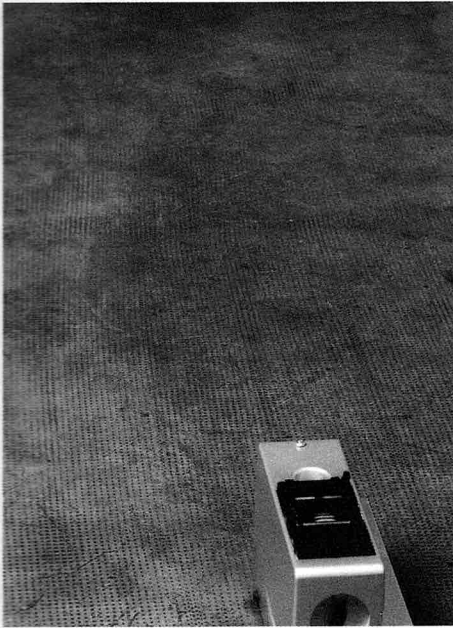


## Approaching Content

The intentions behind an artwork are central to any in-depth appreciation of its significance. What a thing does and how it does it are directly available from any work and if these coincide in the recipient with a perceived direction of intent they constitute, in my opinion, a successful work of art. Any degree of success judged to be present by these criteria will often be intimately connected with the specific approach the artist has taken to making. Where form and content or facture and intention are given equal emphasis, the way of making constitutes a particularly important part of the content of the thing made. The form/content tandem in such a work exists in a kind of dynamic equilibrium.<sup>1</sup> In the past, I have referred to this approach to facture as the 'appropriateness' of a particular medium, material or technique. In studying the completed artwork, such considerations can lead to a discussion of whether or not a work can be described as 'well made'. What does this mean? A work that is fully realized – where construction or implementation of medium is precisely suited to the purpose of its intended content – can be described as 'well made'. This is not the same as good craftsmanship. There is a popular misconception that craft and process are useful qualities through which a value judgement can be made about a work of art. Conception and strategy are of equal if not greater importance. Some work is deliberately faux naïve, awkward or rough, or is intended to be broken, transient or to decay. The aspect most crucial to the concept of something well made is the coeval development of a conception or idea with and through the most appropriate means of its realization.

A particularly successful artwork, by the standards set out above, is the slide projector installation *Invisibile* (1971) by the Italian artist Giovanni Anselmo. One way this piece is experienced is by entering a conventionally lit gallery where an operational slide projector sitting on a wall-mounted shelf appears to be projecting nothing into the space. It is only when walking by it that the gallery-goer inadvertently breaks the projected beam, to reveal that the word 'visibile' ('visible' in English) is focused in the space a couple of metres away from the projector. What was previously invisible has been made visible by the body of the viewer. The piece itself is, physically, very simple. The only elements of craft in its construction are the production of the text transparency, the placement of the projector and the focusing of its beam. Any competent technician could set it up. In terms of appropriate realization of a concept, however, it is incredibly well made. It sets out to do exactly what it ends up doing, and does it extremely efficiently. It is an example

<sup>1</sup> Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, New York, McPherson & Company, 1991, p. 42. McEvilley variously describes form and content as a 'tandem', 'relationship', 'question' or 'bipolar continuum'. He states: 'Just as a cause can only exist as the cause of an effect, and the effect as an effect of a cause, so form can only exist as the form of a content, and content as the content of a form.'



Giovanni Anselmo *Invisibile*, 1971

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp, 'The Creative Act', *Art News*, Vol. 56, No. 4, summer 1957.

of a very good idea that has been perfectly realized. Anselmo's piece derives the greater part of its content from the fact that one of its principal materials, light, is quite invisible unless its source is directly observed or until it strikes a surface and is reflected. The title tells us this and the text in the work embodies the light's transformation. It does and is what both the words imply. *Invisibile* also contains powerful content that is not solely concerned with the nature of its own materials. It literally makes visible the normally invisible moment of an artwork's reception and makes active the role of the audience in completing the art event, in making the artwork whole.

A strongly delineated content like this is clearly recognisable as a resolution of the artist's intentions. Marcel Duchamp wrote with some perspicacity in 1957<sup>2</sup> about how a gap exists, in a work of art, between what is unexpressed but intended by the artist and what is unintentionally expressed. He suggests that this is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference of which the artist is unaware and necessarily cannot be fully self-conscious. This, however, doesn't give exceptionally competent artists much credit. It may be something to do with the somewhat dubious concept of 'expression', but I believe this gap can be closed at the point of intention so long as the artist's conception of the artwork includes and encourages the unanticipated effects of whatever approach is used for its realization. When concept meets implementation halfway in this manner, the 'unintentionally expressed' becomes a key feature of the artwork's realization and there is nothing intended that is not embodied by the particular process or whatever that is undertaken. In relation to appropriateness of approach discussed earlier I have found it interesting that, at a practical level, an appropriate way to proceed almost always derives from a given idea rather than, for example, an interesting technique provoking a search for any idea that is most suited to it. This tends, on the whole, to sidestep the Duchampian gap. It is essential that the artist determines beforehand precisely the most appropriate procedure for the production of the artwork and that its conception arises out of a recognition of possible modes of production.

One very important way that the artist's intentions are brought to the fore in an artwork is through reference. This is either directed away from the artwork or operates internally. There are many ways an artwork can refer to something outside of itself, but the twin preoccupations of 20th Century art have been quotation and its counterpart reflexivity. A very powerful work operating on many levels of reference, which also incidentally does not conform to traditional ideas of good craftsmanship, is *Spade with Chains* (1973) by the American artist David Hammons. Its title is a description of its constituent materials, all found objects previously discarded. The found objects have been treated, joined and wall-mounted to produce an assemblage resembling an African mask. As well as referring to the African folk art tradition that utilises recycled materials, it clearly also refers to the 20th Century Western art

tradition of the found object. It recalls, perhaps even quotes, another representation of a head: Picasso's famous 1942 combination of the handlebars and saddle of a bicycle to suggest the skull of a bull. Hammons' work – sometimes confrontationally, often gently – deals with his social status as an African American. He has worked as an outsider, without participating in the gallery system, for most of his career. Part of his strategy involves employing worthless or discarded materials. *Spade with Chains* demonstrates Hammons' interest at that time in using shovelheads and playing card suits to symbolize the word 'spade', with all its connotations of racial insult and abuse. The piece literally is a spade with chains, and being so titled becomes a powerful image of the enslaved African in terms of both social and art history. Through its use of reference and the found object it is critical of the historical appropriation of African art and imagery by Western culture. It is a poignant response to such art practices as Picasso's use of the African mask in the genesis of perhaps one of the most famous Western art movements, Cubism.

This is my personal interpretation of Hammons' work, which, I think, comes close to his intentions. Any doubts I may have indicate the essential part that the reception of a work plays in any attribution of content. The example of *Spade with Chains* demonstrates how important the artist's verbal supplements to their artworks can be. Simply an awareness of intended genre can suggest this or that type of content.<sup>3</sup> Hammons' title directs an audience toward a quite specific 'reading', but generally the content of an artwork is not absolutely fixed or reducible to a consistent repeatable communication. It varies with the prejudices, conditioning and disposition of the person experiencing the artwork. As was mentioned in relation to Giovanni Anselmo's piece, the point of reception completes a work and is where the 'art' essentially occurs. It exists in a context, crucially, of both the artist's and the recipient's sensibilities.

Much of the progressive art of the last century came out of an intensely critical tradition, which was predicated on the notion of change if not that of the new. Since a critical attitude is the foundation of reason, rational change only occurs through a shifting critical consciousness. This has resulted in overtly intellectual, purely conceptual and even literary modes being admitted into the gallery space. It has led to art practices that embody concerns found previously only in the fields of art criticism, semantics and philosophy. The nature of such work led artists to gradually abandon the metaphysical stream of philosophy in favour of critical philosophy, which dismantles the structures of the mind, often in order to focus on direct experience. Such an attitude insists that artworks exist in the world and are of it, that artist and audience are the conduits of the art event, an ideal and full appreciation of which would be 'a multi-levelled complex of interpenetrated semantic realms' where, since the significance of any cultural object relies on the whole of its cultural surroundings, 'the artwork has no privileged status'.<sup>4</sup> Although the artwork can be distinguished from other phenomena, its identity in terms of formal logic is established on



<sup>3</sup> For a groundbreaking discussion of the attribution of content, see Thomas McEvelley, *Art & Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, pp. 45–48; 63–104.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

the same ontological level as everything else.

The idea of an art without privileged status – and one that is accessible through direct and personal experience – can be applied to the installations of the American artist James Turrell, who uses light as a physical material often in conjunction with architectural interventions. He works precisely with the point of an artwork's reception and, more specifically, with its physiological origins. I would like briefly to describe my own experience of seeing one of his works, *Bluff* (2001), as an example of how it produces content.<sup>5</sup> The installation is entered via a black-painted corridor that leads to a darkened space, the dimensions of which it is initially difficult to judge. A large and dim solid brown rectangle appears to float directly in front of the viewer, but when it is approached it becomes evident that it is located at some distance from the gallery entrance. The rectangle slowly appears to change colour and intensity, becoming bluer and brighter. As one's eyes grow accustomed to the darkness its blue/violet glow suddenly reveals the rectangle to be not a solid object, but an aperture into a white-painted space beyond. The aperture has crisp straight edges, but the space beyond has been modelled so that all its corners are rounded. Its lines are softened to the extent that it is impossible to determine its exact dimensions by sight alone. It is dimly lit by heavily shaded ultraviolet lamps, which has the effect of making the light itself appear to be a glowing mist filling the space. Once one's eyes have become completely accustomed to the darkness, as well as the architecture of the two spaces, the principal effect of the piece is over. In *Bluff*, a title that evokes a broad rock face with transient natural illumination as well as a blind or subterfuge, Turrell makes this transitional state of human physiology – the gradual acclimatisation of the eyes to darkness over about twelve minutes – into a major and powerful content. I have elected not to illustrate this work since a photograph could never record or reproduce its content, which is overwhelmingly experiential. I hope, though, to have conveyed something of how *Bluff* makes its own reception an overt and essential part of that content.

Turrell's work produces content that is partly located in brain and retinal function, a content that is physically inside and about ourselves. Artworks are a proposition about reality, a model of the real and as such present us (the audience) with a way of thinking about it. They force us to react to their way of thinking and by so doing can provoke strong emotional reactions such as delight or anger.<sup>6</sup> The content of an artwork, then, is partly our responsibility. It is a falsehood to suggest that an artwork can or should be able to be entirely autonomous, a kind of perfect artificial means of enlightenment unencumbered by explanations or without the need of study. The recipient needs to complete the work, with an effort. As we have seen the artwork has no privileged status: it is the realization of an intention to specifically produce content (rather than, for example, function) by which the artwork can be distinguished. The art event is not passive – it occurs midway between the artwork and its recipient – and in order to transpire

5 The installation was exhibited at the Michael Hue-Williams gallery in London.

6 See William S. Wilson III, 'Art Energy and Attention', *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock, New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1973, p. 251.

requires a dynamic dialogue between each participant.

All this leads to a difficult question: do artworks convey meaning? Thomas McEvelley describes his list of the various categories of content as being 'like a series of sample sightings of some great beast (Meaning) whose behaviour is too complex to be fully formulated'.<sup>7</sup> Meaning is indeed complex. Like the term 'abstraction', it is at best a difficult problem and at worst a dubious conceit. It has been pointed out, for example, that representation and abstraction are two aspects of the same phenomenon: abstractions, like symbols, represent concepts.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps there is a similar relationship between meaning and content: that they are two sides of the same coin, where meaning is something literary that has to be pinned down and requires definition whereas content is malleable and changes with the circumstances in which it is perceived. David Sylvester has said of the work of Jasper Johns that 'the meaning of a work is the method of its realization'.<sup>9</sup> I would suggest that for work where form/facture/object and content/intention/subject are emphasised equally, the specific way in which the work has been realized is where any 'meaning' will probably arise and certainly where it should be sought.

7 Thomas McEvelley, *Art & Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, p. 85.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

9 Anne Seymour, David Sylvester, Sarah Whitfield, *Jasper Johns Flags*, London, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1996, p. 16.

When I was invited by the Crafts Council to curate an exhibition in my capacity as an artist I was prompted to consider the most important reasons I had for exhibiting. The attribution of content through realization is, for me, by far the most important thing in my practice. I consider that indicating intentions to a possible audience is crucial to the act of communication that constitutes the art event. It was therefore natural to conceive of an exhibition that attempted to bring facture, intention, content and its reception to the fore. By bringing together specific artworks rather than simply examples of a particular artist's output I hoped to direct attention toward the art itself; where any appreciation would proceed from the exhibits outwardly rather than by being imposed thematically by an external grouping, an approach that carries the risk of possible arbitrariness.

The artworks that have been selected for *Approaching Content* are, to use semiological terminology, motivated. That is to say that the greater part of their content is inherent; that it is derived from the specific way in which they have been individually realized. They actively engage the viewer in the reception and, therefore, completion of themselves meeting an audience halfway at the location of 'art'. I hope they suggest that what something is (i.e. how it is made and seen) is the most interesting thing about an artwork and more important than its initial context, or origin.

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