M.F.A. Painting Thesis

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M.F.A. Painting Thesis Produced Cooperatively by J. M. Harris and Rebecca Fogg

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...action, speech, and thought... do not "produce", bring forth anything, they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts and ideas, they must first be seen, heard, remembered, and then transformed, reified as it were, into things - into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture... The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.

Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition
INTRODUCTION

I find in myself a distinct desire to limit verbalization and get on with the business of experiencing and producing works of art. Part of the trouble with so much of the talk about modern art is that it is directed at audiences which have no experience of the actual work...audiences whose abilities to apprehend through the senses were compromised sometime during childhood.

The very requirement of the written thesis for painters is in part a reflection of the built in assumption of the institution and the society that discourse is the supreme key to human behavior, and therefore all other approaches to experience may be subordinated to the demands of discourse.
PART ONE

Paradoxically, I am simultaneously apart from others and a part of them. Since the age of ESP has not yet arrived, I cannot share directly in the promptings of someone else's nervous system, and my solitude would be complete were it not possible to communicate indirectly by using language, also to participate indirectly in the experience of others by feeling. Knowledge is paradoxical since its source, humanity, is the source from which it is tainted. If objective knowledge is knowledge determined solely by what is known, then objective knowledge is impossible. Without feelings, assumptions, and a perspective of my own I could not gain access to a different set of feelings, assumptions, a different perspective; far from knowing others objectively, I could not know them at all.

Also paradoxical, then, is the fact that the very desire of the critic or historian to understand the territory of art is an obstacle which prevents him from achieving his goal. No intellectual theory system has yet been evolved which conforms to the extended reality of art, and the tendency remains for the writer to see the situation as containing possible solutions to his problem; hence, in the name of criticism, history, or anthropology, he reduces the seething mixture of contradictory principles (Malinowski's definition of culture) which lies before him to something which will fit a theory. It can be said that art is a major way of ordering this seething mixture, even that art is the only ordering process whose complexity matches the complexity of what is to be ordered. Yet we are
confronted in the operations of the writer with a set of observations that conform to his biases and preconceptions, not to this richness of extended human possibility.

There are two reasons why art, as distinct from discourse, succeeds as it does: the complexity of its symbols, and its ability to engage all sides of a human being. One of the fundamental characteristics of art, as we normally think of it, is its sensuousness. Into whatever reaches of meaning and imagination the work of art finally enters, it enters these realms by way of the senses. This preoccupation with sensuousness not only heightens the vividness of experience, it also heightens its ambiguity. We ask, what is the art work trying to communicate? When the sensuousness becomes embodied in symbols that point beyond their own sensuous vibrations, then the ambiguity has a definite locus and can be spelled out, without losing its quality of ambiguousness. Though the cues with which we are presented may be concrete, it is possible to read their meaning in different, even conflicting emotional directions at the same time with no sacrifice of coherency of meaning. The result is a richness which can never be reduced to a paraphrase in prose, to a language deliberately purged of ambiguity. Because art is an enactment, a presentation rather than a representation of experience, it is capable of this kind of oblique and simultaneous utterance of complexities (Dorothy Lee calls this a non-lineal codification of reality), which may finally result in paradoxes.
For these reasons, the work of art, if it is to be thoroughly understood, may demand the participation of all aspects of a person. The senses echo in the emotions, the emotions echo in intuition, intuition echoes in reflection, and all of these reverberate through imagination, a compound of them all.*1
PART TWO

The thesis exists in a personal context as the product of individual and collective growth. Not that we should lose our identities, our selves, but that we should seek them, that we should achieve an intensified awareness of where our experiences have led us by testing them against each other and against the demands of producing intelligent and searching work with collective integrity. The effort can be defined by one word, communication. Communication with ourselves, with each other, and finally with those who will perceive the works in the public context of exhibition.

Our most severe limitations were the medium and the time available.*2 The limitations of the medium lie in the fact that large surfaces were to be covered by numerous small, hand printed color etchings which had to be produced individually and whose interrelations could therefore be seen only when all the prints were finished, cut, and laid adjacent to one another on the masonite surface. Even then our ability to evaluate was restricted by the fact that the unattached prints dictated viewing the work as it lay horizontally on a table and not vertically from a proper distance. Throughout the project we dealt with parts which we hoped would eventually form a satisfying whole.

The encountered parts vs. whole process problem brings to mind an issue for criticism, namely that talking about works of art seems to be a matter of talking about parts or
their relations - this image or passage of color against that one. We have words for general categories which qualify the whole, but they do not wrap up the whole and hand it over in substitute form. When we talk about qualities of the whole, we are only talking about aspects of the whole, and the whole eludes its aspects as readily as it eludes its parts. No matter how extensive the enumeration of parts and aspects of the whole may be, it never encompasses the whole. The process is self-defeating. The more parts and aspects we recognize, the more numerous become the possible interrelations among them; the more these interrelations are recognized, the more difficult becomes the problem of synthesizing them.*3

We began with the idea that preplanning would be extensive, that most of the creative aspects of the work would occur in the platemaking, color selecting, and printing stages. Once the prints were made, the process was to be mostly mechanical. Attention was to be given to arranging, of course, but we were to determine the overall design of the work in advance. Our attitudes toward this process changed as we discovered that previsualizing and preplanning were valuable mostly for the purposes of making plates, selecting colors, and proofing. By the time the second piece, "Nuristan Street", was complete we had learned that postponing the overall layout of the prints was not only desirable but necessary.

We had discovered empirically what various researchers of the creative process in art have observed, that the most successful painters continue the search aspect of the process
into the final stages of the work and rarely restrict the search to a preplanning stage. It is interesting to note that much of what may be described as classical art and most civic or public art adheres to strict formulas which are determined prior to the actual production of the work. This mode of working, combined with the nature of the formulas used, is at odds with contemporary theories on creativity, for example those which cite the unconscious as the source of creative power (see Ehrenzweig, also D. T. Suzuki). The contrast between what we now regard as two separate and distinct types of thinking became institutionalized in the late nineteenth century in the conflict between academic art and refugees art, with the result that the contrast now seems to us to be a contrast between the academic and art, with the result that aspiring artists now take rebellion for granted, with the result that an academization of rebellion has taken place.

The whole notion of the academic as applied to art has come up so frequently during my student years that I feel it necessary to elaborate somewhat. It seems obvious by now that the academy, like the womb, is one of the citadels of the human mind, a citadel which has the power to draw into its keep even those forces of the mind which, in their own intention at least, are bound for wide open spaces. The academy is the equivalent of society; it was all there from the beginning. Michelangelo is reputed to have said, "The man who follows others will never walk first", not seeming to realize that to need to walk first is to be as enslaved to those who follow as
those who follow are enslaved to him who walks first. Slavery to others is still slavery even if the others comprise a vanguard or elite. The same slavery is built into the categories which art historians use in discussing the role aspects of artists' lives. All of them use categories which take the group as central and describe the person in terms of his location relative to that center. He conforms to the center, he tries to change it, he retreats from it, he repeats it mechanically, he rebels against it. Because all of these processes have the same center, one is as human a response as any of the others. The underlying assumption is that human arrangements have but one center and this is it. Not to be categorizable in any of these terms would be to fall out of the human world.

This is also what is wrong with the uses of "creative". It usually means something like I am creative because I am not dead like those people in the Pentagon, etc. Everyone has his favorite corpses to whip. The trouble with this is that in preoccupying yourself with what the dead are up to, you do not have time to find out what you, the exemplary manifestation of the living, are up to, and this lack of time for life is singularly close to the way in which we ordinarily define being dead, just as the rebels, adopting the latest fads, are indistinguishable from the academic mannikins.

All of this is so widely prevalent (though not so widely perceived) that we may be growing ripe for the realization that human life is not reducible to society which, from one
viewpoint is nothing but shared consciousness. In order to have shared consciousness, you have to have personal consciousness; you can't have one - at least in human form - without the other. This means that the "human scheme" has two centers: person and society. What we have rarely if ever seen is an art or other activity which genuinely and innocently stems from the person. I know the art rebels talk incessantly about authenticity, but that too is suspect; I suspect it of being a way of persuading themselves to capitulate to the citadel while keeping their capitulation secret from themselves.

It is very human to want to be recognized by others, human even to be unsure that you exist until someone acknowledges your existence. However, everything that occurs, including things which are destroying us, is very human, so that hardly qualifies as a standard for acceptance or rejection. Perhaps it is time to try something inhuman, like making the person rather than society the center of human life, or, better still, making the human scheme central.*4
FOOTNOTES

Parts One and Two

1Mills, George, "Art and the Anthropological Lens", Unpublished paper, 1965. The ideas contained in part one are summarized and adapted from this source. They are incomplete but indicative of the kinds of issues I find vital. Other issues not discussed would include play theory (see Piaget, Structuralism), and the esthetic notion of physical distance, to mention two.

2Issues of interpersonal communication are omitted as Rebecca deals with them.

3Mills, p. 6.

4The discussion of the implications of the Academy is summarized from a comment by Mills on my unpublished paper titled "Toward an Understanding of Academic Art."
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Parts One and Two


In this stillness there is no sense of passivity, of submitting to necessity, for there is no longer any differentiation between the mind and its experience. All acts, one's own and others', seem to be happening freely from a single source.

Alan Watts,
*Nature, Man, and Woman*

Divided into two parts, I create

Devi Bhagavata
INTRODUCTION

This is not a research paper. It does not have a single hypothesis or an orderly build-up of facts, quotations, etc. to support a single conclusion. It is rather a presentation of 1) statements about my own work, both concept and method, which are relevant to the shared thesis project; 2) a brief discussion of the role of conscious analysis and of the unconscious in creative work; 3) a discussion of Michael's and my methods of working together.

I do not know whether it is more valid for the artist or the critic to talk about the artist's work. In any case, that debate is outside the scope of this paper. I do know that it is sometimes helpful, after performing a certain action, to try to understand how your head got into the particular state which is realized in the action itself. The ideas in this paper are indicative of the type of reading and thinking I was doing while working on the shared project. I consider the pieces themselves, less self-conscious and more facile at presenting many modes of consciousness, to be a far more complete demonstration of what occurred: they are at once both event and explanation.
PART THREE

My work is based upon two main concepts which I first began to examine three years ago while enrolled in an Albers type color course. These are: appreciation of subtle changes (variations, progressions) between works of art and within a single work, and the ability to alter a subject (motif, pattern) by changing its visual context. Examples from so-called "primitive art" are considered as models for the utilization of these concepts and serve as a major source of motif.

I am also involved with the idea of visual ordering in the following way: it appears that our culture and visual education stresses seeing in an orderly (balanced, harmonious) way. Aside from practical considerations (the necessity to visually order the space in a room so that one is able to walk through it, etc.) it seems to me that the conscious tendency to always want to create balance and order is false and boring. However, the eye (brain) is so programmed toward order that it becomes almost impossible to make a surface which will be perceived as truly tense or chaotic. Perhaps it can be said that what I am really trying to do is to create order on some "other level". Statements like this are to me a quibble of semantics; what I am interested in is examining the existing program of the eye (brain) to see order, determining how this program can be visually disturbed, and finding out how much tension the eye can be made to perceive, whether subtle or overt.
My working procedure for the past few years has been to divide a two dimensional surface into right and left halves and to visually play the halves against each other in terms of pattern, color, directional focus, etc. As I made more and more pieces and began to comprehend my own limits within this approach I began to wonder what would happen if I allowed another person to do one half of a given work. Would the factor of another "personality", different way of making marks and of perceiving, etc. result in a surface which was uniquely differentiated from what I could make, and would this differentiation have meaning or create a kind of tension that I could not have created myself?

Michael Harris and I did two acrylic and cloth paintings in the winter of 1972 as an exploration of this idea. The thesis project was developed from these paintings as well as Michael's solo work with large modular etchings and our joint experiences with viscosity printing.

I do not follow any consciously systematic approach in looking at works of art yet most visual art has, for me, more than purely visual implications. I think that the "generalist" approach described by John Cunningham Lilly in The Mind of the Dolphin, where many seemingly unrelated disciplines are used to approach a single problem, is increasingly important and necessary to counteract our (learned) tendency to deal with "things" instead
of "relationships"; also to overcome an emphasis on specialization which at its worst results in snobbery and irrelevance. However, I am equally suspicious of trying to formulate a consciously synthesized approach from disciplines that one knows only too little about (another consequence of specialization).

People often discuss "logical" systems in works of art, for example. Are such people familiar with Ayer, Russell, and other writers of modern logic? Can their statements about painting and sculpture relate to these authors? If not, to what do they relate?

When this approach is escalated the most shallow results are passed off as being terribly profound, the "herald of the future", etc.. A case in point is Arthur Koestler's *The Ghost in the Machine*, which at first appears very impressive in its utilization of ideas from many technical fields: physics, anthropology, biology, and psychology. Koestler's credibility wears off, however, if one discusses his book with a person trained in the above fields. A university professor of physics easily demonstrated to me that Koestler's understanding of this subject is rather popularized and simple-minded, and not really suitable to support his conclusions.

Some writers would say that my approach to these problems has its own justification and "system" and that my approach to synthesis is simply carried out by a part of my thinking apparatus other than the rational/conscious
area: perhaps what Anton Ehrenzweig names "unconscious scanning". Really creative endeavors, Ehrenzweig maintains, must take place in "uncharted territory" where no prior structure for ordering exists. Thus "creative thinking", in science as well as in art, presupposes a mysterious capacity for "operating precisely within imprecise structures", yet such an operation is beyond the scope of the conscious mind simply because the area of concern is unexplored and there are too many alternative courses of action: it would take years for the conscious mind to examine them all. Ehrenzweig concludes that "conscious visualization can only deal with one alternative at a time. Hence he [the subject] must rely on unconscious intuition for scanning these many possibilities".

Alan Watts has written similarly in his discussion in *Nature, Man and Woman* of the role of the mind (conscious, linear) vs. the brain (unconscious, simultaneously multi-level) in human thought. He states that:

The notion that the interrelatedness of nature is complex and highly detailed is merely the result of translating it into linear units of thought. Despite its rigor and despite its initial success, this is an extremely clumsy mode of intelligence. Just as it is a highly complicated task to drink water with a fork instead of a glass, so the complexity of nature is not innate but a result of the instruments used to handle it....The circulation of the blood becomes complex only when understood in physiological terms, that is, when understood by means of a conceptual model constructed of the kind of simple units which conscious attention requires.
While Watts approaches this problem as a student of Eastern thought and a critic of Western civilization, many other writers on art have expressed their regret that Western education stresses conscious analytical thought at the expense of non-linear and non-verbal modes. I personally have been horrified by the number of art students and teachers I encounter who do not really use their eyes, who categorize all work in terms of "pigeon-holes", or who, when confronted with a work of art, merely parrot phrases they have read or heard.

My personal preference for visual art is that it operate on many levels: a sensual level, the "what you see is what you get" level calling to mind Frank Stella's statement that it is very worthwhile simply to make "something worth looking at"; also various meta-visual levels: conscious, symbolic, whatever. It is the involvement with, the balancing of, and the communication about these various levels that seems to be critical when I try to think about what happened when Michael and I made the thesis pieces. There seems to be a trend: a beginning emphasis on analysis and overall plan gave way to attention to the unique qualities of each piece and willingness to deviate from plan (preconception) with regard to how we thought the piece should look.

If the thesis work has not been about communication
it has not been about anything. John Lilly has written on this subject that

Our relatively large minds (brains) act as computers than can make models inside themselves of other human minds and their activities. Each of us knows that we construct models of other people: one has a model of his wife in his head; she in turn has a model of her husband in hers.... The model of the wife must change in the husband as the wife changes and grows; the model of the husband in the wife must change as the real person changes. Otherwise there is a severe breakdown of communication.

Thus shared work involved development and alteration of models, both concerning the making of the prints themselves and concerning the two persons involved.

In the beginning of the project, the notion of having an idea or a specific intention for each piece was for me very much associated with the idea of planning the work. I had reached the end of a long phase of experimentation with the prints I was doing by myself and hoped for a more specific clarity of purpose with the thesis. Consequently the act of pre-visualizing (planning) each piece and following initial intentions strictly was much more important for me than for Michael, who argued that once we made and laid out the prints the results would surprise us so much that extensive planning would be wasted time. In almost every case he proved right and the more pieces we did, the more surprised I was; the result being that in various ways we altered our initial methods of pre-visualization.

Certain plans were abandoned as they proved to be
unworkable: that is, they were shown to be more preconceptions than plans. Most of these had to do with transitions from doing normal prints to the large works: color and spatial divisions simply functioned differently. The center split which I had favored in my own etchings and which was intimate and book-like in small prints seemed stiff and arbitrary in the large pieces, possibly because they were so horizontal that it became difficult to easily view both halves simultaneously and thus unite the work by way of the perceptual process. We experimented both with more interlocking configurations ("Birgit", "M. F. A. Deco", "Am Tier") and with distorting the center division by superimposing another system ("Nuristan Street") to find spatial arrangements which worked better on the large scale.

In the beginning we made detailed drawings of each piece before plates were ever made; this gave way to a very open agreement upon an idea for each piece such as "grid" or "aquatint with bars of colored paper". For the final pieces we merely designated existing plates (often very worked-over plates made previously to the thesis) and chose colors. It might be said that conscious abstract intentions were replaced by a non-verbally expressed (although agreed upon) intention, the character of which was actually more visually specific (the existing plates had been previously printed many times and we knew their characteristics).
The primary shortcoming of an experimental approach was that because there was no specific conceptual idea there was also no heirarchy of values by which to conceptually judge or even verbally deal with the pieces (it is hard to decide if you are getting better or worse if you don't know what you are attempting to get better at). The fact that looking at the pieces was a rather unique visual experience only added to the problem: not only did we not have clearly expressable intentions concerning what we wanted; the pieces didn't really relate to anything in our previous visual experience. How could we reach decisions about them?

This problem was somewhat alleviated (or avoided) by the fact that Michael and I seemed to have different areas of strongest concern and were willing to follow the other person's wishes where each of us did not have an especially fixed opinion. Framing, for example, seemed to be very important to Michael but did not really interest me in relation to other problems so I elected to follow his decisions about the frames in most cases.

It was very important for me to create a modified "field effect" in the pieces so that the glued prints would be seen not as a unit repetition (as in Warhol's Marilyn Monroe silkscreens) but rather as a single fluid mass shifting slightly in color, density, etc.. Michael agreed with this in principle but we usually disagreed on printing methods; he wanted to make what I considered
great variations between the prints while I felt that even if we attempted to make all the prints look alike they would, once set against each other, look quite different enough (the Albers idea of interaction through contrast at the border). Michael's approach seems to have worked out best in "Birgit", where the strong linear feeling that his prints are "woven" together counteracts the tendency of color variation to make the piece look fragmented. "Ragland", "Yojimbe", and "M. F. A. Deco" are closer to my ideas of execution.

Gradually Michael and I developed a respect for each other's speed of decision-making and learned to resist yelling "I told you so" when, for example, either of us took an hour to reach some conclusion which the other had made in five minutes. Since our ultimate aim was not to control each other but to let a free interaction of our separate personalities occur, overtly egoistic traits in both of us had to be recognized and controlled whenever possible. Michael and I have very different artistic backgrounds (art history, Western art oriented versus design school, technical, Eastern and primitive oriented) and even if we often had the same or similar ideas I felt that we reached them by vastly different paths. This presented a communications barrier although it was altered somewhat by the common experiences of our shared project. I'm not sure that we ever developed communication very much on a verbal level (Michael's questions of "Does the
piece imply infinity? How can the arrangement be made more consistent with the implication of infinity?" remained as irritating to me at the end of the project as at the beginning; vice vera my customary wordlessness); however, in some unconscious way we definitely grew to be more in tune with each other.

A confirmation of this, for me, was our decision to reprint half of "M.F.A. Deco". What this meant was that by the time we executed this piece (the fifth piece to be printed) we were enough in agreement on some level about what the piece should look like (or even that it should look a certain way) that we felt justified in undertaking a large amount of work to correct an unsatisfactory initial result. This led to fuller mutual expressions of feelings of disappointment we had about earlier pieces (more honesty about our opinions) and additional supplementary printing. Although we had abandoned our initial ideas about planning, we had clearly progressed beyond the purely experimental stage of "making a piece, seeing what it looked like, and moving on to a new piece".

In some ways we retained the use of overall systems and in some ways not; generally, we moved toward approaching pieces on a more and more individual basis: trying to determine the border shape, format, etc. which each separate set of prints "wanted". We grew to have common feelings about the kind of pieces we wanted to make without either of us aggressively asserting our personal
desires, and we came to mutually understand what steps would be necessary to achieve a given intention.

If one facet of the work was neglected, it was the technical question of permanence. The methods of gluing, etc. that were used were advantageous in terms of flatness, evenness of the glue coat, and holding strength. Their long term effect upon handmade paper is unknown to us. I hope that when we attempt similar works in the future we will be able to experiment with more traditional methods of affixing printing paper, or at least obtain information about the long term effects of the more commercial glues and their solvents.
FOOTNOTES

Part Three

See Education of Vision, Gyorgy Kepes, ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1965) for examples of this type of thinking from many authors.


Leon N. Cooper, conversation held at Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island) in April, 1972, concerning Koestler's use of the second law of thermodynamics as a basis for his ideas about evolution.


Ibid., p. 28. The most-discussed example from scientific disciplines is Albert Einstein.

Ibid., p. 28. I tend to think about this in less broad terms than does Ehrenzweig. I believe that historical/psychological circumstances reduce the possibilities from the number that "it would take years to examine" to, say, five or ten. See Leon Cooper's discussion of Einstein's formulation of the theory of relativity in Cooper, Leon N., An Introduction to the Meaning and Structure of Physics (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), chapter 30.


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Part Three


