The intuitive and the rational

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The Intuitive and The Rational

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Introduction

A work of art, with a life unique unto itself, determined physically by the nature of its materials and its plastic elements, is a universe, in little, that exhibits many of the qualities that are possessions of the universe: vitality, order, rest, to name a few. According to Susanne Langer:

A work of art is a composition of tensions and resolutions, balance and unbalance, rhythmic coherence, a precarious yet continuous unity. Life is a natural process of such tensions, balances, rhythms; it is these that we feel in quietness or emotion as the pulse of our own living.¹

The purpose of this thesis is to show that the interaction between opposing elements is essential, not only for the maintenance of an equilibrium, but also to provide the dynamic ingredients which are necessary for change and growth, whether in a work of art or in life.

¹
Chapter I.

Equilibrium, as defined, is the state of balance between opposing forces or actions. The elements in a work of art are held within the confines of the picture space by relative tensions, much like the "planets spinning in their orbits around the sun, which are held in space by a complex of reciprocal tensions." The state of balance that results from the interaction of opposing forces is not a static balance, it is a precarious and dynamic state, which results from forces which are continually interacting and shifting their relationships.

The introduction of anything disturbs the balance of the picture. The picture field is partitioned, and the movement is initiated and immediately there is a disturbance of the balance. From then on, in creation, there is a series of processes, one element checking another, weight roughly balanced by counter-weight, movement turned, enclosed, tied in, but never does the original static balance return. The life of the picture is in the adjustments, the varied thrusts and return that hold the movement stable without symmetry.

While an equilibrium is necessary to maintain some semblance of order, it must be understood that the state occurs in successive stages, that it is a temporary state, which changes rapidly. The period of change is just as important as the interim; without change, there is a tendency towards stagnation.
We believe in evolution, change. Life is a process of change, growth, instability. The intellect changes, and grows, age after age. Art demands change and growth to accommodate its constantly emerging creations. Everything exists by virtue of movement, change and growth.

A common human drive is towards the state of order that an equilibrium imposes on things, and the denial that things are rapidly and ever changing. This state tends to affect the way people view the world; they tend to see in terms of what they have already learned or understand. Einstein has been reported as saying that:

It is not possible to make an observation unless the observer has a theory to bring to bear on what he is looking at. In a sense, this is true of the layman as it is of scientists. We all tend to see in terms of what we know or believe.4

Our seeing becomes "conditioned", seeing in, "the light of accumulated experiences, stored information, private interests and entrenched beliefs."5

According to Roger Fry:

The needs of our actual life are so imperative that the sense of vision becomes highly specialized in its services. With an admirable economy, we learn to see only so much as is needful for our purposes, but this is in fact very little. In actual life, the normal person really only reads the label as it were, on the objects around him and troubles no further. Almost all the things which are useful in any way, put on more or less this cap of invisibility. It is only when an object exists in our lives for no other purpose than to be seen that we
really look at it, as for instance, at a China ornament or a precious stone, and towards such even the most normal person adopts, to some extent, the artistic attitude of pure vision abstracted from necessity.6

Morse Peckham believes that a primary drive of humans is towards order; like Einstein and Fry, he believes that people bring an already conceived orientation to a situation, that they filter out any data which is not relevant to the needs of the moment. This is the "manifestation of the drive to order." He also believes that the preconceived orientation towards a situation causes one to ignore or suppress much of the remaining data which may well be highly relevant. The successful use of one orientation causes a person to use the same orientation again and again, without correcting it by relevant data. To use Peckham's phrase, "the drive to order is also the drive to get stuck in the mud." While man gets positively reinforced from dealing with one situation successfully, he, at the same time, gets negatively reinforced, for the success causes him to use the same orientation again.

Ordinary day-to-day scientific activity is much like the activities of the normal person. The scientist approaches his work with specific orientations and with the intentions of supporting the domains of science. He ignores data or problems which arise that may not support the theory he may be using 4.
during the reign of a particular paradigm. Even critics or art historians approach new creations with intentions of categorizing them as "styles." They perceive art history as a unified field and suppress or alter data which they cannot so unify.

Style is a defining character of art; this is proved by the fact that stylistic continuum can be discovered when an art is examined historically. Since order is the basic defining character of art, style must be a form of order. Consequently, the stylistic features of each work within an historic continuum of style form a paradigm of that style. That is, the order of each work is identifiable with the order of the style in which it exists. Hence, it follows that a style is the historic manifestation of the universal defining character of art, order.7

The scientist, critic and art historian, are governed by rules or a specific order. It takes a genius or innovator to force changes, which are resisted in science as in any other branch of human behavior, with perhaps, the exception of art. Art welcomes change, violation of rules; the artist is rewarded by such activities of denial. Most other human activity is rewarded for following the rules or laws; not art. The activities and visions of the artist seem essential:

To break up orientations, to weaken and frustrate the tyrannous drive to order, to prepare the individual to observe what the orientation tells him is irrelevant, but what may very well be highly relevant.8

This is the task of the artist: to offer another visual option to the already existing "conditioned 5.
vision." The artist creates a world not seen by other men, a world of new meaning for them. People need something that starts the mind to unwonted thinking; that stirs them to action. This interaction of opposing visions thus seems essential for the growth and enrichment of one's visual experience.

In addition to offering new visions to others, the artist must constantly challenge his own way of seeing. It would be easy for him to join others in the drive to order, as noted by some artists who choose to bask in their secure grounds of success, without seeking new ways of seeing things. An artist must protect himself from stagnation.

Comparing the art of the past with that of modern art reveals how particular eras influence the actions of artists functioning within that time.

The artists of yore were confined to the boundaries and traditions of their time. What was then considered "true art" required a degree of conformity to nature and a mastery of representation. They were forced to retain a specific orientation due to the influence of tradition.

Modern art (starting, perhaps with Impressionism), emerged as a dynamic reaction to escape from the confines of classical art forms. The idea of art shifted from mechanical reproductions to its expressive aspect.
Expressionism, is basically a personal and introspective style. According to William Snaith, "the search for means of greatly intensified self-expression has flowed from the artist's desire to escape from the confines of a super-mechanized world." The artists' only responsibility is to himself. He is alienating himself from society by turning his back on his communicative responsibilities to it.

Total preoccupation with either an objective reality or with the expression of the inner self, reveals how destructive and limiting such orientations can be. Perhaps a dual orientation; the integration of an objective and subjective approach, would temper such exclusive orientations? Anton Ehrenzweig believes that:

The present trend in art history is towards objectivity and alienation and that it is part of a more general reorientation of art from introspection towards reality. Art is no longer occupied with studying inner subjectivity, but is inspired by a new libidinous interest in the objective outer world. Ehrenzweig's insistence on the artist studying the world objectively is a good one. He feels that:

Because objective factors are alien to the inner self, they are better able to act as extraneous accidents and so cut across pre-conceived and defensive cliches. In this way, they will be able to tap hidden parts of the personality which have become alienated from the conscious personality. Cool alienation
then has to fulfill the function which
hot self-expression once filled. The old
psychological description and expression of
inner states is replaced by a seemingly
detached and objective description of man's
outer environment. Somehow, and this is the
paradox, our involvement with outer events is
far better able to express our real pre-
ocupation than a direct attempt at looking
inside ourselves or into the minds of other
people.11

The artist to uphold a dual orientation,
should adopt a set of dual attributes, and like the
tensions, balances and resolutions in a work of art,
which are necessary for its dynamic unity, he
must embody such qualities, for his integrity and well
being as an artist and human being.

The attributes of Apollo and Dionysus offer
good examples of contradictory attributes. Apollo,
the god of intellect, "is calm and orderly, but the
calm is not the quiet of lethargy; there is a
powerful tension - a balance of vigor and reason."12
The doors on his temple at Delphi bore the inscriptions
which remained the Greek models to a sane and happy
life: "Know thyself, and Nothing in Excess."13

Dionysus, on the other hand, is the god of joy
and freedom, "the wild and enthusiastic zealot, who
represents the surge and excitement of life, growth,
and the intoxication, not only of wine, but also
of animal impulse."14

Dionysus discovered wine, a two-sided gift to
man for it could be the source of freedom and
joyousness, or of weakness and brutality. The
attributes of wine were also embodied in the god, who could be merry and gentle or ruthless and powerful. He traveled about the earth teaching men the mysteries of the vine. Those who welcomed him received the gift of the vine, those who resisted him were visited with terrible punishment.15

The inscription, "Nothing in Excess," points up the importance of moderation; the integration of such attributes rather than one set dominating another. Order, reason, and calm are essential for one's well-being and to temper the irrational, wild side. Total preoccupation with the Apollonian, however, can cause one to manifest the typical drive to order.

A sense of joy, freedom, impulse and irrationality, on the other hand, are essential "to liberate oneself from the habits of the eye and the preconceptions of the hand."16 Total preoccupation with these qualities could lead to destruction and chaos.
Conclusion

Everything exists by virtue of an interaction between opposing elements. Such an interplay is necessary, not only to temper the elements into a state of balance or order, but also because it provides the dynamic ingredients which are necessary for change and growth.

The interaction of elements in a work of art endow the work with a dynamic unity and a vitality of its own.

Man exists by virtue of such an interaction. He functions in a state of order, which is essential. If he did not, he could not cross the room, let alone the street. Equally important, however, are his dynamic attributes which enable him not only to function in a world that is characterized by a precariousness and by an interaction of discontinuous elements, but also to adjust to continual changes and ways of seeing that may be different than his own.

Total preoccupation with either a state of order or with its counterpart, is to deny the very essence of life, which depends on the interaction of opposing elements, not only to create stability, even though temporary, but also to provide the ingredients which are necessary for its inevitable changes and perpetual developments.
Chapter II.

The use of the objective world for subject matter is an important part of my working process. Things that convey a sense of energy either in their function or visually have often been a source of inspiration for me (i.e., mechanical parts, music, dance). My intention is to convert the energy that is inherent in these forms into a personal artistic energy.

The energy is usually conveyed by the interaction of opposing responses, which results in a certain tension. Intuitive, automatic responses exist, on the one hand. These responses are executed in a linear fashion with particular emphasis on the gestural and expressive character of the line. The automatic and unpredictable execution, for me, is what gives the work its vitality.

A response striving for order, or an attempt to bring the free flow of natural impulses to a logical conclusion exists on the other hand. However, the outcome is not necessarily logical or even illogical, but the firming of such tensions which arise as a result of the two opposing responses.

The choice of subject matter is done with the intention of using it for a series of works. Only by working in series form do I become relaxed or familiar enough with a subject to take chances or
risks with it. It is similar to learning a foreign language; the more you speak it or are surrounded by it, the more apt you are to push your ability to use it. In his book, Drawings and Digressions, Larry Rivers speaks of familiarity. He says:

Through familiarity the artist comes to something that he has not previously expressed, like the difference between a one-night stand with someone, where the evening is full of a new and interesting relationship, or something that comes out of knowing someone for a long time, that seems to be more sustaining. In Remembrance of Things Past, Proust starts with an acquaintanceship with the details of his own life - not with anything new. His thing was to be so familiar with a remembered event that he could turn it over on its side or on its back for aspects that could only come with great familiarity. He had a lot to draw on. I think one has greater art who seems to have more than he has shown, not one who has shown most that he has. 17

The Dance Notation Series began after an involvement with a series based on musical symbols, and after reading an article in the New York Times entitled "Preserving Dances in Print." The article highlighted dance notation, a system which records dance movements by means of symbols on a page. It enables choreographers to preserve dances on paper, rather than in their memories; it thus gives them an accurate way of passing their creations on from one generation to the next.

A photograph of a segment from a dance entitled "Shakers", by Doris Humphrey, appeared in the article with the movements notated below.
Visually, the photograph of the dance, in contrast to the graphic symbols of the notation was appealing. (Fig. 1.) I also saw it as a chance to continue the use of symbols with something more representational.

The series began by using the symbols in a gestural, expressive manner, with an intuitive application of marks and paint. Some figures of dancers were introduced, but remained subordinate to the interplay of notations. I regarded this as a warming-up period; as an introduction to the symbols themselves. The symbols became personal notations. Instead of all the symbols remaining graphic, some of them became symbols with a calligraphic flair. Tensions were created as a result of the layering and intertwining of hard-edged graphic symbols and the freer application. (Fig. 2.)

In some of the later paintings, the spontaneity of marks was countered by the addition of a tightly structured unit (i.e., a hard-edged division, frame or enclosure.) Tensions resulted from the interaction of these two opposing elements. The opposition of these elements is similar to the opposition between water and a barrier used to prevent its passage. There is a constant exertion of force, one on the other. The elements in the painting are similar, in that the looser marks exert their energies on the structure, and vice versa. There
results a "bottled up" energy; the unrestrained marks want to remain so, but are held in check by the opposing structure. (Fig. 3.)

The use of the symbols in and for themselves was not enough to suggest dance notation; the introduction of dancers seemed needed. The first painting, with this inclusion, was totally figurative, with a hint of notation appearing on the surface. (Fig. 4.) Thus began the use of overlays; activity on one layer of space either integrated or contrasted with the surface above or below it.

Areas of contrasting activity continued in the next painting but not with the use of overlays. The painting surface was activated by a preconceived format: figures above and the notations below. The symbols were used exclusively in a gestural manner and as personal responses or translations of the dancers' movements. The areas, instead of infringing on each other, were held in their own space, and functioned more to conjure up the association of a dance and my response to it. (Fig. 5.)

The next series of paintings were executed on paper, with the incorporation of transparent overlays. The use of overlays proved successful, as an aid in creating contrasting layers of space, allowing for rapid juxtapositions of varied elements, as well as in the creation of additional tones of color.
In addition, they allowed one to see areas of activity under them, as well as on top of them, and the interrelations of all the areas together. With the use of the overlays, the erasures, the mistakes and smudges; the history of how the work developed was retained. According to Rivers:

A work of art grows out of an abundance of dissatisfactions. Paintings contain the faint remains of all the artist did not want as well as what he did. Any exceptional work of art is the result of a prolonged and successful struggle. What you see in the finished product is not so different from what you hear in the man talking; a nonstop sifting and sorting of possibilities, sometimes meandering, sometimes capricious, but always intended to move you farther down the road from the known to the unknown.18

For these pieces, initial responses were carefully constructed units, resembling backdrops for a stage. On top, gestural notations appear juxtaposed with overlays and figures of dancers. The notations have little if any relation to the dancers movements. They are used more as visual aides, compositional devices, technical variations, and as elements of evocation. The theme notation is suggested rather than directly stated on the working surface. (Fig. 6 - 10.) This is similar to the abstractions of Lester Johnson:

He is abstract in the sense of projecting a content implicit in but not restricted to the marks of the canvas. The painting as a visual image, has the additional dimension of an external reference that is suggested

15.
but not stated by what occurs on the canvas.19

My present involvement consists in isolating portions from the former paintings on paper, and enlarging them to encompass an entire canvas. The actual overlay is now being translated into sprayed paint, which in its consistency creates the transparency that had been done before by transparent paper. Marks on the surface before the overlay remain visible after its introduction; the application of marks on top of the overlay are seen in contrast to those under it. (Fig. 11.)

By enlarging and therefore simplifying each area and mark, they, in their relative isolation, (due to the amount of open space surrounding it) become that much more important and dramatic. All of the elements and responses in their interrelations and contradictions, (graphic signs, mathematical computations, as opposed to a clumsier, freer application of marks and paint) combine, not only to give the work a dynamic unity, but also to suggest the movements, energies, tensions, balances, and rhythms which are inherent in the dance itself. (Figures 12 - 14.)
A moment in Doris Humphrey's "Shakers" is danced by the Louisville Ballet according to precise directions shown here in an extract from a new book of dance notation.

Figure 1.
Dance Notation
Figure 2.
Dance Notation Series #4
oil on canvas
35x47
Figure 3.
Dance Notation Series #2
oil on canvas
35xx47
Figure 4.
Dance Notation Series #6
oil on canvas
60x69
Figure 5.
Dance Notation Series #8
oil on canvas
59\frac{1}{2} x 68\frac{1}{2}
Figure 6.
Dance Notation Series #2.
oil/collage on paper
22x30
Figure 7.
Dance Notation Series #3.
oil/collage on paper
22x30
Figure 8.
Dance Notation Series #4
oil/collage on paper
22x30
Figure 9.
Dance Notation Series #8
oil/collage on paper 22x22
Figure 10.
Dance Notation Series #9
oil/collage on paper
22x23\(\frac{1}{2}\)
Figure 11.
Props
oil/collage on paper
22x30
Figure 12.
Dance Notation Series #10A
oil on canvas
51x70
Figure 13.
Dance Notation Series #3A
oil on canvas
51x70
Figure 14.
Dance Notation Series #4A
oil on canvas
51x70
Footnotes


3. Langer, pg. 152


5. Ibid., p. 10.


8. Ibid., pg. 31, 2.


11. Ibid., pg. 142, 3.


18. Ibid., pg. 13.

19. Rosenberg, pg. 73.
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