

# Interview with Alan Johnston during the installation of Intelligence, Tate Britain, 7/00

Atopia Journal 'Made Space' ISSN: 1469-3291

D1

What are the origins of your work, how did it come about?

A1

One of the important aspects of the genesis of my work was that at one point I was trying in a sense to make it disappear. I had become fascinated with making it appear old, damaged, hidden. When I was at the RCA, I went through this business of obliterating what I was painting and leaving the obliteration – I suddenly realized that this was sentimental. Literally overnight I took out everything that I thought was irrelevant. I just dropped the banality of measurement. I made a decision that what I should do, in the path of the work, was to work with just the touch and visuality together.

The method in actual fact came from practice, from a kind of trance-like activity a long time ago in the life room. Maybe you should have a look at my life drawings some time, it's very difficult in actual fact to pinpoint features – drawing the figure without the figure, a kind of totem for time elapsed and "poetic reverie" (sic), absent-mindedness, involvement. I made these things with a tiny mark; the mark is the constant factor.

D2

Is it something that's happening just on the surface?

A2

It isn't like an automatic surrealist technique, and it's not about the psychology, the supposed psychology, of abstract expressionism.

D3/4

That work seems to me to operate in the context of a set of preconceived meanings for which another articulation is being sought, as it were a mysterious one. This isn't what you're doing – and it isn't what I'm doing either.

Putting work into locations changes them both. The work of yours that I've seen recently actively engages with architectural space; are you trying to make space in that sense, or are you responding to space?

A4

Both. I think it's inevitable that you have to make space, it's part and parcel of the process of any aspect of creation. I'm not sure that what I do is a response to architecture – if response is really the right word. Like David Hume said, "We reflect, but we're subconscious of it"(1), which is not the same as taking things for granted. On one level, the fixed remit of working in an architectural context is pretty predictable, but on another, when you are in actual fact working in it, the variety of its possible range is colossal. It's impossible to say, "how do I respond to this space?" when I'm in it. It's a more constructive thing, and this is why I find the wall drawings so very important, it's the response to possible permanence rather than to architecture, and in a particular sense I don't have anything to do with that.

D5

What I'm trying to get at is that the space in which work is shown is determined by various conventions that influence the way both are read. How do you get within or around this to make something which originates within the actual situation?

A5

The thing that interests me in this context is the acuteness and realization of visibility, together with the touch of space. The geometric and the spatial fuse with the tactile in the way the point makes the line, makes the gray, makes the body, makes the geometry: there's a kind of temporal spread of tactility. I've just put a quote by the Japanese architect Shinichi Ogawa on The Tate wall. "A neutral space becomes the foundation promoting the exchange of human thoughts, emotions and actions and a horizon generating diverse interpretations, view points and functions.". (2) Trying to aspire to that neutrality provides the opportunity to bring to a particular space a sense of the complexity of bodily movement and, with that, mind movement.

And I keep going back to the Hofstadter idea of an endlessly ascending cannon. You know this musical analogy? It has got a kind of architectonic, looping, substructure – an infinity of reflective yet

contradictory abstract imaging in space, constructed in the symbol of infinity, the Loop. I think these structures work within visual memory too. The drawings loop through each other and one drawing is carried through into another – even when you've got your back turned to one, or you've a wall between one drawing and another. The drawings are in a sense referring to this looping engagement, this kind of canonical structure, like a shadow, a pale veil, thrown off by that physically defined form.(3)

D6

With this notion of visual touch you're going back through a very powerful tradition of the separation of sensations into various categories and actually pulling them together into a single notion of experience.

A6

This is the idea that there is a "common sense".(4) Whether or not it can be mapped out neurologically...I'm not sure about that.

D7

There is a lot of work being done on this at the moment, on the hard-wiring of neural transmission, and the way different sensory inputs work within some kind of matrix of, for want of a better word, mentality. But what seems to be happening in literature about it is that everything is being subsumed under “language”, as the paradigm for its articulation.

A7

I quite agree with that. But what is interesting about it is that the demonstrative means, the language that people are relying on more than anything else to describe this, seems to me to be that of “visuality”, even if its a digitalized process of visuality. Maybe the kind of thing we’re talking about just now is a way to explore it, to humanize the investigation.

D8

Let’s go back to the Ogawa statement about the neutrality of space.

A8

I think it is very, very interesting, pushing into what Shinichi is saying. In a sense, this idea of neutrality is a kind of seeking, and you have to understand within this who’s doing the seeking, what is the flow through the series of ideas. Now Shinichi and I have never discussed anything. We just do it. We don’t even assign roles to each other, except there’s been a kind of sympathy. There is something extraordinary here, as I said to you, like Odysseus telling his crew as they were lost on that wine dark sea, “The east and west mean nothing!” – It’s very interesting that a Greek, an ancient Greek, should say that.

D9

Not so strange to me, because when I was at university Joseph Needham was giving lectures on China, and Volume 3 of *Science and Civilization in Ancient China* actually maps the concordance between pre-Socratic and early Confucian and particularly Taoist thinking.

A9

You’ve mentioned the very person. For the whole context of this I should tell you that before I first went to Japan, when I was at the RCA, I tried to get Needham to come to the College and give a talk. I’ve had this colossal interest in his construction of a completely different notion of science. This is what I’m getting at with Shinichi: it’s a different way of doing things. But the point is, there is a path, there are tangential touch-points, touch tracts, like this idea of neutrality of space and how that can be identified.

If you want to say these are two (completely) different cultural traditions, I don’t really see it. In Rosalind Kraus’s essay in *Formlessness*, there is a quotation from Bataille describing a painting by Manet, about something “more important than being beyond meaning”. I think that there’s a real link here to ‘Eastern philosophy’; these things exist in ‘Western philosophy’, but a lot of the kind of definitions that we carry into things are predicated on constructions which I wouldn’t say are arbitrary, but they’re social historical ones and, in a way, aspects of an imperialism we’re still locked into. You know, as we walked east to west

across the Meridian Line the other day, did you feel different?

D10

That is what is extraordinary about Japan to me, that there is an incredible knowledge which in this culture is articulated as metaphysics. But then, it's not the same thing at all.

A10

Exactly, because there it's still integrated with codes of practice. If you look at technology in Japan, let's take a very simple example, the soroban – the Japanese abacus with a calculator stuck into the base of it – that's another kind of memory. There may appear to be twin tracks of technology, but that aspect of it is interesting, it's not so simple. The first time that I gave a lecture in Japan, I asked people to intervene, and an ancient gentleman stood up and asked me a question, which was: "Have you been influenced by Zen?" and I said "No", whereupon he bowed his head and clapped his hands. He was a Zen monk.

Footnotes

(1) Let us summarize the point Rorty and Derrida are making. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with eyes of other people, scrutinise the propriety of our own conduct. Here we find the metaphor of light and the looking-glass which are ruled out by Derrida and by Rorty as self-evidently nonsense, and we find that like Smith, Hume too has recourse to the same analogy when he is trying to clear up the relations of language and of consciousness. "The minds of men are mirrors to one another...only in so far as they are accompanied by a reflection, of which custom renders us insensible."

Davie, George Elder. *A Passion for Idea*. Polygon, 1994 (ISBN 0-7486-6147-6)

(2) Ogawa, Shinichi. *SD: Space Design, Tokyo*, No.6, 1999

(3) ...abstract art does not simply show a direct transcendental function... but this function depends on the self-referential use of the medium, that is, it is only when every work made in the medium reminds us a priori of the nature of the medium which is the basic meaning of non-objective abstraction – that the work creates an effect of transcendence. To put this in the terms of Douglas R. Hofstadter's, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An eternal Golden Braid*, when an abstract work of art makes a "Strange Loop", an effect of transcendence is produced. That is whenever by moving upwards (or downwards), through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves to be back where we started.

Donald Kuspit introduction. Masheck, Joseph. *Historical Present*. UMI (ISBN 0-8357-1535-3)

4) Aristotle observed that the faculty by which we distinguish the object of the different senses (e.g., white from sweet) must be a faculty distinct from both space and taste. Some of his followers gave the name of the "Common Sense" to this faculty, some of them made it the "Intellectual Faculty", they thought Vision to be imperfect without it.

Reid, Thomas. *Curâ Primâ on Common Sense*.