

## **In Praise of Hands. An interview with John Hutchinson.**

In the final chapter of the classic aesthetic treatise, *The Life of Forms* (1934) by the French writer, Henri Focillon, the author addresses the dynamics of creativity in creating art. Entitled 'In Praise of Hands', he argues for a return to a more tangible approach to thinking through making. His assertion that apprehension and the giving of form is a dynamic process, rather than a static code, always rang true with me. Focillon writes: "When one realises that the quality of a tone or of a value depends not only on the way in which it is made, but also on the way in which it was set down, then one understands that the god in five persons manifests himself everywhere."

This particular quality – of being set down – may be understood as being what we might call "thrown", that is, executed at a particular moment, with a particular degree of skill, and with a particular idiosyncratic result. This suggests a focused action, at which moment the skill of the hands becomes critical, interrupting a more usual state during a time when the hands would quietly probe. For me the most essential point to Focillon's argument is that form giving is a two-way process. "The hand knows that the object has a physical bulk, that it is smooth or rough, that it is not soldered to heaven or earth from which it appears to be inseparable. The hand's action defines the cavity of space and fullness of objects which occupy it. Surface volume, density, and weight are not optical phenomena. Man first learned about them between his fingers and in the hollow of his palm." Whereas the eyes stay fixed on the outer surface of things, hands have a way of getting inside, and so have the ability to contribute more to our belief in the reality of the world.

Focillon's position is all about sensate presence – it is pure phenomenology. The object is a manifestation and a gathering, the product of a tool, a daily form of communion. It is his belief that the practice of work maintains a necessary psychological connection to a dim archaic past. The impressions conveyed by the hands complement those expressed by speech. His argument survives quite well outside his own intellectual context even though his use of phenomenology was simply his form of opposition to the dematerialism of dada and schematism of the early moderns.

In a 1974 film of the same name, the poet Octavio Paz constructs both art and industry as surrogate religions, each seeking a communion lost through separation. Art consecrates objects that have no other function than to be. It is true to say that art became separated from utility at the time of industrialisation, from representation after the rise of the camera, and from symbolic interpretation in the era of television, allowing for complete independence from workmanship as a source of meaning. It is clear that in the generation between Focillon and Paz, art has become fully intertextual – that is, self-referential.

Throughout the film Paz compares the the wholeness of traditional craft with the modern separation of use and beauty: "In the work of handcraftsmen there is a constant shifting back and forth between usefulness and beauty." This continual interchange has a name: pleasure. Things are pleasing because they are useful and beautiful. This copulative conjunction defines craftwork, just as the disjunctive conjunction defines art and technology: useful or beauty. "Industry often produces objects that have no being but their function – they are *nothing but* useful." The handcrafted object reflects on the other hand, not only an informal economy of energy (as opposed to one of process efficiency). Its production involves some play, some waste, but above all a kind of communion. These themes of continuity, practicality, simple beauty, keep coming back to me and were often things I would discuss with John Hutchinson. The following are extracts from various conversations.

**BE:** How can one make plans for the future in a world so lacking in consensus? And by that I mean consensus as a general term for understanding.

**JH:** I like to think that there is already a kind of consensus among human beings, if you look carefully and attentively. As the Buddhists would put it, we all want to avoid suffering and to be happy. If you work on the basis that deep consensus already exists and that all you have to do is to reveal it in its varied forms, we might be more successful in making a difference. But of course it is easier said than done.

**BE:** It is hard to believe in progress in terms of making things better through applying new designs these days but in a way we must still invest in it.

**JH:** I think, first of all, that we'd need to define 'progress'. It's a tricky concept, an aspiration that is generally considered to be a good thing, but I find the idea problematic. Is moving forwards always what is required? Sometimes standing still or even going backwards is appropriate and worthwhile. The same applies to 'new'. I'd rather use the idea of 'unfoldment', which is simple but has richer and subtler overtones. Can design and 'making' contribute fruitfully to social and aesthetic unfoldment? Yes, undoubtedly.

**BE:** I know from our previous conversations that the Japanese design aesthetic *Wabi Sabi* has become an important part in your

line of thinking. Is this an element in what you have just described as 'unfoldment'?

**JH:** No. What I mean by 'unfoldment' is a development from within, a process that has a certain inner necessity. As you say, I love *wabi sabi*, but for quite different reasons, which have more to do with ideas of modesty, transience, and beauty in the overlooked.

**BE:** Could this have to do with developing a new value system that considers things in a more finite way?

**JH:** I'm not sure what you mean by 'finite' in this context. If you mean treating the world's resources as limited and precious, I'd say that attitude, which is certainly justifiable, might best flow from another set of deeper values, which are more important still – qualities such as modesty, humility, affection, goodwill, and so forth. Again, I'm not convinced that conventional models of progress are very helpful these days, and they would probably change of their own accord if we were to internalize those values.

**BE:** Well, maybe because I remain skeptical as to the merit of grounding critical practice in a concept so hermetically metaphysical as Being but sometimes feel a need like Heidegger, to the absolute precondition of 'a bounded domain'. This I find hard to explain but often find it in the large drawings I make with black markers – gradually fading away as the ink runs out...

**JH:** I'm not especially interested in critical practice, so that isn't a problem to me – although I'm not particularly drawn to Heidegger's thought in any case. It's too ponderous and portentous for my taste. Nor do I consider 'being' to be in any way hermetic; it's something very straightforward and simple.

**BE:** In terms of constructing new systems of value, what role do such concepts as alternative ways of living play? Do these alternative models really give new insights or simply exist as a placebo for the ills of the present?

**JH:** Unless deeper values are accepted and integrated into our lives, alternative ways of living probably don't add up to much. You just need to look back at the 1960's to see that.

**BE:** What role can the actual construction of these environments/models play in making real such alternative ideas?

**JH:** Well, at least they provide food for thought!

**BE:** I suppose that brings us back to questioning the need for progress to be something of the future, a temporal aspect one finds in the modernist concept. That's why I like Fredric Jameson's use of contemporary science fiction - making alternative presents, similar to the way one can recycle ideas through recycling objects. Maybe that's what I find so appealing in the way Mike (Nelson) works...

**JH:** What Mike does may be a bit different – what I like about his work, among many things, is its dream-like quality. I think of Mike more as a scavenger and storyteller than as someone who is especially concerned with critical theory or the future.

**BE:** I remember in a previous conversation we had you describe postmodernism as being a bridge – a rather rickety old bridge but one none the less. I think it had to do with the need to believe in something rather than nothing.

**JH:** Yes, I do recall something to that effect, but I guess that what I was trying to say was that postmodernism could be *used* as a bridge. What I mean by that is that although postmodern thought has effectively destroyed our ability to believe wholeheartedly in any single narrative or way of understanding the world – and there may be no way of avoiding a consequent sense of being rudderless and rootless – that isn't the end of the tale. And I'm not proposing a sentimental return to the 'old' ways, which are certainly no longer appropriate to the situations and challenges that we face in the world today. But I sometimes think that admitting that one is lost is halfway to getting home, and that sometimes one has to retrace one's steps in order to get onto the right, or appropriate, path.

To begin with, I'll illustrate this with an issue that strikes me as important. Many people in the art world, and especially those who

are interested in 'critical practices', seem to think that painting is no longer able to convey anything other than ironic or self-conscious meaning. This seems to me to be a rash, if not absurd, position to take. It's a bit like saying that a piano or guitar is no longer able to make good music. Painting is simply a language that can be used more or less interestingly to convey thoughts, feelings, and sensations that are also more or less interesting. The painter has to have something worth saying, first of all, and to be able to say it in paint. And although it is true to say that the 'meaning' of a painting remains complex and fluid, determined substantially by its cultural context and by the ways in which it is perceived and understood, it is also conveyed by the act of painting itself and by what the artist is trying to communicate. In short, a painting – even an abstract one – is rather like a story, which can be skillfully or badly told. I want to be caught up in it, taken somewhere, and engaged by it, but I don't necessarily have to believe it.

There is another point worth making, too. If, as I do, one accepts that there is a spiritual core to life, then postmodernism's deconstruction of the material world and all its values may bring one to the conclusion that being 'lost' may provide us with a real opportunity to discover another perspective – one that is deeper, unifying, and beautiful. A way of making that transition, of crossing the bridge, is to learn to look at the world with detached, affec-

tionate, attention. Those qualities seem to be more than enough to be getting on with, and they have nothing at all to do with belief.

**BE:** Maybe as Paul Klee once said and I am paraphrasing here, the purpose of art is to awaken reality. And so relative to craft, art is the creation of artifacts for alternative ends: to search, to reveal, to release...

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