

METAPHOR INTERPRETED

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"We take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction. We take, therefore, the form of distinction for the form". G. Spencer Brown LAWS OF FORM pg. 1.

METAPHOR INTERPRETED

PREFACE

This paper reflects on my personal awareness of the processes and conditions in which I fashion art objects. Though it seems odd to write about the processes of making art, as the processes are neither verbal nor linguistic, for me they do pertain to metaphors which are at once visual and verbal. The discussion which follows outlines the idea that metaphor is a primary source for producing my paintings. The process and features of the relationship between the work, the metaphor and an internal organizational principle are pointed out. The relationship obtained is addressed in the context of "FIT" and "MATCH". Hopefully what follows may "FIT" in some way with others who are involved in artistic activities.

INTRODUCTION

In May of 1978 I was exhibiting in Tokyo, Japan. Early one morning as I walked around, unable to sleep because of jet lag, I found myself in an underground shopping centre which was empty and larger than anything I had ever seen. As I walked on I came into the centre of a vast open space which was in fact where the commuters transferred from trains, buses, and subway systems. This was Shinjuku Station, one of five main transfer points for all the transportation systems in and around Tokyo. More than three million people passed through this station each day.

Suddenly I was surrounded by a multitude of Japanese men moving towards me from all directions, this was the first wave of commuters that morning. I experienced a moment of shock followed by an insight which has persisted since then as a foundation for my artistic intentions.

In an intuitive sense, I saw that each individual was in motion as a result of their unique memories and experiences and at the same time seemed to be drawn forward by their personal hopes and aspirations. This multitude of aspirations appeared to coalesce above these individuals as a field or ocean of human sensibility. The circumference of this sensibility, which was linked to all people, seemed to form an ocean of considerable depth and fertility. It is this ocean which Teilard de Chardin called the "noosphere", and Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious". From the influence of this subtle and fertile environment I felt

civilization to be carried forward; that the implicit is made explicit, consciousness is stirred up and by degrees humanity is united. Just as the wind blowing across the water causes waves, which in turn produce ripples in the sands, so the subtle effects the less subtle. Also, this ocean, this circumference of sensibility, this subtle field, manifests its existence through humanity in terms of cultures and societies.

The vision I had in that split second was that each individual exists in this ocean, and each culture participates in this circumference of sensibility, which in turn registers the cosmology of this historic period. In a heartbeat that vision gave birth to the hope that as an artist in this time I could swim, like a fish, within this ocean of human sensibilities and in some way address it with my work.

WATERS

(the theory soup)

I have found it useful to initiate and interpret my work in terms of visual and verbal metaphors. For me a relationship exists between the meanings of the inner world and the meanings of the outer world. The boundary between these two conditions is the realm of metaphor. Metaphor is, for me, the means to understand and experience the relationship between things. On occasion the seeing of an actual thing or event will provide a related insight. The insight obtained often forms as a metaphor and in itself becomes worthy of consideration. This unfolding of insight as an induced experience is comparable to the direct experience of a rose, gradually having the power to bring the smell of the rose into mind with some clarity, even if the rose is only seen and not actually smelt. Conversely, when we smell rose perfume an image of roses may come to mind. At some point the single word "rose" may also bring the sight and smell of the rose to mind. So the sight and insight at Shinjuku Station were related and gave rise to metaphors concerning water and oceans.

These, and other metaphors are obtained in terms of an underlying organizational principle which pervades my being. The exact nature of this organizational principle is not obvious to me,

in that it lies just outside/inside the grasp of my conscious awareness. In this sense it would seem to represent a kind of composition of self, which is organic and developing around a code or set of relationships. This principle then, should be seen as a process or operation, a kind of deep ecology or an "implicate order",¹ but not as a static or absolute state.

Significantly, this same principle relates important life situations and appropriate metaphors to each other. Often it is the very occurrence of a metaphor which alerts me to the significance of a situation. Also, the significance of a situation is usually proportional to the clarity and duration of the metaphor which pertains. The external and internal conditions of my life, in effect, are initially understood and given meaning through associated metaphors. The background principle therefore, provides me with an interpretive function from which I recognize certain situations in my life as being significant.²

In these cases, the circumstances of ordinary life are organized through a type of thought language which is pictorial. These pictorial thoughts must then be translated into another type of thought language which is verbal, in order to organize them with speech. Often the result is in terms of analogies, similes, and metaphors, in effect the visual nature of the original thought structure persists in speech. It is here that the verbal or visual nature of the metaphor becomes relevant and intimate.³

The intrinsic quality of these relationships, that is, between

private life and personal associated metaphors, becomes the fertile environment from which works evolve. My work then, results from a type of relationship obtained between metaphors and this background organizational principle.⁴ Often these metaphors concern cycles and features of nature, especially water, ocean and sea.

KNOWING BY FIT AND MATCH

Ernst Von Glasersfeld in his essay, "Introduction to Radical Constructivism", postulated a fundamental distinction between "FIT" and "MATCH". This distinction is developed in terms of the relationship of knowledge and reality.

In everyday English, this conceptual opposition can be brought out quite clearly by pitting the words MATCH and FIT against one another in certain contexts. The metaphysical realist looks for knowledge that MATCHES reality in the same sense as you might look for paint to match the colour that is already on the wall you have to repair. In the epistemologist's case it is, of course, not colour that concerns him, but some kind of "homomorphism," which is to say, an equivalence of relations, a sequence, or a characteristic structure - something, in other words, that he can consider the same, because only then could he say that his knowledge is of the world.

If, on the other hand, we say that something fits, we have in mind a different relation. A key fits if it opens the lock. The fit describes a capacity of the key, not of the lock. Thanks to professional burglars we know only too well that there are many keys that are shaped quite differently from our own but which nevertheless unlock our doors. The metaphor is crude, but it serves quite well to bring into relief the difference I want to explicate. From the radical constructivist point of view, all of us--scientists, philosophers, laymen, school children, animals, and indeed, any kind of living organism--face our environment as the burglar faces a lock that he has to unlock in order to get at the loot.⁵

Where traditional epistemological systems develop in terms of "MATCH", Glasersfeld's radical constructivism develops in terms

of a functional adaptation which "FIT(S)".

A "MATCH" is like an equation where one side is equal to the other across the equals sign. For example, where $2 = 2$, or $2 = x$, both fulfil the idea of a "MATCH". In the "MATCH" type of relationship terms like congruency, conformity, balance, and others come into effect as a powerful method for organizing and understanding experience.

A "FIT" is a type of relationship which contains several discreet identities, working in concert. In the process of the interaction between them a separate identity comes into existence. Like a key in a lock which opens a door. The door opens into a different space or condition. The key, the lock, and the door are all discreet identities working in concert. Here the identity of each element is maintained and in fact, is essential in order that the process obtained from their relationship can reveal a new condition. The new condition can be typified as the room beyond the door. The room bears no resemblance to the door, the lock, or the key. This idea of a "FIT" is a dynamic method for evolving experience in terms of the manifestations of relationships. That is to say, a "participatory consciousness" (Bateson 1972) develops as a consequence.

In certain respects the notion of establishing "A MATCH" between things and events underlines the traditional scientific method. This conceptual framework is generally held as being a successful one and therefore is a relatively secure position for

arriving at an understanding. Consequentially, we have been educated with methods which compare and contrast and we learn to evaluate in terms of predictability. In G. Spensor Browns' words;

"Although all forms, and thus all universes, are possible, and any particular form is mutable, it becomes evident that the laws relating such forms are the same in any universe. It is this sameness, the idea that we can find a reality which is independent of how the universe actually appears, that lends such fascination to the study of mathematics. That mathematics, in common with other art forms, can lead us beyond ordinary existence, and can show us something of the structure in which all creation hangs together, is no new idea."⁶

In art this paradigm has contributed to the structure of a formal basis for the creative process, attempting echoes of the successful structures of the sciences and technologies. Because of this feature, formalist concerns became located in materials, elements, material processes, and their relationships.

The relationships obtained in a "FIT" appear diverse, symbiotic and reinforced as the process continues. While the relationships obtained in a "MATCH" appear stable, balanced and conformist. Both however, represent useful means to understand the processes of creativity.

Let me give as an example African Masks which are created in terms of a "MATCH" and appreciated in terms of a "FIT".

A mask is made for a purpose, for example a burial rite, which has prescribed activities. The maker of the mask obtains the design of the mask through tradition, obtains the materials through traditional methods, and fashions the mask within this

context where there is conformity to "MATCH" type relationships.

If at some later time the mask finds its way into another cultural context, like Paris in the late 1800s, possibly it may "FIT" a developing sensibility and help unlock a new expression, like cubism . It is in examples such as this one where it seems obvious that the work contains internal relationships which are transferable across cultural references and sensibilities. In this example of the mask, the work of art is a sign of human sensibility and as such is a peculiarity operating through time as a "FIT" and a "MATCH".

PROCESS

In the beginning of the process of fashioning works, the metaphor stands midway between two unknowns, the paintings still to come, and the organizational principle, which remains a mystery.⁷ It is from this position, essentially that of a felt relationship, where contours of the work and the underlying organizational principle exist as potentials until the working processes gradually make them more clear or manifest. Fashioning as an external physical activity precipitates the relationships pertaining to the internal primary process.

Painting or fashioning is a type of consciousness or connectedness to each of the three aspects of the relationship; the work, the metaphor and the organizational principle. As in a living organism the parts grow within the whole and do not exist independently, nor do they merely interact with each other without being changed by the relationship, so no single work is a match of the metaphor alone, or of the organizational principle alone. Rather each work reifies the metaphor, opening the organizational principle up in a new way, because of the multiple fits this particular metaphor was capable of. It is in this sense that the work begins to teach me what is enfolded in the relationship from

which it is manifest.

In my work the "FIT" of the metaphor with the organizational principle generates work; underlying organizational principle-> metaphor -> work. There is no singular "MATCH" between metaphor and work, where metaphor = work, from which a new understanding is obtained, rather there is "A FIT" from which a series of results are obtained. Further, the "FIT" of the work back into the metaphor reveals more of the underlying organizational principle; work -> metaphor -> underlying organizational principle. This sequence loop is a simplification of the symbiotic and evolving nature of the "FIT" process. It is not an externalizing objective process, rather it is one where consciousness participates in knowing wholes which emanate from relationships, gradually precipitating a body of work.

The works arising from a metaphor can be referred to as a series. In a series, certain features of the metaphor come to strengthen certain aspects of the individual works. It is in this respect that I view titles as connected to the development of the process. Gradually, individual works come to a consolidated state, and give rise to more work and further insight into the fertility of the metaphor. I will often work on four to ten works at once. This method capitalizes on the developments in each individual work being spread throughout the rest. With a survey of past works it becomes evident that no matter which metaphor I might use at any given time, in the process of making artworks, all the works obtain a resolution which reflects a personal underlying organizational

principle.

Fashioning art in this context then, is at once a personal expression, arising from an organizational principle, and is also a reflection of metaphor which pertains to a domain or conditions coexisting outside of the personal ones. ³

CRITICAL CLIMATE

Art writing and criticism with underpinnings in the disciplines such as literature, psychology, Marxism, or the scientific method, end up "writing a painting".⁹ With systems of thought as references, such writing often places the actual visual work in a category of experience which is ambiguous or virtual. This is somewhat analogous to the moire pattern as a virtual image which results from two screens superimposed on each other. In this example, one screen being the actual art work, the other being the system used to discuss the work.

Art work is, in fact, not only shaped by systems of thought, but among other things; rituals, metaphors, feelings, and material tools. The artist fashions a visual statement with tools and materials relevant to the work. While creating visual works, conceptual, emotive, or thought systems are usually referenced in a non-verbal fashion by the artist. As a result, visual work frequently survives several periods or episodes of fashion in criticism. Unless it becomes a reflection of a critical position, in which case the work comes and goes with that platform.

When I begin to work, the impulse which carries the process is based on a metaphor. Given that my training and main experience

as an artist focus on the object, I have always been concerned with the look of my work, its internal relationships and how it was fashioned. However, the success of the work finally has as much to do with the degree to which it reflects the metaphor which lies underneath it, as in how it is fashioned.

This latter point concerning metaphor seems unacceptable within the strictly formalist dictates. Because formal requirements are often focused on acts of application or technique and almost exclusively concerned with the internal relationships of a work, it is expected that the work should arise primarily from these and not other concerns. However, in the postmodern period with its attending methodologies of criticism, its interest in semiotics, references and meaning, the abstract look of my work is often mistaken as formalist. The metaphorical content from which it derives is not obvious. It would seem that now, in discussing art, figuration and literalism are required as prerequisites for meaning.

At this point I would like to say that I find a great many of the ideas formed in other disciplines provide me with insight into the creative processes I experience as an artist. In general I also recognize that as art writing becomes enmeshed in self reference it gradually becomes dysfunctional and needs an outside reference to reestablish some sort of constant.¹⁰

As with the situation of expecting a cup of coffee and receiving tea instead -- after several drinks it registers on the

mind that this is not just funny tasting coffee, but is in fact tea -- also with vision, there may be prejudices and expectations that persist to obscure what is explicit and implicit in the object viewed. The object itself may be addressed by many structures of meaning or experience. In fact, art works may avoid obsolescence while critical systems often may not.

PRESENT

About a year after Grandmother died, my maternal Grandfather died in his ninety-seventh year, this was in November of 1988. Although he was not my mother's biological father, the relationship which I developed with him was based solely on mutual love and respect. We enjoyed each other very much, we talked about philosophy and we argued frequently. He had seen the Twentieth Century unfold, with each year being more surprising than the previous one. His passing precipitated (here I mean the word "precipitated" to express: to bring on suddenly, to bring down from a state of solution or suspension, moisture deposited as rain, snow, etc.) a range of feelings that I felt should be expressed in a series of paintings.

The day after his death, I started eight paper works which opened in terms of the word "transition", and the idea of a change of state. The metaphors that addressed my feelings about his death gradually became "exodus" (leaving) and "the Red Sea" (crossing). Another aspect of this metaphor of "the Red Sea" has to do with my sense of humanity's circumstances at this historic moment. It is as though the whole population of the planet is standing on the shores of the present, gazing across a sea ("the Red Sea") of conflicting ideologies, and vested interests, towards the shore of the future where there is a dim perception of a better world, of

peace and security. The dilemma is how to cross the sea, and not drown while doing so...who will split the sea, while the past personified as Pharaoh and his army close the gap, as the past catches up to us? These metaphors (as feelings) gave rise to over one hundred works on paper.

This series also developed with reference to the Greenland experience of 1984, when I had spent three weeks hunting on the Arctic Ocean with Inuit friends. This experience remains fundamental to the work I have done since. The experience of the Arctic was one of recognizing the impartiality of nature. It didn't matter who you were; if you made a mistake you would be dead in short order.

Since then, the ocean in my paintings gradually became an ambiguous space between two horizon lines. There is the top or far horizon and the near or bottom horizon. The space between operates at once as background, or sky for the near horizon, or as foreground water for the far horizon. These features are evident in Exodus, Mother of Straits, and Ancestors Songs. Multiple horizon lines are suggested, especially along the edges of the works, these serve to make the ocean passage in the work fairly ambiguous, provide several points of view and also a transition from one horizon to the other. This type of multiplicity is especially obvious in the paintings Metaphor In Transition and Event Horizon. Thus the visual composition and internal structures of individual paintings refer to the metaphors of transition which

further inform all the work in general.

At an earlier stage in the work a particular composition itself acted as a kind of metaphor but in a strictly visual sense. The triptychs Platos' Shadows, and Transfigura are examples of this stage of the metaphor as a visual structure. An earlier version of this metaphor as composition occurs in Healers Place. This is a composition which has two horizon lines, top and bottom, with a diagonal between them and a shoreline up one side. In the foreground or just above the bottom horizon line are some shapes which represent symbolized icebergs. The icebergs personified what I felt most expressed the majesty and ancient presence of the spirit of nature. Most of my recent three dimensional work is also in terms of the icebergs as mobile volumes floating in the ocean. I gradually anthropomorphized the icebergs and later they came to represent the soul of my grandfather and my grandmother as well. So the "old ones" referred to previously in titles of works in the Greenland series came to represent my grandparents. Anthropomorphized icebergs are included in the works titled The Passage of Time, Heart of Light, Passage For Mystics, and A Kindly and Radiant Heart, among others. In these paintings the feelings about passages I have made across oceans and time, merged with the passage my Grandparents had made from this world to the next. The primary way for me to really address this experience has been via metaphor.

CONCLUSION

It seems that metaphor emerges from my innermost being and at the same time derives from an independent realm that exists outside of myself. This is a viable understanding and experience simply because, for me, a metaphor provides a point of origin and reference for the complex operations through which I fashion art.

Any artist works in relation to humanity's collective experience of the universe and, simultaneously, from within a private inner world. This position is accordingly immensely complicated and can often be understood only in terms of metaphors. Adding to the complications, the artist is also positioned between the history of art and the often obscure demands of his own culture and his own, personal creative imperative. And further, within each work itself there are the unique problems of references and relationships which pertain to that work. The tensions and harmonies manifest and latent, between these several perspectives and the dynamics of "FIT" and "MATCH" relationships give rise to new works and new forms of art. Metaphor offers the means to simplify all of these relationships; but simplify them in such a way that their essential and necessary complexity remains. It is in this respect that I have come to view metaphor as a means to the construction of those connecting meanings and felt relationships, that are an intrinsic aspect of my creative work.

NOTES

1. The idea of a principle which I am using here is one which derives from the science of this century in its restless search for insight into the organization of the whole universe. This search has led to a philosophical search and reevaluation of paradigm. David Bohm suggests that the whole is not an abstraction and can be understood as an implicate order. David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1980) p.177. "We proposed that a new notion of order is involved here, which we called the implicate order (from a Latin root meaning 'to enfold' or 'to fold inward'). In terms of the implicate order one may say that everything is enfolded into everything. This contrasts with the explicate order now dominant in physics in which things are unfolded in the sense that each thing lies only in its own particular region of space (and time) and outside the regions belonging to other things."

2. Association in this respect is a general trait of human mind and may be more or less accurate. Even if it is inaccurate it still gives rise to a form of awareness or understanding. Gregory Bateson discusses associations in terms of abduction. Gregory Bateson, Mind and Nature A Necessary Unity, (Toronto, New York, Bantam Books, 1980) pp. 157-8. "We are so accustomed to the universe in which we live and to our puny methods of thinking about it that we can hardly see that it is, for example, surprising that abduction is possible, that it is possible to describe some event or thing and then look around the world for other cases to fit the same rules that we devised for our description. We can look at the anatomy of a frog and then look around to find other instances of the same abstract relations recurring in other creatures, including, in this case, ourselves. This lateral extension of abstract components of description is called abduction.... The very possibility of abduction is a little uncanny, and the phenomenon is enormously more widespread than...supposed.

Metaphor, dream, parable, allegory, the whole of art, the whole of science, the whole of religion, the whole

of poetry, totemism, the organization of facts in comparative anatomy - all these are instances or aggregates of instances of abduction, within the human mental sphere.

But obviously, the possibility of abduction extends to the very roots also of physical science, Newton's analysis of the solar system and the periodic table of the elements being historic examples."

3. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 3. "The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor."

4. Here I am suggesting that the quality of these relationships has a characteristic which gives birth to new insights and important work, as Kubler outlines in his remarks on the history of things. George Kubler, The Shape Of Time, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1962) p. 65. "The discoveries and inventions of the past three centuries outnumber those of the entire previous history of mankind. Their pace and number continue to increase as if asymptotically towards a limit which may be inherent to human perception of the cosmos. How does artistic invention differ from useful inventions? It differs as human sensibility differs from the rest of the universe. Artistic inventions alter the sensibility of mankind. They all emerge from and return to human perception, unlike useful inventions, which are keyed to the physical and biological environment. Useful inventions alter mankind only indirectly by altering his environment; aesthetic inventions enlarge human awareness directly with new ways of experiencing the universe, rather than with new objective interpretations."

5. Ernst Von Glasersfeld, "An Introduction to Radical Constructivism" in The Invented Reality, ed. Paul Watzlawick, (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1984) pp. 20 - 21.

6. G. Spensor Brown, Laws Of Form, (New York, The Julian

Press, Inc., 1972) p.v., A Note On The Mathematical Approach.

7. Gregory Bateson, Steps To An Ecology Of Mind, (New York, Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1972) pp. 139-40. "Primary process is characterized (e.g., by Fenichel) as lacking negatives, lacking tense, lacking in any identification of linguistic mood (i.e., no identification of indicative, subjunctive, optative, etc.) and metaphoric. These characterizations are based upon the experience of psychoanalysts, who must interpret dreams and the patterns of free association.

It is also true that the subject matter of primary-process discourse is different from the subject matter of language and consciousness, Consciousness talks about things or persons, and attaches predicates to the specific things or persons which have been mentioned. In primary process the things or persons are usually not identified, and the focus of the discourse is upon the relationships which are asserted to obtain between them. This is really only another way of saying that the discourse of primary process is metaphoric. A metaphor retains unchanged the relationship which it "illustrates" while substituting other things or persons for the relata. In a simile, the fact that a metaphor is being used is marked by the insertion of the words "as if" or "like." In primary process (as in art) there are no markers to indicate to the conscious mind that the message material is metaphoric."

8. G. Spensor Brown, Laws Of Form, (New York, The Julian Press, Inc., 1972) p. xxi. "One of the motives prompting the furtherance of the present work was the hope of bringing together the investigations of the inner structure of our knowledge of the universe, as expressed in the mathematical sciences, and the investigations of its outer structure, as expressed in the physical sciences. Here the work of Einstein, Schrodinger, and others seems to have led to the realization of an ultimate boundary of physical knowledge in the form of the media through which we perceive it. It becomes apparent that if certain facts about our common experience of perception, or what we might call the inside world, can be revealed by an extended study of what we call, in contrast, the outside world, then an equally extended study of this inside world will reveal, in turn, the facts first met with in the world outside: for what we approach, in either case, from one side or the other, is the common boundary between them."

9. Roland Barthes, The Responsibility Of Forms, (New York, Hill and Wang, A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) p. 150. "What is the connection between the picture and the language inevitably used in order to read it - i.e., in order (implicitly) to write it? Is not this connection the picture itself?"

Obviously the question is not one that would limit writing the picture to the professional criticism of painting. The picture, whoever writes it, exists only in the account given of it; or again: in the total and the organization of the various readings that can be made of it: a picture is never anything but its own plural description. We see how this traversal of the picture by the text out of which I constitute it is both close to and remote from a painting presumed to be a language; as Jean-Louis Schefer says: "The image has no a priori structure, it has textural structures...of which it is the system"; so it is no longer possible (and this is where Schefer gets pictorial semiology out of its rut) to conceive the description by which the picture is constituted as a neutral, literal, denoted state of language; nor as a pure mythic elaboration, the infinitely available site of subjective investments: the picture is neither a real object nor an imaginary object. Of course, the identity of what is "represented" is ceaselessly deferred, the signified always displaced (for it is only a series of nominations, as in a dictionary), the analysis is endless; but this leakage, this infinity of language is precisely the picture's system: the image is not the expression of a code, it is the variation of a work of codification: it is not the repository of a system but the generation of systems.

10. Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism Failed? (New York, New York; Thames and Hudson Inc., 1984) pp. 116-117. "Art must now proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition. So many metamorphoses and revolutions of every kind, so many differing values presented simultaneously, have finally done away with the entire frame of things - and destroyed the conviction that there are any limits to art at all. Having thus removed any standard against which we might any more measure ourselves, we no longer know what rules we ought to follow, much less why we ought to follow them. And so the very question of what constitutes success or failure has to be an ambivalent one: it can only be judged by being measured against some valid conception of what a work of art is, and this is a conception we no longer have."

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