SUGGESTIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS

A Thesis

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by

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Introduction

A person's art may be viewed as a reflection of himself although it is often difficult to ascertain or understand to what extent the person is being reflected. I have written this thesis in an attempt to achieve that goal of understanding. I look upon this work as a guide which indicates the rules of the artist; provides some historical background; and suggests ways of relating to the pieces. But of course, as with any good guide, it is incomplete because the artist is reluctant to expose himself too much. Privacy is an affordable and meaningful luxury within the world of art. The guide is also incomplete because there is always an unconscious aspect of any artist's work that does not lend itself to explanation. And finally, it is not necessary for the viewer to relate to the works as the artist does; in fact, it is preferable that he does not.

It is not my intention to give the viewer concrete images that express opinions or tell stories. Nor do I wish to convert him to a particular point of view. I would prefer to seduce him with bright colors and light, affable objects which suggest ideas and feelings rather than offer explanations. My works are designed to take the viewer part of the way and then allow him to proceed alone: assoc-
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iating his own experiences to the situations suggested by the pieces. Thus, I withhold certain information from the viewer as a means of capturing and fostering his imagination. To explain in full, even if it were possible, imposes too much of myself upon the viewer. I feel free to reject his interpretations and he should feel free to reject mine.

I demand only that the viewer engage his imagination. For if the pieces are to be extended conceptually, it will have to be accomplished in the mind of the beholder. Since I alone possess the right to physically change the works I create, it follows that the viewer has only his mind within which to exercise his creative options.

It is not my intention to provide situations which the viewer can physically manipulate, instead I wish only to place suggestions before him so that his imagination, if so inclined, will extend the work until it becomes something personal to him. My reasons for doing this and the manner in which it is accomplished are the subjects of this thesis.
Some Beginnings

My origins as an artist are traceable to my childhood and the things of play. Wooden blocks, sand boxes, and countless found objects became stage settings upon which a myriad of plays were produced. As writer and director, I had a systematic approach to the building I did. I recreated situations that were related to the reality of my environment and added to these realistic reproductions some inventive ideas of my own. I created situations which reflected both the reality of the world and the fantasies of my own desires. This one aspect of my life has always remained with me and my work today may be perceived as a more sophisticated, knowledgeable, and insightful extension of my childhood play.

As a high school student, I learned architectural drawing and by practicing many hours a week for a period of six years I added another dimension to my creative desires. There existed in my architectural designs that same impulse that had been inherent in my childhood play. The buildings suggested reality and the designs were specific as to function, cost, and construction methods. But their purpose was to permit me the opportunity to change my own environment without necessitating outward physical change.
The buildings I created were reflections of my own life and I changed physical situations and relationships in the belief that anything could be improved. At this point in my life, the intellectual and emotional desires to create were also finding social acceptance. My drawings were of a technical quality that impressed adults and as a result, they encouraged me to do more. I found that these drawings fostered my artistic development in two basic ways. First, I developed enough personal discipline to work long and hard hours at a task that was meaningful to me. And secondly, I learned that when one gains sufficient technical skill and knowledge and one's ideas mature, the child's world of play may become the man's world of art.

But this attitude of adults toward my work produced an interesting problem. I became more motivated to use art as a device to please others than as a means of expressing ideas. The word art in our society often conjures up a very heavy feeling of pretension. This, in turn, creates an aloof and sterile atmosphere around the art world which becomes occupied by pseudo-intellectuals who have lost their perspective on life. Initially, I saw my work as a means of intellectually surpassing other people, while concomitantly it produced nothing to justify this feeling. In addition, the social and intellectual place of the artist was more important to me than the
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creative value of my work.

Slowly I began to free myself from the need to please others and the need to make art a pretentious affair. I was able to differentiate between the value that my work held for me and the value it had to others. I became more realistic about the position my work occupied in my hierarchy of values and as a result, my expectations became more realistic with regard to the functional aspects of my work. For instance, I separate my political activities from my artistic activities and by freeing my art from such interferences, I have become more honest and objective about the direction and value of my work.
The Foundation

Certain decisions of a philosophical and practical nature are made as my work evolves. Some of these decisions precede the actual work, while others are made as the work develops. Some of the decisions I make are related to basic attitudes I have about aspects of my life; others are related to my education; and still others are reflections of my present environment. It is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly recognize and identify the sources of these decisions because of the underlying complexity of ideas and events that generally surround each decision. However, it is possible to explain the basic foundations of my work and then perhaps to reveal how these foundations relate to the body of work as a whole.

I utilize a form of art that is open to change since I wish to deal with the kind of manipulative situation which provides alternatives. Subjective situations seem to have more extensive boundaries than those which are objective. As soon as the viewer associates himself with the work, the piece is extended in meaning far beyond that of its formal elements.

I am expressing, then, a symbolist belief that ideas are the supreme reality and that the actual form these
ideas take is more or less a sumptuous disguise. As a result, I prefer to give less emphasis to the disguise or the formal relationships, than I do to the ideas. The ineffable, the irrational and the subjective are to be suggested since by definition they cannot be stated. Nature, for instance, is only required to furnish equivalents or symbols which allow the mind to escape everyday life into a world of fantasy.

Thus, my decision to use a type of fantasy landscape and ambiguity has evolved from the above ideas. The landscapes I have created are meant to invoke a feeling of something specific that might exist but does not. They are never to be too precise in their meanings and they should not lecture nor be didactic. Instead, they should provide optimal freedom for the viewer so that he may associate himself and his experiences to them.

My particular use of ambiguity seems to extend this idea of abstraction and illusion to the point of being nonexistent in nature. In my desire to stress the suggestive aspects of the works, I have de-emphasized the concrete. My work must never be so precise as to stimulate from the viewer or from myself the recollection of a specific situation. Instead, I prefer that the landscapes educe an elusive image within the mind of the viewer.

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My use of ambiguity, then involves the creation of relationships and events within my own works that never occur in nature: A deep illusional space juxtaposed with a flat space on the same painting; water as a solid three-dimensional element on top of a symbolic image of land within which it might realistically be flowing. Ambiguity, along with other devices, seems to expand the works into flexible situations rather than restricting them to static representations of nature. The piece is then extended by the viewer's response of associating to it something from within his own life.

I view all of the pieces in this series as situational in nature, not only because they assume different meanings to me at different times, but also because I can physically change the elements and rearrange their relationships. An example of this is painting with the changeable car. The piece is constructed so that a new figurative element may be placed on the roadway. Of course, when this is done, the formal relationships of the painting also change, simply because new color and form have been introduced.

But even more important is the fact that by changing a figurative element one may also alter the subjective interpretation of the painting. For example, a black car may hold several associations in the viewer's mind which may differ from those he has toward a striped car. The viewer's personal associations to the new situation are of more
interest to me than his reactions to the change in formal elements.

The formal elements of the works exist to encourage and expand the involvement of the viewer. The decorative-ness of the work, for instance, is actually intended to give the work a certain neutrality. The bright, clean color is meant to seduce the viewer. The sensual richness of the forms and colors is used to draw the viewer to the pieces in a frame of mind that is relaxed and open. I want the viewer to feel safe in that the work will be neither admonishing nor menacing in nature.

The neutrality of the works coupled with the suggestion of something that might be, is designed to enable the viewer to use his imagination to the fullest in relating to or associating with the works. And since I am always the principal viewer, this reflects an idiosyncratic attitude. What I build is part of a lighter more pleasant world where we can escape for a brief interlude. It is a world where one can relax, use one's imagination, and see bright colors, flowing forms and illusions of all types, and in so doing, reflect upon what was and what could be.
Reality

In addition to the philosophical decisions that add structure to a body of work, there are also many decisions involved which arise out of practical considerations. For example, an artist may not have access to the money or tools necessary to build a certain piece of work. Sculptors such as Calder, Oldenburg, Robert Morris and Takis are turning more and more to industrial sources for help in fabrication and materials.

Processes as common as bronze casting are becoming prohibitive because of the cost of materials. Time, although free, becomes a problem when the artist is also a student. Universities operate on time schedules that are not always conducive to creating art. Money, materials, time and fabrication problems all seemed to dictate to me an almost minimal approach if I were to deal with as many ideas as I wanted.

As a result, in part, of the above considerations, I began to contemplate the following idea: what degree of information can be given to the viewer before an idea is suggested. Human beings seem to delight in taking a minimum of information and drawing a maximum number of conclusions from it. I, in turn, attempted to exploit this trait by providing a minimum of information through the
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use of a few forms and then letting nature take its course. My choice of landscapes is related to the fact that people seem to visualize landscape situations out of artistic forms much more readily than they envision any other kind of pictorial effect.

Sculptors who do not sell well have an additional problem: the disposition of finished works. David Smith solved this problem by buying a large pasture on which he could store his work. Tony Smith's works exist on paper as blueprints until one is sold or built for exhibition. For the art student of limited financial means, who must produce finished works for the faculty, the problem becomes a major one. I developed, then, the following means of dealing with the above two problems.

While working on the present series of works, I often had more ideas I wanted to experiment with than it was possible for me to actualize. I extended, then, my concern with the options and alternatives involved in this series of works, and began to construct elements which could be combined, recombined, altered, and, in general, manipulated. Several of the finished works with which this thesis deals, existed previously as parts of entirely different works. The process entailed assembling these pieces, critically viewing them, photographing them, and then deciding whether or not the work should remain permanent.
The above procedure also involved the arrangement of works at different locations to determine how they might change a given environment and how the feelings elicited from such a manipulation might differ. My rejection of the idea that all pieces have to be finished, permanent works enabled me to become much freer in spacial considerations.

The ideas which form the basis of the three dimensional or spacial aspects of my works have their roots in the philosophical and practical decisions inherent in this series of works as well as in my knowledge of twentieth century sculpture, and especially, the sculpture of the 1960's. However, my works also reflect a basic attitude and approach I have to building things.

I am concerned with placing objects, forms and elements in a larger environment in order to effect changes in the situation. Existent in this method of exploring possibilities is an attitude of free association. Ideas and relationships are derived as much from the unconscious as from the conscious areas of the mind, and this increases the emphasis on ambiguity since the logic or rationale involved is not always apparent.

Differences in scale is an especially acute means of conveying relationships which never exist in nature. For example, when a landscape element which suggests a scale of its own is juxtaposed with an existing building, one
begins to compare a scale related to the reality of the building and an illusional scale suggested by the landscape elements.

Some of the pieces in this series of works represent a freezing of this process of re-arrangement and in so doing, prolong the opportunity for studying the ideas. Eventually, of course, the pieces may be broken down into elements again and used to communicate other ideas.

In contrast, however, some of the other pieces in this series represent a permanent isolation of a particular idea. Among these works are the boxed landscapes which are sections of a fantasy world, isolated and permanent. A feeling of conflict develops when a landscape which realistically has no bounds is suddenly limited and severed from the whole. The confining wooden box prevents complete examination of the landscape and although most of the work is visible, small sections remain hidden from view.

This type of work represents the antithesis in spacial approach from the floor and wall pieces in the series. The rationale for the landscape boxes concerns itself with the examination of a approach that is contrary to that of my initial work. My goal, then, in this regard, is the thorough exploration of ideas, where possible, rather than an arbitrary limitation of concepts and execution.
Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to present a personal statement of some of my beliefs and a general explanation of my current work. As such, it has proposed certain intellectual and emotional bases for my work as opposed to involving itself with a defense of my methods. Consequently, the conclusion does not reflect upon a presented hypothesis but instead deals with the work in which I am now involved and discusses ways in which it may be extended to render it even more effective.

My current work only began to emerge in its present form during the winter of 1969-1970. Since eight months is insufficient time to fully explore those ideas I have been discussing, I might describe my work at this juncture as being in an infant stage. Viewing my work, then, as being in an incipient phase of development, it would seem that the next step should be involvement with other materials and techniques.

Reflecting glass brings forth from the viewer different associations than does earth. Water which is real creates a different situation than does the use of an abstract symbol to suggest it. There need be no limits placed upon the use of materials and techniques which fabricate an object except those that are technical in nature.
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One of the greatest artistic developments of the late twentieth century is that we have vast freedom as artists as long as our ideas have merit and our work is approached honestly. This becomes particularly apparent when one views the works of such artists as Picasso, Duchamp, and Robert Morris. The expression has become: if it works, use it. The days of viewing art as movements or styles appear to be ending. Communication is too fast and the constituency of working artists too large to tolerate an art world dominated by movements. Any technique or method is quickly absorbed into the working artist's vocabulary and used toward his own ends. In this respect my approach has been quite conservative. But now that I have established a secure beginning with regard to my ideas and work, it is appropriate to make use of the freedom available.

As this particular body of work grows larger, I begin to view it more and more as a collective whole. My work assumes the properties of what Webster defines as a system: "an aggregation or assemblage of objects united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence, or an organized or methodically arranged set of ideas; a complete exhibition of essential principles or facts."(2)

The works I create present a much clearer reflection of the ideas I am working with when they are displayed together, since each piece is not merely a variation on a theme but a segment of another world or another set of possibilities. The more fragments of this world that can be seen together, the more opportunity the viewer has to relate to the pieces. And perhaps, even more importantly, the viewer will be able to associate beyond the number of individual works and begin to associate to the combinations and complexities of separate pieces viewed together.

Viewed in this manner, the elements of the works create a whole greater in concept than that of the individual pieces. Perhaps, then, the growth of the body of work I am dealing with may be expressed as a geometric progression rather than an arithmetic progression. I regard this, then, as the future of my work.
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