

Black Mountain College Celebration

Notes for a preamble

to the Black Mountain College Celebration, Crickhowell, 2018.

For our purposes here I have drawn up a set of five ideas that have been structural undercurrents to my practice for just over 50 years and which could partly be attributed to the encounters at Black Mountain College.

ONE a critique of logical discourse.

Olson writes:

‘We have lived long in a generalising time, at least since 450 [B.C.E.]. And it has had its effect on the best of [humankind] ... Logos, or discourse, for example, has in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language and language’s other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration ...’¹

The bad habits bred by this system of discourse have cut humankind off from elemental contact with the phenomenal world.

TWO a critique of the traditional conceptions of the self and individualistic lyric.

what Olson called

‘getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego’...²

THREE research the potential for an educated and democratic society.

‘... in 1929, [John] Dewey was invited to give the first William James lectures at Harvard, he quickly decided to make this his topic, expressing his “desire to get into a field I haven’t treated systematically, and art &

¹ Charles Olson. *The Human Universe*, New York: Grove Press, 1967, p.p. 3-4.

² Olson. Projective Verse, in *The Human Universe*, ibid. p.59.

aesthetics has come to me . . . [because of] the criticism for neglecting them and the consummatory (sic) in general”³.

The lectures were delivered in 1931 under the title “Art and the Aesthetic Experience,” these lectures, subsequently revised and expanded, were published in 1934 as *Art as Experience*.⁴

Dewey was an initial strong influence on the formation of Black Mountain College by John Rice in 1933 with an ethos of holistic education grounded in art and design.

Known for his advocacy of democracy, John Dewey considered two fundamental elements—schools and civil society—to be major topics needing attention and reconstruction to encourage experimental intelligence and plurality. Dewey asserted that complete democracy was to be obtained not just by extending voting rights but also by ensuring that there exists a fully informed public opinion, accomplished by communication among citizens, experts, and politicians, with the latter being accountable for the policies they adopt.

Anni Albers and Josef Albers joined BMC in December 1933 following the fascist closure of the Bauhaus. They had been working with Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Moholy Nagy, Walter Gropius in a college run by Mies van de Rohe.

In the same year Albert Einstein was visiting the USA and following the news from Germany remained there and in difficulty with elements of Einstein’s theoretical physics, Fritz Zwicky proposed the dilemma that is still with us, the existence of dark matter.

Josef Albers became rector in 1948 and on the advice of Edward Dahlberg, Charles Olson started teaching there. Albers left in 1949 and joined Yale where, following his work at the Bauhaus under Itten and his work at BMC, he articulated the most advanced colour theory yet achieved.

³ John Dewey. *Art as Experience*, New York: Minto, Balch & Co.: 1934, p. 375.

⁴ Richard Susterman. ‘Dewey’s *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 44, No.1, Spring 2010, p. 30.

FOUR

begin a comprehension and engagement with the natural and invented world through a reappraisal of proprioception.

Olson noted that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity.⁵

I had read Olson's publication *Proprioception* in 1967 and sat next to him in the QEH listening to William Empson spend a quarter of an hour introducing his one minute poem. At the end of the introduction and before the poem Olson opened in thunderous applause and infected the audience to join him.

That day Olson read *I am the Gold machine* which was to appear in Britain in 1968, the first publication of the second volume of *The Maximus Poems (Maximus IV V VI)* put together by Barry Hall and Tom Raworth for Cape Goliard.⁶

and lastly, **FIVE**

My premise is that art can have many functions, but to be considered art its aesthetic dimension needs to predominate.

The concomitant premise is that aesthetics is constituted by patterns of connectedness which are reciprocated by consciousness.

Olson's premise that a poet can be said to possess the tools to practice what he called culture-morphology coupled to his idea of the poet as legislator led me in the 1960s into the work of Gregory Bateson⁷ and C.H. Waddington⁸, the comprehension of patterns of connectedness and in the

⁵ Olson. *The Human Universe*, p.6.

⁶ The poem written, in November 1962, was first published in Spring 1967 in the *Journal of Creative Behaviour*.

⁷ Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature. A necessary unity*, London: Wildwood House, 1979 and Bateson. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2000.

⁸ C.H. Waddington. *Towards a Theoretical Biology*. Edinburgh University Press, 1968-1972 and Waddington. *Tools for Thought*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.

disguise of the situationist Raoul Vaneigem⁹, I took off my jacket and wrote *Gravity as a consequence of shape*.

I want to give particular thanks to Lyn Davies and Penny Hallas, and secretly Graham Hartill, for their wisdom and enterprise in Powys.

I welcome you all here in Crickhowell, after this astonishingly personal note, to this public Celebration of the work from Black Mountain College.

⁹ Raoul Vaneigem. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 1967. (Publisher and translator not noted.)