

My Art Instinct

Max Podstolski

1. Introduction

Why have I called this exhibition *My Art Instinct*? The catalyst, perhaps unsurprisingly, was the recently-published book *The Art Instinct* by art philosopher Denis Dutton.¹ The exhibition is one artist's personal reflection on instinct in art.

Though 'the art instinct' is a universal human propensity that applies to all art by definition, my art fits into a category of art-making that, rather than aiming to represent objects or subjects, is fundamentally driven by an instinct that comes from within. It has abstract expressionist tendencies on the one hand, yet on the other is representational on a strictly primitivist level.

Because of my interest in the subject, I had been aware of *The Art Instinct* for a while before getting around to reading it, and had read a lot of reviews. That led to a painting I decided to call *The Art Instinct (Mine)*, a canvas that had been started in 2007 and eventually finished (and later exhibited) in 2009.² The train of thought that the book set in motion was to culminate in this exhibition, but Dutton's book was only the starting-point for my own ruminations that increasingly gravitated towards Nietzsche.

With the painting *The Art Instinct (Mine)* I was making the comment: whatever theories there are out there about 'the art instinct', the most important thing from my perspective, as an idiosyncratic painter, is that I just follow my own instinct – whatever that may or may not be. When I go into my studio to paint, I am only concerned with getting my mind out of the way to allow instinctual self-expression to flow freely. Philip Guston once put this very well as follows:

When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave.³

However, as I read through *The Art Instinct*, I began to reflect more and more on 'my' art instinct, in relation to, and as distinct from, the universal instinct that Dutton philosophises about. As an artist, rather than a philosopher or theorist, I was not greatly concerned with all the points of aesthetics that he discusses, such as that art talk may focus on acts of creation, the objects created, or the experience of them,⁴ but was curious to find out what he had to say about the 'thing-in-itself', the primary subject of his book. One section in particular leapt out at me, where Dutton criticizes George Dickie, the author of the institutional theory of art, for making "a striking, and inadvertently revealing, comment" about the theatrical tradition dating from the ancient Greeks, which had occasionally ceased to exist, being revived by "the need for art".⁵ Dutton retorts:

The need for art? Given that this phrase appears in the context of a passage arguing that art is virtually defined by its institutions and their attendant cultural practices, this reference to an underlying need for art comes as a jolt. A human 'need for art', presumably some kind of psychological impulse, psychic requirement, or instinct perhaps, would have had to exist independently of art institutions if it is to act as a condition ensuring their reinvention when they have temporarily gone out of existence.⁶

While talk of a psychological impulse or psychic requirement sounded like it was getting close to the art instinct as I think of it as an artist, the main thrust of *The Art Instinct* is to explicate the need for art very differently, in terms of evolutionary psychology. Generally, there seems to be a fundamental disconnect between looking at what is ostensibly the same thing from the different perspectives of artist and philosopher, as if 'never the twain shall meet'. While the artist experiences the art instinct at first hand, in the visceral process of concrete artistic creation, the philosopher reflects on art from a

distanced position of disinterestedness, without being bound up in the messy and uncertain business of actually creating it. The artist's perspective is always particular, primarily, because the art that is created exists in some sort of concrete form as an artefact. This does not mean that artists are not allowed to theorise about art or express philosophical ideas, but that is not their primary role as artists, which is to create art.

Donald Kuspit has astutely commented on the relationship between art and philosophy/theory: "What philosophy ignores is the concreteness that is the source of the artwork's intense particularity. This concreteness declares its independence of theory in the very act of seeming to submit to it, asserting its strange otherness just by forcing philosophers to overtheorize about it. They are compelled to realize that the artwork can never be completely subsumed within theory, that it is not necessarily the most exemplary exemplification of thought."⁷ Kuspit goes on to write of the artwork's "resistance to thought – its 'poetic' character" and "untranslatability" which always eludes capture by and submission to the words of philosophers, theorists or critics.

Artists such as myself are driven to create art, in the words of Kandinsky, out of "inner necessity" (my previous Christchurch exhibition took its name from this.⁸) Inner necessity is the artistic desire to create authentic psychic or spiritual wholeness through art, in a world that is rampantly materialistic and obsessed with the latest technological novelties, far more so than in 1911 when Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* first appeared. I agree with Kuspit that Kandinsky's message is even more relevant today, in a time when "the relentless materialization and mediafication of art ... has stripped it of the sense of subjective presence so basic to Kandinsky's belief in spiritual experience..."⁹

Artistic inner necessity is really just another term for something ineffable, something that may variously be called the spiritual in art, art instinct, artistic freedom or idiosyncrasy, or something else. But whatever one chooses to call it, it remains unquantifiable, indefinable, untranslatable, and elusive of explanation in terms of evolutionary aesthetics or any other theory. Despite, or probably because of, its "resistance to thought" and theory, this is what drives me as an artist: *my* art instinct. But it is not only mine, because otherwise Kandinsky would not have coined a phrase for it that still rings true, that is more relevant now than ever, as Kuspit affirms. And it does not preclude being influenced by kindred spirits who become part of the journey of authentic self-discovery.

2. Kindred Spirits

One such instinctual artist who influenced me for a while was the Dutch primitivist Karel Appel, who achieved considerable fame and notoriety in the CoBrA Movement years (1948-51). He stated in a 1948 manifesto (rejected by the CoBrA collective): "The painter expresses himself in his work for the simple reason that he is driven from within by an urge to do this kind of work. He produces to satisfy an inner desire created by a vital need."¹⁰ For him, art was "positive chaos", a form of necessary protection from the recent negative chaos of wartime Europe.¹¹ Instinctive self-expression, refusing to compromise with prevailing standards of good taste, was his way of restoring balance and wholeness, whether his countrymen could appreciate the unruly, spontaneous, vibrantly primitivist forms it took or not (most couldn't, so he departed his native country for Paris and New York).

Even in New Zealand, there were some artists who insisted on following their instincts, though it was not the thing to do to achieve success in local eyes, as Francis Pound documents in an illuminating account of New Zealand primitivism beginning in the 1940s.¹² Pound describes Gordon Walters' difficulty in deciding whether to commit his art to "the 'pure' geometric stripe, or the geometrised koru bulb and stem... In the end, as we know, Walters followed his own instinct, and Schoon's advice."¹³

Theo Schoon, a Dutch expatriate artist like Appel, was the first to proclaim that Maori cave rock drawings were interesting as art, even wonderfully inspiring, in a country that couldn't have cared

less. Walters, introduced to them by Schoon, became excited because the overlays of drawings reminded him of automatist drawing practised by the Surrealists:

In automatic drawing, according to Paul Éluard's claim – a claim well known to Walters – forms arrive as an expression of the unconscious rather than of the conscious mind. They come in response to 'the mind's dictation, *occurring apart from all control by the intellect, and free of either aesthetic or moral preoccupation...*' Although he was perfectly well aware that the Maori makers of the rock drawings were not proto-Surrealists, and that any visual similarity between automatic drawing and the rock drawings was accidental, Walters remarked, not without a certain wryness at the absurdity of the comparison, that the tangled lines of the 'sand paintings and automatic drawings' of the Surrealist André Masson 'fitted in nicely with the approach of the South Island rock artists', since those rock drawings that are layered one upon another 'look very automatic with the subject emerging out of a skein of lines'. *The subject emerging out of a skein of lines...*¹⁴ (Pound's italics).

Where Dutton writes of the instinctual need for art to exist independently of art institutions, he could also, not inconceivably, be including the likes of Schoon and Walters breathing new life into previously disparaged Maori rock art (and vice versa). These two artists had recognised something deeply inspiring in the rock drawings, something 'primitive' and reinvigorating that spoke to them of the pre-civilized art instinct, an instinct that was geographically localised on the one hand, yet imbued with open-ended human universality on the other. It was only by seeing it through their 20th century modernist eyes, familiar with the work of Miró and Klee, that they, virtually alone in New Zealand, were able to appreciate that such beauty could be found "emerging out of a skein of lines".

While I share with Walters and Schoon something of their intuitive appreciation of the now nationally canonised Maori rock drawings, and feel a distinct affinity with the other artists mentioned above, it needs to be reiterated here that the paintings in this exhibition were created instinctively, not from a desire to emulate other artists' work. What I have in common with these artists is a primitivist way of thinking about art, similar underlying sources of inspiration, and a desire to penetrate to the essence of it on one's own terms. By creating instinctively I mean being driven and guided by a non-rational 'inner necessity' that must be felt and experienced for oneself, over and over again, in the continual process of artistic creation; that must be lived and breathed with the whole of one's being, as an uncompromising life work; and that is prior to any cognitive understanding of what one is doing, its meaning or significance. Painting-by-instinct is the complete opposite of painting-by-numbers – the rules you follow are yours alone, and, since artistic creation is always in a state of Heraclitean flux, 'you can never step into the same painting twice'.

Though one may talk about 'the art instinct' generally, or about an artist following his or her instinct, it can't be automatically assumed that what is being referred to in each case is one and the same thing. But whether focussing on one artist only or on humankind as a whole, such talk is necessarily intersubjective, if something meaningful is to be said that artists in general, or at the very least a minority of them, can empathise with (notwithstanding the 'My' in the title of this exhibition). If artists generally feel 'driven' to create art, and all artists of course are human, then the instinct which drives them must be a shared human instinct, despite the myriad astonishingly inventive forms it takes. Presumably this is what Dutton means by a universal art instinct, which must include all artistic peculiarities, even my own. As the Roman dramatist Terence said: "I consider nothing that is human to be alien to me."

3. The Will to Flower

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of the will – namely, of the will to power, as *my* proposition has it ... The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its "intelligible character" – it would be "will to power" and nothing else.
– Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁵

In reflecting on art and instinct, I became increasingly drawn to Nietzsche's Apollinian¹⁶ / Dionysian dichotomy in his *Birth of Tragedy*, and how it seemed to illuminate my own creative processes. (And not just mine – Nietzsche's influence has extended to many artists throughout the 20th century, including Barnett Newman and other Abstract Expressionists.¹⁷) If the Dionysian aspect equates with the instinctive, chaotic impulse, and the Apollinian with the desire to create order out of chaos, then, on these terms, the resolved work of art can be seen as the successful synthesis of the two. Both impulses need to be present in art – the Dionysian without the Apollinian is insufficient, and vice versa. Nietzsche came to see that “the essence of tragedy consists in the fusing together (*verschmolzen*) of both the Dionysian and the Apollinian impulses. Dionysos is the god of the wild, uncontrolled excesses of nature, who was dismembered by his enemies and later restored by his brother, Apollo. Similarly, the Dionysian impulse in art represents the primitive, unrestrained energies that must be brought together, sublimated, and harmonized through the constructive constraints of the Apollinian impulse.”¹⁸

The primary art instinct or drive as I experience it is the Dionysian impulse; but, to counterbalance it, the secondary Apollinian impulse is necessary, leading to understanding through reflection. A painting is never properly finished until I have understood what it is ‘trying’ to tell me, an understanding that becomes encapsulated in its title. One might say that ‘the unexamined painting is not worth painting’.

To look at this another way, Nietzsche came to regard individuals as collections of drives in which each drive aims for dominance, as observed in one of his notebooks: “Every drive is a kind of attempt to dominate; each has its own perspective, which it wants to force as a norm on the other drives.”¹⁹ This observation became widely known simply as “the will to power”. As an artist, it could be said that I am driven to paint as I do by my ‘will to paint’, which has the potential to become obsessive and self-destructive if allowed to get away on itself and subvert the overall equilibrium. As a person, with what seems to me a healthy *élan vital*, I prefer to re-phrase Nietzsche's dictum into ‘the will to flower’. As I see it, this is what the *real* art instinct is, or at least what it is underneath: the universal desire to grow and flourish naturally through authentic self-expression. To flower is to continue to realize and grow one's potential, as an individual self yet also going beyond the self. Nietzsche called that “self-overcoming” – arising out of instinct, not denying instinct, but channelling and transforming it into a higher state of awareness or being.

Wilhelm Worringer, best known for his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) and a major influence (along with Nietzsche and Jung) on Newman et al., interpreted the Dionysian / Apollinian dichotomy as a “dialectical struggle ‘between instinct and understanding.’”²⁰ That is exactly how I see the creative process: from developing an Apollinian understanding of Dionysian instinct, as each impulse illuminates the other, and harnessing both in the same direction, one comes over time to ‘know thyself’.

Whereas the art instinct theory extrapolates back to the Pleistocene period to explain the origins of art as a universal phenomenon, ‘my’ art instinct is not a theory but something felt intuitively that drives me to create art in the present. When I start a painting, I am aware of being compelled towards an outcome I have a vague feeling about but cannot foresee. Sometimes, in a state of post-creative Dionysian intoxication, the freshly-painted canvas on my easel embodies the indefinable essence I have striven for instinctively, the ‘thing-in-itself’ – or so it seems in that moment. Sooner or later, however, the niggling voice of Apollinian reflection starts casting doubt on my former certitude, leading to the realization that the painting isn't yet finished and needs further work.

The thing-in-itself may be only an unattainable mirage shimmering “in the no-man's-land of the spirit”²¹, but for me it remains a “necessary illusion”.²²

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- ¹ Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct : Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.
- ² *Free Madicals*, Catchment Gallery, Nelson, 2009.
- ³ Philip Guston quoted in Maurice Tuchman, *The New York School : Abstract Expressionism in the 40s and 50s*, Thames and Hudson, London, n.d., p. 76.
- ⁴ Dutton p. 52.
- ⁵ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic : An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, p. 30.
- ⁶ Dutton pp. 40-41.
- ⁷ Donald Kuspit, *Idiosyncratic Identities : Artists at the End of the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, ch. 27: 'Philosophy and art: elective affinities in an arranged marriage', p. 315.
- ⁸ *Internal Necessity is the Mother...*, CoCA (Centre of Contemporary Art), Christchurch, 2005.
- ⁹ Donald Kuspit, 'Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art', *Art Criticism* 17:2, 2002, p. 57.
- ¹⁰ Karel Appel quoted in Michel Ragon, *Karel Appel : The Early Years 1937-1957*, translated by Richard Miller, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1988, p. 376.
- ¹¹ Ragon p. 517.
- ¹² Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand : Art & National Identity, 1930-1970*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2009, ch. 8: Primitivism and the Nationalist purpose, pp. 271-327.
- ¹³ Pound p. 320.
- ¹⁴ Pound p. 306.
- ¹⁵ 'The Free Spirit', *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library, New York, 2000, p. 238.
- ¹⁶ Nietzsche's spelling.
- ¹⁷ See: W. Jackson Rushing, 'The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman's Idea of Redemption in the Abstract Sublime', *Art Journal* 47:3, Autumn 1988, pp. 187-195.
- ¹⁸ Dennis Sweet, 'The Birth of *The Birth of Tragedy*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60:2, April 1999, p. 357.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Ken Gemes, 'Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38, 2009, p. 52.
- ²⁰ Rushing p. 188.
- ²¹ Quoted in Pound p. 350 (unattributed).
- ²² See: Barbara Garrie, 'Necessary Illusion: Max Podstolski and the Primitive Bird Group', *Art New Zealand*, no.118 Autumn 2006 pp. 62-65.