

The Unfolding of an Artist's Book

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In the very early days of the sixties I was introduced to a person who was spending his life sitting in two or three eating places in San Francisco and drawing ceaselessly the faces of the people around, their hands, most often. The day I met him: it was at the Buena Vista Cafe, then a much frequented bar and cafe by Beach and Hyde, famous for its Irish coffee and its proximity to both the end of the cable-car line and the Playhouse Theatre.

Rick Barton should have been a San Francisco legend. But he lived in a kind of anonymity, I should say clandestinity, because he was a thorough opium smoker and lonelier than a sailor.

He had gone to China in the forties and came back to the U.S. with a habit, a Chinese brass inkpot, a brush, and some Chinese scrolls in the form of folding books, accordion-like books which are also part of the Japanese tradition in art.

The inkpot fitted in the inside pocket of his jacket, a kind of a tube in which he could also install (carefully) his slim and precious brush. He was thus constantly totally equipped. He refused to be called an artist when he showed me his working materials. "I am just drawing," he said, and then he added: "I am not a painter but a writer. One day in Peking I was sitting on the main square drawing a chrysanthemum and the little boy stopped close, looked at what I was doing, and told his father: 'Look, he is writing a chrysanthemum.' He was right. I am a writer."

Rick was in fact a great intellect. In his (miserable) room on Geary by Van Ness, he would read for hours, days, and discuss his thoughts with the two or three friends he had in the city. He would eat in the dingiest places and use his meager veteran's subsidies to buy his dope, his folding books, his China inks, and the drinks he had to order in the two or three cafés in which he was spending the hours out of his room. To make things harder for himself he was an insomniac, half sleeping in the smoke of his pipes.

Before that fateful afternoon, I had never seen any folding books. He opened the one he was working on, put it on the table after having pushed his drink and dried the surface, and I was in a state of wonder: tiny heads were drawn, each with its own character, the customers of the cafe were recorded with utmost care, filling every page of the book the way they were crowding the place as well as Rick's mind. Here and there, tucked in what were empty places on the paper, were fingers holding cigarettes, swirls of smoke, an obsessed and obsessive mass of humanity running like a river all along the book which was so to speak growing in length, like a ribbon.

Thus one of the most lasting of my artistic impressions was happening amidst a crowd in the magic atmosphere of San Francisco which was still primarily a harbor with all the feelings of alcohol and transiency that harbors create.

At our next encounter Rick was starting a book. He had already covered a few pages when I arrived and in a short while looked at me, passed on the work to my hands and said that

I surely would like to work the way he did, and that the book was mine to continue. It was clearly a mystic transfer, a gesture in the logic of being, something that came from a place preceding him and that had to go, to keep going, to acquire a new transiency, an open-ended trust.

When I came home, unfolded the book and looked at my own brushes and inks, I thought that I had to do some drawings the way I knew. I drew, I remember, a Chinese ginger vase that I had, then a flower pot with some flowers, then my own inkpot... so different from Rick's drawings!

But that new format started to preoccupy my mind: I had to do something I never did, to find a way of thinking adequate – for me – to this new material. I realized how much materials, for artists, are things that mediate thought, how much they condition one's aesthetic choices, how much they become the elements of one's expression, and instead of being just a support, they become in a way a co-author of one's work.

I know I'm telling a story, but story is always superior to theory, albeit theory is... another story. Things happen in time; therefore they always constitute a story: the unfolding of one's mental operations is akin, it appeared to me, to these long horizontal scrolls that are not meant to be grasped in a single vision like a painting, but rather to be read, visually, in sequence, like an ordinary book that you cannot read in a single glance.

This sense of reading attached to the very format of these "scrolls" brought to my mind poetry and literature. I felt that kinship between script and the horizontality of the paper, I suddenly saw that I was going to write poetry on these papers and paint watercolors with the sentences, verses, or words. I opened up to myself, with exhilaration, a new artistic world whose possibilities I was going to explore by the very acts of painting.

I used Arabic poems: Arabic script has in its essence infinite possibilities, and of course they have been explored and practically exhausted by classical calligraphy and by the geometric patterns made of sacred verses, and turned into clay tiles which ornament the great mosques of the Islamic world.

My endeavor had nothing to do directly with this classical heritage which is based on the codification of script and on the perfection of codified brush strokes.

I used my (extremely imperfect) handwriting, figuring out the visual possibilities of the manipulation of letters and words given the elasticity of Arabic script. To give an example: a single letter can be as short as the tiniest possible script or can be extended to cover a whole page or, by extension, any size possible or imagined.

I was more than just interested in this new approach, I was having the feeling that there was something sacred about it: I felt close to the icon painters of the past: they were in awe of the fact that they were dealing with sacred history, I was dealing with the combination of poetry, script and painting, I was finding a way out from the past (classical

calligraphy), and still carrying on to new shores the inherent possibilities of Arabic writing: I was discovering, by experiencing it, that writing and drawing were one. So, the watercolors or ink drawings and the writing of the poetry were constantly unified in the visual field of the art work.

I remember how carefully I used to wash my hands, with what care and apprehension I was choosing a particular scroll, with what interest I was looking at the paper, usually Japanese handmade paper or rice paper made in Kyoto, because everything had to be in tune, the size, the format, the text, the colors, the texture of these colors, the light outside, my own availability; it was each time like entering into a religion for a believer, like going for a climb, for an alpinist, as if painting in this case was also a scared sport, a battle both spiritual and physical, as well as a game of chance.

When one starts a work which can be as long, when unfolded, as 200 inches or 400 inches... one knows that no mistakes are allowed, that the rhythm has to be kept as long as working endures, that this is a trip, a travel, an adventure, something that awakens in the depth of the species memory images, or memories of the nomadic essence of the spirit. In the meantime, the very presence of size and format, which is part of the experience of a painting (framed or not), seems to disappear with these books when stretched out, and the modular character of the work transpires and enchants, exactly as is the case with music.

Thus, the usual affinity between painting and literature, in representational art, and between painting and philosophy, in abstract or conceptual art, gives way to the presence of an affinity between painting, or the visual arts, and music. The response to the interplay of themes and variations, so essential to music, the awareness of pure compositional values, become here major concerns of both music and the folded painted book, which by the way, in multiplying the possibilities of combinations of different "pages," opens up for music itself infinite temptations of modular combinations and recurrences.

Asked, if the drawings and watercolors which I mingle with the written texts are "illustrations," I have to answer that they are not; they are, rather, an "equivalence," both a response and a counterpoint to the text used, not only on a visual structural basis but also as a means to convey a reading, an intellectual and emotional response to the poetry. Instead of explaining, analyzing my understanding of a particular poem or text in word-language, I utilize the language of painting: in this case written words and the visual text mirror each other and form a new entity which combines them both.

Working for years (since about 1963) in this manner, first exclusively with Arabic texts and then also with some works from American or French poets, I discovered a new dimension to the notion of translation. Translation is transportation. One carries, let's say, a poem or a text in prose, from one language into another, from one language-universe, into another. This operation implies many questions, some of which are metaphysical, such as: do two readers really read the same text when they do? Who's the "author" of the translated text? What is the real being of the original text and the one of the second?

A shower of questions manifested themselves in the course of these many-year

long experiences: these “artist’s books” were meant to show how one sensibility reacted, responded to the one of the poetic text inscribed; how one’s understanding of the poetic text was carried from one language to another, this latter being visual; how the finished work in some ways becomes independent from both the written element and the image, by being seen as forming a new entity which is itself then created by the viewers, their vision differing from person to person ad infinitum.

To put it succinctly: this approach which combines literature and art and which has been fundamental to Chinese and Japanese art, and which is transformed here, seems to bring out a sense of becoming, of fluidity, of constant transformation, as being essential to the mind: the mind never rests on these scrolls as it moves back and forth on them as a scanner. This experience transforms these visual, written words, and the paintings of which they are a part, into a kind of musical score that each person, including their maker, translates into his/her inner languages, into that which we call the understanding.

Working for years in this direction led me to the suspicion that our mental world is an ongoing “translation,” that perception is a translating of the object of that perception, and that any thought that we may think to be primary, primordial, spontaneous, is already an interpretation of something which precedes it and may even be of another nature, another “stuff” than thinking itself, a wavelength, an “it” which remains unknown, a translation of this “it” by an active filtering function we call the “mind.”

On a practical level, all these reflections gradually led me to the erasure, once in a while, of the written text, keeping very little of it or none at all, and made me paint on these “books” unfolding landscapes or abstract paintings, not as a return to realistic or abstract art, but to a vision of reality as a permanently transformed score meant to remain obscure as such but “heard” or “seen” through the translatorial powers of our minds. Thus, although a painted landscape on a traditional canvas freezes, so to speak, its subject matter, a landscape on these accordion-like books can be seen in different manners, the first two openings juxtaposed, for example, with later ones, at will, so that a single landscape becomes many, according to the way the work is folded. We move away from the fixed image and see combinations of the same reality, the birth of different realities out of a single one. To put it simply: by multiplying the elements of a work which is itself open-ended, one calls for an intense participation of the mind, for the collaboration of its various powers, and this process illuminates, brings into presence multiple presences, and it is no coincidence that, historically, the traditional and ancient works combining words and images were called by the magic name of Illuminations.

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