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Design by Chance

Paper given at the conference, “Freedom and Creativity” at the Royal Academy of Arts, London on 28th November 2015.

“Freedom and Creativity”..... Does anyone else detect a faint whiff of Romanticism? Three innocent little words. “Freedom”, “Creativity” and “And”.

If one is modern and googles, links to countless articles will be unearthed, which bear witness to, and base their assumptions upon, the certainty that these two unexamined and deceptive ideas are, as it were, two sides of the same high value coin.

Listening to Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, we are supposed to be in no doubt that we breathe the freshest air of pure freedom. Nor that we are being engulfed in a raging torrent of creativity - exemplified in the person of the individual man - rushing in to sweep us off the cold rock of reason. And yes, in Romanticism it was mainly men - and as in the poetry of Wordsworth not forgetting the paintings of Casper David Friedrich- this marriage of Freedom and Creativity is miraculously transformed into a holy trinity, whereby Freedom and Creativity sit astride the God, “Nature”.

And how God-like in its duplicity this “Nature” is. It offers on the one hand, refuge from the iniquities of a burgeoning industrial revolution - Blake’s dark satanic mills - and in doing so, the gift of a metaphor for all human freedom, but on the other hand, only an ever present threat - an overwhelming force with the capacity to destroy us.

But the nature god, like all good gods, is benevolent and bestows upon us the means of our salvation in form of creative men, men like Caspar David Friedrich - whose wanderer stands defiantly above us - men who would deploy the creativity, engendered by their free spirits, to harness this terrifying force and channel its terrible beauty into the sublime. What Freedom! What Creativity!

In another way, nature is an entirely reasonable emblem for both freedom and creativity. After all is nature not constantly creating things, - in constant flux, never static, always changing? Might we not be tempted to say that nature embodies a will to creation? Perhaps... but we would be mistaken. For to invoke a will, one would have to postulate agency, human agency. And nothing in nature comes from human agency. Mother nature's mother is contingency - chance - pure chance.

Without will there can be no agency. The Sublime cannot be captured without submission to the will. And yet in that very term - submission - lies the contradiction. How can will be free if one has to submit to it? According to Schopenhauer, if free will, the essential component of human agency, is dependent on a state or an event, then it would lack any basis and hence is absolutely contingent and dependent on chance. So does nature embody freedom only through its lack of will, through its lack of agency?

Paul Klee drew lines as a way of making the world rather than merely representing it. For Klee, to draw a line was to go for a walk, the destination of which was unknown at the outset.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold has likened Klee's way of drawing to that of an aborigine making trails in the landscape as he walks. He conceives of a place as a crossing or meeting of several lines - the lines of other wanderers, of hunted animals, of watercourses and their associated vegetative sproutings.

Ingold proposes that creative acts, and not just those perpetrated by humans, involve the creation of lines. Walking is related to drawing, to writing, to weaving and to music - the making of song lines.

He categorizes the kinds of lines made by Paul Klee and those made by the aborigine as lines of inhabitation. Their making is undertaken within and in collaboration with nature. They follow the migration patterns of animals, which in turn, follow the water and the paths of the seasons. Creativity is not anthropocentric. Nature is not a force to be celebrated as an entity separate to human existence and to be channeled by a dominant human creativity. It is enmeshed into human experience, which is contingent upon it.

But the reason for citing this is not to promote a simplistic and naive environmentalism, it is rather to question the way we conceive of freedom and creativity.

If the lines Ingold describes are manifestations of inhabitation, then he also describes another kind of line, which does not wander in the manner of Klee and whose destination is not unknown in advance, but which rather, is carefully plotted. This is the abstract straight line - the territory-capturing lines of latitude and longitude, the sound-constraining staves of music scores and the Euclidean lines of architectural plans which, determine the boundaries of public and private property and delimit the activities that go on in each. For Ingold, these are lines of occupation with all the associated suggestions of domination and control.

Briefly, here are two works of mine that explore these ideas. The first, "My Dreams of Levitation", shown at RoomArtSpace in London earlier this year, is a ghost house constructed in an existing Georgian Terrace. It reproduces the rooms and thresholds of its host by constructing copies of its existing skirtings and architraves, which are shifted sideways and upwards such that they interfere

with the actual thresholds, and boundaries of the existing house. Thus, the occupant of the space, in trying to navigate it, is confronted by doorways interrupted by other doorways and rooms that are newly compartmented. These elements make present the true nature of these seemingly innocent features in revealing their role in delineating property lines and in compartmentalizing modes of social inhabitation. The skirtings and architraves in this piece are lines of Occupation.

The second installation is entitled Piece for 53 Doorframes and 8 Mirrors. It is a random hanging of doorframes, the arrangement of which (which notionally could be any arrangement) is multiplied in a series of mirrors mounted on the surrounding walls. These are framed in the same way as the doors, to create an illusionistic space. From inside the forest of frames it is difficult to distinguish between reality and reflection.

The door frames, the passage through which would normally lead to the expectation of a fully formed space beyond, leads only to further encounters with other door frames. The frames create a series of thresholds into spaces where one never arrives. In some instances the frames create a dense forest-like space, in others they are distributed more sparsely. The frames are hung from different heights on wires, often interfering with each other to create a meshwork of ever narrowing and widening passageways. As the frames are loosely hung, the inevitable physical encounters between inhabitant and frame causes movement and noise.

The pieces jostle against each other, becoming a kind of musical instrument. This anti-perspectival space is mostly encountered close-up. It offers a never-ending array of obscured vistas. The lines created are lines of wandering inhabitation created by visitors who are free to move through space along any route and in any direction.

This latter piece has a suggestion of musical composition in its title, and brings me to the American composer, John Cage whose stated aim in composing was not to represent or celebrate nature, but to “imitate it in the manner of its operation”. For Cage, this meant the displacement of human agency and a reliance on Chance Operations, in order to embrace the contingent aspects of nature’s creativity. The implicit removal of the self was related to his interest in Zen Buddhism, as was his ambition to have sounds exist, as it were, in the moment - in his words “to be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expression of human sentiments”.

Experimental music was to be determined as an affirmation of life and as “an act the outcome of which is unknown” within which “no formative or understandable structure could arise”.

Music could therefore include any type of sound, including noise and silence, and could also be indeterminate in performance, so no two performances of the piece would be the same

Traditional notation, characterized by staves in form of groups of straight lines, which determine the exact frequencies between notes, would no longer be adequate. New notational forms would be required to accommodate these new scenarios.

As I hope is apparent, these methods have something in common with Klee’s idea of taking a line for a walk and Ingold’s description of the aboriginal trail. In each case there is a drawing of lines of inhabitation - of the landscape, of the paper, of the world of sounds - and an abandonment of any attempt to work within a structure of stratifying lines, or to work from an overview of the entire territory. There is the eschewing of rational human agency and of predetermined structures. There is the goal of not knowing what the

outcome will be and an acceptance of the outcome in and for itself as an affirmation.

Music and architecture share many things besides the hackneyed assertion that architecture resembles frozen music. Ideas about harmony, proportion, structure, the repetition of motifs, scale, procession and so on are applicable to both. Another problem that informs both is scale. Music and architecture are often too big to work on directly.

In determining what defines a work of art, the American philosopher Nelson Goodman distinguishes between scripts and scores. For Goodman, a script IS the work, as in the case of the writer whose medium, the printed word, is the same thing as that directly experienced by the reader. Or the painter, who works directly on the picture plane that is subsequently apprehended by the viewer.

A composer, on the other hand, works on a score, which acts as a technology for composing and as an instruction for performance. This leaves room for interpretation in the performance, which IS the actual work, and hence, for Goodman, the score and the work are different things.

The architectural drawing is a form of score. Architects rarely “work on” buildings. Rather, they “work on” drawings of buildings which are done in a special code. That code is exclusive of most of the real experiences that people have in buildings – the smell, the tactility, the acoustic properties, the flows of people, the sense of scale, the changing of the light and the seasons. In other words, what architects generally work on is the score and not the work.

These observations raise questions about the very nature of architectural creativity.

To what extent could different architectural notations, allow for different definitions of architecture, inclusive of inhabitation, of senses other than sight, of the strands of experience that make up a given moment?

Following Cage's musical methods, what happens if we allow architecture to be designed from the point of view of inhabitation rather than relying on the overview of the territory afforded by the plan? What if we allow architectural elements to simply be themselves just as Cage wanted sounds to be themselves and to eliminate totalizing concepts?

What happens if we eschew human agency and instead design by chance?

I have been researching these questions with my post graduate students at the University of Westminster.

Following Cage, we use the I-Ching, an ancient book of Chinese wisdom, traditionally consulted as a way of determining the correct course of action in relation to life's trials and tribulations.

The tossing of coins generates one of 64 hexagrams, accompanied by somewhat florid philosophical texts. The hexagrams can be either assigned values, or use can be made of the texts to inform action.

In compositions from the early 1950's such as Music of Changes, Cage derived the numerical value of the hexagram in the normal

way, via the use of coins and used them to determine the values of elements such as tempo, pitch, note, volume, duration, dynamics, instrumentation and timbre.

Cage's later work involved the use of scores that were indeterminate.

Works such as Variations 1 - 4 involved creating scores for each performance of the work haphazardly by dropping transparencies on top of each other to create a composite.

The techniques we employ are the same as those of Cage, except instead of subjecting musical characteristics to chance, we have substituted architectural or environmental characteristics. These might include questions of scale, material, use, repetition of motif, distances, modes of occupation, number of occurrences, what the weather is like, how many people are there at a particular moment and so on.

We have employed chance operations to develop architectural elements, which exist as they are. They are developed at 1:1 scale as components, and are combined under the auspices of the I Ching.

This means we are working work on the thing itself, not a representation of it. The outcome is something whose characteristics can be directly experienced as it is. It also means designing (if that is the right word) from the inside out, from the small to the large scale, and free from any predetermined concept or structure.

We have developed notations which have the potential to make us think about architecture differently, focusing not just on the physical attributes of the elements but on flows, moments, micro-uses and other elements such as sound and tactility.

The images you have been watching and the sounds you have been hearing, are some of the things that have come out of this process. They are investigations of what happens when freedom is embraced through a denial of free will and creativity is allowed to flow with a minimum of human agency.