

The International
JOURNAL
of ***the ARTS***
IN SOCIETY

Volume 4, Number 4

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY
<http://www.arts-journal.com>

First published in 2009 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1833-1866
Publisher Site: <http://www.Arts-Journal.com>

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
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The Silence of the Paper: Embodiment of ‘Artistic Personality’ in the Process of Art-making

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Abstract: This paper asks the question: how artists embody their distinct personality, emotions and experiences, in the process of making an art work? The literature in art does not sufficiently discuss this point, where the literature often refers to the final product from which views about the artist are deduced, or it discusses the views of artists on their work as an afterthought. Either way, the actual process of making art in which an artist ‘recreates’ his identity, as I would define it, and embodies part of himself through the process, are not often discussed. For my MPhil research I have been documenting my personal insights and experiences during the process of creating art works (paintings, drawings and animation films), and have also engaged in interviewing artists about their creative processes. By separating the art-making process into its various elements (such as line and colour) this article explores the meanings and the implications of each. I will demonstrate how line acts as a personification and evolution of the artists’ thoughts, and how colour builds up emotional layers. Every colour and line create a certain resonance, a story that can elicit responses from the viewers.

Keywords: Authorship, Art, Line, Colour, Emotion, Self, Personality

Introduction

MOST LITERATURE ON the process of creating art works tends to be shaped by a mixture of opinions and knowledge, as well as biased thought (Anfam, 1990: 8). The literature tends to describe artists as individuals who have the skill or talent of presenting ideas in a visual form. However, I would argue that such a definition of artistic personality overlooks the view that a personality is also constructed from within, from one’s emotional experiences, and not necessarily from the outside, from one’s professional or intellectual skills alone.

Anderson (1981: 30), in her PhD research on the hermeneutic of art processes, argues that analysis must be measured in the light of whether it deepens the language of understanding. Anderson explains that intimate knowledge of how the artist develops the formation of his/her concepts is needed before we can philosophize about the making of the art. Thus, I would suggest, it is beneficial to explore the personal context of experiences within which an individual has chosen to express visuals in an art form.

Looking at the variety of styles in art works, I would argue that artists seem to have many ways of expressing emotions and movement through line, colour and texture; and all through the personal experience. The experience gained in the studio turns an artist into what Elkins (1999: 22) defines as a ‘treasury of nearly incommunicable knowledge’ in the way that artists apply movement, and produce a sense of dimension and what may be called ‘individual

reality'. Unfortunately, the academic literature seems to fail to impart this knowledge sufficiently, focusing as it has on the final artefact rather than on the artist as the nucleus of the creative work. It is my task, as an academic and an artist, to communicate this knowledge, and to find ways of passing it on. The purpose of my research is to demonstrate how artists embody or express their identity, and their artistic sense, in the process of making art – focusing in this paper on the elements of line and colour.

Wood (2006: 134) argues that artists live 'through' their art work, and see the making of art as part and parcel of the artists' lives. Performance artist Vaara (Dekel, 2009: 70) believes that:

'we are as much part of the biosphere as a sunset is... From this point of view everybody is not an artist, as Joseph Beuys manifested, but rather everybody is art itself...'

In that way it could be argued that the creative artistic act includes the memories, imagination, space, movement, as well as the artists' skills. Hence, as I create my art works, I visually explore what I sense; what I see and feel as part of an interaction with my environment. Anderson (1981: 74) argues that a painting is an act inseparable from the biography of the artist. She explains that the painting is a language of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's own existence. In my case the matters that have created and shaped my life are those I paint with. My experiences involve first living in the Far East of USSR, a country that does not longer exist, a place where ideas and representation were serving a myth that no longer functions. I then spent 12 years living in Israel, a country that nourishes other types of myths, which I eventually discovered no longer have a hold over me either. And now living 9 years in Britain, I have learned to look back at my experience, as a learning process that does not necessarily require a myth, and have learned to accept is as 'worthwhile'.

My 'international' experience shapes me as a researcher and a practitioner of art. The move between countries, cultures, languages and perspectives gradually shaped me in a way that has no specific sense of belonging to any one group, culture, age or religion. My identity is formed through my actions and my emotions, and not through 'place' or 'culture'. Since the English language is not my mother's tongue but rather an acquired tool of expression, along with Hebrew, I became a 'user' of these languages, not 'identified' by them. Sometimes it feels liberating, as the new words allow wider scope of expression compared to having only one language. But the illusion collapses when I hear myself in my films, where the sound of my own voice comes back to me as a peculiar sound, out of nowhere.

This constant observation of myself in a critical, almost alienated way helps in my self-reflective approach, where I try to solve a peculiar mystery of the self and its identity. Meanwhile, between three languages (Hebrew, English and Russian) and being half-deaf, my realm is a silent exploration through other senses, which are sharpened by this virtual imprisonment of the self, and which is best expressed in my art. In this way, I explore my visual and sensual expression through line, colour, movement and touch in the process of creating my films and artwork. Thus, my artwork becomes what Pollock (Anfam, 1990: 121) calls 'energy and motion made visible-memories arrested in space'. However, the hard work

invested in the making of thousands of frames into an animation film, propagates my self-absorption, silence and foreignness even more.

Wilde (2001) explains that the artist's emotions are embodied through the use of materials (paints, brushes and canvases), while Elkins (1999) suggests further that even elements that are regarded as insignificant have a critical impact on the artwork and, thus, on the artist. Elkins reflects on the posture of an artist and the pressure of his/her hand on the brush during the painting; the alchemy of colour-making and the effect that a personal mix of pigments can have on the message communicated by the painting.

For the purpose of understanding the way the artist embodies himself/herself in the process of making art, I decided to focus on my own artwork and situate it among the work of other artists. Through an analysis and documentation of my practice I try to understand what it means to create a work of art (Dekel: 2007).



*Image 1: Self Analysis and Documentation of Practice: The Character King from the Film *The Truth* (2004) is 'Interviewed' about his Role of being Animated Character. The 'Interview' was Made into the Animation Film *Reflections in the Light Box* (2007). Both Animations Created by Natalie Dekel. This Still Image is from the Animation Film *Reflections in the Light Box* (2007). www.youtube.com/gldek*

Line

The very act of drawing, applying the line, testifies to the universal language (Anfam, 1990: 88). The drawn line is an alternative visual system to a language. Observing the line in my artwork, I see that it can be said to carry with it qualities of resemblance as well as difference to other lines. Resemblance is conveyed in terms of order and hierarchy that create the

movement, the objects, and the environment, through the drawn line. And yet, the line in each succeeding frame in my animation films produces less faithful copies of the original line (see image 2).



*Image 2: Three Succeeding Frames from the Animation *The Truth* (2004). Note the Minute difference is the Lines Depicting the Same Objects (for Example the barn).*

www.youtube.com/gidek

Thus, resemblance to reality fails as it ceases to refer to and classify objects as viewed in detail. Instead, the line becomes a living organic entity rather than a limit or a border. In a way, line develops a series of statements with no beginning or end, as such, but rather small ‘stories’ that bear personal imprint (see images 3, 4, and 5). The change in similitude, in repetition, seems to emulate or ‘visualise’ the thought that run in the artists’ mind, by revealing independent qualities. Line acts as a projection of the artist’s inarticulate moods. It mirrors things about ourselves that we cannot quite understand. This is my understanding of the irrational continuous dialogue of an artist with his/her creation. Line inaugurates a play of transferences that run, proliferate and correspond within the layout and the inner logic of the images. While the play of lines does not ‘overflow’ the main narrative of the image, it leaves it as an incomplete whole.

Lines continuously converse with each other, simultaneously merging and separating. Like an alchemist, line easily shifts one object into a completely different one. It is both a fix, defined, and 'bordered' object, as well as the means of change. The line is the creator of the universe of my films and paintings. It distinguishes shapes from the nothingness of background, projecting from or fading into it. Any two marks seen together will appear complete in themselves, as if comprising a language on their own. Yet, their mere difference will create thoughts of separation and diversity and unique individuality. In animation films, the line creates a new unit, but it is also a formless insipience when it is in the 'in-between stage' of its creation of form.

For me, a line, from its initiation, already contains all forms, but in a hidden and chaotic state. It is through my hand and mind that I unravel these forms. The actual drawing is merely a technique to reveal it, not a name in itself. As I reveal each form, it moves across the frames, exploring the space that is created beneath and around it, continually evolving. Its evolution begins from a two-dimensional dot on the flat surface of the paper and gradually evolves into three-dimensional reality, with forms and substances, thoughts and emotions. The silence of a piece of paper is then broken to explicate my thoughts as an author, as a person. In the chaotic 'in-between stage' of the evolution of line, substances and ideas toss about experimentally.





*Images 3, 4, and 5: From a Dot to a Castle: Three Still Images from the Opening Scene of
The Truth (2004) Showing Development of Line from a Dot to a Drawn Castle.*

www.youtube.com/gldk

In this transitional moment, nothing is fixed; everything is volatile, explosive, half-formed. The space breathes with possibilities, bristling against control and direction. This sense of chaos arouses questions, contradictions and experimentation with conventions.

The line does not bear only my emotions, but (to draw from Anderson, 1981: 69) the imprint of my own movement alongside that which I have drawn. The bent body at work at an animation film, the scanning of thousands of frames, colouring, cropping them one by one using a computer, the editing, altering its pace – all leave their mark on the filmic appearance.

Each frame also speaks of the pen's grip that occasionally scratches the paper (when the pen is almost finished), thus changing the hue and saturation of the ink, and effectively creating movement in itself. At other times, it is affected by the easy flow of ink of a new pen, as it hovers, dancing across the frames. Some lines or moves are done carefully and slowly,

as in drawing faces and details of clothing, others quickly and impatiently, almost flicking on the paper. These memories, along with the thoughts that went into the making, are embedded in the film (Anderson, 1981: 145). It is easy to see in the scenes where I was calm and relaxed (gentle lines) or of a worried mind, as harshly-made lines slash across the flames. ‘The meanings seem to travel like electric current, sparking from the artist’s body to the chemicals and from there to the eye of the viewer’ (Elkins, 1999: 98).

Even static images can convey movement. Consider Egon Schiele’s 1913 painting of a dancer. While it is a painting, i.e. a still image, one notices the tension in one place, and freedom in another. The dance is not in the pose, because the pose is interrupted. The dancer is disabled in the image by the fragmentation of the composition on the page. But the dancer is there in the line, in the way that it is applied, in the way the line is dancing.

As the artist makes any single mark on the paper, the silence of the paper is broken, automatically creating a certain atmosphere. This raises the notion of the artist as mediator. Moreover, the artists’ choice of materials, ink-colour, pen-pressure, and even emotion, all comprise the artist’s personal contribution to the work at hand. As these elements coalesce and flood into something entirely new, with a living history being created.

Colour

Anfam (1990: 9-10) explains that the canvas’ function has shifted from being a painterly surface to an arena in which to act, rather than re-produce or ‘express’ an object. Colour is one of the acts on that arena. Varndoe and Karmel (1999: 112) argues that the performance of the paint and colour itself produces different results, where the use of paint or colour remains deductive and visual and is part of visual exploration by the artist.

In the process of making an animation film, the overall colour and texture spectrum is an element that gives ‘shape’ to the whole film. The sensation of colour runs through an entire film evoking emotions that are personally associated with it. Piper (2001: 118) explains:

‘The viewer’s strong response to colour comes through textures, which are connected to the link between the sense of sight and the sense of touch. For instance the ‘roughness’ of the tree or the ‘smoothness’ of the glass are absorbed into the mind as a visual memory. Therefore once a person sees appropriate image, a particular touchable memory is developed that causes the particular textures and colours to appear real’.

Although there are changes in hue and tones, colour winds through the film as a continuum. Colour has such a presence in the film that without it, the film can be said to loose its hold and becomes much more abstract (Anderson, 1981: 153). Textures of forms and colours are mingling and separating; working along with a graphic line that portray, to my view, the idea that the mind might also be full of mingling and separating thoughts. Tentative or dynamic motions of one texture flowing into another are irresistibly metaphors for mental states of an author. The labour invested in creating an animating these textures portrays a continuous relationship, a struggle between material, line and technique of making it alive. Meditating

on creating a film then naturally expresses inwardly pictures of one's mind into the lines, colours, and the character.

As an animator and a painter I do not see colours as mere elements representing things, but as independent elements in their own right. These elements, though conditioned to their function within the animated frame or the painting, still have dynamic independence. The sensation that I creates in my films come from the choices of colour and line I take from my palette on the computer. Every visual sensation is a manifestation of these choices. 'For perceptual space the painter has to invent pictorial space... each sensation must be recast in pictorial terms. And if these are to 'work'... then together they must create a pictorial reality which is credible' (Lamb and Bourriau, 1997: 28). As part of an animation's credible reality, any colour or texture used in the film describes something – green for instance describes fields, but it also acts as the thing itself – the grass. Blue describes, and is, the sea. Colour both identifies an object and characterises it, while it awakens into life, depends on the animator's sense of the material, intuition and harmony. Every use of colour turns them on the edge of either becoming an obvious illusion or granting them a sense of corporeal, sensually perceptive material value.

Colour is used both to identify an object and to characterise it. Emerging from an artist's sense of the material, intuition and harmony, I feel that colour brings the object to life. The use of colour is at the brink of either becoming an obvious illusion or of granting a sense of corporeal, sensually perceptive, material value (Anderson, 1981: 156).

As I use colour in my paintings and films, I create an experience, both for myself and for the viewer, through memories, imagination and visual links between objects and forms. Wood (2006: 134) argues that people '...live through and in space, generating intensive experiences through memories and acts of imagination'. I would venture to say that colour does not only create a reality, but it elicits wonderment and discovery, thereby creating a unique experience for myself as an artist as well as for the viewer. When I posed this question to artist Avendaño Pablo (Avendaño & Dekel, 2009: para no. 33), he reflected on the use of colour as an expression of the environment, but also as an independent tool that creates his own experiences: '...Sometimes I am naturalistic but at other times I deny my environment and paint with subjective... colours.'



*Image 6: Experiences Created by Use of Colours in Encaustic Painting: *Passion*, A4 (Dekel Natalie, 2009)*

Moreover, a drawing of a bark of a tree is not just a bark; it is not just a brown blob, but it holds qualities that the viewers will utilise. Each viewer who sees the painting will evoke a personal memory of a tree, bringing an intense experience of their past. The painting then becomes a symbol that speaks to each one of us personally. This can be demonstrated in Anish Kapoor's installation work *As If To Celebrate I Discovered a Mountain Blue Flower* (1981). This work transforms his memories of living in India, where some people sit in the street and grind colour pigments into a mound, a purely functional, everyday activity, into a new art experience. Suddenly, this mound of pigment becomes a living entity. One cannot pass it by and say, 'This is red', since it has become something tangible, representing memories, existence, and the artist's own question, 'Who am I? Who am I in relation to where I now live? Who am I in relation to where I was born?' By working with raw pigment, Anish deals with a personal truth. As he works, he is putting together a vocabulary of form, and of colour that slowly coagulated into words (Bickers & Wilson, 2007: 334).

The process of painting can be said to provide the knowledge of experience, which is communicated by surrendering to the material, to the energy, and the movement that creates the image (Anderson, 1981: 46-47). Interestingly, the actual, physical portrayal of emotion or movement does not reveal true meaning in its form. For example, portraying walking in form/line is just walking, but it is the inner feeling invested in that line and the choice of colour, texture and angle that 'gives' meanings which transcends the shapes and becomes explicit, for example, a happy walk, a sad walk, etc. Shapes, colours and lines refer to spatial forms, and harmonize with one another to achieve an overall meaning or story. Paradoxically, to achieve that meaning, I take elements apart to examine them for what they are in the process of making. Each element is a choice-point. As I reflect-in-action on the situation

created by my earlier choices, further choices are then considered. Thus, there is a continually evolving system of implications within which I reflect-in-action.

Finding the right colour in the process of painting is highly important to an artist as it is part of his self-realization. Pablo Avendano (Avendaño & Dekel, 2009: para no. 39) explains, quoting from Italo Calvino's '*Città invisibili*', colour and painting is like the inferno of the everyday life where an artist has to either choose to become one with it physically and visually or separate himself from it and observe it and therefore himself. Hillman (1972: 40-42) adds that this urge for self-analysis stems from an urge for self-realization that works with the compulsion of an instinct. We are driven to be ourselves. However, he then explains that artists often write about their creative processes, about what is happening to them and what they are doing, while limiting these perceptions to archetypically conditioned ideas on creativity. I also found through my interviews with artists that these observations are not driven by self-analysis but by reflection on their process to achieve the aim of their artwork.

Likewise, Anish Kapoor felt that in order to be an 'artist' he had to find something that is truly his; that makes him who he is (Bickers & Wilson, 2007: 334-335). He wanted to learn who he was through polarities, oppositions, elemental qualities (that were part of his Jewish-Indian tradition). So much of being an artist is about understanding, and having a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of being in the world in some real way. Anish argues that making art is not an intellectual or theoretical activity. It is deeply rooted in the psychological, in the self.

On the other hand, artist Barbara Howey deals with the issue of infusing memories into art. Howey (Howey & Dekel, 2009: para no. 2) argues that the process of painting constructs and reconstructs the sense of identity, which holds both a personal and a social sense of self. In her PhD thesis (2000) she proposes a model of a creative self in terms of triangulation between the self, painting practice and social practice (in particular her role as a woman and women in general). This model was the result of observing and analysing her self as a reality, which can be accessed through autobiography (lived history) and its relation to the world of paintings, her use of colour and line and textures as a personal signature.

Colour artist and researcher Ken Devine (Devine & Dekel, 2008: para no. 28) argues that people tend to think of colours as existing points or symbols, but '...a point has no dimension, it is rather an idea.' Hence, colours are more than just signs on paper, they are about how much we can tell about the existence of the person behind them, the person who created them, the artist.

Conclusion

I create my work in order to learn about myself and about others: who they are in relation to who they were before. Artwork, as Silverman (1996: 3) explains, connects highly charged unconscious memories with the opportunity for conscious scrutiny and interrogation.

I see line and colours as a visual expression of a process where artists are being thrown into existence, and at the same time dominated by their own creative nature. Line and colours depict this relationship, and each time an artist creates an image he/she revises the aesthetics of the sublime in his/her own way. What we are left with is a set of relationships between a person and his/her ‘signature’ on the canvas or paper, which needs to be de-coded and explained so that others can learn about themselves and about the artist who created the work.

Looking at my work and that of others, I have found that changes in line, colours and objects within a space provides metaphoric references to the artist’s own situation in society, culture and reality at large.

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About the Author

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Completed MPhil on authorship in animation films making (Leeds Met Uni, 2007), Natalie is following up with a PhD research proposal, looking at the ways that artists embody their personality in the process of making art. She is engaged in interviewing artists, facilitating art workshops, documenting processes in which artists are creating their works, as well as self-observing her own creative processes. Natalie is a visionary painter, and her academic and artistic works can be viewed on www.poeticmind.co.uk



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