, the patronage of the more powerful (artists/tutors) towards those less powerful (students).

Such a 'power play' could be witnessed in operation on a daily basis, especially at Reading, which like a chemical equation, can shift in different directions simultaneously, depending upon mutual personal gaming and other interpersonal and organisational relativities. If one's 'research outputs' (to use today's academic jargon to designate the products of one's artistic endeavours) crossed various domains and powerful traditions like 'painting' or 'sculpture' then there was less traction for such sycophancy and patronage, as the intended visual experience – which, essentially, is my artistic 'research' - becomes the primary concern, and the traditional media, with all of their histories, trappings and class associations, become lesser concerns.

How to 'classify' work as such became problematic for the 1978s/80s art school culture which was built on very delimited categories such as 'painting' (c.f. at Reading meant: 'abstract') or 'sculpture' whilst the boundary-less output was a free-fall conceptual imaginary, which escaped more rigid classification, but unfortunately its creator could suffer a similar free-fall with a traction-less career route ahead. There was also the constant need to hold influential curricular-institutional gatekeepers and mediators to account so that particular production tools, resources and opportunities were accessible to the students in the Experimental Media studio who were often seen as external to the more conventional Sculpture or Painting studios and which traditionally appropriated (all of) the available core facilities, such as machine tools, required by nearly all postgraduate students.

Prospectively, the themes of ambiguity, rationality, iteration and re-iteration have been recurrent characteristics in my subsequent 2-/3-D studies. These included several studies I designed and had filmed from the screen of a Data General computer located in the Slade School's Experimental Media studio during 1979-81 [2].

The filming of these studies was accomplished by Christopher Briscoe, Robert Fearn and Julian Sullivan. The Basic computer programmes running on the Data General computer were written for me by Briscoe based on my design brief (as teaching oneself to write such programmes/learning such skills, at that time, appeared technically 'beyond the pale'). Sullivan developed the automated film frame-advance system for image capture. Fearn organised the camera rostrum. These 16 mm studies (now digitally converted and available on this website) were originally created in order to visualise imagined moving structures and expanding/collapsing imaginary spaces. The latter were complex imaginaries which seemed quite impossible to manufacture in any streamline 3-D artefact that was capable of capturing the imagined spatial potentials. Thus, these computer programmes were not 'generative' in any sense of enacting 'autonomous' or 'unintended' pictorial consequences (c.f. Johnson 1981) as they resulted in pre-designed 2-D pictorial adjuncts which allude to dynamic spatial imaginaries (Nisbet 1995).

ENDNOTES

1. A 21st century example of such vilification can be found in Wright's (2009) Arts Council-funded critique of constructionist (or 'constructivist') art. Wright sees such work as just 'technique', and thus elides the perceptual and experimental within such work, further judging it as passé given the technical advent of personal computing which somehow Wright argues has assimilated the constructional potentials / values and thereby superceded any constructionist aesthetic.
2. For further information on the application of early computer programming to art at the Slade School of Fine Art (UCL) during 1970-1980, see Brown et al (2009).

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