

August 2006

TOP SECRET

INTELLIGENCE

Mat Callahan's quarterly newsletter of music, art, and philosophy
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Dear Friends:

The year so far has taken me many places to speak and perform. From the US to Poland, from the UN in Geneva to the Rock and Blues Cruise on the Mediterranean Sea, from celebrations in Paris, France to festivals in Umbria, Italy I've had a wonderful opportunity to engage in discussion and to share the joy of music. And, in the midst of all these adventures something new has emerged. What began as a practical solution to the logistical problem of getting a band and all our equipment onto a small stage for a benefit concert for the New Orleans Musician Clinic has developed into a full-blown project. Let me explain. Yvonne and I helped organize two concerts here in Switzerland to aid musicians who had suffered grievous losses in Hurricane Katrina. Getting the events staged and promoted properly took all our time so that when it came to our own performance the best solution was to do it acoustically in a duet. The response was so good that we decided to put a bit more effort into the possibilities of duet singing.

There were two parts to this process: First was recognizing the difference between the styles of singing each of us has developed on our own and what sounded best together. In this sense, 1+1 does not equal 2. Two, together, means a third voice emerges that is the combination. Secondly, the songs that made use of this new instrument were not always the songs that each of us might do well alone (or with a band). So, I set about composing music that took advantage of the possibilities this new instrument provides.

We debuted this repertoire at a small open-air festival in Bern. We were given great encouragement by the reaction of an audience that included both close friends and passersby. Subsequently, we had several opportunities to 'test-drive' this new vehicle, including our visit to Italy (see my website for the details of that trip and the others mentioned above). We have not lost our enthusiasm for the amplified band sound and, indeed, we're playing in that format more than ever. But there is something refreshing about this simple, old approach to music making. It has renewed vigor, at least for us, as it lays bare the melodies, the texts and the human beings singing them.

Now, we are preparing to record an album. It should be completed in September and will accompany us on our tour in the States which will begin at the Brecht Forum in NYC November 4. Stay tuned for announcements and updates regarding both the album and the tour. The next issue of ITS will have all the tour dates and information about how you can hear our new music.

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The following essay is by regular contributor Thomas Powell. Tom is an artist and educator residing in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Post-Modernism Is Dead?

It is commonplace today for art scholars to lazily categorize Post-Modernism as one more movement of Modern/Contemporary Art sandwiched somewhere between the site works and computer viruses of the last three decades of the 20th Century. Post-Modernism is dead, passé! Or at least the desire of art historians to revisit it is dead. And this presents artists with a problem, for many of the issues first raised by Post-Modernism remain unresolved.

These topics fester beneath the death mask of academic disinterest. This situation would be pitiful for artists if we continue to concede the theater of art theory to the dreary ruminations of critics. For all its failures, some of which will be reviewed here, Post-Modernism was the final great artists' manifesto of the Twentieth Century. It is more relevant to us today than all its predecessors, not because it claimed "the death of art," nor grandiosely "the death of civilization," but simply, and more modestly, it proclaimed "the death of Modern Art."

As working artists, this is a claim we need to seriously revisit again. We need to grasp the full implications of the end of the Modern Art era. This is not an issue to delegate to the "arts intelligencia" who have no credentials to lead, who have been seduced for this past quarter century by their own blasé, and who would have us believe that we are making "Contemporary Art" as some natural extension of Modernism. Every art is contemporary with its historical times. To call our product contemporary is to practice stupidity while ignoring the pathos of it. The real issue is that Modernism is over. We have entered a new historical epoch of art. We don't yet know what the defining principles will be, so we don't know what to call it. But gracias a Dios, it will not be called Contemporary Art, nor Post-Modernism which swallowed its tail in the morass of semiotics, and choked from the ugliness of its own name.

But the Post-Modern movement was the radical break with Modernism, and for that we can respect it, and be eternally grateful. We are no longer post-anything, nor neo-anything. We have entered the new playground, and we are comfortable with the swing sets. But before I attempt to outline the distinctive traits of this new era, let us briefly examine our history so that we may better understand the present, and also let me first state my own position. The core, strategic, defining issue of one hundred years of Modern Art has been successfully completed. The monotheistic, patriarchal God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity is dead. Modern Art, in collaboration with the historicism of communism, the unfettered and unapologetic greed of capitalism, the relentless materialism of science, and a new Godless

philosophy, all collaborated to kill the father-God. Though the fundamentalists rabidly fear it, and will fight “red in tooth and claw” against it, the truth be told, their God is slain.

The role of modern art in this patricide was to shift the aesthetic. For five centuries commencing with Giotto, the patronage of the Catholic Church and the secular states of Western Europe collaborated to perfect the aesthetics of a pan-European painting style based upon impeccable perspective, theatrical lighting, and stunning realism. Through the abject beauty of Botticelli and Raphael, the humor of Hals, the glory of Poussin, the heroicism of David, even in the pornography of Delacroix, for half a millennium the art of Western Europe from incipient Renaissance to Enlightenment and empire was heroic, greater than life, God-inspired and God-reinforcing. European art was a continent-wide divine apotheosis; it was the unified vision of an art at once fantastic and of sublime realism. The first real sign of decay in this ideological fortress of Christian self-imagining did not appear until the beginning of the 19th Century when Goya reintroduced into painting the atavistic Middle-Ages’ fascination with the grotesque.

Once begun by a fistful of French reject artists, the new aesthetic discoveries of Modern Art collapsed the fluffy and inflated image of God. Ridicule, even blasphemy became possible, then commonplace. Seeing is believing such that the public slowly caught on to the novelty of other picture planes, other color combinations, other psychological moments worth knowing, other competing pathways to the sublime beyond the hegemonic corridors of church and academy.

Modern Art, which began in the 1870’s, ended one century later in 1968 with the global social revolutions in Mexico, the United States, and France. Its mission, its unconscious mission for the most part, the assassination of God, was accomplished. But that future role, which becomes apparent in hindsight, was not known at all in its early decades. The mission of Modernism did not begin to reveal itself to artists (and then only to some) until the 20th Century was well under way. First came the manifestos of Kirchner and Marinetti asserting the avant garde role of the artist. Then came the violent and absolute destruction of the classical picture plane by Cubism. And the coup d’grâce following the utter terror and insanity of WW I was the Dada movement’s attack on the Enlightenment’s unshakable faith in human reason. Again in hindsight, the consequences of such a radical shift of esthetics values within such a brief moment of time made the outcome of Modernism inevitable.

So as artists taking the first fateful steps of the new millennium, we cannot be sure which directions will be most fruitful, but two things we can know. We do not need trained guide dogs to show us the path, and we can examine what has already transpired in visual art since 1968 to see what is indicated from that. There are a variety of topics which are no doubt relevant, but I will confine my discussion to just three.

First, what occurred of such enormous magnitude as to warrant equivalence with concepts like Baroque or Neo-Classicism that marks 1968 as the watershed from Modern Art to the present as yet un-named art epoch? The answer is the immediate and radical shift in art from the dominance of issues of form, to the overwhelming dominance of issues of content.

Modern Art is concerned with issues of form. Aesthetics is the study of form, and “form is truth” Modern aesthetics invented a new “abstract truth” to directly compete against the old “God truth” of realism. The search for a new, defining, formal, anti-Christ, abstract truth, is the defining paradigm of the century of Modern Art. This new truth ultimately succeeded in discovering both its own divine, and its own sublime.

In startling comparison, Post-Modernism immediately subordinated form to content. Post-Modernism overturned the purpose of art-

making to favor content, that is, to make art about meaning. “Content is meaning!” Four decades into the experiment, and there is no evidence anywhere that the issues of meaning are not going to continue to dominate art creation for a very long time yet to come.

To understand the profound relevance of this shift from formal art to content art we must understand that all Western philosophy, science, history, politics, all Western thought in every academic discipline bar none, is built upon an architecture of “oppositional dualism.” I am not referring here to any one debate like mind/body dualism, but instead to the entirety of all such binary oppositions in Western thought. Good or evil, day or night, to be or not to be, Western thought is structured by the pairing of binary opposites. This architecture is distinct from Eastern dualism which seeks to balance male and female, positive and negative. In Eastern duality, yin and yang exist as binary forces which struggle within the unity of the whole. Western dualism is forever asymmetrical, oppositional, and combative. Thesis begets anti-thesis, while synthesis becomes thesis to battle the next antithesis. Every discipline has its polar warring camps. Without this structure, Western thought would not advance. We would collapse once again into an intellectual Dark Age. We would not have history, we would not progress. Perhaps this is art’s next mission?

This is not to imply that the Chinese have no sense of history, or that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not monotheistic religions. The point is that dualism is structural and operates at the subliminal level of culture. Thus, the pendulum of power in art has swung to the opposite pole. Form has been subordinated to the service of content, and with this great change has come a florescence of new subjects. The former boundaries of “proper subject matter” have been rent asunder. All topics of our current age are game-our planet, our history, our genocides, our follies, our private neurosis, and our internal medicines – all, and much more, have been prized opened for inspection. Never mind that the presentation of so much of this material is ill-conceived and oppressively boring; that it is being made available right now is an astounding novelty unto itself.

This phenomenal explosion of subject matter leads us into our second topic which is the parallel growth of the subjective voice. Today’s art is dominated by opinion. Nobody making “relevant” art searches for universals anymore. That is formalism, that’s passé. Instead, today’s art preaches from a soapbox, it rants, solicits, performs, hustles, teaches, reveals, investigates, narrates, bares its soul, waves a white flag, embarrasses the viewer, and begs forgiveness, sometime all in the same work. There is tremendous inventiveness in this outpouring. There is great drama, startling revelations, intense therapy, and plenty of tedium.

The beginning point of subject art cannot be the object, i.e., the artwork, or even the world. Instead, it must be the subject “me,” me as the artist or me as the viewer, me and my relationship to some facet of this world about me which I have placed under the aesthetic microscope. The entire world becomes the act of interpretation. Truth is no longer eternal; it can only be relative.

The impact of Post-Modernism on architecture and on art has been a positive adventure for the most part. But the impact of Post-Modernism (vis à vis semiotics and linguistic theory) on philosophy, and on Western society in general, has been profoundly negative. Form, which is truth, which is the objective voice, has been replaced by content, which is meaning, which is the subjective voice. Our world has become dominated by opinions, all clamoring to be equally valid. Amidst this “democratic” chorus, how is one to sort the grain from the chaff? Tragically, it is within the moral fabric of society where the unraveling brought on by unchecked subjectivity is truly felt. Who is the authority to preside over good and evil? Both the right and the left can agree that there has been a dramatic decline in moral behavior within society, though we finger point at different villains.

The last trend of the four decades following Modern Art that I would like to briefly discuss has been the wholesale appropriation of cultural images and manufactured objects into the iconographic inventory of art. Appropriation has been the driving evolutionary engine of art from the very beginning. Artists in one region borrow materials, stories, gods, ideas, inventions, iconography, and/or methods from their neighbors to advance their own repertoire. In this manner, art has continuously ebbed and flowed with the migrations of human culture and civilization. Thriving local and regional styles evolved within the larger structures of trade, religion, and empire. Some motifs became truly universal as Covarrubius demonstrated with fret patterns throughout the pre-conquest Pacific basin.

Post-modernism accelerated this borrowing process exponentially. Schnabel glued broken crockery to his paintings thus appropriating cultural meaning from archeology. Subsequent movements or styles have blossomed where the appropriation or manipulation of the object, or the deed of claiming ownership itself, becomes the artwork as with found object art, recycled art, and graffiti art. Encouraged by our art school professors who were quick to recognize intriguing results, American artists mined American culture for symbols and artifacts, and then went shopping for global iconography. Appropriation became "sampling." The results of such juxtapositions have fostered remarkable invention, but once again, there have been unintended repercussions, most notably, the accusation of cultural colonialism. Appropriation means to take possession without compensation. Semantically then, appropriation legitimizes and legalizes cultural theft as it becomes proper to appropriate another's property.

I do believe the artists' manifestos from a hundred years ago. From thenceforth, there will always exist in a state of flux an avant garde of artists engaged in novel research and struggle who have a separate mission from the great majority of artists who decorate our homes and offices and public spaces and engage in commerce. The two roles are not mutually exclusionary, but I maintain that artists who wish to lead must hold their conduct to a higher moral standard. The act of appropriation must become once again the act of appreciation, the raising of the value of the icon, not its crass commodification.

The movement of Post-Modernism had its moment in history, and it has passed. In visual art it did not leave much of a stylistic legacy as did Impressionism, but its impact on subsequent generations of artists will be equally profound. Post-modernism established the new turf and many of the rules by which we will play for a long time to come. Our current crop of art historians and critics are out of touch, confounded by subjectivity and helpless to read the tea leaves. The present moment is rampant with issues. The future mission(s) of art is wide open. This is an opportunistic time for artists.

Thomas Powell
June, 2006

The Ownerless Society-Parts one and two

Part One: "If you can't own it, it doesn't exist?!"

As many of you know, I attended a meeting of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), an agency of the United Nations (UN) to present a proposal. This proposal was for the protection of music that is owned by no one, in other words, most of the music in the world. It uses a legal category, the Public Domain, which was created by the (British) Statute of Anne, the first modern copyright law, in 1710. In order to designate certain ideas expressed in songs, stories, inventions, designs, etc. as subject to property-'ownable' by someone-

the vast reservoir of human creativity that could not be so owned had to be accounted for. Not only were the origins of most creative expression obscure or unattributable to any individual, but the uses to which they were commonly put excluded commercial transaction. All sacred or religious art is one example. Songs and dances for feasting, harvesting and other communal activities are another. In fact, the entire field of what we call 'culture', must, by definition, be Public Domain. Culture constitutes human being, as such, and must be available to all within a given culture in order to exist. Unless it binds together a group (society as a whole or a subset within it) how can it be? Unless it elevates the group or society above its scattered, incoherent parts-individual people-what eyes or ears would even notice it? Who would have the capacity to differentiate it from the sounds and movements and colors of which the universe is composed? (a simple illustration is any language you don't understand; even if recognizable as a language it remains incomprehensible sound or marks on a page to you who do not speak it.) That there are secret songs or rituals available only to the initiated does not contradict this fact. Rather, it confirms it. Membership in a priesthood, group of elders or master craftsmen does not proffer ownership; it specifically prohibits it by making guardianship of certain works or skills a necessity of the larger group's continuity. That special guidance or education is required to properly appreciate and protect a song, dance, or any cultural artifact or practice is precisely to prevent its appropriation by anyone seeking private gain or devious purpose.

Now, as I mentioned in my report of that meeting, many tribal delegates specifically oppose the Public Domain because it has been used to justify the plunder of their legacies. In practice, this legal principle has been turned on its head to justify the transformation of cultural expressions owned by no one into copyrighted or patented works whose sale can enrich an individual. The most common examples come from American popular culture. Old blues or work songs were and continue to be taken and registered as: "Traditional, Arranged By" such and such person, the copyright being held by that individual. In effect this makes the Public Domain equivalent to a wasteland, an empty space in which there are no inhabitants and no artifacts, indeed, nothing useful except raw materials. These raw materials belong to the first person who comes to claim them. This is why lawyers speak of a work '*falling* into the Public Domain' after the term of copyright expires. Now, this would be laughably loony were it not so deadly. After all, we're not just talking about the obvious fact that the greatest works of literature, art, music and science were made before copyright existed (Shakespeare, for example). Rather, this conception of the Public Domain is exactly identical to how Europeans viewed the Western Hemisphere following Columbus. It was open to be claimed by any European since its inhabitants, in effect, *did not exist*.

To oppose this today many tribal peoples are seeking the protection of property law by designating their common legacies collective property. In many cases, treaties signed in the 18th and 19th Centuries between, for example, Great Britain and the First Nations of Canada, explicitly acknowledge this concept and guarantee it legal recognition. (see, 19th Century treaty text between Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and "Indian" tribes available at: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/trts/hti/site/trindex_e.html) But this presents a paradox; one that bears a striking resemblance to the Copernican threat to Church dogma concerning the order of the universe. For the tribes explain that their existence consists in this: belonging to the tribe renders incoherent or nonsensical any notion of a single person privately appropriating what originates in and depends on the tribe for its being. Thus, to suggest that a song belong to one man is as meaningless as saying that the tribe can be owned by one of its members or that the letters of the alphabet can be copyrighted.

Nonetheless, while ironies abound, the argument has weight in the WIPO context because it uses the framework of property and the laws, treaties and institutions erected to propagate and protect it. Moreover,

not only tribal peoples are concerned but big countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa use the same arguments to defend their traditional cultural expression and knowledge. (in most cases the focus is food and medicinal plants, only secondarily music and dance) Of course, this begs the question: from whom must protection be sought? Who is it that would misappropriate and illegally profit from the traditional knowledge of tribes, ethnic groups and even nation-states? Guess who...

It is easy to cynically conclude that this is all an exercise in futility. That big pharma and big agri-business will trump any claims by anyone attempting to limit their access to the wealth of this earth. That the UN is just window dressing for the crimes perpetuated by its real masters, namely the Security Council (the US, China, Russia, France, Great Britain, etc.) That the same fate awaits the indigenous peoples today as it did yesterday. But this would be wrong. First, because it would ignore the great waves of anti-colonial struggle that engulfed the world following WWII. It is only because of this struggle that anyone is listening to the Tulalip Tribe (Puget Sound area, Washington) or the Maasai (Kenya and Tanzania) today. Second, it would ignore the storms now gathering which threaten to radically alter the terms of play once again. What swept the 'Third World' in the Sixties, is rumbling forward again. Thus the recent past and the imminent future both conspire to challenge the ruling dogma of our day and age: Private Property is all that matters. All other rights, obligations and practices must conform to those guaranteeing this one or they will not be recognized. If it exists, it can be owned.

Still, indigenous people exist. So does the concept of the Public Interest. Environmentalism, as a movement and an idea, has taken hold precisely because there is an irresistible logic and irreducible fact of shared space-the Planet Earth-that has to be accounted for if anyone is to live in it. This friction is like a tectonic plate shifting beneath all of today's conflicts whether they appear in national, ethnic, or religious guise. Who is the public? What is their domain? Who are the law-givers and what is their jurisdiction? Because this is so we are subjected to an ideological offensive intended to convince us our happiness depends on being alone. While the 'Private' is a well-decorated altar housing an icon to be coveted and revered, the 'Public' is a defiled and mistrusted shadow lurking in the corners of social life. Think 'public' and you think: public toilet or public education; dirty, dangerous and inferior-only there for those unfortunates without the capacity to lift themselves into the ranks of the private individuals by whom civilization is composed.

Yet, for the vast majority of people in the world-including in the wealthiest countries-the opposite is actually true. What is private, in fact, is unavailable and what is public is best-or should be. In other words, the parks, the beaches, the schools, the libraries, health care and roads are necessary to life and should be maintained for the betterment of all. Thus, what tribal peoples are demanding in the form of collective ownership is actually what would benefit humanity-meaning everyone. Indeed, these principles express what humanity is when we use the word to describe benevolence and solidarity. It is a quality that we both aspire to and share the capacity for. It is what we honor and extol, especially when we teach our children.

This is why, in the struggle for a future free from suffering and injustice, the old is new. Far from being antique, quaint or even 'traditional', what Tribal Peoples are fighting for is dynamic. It could mean renewal for humanity.

Part Two: The Ownerless Society (What I want most is what I cannot own)

In the inaugural issue of this newsletter I made reference to 'The Ownerless Society'. In part this was a humorous rejoinder to the tired

rhetoric of George Bush. We've heard hosannas to the Ownership Society sung so often we know the tune by heart. Like all advertising jingles, they're intended to worm their way into the subconscious where they form habits of thought that go unquestioned. But questioning them is precisely what we need to do. Here, I'd like to invite you to join me in exploring some ideas that might contribute to such an effort. There are many possibilities but I chose these because each directly corresponds to its opposite in terms of owning things/objects and the individual who, it is claimed, should aspire to do so. I want to imagine the Ownerless Society based on the following:

1. Friendship
2. The Bond
3. Belonging
4. Justice

There is a fifth concept, Process, which embraces the other four. By process I mean that ends or goals are temporary, impermanent, negative in the sense that they are forever coming into and passing out of existence. Process or unfolding is permanent, constantly flowing, affirmative in the sense that everything is continually in motion, never at rest. Using this as a guide I'd like to explore more closely the other four.

Friendship is mutuality and equality. Sharing with others who are the same because they are people. "The principle of justice is mutuality and equality, through which, in a way most nearly approximating union of body and soul, all men become cooperative, and distinguish the mine from the thine, as is also testified by Plato who learned this from Pythagoras. Pythagoras effected this in the best possible manner by erasing from common life everything private, while increasing everything held in common, so far as ultimate possessions, which after all are the causes of tumult and sedition." - Iamblichus, the Life of Pythagoras

The Bond declares that the gap between individuals, families, generations and occupations is not a separation, rather it is a connection that must be elevated above the separate objects or persons that reside within it. By doing so, the illusions sown by individuality or 'interests' can be overcome by a unification with community.

Belonging means that membership in humanity supersedes ownership of objects. It is the infinite out of which finite objects come into and pass out of being. In order for any THING to belong to me I must belong to humanity. Furthermore, my existence is no more individual than it can be said that my elbow makes me a person. As the song says: "there ain't no I if there ain't no We".*

Justice is done by serving the principles of mutuality and equality. It makes one demand: that we interrupt the numbing inertia of injustice to assert what is fair and right for all. Thus, a circle is drawn making an indissoluble Bond between Friendship, Belonging and Justice.

Now, these ideas may appear to be hopelessly naive. Perhaps they are so obvious that it is only my ignorance that makes me feel it necessary to state them. But I would like to point out that they operate everywhere in the world today, invisible, unacknowledged, but true. They are what we seek and what we cling to in opposition to all that would tear us apart. They may be deformed and distorted yet they continue their stubborn resistance because they express what makes an animal called homo sapiens a human being. The so-called 'real world' is overrun by war, famine, pestilence and death. Why should we consider that realistic? Where is the sanity in that?

If there is to be a new paradigm we must be able to think it.

Mat Callahan

* "Relatively Einstein" by Mat Callahan