A PERSONAL LANGUAGE OF VISUAL FORM

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by
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Art is a versatile tool for the body and the mind. It expands our visual and tactile senses and feeds our thoughts with nourishing new experiences. The following statement from *Language of Vision* is a direct description of art in general as a natural means of expression. "The visual language is capable of disseminating knowledge more effectively than almost any other vehicle of communication. With it man can express and relay his experiences in object form. Visual communication is universal and international: it knows no limits of tongue, vocabulary, or grammar, and it can be perceived by the illiterate as well as by the literate."¹

In my opinion, artists tend to cultivate a personal aesthetic vocabulary to communicate their ideas. Even though they may deal with a wide range of different images and materials there is always a unifying spirit suggesting the character of the person. This is because art comes from within; it is an extension of the self and for this reason, it is ever changing. From my physical reality and from the spiritual realm of unseen energy, I extract those ingredients that coincide with my integrity. These influences on my inner self combine to form my ideas and eventually bring forth my art objects. So as an artist, I perpetuate visual stimuli by returning information in art form to the exterior world. I like to think that all of mankind, in the sense of creating, is involved in this cycle of exchange.

There is a Buddhist philosophy that teaches the belief that we are all constantly in the state of evolution. For we never become a

completed entity but are part of the vast living universe. We never fully develop our mental capacities, never really understand our spiritual beliefs, and our physical bodies continually change in the production of new cells. Science tells us that every ten years we have a totally different body. I think this philosophy of always "becoming" can bring new enlightenment to an artist's life. It suggests continuity and a promise that there are always new goals to achieve. These factors and others, I feel, help to alter the course of my creating.

Adding to the mystery of art is the miracle of individuality. All people perceive their world and lives differently but seem to share a need for fulfillment. We decide our vocation the best we can, for some it is raising children or pursuing a career, but for those who must create... art is a way of life. The wide ranges of art enable me to experience and appreciate more extensions of myself in a more conscientious way. The actual participation of making art is like an enduring wave of feeling that can crash down unexpectedly or roll along in comfortable rhythms. Together my feelings, images, and ideas grow and regenerate, always in some way to renew the finished product.

What stimulates my ideas and motivates aggressive energy to become a physical actuality? It all begins and ends with the individual. My entire being is a reflection of my environment and life style. Involuntarily the subconscious filters and analyzes the information the senses feed it. Whatever exchange is made with people, nature, music or any sensual encounter is digested within me. How I choose to utilize that information partially determines the imagery I originate. Sometimes contained in this information is an element that creates a strong response
inside me. Often, as I investigate my thoughts, I develop an acute sensitivity to the forms they involve and suddenly I find my eyes automatically searching out those forms in my surroundings. The initial reaction then is sustained by further visual and mental input until it becomes a thriving energy. At this point, the idea is strong enough to stimulate my body into motion. That first original response then becomes an external reality through the actual work of building a sculpture. Of course, there are many situations in which this process occurs, such as through drawing, or conversation exchange, or through the indepth exploring into my imagery and ideals. But whatever the circumstances, I have felt this metamorphosis work through me and believe this is one of the ways my ideas are conceived and born. In simple systematic terms, it is the transfer of energy that occurs in all living things. Like the division of a cell, it is a very natural process. As the contemporary artist Rosemarie Castroro said,

"...I think of myself as a container, and what I do is an eruption of what I am. Where do you get nourished? That's where you have something to do."

And as Seth teaches, "There is no difference between the energy that shapes your ideas and the energy that grows a flower, or that heals your finger if you burn it. The soul does not exist apart from nature. It is not thrust into nature. Nature is the soul in the flesh, in whatever its materializations." The process is not always so smooth and effortless though, for often it takes a great amount of time and many mistakes. A lifetime could easily be dedicated to doing art because in my own way of thinking, art is infinite. Because it is full of mysteries with no absolute

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answers it is always an open field for discoveries. But because the
discoveries come through the individual, they must be sought out alone.
It is this inexhaustible searching of the outer world and my inner self
that demands valuable time. But the search and the mistakes along the
way make the discoveries feel like a cause for celebration! It is a
vital experience for recharging the spirit.

The things that originally incite this metamorphosis usually
involve some form of natural phenomena. I feel my sensibilities are
derived from an affinity toward ecology. For there are certain objects
or situations that my eyes focus out from all that surrounds me. These
are the visual impressions that nourish my thoughts. Even my earliest
sculptures suggest growth processes or intended motion. This type of
main theme seems to be a kind of life line to my work at this time and
yet I don't understand why, perhaps this is what compels an artist to
continue searching. The exterior or physical form of the pieces change
in each new sculpture but the spirit or interior segment of the idea is
frequently related to those same strong beliefs regarding nature.

My more recent work has evolved rather steadily. I developed
a strong interest in earth textures and topography. The idea of the
environment as a huge natural sculpture made a genuine impression on me.
Especially all the acres of God's creation that remain undisturbed by man.
These are isolated spaces, some rest quietly while others continue to
shake in earthquakes or burn with volcanic activity sporadically altering
their formation. It was this sensation of an awesome force rendering the
topography that lead to the conception of Monuments of the Earth. (plate 1)
My formal concerns with this piece involved careful positioning of the parts as though composing a drawing. There is interest in contrasting forms, geometric against organic and severe edges containing uncontrolled flowing matter petrified in bronze. I find it very desirable to keep an ambiguous tone to my work mainly because it widens the field of interpretation. This occurs in the forms themselves and the mysterious narrative they create. The scale was obviously influenced by aerial view photographs of the earth's surface which I had studied. "We live precariously on the thin, shifting crust of a turbulent, changing planet, the liveliest in the solar system. Our destiny has been shaped by such incomparably powerful forces as volcanic explosions, shattering earthquakes, upheaving mountain ranges and mile deep ice sheets that grind inexorably across entire continents." Although Monuments of the Earth conveys more peaceful disturbances, I enjoy seeing these correlations between my work and nature's.

Other more subtle influences on me were the surrounding refined areas of earth, all the acres of farmland modeled by machinery in neat simple patterns. I learned to appreciate their patient transition in color, form and vegetation from season to season like living works of art. As I thought about these visions, I began relating them to myself as a single person. I require a more intimate relation with my ideas and so it was necessary to alleviate the great territorial expanse and reduce the idea to my control. The result was a "garden" or different types of "gardens". Tangible cultivations of space and silent mysterious forms, my forms.

One of the first "garden" pieces was a sculpture full of various meanings that I chose to call Autumn Quarter. (plate 2) It presents a formal pattern of shapes pulled together in a random organization and I believe it is this combination that makes it curiously interesting. I have a tendency for over-formalizing my sculptures so the random construction was a forced intention in this piece.

I call it a sculpture of various meanings because its roots go back to many different areas of inspiration. For example, there is a definite relation to Japanese Buddhist gardens, a tradition I was introduced to through an art history course. Not only did the gardens impress me visually but I was spiritually moved by their philosophies and integrity. These people work their land with true respect for nature and a great concern for the aesthetics of the earth and its biology. It is one of the few places where we see man cooperating with his planet.

Staying with the theme of man's relationship with his earth, Frank Lloyd Wright is one contemporary example. I have always admired his architectural creations, especially his regard for placing them. Many of the private homes he designed have the feeling that they just grew there. As he said, when he designs a house, it graces its environment and that same house could not be placed anywhere else. They seem to grab into the earth heavily and securely. In a similar way Autumn Quarter hugs the surface it rests on then seems to stretch out comfortably and confidently.

This sculpture also introduced me to fiberglass lamination, a process of working which I would like to discuss at this point. First,
prior to this time, I had done many cast metal pieces. Because casting is a fairly long procedure, it allowed me time to become very familiar with my ideas and forms and deal with unforeseen changes. I also enjoyed and took full advantage of being able to do all the building and modeling in a softer material such as wax or styrofoam before it was cast into its permanent state. So with Autumn Quarter the change of material and process wasn't such a drastic jump. I was still involved in patterns and molds and time was still an advantage. After a few months, though, this way of working became too monotonous. Although fiberglass has many commendable advantages, it became a burden for the flow of my working habits and I began to think of it as more of a poison. My precious studio time had the drag of a factory assembly line. Every time more glass and resin were applied there was a waiting period for the curing. Looking back, I can see that I allowed myself to fall prey to a process, and it eventually affected my creative intuition. So through this fiberglassing stage, which also bled into other pieces, I slowly developed an appetite for something new. It was this awareness of my static situation that sent me searching, for what, I didn't know at that time. Feeling the need for a more direct material for expression, I first turned to wood. It was a material at hand that required no involved working procedures. I did a very simple but large piece that was an extension of the concept of Autumn Quarter. It was quickly done and seemed to almost push out of my body with pent-up energy.

I could draw a comparison between myself and the creators of the Earthwork sculptures of the sixties. I feel that I've turned to a natural material in an attempt to experience something I may have been
deprived of in my life, for example living in a country atmosphere. My work, in a sense, is a way to escape my technical and synthetic world, yet at the same time, I may need to rely on technology to aid in its execution. It is a paradox I feel I can never resolve. In a similar way, Earthworks became escapes for earlier artists. "A number of factors were involved in the abrupt change. There was a rising disenchantment with the same urban culture and industrial technology which in a more innocent moment had accounted to a great extent for the prefabricated character and geometric structures of Minimalism."⁵ There was revived interest in deserts, mountains, and geological strata. "The prospect of giving form to shapeless brute matter appealed to artists who felt they had begun to exhaust the human possibilities of a willed, anthropomorphic and egocentric art. ...The deceleration of art into rudimentary organic forms could thus be viewed as a flight from the dynamism of the electric age."⁶

Another artist who I believe works closely with his environment is Michael Hall. Although he doesn't use all natural types of materials, he invites the affects of nature to bring certain sculptures to life. Good examples are his "environmental mirrors". One entitled Sundance is simply a large white panel that depends on sunlight and the earth's rotation to create the moving affect of light and shadows across its surface.

Observing my peers proved to be enlightening too, especially Julie, who shares my studio space. Rather unknowingly, she has shown me another viewpoint of making sculpture. She was the one who introduced me

⁶Ibid. p. 449.
to an amazing book about native indigenous builders. It accidently opened a door that let my creative thoughts expand. Finally, I decided it was time to do what I really wanted to. All my feelings about nature, spiritual life, purity, mankind and his earth could finally be expressed in my own way because I had found a way.

The indigenous builders are, in their own way, artists, they are people who live by the land literally. With nothing else but the raw earth and its vegetation they make their survival. In a small village on the edge of the Sahara Desert, "where the temperature is an inferno at noon and drops precipitately at night, where there are no trees for building, no reeds and rocks, no mud or animal skins, no alternative, the people dig into the earth to live; they practice the art of subtractive building."7 This single village contains two hundred people beneath the ground.

In another part of the world, the Norwegian "treats his house as an organism that he brings to life, which then by its own mechanisms, sustains its functions by renewing itself."8 For example, they use organic roofs of sod and bark.

As the seasons pass, the sod perpetuates itself, root intertwines root, and the roof becomes a solid whole which rain and weather only strenthen. In the winter the dead stalks of grass hold the snow for effective insulation. The spring rains beat the grasses down, so that they shed the excess water, then bring the roof to life again. In summer the grasses grow long and effectively reflect the sun's heat.9

7Christopher Williams, Craftsman of Necessity (Vintage Books A Division of Random House, N.Y., 1974), p. 5.
8Ibid. p. 131.
9Ibid. p. 131.
Naturally these houses become a homogeneous part of their environment like an organic interpretation of the design concept of Frank Lloyd Wright. But these people are making a statement that tells us yes, although it is a hard life, it is possible to live in congruity with nature. And though they've never seen an art school their sense of aesthetics is highly developed. The simple tools they use communicate aesthetic awareness, care and respect for everything that touches their lives. They also are extremely sensitive to their raw materials, by allowing for intricacies in a tree's growth they let the tree shape the design. As opposed to mechanical woodcutting which is "not concerned with deviations in the trees growth, in its impersonal way it reduces everything to its simplest form." 10

So this is where my sensibilities have brought me, to a simple and honest idea of life expressing the attributes I'd like my sculptures to have. They could be a celebration of organism and simplicity portraying a kind of meditative quality that's missing in my day to day living. And what a necessary notion to try to communicate to others, for man often needs to be reminded that he too is an integral part of nature.

At the present time, the materials I employ include wood, hay, and hemp rope. When people look at my sculptures I'd like for there to be a feeling of kinship. For these materials have grown upon the earth also, sharing in the energy of life. As Noguchi said, "...it seems to

10 Christopher Williams, Craftsme of Necessity (Vintage Books A Division of Random House, N.Y., 1974), p. 3.
me that the natural mediums of wood and stone, alive before man was, have the greater capacity to comfort us with the reality of our being.\textsuperscript{11}

I find the ephemeral qualities of the wood and straw especially desirable in communicating my concept of our temporal existence. I'd like to point out that this is a marked change from the permanent materials I had always used previously to this time. Now I no longer think of permanence as an unbreakable rule in the execution of my sculpture.

One piece that was conceived through this discipline was the Haystack. (plate 3) I found the results of simple engineering can be quite attractive. The wood sections of the piece were cut from particle board, a material indigenous to my environment, notched out and fitted together. I was nearly overwhelmed by the directness of the process, but I could never have appreciated it without first experiencing the longer procedures of casting and fiberglass. Next, bundles of hay were stuffed into the square openings creating an effective illusion of weight and stability. I feel the piece conveys a statement of quiet strength and organicism, the "theory that life and living processes are the manifestation of an activity possible only because of the autonomous organization of the system rather than because of its individual components."\textsuperscript{12}

For the short time Haystack sat in my studio, I received a fair amount of feedback from students and faculty, a privilege not often encountered. People seemed to be drawn to it in a curious way. I can't explain it but something seemed to be happening, perhaps it's a spiritual


experience that our language cannot communicate. Perhaps I idealize my art too much, but these are the kinds of thoughts that flux my creative instincts. As my reaction to wood and straw causes me to create, so do these private conversations with myself.

I set Haystack up outside one afternoon to discover its mystery accentuated by its surroundings. Among the grass and trees, it truly looked as if it had grown from the earth. And again people seemed to be attracted to it. I feel convinced now that it could work both on an inside and outside piece with certain precautions made for the weather.

In relation to the rest of the art world, I do not feel that I am caught up in any particular movement, although I admit the growing general awareness of ecology has affected me. I do think there is some mutual message in my work and that of two better known contemporary sculptors, Jackie Winsor and Mary Miss. I'm not exactly sure what it is, perhaps a shared understanding concerning natural materials presented in confident statements. Jackie Winsor refers to her working process as "ritualistic" implying a strong interest in the act of construction. There is a kind of pleasure received from working with the materials of one's own choice. In that respect, for the person working, the art of the piece is in its making and not so much in the finished product. I especially liked a piece by Miss Winsor titled Four Corners not only because of the attraction to the material, which shows evidence of long dedicated hours, but because of the strong unequivocal statement it conveys to me. It is a commemoration of pure primitive construction.

An untitled piece by Mary Miss, described below, I found appealing also because she is directly incorporating the earth into her
sculpture, an idea I have often thought about but never resolved. "After
digging a roughly 7 x 7 foot square hole to the depth of about 2-1/2 feet,
Mary Miss then formed that unexpected void into rectangular volumes of air
by super-imposing several lattice-like layers of wooden laths anchored
to the earth on the sides, giving the illusion that this carefully artic-
ulated work continues underground. It was a work of art literally given
to Nature."13 I can appreciate this underground involvement for I have
not yet been able to break the surface of my topography ideas.

Now I am looking ahead to my show where I hope to organize the
past and present lives of my ideas. There are more organically inspired
pieces in process at this moment but I don't feel I'm in that special
position to discuss them. They are still too new to me. But when
everything is complete and presented together they will function as
a "garden" with a variety of "vegetation". Noguchi is inspirational
in his environmental and garden sculptures and their grand scale. Yet
he is careful to keep the perspective between man and the pieces, as he
explains in the following statement.

I like to think of gardens as sculpturing of space:
a beginning and a groping to another level of sculptural
experience and use: a total sculpture space experience
beyond individual sculptures. A man may enter such a
space: it is in scale with him; it is real. ...The size
and shape of each element is entirely relative to all the
others and the given space. What may be incomplete as
sculptural entities are of significance to the whole.
...These sculptures form what I call a garden, for want
of a better name.

Its viewing is polydirectional. Its awareness
is in depth. With the participation of mobile man all

13Ellen H. Johnson, "American Art of the Twentieth Century",
Apollo (103, 1976), pp. 133-134.
points are central. Without a fixed point of perspective all views are equal, continuous motion with continuous change.\textsuperscript{14}

This is close to what I'd like to achieve in the presentation of my sculptures together. But because it is still partially only an idea, there is no way to predict the results.

Each new idea that materializes must be carried out in the attempt to understand it, for it is only through this working process of mind, body, and spirit that we search out answers as artists.

"We shall not cease from exploring
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time..."

T. S. Eliot

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Plate 1. MONUMENTS OF THE EARTH and detail
Plate 2. AUTUMN QUARTER