

Interview To Anthony Caro By Francisco Gazitua

07 August, 2002

Dear Francisco,

Here are my answers to your questions. Things are changing fast in sculpture now, both the place in our lives, materials and subject matter and what is regarded as sculpture's role. I have witnessed big changes in the last 10 or 15 years – we may not like them all, especially as the subject moved so far away from what used to be our concerns, but at least sculpture has become far more accepted as part of people's lives, people's consciousness.

My interest in sculpture has been and is fairly narrow, limited to the subject of sculpture, personal expression through sculpture.

With best wishes,

Sir Anthony Caro

Influence of other Works

At some point the artist has to be obsessive, to live sculpture, think sculpture, dream sculpture. But this does not mean being narrow. I believe that it's necessary to be a rounded educated person – to read, listen to music, go to the cinema or to the theatre, talk to non-artists. But although it reflects on one's work the main thing is that such breadth of vision affects one's outlook on life and this in turn enriches the work.

Do I think that the other arts should affect the sculpture in a positive way?

That's another question altogether: and there are no rules. In the 60's and 70's I felt it was of the utmost importance that sculpture should establish itself as 'high art' independent of likeness to nature, not relying on the figure or narrative – pure and clean and essentially abstract. This would re-establish itself as a high art dependent only on form, scale and so on for conveying the expression. Now that that position has I feel been secured, so the sculptor can feel freer to look outside – outside the material, the subject, outside even the clean white gallery. Sculpture now can involve a social context, narrative, non-sculptural elements, parts of reality, surrealism. But we need to beware because it can get woolly. It can begin to lose formal entity, it can become concept, performance, political statement or

whatever. Sculpture is expression of feeling in terms of form and material and if other areas contribute to it well and good, but it is a formal expression. Let's not forget that.

As far as incursion into other art go let's by all means involve the sculptor in architectural or engineering projects, even in cinema or theatre design. In the same way that Picasso did his ballet we can say, bring something new to theatre because we come from a different place, think differently from most theatre or ballet designers. And in a similar way we can be useful to the architect because we are looser and to the engineer because our priorities are different. But the architect is reluctant to give up any control and wants to relegate the sculptor's role to designing details like handrails! This is a return to the old 19th or early 20th century relationships and it's not what I mean at all. If architects and sculptors trained in art schools close to one another (as do sculptors and painters) then there could – as there should – be close interchange of thought and a real exchange on an equal basis which would continue into practice at a mature stage. This I regard as important.

Theory

Go to the Tate Gallery bookshop and you'll find row upon row of books on art theory. The practice of art requires thought and intelligence but it's artistic not theoretical intelligence. Indeed I believe the Cubists did not have any sort of fully worked out plan – they were working in the dark. However always they trusted their artistic intelligence in front of the pictures. The theoreticians do not need to make anything – they think art can be figured out in their minds. But that's not how the making of sculpture (or painting) works. You can conceive a course of action in your head - at night perhaps when you cannot sleep – but in the morning when you are faced with the stuff itself it's never like you imagined. The stuff, the material, the medium calls for a response, so although you may have a rough road map in your concept the reality forces adaptation, reorganisation, and art. I have always believed in the artist as an intelligent being not a zombie hacking away at a piece of stone for hours on end without a thought, but let's not go overboard in the opposite direction. You can't simply conceive a good piece of sculpture – your idea may be good, but the result is all that counts – in the last analysis that's what we judge the work by.

Education

Teaching at art schools is not always good. For instance in Britain at the present time enormous attention is paid to teaching how to market yourself, or market your product. It is as if art is like shoes or cars and needs to be sold and the artist is treated as if he/she was a film star in the making who needs a gimmick or a personality so as to present a sellable product. All this is nothing whatever to do with making good or great art.

Nevertheless I do not believe that you do not need tuition – that sculptors teach themselves. It may well be that the student learns more from his/her peers than from the professor, but I think that working with others and sharing growth and experience is essential. When I stopped teaching undergraduates at St Martins I initiated workshops where mature sculptors (also painters) worked side by side for two weeks each year. As the participants came from different countries and very different ages, the interchange was

excellent and everyone seemed to feel benefited enormously from this pressured experience. I heard it frequently said that 'in those 2 weeks I learned more than in a year on my own'. Often schools or workshops do speed up development, which is why it's best to make many small or reasonable sized works rather than say one large one.

One's education as an artist never stops. One can always learn, from every new experience, every venture into unknown or little known territory. One gains knowledge or gets a suggestion one had not previously thought of.

Patrons, Sponsors, Galleries, Commissions

The artist is of no immediate practical use in society. He is like a poet. He doesn't mend TV sets, make cars or plough fields and grow food. Even the architect who designs our habitations is a more useful person – and oddly for all its practicality architecture is not an applied art, but at it's best and following the tradition established with the Greek temples – a high form of art maybe the highest of the visual arts. (There may be a lesson here for sculpture?)

Nevertheless art feeds the spirit. We would be immeasurably impoverished without Shakespeare, Donatello or Giotto or Cézanne. So how to reconcile the uselessness of art in a practical sense with its long term value to the spirit. We artists have to find the means to make our art, run our lives, feed our families, pay for our studio and pay our assistants. There seems to be no very happy solution. Commissions almost invariably demand concessions, modifications, the fitting in with someone else's dreams or ideas. Patrons, sponsors want their money's worth. Galleries do not show the work for fun but they have to make money and that's their main concern, to keep afloat. I wish I felt happier about the disposal of our works. We make too much art – because we enjoy this way of spending our lives. Very few artists become extremely rich, quite a lot of gallerists do become millionaires: I suppose it's because our first priority is the art, theirs must be money. Truth to tell we don't speak the same language. As a way round this as a practising artist usually has to teach whether he/she likes it or not.

Personally I have enjoyed teaching. Indeed I only stopped when I felt that I had said my say and was beginning to repeat myself. Teaching is basically teaching yourself and you yourself learn as you teach. The students ask difficult questions which require you to give thought and attention so you teach well when you address these questions freshly and come up with what you feel are true answers.

Links with the Academic World

To my mind the one area to stay away from is administration. That does not feed your art – it teaches you politics and it's actually an area that eats away at one's truth. The world of universities is far I think from the world of art schools although students often go to one or the other at some time in their lives. But often what is learnt at either is in the first place a process of growing.

Lectures and Symposia

All the kind of things which relate to the history of art are good: they give one a background to one's art. I believe the history of painting, sculpture, architecture, photography are good because they feed one's art. Rubens said 'Art comes out of art more than out of nature'. Besides as you know I do not believe in the 'Ivory Tower way of making art' (at any rate not for me. Nor I think for sculptors in general). So the mixing with others and discussions if they aid the learning process are all to the good. It's not much point in having an argument with those views that are dramatically opposed to one's own, but trusting relationships with intelligent artist are bound to be fruitful. In my experience these contacts with artist and critics that I hold in respect have been enormously enriching.

I can't even begin to give book lists. I must own hundreds if not thousands of books, magazines, catalogues, about art. Yes they are good for art critics, art historians, but they are also good for practising artists too. I see something, a reproduction of a painting, a postcard view, anything and I get it and keep it sometimes returning years later. It's food.

The art World

Well, do stay ahead of what's going on and do pay attention. But don't let fashion throw you. It's ephemeral. Great art is timeless. And that's where we're aiming!