Reflections, water, architecture, art and co-creativity

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Art and Architecture are the products of collective labour. Art and architecture have the capacity for investing ethical hope through spatialising something of the basis of art" and perhaps even how art operates as a constant part of how community can develop. The outputs of this event express how the gathered group care about our environment, how they make things for a specific environment but also, as importantly, how an environment creates the context for how people may co-create and form themselves, at least and perhaps most importantly, temporarily, as a community: oscillating between individuality and collectivity.

I have emboldened the terms that hold the two seemingly contradictory positions that are playing in the same frame both the suggestions that art is a collective output and art is an aspect of individual existence. In other words, on one hand there is a claim that art and architecture are made by and for many people. However, on the other hand there is a claim that it takes the act of an artist (or architect, who, for the sake of this short discussion, we can assume has very similar propensities towards the act of creation), a very specifically focussed individual, to make something that we can call artistic.

What is at stake in this contradiction is the fundamental question that troubles all art production: is art for the many or for the few? It can be claimed that it is a false question: either individuals and collectives are presumed to be aspects of each other and in making for ourselves we also make for others, hence, all represents this unity and/or, art is irrefutable to this territorialisation because it transcends its material considerations. The first assertion has some substance. However, this latter assertion regularly comes with a formula: art is for art’s sake. That is, if art is from few claims upon it by individuals or groups. However, this, in my view, seems to exacerbate the tension the question holds. This assertion places art in the realm of mythology and simultaneously mystifies art production and artists. It can be argued that “art for art’s sake” really just simply shifts responsibility for the production of art, simultaneously, the responsibility for art movies towards would-be experts that frequently present themselves as wise or pious enough to understand what constitutes art, and away from those who generally do not engage in artistic production and know insufficiently about such practices to offer anything other than mere opinion.

This fundamental difficulty, one might even call it the fundamental problem of the politics of art, also leads to the reductively bastardised but equally well-proliferated Kantian equation that art is about beauty and “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” However, this equation really doesn’t help very much either because it simultaneously gives the responsibility of art to everyone and to no one: it proposes art as an entirely subjective experience, subjecting collectivity either to the sum of individual egos or to the imperceptible Gnosticism of the connoisseurs. However, in such a viscous social world of relativity to collectively reason, conventionally the ‘institution’ and the ‘artist’ take up the polarity of the issue: on the one hand, society is supposed to grant the institution the privilege of navigating the mythological landscape of art on their behalf and trust that they get it right and hold high esteem all that should be considered collectively heroic and virtuous; on the other hand, the artist is liberated from any collective responsibility and granted the privilege of special insight and gift to act heroically and provide the virtuous with sufficient virtuosity. In other words, an abrogation of critical engagement with the question gives license to the institutions to operate curatorial agendas that are deemed to be good for the general un-informed public, whilst individuals who may find themselves incapable of accessing works are comforted by the authority given to them to make judgements based either on what they feel they are supposed to understand by it, on autobiographical experiences or some combination of the two. In this sense the artistic institution, conventionally in no different from the political institution – it acts top down and limits any bottom up activity to what it deems appropriate, relegating everything the bottom offers as merely subjective, without expertise and without consent.
Here I am reflecting on an event entitled Reflections where groups of architects and artists came together in a setting, The Haining, a Georgian house and grounds with a lake (designed and built c.1790 by a wealthy family – a political and culturally situated story in itself), now operating as a public amenity run by a charity for the benefit of the people of Selkirk in the Scottish Borders (yet another political and cultural story). A group of architects came from Edinburgh to the north (10 people); a group of glass artists came from Sunderland to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate to the south (7 people).
them to be artists? How we see ourselves in relation to others is the fundamental ethical question at the root of all politics. How many of us launch an ethical hope through our work? Perhaps we all do, whatever we think of all politics. How we see ourselves in relation to others is the fundamental ethical question at the root of all politics.

However, rather than thinking about specific art processes or some form of guiding aesthetic, I think what is more at stake here is a reconciliation between individual and collective production.

This working relationship between empiricism and phenomenology allows us to reflect on the measures and experiences we undertook in the Haining. We consider not only that the varied constituencies of the Occupy movement, where the performative/experiential dimension and material situation of the political artist and the works/events go hand in hand. In either philosophical trajectory there is a commitment to an abstract process. Not everything can be directly representational. Communication is indirect as well as direct. However, rather than thinking about specific art production or some form of guiding aesthetic, I think what is more at stake here is a reconciliation between the collective and individual that we see in how an art project might bring together two traditionally conflicting philosophies: empiricism conventionally seeks objective measure as the unifying agency between different points of view, and phenomenology conventionally moves from idiosyncratic poetic language to present work, less as a simple experience and potential sociocentric opening (a move from private language to shared language – a communitarian act).

This situation characterizes culture: the possibility of a distanced contemplation of nature.

In his para-phenomenological analysis of the correspondence between culture and nature, Flusser outlines what is at stake in his opening to his own reflection on rain. Reflection on rain is a reflection on water, which is a reflection of the world on water, which is also a reflection on how glass acts to divide us or connect us to the water-ways of rain and how the water-ways of nature might reflect how we act in nature. Glass has undergone great technological advances from the early stages of the twentieth century and has come to represent the modern condition of architecture and perhaps stage of the twentieth century and has come to represent the modern condition per se. The modern condition might be described through the metaphor of glass: where we have brought the relationship between man and nature simultaneously to the largest expanse and thinnest of films that connect and disconnect us from Nature. Glass can dramatically place us in the midst of the dilemma of our willingness to be part of Nature or apart from it. Architects and artists are using to traverse this line through the traditions of their own disciplines.
However, fundamentally they reflect on a common issue. Glass occupies the between of man and nature; glass art plays in this abyss – naturally, it reflects it but really it is also suspended and suspends us within it. Glass is both natural and technological; it embodies the "abstract collective essence" as its medium.

I have been working on the theme of water for a few years, in Scotland, Sardinia and most recently in the context of India and its monsoon aqua-land-scape. My Indian experience of water has been the most dramatic: for example and quite obviously, immediately after arriving at my hotel in the Bombay Fort area, late August 2013, I went for a walk. In five minutes I had been soaked to the skin. It was very humid. Sticky. I was wet with sweat. The day went from brilliant sunshine to dark looming cloud in a matter of moments with a subsequent deluge. Streets became rivers in an instant. It is true they went back to streets again very quickly afterwards. However, it astonished me to think that here was a place that even though it clearly has an abundance of water, it is a very wet place, there are regular reports in its newspapers of water shortages. There are tank-trucks everywhere removing and delivering water – in all shades from brown to clear. Historically Bombay was known for its beautiful "sweet" water. Its Mithi river translates as such. It has great lakes in the North of its peninsula. Bombay is like many places in the world. Its relationship to water has somewhat soured.

My friends and academic colleagues Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha, who operate from the University of Pennsylvania and various institutions in India, take our relationship to water very seriously. They have been working on water from a sensibility developed through reconciling a deconstruction of western philosophy as it meets historically layered Indian spatial and philosophical practices. In opening the conversations on water at The Haining event, I borrowed from their recent presentation to us in the University of Edinburgh to elaborate how we might try to forge a richer, deeper and temporally intelligent relationship with water. They began their lecture by invoking Paul Klee’s diagram from his notebooks (Volume 1, The Thinking Eye, London: Lund Humphries, 1961, p.402). I sketched a version of it on the paving stones on the terrace between the garden room and the loch as a declaration of a possible point of departure for how the Haining event might begin to think water. I think Klee’s feeling and motion drawings are an inspiration not only for how we might take our lines for a walk, but maybe also for how we may take water for a walk and ourselves for a physical and conceptual walk through an aqua-land-scape. The artifice of the Picturesque loch/ lake beyond the ha-ha of the garden with its poisonous algae due to poor water flow was pertinent to this reflection (yet a further political and cultural story).
The diagram of the water cycle most of us understand and can call to mind from our early school years. It holds a paradigm that we may wish to reconsider. It is a cycle. It can begin at any point. 1. There are clouds. 2. Rain falls from clouds onto sloping hills. 3. Rain collects and forms rivers that run to the sea. And 4., water evaporates from the sea and rises to form clouds. And so it goes on. What Klee wants us to think about is the motion as much as the lull of weather. He gives us a drawing of mixed weather (see fig. right). The mix of weather stirs our feelings. What Mathur and da Cunha want us to think about is significant. They want us to reflect on how we see the world. They are concerned about how water has become a negative thing, a problem to be solved, Nature to be tamed. We have fixed our view of the world on one of these processes and think of it as reality. Rather than perpetuate this absurdity of posing ourselves against nature they take their lead from Klee and suggest that we need to enter this world of temporal flux. They, as many of us, feel that we can no longer develop projects that only seek to hold back water to fixed lines, draw our maps as though rivers have fixed edges, make rivers to conform to fixed edges and alongside which we can then build our cities, fracturing the water as though it was either only an amenity of leisure or a commodity of production. Water is an ecology that propels all other ecologies. Mathur and da Cunha, like Klee, like ourselves at the Haining, begin this question through framing another question: recognizing its temporal flux, how then do we draw water? At the Haining we complicated this question a little more. How do we use glass as a means for reflecting on water, for reflecting on how we might give measure to a deep and meaningful political poetic ontology of an aqua-land-scape? Our productions offer no set answers to such questions. However, they at least launch work on a trajectory of ethical hope with commitment to “the abstract collective essence as the basis of art,” which I think exemplifies how an inter-disciplinary community can work to form themselves around “common” values. 

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DRAWING LINES: TAKING MEASURES
Images: Dorian Wiszniewski