

THE NECESSITY FOR MAGIC IN ART Bob Law, May 1964

1.

It is now generally accepted by prehistorians and archaeologists that the first known gestures or communicable marks were Palaeolithic hand pressings, that is, prints left by hands pressed into the sand, earth or clay. One has to think hard to try to imagine what sort of emotions these first marks evoked and even harder to imagine what sort of emotions were possible in primitive man. It is possible that these hand pressings were the first intellectual game; the first game for intellectual pleasure. By this I mean the first time man held thought of symbolism in his intellect without physically following it up - distinct from more physical and, probably more primitive amusements such as Tag. Once this initial breakthrough had been made it is not so difficult to imagine early Palaeolithic man making marks with a stick. Perhaps at first they drew around a hand or foot and then after a while learnt to do this without using a template. I would like to point out the tremendous jump from 'drawing around' some template to a free-hand drawing. In fact, the whole idea of making something from nothing. The terrific discovery of 'something' still being present long after the template had gone must have been quite a mysterious revelation.

2.

I am going to suggest hypothetically that after developing this primitive communication a shrewd man could use it to his own advantage - further his own survival and in doing so, gain power over his fellow man. This he could do by drawing say, twenty pairs of footmarks, suggesting to his uninitiated companions that there were enemies in the vicinity. Being outnumbered by so many strange feet, they would possibly run off, leaving the drawer of the feet to eat all the best food. This to me suggests a primitive form of Black Magic, or illusion making.

3.

Today we would obviously call this trick lying, but we have so much more experience and knowledge we would not be tricked or cheated so easily. Except possibly by a 'master'; by which I mean somebody exceptionally good or skilled at doing something. In modern times if we have such a person he is usually called a craftsman, artist, magician or even a nuclear physicist. Today he doesn't so much trick us but he intrigues us - we don't really care whether or not it is a lie, an illusion or exaggeration as long as the desired effect is the result. What we do admire is the skill of the performance, the magic of the mastery, so good as to deceive the eye or mind so to speak. Going back to our Palaeolithic liar, he also only wanted the desired effect: whether or not this could be termed art is quite a problem, but it is certainly a clear case if illusionism used to assault a third person's mind or sensibilities. One thing is clear, that is the men who ran away would not be caught twice, not at least by the same trick. Therefore, the drawer of the feet or the artist would have to invent something else next time and, in doing so, this would make him an innovator and a creative person.

4.

Today we all understand art as an illusion for an 'effect or meaning'. In what I have talked of it is the perception that has been misinterpreted by the intellect and our Palaeolithic hero used this illusionary effect on purpose - which is a more accurate way of saying he used a form of magic.

5.

What suggests that it is art is the fact of its innovation, its newness; an attempt at something not yet understood by the collective whole - the reaching into depths of intuitive reasoning and effect. This points to the original being art in that it was a step by which man learnt. Afterwards it became meaningful to the collective whole. They learnt not to be further misled but they probably started to read into other phenomena effects that were not actually present. By this I mean that they began 'looking' for magic symbolism. The fact is, of course, that both intuition and intellect have been developed because they are useful and that, broadly speaking, they are useful when they lead to survival and harmful when they don't.

6.

So now we have briefly arrived at the state where man is using illusion purposefully in communication and also romanticizing about the content of phenomena: to a state where he acknowledges a power beyond physical reality. This could lead to the beginning of effigy making. The basic idea of this was for the actual hunters to go and meditate on the prey to be hunted by means of drawing or making effigies. By this method they were able to draw the spirit of the beast; it was a way of focusing their concentration not only on the spirit but the whole physical and mental beast. They literally replaced the beast, they brought it where it wasn't, 'just as the hand pressings left something which was not really there'.

7.

All this was done in special caves set aside for the sole purpose of the ritual. A pointer as to why they used obscure and secret caves is the idea of being apart from the rest, away from everything - in the dark; safe from sight, secure from wild animals in the bowels of the earth. In the complete dark silence they could expound their full concentration on the meditation to be done. The drawings and paintings were often drawn one on top of each other at different times, indicating that 'art' or aesthetic value was not the axiom of their activity, but that it was the necessary way of obtaining psychological power over their prey. Another pointer away from the decorative incentive is the fact that many of these drawings have been executed in the most inaccessible corners and chambers, that one has to lie down on one's back or crawl to see them. Add to this the fact that any form of candle would soon be unbearable because of the smoke; it is fairly certain that a great number of them were done in the pitch dark - 'hence the superpositions'.

8.

The distortion in the drawing of the beasts around the vital killing points is obvious. Some have arrows actually drawn in the flesh; some with arrows going towards them. Many of them have our original hand-pressings all over the drawing as though the hunters had gone even further with the ritual and tried physically, or perhaps only symbolically, to seize their prey. There is sufficient evidence to show that on completion the effigies were actually stoned and fired at with spears and arrows. This 'real' and inept treatment of the illusion illustrates the inevitable paradox - 'the game'. The hunter-artists did not depict all the animals they knew, but selected those which provided excellent food. They killed lions which were dangerous and others whose tusks, antlers etc. supplied needs for tools. This logically suggests that there was no time or interest or 'even the idea' of drawing and painting in terms of decorative art.

9.

Perhaps significantly these fine naturalistic drawings of the Palaeolithic culture, the exuberant virility, the bright colours of this most ancient art form, came to an end. Naturalistic art did not again reach a comparable level of aesthetic performance in Western Europe for thousands of years - indeed for the most part did not exist at all. This ending of the Palaeolithic age suggests that man was beginning to master the keeping and rearing of animals for food and that there was no longer any necessity for the magical cave painting. In fact the decline was not so sudden. There was a gradual change in style from the very individual drawings to a much more formal art; this began to develop as communication and craft advanced. Historically this usually comes under 'Neolithic Art' - 'The New Stone Age' (i.e. polished axe heads).

10.

As art finds the new communication between peoples, it is used to induce fear, exultation, gods, devils, the beginnings of religious sects. The magical ritual from here on comes outside the caves and develops in the form of the Megalith builders - the beginnings of the nomadic tribes and collectivism. Wars make them concentrate more on collective power; they invent godheads - artists become priests. With the beginnings of organized labour art becomes decorative to a certain degree. What has happened is that the necessary incentive has gone from art in the form of magical hunting pictures. As man now understands the keeping of animals for food, he now uses the magical ritual process to push further into the unknown elements of life, death and nature, from the point where his knowledge and foresight begin to fail, where chance and luck begin; where rational technique can no longer avail. The ritual process provides him with a firm belief in his own powers by promising him control, illusory though it may be, over these all-important factors of success. It provides that much-needed psychological backing of confidence and assurance which is so essential for the integration of a complex society.

11.

As I have already stated, we find in Neolithic Art - stylization - schematic and conventional signs - the hint of hieroglyphs. Man with new found communication in art now tries to 'hold the idea' - 'the concept' - 'the inner substance of things in the work'. He begins to create symbols rather than the likeness of the real object depicted. In Neolithic drawings a human figure is indicated by a vertical straight line or a square for a body, and two semi-circular lines, one facing up, the other down, representing arms and legs - the head being a dot or a circle, sometimes with eyes.

12.

This is the beginning of intellectualization and rationalization in art, the replacement of naturalistic pictures and forms by signs and symbols - abstractions and abbreviations - accentuation and exaggeration. The work of art is no longer purely the representation of the material object, but that of an idea; not merely a 'reminiscence but also a vision'.

13.

As Neolithic man begins to learn to grow plants and breed cattle, he begins to feel the power of fate in the fertility or non-fertility of certain plants and animals - the power of the weather - the Sun - the Moon - rain - lightning - hail. Little wonder that out of this arises the concept of all kinds of demons - spirits beneficent and malignant, and indeed the notion of historical 'time' we

now take for granted. Life and death become ritualized. Hence the enormous burial mounds and megaliths for Sun-Worship and so on. To overcome all this newly realized power in the unknown elements - man's reliance on the magical ritual is understandable. In Frazer's words, (Frazer, 'the Golden Bough') "Magic is akin to primitive science in that it exists to serve very definite, often similar ends and is possessed of a theory, a system of principles which dictates the manner in which the ritual must be performed". Man could not then, and still cannot to a lesser extent, bear the idea of something unknown and infinite; everything it seems must have a source, must have a system which he can come to grips with.

14.

A way of enabling himself to come to terms with the unknown is to make drawings - diagrams - sculpture. In this way he is able to draw-out from the depths of his imagination the thoughts and ideas making them into something real and tangible. An actual definition of drawing given by a child may be quoted in this connection:- "First I think, and then I draw a line around my think" (Roger Fry, "Vision and Design"). The same is true if we make a sum or write a sentence. We are, in fact, making a construction of conventionalized values to get at something unknown. Even in Modern Science we depend on tangible concepts, like atoms, electrons, photons, etc., to make comprehensible a system whose physical identity is unknowable.

15.

It is this quality in art, this getting at the unknown, however seemingly irrational, that prompted my title "The Necessity for Magic in Art" - this inventing of illusions however ridiculous to get at the ever elusive truth. Art, it seems, is centered around the unspeakable and often sublime qualities which go to make beautiful; in fact it gives life a purpose and a meaning. On the other hand art could be said to be the most sophisticated game ever, the point of its being magical and elusive only strengthens this statement. If it were not secret and elusive it would not work, it would fall flat at first glance; without intrigue our perceptions would not be qualified by an effort to understand. What keeps man alive and vital is the 'Great Intrigue' of his perceptions and the idea of the infinite Universe.

16.

In other words the mind plays a game with itself merely to keep itself surviving. When perceptions and ideas are dissonant the mind is stimulated to develop the GAME. Ambiguity is the stimulus for the next move. Ambivalence, hallucination, art, these provide the questions that force the thinking mind to think.

17.

Ambiguity and Magic Games allow man hallucinations in a sort of play form which he needs - not that he can do anything about it, but it does elevate him for a while. After all, to 'know' completely would be an unbearable and impossible burden. However the by-product the 'Game' becomes the act of living which engages the mind to its utmost limits, trying always to justify its own promotion. Man cannot transcend that which he is made of, cannot know beyond his smallest particles; it would be like trying to think of a number before you thought of it. Although the Japanese seem to make beautiful sense from this, I have come to understand it as a play on intuition.

18.

Everything is relative - everything in nature and in us is striving for comprehension and survival - everything, it seems, tries to survive in order to evolve to know the ever elusive secret. In this error of comprehension and understanding lie all your godheads, heroes, magic and tragedies. From the myriad forms of nature continually coming into being and passing away conscious reason extracts one by one - as we might put it, the permanent types, and attaches to each a permanent symbol and in this way builds up in its own inward world a structure of images and ideas that reflect the natural world and approximates more and more towards a complete counterpart of it.

19.

Experience is an operation of the intellect and the memory, both of which have given us sufficient justification for doubting them. What is not present is specifically questionable. 'I think therefore I am' (Descartes). The past and the future are probabilities and possibilities: There is no heat but that which warms us, no happiness but that which we experience. Everything else is substitute, hypothetical, illusory. It is from love and irrationalism that life springs. So all around us we have unknown phenomena and mystery; we use art to bridge the gaps of knowledge, to put something where there is nothing - to probe the hidden meaning.

20.

If we draw down those fleeting inarticulate happenings, then with our bits and pieces we can construct 'purely intuitively' toward and around those elusive and treasured seconds when we feel sublimely elevated - those moments which give one the whole essence of life and yet say nothing. Indeed, as Melville observed, "No man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences", subjectivity as subjectivity is inconceivable, is an unknowable abyss.

21.

In the numerous manuscripts on Alchemy we find precisely the magic ritual art-form. I find the text of some of these manuscripts profoundly moving and often curiously true, even by today's scientific standards. What is true, of course, is that Alchemy was a pseudo-science, the forerunner of modern science and psychology. I think what I find so valid in it is the human element, the way in which they were completely consumed with what they called "The Work".

22.

I am impressed by the enormous faith and patience they possessed, even after constant and inevitable failure. Professor Jung in his "Psychology and Alchemy" suggests that this inevitable failure was often realized by the Alchemists; success was not their goal. It was the 'work' that was important, the knowledge and meditation it produced - it was the truth they were after - 'not the gold': that was just a fable to prevent their people from saying they were mad. The same accusations were fired at artists like Malevich and Piet Mondrian. Because there was nothing materially recognizable in their work, they were thought of as mad, as wasters, evenhoaxers, by the general public. The public could not understand such statements as this one: on positive mysticism, "We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions which can be

controlled by reason and order, we recover these same constructions later in a "given" natural reality, thus penetrating nature by means of plastic vision..." (From the De-stijl movement)

23.

Bertrand Russell advocates the use of magic in "Mysticism and Logic" - "The greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need for both science and mysticism - reason is a harmonizing controlling force rather than a creative one. Even in the most purely logical realm, it is insight and intuition that first arrives at what is new".

24.

Again, this time from Coleridge: "Poetry has a logic of its own as severe as that of science, and more difficult because more subtle, more complex and dependent upon more fugitive causes".

25.

But let us not burden ourselves with the general public viewpoint. The true creative spirit is not sullied by the bogged down rationalism of material logic; it is free and robust and transcends material mutterings; it lives beyond the rational Mandala. But this does not mean that the creative spirit is not in pursuit of truth - in fact entirely the opposite, although this may seem contradictory: It is here that the love of life lives. It is from this generosity that the creative spirit rises. 'Non-ambiguity' and 'non-contradiction' are one sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible.

26.

On scrutinizing Metaphysics, Alchemy and Mysticism, we find that it is impossible to get at the content without using allegory. We can only come to an approximation. We can only know the essence of these qualities and visions. All we can get is a hint of what is meant but seldom stated. For example, from an eighteenth century explanation of the understanding of Alchemy: "The obscure by the more obscure; the unknown by the more unknown". This is what intrigues us, draws us in, together with the fact that the individual is allowed to read in his own ideas to a certain extent. This perhaps suggests the generosity, the sharing and confirmation of the mystical experience. If we reverse the last paragraph we can see how the artist or philosopher can use this allegoric method on purpose to get communication however slightly - and push collectively into the depths of the unknown. As history shows, one individual cannot get too far beyond the collective consciousness without fear of losing his balance of mind. This collective method is sympathetic to all in that one is not forced to accept ideas, but rather one takes what is correlative to one's own vision and understanding.

27.

It is the use of magic or illusionism that allows two people to enjoy a work of Art for entirely different subjective - objective reasons. We are now coming near the vast subject of Aestheticism which would be better studied in another lecture. But I will hint at the collective values of form in my next chapter with the mention of GESTALT form.

28.

This chapter is centred around my own personal philosophy which I have worked with for four years. It is called the "The Error Principle" or "The Dynamic Flaw Principle".

i. A pure circle is (viewed as a pure circle in the flat) static.

ii. An absolutely pure circle is imperceptible in physical actuality; intellectually it can be comprehended as a symbol and a workable unit

iii. An offbeat or impure circle is completely conceivable by its readability through its flaws. This in turn is the only preciseness any human mind can fully conceive; abstracts and absolutes cannot be fully realized, one can never know the unknowable - but can conceive the 'essence of'.

iv. This simply leads to the fact that you have to make illusions to get at the truth-essence, or you have to err to be human. We gain knowledge through the imperfect, as in the case of the impure circle: it appears to have a beginning and an end - or there is a part of it that seems to be more dynamic than the remainder. Each part adds up to a unity which results in a comprehension of logic and cause - we embrace the total as known and understood. On the other hand when faced with an absolutely pure circle the eye seems to travel around and round looking for some flaw with which to fix a point of reference before assaulting the total. Finally it gives up and in the intellect the 'idea' of the pure circle is accepted. And without cutting it up or mutilating it there is nothing more one can do about it as a total. When there is nothing to grasp there can be no perception - absolutes are final by definition, and thus seemingly dead.

v. Using the impure circle as a graphic allegory of the error principle, and applying it to evolution and the Universe, it seems to work; if it were static it would burn out quickly as soon as its native energy was used up. With the error principle the energy is continually in circulation because the 'idea' of the energy is in the error; the error is in fact the dynamic of the total - it is the dynamo and the idea. The imperfect becomes the perfect - only because it has its own inbuilt error in what we can only know as the perfect. This head chasing its own tail can be symbolized by the offbeat circle and, incidentally, one often sees this symbol used in alchemical drawings.

We seem to get the maximum energy from the offbeat circle nearest the pure circle. But we have already established that the true circle seemed metaphorically dead. We can deduce from this that the living creative dynamic seems to be hovering perilously close to the 'death-truth'. (death-truth: I can find no other way of expressing this idea). It is the 'little flaw' that allows us 'not' to know - and gives us hope and a survival motive in trying continually to know. If we close the gap in the flaw by using time - we have the 'living instant' which is the supreme nothingness and everythingness of Zen Buddhism. My western interpretation of this is the mind playing with its own knowledge within sight of certain death. Once the error is realized the 'game' is on, what is important is not the final results but the playing of the game. The beauty and meaning of life could be said to be how well and how near you play to the living instant. I do hope that none of you will misinterpret this play idea as in any way frivolous. It is a matter of life and death; heroes, saints, gods and the system of the Universe appear to come within these bounds.

29.

Some years ago, when I was first experimenting with the idea of the impure circle I found that one of the only ways to make an impression on a pure circle was to draw an arrow, as though

piercing it. This was interesting as it obviously suggests male and female phallic symbols. Again with the impure circle - it suggests the Great Mother, that is male and female in one unit, a sort of hemaphrodite idea. This Great Mother symbolism has been with us for thousands of years; it seems to have arisen with the birth of pottery - the idea of something being contained - one with each other. This again is very strong in the writings and drawings of the alchemy. It is evident in pre-columbian and primitive art - the figure having both a phallus and breasts. If we go on analysing these two forms, male and female, they become GESTALT; that makes everything else form-wise begin to look secondary.

30.

This positive and negative form seems to get in everywhere. Every passage we look at in a picture, the forms are either positive or negative to the next either by form or colour. I am not suggesting that art 'should' be viewed as a monotonous succession of phallic symbols. Rather the reverse - creative ideas are concerned with disguising such references. In modern painting we find it is almost totally composed in this way. We are led into a picture through the negative passages to the climax and then back again until we read it as a total work. As this positive-negative oscillation increases it becomes more and more ambiguous, as in the work of Victor Vasarely. As we perceive one idea of the correct viewpoint it is very difficult to change to the other seemingly correct one.

31.

We read form by selecting positive from negative and vice-versa and that on a flat form this is done by illusion and colour gymnastics; add to this the fact that what is represented in the work may well be allegory - the result is 'nothing' if it is not MAGIC.

32.

There is another basic way to make a magical image, by placing one, two or more recognizable forms or objects, similar or totally foreign to each other, juxtaposed within the same picture structure. What happens is each object having its own identity fosters an overall image which is not materially present. A blank tin and a tinopener on an orange ground may suggest 'baked beans' or your favourite tin food; this is a weak example of 'Pop' painting. We get the same magic image construction in Surrealism - when this becomes complex the result can be inexhaustibly intriguing. Each time we view the work we perceive slightly different information; it is the ambiguity which makes the work of art live; it is permanent - we change all the time. So in two senses, it becomes reflective. What in one decade is beautiful may in the next become ugly. The quality that makes great art, it seems, is that which makes it outlive its age and its creator. But we are not trying to define what is great art in this lecture. What we are interested in is the magic ritual way in which it is brought about. The ambiguity that is always present in art, and must be present, solely because this intuitive method is the one way by which we can simulate the unknown and the inarticulate, makes unassumingly a collective effort towards the understanding of man and the nature of things. If this were not the case there would be little point in making art; it would be pointless to bother to make something if the result was completely known and understood collectively - that is everybody knew about the whole value of the object, both plastically and subjectively.

33.

To those of you who have seen the work of the American painter Jasper Johns (b.1930.) this painting of an image already excepted collectively may come to mind. His work is underestimated and grossly mis-labelled 'PopArt'. I think the work of this artist is among the greatest and most intelligent of its decade - its execution is also of the same standard.

What Johns has done, in one sense, is to go right back to the realism of Palaeolithic art. He presents us with a known and GESTALT (accepted) image - the American flag. By representing this as a work of art, which it surely is, he forces us to examine it as 'more' than the American flag - and in doing so the actual picture becomes even better than the idea of the original. In a curious way the original flag seems to become second rate. It seems that on seeing his painting we read all the lots of little brush strokes (which incidentally you cannot see in the reproductions) and in its not being so perfect and lifeless as the real flag it becomes full of new possibilities. He makes the flag 'his', real forever in a sort of timeless way. He replaces all the original flags with his own - and it 'works'.

34.

In some of his other work he paints with letter stencils, the word "BLUE" written in blue paint on a red passage - or the word "RED" written in red on a blue passage and so on. What happens here is that one is literally forced to contemplate just what is going on; it's a sort of game of who's cheating who which is enormously intriguing as it engages the intellect at a high level about rational values. Finally we realize that what is painted, colour-wise, is true; the colours are what they are, but that it is 'we' that have read in all the complications by allowing ourselves to read the 'BLUE marks' as meaning blue. This transcends what is actually present - and gives it a new significance. In his 'Device' paintings he uses a ruler or a stick which he nails at one end - and then sweeps through the paint in a half or full circle 'leaving' the rule attached; in the same manner he forces one to know just how it was done - 'the gesture'. I saw one of these in the Tate Gallery with the ruler hanging off - the whole effect or performance was ruined. It dawned on me then how important the presentation of this work was, how important the attitude of the observer was. The enjoyment of this work is immense once the idea is perceived - it's a pity so many called art critics have not understood what's going on - thereby only confusing the public. To those of you who are interested by the idea of the work, you must see the real thing to receive the full impact.

35.

We have only just started to expose the magic illusory qualities in 'particular' painting and art; one could go on indefinitely - but a barrage of names and ideas may only lead to confusion.

In conclusion, I hope I have shown how important the magical image and various illusory processes are; how they have helped man for thousands of years in his long battle for subsistence, knowledge and understanding; how it is that these magical qualities allow us intuitive thought. It is from this source that we can all CREATE.

Robert Law, May 1964.