

LOCALIZED CHANGES OF CONDITION.

“It was a catastrophe which gave a wrong direction to all medieval thought and threw it out of its course when, owing to the Renaissance, thought, which till then had been an end in itself, was degraded to a mere means to an end, namely, the knowledge of external scientific truth, when the purpose of knowledge became everything and the process of knowledge nothing. Thought then lost its abstract autonomy and became a servant: it became the slave of truth. . . . In short, it was condemned to be a mere intellectual copy of the true, that is to say, of objective facts – like the line in painting, which also had once lived by its own particular expression alone, and now, in the same circumstances, also lost its arabesque existence to become a limiting outline, a reproduction of the world of natural forms, a mere handmaid of the objective.”

(Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, 1911)

I first met, or at least saw, Garth Evans on 22 September 1969. Garth was one of a quartet of lecturers in the sculpture school at Saint Martin’s School of Art (the others being Peter Kardia, Peter Harvey and Gareth Jones) who had drawn up a radical new course for the first-year intake. Garth was there that morning, along with Gareth Jones, to induct us, the selected group of first years, into that course. There was an air of some curiosity and expectancy. On arrival at Saint Martin’s, the incoming sculpture students had been directed to the A2 studio. One end of this large and, at that time empty, studio was closed off by a barrier of wooden screens. On the left-hand side of this screen wall was a padlocked door with a notice pinned to it saying PROJECT AREA. KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING. Sculpture students from all three years of the diploma course assembled in the room, those returning talking, those new sitting or standing, mostly silent. At about 10.15 two men came into the studio, both wearing name badges – Garth Evans and Gareth Jones.

The first-year students were asked to return at 11.20.

At the appointed time we gathered in the studio. Garth Evans and Gareth Jones reappeared. Gareth held a small box of name badges. He picked these out one at a time, reading the written name aloud and giving it to the responding student. All having received badges, Garth read an introduction to the project from a piece of paper that he held in his hand. In this statement he emphasized that the project would be demanding and require self-discipline on the part of the students to make it successful. His hands shook as he read. The door to the project area was then unlocked, Garth and Gareth entered, followed, one at a time, by the students. As each entered they were handed, from piles either side of the door, a 20-inch cube wrapped in brown paper. The project area was bare of furniture save for notices pinned at various points to the walls and saying “No drawing or writing materials to be used” – “Punctuality is essential” – “No verbal communication between students” – “Verbal communication is allowed between individual student and member of staff” – “The project area will be open 10.00–11.00, 11.20–1.00, 2.00–3.00, 3.20–4.30.” Pieces of card were pinned at various points to the floor, each with the name of an individual student. I took my cube, placed it by the card containing my name and sat down on it.

It was not stated, but the material provided changed sporadically – evidence of the previous encounter being removed and, presumably, destroyed. The supplied materials were:

Polystyrene (and brown paper). Kraft paper.

String.

Plaster and water.

Stopwatch.

This first project lasted twenty-four days. Further projects, with variations in the rules, were introduced throughout the year. The project area was only used during the project periods, outside of those times it was locked and inaccessible. During the projects at least one of the four members of staff was always present. No one ever told us what to do, but, more importantly no one ever told us what *not* to do and we were never ignored or not attended to. In retrospect, I realize that it is relatively easy to teach people what to do but it is enormously difficult to place someone in a position where they can learn what *not* to do for themselves rather than through a prescribed process. However, if this can be achieved, the benefit is the great gift of ‘what to do’ becoming an arena of endless possibility.

Throughout the ‘A Course’ (as it has become known) Garth was hard to read. He never frightened or overawed us, as Peter Kardia’s intense and commanding presence sometimes could, nor did he appear, as Gareth Jones and Peter Harvey occasionally seemed, either vulnerable or insecure and thus a potential target. (In an effort to construct an explanation for what was happening, our participation was sometimes an attempt to undermine.) Garth remained inscrutable, but clearly attentive and engaged – as the suppressed passion of his opening remarks had revealed. It was a complex position that nevertheless commanded respect.

Looking back I see in Garth a natural observer – open and curious, slow to form judgements. Over time, in other contexts, it became clear that a part of his teaching method lay in his being able to observe and to make deductions from those observations. In his studio practice, I think that Garth accepts that the activity of art-making is rule-bound as a state of things rather than as the consequences of authority. In other words, he embraces such constraints as the number, type and size

of modules in a work, the demands and limitations of materials (only this or only that) as well as the starting conditions of the genre and discipline (such as wall relief, three-dimensional figure portrait). Garth equally strongly rejects external voices dictating concept, image or process (this or that form, this or that technique etc.). In the intense teaching situation of that first year course at Saint Martin's, Garth's clear acceptance of the rules of the role he had been instrumental in building and his wide-eyed curiosity about where that would take him, and us, were, perhaps, what we understood. Neither an authoritarian imposition nor a misunderstood friendship, but just how it was in that situation at that time.

The rigours of that first-year course produced, quite naturally, a strong sense of solidarity amongst us students.

We became an awkward and demanding year group. During our third year we began meeting regularly to discuss collective actions and to think about how we might continue to be together after graduation. This loose discussion group slowly formalised into a limited company called The Manydeed Group, with the objectives of being a mechanism to provide mutual support and a public face or umbrella for our activities. Peter Harvey, Gareth Jones, Peter Kardia and Garth Evans, who had now become known as the 'Group A' staff, had resumed their tutorial contacts and initiated some further projects with us during that final year. Although we knew they were aware of our regular meetings, it was nevertheless unexpected when The Manydeed Group received a formal application from all four 'Group A' staff to join. Given the sustained and formative intensity of our contacts, it's perhaps not so surprising, some might say a variant of the Stockholm Syndrome was in play. In any case, there were undoubtedly strong connections and it seemed an appropriate development so, after some discussion, the four were welcomed into the group.

Post Saint Martin's, The Manydeed Group met weekly and, apart from complex and arcane issues of our own governance, the substantive problem we faced was finding somewhere to work. Here Garth proved invaluable. He had relocated his studio several times and was very connected to the mass of artists jostling for affordable space in the bleak and straitened property market of 1970s London. It was Garth who provided the contact and made the introductions that led us to a church hall (a former primary school building) in Baldwin's Gardens, just off Chancery Lane, where the high ceilinged fourth-floor assembly room had long stood empty. Prior to signing a lease on the space, Garth and I met the verger, Miss Nesbitt, a crop-headed and engagingly sprightly woman in her late sixties, many times. It was also Garth who helped with getting small grants for paint, for a skip to clear the rubbish into, for small propane heaters and for the deposit on (much larger) gas cylinders. These were greatly needed as the hall was woefully under-heated. A large, pot-bellied Victorian cast-iron stove could, with continued stoking, be made to glow almost red with no discernible benefit (sweeping the floor was a more effective method of warming up, though the benefits were short lived). In trying to find a way for us to show something of Manydeed's collective activities and to help us to transition to another plane in the art world, Garth used his position to bring us to the attention of curators and art officers. Garth showed an unusual collegiality towards us as artists, treating us as neither more nor less than equal.

As my own practice has developed I have come to realize that one of the ways to make art is to apply (selected) rules and deal with their consequences. I think this is as true of the welter of marks that build up on the surface of a painting by Cézanne or Giacometti as it is of Mbuti bark-cloth images from Zaire, Yuan-dynasty bowls, or Bruce Nauman videos. There is also a sense in which the recognition of pattern (a fundamental part of perceptual processes) has to do with the application of acquired, or given, rules. Although I did not learn this from Garth, as I began to see more of

his work in the context of our developing friendship, something that might at some time have seemed wayward, quirky or even downright stubborn became compelling.

One of the first sculptures by Garth that I saw was *Babar* (1965). This was one of two sculptures by him that were exhibited in Bristol in the summer of 1968 in a show titled *New British Sculpture / Bristol*. In the accompanying catalogue, a photograph by Derek Balmer shows the work behind a prominent No Entry sign, being quizzically examined by two parking attendants (looking as if about to issue a ticket). So the attribution of a stubborn, quirky waywardness does not seem unjustified. In the accompanying statement Garth says:

“The obvious theme of these sculptures concerns the local softening and distortion of hard forms. It should be clear that they are in no way portraits of events – they do not attempt a representation of what would have happened to the forms concerned if they had been treated in the way described. In fact these sculptures originated conceptually as structures related to ideas about and sensations of events rather than their appearance.”

In other words, he reminds us that although it is relatively simple to say what it is that these sculptures resemble, that resemblance is misleading. The phrase “structures related to ideas about” implies a studied distancing from appearances whilst using the constraint of a particular imagined condition – “local softening” – to generate consequences.

In helping to select an exhibition of Garth’s work held at Longside Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2013, it was noticeable that such local softening, the sensory impact of imagined or enacted area-specific changes of condition on structural form, had been a consistent device in Garth’s methods, with the use and

limitations of the linear polythene welder in making *St. Mary's No.1* (1974–75) being a particularly clear example. The distinction between the *purpose* of knowledge and the *process* of knowledge that Worringer points to in the paragraph quoted at the beginning of this essay is apropos. There is no empiricism or testing of results; the work is autonomous, an “end in itself” living “by its own particular expression”. When Garth, on behalf of his colleagues, introduced the ‘A Course’, he wasn’t starting an experiment, he was opening a door.

We build our perceptions of the world through the firing of millions of neurons and their associated synapses in our neural networks. This constant state of ever-shifting, electrical activity corresponds to our perceptions of and ratiocinations about our internal and external worlds as they change, and our behaviour as it develops: the motley palimpsest of our lives. One of the many remarkable things about this barrage of neural activity is its consistency from moment to moment, minute to minute, hour by hour, day by day. It is an extremely stable system. I have often thought that the reason people have, since pre-history, always liked taking mind-altering substances and pursuing extreme behaviours of many sorts, is not so much to do with insight or with forgetfulness but to do with the sheer enjoyment of experiencing the creative and particular ways in which the disrupted system restores balance and re-establishes that consistency, however much it may fly in the face of knowledge, expectation or experience. This is, in part, the deep pleasure that arises for me in looking at much of Garth’s work: from a disrupted or enfeebled system, he develops and sustains a process that conjures non-rational or creative products, which are, nevertheless, consistent.