

The Monumental Paper Sculptures of ARTSTATION

The work of Glenn Davidson and Anne Hayes, the work of ARTSTATION, is conceptual, political, cybernetic and humane.

In their work, thinking and doing come together in an event that is always shared, that is a matter of community.

Each of their projects has implicit as well as explicit structure. The explicit structure is the object itself, usually an impermanent manifestation, a grand yet vulnerable sculpture, most often monumental, yet made of paper filled with air.

The implicit structure is the means by which community self-identifies and comes to life in the presence of these vulnerable sculptures, either in the creating or witnessing of the creation as an event.

On the material level, their work recalls that of painter, conceptualist and prankster, Leonardo Da Vinci who would, by inflating a animal bladder with a bellows, back his startled and threatened audience into the corner of a room as the bladder was pumped up to astonishing size. ARTSTATION's works are not stunts, but they are astonishing, as monumental and mathematically intricate envelopes, big enough and tough enough to walk around in, are made from the humblest of Kindergarten art materials: paper and tape.

There is a lineage of cold conceptual art and a lineage of warm conceptual art. There is something of the cold and astringent in ARTSTATION, but this is only while each planned object is on the computer screen, before people get involved in translating the planned into the actual in an inevitable passionate community of assembling, taping and inflating one of these miraculous, elegant structures.

Once assembled and filled with air by means of a fan, these objects are often literally open to the public. One can walk around in them, in an unexpected oasis from workaday life- in a luminous white space - something from a science fiction movie or from a psychological drama. While the objects themselves realize in geometric form conceptual objects (biTori, Leap), or gigantic artifacts (teapots) or natural objects (thistle), it is disarming to see and feel them "breathe" as the inflation slightly ebbs and flows. In the face of this breathing, a kind of tenderness is felt, as the sculpture's impermanence is understood at once with its *participation* among the living things of earth.

With each of these works then, there is a sense of the biological, and of inevitable vulnerability. In this, ARTSTATION's work stands apart from the aggressively permanent hubris of historical sculpture. When Michelangelo makes a man out of marble, he makes a permanent man. In exchange for his superb effigies, he must accept that when he tells his sculpture of Moses to "Speak!" that this sculpture, no matter how lifelike its appearance, is merely that - *life-like*. It is a representative of some other, incorruptible Platonic realm, but it is not here. It is in the world, but not of it.

ARTSTATION's work is decidedly of the world. It accepts space and time as we must. It comes into being and it passes away. While it is here, it breathes. While it is here, we can walk around inside it, touching its tender walls, feeling them give in to our touch.

The shapes the sculptures achieve, has something to say. Each offers a specific invitation, if not a message. The invitation respects the viewer-participant in a way that "message" does not. To be invited is to be treated as a subject; to be faced with a message is to be predetermined in the mind of the other, in the mind of the message-giver, whose "power" exceeds our own. Message-giving is then a power game. Its politics are autocratic. To be invited, is to be asked to co-create, to determine meaning in collaboration.

Cybernetician Klaus Krippendorff specializes in the field of "product semantics." He seeks to show that it is the user of a product who determines its use, not the inventor. The same could be said for art: it is the viewer who determines its meaning, not the artist.

ARTSTATION, even in assuming its corporate name, sidesteps personal ego, including art world ego, in favour of naming itself as a location, as a place where something happens. This thing that happens is

the production of provocative objects; objects that are likely to overcome indifference and disconnectedness by acts of invitation.

One is invited to help build bi-Tori, a pair of intersecting toruses that illustrate some part of Gordon Pask's Conversation Theory- it is about how conversation happens- conversation with another, conversation with one's self. The object itself in its relation to any observer/participant reiterates this theme of conversation. What is it?, one inevitably asks, and at this moment, the conversation which BiTori exemplified, has begun, and the observer/participant, if reflective, is already "understanding" the work.

"Art loves the solitary admirer", Oscar Wilde asserted. ARTSTATION does not agree. Art is engagement, as far as ARTSTATION is concerned. Art is an act of community. It is about connecting.

This quality is so deep in the work of ARTSTATION that participation in constructing one of its sculptures leads into deepening community to such an extent that each participant is transformed. Part of the transformation comes about due to Anne and Glenn themselves. Their charm, enthusiasm and open heartedness overrides their estimable intellectual achievements in designing a sculpture and its context, the moment assembly gets underway.

The experience of building one of these things is one of being welcomed into a magic circle. One quickly becomes a stakeholder. But most remarkably, Glenn and Anne have a capacity to step back from their own work as assembly gets underway. They accept the idiosyncrasies and errors of the assemblers, and, as if by some unseen grace, the "finished product" absorbs imperfections of executing by becoming "more human" itself, more expressive, more individual, more biological.

Glenn Davidson and Anne Hayes are concerned with "Event structure"- with creating a culture of *making*. Event structure includes the obvious and the peripheral. It concerns the moment the latent volume of the sculpture is inflated. But it also concerns side conversations, getting tired, laughing, going out for coffee. It organizes random thoughts. It saturates these thoughts with significance, almost like grace as the intoxication of working together includes the shared decision to leave out the rest of the world---what a relief! Thought and action become simple. It is almost a meditation. Mindfulness expands in each individual and in the community. These experiences constitute part of the artwork. This is an important part of what art is about- the saturation of something with significance so that all else is provisionally eliminated from consideration and the hyperactive and fretting mind can settle peacefully in a collaborative tribal nest in which values of what is and what is not important are the principal things being developed, shared-and in a context wherein they will eventually be discarded. This gives 'permission' too. A hi-tech quilting bee, a lo-tech factory

The forerunners of this work are many. Conceptual Art in Britain joined with political artist activism in the 1970's through Artist Placement Group (APG) with John Latham as its leader.

Glenn Davidson says, "I first met John Latham through Nicholas Tresilian. Tresilian was a visiting lecturer in mid to late 70s at Cardiff art school. We immediately became great friends. Nicholas had been out at Documenta with Latham's APG group which featured large in discussions with Joseph Beuys. Nicholas presented APG's activities at Documenta. As he is a gifted speaker, articulate, it really turned my young head. Art as process was the hit, art as research and discourse, commentary, intervention and work which became interlocutor with some of the most pressing social and ecological questions of the age,"

In 1979 Davidson traveled to see Latham at his home, "I remember him talking to me about the "Bings" which were a northern town's coal fields. Latham was involved in redesignating the "Bings" a work of art following extensive research into the relationship the community had with this industrial waste. The coal board proposed removal of an eyesore."

Nicholas Tresilian recalls, "The bings were red shale-hills left over from the process of oil-shale extraction in the Lothians - an area to the North of Edinburgh. They formed massive artificial hills, equivalent to the black slag-heaps around coal mines further South. At the time (early 70s) the bings were considered unsightly excrescences rather than archaeological deposits of a former industrial process with a unique identity of their own. Asked by the Scottish Office for a suggestion as to what to

do with them (other than expensively cart them away), John Latham, recognizing their natural beauty, proposed them as art-works, to be adorned with giant John Latham sculptures and made available for popular recreation." This was typical of the problem solving, win-win orientation of APG.

Tresilian was an APG member writing concept papers about the APG model - SOANS (self organising artist networks). Davidson remembers, "These papers contained powerful metaphors and processes straight out of physics to discuss the fluidity of social organisations. Hydraulic lift in fluids was used to describe cultural evolution, lending social systems form through field theory and through the theory of fluids. This was a theme in discussion we had about waterfalls and the nature of manmade structures and water courses."

Artist Placement Group worked as follows:

Authorities, such as the Scottish Office, offered APG a target area, designated 'problem area'; through collaboration with various stakeholders, a creative and plausible redesignation of the target area is determined, by which the "problem" becomes redescribed and refitted into an asset; the reform of intercommunication among stakeholders becomes the main activity of the placement and it is this which gives APG its social work cachet.

While Davidson is of a different generation than Latham, Tresilian and the Artist Placement Group, he is of their lineage. He comments, " The role of the artist as socially relevant, the artist's intervention in pattern (of thought), and art as process - these are core to Artstation practice."

ARTSTATION, like APG, has an interest in *dematerialization*. Many artists since the nineteen sixties have felt that art was held hostage by its commodification, that its independence and autonomy were systematically compromised as works of art became systematically translated into objects of value. As the effort to produce objects of permanently questionable value, such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimal Art, failed to hold back appraisal, the non-object became a desirable refuge. But if the object, and its trappings- style, touch, substance and weight - were to be abandoned, a comparably replete conceptual art required and expansion of the scope of the aesthetic so that sufficient ingredients could come into play as a work of art came into less material existence. New areas of consideration were opened up, with new conversations, new links among art and other enterprises, especially social enterprises- teaching and learning, community building, cooperative work, and stakeholding in the non material via the building of stakeholders in the temporarily material. ARTSTATION has its own *arte povera* economics: the transformation of inexpensive materials into remarkable outcomes though a combination of technology (brain work) and cooperative and fabrication (hand work).

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