

UNNATURAL ACTS

Bruce Ferguson

Tony Brown's sculptures are constructed to invite simultaneous audience responses which might range from the intellectually thoughtful to the more immediately visceral. The works may promote investigations into traditional questions of aesthetics or to the societal relations they reference or the works may be more directly emotive in their effects. Or it is possible then to find a directly articulated response to one of the works while experiencing it or to be caught inarticulately in its often hypnotically spectacular and dramatic conditions. In other words, the works have deliberately allowed spaces or points of entry which are diverse or even contradictory to address his understanding of a heterogeneous audience. In the works, this is accomplished by a layering in parallel strands of visual presentation together with conceptual strategies and temporal movements within suggestive textual moments. In effect, there is the creation of a theatre, the restaging of a reality process as a model, the linking of many diverse cultural elements which offer an engaging field of potential responses.

The force of this multi-dimensional work is directed toward an active participant, not a passive viewer, or it might be said that it is directed toward a person potentially outside the habitual constraints of the normally mediated art discourse. This deliberately emphasized shift to a consideration of active kinesthetic experience rather than to an isolated

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visual gaze, and therefore, from guaranteed elitist to unpredictable populist possibilities is fundamental to the works intentions and critical implications. A 'viewer' was the assumed product of a more reified predication from the theoretical concept of the 'visual' arts. This adjective — 'visual' — was in some ways always a deflective misnomer — a convenient categorical name which best served the interest of certain aesthetic theories, academic specialities and functioning bureaucracies. 'Visual arts' was utilized to assume and naturalize as well as purposefully reduce the role of audiences to 'viewers' or passive receivers, postulating a determinant role for the sign (the sign-system, the code, the work of art) to impose an austere hierarchy in a one-way system of communication. Which is to say that such efforts gave the appearance of being a one-way system of communication by concentrating on and privileging only one side of the equation.

To assign the code such a privileged position of authority is a basic tenet of modernism as theorized and practiced by proponents of a dominant version of the historical avant-garde. It corresponded to a need for an emphasis on progress (Walter Benjamin's "storm blowing from paradise"), subject autonomy and essentialist transcendence of consciousness. Such beliefs stemmed from other disciplines' positivistic and condescending assumptions regarding audiences (or publics or masses). These theories of sign determinism were given even more textual force through recent transliteration into the art discourse of narrow structuralist versions of the dominance of language as a socially determining formal code. As Boettger says... "The belief in the primacy of language in constituting consciousness has dominated the interpretation of literature, art, film and cultural artifacts over at least the last two decades" and that excessive uses of this proposition of cognition... "also posit a false dichotomy between representational form (seen as a retreat to tradition) and modernist abstraction (with its corollary avant-garde, constantly and radically innovative)."¹ In retrospect, then, it is possible to see how this century's long reductive development of modernism (retreat into form) in the 'visual arts' is forcefully normative and now through transliteration is made congruent with equally reductive and often paranoid notions of the determining codes in versions of structural semiotics (retreat into the text).

If the world of human warmth was closed to him so that to feel was to be hurt, he would create one where feelings had no place. But since things do happen, it had to be a world without feelings being involved. It had to be a world of machines.*

Elsewhere (1960) I have discussed the fact that while all psychoses are due to conflict within the person, his specific delusions will reflect the

hopes and anxieties of the society he lives in... What is entirely new in the machine age is that often neither savior nor destroyer is cast in man's image anymore. The typical modern delusion is of being run by an *influencing machine*.

The overriding problem with such reductive theories reproduced by both leftist and conservative thinkers alike, who battled for the power assigned to the sign, is that they are only theories of production. Which is to say that like theories regarding sex and violence on television, both in the attack and the defense mode, they assume a work of art to be a 'cause' which produces a specific 'effect' on a 'viewer' as if no other factors were at play, or as if when the communication is ineffective, that the 'viewer' has an inferior consciousness. Such theories assume a linear relationship between subjectivity and subjugation.

Just as the angels and saints of a deeply religious age help us to fathom what were man's greatest hopes at that time, and the devils what he trembled at most, so man's delusions in a machine world seem to be tokens of both our hopes and our fears of what machines may do for us, or to us. In this sense Joey's story might also be viewed as a cautionary tale.

Such limited systems of thought about production avoid the 'viewers' own experiences — their own histories of the particular sign systems, or, importantly, their own "misinterpretations" due to age, gender, ethnic or cultural difference. Emphasizing the emotionally receptive side of aesthetic experience or what he calls the "affective intensity" in opposition to the rationally analytical, Jean-Francois Lyotard repeats this shift from determination to reception... "It shows that the problem is not so much knowing what a given discourse says, but rather how it is disposed."² Or it is not so much that modernism has failed or is over or is often pronounced dead or "liquidated", as it is that as a theory of production only modernism is insufficient and incomplete for describing the experiences of art. For it ignores the world of events, references and their received connotations and institutions (or of pre-production, of various mediations and of receptions). Or, in short, it ignores History in its idealistic formulations of art as a pristine, non-tactile, soundless, metaphorical abstraction. In his close reading of the philosophical basis of modernism's most influential 'visual arts' writer, Clement Greenberg, and his understanding of a medium as a "primordial fact" of art, the critic Donald Kuspit has said... "The big question here, of course, is whether it is possible to have aesthetic experience that is not culturally conditioned".³

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Often it took a conscious act of will to make us perceive him as a child. Unless we held him in the focus of our attention, he escaped into nothingness. In the same way we are blind to pieces of machinery around the house unless we are using them and they whirl. This boy-machine was only with us when working, it had no existence at rest... Though just an instant ago not "there", in the next Joey seemed a machine, the wheels busy cranking and turning, and as such held us rapt, whether we liked it or not.

That a schizophrenic child, particularly an autistic one, can create a vacuum around him, can wholly isolate himself in his delusions or empty preoccupations, is so well documented that alone it is hardly worth mention. But Joey had the added ability to hold the fascinated attention of those who watched him in this vacuum, to seduce them into believing him a machine.

Even an object, eg. a painting, can be perceived (understood, enjoyed and engaged) only by virtue of being in relation to someone; a someone already enmeshed in the social, psychological, cognitive and physical networks of existing complex relationships (of ideas of realities and ideas of metarealities — of empirics and abstractions — of socially constructed representations). No object, much less a process, was or is purely visual (or by implication, flat, or any other autonomous absolute quality), but always stands in a negotiable relation to an already multi-dimensional receiver (an agent). Brown's use of the aphoristic text in his works (like that of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger) is a characterization of this understanding. It is a device first used modernly by Nietzsche to oppose the narrative closure of tracts which he identified as a will to systematize, a will he thought indicated a "lack of intellectual integrity". The aphoristic mode problematizes the oscillation between writer and reader, art and audience, to open the world of being and the world of becoming, of relative truths and even personal truths.

In retrospect it is easy to see what was so upsetting to those of us who tried to become close to him. All of us have feelings about how powerful our machines have become: in this nuclear age we have reason to fear that our own creations may destroy us. In Joey it was so blatant that this had already happened. Joey had lost command of himself to machines; he was living proof that our fears were not groundless. This is why, however strange his talk, his behavior, and later his drawings, they cannot compare in shock quality with what we experienced in his presence.

To bother to rehearse the well-known deficiencies of modernism as understood within the art milieu is neither new nor radical. But it seems

important to reiterate that as a theory of production only, the modernist assumption of equivalence between the sign and its effects and the lack of information about audience reception is not just a matter for theory (especially today during a crisis of museums). For it was not only theory (feminisms, post-structuralisms, cultural studies, cybernetics, etc.) that engendered the reaction against a narrow modernism; it was the actual practices of artists primarily in the post-Kennedy era who moved from metaphorical analogy to questions within all fields of representation (from pre-production to reception). It was the intense immediacy of new political agendas associated with the marginal and the systems of technology that ruptured the theoretical closure of modernism. Some of these practices included realignments of art to vernacular processes of distribution or popular media practices in general, i.e. performance, installation, video, etc., within structures of representational narrativity.

During Joey's first weeks with us we watched absorbedly for example, as he connected himself with his source of electrical energy. Then he strung the wire from an imaginary outlet to the dining room table to insulate himself, and then plugged himself in. These imaginary electrical connections he had to establish before he could eat, because only the current ran his ingestive apparatus. He performed the ritual with such skill that one had to look twice to be sure there was neither wire nor outlet nor plug. His pantomime was so skilled, and his concentration so contagious, that those who watched him seemed to suspend their own existence and become observers of another reality.

To trace Tony Brown's maturing development as an artist would be to follow an individual map which is typical of those value shifts from color-field painting to conceptually-based process sculpture through considerations of photographic representation to the kind of theatrical installations here. It would describe an arc which began in formally educated assumptions of specifically informed viewers and which has progressed to assumptions of a more non-homogenous audience now respected for its ability to experience simultaneously, and even contradictorily, constructions of complex meanings. It is a move from a fixed state to a variable one and from beliefs in the passive (cultural dope) to the active participant. It is an arc which traces the recent attempt to reassert the practice of art as a socially meaningful activity.

What this new engagement of artists like Brown means for interpretation is significant. The work, being performative, like speech-uses as opposed to language as a code, is caught constantly reconstituting itself. It "drifts" or is vulnerable to the interpretation of others; in fact, it demands it, sacrificing the authority of a code for a rich expression which can surprise or open experience rather than reaffirm tired

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dogmas. Like desire itself, it simply continues. It can split audiences by being in this continual process, a model which makes meanings and then revises them. Interpretation is consequently made vulnerable and less authoritative, or simply, contingent. This does not mean that any interpretation is possible as the narrative has images and texts, however fragmented, which define a focus within a field of representation. But it does mean that the work returns his art to diversity and imbalance, to questions over answers, to history over historicism and to audiences in place of critics. This admission is that subjectivity is not more a fixed state than objectivity was believed to be. The avant-garde position of dissidence, dependent on hopeful failure but now thoroughly absorbed by an unshockable audience, is replaced by a site of reciprocity. The vulnerability and transitional nature of Brown's work, like certain theatre and speech-uses, allows then for only provisional and tentative thought — for stimulations.

Electricity provides us with warmth and light, both of importance to our well-being and survival. But electricity is also power. So if electricity also powered emotions, powered the vicious circle of longing and anger, and if this circle was all there was to Joey's life, then it did indeed power his life. And if it did all that, couldn't it also provide what he so deeply needed, what for want of a better name I might call sustenance through love? If electricity provided so much that we normally look to from a mother, why not expect the rest from it too? Then, to "plug himself in" was to connect himself to the flow that sustains life.

If one wished to extrapolate from Joey to other autistic children who use rotating objects to state where they most need our help, one might say that to them the turning objects represent a vicious circle that goes from longing to fear to anger to despair, and comes full circle when the longing has started up anew.

Without attempting to assess the autobiographical and psychological sources of Brown's production (which would be misleading in any case), it may be enough to say that the works' increasingly technological base and its representations of direct social occurrences (sleep, home, gender relations) constitute a deep consideration on the human immersion into a technologically based system of domestic society and its implications for understanding. At a material level, the work depends upon technological systems (from electricity to museums). To experience the work is to be in a condensed environment in which the technological systems are visible, present, situated at a first order of experience. At a metaphorical level, the controlling source is the nature of infantile autism or arrested development, and in particular the famous case history of Joey the

Mechanical Boy (of which excerpts of Bruno Bettelheim's observations scatter these pages as a kind of mnemonic interpretation of modernism and technology). At a representational level are images and texts of "ordinary" daily North American life — of beds, of homes, of people — general figures of activity, of emotions, of fantasies, of social memory. In other words, the work reproduces or doubles or makes a facsimile of the very conditions it addresses without occupying a simple critical position of superior and contemptuous distance. It is fast, confusing, and never-ending, ever-circulating, a complicit imperative toward the subject.

There were moments for example, when a long span of non-existence would be interrupted by the machine starting up, getting into even higher gear, until its climax was reached in a shattering "explosion"... Once the time had arrived to explode the world, this child who lived in utter stillness, mute and unmoving, would suddenly go beserk, running wildly and screaming, "Crash! Crash!" or "Explosion!" as he tossed a bulb or a motor. As soon as the thrown object had broken and the noise died away, Joey died with it. Once the machine had exploded, no movement was left, no life, nothing at all.

Old liberal and Marxist dualisms of individual/society, conscious/unconscious, theory/practice, play/work, subjective/objective, are gone through — oscillated like an electrical circuit, and return privileging neither. Instead a house "breaks", but returns to its original state. Another house is never finished but is caught in an endless tautological circle of either seemingly banal or virtually hysterical movement. Or a male robot stutters gesturally and begins a linear dance bathed in still and moving images of a female ballet dancer. In each, two polar axes are forever intersected in overstimulated but unfulfilled circumstances. The works oscillate between the poles constantly — sometimes seductive entertainment, sometimes serious alienation. There is no attempt at unmasking, just the unstable activity itself exposed — a double-bind which admits its complicity with the systems it points to, but which does not allow singular meaning to be possessed.

In Joey's system only machines produced things. So becoming aware of elimination posed nearly insolvable problems. If he produced feces, was this further proof of his being a machine? If, on the other hand, he was a human being and the stools were his, then how could something that was part of his body be outside of his body? What were the boundaries of his physical existence?

For a long time he continued to view the body as a machine. But if this Joey-machine eliminated, wasn't it logical to assume that all other machines did too? Thus the particular form in which Joey wrestled with

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the problem of self versus nonself around elimination was this: either this is not my elimination or else everything eliminates.

To accomplish this complexity of purpose and possible effect. Brown's formal strategy has been to reverse the experience of "seeing" a film. In a movie theatre, as in a museum, the 'viewer' is situated architecturally, socially and technologically in the position of the gaze, the seat of the voyeur, the site of the tourist of illusion. By making the 'screen' active, Brown instigates the modernist technique of estrangement not toward the object of production but to the space itself, not to meaning of images and texts made strange but to the physical experience of reception. The act of perception becomes a decision-making process for each participant in the space. Each becomes their own editor in their own time. Thus, strategies of manipulation or overdetermination are replaced in favour of the participant's own interests and judgements, and depersonalization is replaced by the possibility of public experience which could lead to social knowledge. If art is to have any other use or purpose in the late twentieth century beyond its value as a luxury commodities market, it must give up the position of authority for this one of reciprocity and address itself to those concerns which are of the body politic. It is to this transition that Brown's work speaks.

Because to be born again, to be able to feel, even to wish to be liked, is not enough for a full human existence. What is still lacking is the ability to be active to deliberately reach out to others for warmth and affection, to dare on one's own to close the gap between self and other; to reach out and change one's physical apartness into closeness between body and body; to be a lover and not merely to enjoy being loved.

New York City

Notes

- All quotations in bold are from Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. The Free Press, New York, Collier-MacMillan Limited, London, 1967. The quotes are from the Chapter entitled *JOEY*, a case history of an autistic child who believed himself to be a machine.
- 1. Susan Boettger, "Regression in the Service of...", in *Art Criticism*, ed. Donald Kuspit, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1986, Art Department, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY, p. 60 and 58. In reinstigating the healthy uses of "regression", Boettger is in agreement with Bettelheim who earlier said... "Why then do I not refrain from using the term regression? Because it has its use when it is clearly understood that what we are talking about is how a behavior looks to the observer who knows nothing of what it means to the person who enacts it. Thus the dictionary definition would be entirely acceptable if it were to stress this important qualification. It would have to read as follows. 'Regression is what simulates a return to some earlier level of adaptation'." (cited above).

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2. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "On Theory", in *Driftworks*, ed. Roger McKeon, Semiotext(e), 1984, New York, NY, p. 29. Lyotard also has something to say about the notion of the unconscious as expressive or deconstructive as well. "Unconscious processes transgress the two spaces of discourse ie. that of the system and that of reference. The space which contains them and that they themselves produce is then another space, differing from that of the system in that it is in incessant mobility and from that of reference in treating words like things." p. 61.
3. Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic*, the University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1979, p. 18. Kuspit goes on to later answer his own question writing... "The being of art, if it can be understood, whether by modernist or other methods, is a language, and as such a symbol, ie., in a certain relationship to life... It is hard to see how art can be said not to point to another thing, or how if this pointing is acknowledged it can be ignored in the determination of art value and the quality of individual works, or in any description of art." p. 158.