

Kaleidoscope: A Crystalline Form in the Eye

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Interview with Alan Johnston– 15TH November 2004

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AJ: The first draft for the idea of the exhibition that I made was for an idea, 'The Lower Wisdom' and some of the quotations are parts of e-mails and attachments that I sent to various friends about The Lower Wisdom and Kaleidoscope, in that context, perhaps what I really should do here just now, because this really does set the picture, [is] just read it into the interview because, given the context of what this show is about, it's fundamental because it covers one thing and the other. As for Kaleidoscope, as for the Lower Wisdom:

Within the curatorial notion lies the issue of 'the comparative paradigm'. Within this too as Geddes infers is 'The Dark Side': "Some legends and dramas present Faust as dreamer and self deceiver, as tempted and misled, as egoist, charlatan, and evil wizard, and send him even to the ultimate tragedy. Yet again we see him in a type of science, struggling through hypothesis and error towards the light of knowledge and its applications in power the self deceptive, Faustus-like search of 'the lower wisdom', to which no thinker, nor perhaps even a saint, but at times has felt prone."

Now, reading that in the context of Brewster, (from a slightly earlier Edinburgh than Geddes), it indicates in some senses how far you can take comparative notions. Because if you are looking at it from the point of view of Geddes, as a kind of an agnostic /believer generalist, Scientist, to Brewster as a Christian evangelical Scientist you can see the range of the post-Enlightenment contexts that both these guys worked in and, of course, the arena of ideas from which the Kaleidoscope came. So, it is really quite important to set that context for this exhibition. It is not necessarily looking at something in terms of a historical period but is somehow connected by let's say, sets of connections about colour or the mechanisms of geometry. It's actually quite a deep-seated and continuing one, which I think, really is endemic to the Scottish creative and intellectual world. Another thing that comes through into this context is the idea of the Enlightenment. Within many factors, there are two factors, which appear apposite to this exhibition idea, the neo classical, and I suppose the Huttonian idea of geological time, 'There is no end'. Two things existing within the notion of 'Enlightenment'.

To bring this into a contemporary context: where 'another Faust', as in a sense R. D. Laing is, (He of 'The Divided Self', who like fellow Glaswegian Douglas Gordon, have the source in common, an ambivalence or moral duplicity, a seeing of human division, see also James Hogg, another Brewster near contemporary), at the other end of this chronologically, sees it,

"It is not uncommon for depersonalised patients to speak of having murdered their selves and also of having lost or been robbed of their selves. Such statements are usually called delusions, but if they are delusions, they are delusions which contain existential truth".

LS: You were talking about science and play being quite close but it seems to me even more so now in the kind of public mind, with genetics; the idea of the scientist playing God.

AJ: Yes for example in today's paper was "the God gene". I am sure that Brewster, in his mission to sustain science within Christendom, was very much prone to that. It's also interesting, in the context of the continuities between one aspect of science in this light, and the sceptical, like Hutton¹ and I suppose Geddes who continued that post-Enlightenment scepticism. I mean the implications about what he does, in terms of faith, are not directly related to the Christian ethos. They are still very heavily laden with a Presbyterian notion of a unified theology or a participatory theology/democracy which was of course very evangelical in its secular/scientist way. But, I suppose we are beginning to stray a bit.

LS: I was reading some comments by Brewster in which he was complaining that a lot of people who were making the kaleidoscopes weren't making them on true scientific principles and that of the people who were looking at them only a few of the many thousands would see the kind of potential for its use in the arts and understand its scientific principles. He seemed to take seriously the scientific underpinnings of his invention and worried that people saw it only as a trivial amusement.

AJ: Well, in a certain sense I felt initially, when this opportunity came up, that that would be the case with quite a lot of people. In a sense, 'What the hell is Alan playing at here talking about the kaleidoscope and contemporary art?' But, I think actually as the thing has unfolded there has been quite a realisation about how very serious the connections are, with these artists. What I've got in front of me here in the original brief is: "Kaleidoscope is an exhibition of contemporary art reflecting on the very nature of the kaleidoscope and its timeless, fascinating and scientific yet, (ambivalent), playful quality." I suppose when I consider even in the work, for example, of Franz Graf there is a kind of 'deathly' Austrian playfulness. In a sense, the use of geometry edging its way from decoration into a rather dark, secret place. In fact, Franz's work is almost the inverse of the kaleidoscope. It's almost like seeing the movement of geometry in the dark. I find that really quite an astonishing feature of his work. Also, looking back at what we were talking about just a couple of minutes ago, Ian Hamilton Finlay and the idea of how he plays with decoration, almost like Runge plays with decoration. It looks light but it's deadly serious. Thinking about the very nature of all this, for example you can see play and deep connection to the concept of the

¹ Hutton. The Edinburgh geologist who established, 'Plate' theory. This movement of the earth's geological plates produced the recent 'Tsunami' in the Indian Ocean. A disaster of horrific proportions and our essential understanding of this phenomena is dependent on his 'Enlightened' observations.. Hutton's thinking is now being seen as more than a forerunner of Darwin's Fundamentally placing him as in very much outwith the 'creationist', (Christian) notion of science.

aleatory in the piece by Richard Tuttle. It's a vapid single gesture, which is almost child-like in the context of the work itself. In fact, there is almost a challenge in Richard's work, which is saying it is child-like, and this constant reference back to a programme of sustaining an interest in fundamental memory. Again, a continuity of fundamental memory in making work. For me, the challenge inside that ... it's not a challenge to make the observation, it's actually for me very clear. Also I think with Richard Wright there's the obvious psychedelic - has psychedelia been influenced by the kaleidoscope? I've thought about this, in the case of Norman Shaw, an artist collecting kaleidoscopes, there is the extraordinary chance that there we were sitting in Osaka talking about it and Norman says, 'Well, I do, I collect kaleidoscopes.' So you can see in his example somebody who has, in a sense, cherished the child-like yet also it's quite amusing to note that Norman's background is one of an evangelical Christianity and there may be more than a causal relationship between Brewster and his interest in fundamentals of observation. For example his deep interest in Sonics and negative presentation.

One of the things also that keeps going through my mind is the Stevensonian ambiguity between childhood and seriousness. The hidden seriousness of the child's psychology and, of course, fears perhaps the childhood fear, transmitted through and articulated through to adulthood. E.g. 'Treasure Island' to 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. In Douglas Gordon's piece, made for 'sleeper' in Edinburgh, the Black Spot is a terrifying yet playful aspect in the way Douglas has used it. He refers to the seriousness of childhood in his memory, probably in reading Stevenson, quite terrified at the black spot delivered by a 'tapping' blind man 'Blind Pugh'... which was deadly, if collected. I mean, I don't know if I told you about the installation he made in Stevenson's house where, again, this idea of play and construct, the constructed social event, happened. Part of it was the last letter that Stevenson had written, that Douglas had acquired. We did a presentation at 'sleeper', in Stevenson's old house, where Douglas, at one point, pulled his recently made tea set and provided liquid refreshment to the participants in the shape of whisky in the tea cups. The tea sets had black spots. Not predictably placed. I mean, some of them were under the cup; some of them were on top of the saucer or under the saucer, but this continuity of play in death I found essentially part of this great continuity of 'A Lower Wisdom'.

So inside the analogy with the kaleidoscope as toy – scientific instrument I am making a point between this idea of deathliness and childhood, narrative, play and fear. This I felt very strongly in Douglas's fascination with Stevenson's darker side. The deathly instruments of dissection. Brewster saw the eye like a flower; the post-Enlightenment dissection knife cut both eye and the flower. In making the toy the dissecting knife makes the cut, in the flower and the eye.

I see also the works here of Franz Graf have a very particular kaleidoscopic form, full of a Botanical/Optical allusion, they are like black flowers prismatically encrypted in a very kaleidoscopic pattern. Geometry of darkness. Where certainly the tradition of the Viennese context of Franz's work from Messerschmidt through to the psychological readings of space and form in late nineteenth-century Vienna bring Freud and the cult of suicide and

depression in touch with aspects of Franz's personal life. (The world of Thomas de Quincy a contemporary of Brewster in post-Enlightenment Edinburgh echoes that 'Dark Side' of science and its Faustian power).

LS: Speaking about Norman's work, his interest in Romanticism reminded me that just recently I read someone describe the kaleidoscope as the ultimate romantic toy.

AJ: Well, it's like playing with light and geometry, playing with the fundamentals. It would be very interesting, for some people that is, to work out how many permutations there are. I've never thought about it but some people may have worked out what you can do or maybe the accident context is so big that you don't know where you are. But it would be quite interesting with today's mega-byte, giga-byte, and memories to actually work it out but then it would be slightly pointless.

That brings me, of course, into the lens and colour. That's another aspect of what we're talking about and, of course, Olafur Eliasson's piece is such an obvious piece to have in this exhibition. But what it does do, I think, physically for the exhibition, is make a physical metaphor and symbol of the original kaleidoscopes into a contemporary art object. That, in itself, I find really quite a useful parameter to establish, not just in its own right but to actually show how close many of the other individuals in the exhibition are. For example Sean Shanahan's focus on colour as with Takashi Suzuki. For example David Williams's selection is very much about a feeling of light and colour and that faint notion of threat within a very ideal environment. It is something in David's work, which again is redolent of the general theme of Kaleidoscope, ambivalence yet a presence.

There are all sorts of personal analogies in the show. Like the colour top which belonged to B.B. Turner and the Thomas Struth portrait of the Robertsons. This exhibition is in a sense very much about the city of Edinburgh where Brewster made the works and its kind of associations. The Robertsons' meeting with Thomas Struth was, in a sense, set well within the context of a civic enquiry and the very fact, for example, that Giles Robertson had inherited B.B. Turner's colour top I mean, I think, is an obvious strain of connection, one of the many strains that runs through the exhibition of personal connection to those fundamentals that we're engaged in. The colour top related to the kaleidoscope is I suppose so obviously connected but here we have it, with a double layer of connection to the family and through family and family introduction that we see Thomas engaged in his first early portraits. The portrait form, of course, developed by Brewster's son-in-law, Adamson of Hill and Adamson. This family, also from the same B.B. Turner source inherited the complete Hill and Adamson folio of works. But it's not just, you know, that strain that runs through it. On one occasion I was out with Thomas early in the morning, photographing the streets of Edinburgh, very much the streets of Edinburgh that Brewster walked in. He said, "Look into the lens", and I looked into the lens and I saw his eye. This reminded me very much of this machine that we had in front of us then, The Camera. The camera is so closely related to the kaleidoscope. I think Brewster's work on optics is endemic to the development of photography. So, there are many aspects of things where, if we look perhaps we are seeing or perhaps the public can see the names, or will the public see the names? That's another thing that's interesting about this exhibition and this isn't any deference to the Japanese

audience. It relates of course to the ambivalence in my own work, where many of themes in Kaleidoscope appear, as Charles Esche has written about these connections:

'Johnston's work is undoubtedly demanding on the viewer, requiring a self-analysis of the clarity of our individual perception and rigorous testing of our visual intellect. It makes explicit the complex connection between mind and eye, sight being the sense that triggers the most widespread response in different areas of the brain and hence arguably our primary faculty for comprehending the world.

LS: Talking about making a map of connections that comes right back to the original piece you were reading from at the start, about connections and continuities as a model for an exhibition.

AJ: Well, you actually start to get into factors, which have determined my approach. Brewster's science and faith are deeply interesting as stated it kind of runs against our conceptions of Enlightenment ideas of science. Brewster tried to get it to work as a matter of faith. In a sense adopting Reid's position as against Hume's sceptical empiricism. Now, I think that almost all the work in the exhibition displays that characteristic. Thomas Struth's contact with the eye. I have seen him looking into the eye and the Hume comment comes to mind, "The minds of men are mirrors to each other" and this mirroring analogy is another thing which, of course, very much relates - 'Is the kaleidoscope a mirror?' There are many other analogies. I mean is Sean Shanahan's Monochrome Colour a mirror? I mean the dull mirror. The black graphite of Franz Graf reminds me of Chinese mirrors. Also, I suppose aspects of my own work where black is mirrored through reflection in glass. With Ragna Robertsdottir she is making work with glass. It's the vitrified product of the volcano. Again there is this analogy to fundamental flows of energy.

LS: I was reading one text in which you were talking in this about the relationship between different senses. Between touch and sight and a kind of determined space. There is this strange thing that when you look into a kaleidoscope you peer into this small hole and the space you see is sort of indeterminate. Maybe that is related to the notion of the Romantic.

AJ: Or perhaps the 'Sublime' in the Romantic sense. Well, the mechanical in the kaleidoscope, even the finest made, is very tangible. We do not see its mechanism; it turns through our tactile and visual movement. It's the closest you can get in a sense, using the Fox Talbot analogy, which is not so far away from the kaleidoscope. Fox Talbot, it is said, couldn't draw so used a camera Lucida, hence the title 'Pencil of Nature'. Is that a mechanical means or is it any more or less mechanical than a kaleidoscope? Somehow, with a kaleidoscope you can feel the glass; you can feel the edge; it moves.

LS: Because it's inter-active. You have to make it work. You can't just glance at it.

AJ: It's not so mechanical. For mechanical I would read algebraic as Hamilton, (the philosopher, again in that Post Enlightenment Edinburgh), did in this comment about sense

and geometry. Again, it's well within the parameters of the time that we're talking about. Its applications are, again, exactly pertinent to sensibility today. So here is Hamilton's observation on this issue. When Hamilton wrote this I think that's very important, again, about the kaleidoscope. It is geometry in the Greek style.

'When Hamilton wrote this disparaging way about algebra, his standard of comparison was always geometry developed in the Greek style. The geometer, he maintained, had a philosophical curiosity about the foundation of his studies, and about the relation of mathematics to the rest of the curriculum; the algebraist, on the other hand, had no interest in exploring the obscure foundations of his subject, and treated mathematics as a remote, narrow speciality. Thus to quote a passage already quoted before, 'the mathematical process in the symbolical method is like running a railroad through a tunnelled mountain; that in the ostensive is like crossing the mountain on foot. The former carries us, by a short and easy transit, to our destined point in miasma, darkness and torpidity; whereas the latter allows us to reach it only after time and trouble, but feasting us at each turn with glances of the earth and the heavens, while we inhale health in the pleasant breeze, and gather new strength at every effort we put forth'.

G.E. Davie. 'The Democratic Intellect'. 1964.

I cannot help making comparison with this comment, from Pham T. Hien writing in 1998 on Tadao Ando,

'Geometry... should take into account the diversity of intentions and emotion. It is not a synthesis of everyday order and functionality, logic, or rationality. It transcends them into primordial, archaic wholeness. It also means non-geometry in terms of continuity, the open and symbolic traditional Japanese space. In the spatial language, these are pure geometry as a whole, abstract space in which nature (intrinsic light, wind, and water) enters into the dialogue with architecture and its inhabitants. Geometry is not the Geometry of mathematical logic and order. *The Japanese* concept of geometry encloses people and nature in its order and logic and goes beyond objectified form into the realm of existential space, or place, where people and nature come in and change it'.

Now I think that rather beautifully illustrates the kind of thing about the simplicity of the geometry involved in the kaleidoscope. I'm sure that, in terms of the roots of Hamilton's comment, there is this facet that occurs also very much inside the kaleidoscope. I do think that in the context of how the artists were picked for this exhibition, particularly somebody like Adam Barker-Mill who, in a sense, is inducting light in his passive works. That brings me to Bruno Taut. In his explorations in Japan I think he was engaged in something similar. I think he was looking, in a sense, for some kind of universality.

LS: I thought it was interesting that you included his book on Japan when it might be more obvious in terms of thinking of a kaleidoscope as being crystalline.

AJ: Well, crystalline form was another aspect. That's something that Joe Masheck has brought to me and I can read a very important passage of Joe's book where he actually takes us into the gothic/classical context, and also alludes to a new universal.

As Wölflin puts it, whoever goes from the North to Italy is likely to notice, "How plain and easy to grasp are the planes and cubes!" But that, in a way, is exactly what Worringer challenges. Nor need one necessarily know the ancient Tower of The Winds in Athens, so often quoted in Post- Renaissance European architecture (especially in steeples), to sense in front of Tony Smith's sculpture *Tower of The Winds*, 1962, a foursquare and abstractly "classical" structural aplomb. From about the same time too, dates a sheet, untitled (No Stars), on which Tony Smith has sketched out simple and complex geometric solids, from "tet," "hex," "oct" and "dodeca" onward. Yet the question within expressionism of crystalline geometry as classicizing or else anticlassical anticipates the question within latter - day minimalism, including Tony Smith's, of crystalline geometry as formal or antiformal, anti expressive or pointedly neutral. Since Worringer himself was by no means oblivious to the Burckhardtian North -South distinction, it may help in establishing the ambiguous standing of crystalline form in latter - day minimalism to compare a cube drawn by Dürer with a well known 1962 piece by Tony Smith called *Die*, Dürer's drawing. It shows a cube like box on the side, set to cast a shadow. As transparently crystalline as it presents itself, Dürer's drawn cube is also rigid and earthbound, crystalline in the sense of quartz'.

This is from his book 'Building Art', and I think it describes much of what I have been alluding to within another but apposite context. It relates continuities within the metaphor of a comparison of forms, or is it a universal? Taut was looking inside his crystal in a sense I feel, for something linking East and West. As I am very fond of quoting:

"There's no mystery in *Oedipus the King*, that quintessential Western Drama. East has so far been East; West, West. But, as the mythic model demonstrates, it is one voyage after all, and its philosophical hemispheres impinge at two interesting places. One is down there at *Axis Mundi*, where as Odysseus tells his shipmates, East and West mean Nothing".

John Barth *Mystery and Tragedy. The Twin Motions of Ritual Heroism.* 1984.