

Interview

SOURCES OF MEANING: INTERVIEWS WITH A GRADUATE
ART STUDENT, INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF HIS EXPERIENCES

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Rose Slivka (1965), editor of Craft Horizons, described the emerging young American artist today as "a product of the eclecticism of the liberal arts program of the university system rather than experienced in the specialized disciplines of the apprenticeship system or the concentration of the professional schools" (p.11). She said that, "He is an educated man, thoroughly graced in the arts of articulation and communication. He knows all about 'the power of the press'...He knows every book. He has studied the lives and the words and the acts of his predecessors, not to mention their work. It has all been published, filmed, and recorded. Based on this inescapable mass of evidence, he can figure out what works and what doesn't, write his own script of his own life as artist, a known object, and play its role in a theatrical event of predictable elements" (p.11). The graduate student whose work we will examine resembles her description in some respects.

Chris works in ceramics and sculpture. He makes fragments in clay and uses cardboard for sculpture. Recently, he built a dog house, which no one would mistake for anything else, and he constructed a birdsaver, which many people took to be a piece of sculpture. He says, "This bird piece, and my fragments, and the cardboard are three different directions. But they're all me." He does make distinctions about the sources for these works. In speaking of his need to build the dog house, he states,

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"Jake was at home, but he was in the rain, you know every day when it was raining, so he had to have this house. There was a lot of pressure to get it built before this happened, before it started snowing." In considering the bird piece, he explains: "This bird saver came out of the concern for two hundred or more birds being killed against this window. And then the form has followed the function of the device, and the same energies that went into it came out looking more aesthetic, more artful, than say the dog house." Although he maintains that, "I have better feelings about the energy that comes from a problem like the dog house and this problem about keeping birds from hitting the glass than I do about pure art for art's sake," he moves into aesthetic considerations when he talks about these two projects.

When he recalls his thinking during the building of the doghouse, he reports: "I even thought that maybe what I ought to do is build another house like this, and put a large socket, like this electric socket here, on the inside which would blow the scale of the room. You know, this little bitty house, say 36" x 30" x 40" with this life-size, reality light socket in it." Describing the construction process with studding and plates evokes this response: "It was like my interest in deterioration and fragmentation, in the association that here was a house that has the siding torn off it. And yet you can go inside and there is all the house still there. So there was the idea of fragmentation and deterioration." Here a direct interface with his ceramic work is evidenced. He makes fragments of clay, and reveals as his source, "I began responding to a grid and then, over the last eighteen months, the response has matured

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into a general response, and just dumped into a very intense concern about line and 90 degree angles which is the essence of a grid."

Aesthetic considerations entered his thinking at a very early stage in planning the bird saver. He says, "The energy was coming from build something that will save the birds, but also considering that it is a beautiful area, that the building is essentially a bridge over some land, and that the glass was installed along the edges of this bridge to keep weather out, the air conditioning in, and let us view this scene out there, juniper trees, and changing seasons, and so on."

He indicates his awareness of the aesthetic operating in all of these activities. "The idea of the dog house was to build a very sound structure from engineering givens. My premise is that the dog will be warm and dry and the house will be sound. And you always bring to it a certain competency that you want, and you're making those decisions all the way along the line, like, 'Oh, this isn't a work of art, you know, but wait a minute. Where do you draw the line between the kind of effort that you're going to put into it?' Well, you start thinking about, 'It's my dog, you know, and what does my dog deserve?' And it is an object, just like a house would be an object or a table, or a good pair of shoes, or an automobile. And so you are creating an object into the world. So where does your responsibility for the word 'art' and the word 'functional object' come into play?" William Thompson (1971) has written that in the industrial culture, "To insure that the aesthetic experience stayed in its place to leave the landscape free for industrial development, the painting was locked in a huge restraining gilt frame, and the individual was locked in evening dress or business suit while he watched theatrical imitations of reality in the privacy of his anonymous darkness. All that

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is over, and now we have the withering away of art in the posthistoric landscape. The painting has spilled over its edges to involve the whole environment" (pp.87-88). Chris seems to embody this spilling-over in all of his activities.

Thompson also maintained that, "Now that NASA has given us a lunar perspective of the planet, the environment has become the work of art and the body and the mind have become our new form of landscape" (p.89). Chris appears to be exploring the landscape of his mind as he talks about the basis for his work: "It was something that was more centralized within me to do a good job on my standards and to do justice to the object. I think about my whole, I guess you could call it image, of the way I like to look at myself, of the way I like to be thought of. I guess it comes out of social sense, or a sense of social responsibility. But here would be the object and would it be a shoddily made dog house, just made for the moment, or would it be something that had the care and integrity, of say, a work of art? And I feel that way about everything that I do. I don't think that any energy output, or anything that I do, or anything that I undertake to do, means anything less than any other thing."

When Chris interjected himself in the form of the bird saver into a public area he found himself in unexpected interaction with others whose presence he had not considered. He related that his response to their reactions (vandalism) was numbness, then fear, then seeking for solutions. Of this event he says, "And it changes my whole thinking, it changes my aesthetic judgment, it changes the way I would approach the piece."

Discussing his activities, which he views as interrelated, but whose variety he thinks may put him at a disadvantage in his formal education, leads him to consider his validity as an artist within the school frame-

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work. Finally, he concentrates on the process of interviewing him about his work and speaks of his excitement about it, and states that he would like a copy of the tape. He summarizes: "That's what teaching is about. Focus. It is the point of focus that's crucial. To be able to focus in on something. To be able to think about something ... Well, that's why questions are the most important thing. First comes the good question."

In addition to manifesting an awareness of art trends, Chris' comments also indicate that his thinking has been influenced by the self-actualization concepts of pop culture. Fromm's (1947) declaration that, "Man's main task in life is to give birth to himself, to become what he potentially is," is an example of this attitude. He added that, "The most important product of his effort is his own personality" (p.238). Maslow (1968) made a more direct case of linking this persuasion with artists when he hypothesized that, "becoming values which exist as preferences or motivations in our best specimens are to some degree the same as the values which describe the 'good' work of art, or Nature in general, or the good external world" (p.169). The concern which Chris expresses for integration of the various directions of his life is supported in the writings of Maslow. From his study of individuals whom he regarded as self-actualizing, he stated: "The creativity of my subjects seemed to be an epiphenomenon of their greater wholeness and integration, which is what self-acceptance implies. The civil war within the average person between the forces of the inner depths and the forces of defense and control seems to have been resolved in my subjects and they are less split. As a consequence, more of themselves is available for use, for enjoyment and for creative purposes. They waste less of their time and energy protecting themselves against themselves ... Also, since one aspect of this integration within the person

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is the acceptance and greater availability of our deeper selves, these deep roots of creativeness become more available for use" (p.141). Some of Maslow's convictions about the value of integration were based on his analyses of individuals' reports of "peak-experiences." "The person in the peak-experiences feels more integrated (unified, whole, all-of-a-piece), than at other times. He also looks (to the observer) more integrated in various ways, e.g., less split or dissociated, less fighting against himself, more at peace with himself, less split between an experiencing-self and an observing-self, more harmoniously organized, more efficiently organized with all his parts functioning very nicely with each other, more synergic, with less internal friction, etc." (p. 104).

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