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# ACMC

**JULY 1-3.**

**SCHOOL OF MUSIC  
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY  
WELLINGTON. N.Z.**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**'We are the bees of the invisible.  
We distractedly plunder  
The honey of the visible in order to  
Accumulate it within  
The golden hive of the invisible'**

**Rainer Maria Rilke**

**John Cousins**

### ACMC – Keynote Address. (July 2004)

I have to declare at the outset that I presume the central concern uniting everyone at this conference is the production of art.

No matter which genre we use, or direction we may be individually taking, and how seemingly incompatible our attitudes and methods, we are all, I take it, committed to getting something inside, out!

Although the materials and tools we use may vary, the process of making good this commitment is always complex and fraught with difficulties.

It is not only the fact that we all use digital technology in a variety of ways which places us on common ground, it is also our sharing of the experience of having to deal to the less tangible phantoms of our imaginations.

It is with this in mind, that I proffer the following comments.

The conference title is:

‘The Ghost in the Machine’ Performance practice in Electronic Music.

It is the ‘ghost’ of the title upon which I would like to dwell.

Some initial insight into this phrase can be gained from the person who coined it. viz.: the Waynefleete Professor of metaphysical philosophy at Oxford and the editor of the journal *Mind* for nearly twenty five years, one, Gilbert Ryle. A synopsis of his writings states:

‘In ‘Systematically Misleading Expressions’ (1932) he proposed a philosophical method of dissolving problems by correctly analysing the derivation of abstract inferences from uses of language. Applying this method more generally in ‘Categories’ (1938), Ryle showed how the misapplication of an ordinary term can result in a category mistake by which philosophers may be seriously misled.

Dealing with the traditional mind-body problem in ‘The Concept of Mind’ (1949), Ryle sharply criticised Cartesian dualism, arguing that adequate descriptions of human behaviour need never refer to anything but the operations of human bodies. This form of logical behaviourism became a standard view among ordinary-language philosophers for several decades.’

Cartesian dualism held that the spiritual dimension in human beings, commonly referred to as the 'soul', is a separate category from the physical corporeal aspect, existing independently of it.

Ryle's theory however, relegated the soul to a ghostly category, it being merely a mirage produced by the machine of the body. No body – no soul. Although I tend to agree with him (that our spiritual experiences are essentially the results of body chemistry). I empathise with those who regard the spiritual dimension as an entity in its own right. It can often seem that way. Perhaps it is a little like our everyday experience of the flatness of the earth, despite the contrary data provided by our satellites. The scale of our physiology in relation to the planet makes it impossible for us, at least in our everyday existence, to perceive its curvature.

Of more interest perhaps, is a recent paper by Bruce Mangan, of the University of California, Berkley, entitled 'Sensation's Ghost' The Non-Sensory "Fringe" of Consciousness', the abstract for which reads:

' Non-sensory experiences represent almost all context information in consciousness. They condition most aspects of conscious cognition including retrieval, perception, monitoring, problem solving, emotion, evaluation and meaning recognition. Many peculiar aspects of non-sensory qualia (eg, they resist being 'grasped' by an act of attention) are explained as adaptations shaped by the cognitive functions they serve.

The most important non-sensory experience is coherence or 'rightness'. Rightness represents degrees of context fit among contents in consciousness, and between conscious and non-conscious processes. Rightness (not familiarity) is the feeling-of-knowing in implicit cognition.'

*A 'feeling-of-knowing' which cannot be grasped by an act of attention.*

Sound familiar?

A close analogy is our experience of peripheral vision. We usually look directly at anything we wish to examine, taking little or no notice of the objects away from the centre of our gaze.

Attempting a close examination using only peripheral sight will result in us giving up, and turning to look fully at the object. It feels unnatural *not* to do this.

Using the corner of one's eye to notice what is fully displayed centre stage, rather than what is lurking dimly in the wings, is an acquired skill.

This 'feeling-of-knowing' is of course what we all as art makers constantly rely upon. It is our compass and chronometer in the uncharted universe of the soul (or as Ryle would have it, our own impenetrable cerebral illusion). Of course artists don't externalise it as a 'feeling'. We just accept it as 'knowing'. If we chose to be concerned by it for its own sake, we would become philosophers and cease to be artists.

The evolving preference for objective scientific thought over understandings achieved through essentially subjective means (via art, or religion for example) is still very much on the move in our culture which heralds the facts of science and is suspicious of the feelings of art. It is not entirely surprising that this is so, for it is true that the sense of rightness referred to by Mangan, is a notoriously slippery animal. It is the greasiest of pigs, being fiendishly difficult to pin down. But just because you can't catch it, does not mean it is not there!

Hopefully, gatherings such as this may validate the power, accuracy and enormous regenerative energy contained in that 'feeling of knowing'.

I am personally convinced that the true value of conferences like this, resides primarily in the collective human contact which coming together in one place facilitates. The enabling solidarity of being in the company of other maniacs, partaking of the collective store of passion inherent in this sort of forum, is, in my opinion, the hit we most need. It is also of course useful to experience one another's work, and to present and respond to papers on various topics. But if I were forced to remove every activity except the one most valuable, I would choose a massive, all in, 72 hour rave with a prize for the last person left standing.

The repercussions on each of us of attending a conference like this are unique and complex. Being exposed to the myriad combinations of personalities, ideas and products can be as confusing as it is uplifting. Coalitions form fragment and reform. Like gravitates to like, positive sparks off negative. Convictions are confirmed, and demolished and re-confirmed. It is a primal sea teeming with single minded individuals, ravenous for sensation.

And we are all in survival mode, for this is an emotionally threatening environment. Each one of us desperately seeks evidence that *we* are on the right track, and (secretly) that everyone else is in some way misguided. That somehow our personal 'feeling-of-knowing' will show us the way to the holy grail.

Beneath every passionate articulation of what makes sense, and how things should or should not be done, there lurks the realisation of the near impossibility of the task we are asking of ourselves.

Alongside every skilfully exposed hypothesis, stalking every confident sonic gesture, is the unsettling recognition that we are involved in a subjective lottery where the chances of winning are virtually nil.

This is of course, simply the reality of the art making process. We can acquire information relating to many aspects of the task. We can get to the bottom of the physics of our particular medium, and how the technology for manipulating it can be of use. We can engineer working contexts of great power and sophistication. But still we sense our ultimate impotence. It is this sense which compels us to act.

It is the maddening itch we must constantly scratch, an innate condition produced by our very humanity; the oxygen which feeds the furnace of our creative desire.

Which is why we gain such sustenance from being with other people who must also scratch.

*(Start eg 1)*

So perhaps the most useful thing you come away with from a gathering such as this, is the realisation that the only way through to your particular goal is via an essentially self-defined and defining pathway formed by your own particular 'feeling-of-knowing'.

But if you succeed in 'following your bliss' as Joseph Campbell would have it, sooner or later you will find yourself in a region without landmarks of any kind, where none of your previously successful strategies are effective, where you stand or fall on your innate qualities. This is the time when you must investigate the central, elemental secret which is *you*.

As Annie Dillard (Author of 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek') puts it:

‘I think it would be well,  
and proper, and obedient, and pure  
to grasp your one necessity and not let it go,  
to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you.

Then even death,  
where you are going no matter how you live,  
cannot you part’

\* **EG 1. audio** ( *Telling of the secret from INPLACE*) DUR: 6'.30”

So you find yourself in survivor mode, and you simultaneously rejoice and tremble. This is the paradox of the authentic creative act. It carries with it the possibility of naming the infinite, while simultaneously embracing the risk of dying to the world.

The ability to survive in this extreme environment is some thing which cannot be taught at arms length. No number of learned papers or analyses will be of use. It is a place on the fringe of consciousness, beyond, or beneath any act of attention, on the outer periphery of our habitual, safe haven. It is an indescribable location which can be entered only through sentient experience. A ‘survivor reality show’ which abandons each competitor on their hermetically sealed island, with no cameras, no cell phone, no back up, no escape.

It is absolutely razorblade real.

Throwing oneself back upon oneself, inevitably generates an iconoclastic, self reliant attitude. Reinhold Messener (first person to climb Mt Everest solo, without oxygen) describes it quite categorically:

‘Someone who is fulfilling his own ambitions does not need to listen to other people – he must be willing to accept the risk that is ever present when one converts dreams into reality, and he must be prepared to give each one of his dreams the chance to succeed. If he follows anyone else’s standards, he won’t discover new horizons.

What matters is to evolve one's own standards. Not to allow oneself to be coerced by any outside attitudes, and above all, to find one's own goals within oneself'

Identifying these goals is not always easy, even although, (or perhaps because) they are so intimately within. They lurk in a myopic haze, sensed rather than seen.

In the words of James N Powell ( author of 'The Tao of Symbols').

'This obscure something, which has not yet presented itself in the form of coherent thoughts or words, we experience as an intense desire for expression, *a tumescent inevitability.*' (my italics).

Equally important to the 'feeling-of-knowing', or 'rightness' is its underside, or shadow, the 'feeling-of-not-knowing', or 'wrongness'.

This is the feeling which so often prevails, particularly in the early stages of the gestation of a work. It results in enormous, but necessary redundancy of both materials and effort. Everything has to be attempted, and usually it is rejected by this sense of wrongness.

The true measure of a potentially successful art maker is their ability to experience this state and despite their fear, panic, disorientation and exhaustion, not only stay intact, but determinedly initiate action.

Acting under conditions such as these requires a lunge towards an unidentifiable target which only materialises after and often because of the lunge itself.

It is like jumping off a high cliff into thin air with no visual evidence that one will not fall. The jump transcends the ordinary, only if it is made in the face of seemingly fatal consequences.

*The kernel of this act therefore lies in belief or faith in a positive outcome.*

Successful artists believe they will succeed, in a totally unregulated environment, without any shred of a guarantee.

Unfortunately qualities such as belief and faith are notoriously elusive and can be regarded as inappropriate in data and information sharing contexts which often characterise technology based activities.

It is an ironic fact however, that data and information sharing, although of use in a restricted instrumental way, have little effect in the generating of belief and faith.

Of course one can achieve nothing without the tools. One cannot just 'think' a work into existence, and it would be churlish to diminish the importance of the interdependent continuum joining the creative impulse, the idea, and the technical means of expression.

But one only has to experience that ghastly moment when one 'runs out of steam', and a studio full of the latest technology becomes so much dumb junk, to realise that the spark which ignites the flammable material of the idea, quite clearly resides in the subjective interstices of the self. One's technique must therefore reach not only outwards, via the technology towards an extant product but also inwards, via stubborn patience towards the elusive identity of the creative impulse.

On the subject of technique: David Smith (American sculptor)

**Define technique:**

technique is what belongs to others

technique is what others call it when  
you have become successful at it

technique as far as you are concerned  
is the way others have done it

technique is nothing you can speak about  
when you are doing it  
it is the expectancy of imposters

they do not show a respect for themselves  
or for what they are doing.



The problem lies in the fact that the outward pathway is situated directly centre stage, in fully focussed view, whereas the inward one is quickly shrouded in disturbing shadow. It is so much easier to make headway, when you can see where you are going! Before we know it only the clearly visible and tangibly measurable is acknowledged.

We should therefore be on our guard against the tendency (currently at large) which implies that the more one can measure and quantify the more one can qualify.

As Picasso said:

‘When we love a woman we don’t start measuring her limbs’.

Surely we should share our stories of failure and frustration, weep and gnash our teeth, beat our breasts and declare our fear; cling together under the shadow of our collective ghosts. We should give and receive mutual succour.

So often, alas, this seems to be an outlandish hope. Why must acknowledgement of the subjective aspect of the task, the complete bag of worms, remain unexamined; indulged if at all in off duty time in pubs, cafes or parties, or in the fleeting moments between conference sessions?

I have no answer, except to say that for this we can blame only ourselves, for it is a fascinating behavioural trait of most human beings that we participate in our own downfall. It is almost as though the replacement of analogue technology with digital has infected our intrinsic values so that we are now uncomfortable with anything which might be somewhere between on or off. More and more we seem to reject that which resists the compulsion to sample, dissect and evaluate. Soon we will genetically engineer our vision so that everything in sight is in absolute focus, and the irritating phenomenon of peripheral uncertainty is abolished. What is more important, a faster computer, or better quality time to contemplate what one might enter into it? How many sacred streams do we cover over in the name of progress?

As Annie Dillard warns us:

‘ It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we had asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum.

We douse the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind once cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few.....

(Start eg 2)

\* *EG 2: audio ( sheep talk section of INPLACE) DUR: 4'.00"*

Annie Dillard continues:

.....

.Birds may crank out sweet gibberish and monkeys howl; horses neigh and pigs say, as you recall, oink oink. But so do cobbles rumble when a wave recedes, and thunders break the air in lightning storms. I call these noises silence and wherever there is stillness there is the still small voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town.'

We should not be unduly worried by Annie Dillard's use of the word God. Divine terminology is almost unavoidable in any discussion looking to make sense of the role of human beings in the world.

It is the Gods of the natural world however that she is invoking, harking back to a time when the connection between mankind and nature was acknowledged through particular cultural practices and attitudes.

In those days the artist was Shaman, Tohunga, and Witch Doctor, with magical powers sustained by their access to the mystical over arching momentum of the natural world. Connective processes welded people with their environment, and blurred the boundaries we have now established between fact and fantasy. To many earlier cultures, the wind *did* cry and the hills *did* shout forth praise. Although we may not any more acknowledge it to the same extent, this magic is as alive and well in contemporary art making as it was in the broader social functioning of earlier times.

In his wonderful documentary film about Picasso entitled 'Magic, Sex and Death' John Richardson points out how the painter thought of his own practice as shamanistic. One only has to look at some of the sculptural works made from found objects to sense their voodoo quality.

Picasso saw himself as a magician.

The process of making art remains magical.

If any one *artist* was driven from town time and again, along with God's voice, it was the Russian film maker Andrei Tarkovsky, perhaps because of his totally uncompromising views on the role of cinema as an art form.

In his book 'Sculpting in Time', he ponders the delicate, transcendental mechanism of the artistic image by describing the use in his film 'The Mirror', of a portrait attributed to Leonardo da Vinci.

That elusive quality given off by an art work which transcends the simple combination of its contributing elements is nowhere better explained.

**(Start eg 3)**

- **EG 3 video** (*Leonardo portrait: A Young Lady with a Juniper*)

(freeze after title for duration of spoken excerpt )

'If you try to analyse Leonardo's portrait, separating it into its components, it will not work. At any rate it will explain nothing. For the emotional effect exercised on us by the woman in the picture is powerful precisely because it is impossible to find in her anything that we can definitely prefer, to single out any one detail from the whole, to prefer one, momentary impression to another.

And so there opens up before us the possibility of interaction with infinity, for the great function of the artistic image is to be a kind of detector of infinity towards which our reason and our feelings go soaring, with joyful, thrilling haste.

Such feeling is awoken by the completeness of the image: it affects us by this very fact of being impossible to dismember.

In isolation, each component will be dead – or perhaps, on the contrary, down to its tiniest elements it will display the same characteristics as the complete, finished work.

And these characteristics are produced by the interaction of proposed principles, the meaning of which, as if in communicating vessels, spills over from one into the other’.

Tarkovsky goes on to say:

‘It is possible for us to see any number of things in Leonardo’s portrait, and as we try to grasp its essence we shall wander through unending labyrinths and never find a way out. We shall derive deep pleasure from the realisation that we cannot exhaust it, or see to the end of it. A true artistic image gives the beholder a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings. It is not possible to catch the moment at which the positive goes over into its opposite, or when the negative starts moving towards the positive. Infinity is germane, inherent in the very structure of the image.’

Did you know that the closer you get to the speed of light, the more mass you accumulate so that if you *did* succeed in reaching that ultimate value, your mass would become infinite and you would assume the condition of a ‘black hole’ with a gravitational pull so gross that nothing, including light itself, could escape. The speed of light is thus an insurmountable physical barrier.

This is what Einstein would have us believe.

Tarkovksy’s notion however, asserts that the seemingly inevitable consequences of rational relativity can be side stepped. That there is another ‘cosmic’ realm of travel. It involves the replacement of consecutive narrative structures by faithfully reproduced chunks of reality, juxtaposed so that their combination sparks the plasma drive of our deep intuition.

This locates the phenomenon of the *epiphany* as the central mechanism of art. He believes the understandings which accompany the art experience happen synaptically, between things, as much as within them, resulting in an instantaneous numinous revelation.

The essence of this type of expression is undoubtedly the Haikku.

*Coldly shining moon  
Near the ancient monastery  
A wolf is howling*

The aim of a Haikku is to initiate an epiphanous experience in the reader by describing juxtaposed but syntactically linked prosaic images as succinctly as possible, within the constraints of a three line, five+seven+five syllable structure.

It is the tension between the structural constraints, economy of expression, and the nature of the image itself, which produces the haikku phenomenon. The reader is transfixed directly by the result.

The dart carrying the emotion lodges in one's heart the moment one completes the reading. It is a dart made of ice, instantly melting on impact and leaving no trace. No matter how rationally the reader analyses the haikku in retrospect, the mechanism which releases the emotion remains elusively peripheral. It can never be intellectually described or justified. It is only available as poetic sensation.

And so we reach the nub of things. The fact that however much we dissect the mechanism of the artistic image and the processes which make it extant, both remain stubbornly inaccessible, and can never themselves be dispassionately available to us.

Whether the source is in the disembodied soul, or the neurological pathways of the brain, the result is the same.

In the old days they prayed to the Gods, and they were bountiful. Now we must have faith in the magic of the creative process and if we are lucky, it too will be bountiful.

For me, as the job becomes progressively more difficult, the interrelationship between my innate requirement for artistic expression, (for the articulation of the unique *me*) and the sense of my place within a broader universal context, becomes less paradoxical and more symbiotic.

Camping at a coastal location, I note this in my diary:

'A thought today, occurred to me while just sitting watching the sea during the heat of midday. I saw the coast solely as it is, (a natural entity of water, land, sky and climate, all working as part of an environment which I take absolutely for granted) with no aesthetic, or philosophical overlay, just as a 'thing'. And I felt a slight tremor at the back of my mind, a sort of shiver of recognition saying that this is the real secret.

That reality, what we perceive with our physical senses, is all there is, and that anything I might feel as being below or beyond, is merely a construction stemming from my own psychological requirements.

I think it was a glimpse of what it would be like if one could truly let go of one's personal point of view of the world and see it and yourself objectively, as something from which you are apart but to which you simultaneously belong.

It was like really getting outside of myself, or else getting fully inside of everything else. A sort of relaxing into a state of neutrality concerning it and me, somehow letting go of my feelings and just acknowledging it as being there. It was a mere hint, like a fragile odour immediately gone, or a mirage, or some kind of ghost sonority which leaves you wondering if you have heard it at all.'

The sensation of 'being outside of yourself', or 'inside of everything else' can happen for all sorts of reasons. In this case it was precipitated by an involuntary meditation. I was warm and comfortable, physically and emotionally relaxed, to the point where my head was empty of thoughts, and I was semi-somnambulistic.

The sonic environment in such a location reinforces this state via the subtly undulating mantra of distant surf and air movement.

I gradually became less and less aware of my own presence, so that the balance between my awareness of self and my surroundings, tended towards equilibrium.

This is an example of an inadvertent giving in, a relinquishing of effort, a slow lowering into an acceptance of the reciprocal connections between things rather than an emphasising of the boundaries.

More and more, when in the process of working, I wait for such a state to envelope me.

Lets give Annie Dillard the last word:

*'The sea pronounces something, over and over, in a hoarse whisper; I can't quite make it out. But God knows I've tried'*

**(Start eg 4)**

**\* EG 4 audio (Sea song section 'INPLACE') DUR: 10'.00"**

**FINIS**