ART AS ART BECOMES ART AS ART

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN ART

AUGUST 1977

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The problematics involved in the writing of a MFA thesis raises interesting questions about the nature of art-education itself as it is perpetuated in the studio-areas. How important is the actual thesis, for instance, in relation to the works that are being exhibited in the thesis exhibition? There are those detractors who will question the validity of a lengthy thesis and state quite categorically that the actual works produced by a "visual" artist should speak for themselves without too many wordy explanations from the artist who has produced them. The job of actually describing them should be left to the art-critic if that is necessary. Such a point of view which is rampant in art-institutions everywhere still presupposes that the ideatic considerations behind the work of art can be readily comprehended on the basis of the work's "visualness." Underlying this line of thinking is, of course, the notion of a formalistic art-making approach which makes much of the morphological characteristics inherent in the work itself and also, "retinal" considerations. The detractors will argue therefore that because art is essentially "visual," there is no need for the artist to describe via
any other form of expression the underlying ideatic and conceptual considerations that have entered into the art-making impulse. A good "visual" work of art would have revealed very clearly all the "processes" involved. If only this were the case always!

My rebuttal to those simplistic believers of a purely "visual" approach in art will be to remind them that the history of modern art is full of instances wherein serious artists who were essentially "visual" were misunderstood and condemned when their works were first shown in avant-garde exhibitions. Clearly then there is much more to the art-making impulse and the "art-context" than "visual" considerations alone!

That there is a fundamental difference to be discerned between the terms "art-training" and "art-education" may be worth pondering about. The difference, I am inclined to feel, may be located in attitudes behind teaching an art-student to "make" specific kinds of art-objects and, to help him "investigate" specific problems pertaining to art's semiotic and art's semantic definitions. The differences to be discerned between an artist who is essentially a picture-maker following academic modes of composing and the artist who requestions those very rules and norms which are adhered to perhaps underlies the very spirit of the modernist impulse in art itself. Further, there is to be discerned a fundamental difference between the artist who is involved with a
specific kind of art (i.e., painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics, etc.) and the artist who attempts to investigate ideatic considerations pertaining to art in its broadest connotations. The second kind of involvement is, I am inclined to feel, more demanding and necessitates more than the manipulation of techniques and materials alone or egocentric whimsicalities. A thorough understanding of ideas and concepts pertaining to perception, aesthetics, the history of ideas, the art-context and socio-cultural attitudes are prerequisites for such an undertaking.

The emergence of the "artist-aesthetician" then is perhaps one of the most interesting things about modern art itself. That so many of the early pioneers of modernism in fact felt compelled to write extensively about the theoretical ideas behind their works may explain why such artists as Gabo, Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Boccioni, Kirchner, Duchamp, Ozenfant, Le Corbusier, Malevich, Gleizes and others have had such a considerable impact on the subsequent development on twentieth century art itself. More recently, such artist-writers as John Cage, Ad Rheinhart, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Terry Atkinson, Mel Bochner, Daniel Buren and others have continued to influence modern art through their theoretical writings. Our understanding of the complexities involved behind the modernist impulse then are that more meaningful
and complete simply because there are left behind voluminous notes and writings by significant artists. The point I am making then is that there is a very big difference between the artist-craftsman and the artist-dialectician. Whereas one is essentially a maker of artifacts and a picture-maker, the other is essentially an aesthetician and an investigator of the language of art itself.

The reader of this thesis will realize that the works in my Thesis Show reflect the results of an essentially investigative attitude. My investigation has been motivated by my own desire to understand how art's ontology actually operates. My decision to embark on this investigation was in fact taken nearly five years ago and hence, there is need to supply in this thesis a background with which to approach the present works. Further, that I have chosen to reject formalistic and stylistic considerations within my scheme of things and borrowed freely from oriental ideas about reality and form makes it necessary that I discuss some of them at least. Part of the thesis therefore constitutes a discussion of the significance of a "peripheral" mode of perception derived from Taoist sources. And that I have also borrowed freely from the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (i.e., the "signified"/"signifier" concept in sign systems) and also the ideas inherent in the writings of the structural anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, must explain the unusual character of this
MFA thesis itself. There is need to discuss the complex ideas behind my art and my approach. For to look at my works on a purely "visual" level alone cannot possibly result in anything but vague ideas about what they are about. And because my works deal specifically with questions pertaining to the "art-context" and with the differences to be discerned between what is "visual" and what is "visible" there is need for me to devote much energy to the thesis itself.

The written thesis at the graduate level is, I believe, very important for it affords an indication of the educational process at work. In this instance, I have attempted to bare my own growth and development as an artist to the reader. I do not believe today that by simply looking at a physical work of art alone one can possibly grasp all the cumulative complexities that go on in the creative process itself or even, the many ideatic levels on which a serious work of art actually functions. The dependence on words, in my case at least, affords a more complete picture!
CHAPTER II

ART AS ART BECOMES ART AS ART

Esthetic doctrines once proclaimed that art was "beauty," "the search after truth," or "significant form"; what passes for esthetics today--that lingering element which makes art "art"--is no more helpful. Like the patient who repeatedly relocates the cause of his neurosis while being careful not to divulge its underlying origins, redefinition diverts us from the structure of art. And when, as Levi-Strauss maintains, we do structurally derive an activity--for our culture or for others--we have moved considerably toward eliminating it. Myth as the basis of Western art functions not unlike neurosis: neither depends upon a physical form, but so long as either is believed, it continues to exist.


Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That is because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you are making paintings you are accepting the nature of art to be the European tradition of a painting-sculpture dichotomy.

A definition of sculpture: something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.


That the works that are being exhibited in my Thesis Show constitute the logical extensions of an art-making attitude that I have been preoccupied with for the last ten years or so necessitates some explanation of the various considerations that have gone into their realization. The fundamental approach that I have adopted in executing these works is one of investigation rather than emotive picture-making. It is as such an involvement with the ideatic and the historical rather than simply an involvement with a highly personalized image-making intent. The art-making process is becoming for me a means of exploring various questions pertaining to aesthetics and art’s ontology and hence, my attitude is clearly dialectical in character. That much of my own thinking has been influenced by recent developments in Minimalist Art and, more exactly, Conceptual Art, is worth mentioning as the works in the show have to be viewed within this frame of reference.

It needs also to be mentioned that an essentially investigative attitude towards creativity has been a part and parcel of my development as an artist since my student days at the Hornsey College of Art in London. Being a
student in London from 1963 to 1967 must in no small way have influenced my preference for the intellectual rather than emotive approach in art-making for the emphasis in English art-schools during the 1960s was one which drew heavily from the Bauhaus approach to art-teaching with its strongly analytical overtones. The analytical approach in the studio areas at Hornsey was further bolstered by a very effective Liberal Studies program which every student had to become exposed to over a period of five years. Basic to the Liberal Studies program was a wholistic educational process which emphasized the history of ideas. My own interest in the dialectics of art may be traced back to my days at Hornsey where I became convinced of the validity of the avant-garde impulse and an essentially investigative and iconoclastic approach that typifies the modernist spirit in art.

It was perhaps symptomatic of the kind of changes taking place in English art-schools during the early 1960s that must also explain my own predilection for incorporating two-dimensional and three-dimensional considerations within my scheme of things even today. At Hornsey, at least, every Fine Art student had to major in both Painting and Sculpture and hence, so much of my thinking oscillates between the problematics of Painting and Sculpture. The British art scene during the 1960s, too, reflected this somewhat schizophrenic tendency and the use of color in sculpture by such
sculptors as Caro, Phillip King, Tim Scott, William Turnbull and others was complemented by the incorporation of three-dimensional influences in the works of such painters as Richard Smith, Victor Pasmore, Anthony Hill, Joe Tilson and others. It was simply that the sixties witnessed a conscious attempt made by artists to break down the demarcations that had hitherto separated painting from sculpture. In any case, the Abstract Expressionist hold on the avant-garde was beginning to give way to a new pragmatism in art and much of my sympathies even as an art-student in England during the 1960s lay in the Constructivist approach to art-making.

London during the time I was there also served as the venue for some of the most important avant-garde exhibitions from the United States and Europe. My first exposure at firsthand to the works of such American artists as Rauchenberg, Jasper Johns, Warhol, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Oldenberg, Segal and others dates back to this period. My fascination with the Neo-Dada tendencies inherent in Pop-Art certainly stems from this period. From Europe came the works of some of the most important avant-garde artists of the sixties such as Yves Klein, Pierro Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Joseph Beuys, Tinguely, Gilbert and George, Hans Haacke and others who would herald the phenomenon that would later be described as Conceptual Art. The five years I spent in London certainly fostered in me a notion of art
that transcended the purely romantic and the purely indulgent. The art-making process is for me even today founded upon analytical considerations.

Returning to Malaysia at the end of 1967, I began teaching at the first art college founded by the Malaysian government. My task as Coordinator of the Foundation Course program for the next eight years was to bring me face to face with the rudiments of Basic Design considerations. In teaching Basic Design, one in fact comes face to face with the components of formalistic art and acquires an understanding of the mechanisms by which formalistic thinking is in fact structured. Some of my works produced during 1967 and 1968 clearly reflect a preoccupation with simplified shapes and forms so typical of "hard-edge" tendencies. A desire to produce works that incorporated both Painting and Sculpture influences was to result in a work such as that reproduced in Figure 1. Color, shape and form were interactive in this piece which is essentially self-referential in character.

By 1969, I had become increasingly interested in the possibilities offered by the "relief" form as an intermediary ground between Painting and Sculpture. A systematic investigation of the ideas of such artists such as Charles Biederman, Victor Pasmore, Anthony Hill, Jesus Raphael Soto, Agam and others was followed by a new fascination with the slashed canvasses of the Italian sculptor, Lucio Fontana,
and what they implied in terms of the "quasi-sculpture" properties inherent in them. The realization that one can in fact "go backwards" from the picture-plane rather than only outwards as in the traditional Cubist-inspired relief resulted in my attempts to produce a kind of structurist form that drew the eye directly to the wall on which it had been placed. Increasingly, the realization that one can activate the actual wall by optical effects (i.e., simultaneous contrast) led me to works such as those reproduced in Figures 2 and 3. Calling these works "open paintings," I investigated the possibilities that they offered for the next two years. How different they were from the traditional Constructivist relief may be gauged by the fact that the structural elements were not self-contained within the work itself but rather the very wall on which they had been placed became incorporated as an integral part of their structure. This fact was very clearly stated in the catalogue of my exhibition of 1972 in which the results of these experiments were documented:

My works are not reliefs. There is no question of something projecting from a flat picture-plane into the third dimension. My works occupy a part of the wall. They have been placed on the wall. They are not a part of the wall. The wall becomes a part of them.1

I quote further from the same catalogue:

In the past the picture-frame used to function as a kind of demarcation line which separated the "pictorial" space of the painting from the actual space occupied by the painting. My "frames" succeed in linking the two. There are no demarcation lines between illusion and reality.2

The realization that I was already beginning to incorporate the environment into my scheme of things was to draw me closer to Minimalist attitudes and it seemed inevitable that I would eventually arrive at a breaking down of the customary demarcations between art and life in my "art situations." Further experiments with these "frames" led me to the conviction that I should paint a part of the wall area that had been enclosed within my frames. The "situational" character of my work became more emphasized and, with it, a new element became apparent, namely, the immovable quality of the work! The "work" became quite literally "locked" within the realness of life itself and taking the frame off the wall and repainting the wall quite literally negated its very existence. My "art situations" were clearly becoming "ephemeral" in character and the problem posed by this new realization was also documented in the same exhibition catalogue of 1972:

In a sense my work cannot be sold. This is because the experience I am forcing upon the viewer

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2Ibid.
is a real experience. My work may be reconstructed elsewhere in a new environment in which case they will constitute an altogether new experience.³

The works reproduced in Figures 4 and 5 will illustrate what I mean. Had I reconstructed the work on another wall, the experience afforded the spectator would, in fact, have been located within another point in time and space! It seemed inevitable that such problems as I was already encountering by 1972 would lead me to requestion the very nature of art itself and the character of illusion and reality. And fundamental to the dilemma was the realization that I had to understand how the "art context" operates!

It was around this time that I entered a national competition for landscape painting organized by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. My entry titled, "The Great Malaysian Landscape," was in fact a parody of the whole competition but it nevertheless earned me the Major Prize because of its complexity and wit.⁴ Incorporating the spatial ideas that were inherent in my "frames" and employing the use of stencilled words on canvas for the first time in my scheme of things, I was in fact parodying Painting itself and, with it, pictorial space. In the attempt to reduce

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³Ibid.

⁴This particular work was eventually reproduced as a postcard by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in 1976. See Figures 7 and 8.
everything within the work to the level of "facts" about Painting jargon, I was quite simply trying to de-mystify Painting itself. Further, the attempt to create a "painting-within-a-painting" situation on the large canvas forced attention to a peripheral rather than central mode of perception. Clearly, the work is contextual to the history of Modern Painting itself and superficial comparisons to the work of Larry Rivers and Arakawa are indeed quite inevitable.

The decision to stop working altogether for the next two years (1972-1974) was perhaps inevitable for I had reached an impasse of sorts. The need to devote more time to reading about Minimalist Art and Conceptual Art seemed imperative at this stage. The problem was no longer one of making art-objects or image-making anymore but rather an investigation of the "art" concept itself.

The decision at the end of 1972 to join forces with another Malaysian artist, Sulaiman Esa, who had also reached a similar artistic impasse, was to result in our working together for the next two years in a systematic attempt to investigate the character of Art itself. Fundamental to our investigation was the search for a philosophical rationale within which we could function. The decision to view art and reality from another standpoint, namely, the Mystical rather than the Empirical was to result in our reconsidering such things as notions of space, time
and form as viewed from non-western standpoints. Similarly, the more we investigated the character of non-western cultures, the more it became clear that there were fundamental differences to be discerned about the role of the artist and the role of art within these traditions. For one thing, there was absent the Humanist or Romantic notions of the artist as is to be found in western culture. The idea of the individualistic artist and his egocentricity simply did not exist in many instances. And if Plato's idea of "mimesis" formed the backbone of the western aesthetic tradition, the notion of art in many non-western cultures presupposed the existence of the art work and the spectator within the same time-space continuum.

The notion of a purely "visual" approach to art that stemmed from the European Renaissance and was extended by Cezanne and Picasso seemed even somewhat limiting to us as we continued our investigations. Further exposure to non-western traditions only opened up newer discoveries. All forms for the oriental artist are, for instance, conceived as only embodiments of the essence of "events" and "energies" rather than physical entities and, as such, art works also reflected a further aspect of the multi-dimensional and multi-faceted reality. The art work was not separated from life nor the art context necessarily isolated from the very reality within which the spectator lived and breathed. And if all forms are embodiments of "events"
and "processes" (as is the case with the Indian theory of aesthetics) then the idea of time is synonymous with that of form! Further, in a culture permeated with a mystical world-view, demarcations between the animate and inanimate, too, break down for all beings and all things are in essence trapped within the matrix of life; and, each form (whether animate or inanimate) can only confirm the "illusion" of appearances. Clearly then we had arrived at a point in our own artistic development wherein we re questioned those very codifications by which the concept of art is conceived and celebrated in the west.

The exhibition titled "Towards a Mystical Reality" which Sulaiman and I held jointly in 1974, was to result in a thirty-page manifesto that we published stating some of the results of our investigations. The exhibition was clearly a Conceptual exhibition which attempted to draw attention to a whole new way of perceiving reality that depended on mystical rather than empirical modes of perception. In emphasizing the differences to be discerned between what is "visual" and what is "visible" we were in essence drawing attention to the particular relevance of artistic attitudes that were dependent on philosophical considerations. Art's raison d'être lies in philosophy we stated rather than in aesthetics and any attempt to understand the "art context" must therefore take into consideration factors that transcended the purely
Fundamental to our approach was a systematic requestioning of the western-centric celebration of a notion of "transcendency" located within the mythic art object. Further, we were requestioning such notions as the "sacredness of art" and "the permanence of art" and with it, "the myth of artistic inspiration." The extreme banality of the found "things" taken from everyday situations of life which we exhibited raw in our show was perhaps inevitable, in retrospect. (See Figure 8) And because we were not out to draw attention to their physical appearance but rather to the time structures they embodied, we included strange-sounding captions that deliberately emphasized their reality as "events" rather than "forms." Hence, titles of "works" in the show such as "Two Half-drunk Coca-Cola Bottles," "Empty Birdcage after Release of Bird," "Potted Plant Watered and Looked After by the Two Artists over a Period of Seven Months," "Empty Canvas on which many Shadows have Already Fallen," and "Randomly Collected Sample of Human Hair Collected from a Barber Shop in Petaling Jaya." In alluding to aspects of the form that were not immediately perceptible to the eye we were in fact drawing attention to considerations that transcended the purely "retinal" and found their relevance in the workings of the mind. A fundamental difference between what is "visual" and what is "visible" becomes very clear!
Further, in heightening the perception of phenomena we were emphasizing what is integral to any form in life, namely, its imperceptible but ever-present link with real time-space structures and continuums. And in attempting to break down the demarcations between the spectator and the "things" (as against the "art object"!), we were, in fact, drawing attention to perceptual fields. In perceptual fields a two-way process is always taking place between the spectator and the "object/thing" being perceived and one is here involved with "event fragments." Perception, as we suggested, is essentially a continuum, a precipitation of event fragments decaying in time. Perception is in itself a "process" and subject to the same changes in time as with all other "things" in life. The oriental mystics may have had something when they refused to make any difference between the animate and the inanimate, illusion and reality!

Our interest in a "peripheral" mode of perception then is understandable and we requestioned the effectiveness of a "central" vision. It seems interesting today that arriving via mysticism we had hit on a realization that called into question the validity of a view of art founded on the notion of the "frozen moment." How limiting such a conception of art is can be grasped from the following quotation from our exhibition catalogue in which we stated:

"Our interest at this stage was with the perception of reality itself. We were faced with two particular ways of perceiving of reality. There
was firstly a conscious one-thing-at-a-time "central" vision that went back to the European Renaissance and there was the "peripheral" vision of the Taoists which envisaged reality as a never-ending continuum of "events." In the West, the tendency has been to isolate aspects of reality and study them consciously whereas in the Far East the tendency has been to observe reality in its entirety. The "peripheral" vision of the Taoists allowed for the noticing of objects and movements not in the line of a central vision.

Much of my thinking today accepts a "peripheral" vision as perhaps the most meaningful way of perceiving phenomena. Many of the pieces in the Thesis Show which have to do with shadows then have been designed to heighten the peripherality of perceptual fields and the "gestalt" consideration are not so much located in the work's internal structure but rather in the "situational cues" that have been established wherein the spectator's position and the sun's changing position add to the experiential considerations involved. Herein may lie my own dissatisfactions with a notion of Sculpture that is founded upon three-dimensional considerations or even with a notion of art that is limited by the celebration of only the formalistic components inherent within the work. The sculptural experience, I believe, is much more complex than a confrontation with the art object and rather, it is actually a confrontation with time, space and "event fragments" in 

which the spectator's physicality and location have to be seriously considered! Sculpture is not about forms but actually about kinetic "situations" and about the interactions and forces that are going on in real time and space and not in "art-time." The myth of "art's permanence" as is celebrated in the west then can actually be questioned for what is real to life finally are the perceptual processes and situations that are continuously decaying in time! The tendency to believe in the permanence of art which is only reflective of the whimsicalities of a particular culture at a particular point of its evolution says so much about the culture's world-view and myths but very little about reality itself.

The most interesting thing about Minimal Art and Conceptual Art seems to me therefore that an attempt is being made to transcend the purely symbolic and the metaphorical in art in order to confront reality from an essentially phenomenological standpoint that is essentially open-ended and investigative. And central to the rationale behind these two movements is the attempt to requestion the myths of a western-centric art history itself and the codifications by which art itself has been mystified. E. G. Goosens in drawing attention to the special significance of the phenomenological attitudes inherent in the Minimalist approach has in fact summed up very succinctly the new attitude toward art-making which sadly is yet to be fully
understood by most people teaching in art institutions.
In drawing attention to the new attempt to transcend the
purely symbolic and metaphorical as is inherent in the
Minimalist credo, Goosens in fact draws attention to the
need to reconsider art's function today:

The Renaissance artist laboured over perspective
in order to create an illusion of space within which
he could make believable the religious and philosoph­
ical ideals of his time; the contemporary artist
labours to make art itself believable. Consequently,
the very means of art have been isolated and exposed,
forcing the spectator to perceive himself in the pro­
cess of his perception. The spectator is no longer
given symbols but facts to make of them what he can. 7

The rationale behind my thinking then will become
obvious. I am not so much interested in traditional tech­
niques or with a highly personalized image-making intent
but with a serious attempt to investigate how art's ontology
actually operates. Jack Burnham in his highly complex book,
The Structure of Art, has actually pinpointed the present
dilemma which is worthy of our serious consideration:

As a rule historians try to develop analytical
tools covering the broadest array of art styles, but
as innovation further fragments the art impulse, and
new and contradictory styles of art arise, historians
are forced to adopt a variety of approaches. Not too
many critics or scholars seem to be worried by this
situation, although they should be. It indicates
that all their efforts are directed toward explaining

7E. G. Goosens, "The Art of the Real," essay included
in Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art,
1968).

George Braziller, 1974.)
the physical evidences of the art impulse, rather than the conceptual conditions which make art objects possible under very different circumstances.  

The conscious attempt made to reject preoccupations with the Formalistic credo (i.e., "significant form" theories) therefore presupposes that what is important to the art-making impulse is the ideatic intent of the art-context. The art work or rather the "art situation" becomes a means of making tangible particular cultural ideas relevant to art's function and such an approach can therefore allow for the transcending of an essentially "high art" mentality. Hence, there is no need to subscribe to the very attitudes which have resulted in the Painting/Sculpture myth or the hierarchies inherent in the westerncentric value structures of a traditional art-historicism which still conceives of artists as either painters or sculptors or designers, print-makers or ceramists or what have you.

The material considerations do not dictate the resultant art context but rather the semiotic.

My works as such are not so much Paintings or Sculptures but "art situations" which call into question the very validity of limiting one's thinking to an essentially two-dimensional or three-dimensional mentality! Further, fragments of reality have been deliberately incorporated

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into my scheme of things only to question the nature of
the art situation itself and the traditional western-centric
demarcations that have hitherto existed between art and
life. There is a conscious attempt then to break down
the demarcations between art and life itself!

My works then refer to western art-history itself and,
in an apparently banal-looking work such as that on which
the stencilled sentence "THIS IS A STATEMENT ABOUT FORM"
appears, I am actually requestioning the very notion of
"significant form" which underlies the whole myth of
Formalism itself which presupposes that the physical and
the tangible manipulations of materials and organizational
skills are essential to art's seriousness of purpose!
Further, a notion of art founded upon the "visual" is
also here questioned. A thorough awareness of the various
aesthetic ideas inherent in a western-centric art-historicism
seems therefore necessary in order to fully understand my
intent. I am raising questions about the validity of an
essentially "visual" mentality in art simply because I am
convinced that "content" in art need not necessarily be
dependent on the "visualness" of the art object but in the
cognitive structures which underlie the ideational intent
and also the context of the "art situation." An artist may
therefore use any number of idioms and means at his disposal
simultaneously to say what he wants to say and the Concep-
tual artist, Sol Lewitt, has summed this fact up most
effectively when he claims, contrary to the Formalist position, that:

... since no form is intrinsically superior to another, the artist may use any form, from an expression of words (written or spoken) to physical reality equally.

So much of the Conceptual revolt has in fact drawn attention to the broader semantic and linguistic aspects inherent even in traditional art situations and, similarly, my dependence on stencilled words and even whole sentences in my scheme of things only bolsters art's essentially semiological character and function. Fundamental to my approach therefore is also a deliberate attempt to investigate art's function as language.

In turning to Structural Linguistics especially, I am here dealing with Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas about the "signified" and the "signifier" which constitute the very components by which all language systems operate. Saussure's ideas about the nature of language have been described by Jack Burnham in his book, The Structure of Art:

Saussure pictures language as being divided into a series of psychological entities called signs, each composed of two parts: a concept and a sound-image. These are transposed into the respective terms "signified" and "signifier" which denote an interconnected whole. The sign has characteristics determined by its context in the line of speech and also by the internal

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relationship of the signified to the signifier. Signs used in language have to be arbitrary or unfixed in meaning; also, the sound-element of the signifier must exist in time.\textsuperscript{10}

Traditional art forms, as with all other language manifestations, therefore functioned on the basis of two components, the "signified" (ideational intent or purpose of the "sign") and the "signifier" (tangible manifestation of the "sign" or, the "art object"). Both these interconnected components allowed for the communicability of a tribe's ideas ("content" or "values"). All traditional art objects then were designed to fulfill a semiotic function and hence, the formal characteristics were actually dictated by linguistic intent. (This fact may explain why in so many non-western cultures there was an absence of the very notion of "ART" itself or any beliefs in the gap existing between art and life as is the case with western culture since Greek times!) Further, the idea of "content" then existed outside of the art object itself and hence, any celebration of such notions of art such as "the form is the content" as has been perpetuated in so much abstract art of the twentieth century can, in fact, be readily challenged! For as Saussure has stated, use defines meaning in language and all living art must have a function outside itself! The Conceptual Art revolt against Formalism is

\textsuperscript{10}Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 15.
then understandable.

Saussure's theory about the "signified" and the "signifier" in sign systems has had a very important influence on the Structural Anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss has in fact raised some very pertinent questions about the study of mythic structures in society and pointed out that all societies from the most primitive to the most advanced have built-in myths about those values that are necessary for the functioning of the group's identity. According to Levi-Strauss, art forms constitute a very definite form of language that is necessary for the perpetuation of the tribal myth or value structure. Art objects are therefore conveyors of the tribe's myths and hence, art's primary function is to bolster the myth. According to Levi-Strauss, western art-historians have quite unwittingly created a myth of their own by establishing values about art which are in fact questionable. That Levi-Strauss has, in fact, attacked the myth of art-history itself is therefore understandable. Levi-Strauss has pointed out that a system of thinking which accepts such codified myths as the hierarchy of a Painting/Sculpture dichotomy or the notion of "the individual genius" or "beauty" and "significant form" cannot possibly afford very sound methodological tools for the appreciation of art forms from cultures wherein such values are, in fact, non-existent! Further, a notion of art that is founded
upon such considerations as "stylistic coherence" and "the work's authenticity and pricelessness" or "the artist's uniqueness" cannot possibly reflect anything but those built-in structures that are peculiar to the west.

In calling attention to the very mechanics by which the art-impulse operates, Levi-Strauss has in fact drawn attention to the very flaws inherent in the art-historian's dependence on a morphological analysis of the "object d'art." According to Levi-Strauss, art's primary function is linguistic and semantic and therefore any aesthetic presuppositions about what is "serious" or "ideal" in art founded upon the physical appearances of the art object cannot possibly result in a very complete picture of art's ontological character or its potentialities as a conveyor of ideas of signification. Levi-Strauss implies therefore that a consideration of the "art context" rather than the art object within a socio-cultural framework may allow for a more realistic understanding of how art and the artist operate in society. Any aesthetic presuppositions about the superiority of one kind of art style over another (i.e., the Classical ideal of art as against, say, Primitive art tendencies) only further adds to the myth of aesthetic analysis but says very little about the quality of either one of them. Art by its very character can never therefore aspire toward "truth" as such but it can only mirror particular culture-bound values and myths. The attempt by
simplistic-minded artists to "portray truth" or "beauty" even can seem very preposterous indeed!

A westerncentric attitude toward art appreciation that places so much emphasis on the formalistic and morphological manifestations of the art-impulse then is questionable and hence, the new attempt to transcend the limitations of a Painting/Sculpture dichotomy itself today. Similarly, the belief in the "transcendental art object" as has been advocated by the champions of "self-expression" in art also becomes somewhat untenable. Nor does the idea of the art object possessing "timeless" values seem quite believable any more. Those very "values" that have hitherto been upheld by western art historians and artists are being exposed as mythic propositions which have only helped mystify art itself and encouraged such ideas celebrating the artist's special significance as someone who is set apart from the crowd. The romantic notions of the artist as "inspired," "tormented," "a social rebel," "a non-conformist" and "unhappy" only indicate whimsicalities peculiar to the western art myth. What Levi-Strauss has suggested therefore is the fact that the art-impulse and the creative process are not so "mysterious" as to defy systematic analysis and explanation. Very few artists still understand what all this implies for the future of art itself or the "visual" artist. (The Conceptual artist, Allan Kaprow, in a very caustic article has, in fact,
suggested quite matter-of-factly that artists have only to lose their professional credibility and "mystique" as a result of all these developments because what is at stake is art history's believability itself!

The myth of twentieth abstract art then is actually challenged by Levi-Strauss and with it, Formalism, which constitutes the backbone of the teaching methods employed in art institutions even today. Using the semiological rationale behind the art-impulse, Levi-Strauss draws attention to the ineffectiveness of abstract art as a language of mediation:

It appears that communication in abstract art depends upon acculturized secondary levels of meaning. Even so, Levi-Strauss concludes that abstract paintings increasingly takes over the function of decoration as it is incapable of semiotic significance. In a brief passage he defines the unresolved dilemma of modernist art: "Does not this dependence on a different idiom betray a feeling of anxiety that, in the absence of a fairly apportioned code, complex messages may be inadequately received by those people to whom they have, after all, to be addressed? Once a language has been unhinged, it inevitably tends to fall apart, and the fragments that hitherto were a means of reciprocal articulation between nature and culture drift to one side or other."

Understandably then Levi-Strauss has attacked the whole myth of "stylistic breakthroughs" that has sustained the spirit of modern art itself until very recently. Such an approach to art-making that has been championed by art-historians and most modern artists until very recently only

11Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 9.
attempts to emphasize a preoccupation with materials, techniques and "styles" but not with the conceptual attitudes so necessary for art's ontological existence. Marcel Duchamp's uncanny understanding of the fundamental ideas advocated by Levi-Strauss as early as 1913-1916 then must seem almost prophetic today. Can one really blame him for having thrown his "Readymades" (including the famous "Urinal") at the faces of the art-historians and artists of his day? That Duchamp was a close personal friend of the linguist, Saussure, at about the time he produced his "Readymades" is perhaps not without significance. And that Duchamp still remains largely unappreciated and even misunderstood may be attributed to the fact that most so-called "visual" artists remain hopelessly ignorant of the very fundamental ideas inherent in Structural Linguistics and Semiology.

That so much of my thinking today is founded upon linguistic rather than formalistic influences then should become clear to the reader and this fact should explain, too, the character of my present works and their widely dissimilar physical manifestations. **Stylistic coherence is not one of my concerns nor the dependence on any one type of material or technique.** The dependence on the written word and verbal considerations side by side with fragments of reality should indicate that my intent is to raise questions about the validity of a formalistic approach
to art itself and also to question the relevance of a purely "visual" mode of perception. Further, that I have in many instances tried to incorporate the principle of "double signifieds" in some of my works must explain why an apparently banal-looking chair may be juxtaposed with such a sentence as "DISMAL EFFECTS OF THE MASS MEDIA AND THE JUNGLELIKE CONDITIONS OF URBAN LIFE PREOCCUPY THE PAINTER FRANCIS BACON." I am quite simply trying to communicate "facts" rather than symbols for the viewer to decipher for himself. It is essentially an open-ended statement that does not presuppose the celebration of any particular aesthetic value judgment. My real purpose is to communicate facts about reality and not to celebrate formalistic pursuits and ideals founded on the technical mastery of materials. As a rule, I am very uncomfortable before things that are very slick in construction. Maybe, I am simply not a craftsman and have never tried to be one. Perhaps it all boils down to a question of motivation. I have never been motivated enough to labor over art. The challenge of art I am becoming convinced lies not in the grappling with materials and techniques but with ideas.

That my works may be made up of apparently banal-looking aspects of reality itself should not upset anyone but those who believe that art's "situations" must always be predicated upon the beautifully crafted "art object."

Banalitv in art can and has so often resulted in
extraordinary views of life and reality itself. The history of art is full of instances wherein a realistic approach in the confrontation with reality that transcended the purely "tasteful" has resulted in newer ways of perception itself. Increasingly it is becoming clear that the previous demarcations which have existed between art and life in the west are breaking down and for some artists at least, art and life are in fact becoming nearly identical. How to face the new challenge of merging art into life seems to afford a very interesting challenge for artists everywhere. Such a challenge necessitates, of course, that the artist expand his repertoire of mediation!
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Plywood and Acrylic
Figure 2

"Open Painting No. 9," 1971
36" x 24"
Wood and Acrylic
Figure 3

"Open Painting No. 12," 1971
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Wood and Acrylic
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"Spatial Situation No. 3," 1972
48" x 48"
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Wooden frame and partly-painted wall constructed at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur
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April 1974
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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14. "Art Piece" (Detail)
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