OBSERVATIONS OF EMOTIONAL IMPACTS ON

FORMAL ABSTRACTION

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

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I would like to acknowledge Professor David E. Black's patience in recognizing that I was determined to discover myself, Associate Professors Steve Lawson and Barbara Groseclose for helping me make the discovery, and my family for letting me do it.
INTRODUCTION

It is my intention to present in this thesis my present understanding of Art, the influences that shaped this understanding, Art's response in the viewer, its use by the artist and discussion of two particular pieces of my work.
I. INFLUENCES THAT SHAPED UNDERSTANDINGS

The primary concern of the society which nurtured me was work. Work was seen as producing money, money to buy things that can be owned and touched. Work was not to buy time, culture or intellectual pursuits, but to buy survival things: food, shelter, taxes, machinery for work and security. Theirs was a physical world. Deviation from the norm was unacceptable.

This background fostered an emphasis on craftsmanship, on hard clean objects. It also fostered a concern for clarity of physical relationships in these objects. However, this background also fostered a great need for emotional expression: awareness of introspection was unacceptable in that world. The subtleties of the emotional relationships in my work are thus also a result.

My war-time experience paralleled my earlier experiences in two major ways: the unacceptable of emotion and necessity of objects for survival.

My interest in art, and sculpture in particular, is clearly connected to a need for acceptable emotional expression and the making of objects. My survival seems to be still involved with these two realities. In connection with my immediate concerns (i.e. this paper) these experiences have led me to a formulation regarding
the whole idea of Art which de-emphasizes the importance of the art object itself, as an object. As developed in the next section, the importance is seen as residing not in the object itself, but in that which is prior to the object, that force to which I will refer to as Art. Thus both my work and my theoretical stance can be seen as an effort to modify (and thus make useful to me) my background along these two dimensions, emotions and objects.

In terms of conceptual influence on my understanding, many schools and styles of art have been of value. Of primary importance was Constructivism, which includes the artists Malevich, Tatlin, Gato and Pevsner. Among these, Gato and Pevsner are of primary importance. They reached a formulation of abstract art that not only embodies Tatlin's conviction that the new art must accept the technology of the modern age, but it must also be a non--, even anti-materialistic concept of artistic expression, the latter being Malevich's earlier theory of art. They claimed that emotional content is just as important as the formal content of the art object. This theory, in itself, gave me a stance that allowed equal consideration for the object and its emotional content. I needed, however, a more personal understanding of the basis for making these objects. Writers such as Wittgenstein, Ram Das and Ziff offered me
alternate views of the artist's task and his basis for
decision making. These authors, and others of the
same nature, offered insight as to the sources of art
activity. While not dealing directly with the issues
I am confronting they offered the atmosphere for its
understanding: Wittgenstein and his descriptions of
the use of language, Ram Das and his descriptions of
creative being and Ziff's analysis of doing.
II. A PARTICULAR USE OF THE WORD ART

Anyone who chooses to become seriously involved in art has a tendency to need to describe what art is. My study has been concerned with both making sculpture and meeting this need. In attempting to understand what it is, the first consideration is to determine the nature of Art through formulation of a definition of it, hence one asks the question, "What is Art?"

In the search for the definition that will answer this question one discovers that there are many, many definitions to draw from. With each new age, art-movement, or philosophy of art there has been an attempt, based on its definition of Art, to establish a new or revised ideal, which claimed to be the true definition about the nature of Art. The claim has been made that the others are false because they left out some necessary or sufficient properties.

However, all these notions concentrate on the art object itself, that is, past experiences which have been completed. If Art is an "open concept," as Morris Weitz suggests, and as I believe, then interpreting the whole idea of Art through art objects eliminates too much. It does not touch the source of Art. It does not touch that force that stimulated the artist to make this heretofore unknown object. If one is willing to accept the art object
as Art then he need not search farther, but if he realizes that the art object is a product of Art then consideration of what precedes the object is essential.

Art Theory is not the same as Art. It too is based on past art objects, completed experiences. Further, saying what Art "is" turns Art into an object or thing which could be completely knowable, i.e. defined. Thus neither theory nor art objects can be seen as Art itself.

My premise, then, is that Art generates those qualities to be found in the art object. The artist's experience, or stimulation, precedes his art concepts. This experience or stimulation is part of what I refer to here as Art. I see Art as a generative force, a process, which the artist draws upon in creating the object. While Art is not the same as the art object or art theory, and is not knowable in its entirety, it is partially understandable or perceivable through an art object, and through art theory. To this extent the study of art objects or art theories is valuable, but obviously incomplete. Art in its entirety then is "unknown", sometimes to the artist, but almost necessarily to the viewer.

I claim that Art is known by that event when the artist's emotion is combined with the physical elements that are used in the creation of an art object. Thus,
the art object is itself not Art, but merely the result of that event; the artists glancing contact with Art. Art is seen here as the prior necessity, that which is drawn on by the artist. Writers in the 18th Century referred to having a "genie" or a "genius" whispering to them, e.g. Johnathan Swift. (The "Muse" of the 19th Century.) The metaphysical poets of the 17th Century, e.g. John Donne, wrote of being in touch with the "spirit" which was often represented as nurturing waters: unknowable but clearly evident; tapped into, but not held. I see Art as the source for art objects and as being experienced by the artist and, at some distance, by the viewer. It is not a thing, it is an event.
III. THE VIEWER: FORMAL ASPECTS AND EMOTION

From the viewers' stance Art is only to be understood through the object presented to him by the artist. The presentational elements, the formal aspects, offer the emotions or feelings to the viewer; the balance and tension, the strength and delicacy. Things delicately hung seem hardly able to hold themselves up or out, suggesting the possibility of immediate change. For example Three Months of Emotion, (see Plate IV), cut one wire and it changes. The choice of materials and the kind of presentation of these materials are analogous to emotional states. Thus, from the viewers' stance, if a piece is made of one material it might "speak" of one kind of tension--perhaps physical tension. The use of various materials offers a variety of ways to "speak" of a variety of feelings including personal emotions. For instance, rough creosoted posts offer different emotional contents than the slick copper (Three Months of Emotion). Wire and rope offer a tenuated development of these feelings.

The formal aspects do not present all of the relationships blatantly, neither the physical nor the emotional. The subtle interconnections and similarities to be found in the work are to be drawn out by the viewer, discovered rather than dropped on him. The viewer must be stretched,
must reach for those understandings which the artist has incorporated in the work. With my work the viewer may be outside of my experience of Art, but I want the viewer to experience the struggle of creation, the decisions about the relationships, which reflect the struggle about the emotional relationships in the artist's (my) life. I require the viewer to be aware, through the physical presentation of emotion, of what is not there. That is, I desire the viewer to become aware of Art, that generative force behind the artist's emotion and materials, hinted at although not available. To put it another way, I desire that the viewer participate in (enjoy, understand, experience) the event mentioned earlier, my glancing contact with Art. In short I want the viewer to get a hint that the force I call Art has been tapped and drawn upon in the creation of the work.
IV. THE ARTIST: EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND SURVIVAL OBJECTS

If I am concerned that the viewer experience, in some measure at least, Art through art objects I believe that the importance of the object lies in its ability to increase public, as well as personal, knowledge; the object's ability to indicate that which caused its existence, Art. I must then be aware that if the expressions are too subtle, no association or indication will take place. If I make the relationships too obvious, not stretch the viewer, there will also be no indications or understandings of Art (the event). Thus the middle distance will permit the greatest potential for the viewers' experience of my contact with Art. My choices then are in part limited by these considerations.

My emotion generates the need to express. The emotions contribute to the selection of materials and arrangements of these materials. My work then presents my emotions, through objects, generated by contact with the force of Art. The parallels between the relationships in my life and the relationships within the work are important to me. They are also obvious in the work. Thus in my work are to be found that struggle of creation (the Art event) and the struggle of my emotional relationships. My emphasis on clarity of physical relationships, craftsmanship and indications of emotion serve both my
requirements of the viewer and my own needs.
V. TWO OF MY PIECES

In Three Months of Emotion (see Plate IV) my concern is with a lack of choice. At the time this piece took shape my future seemed to be controlled by external forces. The fact that a choice had not been made put me between my past and my future, and by the very nature of choice I was not allowed a present, I was held in limbo.

The wooden cylinder, copper tube and wire represent the future, a precious opportunity for refinement and development. The hidden method of hanging is a direct reference to the mystery of the unknown, the future, which is not completely comprehensible.

The three creosoted posts and rope represent my past, my home in Colorado and my family, of which there are three members. The obvious binding and arrangement is an analogue to the past, that which is known and understood.

The bundle of sticks held in the middle represents my position of limbo. A position, in the case of the sticks, that is dependent upon the exterior forces put upon it by the rope and posts, and the wire and copper tube. If either a wire or the rope is cut the position of the sticks changes. This position of being dependent upon exterior forces is an analogue to the personal
position of limbo I was experiencing at this time.

The strong sense of physical tension between these elements is a tension that is analogous to my emotional state. The complete composition of elements points in an upward direction toward the future, the unknown, which parallels my personal preference of pursuit.

The choice of material was based on its ability to convey the concept, and to complete the idea. The arrangement resulted in an harmony that would unify the emotions with the materials and thereby allow maximum understanding of the viewer. Although the viewer does not know the particulars that brought this piece into being, he can participate in the emotional content through the physical presentation of elements.

My Wensday (sic) (see Plate III) is concerned with my awareness of a dependence and change. Dependence is presented, in this piece, through horizontal and vertical relationships. The top horizontal element is dependent upon the wall, the lower horizontal element is dependent upon the wall and the vertical element, and that vertical element is dependent upon the top horizontal element for support. This interdependence of physical supports, the dependence of one element upon another, is an analogue to an emotional state I had experienced.

I was also concerned with change, hence the delicate balance of the vertical element, which is dependent upon
time. Time, in this piece, is represented through the seven recessions in the top horizontal element, i.e., the seven days in a week. My family, represented by the three bundles of sticks, was dependent upon that change I was concerned with. They, in fact, would be subjected to it, therefore, change had to include them.

The arrangement of the physical elements is such that all are dependent upon the top horizontal piece, which, for me, represents the time that change is dependent upon. Change is fragile, if not given its due time—all is lost.
VI. CONCLUSION

As a working artist my concerns, derived from my background and extended into my work, are unique and individual. However, since one of my concerns is contacting the viewer in some important way, my art objects must relate to general experience clearly enough to be understood or accepted even though the viewer must, in some instances, be stretched. The needs of my life and my art are coexistent and mutual concerns. The theoretical descriptions of art, such as that presented here, is obviously an on-going concern. Both the theoretical stances and my work must change as I change. This is my beginning.
PLATE 1

Muse, April, 1975.
PLATE II

PLATE III

PLATE IV

Three Months of Emotion, Jan.-Mar., 1976
BIBLIOGRAPHY


