



MODERN ART OXFORD KALEIDOSCOPE *Mystics and Rationalists*

Artists Everyone as Mystics by Sally O'Reilly

Artists have been described as mystics, as producing different knowledges, operating beyond the logical, dismantling the habitual or conventional and superseding language. This paradigm of contemporary art has a few origins that I know of: eighteenth-century German Romanticism, for one, which pitched the artist against encroaching rationalism; and Greenbergian Modernism, where art was at a remove from everyday life in order to be properly aesthetically appreciated. Here and now, however, the separation of the artist from society is usually less of a goal. The artist is more likely to desire relevance than transcendence.

What is more, operating outside the strictly logical, perceiving the incommunicable, transcending conventions and overflowing singular belief systems can be claimed as equally applicable to the non-artist too. Rather than defrocking the artist, it would be more fitting to exalt us all. Whether we realise it or not, none of us are consistent in the knowledges and beliefs by which we steer ourselves through daily existence. We communicate through many conscious and unconscious means. And anyway, the idea that logic and illogic are oppositional is no longer tenable when so much 'rational' effort goes into so many irrational things. More fundamentally still, the idea that reality is singular, and therefore opposable, can no longer be upheld. There is no 'rational reality' for the artist, or anyone else, to subvert or surpass.

To demonstrate this, I have observed myself for a single day, noting down the various knowledges and belief systems I have drawn on, and the incommunicable phenomena I have somehow perceived or generated. There will be many that I neglect to mention – the required length of this text rules out an exhaustive list – but you will get the idea. As ever, the context of communication necessarily influences the nature of the meaning that it carries. Knowledge is already and always contingent.

On a typical day my first waking thought is of breakfast. After a hard night's dreaming and metabolising, and before memories of the recent past crowd in to this new now, my body wills thoughts of fuel. Over years I have perfected a breakfast that prompts all the physiological effects that make for a comfortable and productive day. The physiological – the logic of my own unique physicality – has taken a long time to get to grips with, and my understanding of it still remains patchy. A knowledge of personal food-body relations is fraught with obscuring complexities. It requires a mixed methodology of rational deduction, trial and error and collective intuition accrued over millennia. My own tastes, intolerances and foibles must be factored in to received ideas about what is good for me. And even then, what causes gas on one day might not on another. The system is just too complex for such straightforward equations as what goes in yields that which comes out.

After breakfast I shower and dress, which requires knowledge of the swift passage of fashions. I have occasionally been heard announcing that I ignore fashion, but the truth is that I must know what is in fashion in order to stay out of it. Perilously, there was a time, not so long ago, when anti-fashion was extremely fashionable – although this seems to have passed now. In order to dress, I call on what I think of as my own taste – a 'knowledge' of what is aesthetically pleasing and ideologically correct, shaped by cultural and historical influences from birth – and anticipate what would be appropriate for the day ahead. I may need to consider my position in the power structure of a foreseeable situation, and how my mode of dress might manipulate or reinforce this. A wardrobe is a vocabulary from which I construct nuanced messages. I've heard that women in the city who bare their legs are not taken as seriously as those who wear tights. But what about fishnets? These surely cannot garner respect in the boardroom. This is a complex code indeed.

Once dressed, I turn on my computer. This is when the knowledge of others becomes mine by proxy. But I do not own this knowledge – I am simply renting use of its results on a short-term basis. The coders and software developers, the hardware designers and network architects each contribute to a vast interconnected system which no one person can fully understand. In fact, most of us are in the dark as to how much of the world works most of the time. Intelligence is distributed – but unequally. Each morning I simply have to trust that everyone is keeping up their end of the bargain.

I have a fiddle about with an essay I'm working on. I must find a way of handling its slippery subject to achieve predetermined academic standards. At times I can envisage how I might soon grasp it; at others it is a maelstrom of contradictions, with no one handhold seeming any more promising than another. Ideas from history, in their abstract state, refuse to crystallise into stable sense. I place them in relation to one discipline and they feign falling under my control; in relation to another, off they rush again towards the horizon of total confusion.

An hour of this is enough, and I feel that, in closing the document, I am re-entering material life again. This is not true, of course: the chair and desk have continued to keep me off the floor; the electricity supply, and all that involves, has continued to stream the requisite electrons through my laptop. But I feel nonetheless as if I have been in a realm where language is what makes things happen. But then a telephone call from a friend wanting advice about a love interest reminds me that in lived existences – not just narrated ones – language also produces knowledge, precipitates action, produces effects.

There is an hour before I must leave for a train. I have been meaning to make a new carrying case for my laptop for some time now. I have an old anorak set aside for the job. I cut it into a rectangle, sew up the sides and shorten the long zip to make a pouch that fits the computer perfectly. The coat's pockets are kept in play too – handy for putting adaptors and small headphones in. It is through these material improvisations that things are diverted from manufacturers' prescribed uses, their fundamental properties liberated to produce new significances.

This is a bit like playing devil's advocate or conducting

thought experiments. I have considered many a situation from different angles, tried to overlook my own position on it, to get to know what it is like to think and speak from over there. It is possible to experience knowing something in this detached way: knowledge does not necessarily have to be embodied. It can be empathetically achieved or experimented with verbally, even if it is not actually believed. Indeed, I often say things for effect. I experiment with the impact of potential beliefs to test the response of others. I will resist trying to recount things I have said that I do not believe, because often I cannot spot the so-called 'authentic', particularly in myself.

I catch the train into town for a lunch with friends, to commemorate someone we all knew and liked, and who recently died. Throughout the afternoon we all experience the ultimate unknowing. Where is she now? What is it like? We sift through specific memories and general remembrances, all the while negotiating current group dynamics. This social present is built on memories that are conscious, unconscious, micro and broad; and on expectations, on how we would like to be, or to be perceived, or be remembered in some foggy future. We each possess a version of knowledge of the group, of allegiances and frictions that change with every encounter. The subtexts are flowing like the wine, and we each understand not only spoken words and body language, but hidden intentions, which we interpret with recourse to historical precedence and characteristic tendencies. We read each other like banal crime fictions, like very slow potboilers.

Although this sub-textual drama sounds exhausting, it is perfectly normal, and the afternoon unfurls pleasantly. Everyone exercises their emotional intelligence, putting the occasion first, above themselves. We know not to drink too much, not to show off about recent successes, not to network or flirt or act up. We all know what is appropriate. And we understand when to leave, which requires a balance that must be struck between personal schedule and public form. There are shortest and longest times one should be at an event, appropriate moments at which to excuse oneself, and those when one really should not – during the toasts, for instance. The ancient Greeks had a word for the appropriate time or an opportune moment: *kairos*, the point at which the arrow should be released from the bow. This can be a metaphor for many sorts of mastery

– physical, social, intellectual or emotional – and is achieved partly through training and practice, partly through a 'feel for things'. The writer, too, must use *kairos* to know when and how to withdraw from a text. She must understand not only the needs of the publisher, but also the readers, who have been led to this place which, while not exactly remote, is not on the way to where they were previously heading. The writer knows she must offer her readers a reward for coming along: an ultimate sugar lump of closure, an argument completed, a new insight delivered. But this is the old way. The writer is no more capable than the artist of producing new knowledge, and so I must abandon you here, in the middle of a recognisable thought, which you are more than capable of extrapolating yourself.

EVENTS

Sally O'Reilly: *Live Illuminated Manuscript 2*
Thursday 4 August, 7pm
Free entry, booking essential

FURTHER READING

Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1999;
Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005;
Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2002;
Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London: Penguin, 1990;
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.