

Aesthetics — Gone with Gregor?*

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I found it hard to resist the urge to comment on some of the contents of *Studies in Design Education & Craft* Vol. 6 No. 1, which I've been reading recently, and finally I've stopped resisting.

If Sonia Gregor has anything meaningful to say about aesthetics it didn't emerge in her paper — even though she began by stating her aim as being to show that theorising has a “direct relevance to pressing practical problems”. What pressing problems will be easier to solve as a result of her article? Will it help in the classroom or in the studio? What we get is what the Americans call crackerbarrel philosophy dressed-up in the verbiage to which educational theorists are so prone.

For example, what on earth does “ready-structured thought” mean in the context of: “A painter, poet, sculptor, inventor all solve problems by using ready-structured thought in a more free way than the unimaginative person”? Where does her evidence come from? Is it proven that creators all follow the same pattern of thought-processes and procedures? Is it not the case that, on the evidence of the writings of artists, most seem *not* to think and then to make, but rather do the two simultaneously? It is ludicrous to talk of artists as “solving problems” — very few really work in a way which amounts to problem-solving. Generally speaking the main problem is, as Brancusi said, simply to start work, the next problem is to keep working, and the third is to know when to stop. The problems are to do with decision-making: you can only say that the artist solves a problem when, say, he opts for green paint rather than red, if you assume that only one alternative is right — the artist might choose either and *make* it ‘work’, and so chooses one rather than the other simply because he prefers it. In a sense you could say that that is problem-solving, for it solves the problem of what to do next, but I think that problem-solving implies a lot more than that: if the artist *makes* a solution

then he also *made* the problem and at any stage he can choose to change either: what might begin as a short story might end as a lengthy novel. Klee said that for every picture you see two or possibly three superior pictures have been sacrificed. Maillol defined the difference between an artist and a craftsman as being that the latter knows what he is going to make and the former doesn't.

Gregor goes on to say: ‘Occasionally they will significantly break a rule — not because they did not know about the rule, but because, understanding the reason for its existence, they decide it is not necessary to their particular purposes but an inhibiting influence’. I thought that philosophy (including aesthetics) of necessity used precise language: can she name *one rule* in, say, painting or poetry? Isn't she really talking about *conventions*? If I know the conventional form of a sonnet and write a poem with a different form it must be because I didn't want to write a conventional sonnet — I've broken no *rule*. If I write a poem and call it a painting I'm either redefining or misusing language: I'm not breaking rules but ignoring conventions. If I know that paint A and paint B aren't normally mixed together because they react against each other but I nonetheless paint with a mixture of A and B it is because I have decided that permanence isn't important — I've made a decision rather than broken a rule. If I ignore the rule that you keep your hands clear of some piece of dangerous machinery then I'm a fool. If I can't see the difference between rules and conventions then I've limited what I can achieve: I limit myself as an artist if I accept without question (as though it were a rule) the convention among writers on art than a artist is measured only on the basis of the extent to which he breaks conventions.

“Thus,” says Gregor, “the creative thinker makes some of his own rules as he goes along — not in an anarchial way, form

miraculously arising out of chaos, but in a rule-recognising and purposive way." *Some* artists, but not many, make a personal resolution, and thus a sort of rule, that they will abide by some convention, either traditional or of their own devising: I will only use these colours, or this medium, or this form. But artists like Joseph Albers are very unusual. Most of us repeat forms or colours either because we're lazy and have gotten into set habits or because we're limited imaginatively (or both): most of us would prefer *not* to be limited. Gregor should read the writings of Klee and Webern, who both explain, with great lucidity, the speculative way in which most artists work — the best forms often *do* arrive "miraculously". One can think of various artists (writers particularly) who have produced a lot of indifferent work and one or two superb works which seem as though they were created by someone else. Gregor would do well to read both Ehrenzweig and D.T. Suzuki: Gregor seems committed to the dubious old idea that art is about imposing order on chaos.

"Rule-recognising and purposive" artists are likely to be inferior artists. There must have been a first person to make an omelette: artists are like that first person — they don't know if they'll produce an omelette because they don't know what an omelette is. The "rules" of omelette-making emerge retrospectively: the "rules" are seen in the gallery or art-history book but not in the studio (it is well-known that aesthetics consists in being wise after the event, hence the painter Barnett Newman said that "aesthetics is to artists what ornithology is to birds"). If, as Gregor says, I make some of my own rules as I go along, then I either accumulate so many rules that I cease to be creative and can merely repeat myself or I must discard old rules as I invent new ones — so how can they then be described as rules if they are so easily discarded? A work of art makes its own "rules" — the artist doesn't know what those rules are until the work of

art is made; if he did he wouldn't be an artist but a craftsman. It is said that Picasso and Stravinsky had stylistic "periods" (Neo-Classical, Blue, and so on): does each period represent a particular set of rules or does it represent a particular set of preferences and interests? Schoenberg is popularly supposed to have composed according to a set of rules — in fact he frequently ignored his own theories. If artists thought in terms of rules they would not be able to enjoy artworks which differed from their own — it would be "wrong". The Norwich watercolourists, who are more or less the "definitive" watercolourists, repeatedly ignored the "rules" of the medium which one finds enshrined in technical manuals on the subject. The sculptors of Ancient Greece didn't know that, several centuries later, it would become a "rule" of classically-inspired sculpture that no colour should be used. The founders of all the great religions would be surprised by the rules which would become essential parts of those religions in later times.

The creative thinker, according to Gregor, is not "anarchial" (why use this rare form rather than anarchical or anarchic?): anarchy means not only a state of chaos, but also "a harmonious condition of society in which law is abolished as unnecessary": most artists, I think, are not anarchic in the sense that they simply and mindlessly ignore "laws" (or conventions), but *are* anarchic in that they strive to make those laws or conventions redundant insofar as they affect their work — the creative person will not do something merely because it breaks a law nor will he do something merely because it accords with a law. An intelligent artist will not hesitate to learn from what has gone before, but will not be *bound* by the conventions which he sees. (A Jazz pianist once remarked that "the trouble with young musicians now is that they don't get influenced any more — and when they do they get influenced by people I can't stand!").

Most creative artists aren't "purposive",

as Gregor says they are, so much as optimistic: Webern wrote that one *doesn't* sit down and say "now I will paint a beautiful picture" or "now I will write a beautiful poem" — amateurs may well do that, but serious artists don't. Chance has been used in European music and painting since the Renaissance (at least): Botticelli advocated it, and Haydn used it — if only as a starting point. We can never know absolutely which artists might have exploited "accidents" — we only know such things if the artist told us. X-Ray photographs show us how many great paintings have been altered, how colours and forms have been changed, sometimes drastically: "Purposive", according to my dictionary, means "directed towards an end" — the artist doesn't *know* what the end will be, and the end which we see (the purposive-looking painting in a gallery) is simply the point at which the artist decided to stop. Had he lived *might* not Proust have rewritten "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" at least once more — is that unthinkable? Poets (Auden for example) and composers in particular sometimes tinker with work written years before when they're republished or performed again. Turner would make alterations and additions to his work even when it was hanging at the Royal Academy. You only know *absolutely* when you've finished something when you had a definite end in view: artists stop adding to or altering a work when they feel that anything further might detract from what has gone before (they quit while they're ahead), or because they've lost interest in it or because they're eager to capture the germ of another idea before they forget it. If, when you see again something you did years before, you don't feel that it could be better than it is then either it was a fluke or perhaps you've stopped developing. The most creative artists are often as surprised by what they've produced as is anyone else. That first omelette was as much a new taste for the

man who made it as it was for whoever he shared it with: I doubt very much if he imagined a taste and then spent years trying different recipes until he achieved it, I doubt if he was purposive. I think it more likely that he liked to experiment and had a strong sense of curiosity; perhaps the same man invented scrambled eggs — but it's likely that he also made some unspeakable messes. I don't expect he stopped there either — probably he tried adding various things to the mixture. *Is* there a "right" omelette? There are bad ones of course; there are failures, but perhaps the first scrambled egg was an omelette which didn't go according to plan — and perhaps if that man had been more purposive we'd still be ignorant of scrambled eggs.

I've written about this at length because it seems to me that Gregor's aesthetics are built on insubstantial foundations. To refer back to Barnett Newman's comparison of aesthetics and ornithology it is as if birds had written about their way of life but the ornithologists had ignored those writings. Many widely-held beliefs about Natural History have been confounded by naturalists who have taken the trouble to do detailed observation work. For example it had been observed for years that African lions were often to be seen in the morning enjoying a carcass, while hyenas edged around them waiting to partake of the remains, and from this it was assumed that the lions had done the hunting and that the hyenas were scavengers, but when a team observed them through the night it was seen that the roles were, in fact, often reversed — the hyenas had done the hunting and the lions the scavenging. Of what use is analytical aesthetics if it refers only to other works on aesthetics and not to "field-work", to works of art and artists?

I am coming more and more to think that the tragedy of art is that the only people who understand it are artists.

Gregor speaks of "expressive theories of art" as growing as an alternative to "classical mimetic or representational theories": in the first place this appears to suppose that the two are alternatives (but there can be expressive mimetic) and secondly it presumes that the mimetic is not expressive (one might refer to John Berger's theories) and thirdly it ignores idealistic art (which is, of course, expressive of certain things, but no more than is mimetic art) and fourthly it ignores art which refers only or primarily to itself. There has never, with the exception of waxworks, which aren't universally accepted as art, been an art which is fully mimetic; where there is selection (if just of what and when and how something shall be represented) there is expression. The number of stable symbols in European art for several hundred years have been so few that its expressive capabilities are limited. The mimetic artist (so called) chooses (or else his patron chooses for him) which aspects of something he will draw attention to: he expresses something — perhaps his skill, perhaps the vanity of his patron, perhaps both of those and a lot more besides.

Vermeer and Holbein both produced "likenesses" — but there can be no doubt, looking at their respective paintings, that they were two quite different men, indeed their personalities emerge very forcefully. I select from a number of photographs which one expresses the way in which I want myself to be seen.

There is reason to doubt the *extent* to which paintings (or music) *can* express specific and fixed emotions, "moods" or ideas — because there are not enough language conventions. I might produce a picture violently and viciously — you might find the result charming. The colours which "mean" one thing to me may "mean" something quite different to you. The shifts of emphasis as to what art is "about" often represent no more than wishful thinking.

It would perhaps be more realistic to talk of art which uses conventions to represent (persons, scenes, or ideas) and of art which creates the raw material for experiences.

Gregor asserts that " 'Self expression' is currently regarded as self-evidently valuable ...", which may hold true in Colleges of Education but is not true elsewhere. This notion has been under fire for many years and it is a term which, in my experience, is only used in Art Colleges in an ironic way.

It is significant that Gregor begins her analysis of aesthetics with "expression": there seems to be an underlying belief that artworks exist to be interpreted. Like so many writers on art she is obsessively verbal. It is curious how many writers on art seem to hold a low opinion of the sensual and imaginative experience, seem unable to accept that the aesthetic experience may be precisely that which cannot be codified. The aesthetic experience is between you and the artwork, not between you and the artist (i.e. the artwork isn't merely a vehicle, although it may be that too). Your pocket phrase-book to the language of art is no good to you unless it relates to a language which is actually used. It may be interesting to divide artists into categories, particularly if those categories have some substance to them, but can it not be like knowing the rules of French grammar without understanding any French? Is it of much use if each Frenchman is to some extent creating his own version of French?

Sonia Gregor says that "Art, too, has a vast store-house of recognised meanings and associations of meanings": I question this, particularly with respect to the visual arts. It may be true of the art of other cultures (of Indian art for example) but has not been true of European art since the Renaissance — which is perhaps why mimetic art has been dominant for so long because in mimetic art art can "borrow" meanings from outside of art, from, in fact, other areas of a culture. Comparisons of the meanings which dif-

ferent people read into the same work of art shows just how insubstantial art-as-language is. In our culture a convention which is used frequently is seen as a cliché and thereby demoted — we relegate easily recognised meanings to film music, to poster design, to cheap paperbacks and so on. The artist, therefore, is in the position of Humpty-Dumpty (or was it Tweedledee?) who said that “when I use a word it means just exactly what I want it to mean” — and has to recognise that others might use his “words” to mean what *they* want them to mean. Actual words are sufficiently stable for us to use them for reasonably particular meanings, whereas although European visual and musical arts lose-out in some respects in their instability they gain in that a single artwork can mean a great many things and to attempt to decipher them is to be like a schoolkid who’s taken to the National Gallery, strides briskly through all the rooms and announces “I’ve finished”.

P.S. Precisely when “recognised meanings and associations of meanings” in European art began to lose their potency may be a moot point but I would argue that there is a direct link with the decline in popular familiarity (and perhaps also sympathy) with Christian and Classical mythology and tradition — the main sources of symbols in European art. Meanings are now conveyed in European art by borrowing the meanings attached to things outside of art: this is pictographic rather than symbolic, and has only as much continuity of meanings as there is in society’s attitudes to things.

** A letter to the Editor of Design Education and Craft.*