

Chapter 7 - What is Art?

I thrash on my bed as my mind is forced to take these memory trips that tear me out of my nirvanic stupor, and tears fill my eyes as I am drawn back into reality by Gabriel's glorious, salutary music invading my peace. But my tears fall too for Gabriel, not only because he was a helplessly abused child, but because life always seems to deliver these terrible tricks: Gabriel on the boat had been, in the language of the '60's, as high as a kite. He had been as happy, as free and as emotionally complete as he could ever hope to be. What conundrum of creation decrees that it is at such a time as this that the perverts swoop?

I know that the ether I visit, that seems to straddle all of Central Asia from Persia to Burma, is full of spiritual action rather than mere romance and promise, and that action will necessarily lead to religious and sectarian conflict, possibly even violence, and even outright war. I know that spirituality is never serene; meditation never silent; peace is never peaceful – and I know that my ether also emanates from that particular bend in the River Thames that exerted such a powerful attraction to Gabriel. This 'oxbow loop' had once been a broad and shallow roman crossing point, the site of spectacular carnage on both sides after weary roman battles and sieges with the Saxons.

For me this area has always been powerful on many levels. I was born in 1945 in a riverside convent just up-river of the Eyot. Gabriel was born there to in 1962. It is said that my chosen Master Bollo had in 1932 on one of his first visits to the west, stood on the terrace at Richmond and, gazing down on the great Arcadian vistas of Ham and Syon, had planned the future of His spiritual work for the next two hundred years (my life included perhaps?) But on the river on that awful evening for neophyte sea-scout Gabriel? Conflict and karma conspired to subvert serenity and bliss. Lust overthrew art. Self-interest and carnality disturbed the creative dreams of a child. How did Satan find this place? I know that the disturbances that displace and upset me so, are the simple events of the passage of time through life. There is no real evil here, but sometimes it is hard to accept that.

Language and thought cannot contain the subject. All I can do when faced with such dichotomy and the futility with which it fills me is lean back into the reassuring uncertainties of my art-student years. I remember one of my tutors who had chided me for my efforts at inventing a new alphabet, when the challenge that had been set was to look at and revise the essential semiology of art. I had invented, memorised and then learned to rapidly write my own coded alphabet. It was almost indecipherable to

an outsider, and I – a young neophyte struggling to understand the cybernetic apocalypse the teachers threatened lay ahead unless their students were properly prepared – was very proud of my designs and felt certain I had done something quite wonderful.

‘It’s two dimensional,’ snapped Harold Silverman, one of the immense Jewish minds who had concocted the course.

‘What? You mean it’s *flat*?’ I was bemused. ‘It has to be flat, it’s writing.’

‘It doesn’t have to be flat.’

Silverman took up a fine brush and a tube of black acrylic paint. He began to create lines of symbols, each made by touching the surface of a sheet of paper with the brush, and pulling it away, leaving a cone of acrylic wisping up into the air above each mark.

‘Ah,’ I thought I understood. ‘The way the paint leans, or curves up into three dimensional space decides what letter of the alphabet you are making?’

‘Bloody idiot,’ snapped Silverman. ‘These are numerals not letters. Can’t you see that?’

I could not see that, nor could I grasp Silverman’s dark sense of humour, yet I was one of the few students who ever attempted to get to grips with what was being taught – or rather, untaught – by these sarcastically irritable and impatient men at my art-college. Machines would one day redefine the way artists made their art. But if art for two and a half thousand years had helped to reflect and uphold morality, societal structure, political freedom, and spiritual longing and romantic escape, how could anyone be expected to predict or anticipate the effect the super-computer – in the ’60’s as yet uninvented – would have on the way art reached its audience? What was an artist?

Having ascended (or is it *descended*?) into the ether in my rank old age I now know that an artist is nothing but a portal, a window, a mirror, a gap in the hedge through which the fluffy celestial imaginings of creation itself find a passage to mortality. An artist is merely someone who *finishes* things.

My thesis grew until this moment. Little wisps of paint, the tips of which lean – apparently randomly – this way and that. They cannot be taken literally to mean anything at all, but in coded form they convey

meaning, irony, promise and anxiety that can be settled only by accepting that what is concluded is the conclusion. What is, is what is. What is already in existence, what has already been imagined is all that an artist can convey. He lives perpetually in the moment that follows the present – he can never truly create. His ‘work’ is always an echo. But if he could create and programme a machine that would *lead* his mind – the actual nuts and bolts of his imagination – a few steps into the future, the artist would be able to reveal Creation itself in action.

When I got away from Silverman I quickly realized I wanted something he didn’t have and that he could never give me. I wanted joy. Music gave me joy. Blowing and sucking a cheap mouth organ in the rain by a river, my head covered by a raincoat, I could be transported. Later when I began learning the guitar – and I learned at the most wonderful time, when the guitar was the most glamorous thing a young man could carry in Acton high street – I found my pathway toward nirvana. For though I had done what Gabriel had done, and banged away at a piano as a child, and heard some unusual things, I had never been inspired in the way he was, was never encouraged as he was and would never become as disciplined as he. All Gabriel ever had really was music and an open mind, and it must be conceded he had two wonderful compatriots. I had something more, the terrible encumbrance of ideas. Damn Silverman. Why threaten an artist with computers, with the electronic omnipotence of digital data half a century before they arrive?

In my studios, that quickly became more and more complex – though by today’s standards they look as sophisticated as the driving platform of an old locomotive – I continued to be amazed, transported and uplifted by the subtleties and eccentricities of musical sound. Let me put it bluntly. A mouth organ is a mouth organ. Yes? Try playing a few notes at the bottom of your garden in the thin evening air haunted by the distant sound of traffic and airplanes. Then try a few notes with your entire head inside a plastic bucket. Now take your mouth organ to your local place of worship and – choose your moment carefully – blow and suck a few times. Tell me now that a mouth organ is a mouth organ. Sound is a perfect reflection of the complexity of all life, of all the laws of physics from the basics to the quantum. Music could be described, quite simply, as the organisation of sound events in a given period of time, and reflects even more. Perhaps it is time itself that is the element that makes the physical and the simple so elegant. Perhaps it is the practical constraint exerted by time on the infinite scope of the rest of vibration that makes being alive a spiritual journey, not just an entirely mechanical one?

One of the first experiments musicians of my era undertook, many of us unaware that we were not the

first, was implementing feedback loops of sound using a tape recorder. That is recording sound, and using a second playback head on the tape machine, to play back the sound just recorded and feed it back into the tape machine. Thus it goes around and around, building into a dirge, or a reverberant fugue, a choral waterfall or a stuttering rattle. Again, the physical shape and size of the room in which the sound originates has a great effect on the sound. The quality and fidelity of the recording equipment matters, the music matters. Finally of course the music matters.

What is said matters too. I was a song writer. I needed words. But I had been trained by Silverman to invent codes. My code of choice, my path to poetry if you like, was to pretend to be truthful and to pretend to lie. Later I was found out and my fans took me to their hearts because I was, deep down, an obvious social failure. We are not a fellowship of misfits, not really. But there is a group of us who gather together to exalt those among us who are willing to carry our defects for us, to parade them and struggle with them. We call such souls entertainers. The defect I could not hide was my fear.

I have heard something of what Gabriel heard, and seen visions too that stop my daily life for weeks at a stretch. Maybe they are merely shadows compared to his inspirations but I know that the artist's most awful suffering is to know what he must convey, to know its perfect beauty and power, but be unable, unequipped with the necessary artistic eloquence, to ever begin to deliver an end-product. Unable to *finish* something.

Some may know the story of my humiliation. Perhaps it would be useful here to say something about it. I have tended sometimes to make a bit of a joke of some of this. That's appropriate in a way; I can be pretentious. I was after all - in the end - just a derelict old rock star when the acerbic tabloid journalist Ruth Streeting came after me, to taunt me, to expose me, to challenge me, intoxicate me, seduce me and reinvent me. When she lunged back into my life, and into my heart, I suppose I was washed up. My manager Rastus Knight, who I adored, despaired of me because he knew I still had it in me to make one more Come Back. But I couldn't finish anything. By my own definition I was no longer an artist. It was the early eighties I think. I was shackled up on the river at Cleeve in the glass house I built for myself there, a house that had been intended to inspire me with its pastoral views and falling waters, but became instead a kind of tomb. Rastus came to see me, and bullied me out to a London Club for lunch. She was there. It was a shock to see that where my powers had ebbed hers had flooded; she was surrounded by fawning, faking, gossiping acolytes, and refused to even look over in my direction. She had slaughtered me in her diary column, and I had been surprised by the personal barbs in her attack. I

had no album on release, no tour to promote, no charity to proselytise. Out of the blue she began to write venomously about me almost every day.

Her articles brought me to the attention of those fans who feel protective, and a few of them wrote and helped me to feel valued again and useful, giving me advice, writing to me for advice about their careers, and telling me how much my music had meant to them when I had been in my heyday. One day I received such a letter from a young woman asking for help. In the package was a very large photograph of a girl lying naked on a grave. Her name, she said, was Rosalind Nathan, and clear on the headstone was the name of her dead mother. Rosalind is my mother's name. It triggered something in me, a kind of dark circle. Feedback. I began to write to her. I gave her a number of my secrets. Does that sound sad? I hope not. I did have some secrets: I told her not be afraid to use her weaknesses, her anger, her vulnerability and insecurities in her work, and to allow them to show openly in her public life as a developing artist.

I told her that until she became expert herself I would lend her a song. I had one I felt might be perfect for a new artist like her. I told Rastus about her. It was a terrible mistake. He was a lascivious man, interested only in the fact that Rosalind was young and pretty, and naked in the photograph. Then I went even further in my betrayal of my protégé. In the photograph it was evident that Rosalind had a physical defect that had caused many a girl to be burned alive in the uproarious past of English country life in the Middle Ages. She had 'witches teats', two small extra nipples about four inches below her breasts. I pointed this out to Rastus. Great name for a band he said. There are four of us and we're all suckers. Hur hur hur. We are four big tits. Hur hur hur. Witch boob are you? Ha ha ha. Lots more I can't remember. He told Ruth Streeting, challenging her to make something out of it that might spur me in anger to return to my old creative form. He offered her a commission on any creative or performing work she helped to effect.

She may already have been ahead of him. I may already have been ahead of her. If you want to know how the whole thing turned out listen to my autobiography *Psychoderelict*, released in 1993 shortly after Ruth recreated me and then abandoned me again. The musical play ends with my legendary punchline: *Whatever happened to all that lovely hippy shit?* I can give this away without spoiling the story, because it is probably evident by now that my return to glory was brief. Ruth Streeting was not just a catty journalist looking for a story. She was, by my own definition, a true artist. She finished things.

