

## Consciousness and Art- notes from 1985

At Xmas I visited my friend Charley in Los Angeles. Charley always takes me to good places, such as Forrest Lawn Cemetery to see the talking sculptures. Thousands of the dead stacked vertically, Muzak piped from all the bushes, Michelangelo's David there beneath the blue California sky where, a voice tells us, Michelangelo would surely have liked to see him. Only in this case the sky is not blue, but yellow from smog.

Now Charley is driving me through a desperate sort of landscape. We keep the windows of his Toyota rolled up as protection from hungry dogs that slink among the piles of garbage. There are many small fires smoldering. Inside the truck my feet rest on a solid carpet of cigarette butts. Strangely, around the stacks of trashed autos and abandoned rubbish, horses are corralled. There are also a few sheep and chickens. Filthy tramps lie around. They are too sick to threaten us, but everywhere are guard dogs waiting a chance: dobermans, shepherds, pit bulls. A rough man comes to Charley's window, he remembers Charley. This is his empire, as far as one can see. What isn't his, he can get. He has a couple of the derelicts cutting scrap steel. He says he has seen death and come back; he lifts his shirt- a diagonal scroll of scars left by bullet holes. We don't want anything now- perhaps we'll be back.

We drive out to Long Beach to a park - it's a holiday, but not a soul is around. We are looking at the Queen Mary, trying to decide - *does it really look big?* I tell Charley my answers to the questions in the Space Invaders exhibition catalogue. He says "good", "good", "not too good". That last one to my statement that art is too complex to deal with issues which occur at the forefront of our consciousness. I say that, like everyone else, I have political notions, but that though they are sometimes clear when I begin a work, they're seldom there in a recognizable form in the end. Charley says the Structuralists, of which he is not one, have put a lot of effort into disputing the idea that art taps a deeper source of consciousness- it's all at one level. Shit, I think, I can't argue with that. When I've lived with a work for a while, I know exactly what considerations caused a particular result. And if not considerations, then compulsions. On the other hand, these things don't seem available to me during the act itself. Obviously I'm thinking, evaluating, making choices and comparisons, but the reason, the rationale come later, and it only reveals itself bit by bit. And then, eventually, when all is said and all is done, perhaps what I will say will be a lie. I mean, I know I'm a liar sometimes.

My brother, who is a behaviour scientist, told me he does not accept there is such a thing as consciousness at all, and I find it easy to accept. That is, all my actions are determined, which is to say that I know why I do what I do, and the reasons *are* there, but I don't always bother to think about them.

Another approach might be to just explain that I was born and grew up in South Africa. My experience of culture was one of extreme dislocation. Because I could never accept that white was special and a reason for privilege, I, and many of my contemporaries, viewed ourselves from a position of opposition. For instance, when a visiting sports team came to South Africa, the Blacks always turned out to cheers for the visitors, and we also

hoped that South Africa would be defeated and humiliated. Now that, obviously, was not only reasonable, but right. But then I left. I moved to England and I found myself incapable of supporting England, having become British, even when in soccer they played countries I disliked! My contrariness, induced by prior conditioning, had me hoping desperately that even West Germany would beat them! On the one hand, perhaps it was just disdain for jingoist sentiment, but then again perhaps it is an example of lack of consciousness.

Well, one of the things I *do* think about, though without much focus or information, is the origin of much of the throw away objects that infiltrate and permeate our lives. No matter how humble or unnecessary the thing, whether a tool or a toy, it has been made somewhere else, never here. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea. Things you buy for a few cents have been hand-painted, have been manipulated, assembled, given an expression. What I think about are the people who made these things. I mean, the thing with the Mickey Mouse face, *what is it really? Who made it? What were they thinking of while they worked?* I think I'm a moralist. We buy someone's labour, a moment in their life, and in the end, we will pay the price.