

"What do you think, how will all this end?"

"What?"

"The Visitation. The Zones, the Stalkers, the whole lot. How can it all end?"

"For whom? Be specific."

"Well, say for our part of the planet."

"That depends on whether we have luck or not."

"What if I turn out to be completely superfluous in their system? What if we are superfluous? Listen, since we're talking about it, are there any answers to these questions? Who are they, what did they want, will they return?"

"There are answers. Lots of them, take your pick. For me the Visitation is primarily a unique event that allows us to skip several steps in the process of cognition"

"What do you think about the Visitation?"

"I must warn you that your question comes under the heading of xenology. Xenology is an unnatural mixture of science fiction and formal logic. It's based on the false premise that human psychology is applicable to extraterrestrial intelligent beings."

"Why is that false?"

"Because biologists have already been burned trying to use human psychology on animals. Earth animals, at that."

"Forgive me, but that's an entirely different matter. We're talking about the psychology of rational beings."

"Yes. And everything would be fine if we only knew what reason was."

"Don't we know?"

"Believe it or not, we don't. Usually a trivial definition is used: reason is that part of man's activity that distinguishes him from the animals. You know, an attempt to distinguish the owner from the dog who understands everything but just can't speak. Actually, this trivial definition gives rise to rather more ingenious ones. Based on bitter observation of the above-mentioned human activities. For example: reason is the ability of a living creature to perform unreasonable or unnatural acts."

"Yes, that's about us, about me, and those like me."

"Unfortunately. How about this hypothetical definition? Reason is a complex type of instinct that has not yet formed completely. This implies that instinctual behavior is always purposeful and natural. A million years from now our instinct will have matured and we will stop making the mistakes that are probably integral to reason. And then, if something should change in the universe, we will all become extinct -- precisely because we will have forgotten how to make mistakes, that is, to try various approaches not stipulated by an inflexible program of permitted alternatives."

"Somehow you make it all sound demeaning. Let's get back to the subject on hand. Man meets an extraterrestrial creature. How do they find out that they are both rational creatures? What do you think about the Visitation?"

"Imagine a picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car drives off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out of the car carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios, and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Gas and oil spilled on the grass. Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around. Rags, burnt-out bulbs, and a monkey wrench left behind. Oil slicks on the pond. And of course, the usual mess -- apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow."

"I see. A roadside picnic."

"Precisely. A roadside picnic, on some road in the cosmos."

"So does that mean they never even noticed us?"

"Don't get depressed. The picnic is my own theory. And not even a theory -- just a picture. The serious xenologists are working on much more solid and flattering versions for human vanity. For example, that there has been no Visitation yet, that it is to come. A highly rational culture threw containers with artifacts of its civilization onto Earth. They expect us to study the artifacts, make a giant technological leap, and send a signal in response that will show we are ready for contact. How do you like that one?"

"That's much better."

"Here's another one. The Visitation has taken place, but it is not over by a long shot. We are in contact even as we speak, but we are not aware of it. The visitors are living in the Zones and carefully observing us and simultaneously preparing us for the 'cruel wonders of the future.' What do you think you've already received?"

"Very little."

"We've unearthed many miracles. In a few cases, we've even learned how to use these miracles for our own needs. A monkey pushes a red button and gets a banana, pushes a white button and gets an orange, but it doesn't know how to get bananas and oranges without the buttons. And it doesn't understand what relationship the buttons have to the fruit. In short, the objects in this group have absolutely no applications to human life today. You understand that we've been digging around in the Zone for twenty years but we don't even know a thousandth of what it contains. And if you want to talk of the Zone's effect on man... By the way, it looks as though we'll have to add another category, the fourth group. Not of objects, but of effects. This group has been shamefully neglected, even though as far as I'm concerned, there are more than enough facts for research. Sometimes my skin crawls when I think about those facts. We can't imagine anything scarier than a ghost. But the violation of the law of causality is much more terrifying than a stampede of ghosts."

"Isn't it time we headed for home?"

"Let's go."

"Do you have a car?"

-- excerpted and edited from A Roadside Picnic by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, 1971

Long before quantum mechanics the German philosopher, Husserl, said that "All perception is gamble."

Every type of bigotry every type of racism, sexism, prejudice, every dogmatic ideology that allows people to kill other people with a clear conscience, every stupid cult, every superstition, written religion, every kind of ignorance in the world all results from not realizing that our perceptions are gambles.

We believe what we see and then we believe our interpretation of it, we don't even know we are making an interpretation most of the time. We think that this is reality. In philosophy that is called Naive Realism. "What I perceive is reality." Philosophers have refuted naive realism every century for the last 2500 years starting with Buddha and Plato, and yet most people act on the basis of naive realism.

Now the argument is maybe my perceptions are inaccurate but somewhere there is accuracy. The scientists have it with their instruments that's how we find out what's really real. What relativity and quantum mechanics have demonstrated clearly [is] that what you find out with instruments is true relative only to the instrument you are using and where that instrument is located in space time.

So there is no vantage point from which real reality can be seen, we are all looking from the point of our own reality tunnels. And when we begin to realize that we are all looking from the point of view of our own reality tunnels we find it is much easier to understand where other people are coming from. Or, the ones who do not have the same reality tunnels as us do not seem ignorant or deliberately perverse or lying or hypnotized by some mad ideology. They just have a different reality tunnel and every reality tunnel might tell us something interesting about our world... if we are willing to listen.

When dogma enters the brain, all intellectual activity ceases. The map is not the territory, the word is not the object. Reality is what we can get away with.

- Robert Anton Wilson

Chapter 15

Beyond the Art World

from

9.5 Theses on Art and Class by Ben Davis

I don't care for the term "art world." It's a useful term, of course, a kind of shorthand for something like "the professional sphere of the visual arts." Thus you can say, "The art world thinks ..." or talk about "art-world concerns." But the truth is, art is not a world unto itself. Art is part of the world. That fact has to be a fundamental starting point for everything we write about the subject.

It is not my goal to become an "art person." For some people, becoming an "art person" is their main ambition. Paradoxically, when I talk to such people, I quickly become confused about why they are interested in art at all. They are interested in art as a world, I guess, as an environment to inhabit: for the parties, the people, the gossip, the money, the vague and ill-defined aura of intelligence and importance that art gives off.

Art-making is a complex social act and one of the primary passions; perhaps not so primary as food, or love, or sex, or shelter-but very, very important. People will suffer for art, for a shot at creative self-expression. Nevertheless, art cannot and does not exist on its own; slipping into the habit of addressing the sphere of the visual arts as a self-enclosed universe is a recipe for sapping art of its social vitality.

The movement of art and art criticism, as I have come to see it, is one of threading, of finding the points where art and its world connect back to everything else, the big, beautiful, sometimes fucked-up and scary world beyond it. If you can't stomach being interested in the wider world, having a thought about it, and figuring out how that relates back to what artists are doing in the present, then all you are left with is professional opinion of interest mainly to other art professionals or those in their spell.

To say you should approach art politically is not necessarily the same as demanding that art be political. In fact, quite often the sterile imperative to make "political art" is just a kind of inverted expression of "art world" solipsism. To whom is this political art addressed? If it is only addressed to "art people," then it can't be that political at all. One mark of the insularity of the visual arts has been that its productions mainly become part of the larger political conversation in a negative way, at those moments where some exhibition comes under fire from conservatives, and once again art's supporters trot out all the arguments about the fundamental social importance of culture that no one bothers to make otherwise.

We are all creative people. We all have art in our blood. Yet not everyone gets to express herself or himself equally; that is something people fight for. The way I see it, when you judge something as an artwork, you are judging how it plugs into a larger conversation, on at least two distinct levels.

First, an artwork must connect with an audience's understanding of what "art" is in society today, which is just a tissue of topical conventions and historical precedents. On this level, what is

thought to be good art is indeed determined mainly by professional concerns. I think of this as the "horizontal" level of analysis, because it is just a matter of connecting one art reference up with other art references, in an endless plane. Much present-day art writing stops at this level, of assessing whether something is original or derivative in relation to the accepted battery of art conventions and references. Hence, you get a kind of aesthetic algebra-"artist x is like artist y meets artist z"- always ensuring maximum tension between the variables to generate a sense of historical novelty. Thus an artist can be "Edouard Manet meets Maxfield Parrish," or "like Roy Lichtenstein combined with H. R. Giger," or even, perhaps, "the love child of Jackson Pollock and Banksy."

Secondly, there is the "vertical" level of reference, the way a particular artistic gesture is rooted in the earth of in social present, the energies and forces of the world that surrounds it. To feel truly passionate about a work of art means connecting it up, consciously or unconsciously, to a way of thinking, an existential world, a social reality. "The mere desire for novelty plays a relatively small part in the alternation of styles, and the older and the more developed a tradition of taste is, the less liking for change it shows of its own accord," Arnold Hauser once wrote. "Hence a new style .can make in way only with difficulty, if it does not address itself to a new public." In fact, without some sense of the social background, it is hard to make sense of artistic forms at all. At one historical juncture, a particular type of art can seem heroic, while at another the same gesture might seem obvious or derivative, a reflex of the establishment. At one instant, it is a symbol of daring and innovation, relating to the social outlook of freaks and eccentrics; at another, it becomes associated with the preachings of professors and the calculated provocations of ad men.

I once wrote an essay about the Bauhaus in which I tried to show how the legendary art school's trajectory from its origins as a kind of hippie arts-and-crafts commune to the prototypical font of industrial design was determined not just by intra-aesthetic debates but by the pressure of having to justify an art school's existence amid the turbulence of Weimar Germany. To get at what this particular artistic movement really meant, I said, was to look beyond the parade of exciting forms it generated, to see the underlying social struggles to which they were related and thereby "to put the history back into art history." This perspective also holds true when it comes to the art of the present: the task should be to make contemporary art feel truly contemporary, part of the present and not removed from it.

The specter of the "art world" casts a mesmeric spell upon creative discussion, constantly absorbs new forms into its professional orbit, and sets all kinds of bad examples because, of course, those who succeed are not necessarily the best artists or writers-merely the best "art people." But the "art world" is not the avatar of some all-consuming "society of the spectacle" that has come to foreclose any possibility of critical thought or artistic passion. It is, at most, a theater for people's professional aspirations, a stage that some people get stuck in and that some other people pass through and then transcend. When you have learned its terms and then learned not to care about it, you have achieved a kind of state of grace, and that is where good art begins.

What we wish most to know, most desire, remains unknowable and lies beyond our grasp. Thus, as the meaning-seeking, meaning-creating species, we depend on the image, which arises out of depth encounters. This image, as we have seen, is not itself divine, though it carries and is animated by the eternal exchange of that energy which we may call divine. The husk, which such energy inhabits, is perishable, as we know our own bodies to be. While we would understandably cling to that husk, be it this body, or this ego-concept, or this god, we would be better served trying to hold the ocean in our hands.

The deep stir and tumult has another source, and another end, beyond that which our limited consciousness could ever frame. Yet that fragile reed, as Blaise Pascal reminded us, is a “thinking reed” and courageously conjures with that infinity which could so casually destroy it. That disparity, the longing for eternity and the limits of finitude, is our dilemma, the conscious suffering of which is also what most marks our species. It is the symbolic capacity, which defines us uniquely. The images which arise out of the depths, be they the burning bush of biblical imagery, the complaint of the body, or the dream we dream tonight, link us to that throbbing, insistent hum which is the sound of the eternal. As children we listened to the sound of the sea still echoing in the shell we picked up by the shore. That ancestral roar links us to the great sea, which surges within us as well.

- From The Archetypal Imagination by James Hollis



Without the notion of Zero, our system of mathematics becomes meaningless. Similarly, the Fool is an essential part of the Tarot because he is the spark that sets everything else into motion, the divine breath that gives life and inspires the first step towards fulfillment and completion. Though the first step down a long path may often seem small in comparison to the journey, that first step is vital because without it there would be no journey at all! The Fool is the cause behind all effects, the power behind all manifestations and the seeds of the end sown in every beginning.

The Fool is unmolded potential, pure and innocent, neither positive nor negative yet containing the possibility of both. He is the unconditioned soul about to come into manifestation for the first time to start learning the lessons of the world. Though everyone calls him a Fool, he does not pay them any attention, and he simply goes on his way. Certainly what they say can be justified, since his ignorance of the world can lead him to do things that more experienced people would never imagine. But in these things he can find knowledge and enlightenment. He does not care what others think or say about him, because he knows that what he is doing is right for him.

His approach to life is a strange, unconventional one, because he does what is comfortable to him. This is a viewpoint not often supported in our modern world, in which "do as I say" is the commandment most followed. To those who have lived their life under this philosophy, the approach of the Fool may be

extravagant, shocking, even frightening. But this approach is all that the Fool knows, and because the only approval he requires is his own, he will continue to live this way, despite what all others think of him. He has total faith in himself. Perhaps he is not such a fool after all.

The Fool does not hide himself from the light, because he is the light - the wonderful light that shines out of every child before they see the world and are forced to build so many walls and barriers to protect themselves. The innocence of a child, sadly, is something rarely found outside of children, even though a lot of people could use it these days. With this innocence comes perfect trust, fearlessness in others, and total self-reliance. It allows you to see the world with new eyes and learn new things every day of your life. Think of how much better the world would be if everybody acted this way! It's a shame that only children, and the Fool, see this light.

The Fool almost always stands for new beginnings, new experiences and new choices; the first steps along a new path and the first words written onto a blank page. Such beginnings are like the Fool himself - neither positive nor negative, but with the potential to turn into either, depending on the choices you make and the path you follow. But this must not be your concern, because when a journey begins no one can know (or should know) what will happen on the way to the destination. Never let another person control your life. Live in the present and trust in your own abilities - this is the way of the Fool.

Such journeys always imply a degree of risk, and hence the Fool is pictured walking toward the edge of a high cliff. With any new experience there is always the risk of failure and the certainty of change; it is the degree of change, and how that change will appear, that are undeterminable. But the Fool has no qualms about taking chances, so why should you? It is through the first steps that we learn how to walk, and it is through changes that we learn how to live our lives in harmony and peace. So jump head first into the abyss of the unknown, and know that even if you eventually fall to the ground, for a while you will soar.

-- James Rioux