A Contract with the Ineffable:

The Collapse of Language in the Face of the Unsayable; the Making of a

Contract with the Universe

[First Draft]

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Research Question

οἶδα δ'ἐγὼ ψάμμου τ' ἀριθμὸν καὶ μέτρα θαλάσσης,
καὶ κωφοῦ συνίημι, καὶ οὐ φωνεῦντος ἀκούω. ὀδμή μ' ἐς φρένας

I count the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea;

I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless:

From the Delphic Oracle 560 BC Herodotus (1890)

What I have in hand is a knot. What I aim for during the MA period, is to loosen this knot and use the freed threads to weave some sort of ordered fabric. My difficulty lies in identifying a single question that represents the tensions between my various interests and disparate methodologies.

In view of this difficulty, I aim to start with a broad approach, gradually finessing the search towards more probing interrogatives. One such question lies in the area that concerns the relationship between sound and free standing sculpture. Working in this way I hope to form a more comprehensive synthesis of my practice, one that could help bind together its different aspects into a cohesive whole, a dynamic nexus which is in a continual rebalancing, generating personal microcosms from common ideas: fractals of a world of infinite possibilities. This process involves an audience as active agent, which leads me to another question, what is the nature of the implicit contract between myself as artist and audience?

The following are themes I see as having a fundamental relevance in my work which, when filtered through an appropriate research question, could be used to create a new framework for future work:

The passage of time and timelessness

Permanence - transience

Synthesis - dialysis

Language

Ritual and universal myths

Absence (presence)

Context

Language

I have often found that in trying to grasp the ineffable, spoken language breaks down and gives way to what I would describe as coherent incoherence. From this state of chaotic order or ordered chaos, new meaning and patterns of behaviour can emerge. These manifest themselves as religion, art, science and other such human activities driven by the imagination. This grasping of the big questions is more often than not articulated in a language of tropes or more simply put by labelling.

Uncertainty and 'ignorance' are often expressed in ambivalent terms. Oracular proclamations in ancient Greece and Rome, were translated from incomprehensible utterances and arcane signs into common language and accepted as sacred and divine. Shamans, politicians, clerics and many more arbiters of behaviours, enter this territory, one that is full of rhetoric, and poetry, politics and faith; areas in which ambivalence of meaning and clarity of intention coexist but each exists for very different reasons.

Martin Esslin (1961) discusses the difficulties of communicating meaningfully and how any attempt to do so will fall short of truly meaningful intercourse. He describes ways in which art is an attempt to connect individual *Umwelts*.[1] I see progress towards further understanding of the world and between people, as being made possible by the unsayable

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[1] A German term introduced by pioneer of ethology, Jakob Von Uexkull, meaning surrounding world or environment describing the environment as experienced by a given organism.

being conceivable.[2] The imagination is prime matter for art and as so often it is with art, the absurd can cut through the strictures of society's conventions and get to the core of *the* problem or question in hand.

Behaviours

Robert Graves (1961), in the context of ancient civilisations, deals with intertwined issues of politics and religion. In his book *The White Goddess,* Graves conjectures on the development of the West European alphabet in terms of migrations, religions, cultural appropriations and takeovers through the analeptic narrative of the struggle between the eponymous female deity and subsequent patriarchal beliefs. He makes a case for poetry's origins lying in humanity's response to the seasons, agriculture and the cycle of life.

This link between civilisation and nature has been severely weakened under pressure from urban industrial culture which is rooted in the Enlightenment. With the preoccupation with description, classification, and ordering, the taming of nature has led to the wholesale industrialisation and exploitation of the planet as described by Kraft Von Maltzahn (1994).

The transition towards a post-enlightenment world, driven by scientific enquiry and commercial activity, has given way to a period characterised by the mathematisation of enquiry: the formulation of the 'laws of nature', statistics and probabilities to name just a few of the ways in which the world is now defined and quantified. The advent of computers and digital technology has greatly accelerated this mathematisation of knowledge and the development of big data. This revolution is recalibrating trajectories of enquiry, control and expectations.

The botanist Agnes Arber (1950) describes a more personal and intimate world of enquiry; how a botanist visualises and represents what she sees through the lens of continental

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[2] The Greek philosophers two and a half thousand years ago intimated ideas that are consistent with today's scientific concepts.

philosophy. In later books, Arber (1954) considers biological research more widely. She finally ends by drawing together Eastern and Western philosophies in a search for that elusive sense of the whole (Arber, 1957). It is an intensely personal exploration made with the detachment of a scientist: a poetic rendition of an analytical world.

Form

Gareth Jones' essay *The Object of Sculpture,* describes a changing reciprocity between (free standing, statuary[3]) sculpture and music (sound]) in recent European history. The competition for attention between the two within the same space has resulted in sculpture gradually moving towards having a greater correspondence with architecture rather than dependence on it.

When sculpture and sound are considered as part of an artwork, the former is often used to 'produce' sound, ostensibly or actually, as an instrument, its form subordinate to the acoustic element. Alternatively sound is often used in its own right to 'sculpt' space. There are many cases of acoustic sculpture such as the complexly-engineered multichannel installations by Wolfgang Gil (2018). In other cases, sound has a subordinate role as a descriptor, diegetic, or simply as an added quality. Whatever the case might be, the relationship seems to be more often than not one of either asymmetrical coexistence or detached partnership. This is borne out in many institutions by the division between visual arts and sound departments.

The question arises, can sculpture and sound coexist on equivalent poietic levels, synchronous to one another in their making? Can the asymmetry be mitigated at least? It is not easy to reconcile the two so that neither one is subordinate to the other: their respective modalities and generation are manifestly different.

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[3] I use this term in the loosest of meanings rather than free standing sculpture in the context of sculpture having been very much concerned with human form in earlier periods.

Performance: The Individual and the Collective

Much of my practice resembles a theatre with characters, props, scenes and plots as remnants of an abandoned play. Aristotle's *Poetics* provides a starting point for organising these elements into a drama of sorts. His 'four causes' in *Physics,* subsequently built on by Heidegger gives a way of analysing the causal position and therefore role of each component.

Anthropology and archaeology are of significant interest in what I do. Richard L. Anderson identifies *art* in its broadest sense from an anthropological perspective, 'Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.' (Anderson, 1990, p.238). This seems apt in the pluralistic contemporary environment where the term art has become so blurred as to be of little use. Anderson redefines the term making it flexible and applicable to past and future situations even where the concept of art may not be recognised. With each one of his criteria lying along a spectrum and acting as part of a cohesive whole, a critical rigour can be applied to what are all too often confused correlations between being creative and bringing an artwork into being.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger (2016) in a series of essays and books, describes the nature of social contracts and the relationship between the individual, the collective, and nature. His writings invite further exploration into the relationship between the self and the universe which can be extended to the artist, audience, and contemporary society.

Finally, I am mindful that, in the age of the machine the human becomes more important than ever and that we are in partnership with the computer, not subordinate to it (Fry, 2018). We live in a world where the absence and presence of humans is equally important.

Methodology

It is not the why but the how that tells me about the nature of a given thing or event; intent and process cannot be separated for intent without action is latency made infinite.

I envisage the final outcome as a drama born out of a dialectic between forms, notions, and audience, in which assertions invite tensions and polemics that foster new meanings and behaviours.

The digital is an ideal mediatory tool, perhaps medium in its own right, with which to work. It offers a 'simultaneity' of means facilitating synthesis out of complex relationships and the possibility for what I would describe as an operatic outcome.

I see this process taking place as a feedback cycle of material and process led ideas and practices evolving on a metaphorical stage through rigorous making, thinking, investigating, experimenting, analysing, collaborating, speculating, and above all in my case listening. Notwithstanding the need for critical thinking, I am also mindful of the need for a less formal, more intuitive abductive approach, as well as embracing contingency.

Research methods:

- practice based
- text based, online and library sources
- Conversations with peers, staff and audience
- collaborations
- analysis and reviews of works and exhibitions
- reflective critical writing

Mediums:

- cast metal and non-metals
- clay
- digital sound
- painting and drawing

- Performance
  - Ritual
  - Mummery
  - Pantomime
  - Dumbshow
- Photography, digital and chemical
  - Lens
  - Pinhole
  - cameraless
- Printing
  - Digital
  - Relief
  - intaglio
- Video

Resources

Camberwell based:

Metal casting facilities to be accessed whenever possible on visits to London.

4k video recording equipment

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